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Community Psychology and the Capabilities Approach

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Abstract

What makes for a good life? The capabilities approach to this question has much to offer community psychology, particularly with respect to marginalized groups. Capabilities are freedoms to engage in valued social activities and roles—what people can do and be given both their capacities, and environmental opportunities and constraints. Economist Amartya Sen's focus on freedoms and agency resonates with psychological calls for empowerment, and philosopher Martha Nussbaum's specification of requirements for a life that is fully human provides an important guide for social programs. Community psychology's focus on mediating structures has much to offer the capabilities approach. Parallels between capabilities, as enumerated by Nussbaum, and settings that foster positive youth development, as described in a National Research Council Report (Eccles and Gootman (Eds) in Community programs to promote youth development. National Academy Press, Washington, 2002) suggest extensions of the approach to children. Community psychologists can contribute to theory about ways to create and modify settings to enhance capabilities as well as empowerment and positive youth development. Finally, capabilities are difficult to measure, because they involve freedoms to choose but only choices actually made or enacted can be observed. The variation in activities or goals across members of a setting provides a measure of the capabilities that the setting fosters.

Keywords

Capabilities approach; Empowerment; Positive youth development; Settings; Mediating structures

Introduction

What makes for a good life, and how can it be promoted? Many disciplines address these questions. In this paper, I describe the capabilities approach, as developed by economist Amartya Sen (1992, 1999) and philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2011), why I think it is useful for community psychologists and others interested in promoting better lives for people who face various forms of marginalization or social exclusion, and how community psychology can contribute to it.

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The Capabilities Approach

Capabilities are freedoms to engage in valued social activities and roles—what people can do and be given both their capacities and the opportunities and constraints in their environments. What Nussbaum (2000, 2011) calls “combined capabilities” are a joint function of personal capacities and what psychologists might call environmental affordances (e.g. Gibson 1982; Withagen et al. 2012). Thus, capabilities can be reduced in two ways. Internal capacities can be warped or stunted, for example by lack of education or violence; combined capabilities can be further constrained by “social, political, familial, and economic conditions” that prevent people from exercising internal capacities (Nussbaum 2011, p. 30). Crucially, the focus is not on enacted behaviors but on the range of behaviors and roles that a person is free to enact.

An analog to the capability approach in psychology may be Cantor and Sanderson’s (1999) work on the importance of participation in life tasks to well-being. But whereas Cantor and Sanderson focus on the activities people enact, Sen and Nussbaum emphasize what they are “able to do and be” (Nussbaum 2000, p. 69). A capability set is the set of freedoms or possibilities realistically open to a person; the one she actually enacts is called a functioning. For example, both starving and fasting suggest the same functioning with respect to nutrition, but fasting implies a choice not to eat when food is available. Depending on the reason for fasting (is it enforced by social or other pressures?), fasting is likely to involve a larger capability set than starving (Sen 1999, p. 75). I will return to the distinction between capability and functioning later.

The capabilities approach, which Sen (1992, 1999) originated in the field of developmental economics, underlies the United Nation’s Human Development Index. It addresses deficiencies in both Gross Domestic Product and resource-based approaches to measuring welfare and various forms of subjective utility, happiness, or life satisfaction (e.g. Nussbaum 2011, chapter 3). Resource approaches treat wealth as an end rather than as a means and typically average across people, with insufficient attention to inequality. Nor is equal distribution of resources sufficient to yield equality in the domain of capabilities—additional resources may be required to afford equal capability to a person with a disability or to overcome differences arising from persistent social inequalities. And because the requirements of social functioning are higher in wealthy than in poor countries, relative income deprivation in rich countries, can lead to “absolute deprivation in the space of capabilities” (Sen 1992, p. 115). Resource approaches also ignore the inherent multi-dimensional nature of capabilities, as emphasized by Nussbaum. Even wealth is no guarantee against deprivation of capabilities in other domains, for example social exclusion of stigmatized groups (Nussbaum 2011, p. 58).

Subjective approaches to assessing well-being are problematic because life circumstances explain relatively little variance in subjective reports. Set-point theory in social psychology describes how quickly reported well-being returns to previous levels after major events (Diener et al. 1999), and theories of response shift show the changing frames of reference people use in appraisals of quality of life (e.g. Rapkin 2000). For example Brickman et al.

(1978) famously found that people who had won up to a million dollars in lotteries did not rate their happiness higher than others who lived in the same neighborhoods.

One reason for the surprisingly modest relationship of subjective well-being to life circumstances is the human tendency to allow existing conditions to circumscribe one's sense of the possible. For example, Barr (2004b) contrasted her own view of a dark, sour-smelling, noisy, dirty basement shelter with that of a resident who, despite sleeping in a chair with his head pillowed on his sneakers to safeguard them from theft, described "the accommodations" as "very nice, very pleasant" (p. 171). Circumscribing one's goals is often adaptive: people need not waste time or regret on unrealistic endeavors. For example, Nussbaum (2000) describes giving up her ambition to become an opera singer. However, adaptation also leads people to give up on what "human beings have a right to have" (p. 138). Nussbaum proposes a list of the latter, which she calls central human functional capabilities (See left column of Table 1, reordered and abbreviated from Nussbaum 2000, pp. 78–80). The list includes the material preconditions of freedom, but reaches beyond them to human relationships and fulfilling activities; it "bridges material and social registers of disadvantage" (Hopper 2007, p. 875), and both bread and roses. Nussbaum (2000) argues that each of the capabilities must be satisfied at some minimal level to afford people a life worth living, a fully human life.

Nussbaum's Central Capabilities

The most mundane of Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities are denied too often, not only in poor countries, but also in the United States. I illustrate selectively, with a spotlight on a particularly disenfranchised group, people who experience mental illness and homelessness and a capability-enhancing program that serves them. Pathways to Housing is a housing first program built on principles of consumer choice. It offers apartments with private landlords to people living on the street, without requirements for sobriety or participation in treatment. In experimental studies, it ends homelessness more successfully than traditional models of supportive housing that do have such requirements (Aubrey et al. 2015; Tsemberis et al. 2004).

The first capability is *life*, that is, living to the end of a normal human life, and not dying prematurely. Research on health disparities has shown that African Americans ages 35–54 are over twice as likely to die in any given year as are their white contemporaries (Otten et al. 1990), and in some communities, such as Harlem, African American men are less likely to reach old age than men in Bangladesh (McCord and Freeman 1990; Sen 1999, p. 22). Similar patterns hold for other socially excluded groups. Clients of public mental health systems have mortality rates twice those of others of the same age and gender (Colton and Manderscheid 2006) and people experiencing homelessness, already a gross deprivation of capabilities, have mortality rates three to six times those in the general population (Hwang et al. 1998).

My goal here is *not* to attempt some hierarchy of disadvantage. Multiple forms of marginalization often co-exist and compound one another: Homeless people are especially likely to be members of stigmatized minority groups, although the particular group at risk

varies from country to country (Shinn 2007), and they have higher than average rates of mental illness, substance abuse, and disability everywhere (e.g. Burt et al. 1999; Philippot et al. 2007). Clients of public mental health systems are disproportionately members of minority groups, and like people who experience homelessness, are often desperately poor. Income accounted for 38 % of the *racial* disparity in mortality in one study (Otten et al. 1990). The point is that there are multiple, overlapping groups whose lives are too often foreshortened, in this most basic deprivation of capabilities.

Nussbaum's (2000) second capability is *health*, including adequate nutrition and shelter. The United States ranks in the bottom fifth of 29 developed countries in infant mortality, low birth weight, and a composite housing and environment index (UNICEF Office of Research 2013). Sen (1999) points out that there has never been a famine in a functioning democracy but the protection of democratic institutions does not extend to hunger. In 2013 over 14.3 % of U.S. households were food insecure—a sanitized term for hunger (USDA Economic Research Service, 2013), and over 1.42 million used homeless shelters (HUD, 2014), with many more affected over longer periods.

Nussbaum's (2000) third capability is *bodily integrity*, including freedom of movement, security against assault, and having opportunities for sexual satisfaction and reproductive choice. The National Coalition for the Homeless (2014) documents 1,437 acts of violence against people experiencing homelessness over the last 15 years, in which 375 victims lost their lives, so housing is critical to bodily integrity. But residential programs for people who have been homeless often constrain movement and assume residents are asexual. Homeless shelters in many cities still do not allow even married couples to live together (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2006), and transitional housing programs often have curfews and rules prohibiting guests. Many shelters and housing programs lack privacy: families often share a room, and single individuals, when not in a dorm or barracks, typically have roommates not of their choosing. Contrast this to both the real possibilities at Pathways to Housing, where individuals come and go freely from private apartments, and the symbolic message (and direct contribution to health) provided by the bowl of condoms on the receptionist's desk.

Senses, imagination, and thought includes abilities to imagine, think, and reason and produce self-expressive works, along with freedom of self-expression and religious exercise. *Emotions* includes the ability to experience emotions and, like the first half of *affiliation*, to live in relationship to others. None of these are novel ideas for community psychologists who study social support and social capital.

The second half of *affiliation*, having the social basis of self-respect and non-humiliation, is one of the capabilities most regularly denied by the public, which stigmatizes both homelessness and mental illness (Phelan et al. 1997), and shelter and housing programs that treat adults as though they were children and usurp parenting roles (Mayberry et al. 2014).

Practical reason includes the critical reflection and planning of one's life and the ability to engage in meaningful social roles. Nussbaum suggests that although all central capabilities are essential to a life worth living, practical reason and affiliation stand out because they

“suffuse all of the others” (Nussbaum 2000, p. 82). Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2004) speaks of the “capacity to aspire” which is diminished for poor and subaltern members of a society, not because of any inherent deficit, but because it “like any complex cultural capacity, thrives and survives on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation.” The limitation of such possibilities is, Appadurai suggests, one way to define poverty, and where such possibilities are limited, “the capacity itself remains relatively less developed” (Appadurai 2004 p. 69). Many programs for homeless individuals or families assume that clients require guidance to overcome their problems, and use the opportunity for housing as leverage to increase residents’ adherence to treatment plans (Susser and Roche 1996). Pathways to Housing assumes far greater capacities and rights for tenants, and assumes they will set meaningful goals for themselves, given the opportunity. The program’s array of supportive services is under tenant control, with no privileges for choosing or penalties for refusing services.

Political control over one’s environment includes effective participation in “political choices that govern one’s life” and freedom of association. Along with practical reason, it corresponds to the individual aspect of what community psychologists mean by empowerment. Effective participation involves more than a psychological sense of control, but for Nussbaum, it is an individual rather than a collective right.

Like all capabilities, *material control over one’s environment*—the right to hold property— involves not simply formal rules but real opportunity. Wealth in the United States is even less equally distributed than is income (Piketty 2014; Stiglitz 2012). Although the Great Recession reduced wealth at the top, the wealthiest 1 % of households still had 225 times as much wealth as the median household at its end (Stiglitz 2012). Racial disparities in wealth grew worse: White families’ wealth fell 11 % but Black families lost 31 % and Latino families lost 40 % from 2007 to 2010 (McKernan et al. 2013), in part because low-income and minority neighborhoods and households were targeted for the sub-prime loans that were more likely to lead to foreclosures (Immergluck 2009). Thus the “real opportunity” to hold property is lacking for many poor Americans, particularly those of color. Even formal opportunities are abridged for individuals with mental illnesses, because disability benefits cease if an individual has more than \$2,000 in assets. A home one owns is excluded from that total, but savings to obtain a home are not (Social Security Administration 2014).

Nussbaum’s (2000) last two capabilities are *play* and *other species*. The first is straightforward, but the second, the ability to live in relationship with animals, plants, and nature, deserves some unpacking. Fair Housing Law requires landlords to make reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities, and courts have held this to include relaxing “no pet” rules to permit service animals, including animals that provide emotional support to people who have mental disabilities (Arusha 2004). A tenant at Pathways to Housing had previously remained homeless because most shelters and housing programs do not allow pets. She slept in the stairwell of an apartment building where a friend housed her cat. After the friend’s husband left for work, the woman was permitted to go inside, take a shower, and visit her cat. When offered her own apartment where she could keep her cat, the woman gladly accepted (Shinn 2014). Once again, capabilities are freedoms. The point is *not* that

everyone who lacks a puppy or a house plant is failing to live a fully human life. Rather, it is the freedom to live with plants and animals, along with other capabilities, that is important.

In emphasizing freedom, I am not advocating licentious abandon. Practical reason includes the ability to choose discipline and even privation to accomplish other goals. For example, people struggling with addiction may choose to enter supportive communities where substance use is prohibited. But there is an important difference between choosing a drug-free community or for that matter choosing a vocation that requires poverty, chastity, and obedience, and having those privations forced upon one. Agency and well-being are often intertwined, but there are circumstances where people exercising agency choose to reduce their well-being to accomplish other goals (Sen 1999).

The capability approach's emphasis on agency is quite compatible with community psychology's commitment to social justice and empowerment. "An approach to justice and development that concentrates on substantive freedoms inescapably focuses on the agency and judgment of individuals; they cannot be seen merely as patients to whom benefits will be dispensed by the process of development" (Sen 1999, p. 288). Arguably, capabilities provide an alternative approach to the antinomy between needs and rights that Rappaport (1981) cited in his initial advocacy for empowerment. Nussbaum (2011) describes all capabilities, even those that correspond to Maslow's (1962) deficiency needs, as rights. Her enumerated list of capabilities is both more specific than empowerment and also broader, drawing attention to conditions of material and social deprivation as well agency in "a life worth living."

The capabilities approach has certainly been criticized. Nussbaum (2000) makes claims of universality for her list, although it is not necessary to defend that claim in order to employ it in a Western context. The items are not mutually exclusive and may not be exhaustive. Sen's (1992) focus on equality of capabilities is criticized both by those who prefer equality in some other domain, and by those who worry about trade-offs between equality and efficiency, arguing that maximizing freedoms on average should not be sacrificed for promotion of equality (Sen 1992). Nevertheless I hope my examples suggest that the capabilities approach is useful, not simply for people experiencing homelessness or mental illness, but also for community psychology more broadly.

What Community Psychology can Contribute to the Capability Approach

Thus far I have described how community psychology can benefit from the capability approach. Now I turn to ways that community and other psychologists can contribute, by filling a surprising lacuna in the approach with respect to children, theorizing and demonstrating how settings can foster capabilities, and assessing both characteristics of capability-enhancing settings and capabilities themselves.

Extension to Youth

Neither Sen nor Nussbaum devote much space to youth development, although Nussbaum (2011, Appendix A) cites Heckman on the importance of early childhood education. Across two books, Sen (1992, 1999) devotes one footnote to children (Sen 1992, p. 91). Nussbaum

(2011) wants to guarantee the same threshold level of capabilities to all humans capable of “some sort of striving” excepting only people who are anencephalic or in a permanent vegetative state. (p. 24) but children, she says “are different” (p. 26). She deems it legitimate to deny choices to children to promote their “health, emotional well-being, bodily integrity, and dignity” (Nussbaum 2000, p. 90). Of course, no one would claim that a two-year old should have the same freedoms as an adult, and I agree with Nussbaum that requiring certain types of functioning of children is necessary to develop later capabilities. But I believe her framework applies better to positive youth development than Nussbaum realizes.

A National Research Council (NRC) list of setting characteristics that promote youth development (Eccles and Gootman 2002, pp. 90–91) is strikingly similar to Nussbaum’s capability list (2000, pp 78–80), as shown in Table 1. The NRC’s principal of *physical and psychological safety* encompasses parts of what Nussbaum classifies under *bodily health* and *bodily integrity*. “Safe and health-promoting facilities” parallels Nussbaum’s adequate nourishment and shelter, and a decrease in “unsafe or confrontational peer interactions,” parallels freedom from violent assault. *Opportunities for skill building* includes “physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social skills,” parallel to Nussbaum’s *emotions*: “being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason, [in a way] cultivated by an adequate education.” The emotional and social aspects of *opportunities for skill building*, along with the “caring, support, and guidance” of *supportive relationships* correspond to Nussbaum’s *emotions*, “being able to have attachments to things and people outside ourselves.” Supportive relations is also relevant to the first half of Nussbaum’s *affiliation*, “living with and toward others.” The second half of *affiliation*, “having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation.” includes protections against discrimination like those enumerated in the NRC’s “*opportunities to belong*.” And both Nussbaum’s *practical reason* (“being able to ... engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life” and the political half of *control over one’s environment*) parallel the NRC’s *support for efficacy and mattering*, including “empowerment practices that support autonomy, [and] ... responsibility granting.”

The Capabilities with no parallel in the NRC’s features of developmental settings (*life, play, other species*) are as important to youth as to adults, although the NRC’s list includes some issues more central to youth (*appropriate structure, integration of family, school, and community*). Considering youth as a group whose freedoms can be enhanced in developmentally appropriate ways, rather than thinking of childhood as simply a way-station to adulthood, would be a worthy addition to the capabilities approach.

Empowering and Capability-Enhancing Settings

How can capabilities be fostered? As the NRC’s report on settings that promote youth development suggests, characteristics of settings are important. Community psychology reminds us that people live most of their lives in social settings—schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, churches, voluntary organizations, and, particularly for people whose capability sets may be limited, social programs. Berger and Neuhaus (1977) described such settings as mediating structures that stand between individuals and the larger society, and Rappaport (1981) discussed their importance for creating community, opportunity, and

empowerment. Community psychologists are in a good position to generate theory about how settings can foster capabilities.

Neither Sen nor Nussbaum pay much attention to the potential of such settings. Sen (1992, 1999) discusses the role of governments and society in promoting capabilities for citizens and the creation of social norms through democratic discourse. That is, he considers what Rappaport (1977) called the institutional level of analysis and Bronfenbrenner (1979) dubbed macrosystems. For example, Sen points to the benefits of education and literacy, particularly for women, in reducing fertility, infant mortality and differential deaths among girls, and the importance of developing human resources in promoting economic development more generally, but the discussion remains quite broad. He does not speculate, for example, about how to fix crumbling inner-city schools that fail to educate the children who attend them. He emphasizes the importance of individual agency, but beyond education and access to markets, he says little about how agency comes about. Sen (1999, p. 284) does give a brief nod, almost in passing, to the importance of settings, suggesting that “political and social organizations, community-based arrangements, nongovernmental agencies of various kinds,” as well as the state, have a role to play in creating freedom, but he says nothing about how this happens.

Nussbaum also focuses on national governments and dismisses mediating structures. She considers the central capabilities on her list to be human rights and the existence of rights implies a corresponding duty to secure them. She assigns that duty to the state (Nussbaum 2011, p. 64). Nongovernmental organizations and private philanthropy have done some good but they are not accountable to people in the same ways as a democratic state, which must play a central institutional role (Nussbaum 2011, chapter 5). Her exclusive focus on the nation is surprising to a community psychologist, since Nussbaum (2000) illustrates the central role of a mediating structure, the Indian Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), in creating capabilities for its members via credit, education, and a labor union. What about SEWA enables it to play this role?

Community psychologists who have examined features of organizations that foster members’ empowerment (Maton and Salem 1995; Maton 2008) can contribute here by examining whether the same features, or additional ones, characterize organizations that promote capabilities. Nussbaum’s description of SEWA makes clear that it embodies the four characteristics of empowering organizations described by Maton and Salem (1995): inspirational leadership, a strengths-based belief system, mutual support, and an opportunity role structure. In Nussbaum’s account, the opportunities arise largely from loans that allow women to become financially independent. SEWA’s website, <http://www.sewa.org>, suggests that the organization also creates opportunities by brokering services, such as child care, banking, health care, and legal assistance that women can provide for one another, thus creating jobs for some and allowing others to earn incomes outside the organization; it also provides roles within the organization for women to participate in democratic governance.

Although neither Nussbaum (2000) nor the website speak specifically to the setting maintenance and change dimension that Maton (2008) identified in his updated work on empowering settings, the organizational history on SEWA’s website suggests that the

organization has adapted flexibly to external challenges such as being thrown out of its parent organization of trade unions due to its outspoken support for lower caste Harijans. Nor is Maton's (2008) core activities dimension fully clear. For at least some SEWA members, it is externally focused activities such as banking that seem most important. Of course, neither Nussbaum's account nor the SEWA web site are structured around Maton's theory about how organizations work to empower their members, but the theory seems a good starting point for understanding capability-enhancing organizations.

The creation of opportunity role structures, that is, opportunities to participate in valued social roles, is particularly important for groups who are often denied such participation. Stein and colleagues (Stein et al. 1992; Stein and Wemmerus 2001) document the importance of normative social roles such as wife, mother, or student to people with experiences of mental illness. Zimmerman et al. (1991), describe how GROW mutual help groups for people who experience mental illness intentionally created underpopulated settings, that is settings with more roles than members, to encourage members' participation. Barker's (1968) theory of manning or staffing posits that underpopulated settings create social "press" to engage in activities, an effect that is particularly important for people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized if others were available to take on the same roles. For people whose lives are often bounded by programs and agencies, capabilities may also depend on relationships between staff and service users. Bond and Keys' (1993) description of how an organization can co-empower different groups of people may be particularly relevant here.

Community psychologists' theoretical understanding can be employed in transforming settings, often in collaboration with setting members, in order to promote positive outcomes such as youth development, empowerment, and capabilities. For example, Weinstein (2008) described working with schools to actualize high expectations for youth who are too often shunted into paths of low-achievement; Henry (2008) showed how to change classroom norms about aggression by feeding back data to children about disapproval for aggressive behaviors; Maton et al. (2008) described a transformative change process at a university that increased the representation, retention, and achievement of African American students in the sciences; and Speer (2008) described community organizing efforts that empowered youth. Although the authors did not use this language, all of these interventions transformed settings in ways that enhanced capabilities for their members.

Measuring Setting Characteristics that Enhance Capabilities

Each of the authors cited as showing how to transform settings also described how to measure relevant setting features in order to motivate, guide, and monitor change (Shinn and Yokishawa 2008). Measurement of such features, which varied from setting to setting, is another way community psychologists can contribute to the capabilities approach. Let me offer an extended example, again involving Pathways to Housing.

As part of an experiment comparing Pathways to Housing to other housing programs for people with mental illnesses in New York City, researchers queried staff and consumers about the extent to which the programs fostered choice. They assessed Staff Values with

anonymous questionnaires. Staff at Pathways to Housing were more likely to agree with statements such as “Homeless people with psychiatric disabilities (or dually diagnosed with psychiatric disabilities and alcohol or drug use problems) have a right to refuse treatment,” or “have a right to independent housing, regardless of their problems.” Staff in the other programs were more likely to endorse statements such as, “Homeless people with serious mental illnesses require structure and supervision to put their lives in order,” or “need clinical support to make wise choices regarding their lives” (Henwood et al. 2013). Staff also responded to a version of the Tolerance for Deviance scale (Moos and Lemke 1983). It asked how the agency would respond to assertive and deviant behaviors such as refusing to take prescribed medicine, being drunk, pilfering or stealing others’ belongings, and physically attacking another resident. Although none of the behaviors are particularly desirable, the crucial question was whether they would lead residents to be excluded from their housing, that is, would disruptive behavior lead to capability deprivation in this domain. Such exclusion was least likely at Pathways to Housing (Henwood et al. 2013).

Finally consumers responded to a 16-item choice index, based on Srebnik et al. (1995), which asked how much choice they had over aspects of their housing and lifestyle such as the place they live, the people they live with, who can come over, and how they spend their day. Pathways tenants reported significantly more choice than tenants of other programs. All three of these measures tap people’s freedoms to do and be, and suggest that Pathways to Housing was more successful than other programs in enhancing capabilities. Interestingly the last measure, subjective choice, may have some of the same problems of adaptation as other measures of subjective well-being. Perceived choice among Pathways tenants was high 6 months after they were randomly assigned to the program, but somewhat lower (although still well above the control group) at 12 months. At first blush, tenants who had left the streets for a private apartment experienced enormous new freedoms. Later, as they acclimated to their new setting, the constraints of poverty and mental illness may have become more salient. They could live anywhere, as long as the rent was not too high, and welcome anyone into their homes, but that did not stop many from feeling socially isolated (Yanos et al. 2004). The capability approach suggests a dimension—affiliation—along which the program could develop further.

Measuring Capabilities

Psychologists can also contribute to measuring capabilities themselves. As Sen (1992) discusses, measuring freedoms is inherently difficult when one can observe only choices actually made, or functioning, not other choices available. Nussbaum also notes the difficulty of inferring capabilities from functioning and suggests qualitative measurement and discursive analysis (Nussbaum 2011, p. 62). Sen (1992, p. 67) engages in a sleight of hand called the principle of “counterfactual choice” in relating some aspects of welfare or functioning to capabilities. For example, given the choice of having malaria or not having malaria, everyone would chose to be free of malaria, so freedom from malaria is a “freedom” even if no direct choice is made. This sort of reasoning, which underlies the United Nations Development Index, works only for basic capabilities such as life and health where one can safely assume that everyone would indeed make the same choices. In situations where people’s choices might differ, how can one make inferences about the range

of realistic possibilities (the capability set) if one can observe only the single choice enacted (the functioning)?

I propose that assessing variation in functioning at the setting level provides a solution to this puzzle, by offering insights into the capability set available to members of that setting. If everyone in a setting has the same observable functioning, it is perhaps not unreasonable to infer that the setting provides real opportunity for only that functioning. If there is considerable variety in observed functioning, that implies that the capability set is large. Take supported employment programs for people who experience mental illness as an example. Too often these result in jobs in “food, filing, and filth.” If everyone in a supported employment program becomes a janitor, one may safely infer that janitorial work is the only capability the program promotes. However, if people get varied jobs, as a computer programmer, architectural draftsman, auto mechanic, cake decorator, history writer, laboratory analyst, paralegal, webmaster, data analyst, as well as secretary and worker in a hospital laundry, one may infer that the program fosters a much broader set of capabilities. The latter examples are real ones from the Association for Study and Psychosocial Integration in Lisbon, which helps members with psychiatric disabilities to get jobs with ordinary employers, doing varied work consonant with their education along with additional training in specialized skills necessary for the jobs (Ornelas et al. 2010, 2014).

The capability set for an individual setting member is not the same as the range of functionings enacted by other members of the setting—I could no more get a job as a cake decorator than as an auto mechanic. Nevertheless, compared to a setting with little variability, a setting that supports varied functionings for different members is likely to afford greater opportunities to any individual member—including new possibilities not undertaken by any current setting members.

Variability in goals held by setting members may also reflect how well a setting cultivates the “capacity to aspire” and hence the capability of practical reason, or the ability to plan one’s own life. For example, Barr (2004a, p. 160) asked participants in the experiment comparing Pathways to Housing to services-first programs about their goals. The goals of 20 tenants in the Pathways to Housing program included work, education, painting, and writing poetry, whereas 19 of 20 participants in the control group, whatever their current housing, had the same goal, “to get an apartment of their own.” Again, variability, this time in goals among program participants may be a setting-level measure of practical reason (See Raudenbush and Bryk 1987; Shinn and Rapkin 2000, for further discussions of variance as well as the mean as measures of ecological settings.) Barr’s work suggests another simple measure: Pathways residents were more likely to say “I” rather than “they” during interviews, reflecting a sense of agency (Barr 2004b, p. 171).

Conclusion

In sum, I have suggested that promotion of capabilities for disenfranchised groups is a worthy goal for community psychology. The capabilities approach is compatible with the field’s theories and values, including empowerment and liberation, but is both broader and more specific, in ways that can guide action and research. Psychology’s understanding of

human development and skills in measurement, and community psychology's action orientation and focus on settings can contribute to both theoretical understanding of how capabilities come about and the promotion of freedoms for marginalized groups.

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Table 1

Central human functional capabilities (Nussbaum 2000, 2011) and features of positive developmental settings (National Research Council; Eccles and Gootman 2002)

Capabilities	Developmental Settings
Life	
Bodily Health	Physical and Psychological Safety
Bodily Integrity	
Senses, Imagination, and Thought	Opportunities for Skill Building
Emotions	
Affiliation A. Living with and toward others	Supportive Relationships
Affiliation B. Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation	Opportunities to Belong (Meaningful inclusion)
Practical Reason	Support for Efficacy and Mattering (empowerment, autonomy)
Control Over One's Environment A. Political	
Control Over One's Environment B. Material	
Play	
Other Species	
	Appropriate Structure (age appropriate)
	Positive Social Norms
	Integration of Family, School, and Community