Capabilities Approach Through the Looking Glass of Empirical Psychology

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Abstract

In this paper we show how research from cognitive psychology can inform, lend support to, and serve as an empirical sounding board for advancing the dynamic nature of the capabilities approach. We argue that as a prescriptive theory of justice and human development, the approach has to be dynamic and dialogical, open to continuous re-evaluation by the people whom it serves. We discuss how the approach would thus benefit from an anchor in empirical psychology. In particular, we find that the theoretical framework and methodology of social domain theory, which studies people's socio-moral reasoning across cultures and individual's development, serves this function well. Social domain theory suggest that people reason from within three distinct domains of thought: moral, social-conventional and personal, and they coordinate / prioritize these domains differently, depending on their contexts and assumptions. We use social domain theory to show how understanding the process of making and coordinating judgments is essential to understanding why and how capabilities approach(es) may, or may not, be gaining traction, and why and how people prioritize different capabilities.

Key words
social domain theory, capabilities approach, human thriving, morality, cognitive psychology.

Introduction

The capabilities approach posits itself not only as a theory of justice but also as a project for human thriving, concerned with full human potential rather than just a check list of functions. As both a human development theory and a political project, it provides, at once, an ethical platform and an actionable roadmap to human well-being. However, as a theory about people, for people, what the capabilities approach still lacks is a closer relationship with empirical theories that study how people reason about their social world. In this paper we propose how such a relationship may be established and how it may lend the capabilities approach a much needed empirical grounding, as well as a method for continuous self-evaluation.

Capabilities Approach - Overview and shortcomings

Two normative claims at the core of the capabilities approach are that the freedom to achieve well-being is of primary moral importance and that such freedom ought to be understood in terms of the real opportunities people have to do and to be whatever they have reason to value. Rather than a passive or prescriptive theory, therefore, the capabilities approach is better described as a dynamic and participatory framework that acknowledges - indeed encourages - human agency, efficacy, and ability to reason. As such, it is a framework that depends in great measure on what those agents actually understand is encompassed by those two core claims; that is, what they view as their issues of primary moral importance, and what they understand their sociopolitical entitlements, opportunities and access privileges to be.

In other words, the capabilities approach gives an idea of what sorts of things are intrinsically valuable and hence desirable for all people, thus facilitating an assessment of individual well-being. It also provides us with measurements for translating those philosophical goods into practical policies, thus facilitating the evaluation and assessment of social arrangements. On the whole, it gives us the tools for measuring social change and human thriving. It does so by explicitly claiming that ends rather than means matter, since people's abilities to transform means into valuable opportunities (capabilities) or outcomes (functionings) differ (Sen 1992: 26–28, 36–38). Capabilities, in other words, are real freedoms or opportunities to achieve functionings. However, the approach does not claim to, or venture to explain the vantage points of the individual beneficiaries with which it is concerned. What does it mean, from those individuals' perspectives, to thrive, or to have equality? What sort of means-end reasoning do they employ in making judgments about their own, or other's, well being? What considerations they might be weighing against one another in deciding, which is, at any given moment, more crucial? To be sure, these types of questions are the jurisdiction of empirical psychology, yet they seem central to the project of coherently and convincingly articulating the capabilities approach, and therefore ought to be in some manner addressed.

An unequivocal acknowledgment of human diversity is one of the theoretical anchors of the capabilities approach. Enlisting a wide range of metrics for well-being, and outcomes of well-being ensures that many different dimension that reflect that human diversity are included in the assessment of well-being. This is something that many fleshed out theories of

justice actually fail to achieve. Yet, it would still be interesting and beneficial to empirically investigate, where exactly those diverse individuals stand vis a vis the claims of such an ambitious theory. What sorts of capabilities matter to people and why? How do they view them, as their moral or social entitlements, in virtue of their humanity or citizenship? Do people prioritize capabilities, and if so, do different people do it differently, or do the same people do it differently at different times? Why? How do they justify their reasoning?

Without empirical evidence of people's understanding and/or potential ordering/prioritizing of the capabilities, there continues to exist differences about the capabilities among the scholars of the approach. Nussbaum argues (2006: 76–78) that her ten "central human capabilities": life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment, are incommensurable, that they cannot be traded off against one another, and that they are due to each state citizen at a minimum threshold. Does Nussbaum, with this last condition in particular, tie her ten capabilities to citizenship? And does that mean that they would find their guarantees in civil rather than human rights? How does this affect people's' / citizens' sense of entitlement to such rights? Sen maintains that a democratic process and public reasoning should be involved in defining capabilities, but has largely been unclear on how to select and weight capabilities. Furthermore, Anderson (1999: 316) argues that people should be entitled "to whatever capabilities are necessary to enable them to avoid or escape entanglement in oppressive social relationships." Alkire (2002: chapter 2) proposes to select capabilities based on John Finnis's practical reasoning approach: by iteratively asking "Why

do I do what I do?", one comes to the most basic reasons for acting: life, knowledge, play, aesthetic experience, sociability (friendship), practical reasonableness, and religion. Robeyns (2003) has proposed some pragmatic criteria, mainly relevant for empirical research, for the selection of capabilities for the context of inequality and well-being assessments.

But, as cognitive psychologist, in this paper we want to ask, and hopefully begin to answer, how does this ideal theory translate to - and stand up to - people's practical reality? Nussbaum (2000: 70–77; 2006: 78–81), for instance, justifies her list by a claim that each of the capabilities is necessary for a human life to be "not so impoverished that it is not worthy of the dignity of a human being" (2000: 72). She maintains that the ten capabilities are moral entitlements of every human being on earth. Yet, we might say that an approach that is so deeply concerned with human agency and individuality ought to reflect on exactly those aspects of our nature. It ought to consider what notions people have about their own moral entitlements, and how they arrive at those notions. As psychologist, we want to ask, what happens when moral entitlements of different people conflict, or different entitlements of the same person conflict? What is the process of coordination of those conflicting domains of reasoning, and how might we understand the workings of it? Nussbaum bases her argument on Rawlsian overlapping consensus, noting that the list remains open-ended (Nussbaum 2000: 77). However, given that Rawls's political liberalism does not travel well across cultural-geographical divides, it may transpire that socio-cultural differences become a show stopper for embracing central capabilities. Again, it seems timely and pertinent to enquire about how people reason - because they do - about their own well-being and opportunities.

Moreover, and central to the success of the capabilities approach moving from political project to political reality, it also is worth investigating why attempts to ensure the well-being and opportunities of particular groups of people are met with resistance.

The co-dependence of philosophy and psychology

In his chapter "From Is to Ought: How to Commit the Naturalistic Fallacy and get away with it in the Study of Moral Development," Lawrence Kohlberg drew out the importance of the mutual awareness of philosophy and psychology. His concern was to ground his psychological studies in a philosophical and an epistemological theory, and to show what his psychology can contribute to philosophical moral questions. He thus set out to show that although *is statements* cannot be derived from *ought statements*, there is a relationship between "is" (the development of knowledge and morality) and "ought" (the epistemological and moral norms) (p. 105). Kohlberg warned that we must distinguish cultural relativity (value diversity among cultures) from ethical relativity (the assumption that there are no principles by which to resolve such diversity), lest we commit a naturalistic fallacy of assuming that "everyone having their own values" necessarily means that "everyone *ought* to have their own values" (p. 107). Ethical relativity, he claimed, must not be confused with ethical tolerance, which admits of no universal prescriptions. Kohlberg relied on the methods of developmental psychology to continuously examine how individuals regard moral issues and the way things ought to be, as well as how they develop their sense of morality. Although his later theoretical ventures into stage-sequenced moral development leave much to be desired, and criticised, his initial intuition that psychology and philosophy are inextricably intertwined remains sound. He argued that philosophy should

inform psychology, and the emergence of experimental philosophy indicates that the reverse seems equally true. The questions of what consciousness is, for example, and what conditions are necessary for conscious thought have been approached by trying to get a grasp on how exactly people ordinarily understand consciousness. Knobe and Prinz (2008) suggests that people may have different ways of understanding minds, Sytsma and Machery (2009) have written about the methodology for studying folk intuitions, Huebner, Bruno, and Sarkissian (2010) have argued that the Westerners understand consciousness systematically differently from the East Asians. Indeed, philosophers since Descartes and Hume have harbored ambitions to imbue their philosophical approaches with empiricism and social science methodologies. Thus, the idea of a symbiotic relationship between the two disciplines is nothing new; we only recall it here to show how a particular philosophical and a particular psychological approach complement one another. We suggest in that vain, that a particular cognitive psychology theory, that sprouted from the seeds of Kohlberg's mentioned intuition, and was developed with a view to being a robust tool for exploring moral development and socio-moral reasoning of individuals across ages and cultures, be put to use in answering some of the aforementioned questions. To test the appeal for want of a better term, of the capabilities approach, we start with an assumption that people everywhere reason about their social predicament, whatever that predicament is. Extensive research evidence from a wide breadth of cognitive psychology renders that a safe assumption to make. Moreover, social domain theory research tools enable us methodologically to capture the fine nuances of that reasoning, and to offer an explanation as to why the approach may be failing to gain traction in some contexts / environments, or in some of its own aspects.

Questions we ask

As developmental psychologists studying how individuals reason about morality, laws, and personal agency, we examine the possible limitations of the capabilities approach, both as a theory and a political project. We ask:

1) why some people may misunderstand or resist the idea or the application of central capabilities;
2) how people view their own and others' development and thriving;
3) what types of reasoning might lead people to lexically order the ten capabilities in a certain way;
4) why gender inequality often can continue to exist alongside a general acceptance of the principles of the capabilities approach;
5) whether and in what way cultural context affects or indeed determines the answers to all of the above.

Theoretical framework

We write from the perspective of social domain theory (Turiel, 1983), which offers a theoretical framework for studying how people reason across cultures and across the human lifespan. Some psychologists (Shweder, 2006; Haidt, 2002) who focus on cultural comparisons of human development would stand in opposition to a political project of universal capabilities, claiming that well-being is dependent - cross culturally - on different metaphysical understandings of the world. From the standpoint of social domain theory, we disagree with such positions. We argue, in line with the capabilities theory, that not only are cultures not

homogeneous, but also that people are active rather than passive participants in their cultures and their interpretations of the social world around them. Moreover, we argue that studying the way people interpret and push back against cultural practices can tell us a lot about how they understand their own capabilities, as well as how that reasoning develops across time and across contexts.

Mapping Social Domain theory to the Capabilities Approach

Social domain theory posits that people are in reciprocal relationship with their environment and that through interactions with adults, peers, and siblings, they construct forms of social knowledge (Smetana, 1999; Turiel, 1983). These forms of knowledge are categorized into three domains: the moral, the personal/psychological, and the social-conventional. The moral domain is understood as prescriptive notions regarding how individuals ought to behave toward each other (Smetana, 1999) and deals particularly with concepts related to rights, justice, and welfare/prevention of harm (Turiel, 1983, 2002). Moral prescriptions are seen as universal, not legitimated by agreement or law, and are impartial to one's preferences (Turiel, 1983, 2002). Furthermore, decisions about moral issues involve reasoning (sometimes straightforward, sometimes complex), and, thus, are never the products of mere intuition (beliefs *without* conscious reasoning) (see Haidt, 2001; Kahneman 2011).

The social-conventional domain in our theoretical framework is concerned with how people reason about social organizations, rules, and authority and how they apply that reasoning to the coordination of social interactions (Turiel, 2002). Looking at reasoning in the

social-conventional domain, therefore, can tell us something about the practical challenges of the capabilities project being realized on the ground, as well as reasons why it may face resistance.

Lastly, the personal domain in social domain theory consists of decisions that are understood to primarily effect the actor and should not be governed by a societal rule or law (Nucci, 1981). Looking at reasoning in the personal/psychological domain can tell us something about which types of situations people consider to be "their own business," rather than a social or a moral concern, and how that might affect their tendency to evaluatively order the central capabilities.

We therefore argue that insofar as the capabilities approach is concerned with enabling the exercise of rights, welfare, and justice in a way that addresses the psychological, social, and moral features of how people function and flourish, it is well suited to study within social domain theory.

What we know so far and we still need to explore

While political philosophers may investigate the use of the term 'freedom' by Amartya Sen, and the applied social scientist be concerned with how the capability approach can be applied to study poverty or inequality, a mainstream economist will wonder how the capability approach differs from welfare economics. As Sen has stressed, the capability approach can be used for a wide range of purposes (Sen 1993), but it essentially focuses on the information that we need to make judgements about individual well-being and social policies. The capabilities approach also identifies social constraints that influence and restrict well-being and evaluative processes. The approach can be/and is used to measure poverty or inequality, or can be/and is

used as an alternative to utilitarian cost-benefit analysis, or can serve/and is an important constituent for a theory of justice. Yet given that it lacks any significant contribution from psychology, it cannot explain or provide tools for understanding how people conceptualize inequality, cost and benefits and the principles of justice.

Social domain theory is a particularly good fit for the capabilities approach, because much of the body of research that makes up its history addresses some of the gaps that the capabilities approach, as a philosophical theory, cannot fill on its own. Specifically, as noted previously, the capabilities approach does not yet have a way of gauging the lived experience of the capabilities in the hearts and minds of men and women. It, however, has been the business of social domain theory research to examine how people understand constructs like equality, justice, and welfare and what sorts of other considerations people coordinate when applying these understandings in their daily lives and to the lives of others. In other words, social domain theory research studies clinically, cross culturally, and developmentally the sorts of issues that are central to the human development and capabilities agenda.

Social domain theory research on rights, for instance, provides a good example of this. Across various academic disciplines (including philosophy, anthropology, and psychology), there is a propensity to assume that rights must be uniformly endorsed and applied if they are well understood. People who endorse rights in some situations and not others, therefore, are seen as deficient in their understanding of rights. Social domain theory research, however, demonstrates that it is common for people's application of rights to be variable, and that this does not indicate misunderstandings of rights. Helwig (1995, 1997) gives evidence that, even at young ages, children are able to understand and maintain rights (e.g. freedom of speech or

religion) in the abstract as obligatory and applicable to all people. But, for both adults and children, when faced with contextualized situations, rights may be occasionally subordinated to other social concerns, for instance to concerns of psychological welfare (e.g. a public speech with racial slurs). The idea that rights, while well understood, might be given less priority compared to other competing social and moral concerns in some circumstances is supported by philosophers, like Dworkin (1977).

Research on exclusion (Conry-Murray & Turiel, 2012; Killen et al., 2001; Killen et al., 2002; Killen, Sinno, & Margie, 2007) shows similar findings. In the abstract (e.g. "Is it alright or not alright to exclude someone because of their race?") and in certain situations, children believe it is morally wrong to exclude somebody because of race, ethnicity, or gender. However, considerations for group cohesion, systems of societal arrangements, cultural practices, stereotyped knowledge of gender activities, and personal prerogatives are coordinated with moral goals (such as fairness and equality) when making conclusions about the validity of excluding certain people from certain activities, and this may result in the conclusion that some acts of exclusion are valid. Results from social domain research also provide evidence that individuals' positions in society may shade what types of considerations they prioritize and whether or not they use moral, conventional, or personal justifications when thinking about instances of exclusion or inequality (Horn, 2006; Neff, 1997; Wainryb & Turiel, 1994).

What does this mean for the capabilities approach? It means that, within social domain theory, there is a system of understanding why it is that individuals apply certain rights, freedoms, and opportunities to some people, situations, and contexts, but not others. It means that, within social domain theory, there is a system of explaining why it is that someone might

prioritize or lexically order certain rights (or capabilities) over others. It is possible that people's understandings of their own and others' thriving is bounded by their knowledge of the social structures within which they exist, and social domain theory lends the capabilities approach the tools to examine how people simultaneously consider these different facets of their social world.

Relevant and applicable findings from Social Domain theory research

When it comes to people's misunderstanding or resisting the idea or the application of central capabilities and their ordering; or the idea of their own and others' development and thriving; or whether gender, age, or cultural differences affect reasoning, social domain theory proposes that

1) People do not necessarily misunderstand or fail to care about certain social situations, they rather focus on different aspects of it, and prioritize those aspects differently
2) People's reasoning in each domain of judgment develops as they grow and changes as their context and informational assumptions change
3) People everywhere understand that they have certain rights but tend to prioritize and lexically order those rights as they try to exist in, or in spite of, their culture
4) People everywhere reject inequality as a moral wrong but have different thoughts, derived from different domains of reasoning, as to what reciprocity and therefore equality - with regards to gender especially - requires.

While social domain theory research already gives us some insights about how people reason about their social world, there still is much left to be explored in terms of the specific psychology behind the adoption and application of the capabilities approach. We propose that

future research investigate questions such as "What capabilities face the most resistance? Where? And why?" through the lens of social domain theory. Moreover, we suggest that research on the capabilities employ not only the theory but also the methodologies of the social domain approach - methodologies particularly like the clinical interview method, which has proven to be one of the more robust techniques for evaluating individual reasoning and finding trends across people (Damon, 1977; Piaget, 1967; Turiel, 1983).

Conclusion

We argue that, on the whole, studying the capabilities approach through the looking glass of social domain theory can help us understand what happens developmentally, particularly when it comes to people's perceptions of their own and others' capabilities and functionings. It can also show us something about how and why people may coordinate or prioritize the ten capabilities. Social domain theory exhibits how people consider the full complexity of their social world when making a critical judgement, leading them to coordinate domains, often subverting the moral to the social-conventional. These findings have been corroborated in studies done across the Middle East, Africa, North, Central and South America, Europe, and Asia. The particular strength of social domain theory is that it is not just a theory of human development, but it is also an empirical methodology of studying development. We show that, as such, it offers the capabilities approach a means of testing and measuring its own claims, thus lending the capabilities approach an even more robust framework and giving it further reach.

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