Creative Capabilities and Community Capacity

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Creative capabilities and community capacity

The capability approach (CA) is intended to broaden our understanding of the nature of social welfare. In place of a narrow concern with the material well-being of people, which has been the primary focus of social welfare policies, CA theorists argue for a multi-dimensional conceptualization of human welfare. This line of thinking provides the opportunity to consider the place of a variety of “goods” that typically is not part of social welfare in the CA framework.

The authors’ research group at the University of Pennsylvania – the Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) – has undertaken a study of the role that arts and cultural engagement play in the lives of Philadelphia’s neighborhoods. This study was motivated by a realization that the rationale for social welfare policy in the United States had reached a dead-end with the passage of the so-called welfare reform law of 1996. In a 1995 paper, Stern suggested that we were at a point of departure in which we need to articulate a new foundation for social welfare – one less tied to the narrow material needs of the population. The paper suggested that engagement in the arts and culture could provide an example of a “new civil society” and a new way of conceptualizing the nature of social welfare (Stern 1995).

Over the past decade, advocates of the capability approach (CA) have begun to provide this new foundation. Amartya Sen’s critique of welfare economics theory provided the starting point for CA. By distinguishing individuals’ capabilities (their ability to do and be in particular ways) from their functionings (the actual choices they make), Sen was able to preserve the autonomy of individuals without reducing the measurement of welfare to the choices that people actually make. Martha Nussbaum was able to move the discussion of capabilities from a general emphasis on people’s freedom to do and be to a particular set of capabilities that society should ensure.

In recent years, elements of CA have gained even wider exposure. The report of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (Stiglitz, Sen & Fitoussi 2009) made explicit use of the CA in its efforts to develop an approach to measuring well-being that went beyond standard measures of economic performance. Eurostat, the European Union’s statistical office, meanwhile, has incorporated elements of the CA into its statistical portrait of poverty and social exclusion.

For the most part, however, CA theorists – while acknowledging the role of the arts and culture in human well-being – have been less successful at
translating that theoretical position into empirical investigation. This failure, we contend, is a product of two problems: one theoretical and one empirical. Conceptually, how the arts and culture contribute to human well-being has been under-theorized. Intellectuals seem to take for granted the relationship between culture and well-being and don’t feel a need to explain where and how this happens. Complementing this conceptual failure, little reliable data exist that allow for empirical investigation of the relationship between culture and welfare.

Over the past fifteen years, SIAP’s work on how the arts and culture influence urban communities provides a starting point for addressing these problems. We believe that the primary means through which the arts and culture influence people’s well-being is through the social interaction they promote directly and the resulting social networks they spawn. In other words, the relationship of the arts to welfare is primarily a result of social – not individual – processes. Furthermore, the systematic data gathered by SIAP allow us to test a number of empirical propositions about how the arts influence social well-being.

In this paper we focus on two of these empirical relationships. First, we use Sen’s distinction between functionings and capabilities to examine the role of social context in facilitating individuals’ ability to translate arts-related capabilities into actual involvement in the arts. Second, again with a focus on communities, we demonstrate the interconnection of different capabilities by examining how communities with more intense cultural scenes fare better on other indexes of well-being (Sen 1992).

The overarching theoretical contribution of the paper, then, is to argue that CA investigators need to broaden their framework to recognize the role of social networks in enabling individuals to achieve higher levels of well-being. This builds on an important argument made by Nussbaum, who distinguishes the CA from social rights’ approaches. In essence, we argue that more attention be given to sources of social power other than government in both promoting and restricting capabilities. A focus on social context or ecology provides a stronger foundation for understanding the relationship of the arts to other capabilities.

The Capabilities Approach

The CA grows out of the critique of a narrow economic definition of social welfare. The CA attempts to define welfare as neither an objective level of consumption, nor as a subjective level of satisfaction that an individual gains from a particular market basket. Instead, CA focuses on the ability of indivi-
duals to pursue a particular type of functioning, whether or not they chose to take advantage of it. As Sen notes:

“The well-being of a person can be seen in terms of the quality (the well-ness, as it were) of the person’s being. Living may be seen as consisting of a set of interrelated ‘functionings,’ consisting of beings and doings. ... Closely related to the notion of functionings is that of the capability to function. It represents the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve. Capability is, thus, a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person’s freedom to lead one type of life or another” (Sen 1992: 39-40).

The distinction between capability and functioning puts particular focus on the issue of freedom. It is this ability to have a choice between different sets of “goods” (or sets of functionings) that differentiates CA from the traditional focus on the market basket of goods that an individual actually achieves. For Sen, this freedom to choose is an additional “good” that adds to a person’s well-being.

In concrete terms, one reason for the distinction between functioning and capability is to address what Sen calls adaptive preferences. These arise when, because of the lack of freedom to choose, members of a socially-excluded group express a preference for a functioning set that insures their second-class status. For example, in the frequently noted case of working-class school behavior described by Paul Willis, schoolboys choose a set of functionings that cut off their possibilities for success (Willis 1981). From a CA perspective, we would focus less on the actual choices made by the boys than on the fact that they did not have the freedom to choose an alternative way of being. In effect, a range of sources of social power – market opportunities, material deprivation, and peer culture – combine to limit the boys’ options to choose the life they might desire. Their actual choices are a response what Gareth Stedman Jones has called a “culture of consolation” (Jones 1974).

Nussbaum has built on the idea of adaptive preferences with a focus on the example of women. As she notes:

“Similarly, Sen criticizes approaches that measure well-being in terms of utility by pointing to the fact that women frequently exhibit “adaptive preferences,” preferences that have adjusted to their second-class status (Amartya Sen 1990, 1995). Thus the utilitarian framework, which asks people what they currently prefer and how satisfied they are, proves inadequate to confront the most pressing issues of gender justice. We can only have an adequate theory of gender justice, and of social justice more generally, if we are willing to make claims about fundamental entitlements that are to some extent independent of the preferences that people happen to have, preferences shaped, often, by unjust background conditions” (Nussbaum 2003: 33-34).

Yet, this distinction between functioning and capability raises the issue of whom or what institutions are responsible for insuring that individuals have
both access to a particular set of functionings and the freedom to choose a particular set. Nussbaum notes that the CA requires a notion of rights that moves beyond a neoliberal focus on negative rights to a positive endorsement of people's right to the material and social conditions that actually provide them with the freedom to choose. She then goes on to address the issue of who or what institutions are involved in assessing this freedom.

"A further advantage of the capabilities approach is that, by focusing from the start on what people are actually able to do and to be, it is well placed to foreground and address inequalities that women suffer inside the family: inequalities in resources and opportunities, educational deprivations, the failure of work to be recognized as work, insults to bodily integrity. Traditional rights talk has neglected these issues, and this is no accident, I would argue: for rights language is strongly linked with the traditional distinction between a public sphere, which the state regulates, and a private sphere, which it must leave alone" (Nussbaum 2003: 39).

In other words, capabilities move beyond the rights that government may or may not guarantee to the influence that other sources of social power may have on people’s ability to choose. This perspective highlights, in particular, the layers of power relationships that lie between the individual and the state. Nussbaum and Sen, for example, have frequently noted the role of families in constraining the life-choices of women. But if we are to take full advantage of the CA, we need a systematic approach to these intervening sources of social power and their role – either positive or negative – in allowing people to function.

These theoretical points provide two foci for the current paper. Following Nussbaum, we argue for the importance of non-governmental sources of power in influencing people’s freedom to choose. First, we argue that the level of cultural assets present in a neighborhood influences the residents’ actual capability set associated with the arts and culture. Second, again with a focus on geographic communities, we argue that the capabilities associated with the arts are related to the functionings associated with other capabilities. In particular, we focus on capabilities associated with health and freedom from harassment and intimidation.

Capabilities and creativity

Creativity has been an important element of the CA since its conception. As Nussbaum has noted in her delineation of the central human capabilities:

"4. Senses, Imagination, and Thought. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason – and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by
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an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one’s own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one’s mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to have pleasurable experiences and to avoid nonbeneficial pain.


These two entries in Nussbaum’s list of capabilities clearly point to important roles of the arts and culture. Yet, they seem more focused on the “negative” rights associated with freedom of expression and religion than to a positive freedom to have opportunities and access to engage in cultural and creative expression. Again, by focusing on the threat to freedom of expression posed by the state, Nussbaum does not follow her own assertion that we must assess how other locations of power – families, communities, and institutions – can either enhance or constrain individuals’ creative capabilities.

Community as a source of social power

One of the ways in which the capabilities approach is differentiated from a rights approach is its focus on multiple levels of social power. The roles of families, corporations, and religions are all recognized as having the ability either to enhance or limit individuals’ capabilities.

In our research, the authors have focused in particular on the role of communities and neighborhoods as a source of power. Communities can be defined by their institutions and social networks. Formal institutions – including schools, libraries, and non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) – provide a critical link in the resources available to community residents. The importance of these resources is easy to miss until they are withdrawn. The recent spates of institutional closings that have affected American cities as a result of fiscal crises have brought this point home. Across the Delaware River from Philadelphia, the city of Camden, New Jersey has faced such a severe crisis that libraries, recreation centers, even fire and police protection have been removed from the community.

Formal institution’s power, however, depends on the types of social networks that link individuals. In our work, we have identified two important forms of social networks. Some networks focus on issues of immediate concern to local residents and build on their determination to act collectively to improve their community. Sampson and his colleagues have characterized this type of network as evidence of collective efficacy. Community-based networks are complemented by those that link people and institutions across
neighborhoods (Sampson, Morenoff & Gannon-Rawley 2002). As a result, cross-community networks function both as an alternative source of resources and as a means of tying communities to the larger region.

Both types of social networks contribute to community members' capabilities. In an immediate sense, they provide a set of tangible resources that would otherwise not be available. In addition, the connections they foster provide a means through which residents can express their views and thus the potential for influence.

If institutions and networks are the "stuff" of community assets, then we would hypothesize that the availability of these assets – and the fact that not all communities have them in equal quantities – should influence individuals' ability to translate their creative capability into functionings. Although the state might theoretically guarantee all residents the right to self-expression or a livelihood, it is only the presence of actual means of translating those rights into behavior that assures residents' capabilities.

There is a further implication of this line of thought. If institutions and networks are critical to capabilities, then it makes sense that community context provide an important link between capabilities. Many of the institutions and networks that distinguish neighborhoods are tied to particular capabilities. Health and social service organizations promote health and bodily integrity. Recreational and cultural institutions promote affiliation as well as imagination. Social justice institutions contribute to control over one's environment. If these institutions are concentrated in particular environments, one could hypothesize that the presence of institutions that promote one type of capability could contribute as well to realization of others. From an empirical standpoint, one would expect to find a statistical relationship between the various functionings – that is, neighborhoods with evidence of one functioning would be likely to display other benefits as well.

Philadelphia's Cultural Assets and Capabilities

SIAP has been able to subject this line of reasoning to an empirical test. Specifically, we have developed methods for identifying the concentration of cultural assets in particular neighborhoods of Philadelphia. Neighborhoods with particularly high concentrations of these assets provide an environment in which residents are more likely to translate their capabilities in this sphere into functionings – that is, they take advantage of these resources by becoming more involved in the arts. Furthermore, our research demonstrates that neighborhoods with high concentrations of cultural assets also experience a range of other economic and non-economic benefits tied to the capability approach.
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In our investigation, we have focused on four types of cultural assets: nonprofit arts organization, commercial cultural firms, resident artists, and levels of cultural participation. Viewing these assets through a CA lens, we could argue that the first three – nonprofits, commercial firms, and resident artists – provide the freedom to choose – that is, capability – while actual participation in the arts is a measure of individuals’ success in translating this capability into a particular set of functionings.

For example, the attached map shows the distribution of nonprofit cultural resources across the city of Philadelphia. Residents living in areas shaded green or yellow have relatively few of these institutions while those in areas shaded orange and red have more.

Figure 1: Distribution of nongovernmental arts and cultural organizations in Philadelphia, 2004

Source: SIAP

As the following map shows, the distribution of cultural participants is higher in neighborhoods with more nonprofit cultural organizations.
This apparent relationship is confirmed by statistical analysis. The correlation between the presence of nonprofit cultural resources, commercial cultural firms, and resident artists with residents’ rate of cultural participation all exceed 0.7, representing very strong correlations.

The ecological relationship is also present at the individual level. An earlier investigation of the relationship of individual and ecological influences on arts attendance found that the characteristics of one’s immediate neighborhood – including the concentration of cultural assets – had a stronger influence on one’s level of arts participation than did individual characteristics like one’s education, age, or occupation.

Taken together, these findings support our first hypothesis: that the ecology of one’s neighborhood—specifically, the concentration of cultural assets – increases the likelihood that community members will translate their capabilities into actual functionings.

Our second hypothesis concerns the spillover effects of cultural engagement on other forms of well-being. Because the well-being produced by cul-
tural engagement is a product of social interaction, we expect it to contribute to an environment where residents are able to attain other functionings as well.

Here, we examine two outcomes, one related to social stress and one to freedom from harassment and intimidation. The relevance of these two functionings to the CA is straightforward. On Nussbaum’s list, a concern with social stress is related to health. Freedom from harassment and intimidation is related to Nussbaum’s categories of bodily integrity and affiliation.

**Social stress and public health**

We have been able to collaborate with the KIDS project at the University of Pennsylvania, an effort to track the social and health well-being of Philadelphia’s children. The project developed an index of what researchers identified as “social stress,” which includes measures of low-weight births, births to younger teenagers, infant deaths, substantiated incidents of child abuse, and out-of-home placements for delinquent and other dependent children. Taken together, these factors point to the overall level of public health in Philadelphia’s communities.
As one might expect, a neighborhood’s socio-economic status – its rates of poverty, unemployment, and educational attainment – have a strong influence on this measure of social stress. Therefore, to specify the relationship between cultural assets and social stress, we need to control statistically for the role of socio-economic factors, as shown on the following chart. As the chart makes clear, even when controlled for socio-economic status, block groups with high numbers of cultural assets have much lower than average levels of social stress.
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Figure 4: Relationship between social stress and density of cultural assets, Philadelphia blockgroups

Source: SIAP

Ethnic and racial harassment

The United States has a long history of ethnic and racial discrimination. A significant element of this injustice is residential segregation, which has been a common experience especially of African Americans. Before the 1960s, black Americans were subject to a variety of techniques that promoted segregation — restrictive covenants that prohibited selling property to African Americans, lack of access to loans to buy homes, “steering” through which real estate agents would show them properties only in black neighborhoods. Although all of these techniques became illegal by the 1960s, they and more informal means continued to keep the races apart. As a result, in most American cities, the vast majority of African Americans were confined to “black” neighborhoods.

However, for those who chose to ignore racial segregation by moving into a “white” neighborhood, there was one additional means of enforcing the
cidents of ethnic and racial harassment. Here again, our results supported our hypotheses.

One of the major insights of the CA is its focus on multiple levels of social power. Rather than following the social rights tradition that focuses exclusively on the role of government in enhancing or reducing individual freedom, the CA recognizes that capabilities can be enhanced or constrained by various centers of social power, including families, institutions, and local communities.

This paper argues that this important insight deserves more attention as scholars explore the implications of the CA. We argue, in particular, that local communities can play a decisive role in individuals’ ability to translate abstract capabilities into actual functionings.

**Immigrants’ Capability Challenge**

Up until now, the paper has focused on the citywide relationship of the arts and culture and other dimensions of social well-being. This section of the paper focuses on the role the arts can play in achieving capabilities for one particular population: immigrants.

Immigrants often turn to the visual and performing arts to make sense of their changing environment. Some groups form organizations based on preservation of their cultural heritage and identity. In Philadelphia, for example, a Cambodian refugee founded a classical dance program to keep alive a court dance tradition endangered by both Khmer and American societies. Other immigrant groups – often second-generation and U.S.-educated – embrace *hybrid* cultural expression that merges old and new artistic forms. The Asian Arts Initiative, for example, combines presentation of traditional cultural forms with exploring ways to express the challenges of Asian Americans in contemporary America.

Through the process of cultural engagement, migrants define who they are. For migrants seeking to recapture a lost past or forge a new hybrid present and future, the arts are serious business. Yet, the seriousness with which many migrants engage the arts presents an opportunity. Migrants face a host of institutional barriers, not only in the arts but in education, employment, and health care as well. The arts often serve as a place of connection between newcomers and mainstream institutions. Once these links are forged, the arts can also serve as a means of overcoming other barriers to access and assimilation.

Although the arts and culture are important to immigrants, many immigrant artists and practitioners face challenges in finding outlets and venues that embrace their concerns. Existing cultural organizations are often slow to
respond to new populations, immigrants included. Most importantly, the unique institutional arrangements of the American cultural sector – based primarily on the link between private philanthropy and nonprofit organizations – are often unfamiliar and confusing to newcomers to the U.S. These two issues – the rigidity of existing organizations and the primacy of nonprofits – continue to define the cultural experience of immigrant communities.

While immigrants often engage in cultural expression that is central to their identity, they are less likely to take advantage of established cultural organizations. This pattern of high cultural engagement and low formal participation showed up in a 2004 survey, undertaken by SIAP in collaboration with Alan S. Brown and Associates, in two low-income sections of metropolitan Philadelphia (Stern, Seifert & Vitillo 2008). The survey discovered that residents were heavily involved in creative activities ranging from doing arts with children to painting and writing to handicrafts. Indeed, across a range of informal creative activities, immigrants were often more involved than U.S.-born respondents. During the previous year, the average immigrant had participated in 3.2 creative activities, significantly more than the figure for U.S.-born respondents (2.8).

When we turn to organized cultural activities, however, it is a different story. Where 56% of U.S.-born respondents had attended a concert during the previous year, only 25% of immigrants had done so. Two-thirds of U.S.-born residents had attended a music, dance, or theatre performance, compared to only two-fifths of immigrants. Overall, immigrants attended just over half as many formal cultural events as residents born in the United States.

Immigrant artists, like participants, are more likely to engage in informal cultural settings. The informal cultural sector (including unincorporated groups and public settings) was the venue for just over 11% of all cultural projects included in a survey of metropolitan Philadelphia artists. Yet, among immigrant artists, fully a quarter (25%) of projects were in the informal sector, including festivals, performances in public places, and less formal settings.

Finally, formal cultural participation in immigrant neighborhoods is significantly lower than in similar but predominantly U.S.-born neighborhoods. This finding is based on analysis of participant records of roughly 75 cultural organizations in metropolitan Philadelphia. Although masked to some extent by the clustering of many immigrants in Center City, the part of the region with the highest level of formal cultural participation, neighborhoods with a significant concentration of immigrants have lower cultural participation rates than similar neighborhoods with few immigrants.

Taken together, what we know about the cultural engagement of artists and residents leads to a clear profile of immigrant culture in Philadelphia. Immigrants are deeply involved in culture, especially in informal social settings. But this involvement does not translate into higher rates of formal cultural
participation. As a result, migrant artists and cultural participants often create their own institutions and venues at the edge of the established arts scene. In doing so, they have helped shift the balance between the nonprofit cultural sector and the commercial and informal sectors.

What are the implications of these findings for the CA? Immigrants face a variety of dimensions of social exclusion. They are often confined to particular labor market niches. Many have insecure citizenship rights. Even those who are citizens often face racial profiling that can lead to intimidation and harassment.

Culture has the potential to counter immigrants’ social exclusion. It provides a resource through which the foreign-born and migrants can make sense of the world and build connections within immigrant communities and between these communities and the wider society. Indeed, SIAP’s research has uncovered a variety of cultural organizations in the city of Philadelphia that are involved in what we call arts-based social inclusion work with the explicit purpose of building capacity within immigrant communities and reducing barriers to the mainstream society.

At the same time, the structure of the cultural sector may work against these efforts. The lack of immigrant engagement with established nonprofits is complemented by a level of indifference on the part of their leadership. In a survey of Philadelphia-based nonprofit cultural organizations conducted in 2010, for example, we found that executive and program directors had a rudimentary understanding of Philadelphia’s newcomers and had taken few concrete steps to build relationships with immigrant communities. As with the U.S.-born residents, local presence of cultural institutions has an influence on immigrants’ ability to translate capability into functioning; however, for immigrants, the relationship is often “lost in translation.”

Conclusion

The capability approach has grown out of an interest in conceptualizing social welfare beyond a simple focus the level of consumer goods available to individuals. This perspective provides the opportunity to see the arts and culture as part of the range of capabilities that define well-being. This paper has shown how elements of the CA framework provide insight into the role that the arts and culture play in Philadelphia’s communities.

First, we found that the distinction between capabilities and functionings provides a way to conceptualize the importance of access to cultural assets. Specifically, we found that communities with high densities of nonprofit cultural organizations, commercial cultural firms, and resident artists also enjoy high levels of cultural participation. Thus the cultural ecology of a neighbor-
hood enhances individual capabilities by increasing their freedom to choose whether or not to engage in the arts.

Second, we suggested that community cultural assets have implications for the relationship between different capabilities. We were able to show that neighborhoods with high cultural engagement were likely to have lower levels of social stress and ethnic and racial harassment.

Third, in focusing on Philadelphia’s immigrant communities, we discussed several contradictory findings. Immigrants have active cultural lives, but most activity takes place outside of established cultural institutions. We argued that this informal cultural life is a lost opportunity, because it reduces the extent to which immigrant communities benefit from the spillover effects we have discussed above. Our field work, however, has also found that many community actors are active in *arts-based social inclusion* work through which they use the arts to overcome immigrants’ social exclusion.

Taken together these conclusions support one major revision of the CA perspective: the importance of geographic communities to understanding capabilities. The connection between a community’s social ecology and an individual’s capabilities takes several forms. First, the presence of and access to cultural resources are critical to individuals’ ability to use their freedom to choose to engage in cultural activities and thus facilitate the transformation of their capabilities into functionings. Second, the social ecology of a community influences the linkage among sets of capabilities. Neighborhoods with many cultural assets do not only foster cultural engagement but also contribute to the health and affiliation capabilities of residents. Finally, the processes of social exclusion—like those affecting immigrants— influence both the individual capabilities of foreign-born residents and the collective capabilities of their families and communities.

For the most part, the discussion of capabilities has focused on individuals’ freedom to choose particular ways of living their lives. But these choices are constrained and enhanced by the social ecology within which they live. The people and institutions that surround them exercise as large an influence over their life-chances as the policies of their national government. This paper suggests that advocates of the CA spend more time examining local contexts and understanding the role they play in affording opportunities for residents as well as how those residents use that freedom to make decisions about how to live their lives.

The CA enhances our understanding of the way in which the arts and culture are integral to social welfare. For the most part, usually implicitly, theorists assume that the benefits of the arts and culture operate at the individual level. One sees a great work of art or reads a great work of literature, and that experience changes one’s understanding of the world and enhances one’s well-being. Looked at from the standpoint of the CA, however, we understand that the social welfare effect of the arts is associated with the social
interaction generated by cultural engagement. It is this social impact of the arts – the ways in which the arts contribute to building community and linking different communities to one another, not their isolated individual effects – that provides a way of integrating culture and creativity into the fuller view of social welfare promised by the capability approach.

References


