

**Democratic Selection of Context-specific Capabilities:
A Dialogic Procedure to Address Agency,
Difference, and Power**

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**International Conference
on
“Happiness and Public Policy”**

United Nations Conference Center (UNCC)
Bangkok, Thailand
18-19 July 2007

Introduction

The human development paradigm emphasizes people's empowerment as both a means and an end, and central to this conceptualization of development has been Amartya Sen's work on capabilities (Fukuda-Parr 2003). The Capability Approach (CA) and the Subjective Well Being (SWB) or Happiness approach share the same goal, to better understand human values and the conditions that foster the good life, but CA offers more attention to agency (including constraints) and may provide some normative reference points that SWB lacks in its predominantly empirical description of preference and utility (Comim 2005). Thus, this paper defines Happiness as Sen would: an individual's capability to live the life he or she has reason to value.

Much discussion has ensued in recent years as to how to operationalize CA, a purposefully underspecified theoretical framework. Broadly speaking, evaluating and fostering well being via CA would entail a 5-step process: making a list of capabilities to serve as indicators in a particular context, measuring these capabilities against a standard, identifying the factors that hinder or enable the capabilities, targeting these factors in development programs, and finally re-evaluating not merely the progress made toward goals, but the goals themselves—the initial capability list—to respond to change in values over time. This paper focuses on the first challenging step of reaching reasonable agreement on the capabilities to be prioritized in a given application of CA, when the involved parties invariably comprise individuals with divergent values, aspirations, and command of social power.

While precedents exist for creating a universal list of capabilities to indicate well-being (most obviously, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), that is not advocated here. Some scholars (e.g., Nussbaum 2003) understandably criticize Sen for failing to endorse a single list of

capabilities to ensure an equally good life for all; nevertheless, Sen maintains that because the valued life varies from society to society (and among individuals within a given society), context-dependent lists must be generated anew via democratic process each time the approach is employed. A standard *procedure* for capability selection would help address concerns that CA could be exploited in ways that violate social justice norms. A promising procedure is detailed by feminist economist Ingrid Robeyns (2003), who used CA to assess gender inequality in post-industrial Western countries, but techniques must be further specified to engender a genuinely democratic collective decision-making process. Some capability scholars have turned to theories of deliberative democracy for insight, though these are too abstract to implement directly. This paper contributes to the refinement of capability-selection procedures by drawing further insights from feminist and action-oriented perspectives on ethnography, a qualitative research methodology, culminating in a 14-step dialogic procedure for democratic selection of context-specific capabilities that simultaneously respects agency and difference while mediating inequalities in power.

Robeyns' criteria and methodology for capability selection

To begin the discussion of how to draw up a context-dependent list of capabilities, Ingrid Robeyns (2003) proposes five criteria. The first criterion of explicit formulation establishes “that the list should explicit, discussed, and defended” (2003:70). This is the fundamental condition for a democratic process. The second criterion of methodological justification requires that the methods for creating a list as well as the rationale for choosing these methods should be made public for the sake of transparency and accountability. This holds true for each instance that CA is applied, including Robeyns' assessment of gender inequality, the methodology for which is

presented below. The third criterion of sensitivity to context refers to awareness of the level of abstraction befitting the purpose of the list and the “language” of the debate, e.g., philosophical versus economic. The fourth criterion of different levels of generality is related to the third but further stipulates that if the list will be used for empirical or policy purposes, its creation should start with ideals unencumbered by realistic considerations and then be modified according to availability of data, feasibility in terms of time and resources, socio-economic or political concerns, and the like. The last criterion of exhaustion and non-reduction indicates that the list should not overlook any significant capabilities and those listed should not be collapsible into any other.

To generate a list of capabilities to assess gender inequality in Western societies, Robeyns worked through four steps. She began with unconstrained brainstorming, and then tested a draft by “engaging with existing academic, political, and grassroots literature and debates” (72) on the subject. This critical step locally situates the list and draws on the expertise of both outsiders and those whom the list directly concerns. In the third step, she compared her list to other lists to scrutinize whether it upheld the criteria, particularly of exhaustion and non reduction. Finally, she debated the list with others in fulfillment of the first criterion of explicit formulation and justification, possibly resulting in further refinement. This process of crafting a context-dependent list is significant in light of not only Sen’s commitment to democracy but also the extent to which the process itself establishes a list’s political and academic legitimacy.

Robeyns’ five criteria and four-step methodology go a long way in making concrete suggestions for generating a context-dependent list, but as she herself stated, her empirically oriented methodology may not be suitable for policy decisions. The main point of concern is that although Robeyns stresses the importance “to involve the affected people in the section of

capabilities and not to impose on them a list they simply have to accept, especially when the capability approach is used in political and policy contexts,” (76) it is not clear that Robeyns actually did so. She thoroughly consulted the literature and debated her list amongst her academic peers, but it does not appear that she involved others with a more vested interest in those capabilities. To be fair, Robeyns intended her list for an academic evaluation that wouldn't likely have a direct affect on anyone's lives. For practical situations in which policies or actions would be derived from the list, Robeyns pointed out that “hard issues would need to be discussed, such as deciding on the list where deep disagreements exist” (72). Thus, for public discussions in which ordinary people debate the capabilities that contribute to the lives they value, techniques must be further specified to promote a democratic collective decision-making process. To do so, the next section considers critiques of participatory development and theories of deliberative democracy.

Literature on participatory development and deliberative democracy

To select capabilities democratically, the criterion of participation is necessary but insufficient. When participation entered the vernacular of the development industry, it indicated a monumental shift in thought and practice from the traditional top-down approach to one that aimed to empower the targets of development. Unfortunately, “participation” has many different connotations, only some of which allow for a more bottom-up debate. According to Philip Hirsch's observations in rural Thailand, power and control are fundamental to the evocation of participation in the development context. He elaborates, “There is a constant tension between development as a *liberating force* giving people more control over their own lives and access to a better standard of living, and development as a *constraining influence* in the sense that decisions

affecting people's livelihoods are made at an ever more remote level" (Hirsch 1990:1 emphasis added). In this way, participation is ambiguous in its implications for the role of ordinary individuals and the degree of control they have over change in their communities. Regarding participatory rural appraisal (PRA), anthropologists Katy Gardner and David Lewis caution that "villagers can be routinely consulted, maps and charts can be drawn, games can be played to reveal local realities, but experts may well go off and implement their project much as planned" (1996:115). These comments on participatory development involving outside agents point to the need for a more genuinely empowering approach to decision-making.

The answer is not as easy as ejecting the outsider to allow communities to work out the selection of their valued capabilities on their own. A pressing concern is that communities are rarely homogeneous, and conflicting ideas are dealt with according to existing power structures, such that what emerges is often more representative of dominant members' aspirations. Thus, procedures are required to ensure a democratic process—one in which there is better sharing of the influence over decisions affecting valuable capabilities so as to widen "access to capability-enhancing institutions (such as schools) and programs (such as social welfare) for the population as a whole, rather than for elites" (Drydyk 2005:257).

Some capability scholars have turned to the literature on deliberative democracy, which stipulates that for political decisions to be legitimate, they must be made through public deliberation "according to a set of procedures that will guarantee that each participant has equal power and equal freedom in the decision-making process" (Deneulin 2005:81). As summarized by Deneulin (2005), the literature outlines the ideal conditions of democratic decision-making as follows: First, participants are considered equal and free in the sense that they are not obliged to uphold norms and views that exist outside the deliberative context (Cohen 1997). Second,

participants have an equal voice and the cognitive and communicative skills necessary to ensure that their voice is heard (Bohman 1997). Third, the deliberation results in an agreement based on reasons that all parties weighed publicly and found acceptable, despite their differing opinions (Gutmann and Thompson 1996). Fourth, the deliberation is accompanied by epistemological or substantive notions about a just outcome (Gutmann and Thompson 2002; Richardson 2002). As a normative theory, these insights are instructive yet underspecified in terms of how the ideal conditions can actually be achieved. The conditions of freedom from preconceptions/norms and equal voice seem particularly out of reach in light of the nature of human existence as inextricably entangled in webs of cultural meaning and relations of power. To better deal with these complexities, both theoretical and practical insights may be drawn from anthropology's methodological framework, ethnography, and particularly from feminist and action-oriented perspectives.

Insights from ethnography and feminist perspectives

The project of creating a context-specific capability list is essentially an inquiry into what humans value and how they live. What better way to conduct this inquiry than through ethnography, a qualitative research methodology that aims to explicate human existence in its myriad forms. By studying actual material and social conditions, interviewing informants, and participating in the life of a community, ethnographers can engage a critical analysis of prevailing beliefs, attitudes, and practices in a given society. Their examinations of everyday experiences are not meant to simply provide a narrative record but also to offer critical insights into the interplay of human agency and social structure. Ethnographers might, for example, uncover how repressive and manipulative interests may be found in seemingly neutral

institutions like science, the media, family, government institutions and education. By exposing hegemonic institutions and processes through grounded research, ethnography can be instrumental in producing more effective economic, social, and political policy. A qualitative investigation of household decision-making in particular contexts, for example, may illuminate gender inequalities that greatly inhibit the effectiveness of development aid (Hart 1992). At the same time, ethnography emphasizes human agency in ongoing processes of reproduction, resistance, and change. Sherry Ortner (1984) states that the participant observer's position "on the ground" allows her to see people not as passive reactors to the dictates of dominant social forms, but as active agents in their own history. Keeping with the example of household decision-making, an eye to agency would highlight not only the constraints women face in patriarchal societies but also their negotiations to heighten their bargaining power. This perspective on agency and structure is closely aligned with CA, which centers on what individuals are able to do and be given their capabilities, encompassing both enabling and hindering factors in material and non-material form.

Despite the appeal of ethnographic research, this medium is not entirely without problems for those concerned with relations of power. Ethnographers are largely associated with institutions of higher learning and, as such, are situated in a structure that dominates and monopolizes the production of knowledge. Thus, ethnographers traditionally have had the discursive power to speak for and define others. Through its representation of others, the discipline of anthropology has often been implicated in the perpetuation of Western hegemony (Mascia-Lees, et al, 1989). While well intentioned, many contemporary ethnographic attempts to rectify past mistakes by "giving voice" or empowering research subjects cannot help but be "matronizing" (Gordon, 1993), by implication that the subjects are without voice and power of

their own. In the process of speaking with and about others, the hazard of speaking *for* others (intentionally or not) can tear apart collaborative projects.

Feminist approaches to ethnography have had some success in mediating power differentials to produce knowledge collectively, in non-dominating ways, with a social purpose in mind. In Judith Stacey's view (1988), a feminist ethnographic process may be more egalitarian; that is, it may promote a more authentic, reciprocal, and inter-subjective relationship between researcher and informant. This may be so, as feminists with heightened concern for power and difference carefully choose methods that negotiate discourse between multiple voices to illuminate and eliminate the privilege of one form of consciousness over another. This endeavor requires mutual respect and involvement, shared responsibility, valorization of difference, and non-hierarchical ways of achieving ends (Kobayashi 1994). It also requires a particular epistemological theory.

The evocation of epistemology may seem overly esoteric for pragmatic enterprises, but it is necessary to conceive of knowledge production in a way that will empower participants. That is why deliberative democracy theorists advocate it as their fourth condition of democratic decision-making. Briefly, feminist ethnographers hold that truth is situated, partial and contested and that dialogue is integral to knowledge production. "Situated" means that truth emerges from an individual's life experiences, which are shaped by that individual's axes of identity: gender, ethnicity, class, and so on; it is thus partial because individuals view the world from this limited position. Hence conceptions of reality put forth by different actors vary and often conflict; the ones backed by the most social power dominate and can be mistakenly identified as "objective" reality. Regarding dialogue, feminist scholar Donna Haraway explains why communication between multiple individuals is necessary for a less partial, more objective knowledge: "The

knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another. Here is the promise of objectivity: a scientific knower seeks the subject position, not of identity, but of objectivity, that is partial connection” (Haraway 1988:586). Taking an action-oriented perspective, sociologist Dorothy Smith affirms the pragmatic importance of shared conversations: “We want to be able to know because we also want to be able to act, and in acting to rely on a knowledge beyond what is available to us directly” (Smith 1990:34). For many feminists, shared conversations are necessary to build bridges of mutual understanding, creating conditions for collective action. An expansion of human potential is at the heart of this epistemological framework.

Finally, in response to the formidable barriers to an egalitarian research process, some feminists are experimenting with different participatory research methods that seem to deconstruct power asymmetries. Elizabeth Enslin (1994), who engaged in educational activist research concerning women’s literacy in Nepal, advises action-oriented researchers to disrupt local relations of power and knowledge. To do so effectively requires critical understanding of local, national, and international relationships and a critical and feminist epistemology that pivots on situated knowledge. Researchers and participants can then collaborate in developing strategies to put power differentials into productive use. Geographer Cindi Katz (1996) also employed participatory methods on a social forestry project with CARE International and Ethiopian and Etrean refugees in Northern Sudan. She demonstrated her awareness of agency, power, and difference by taking separate village walks with men, women, and children, thereby eliciting different knowledge sets about the natural surroundings and identifying gender- and age-based problems. This case illustrates how participatory methods can be used to uncover gender, class,

and ethnic based experiences and empower participants as central actors and holders of knowledge.

A 14-step dialogic procedure for democratic selection of context-specific capabilities

From the theoretical and practical insights presented above, it is possible now to construct a 14-step dialogic procedure for democratic selection of context-specific capabilities that attends to agency, difference, and power. These 14 steps are as follows:

1. Form Discussion Groups: Select a sample of the target population that is representative of community-wide distribution of gender, age, class, ethnicity, religion, ability, and other significant axes of identity and form discussion groups of a dozen each that reflect this diversity. The desirability of a statistically significant sample size must be balanced with feasibility.

2. Select and Instruct Moderator: Each group is to be led by a moderator who does not participate in the discussion itself but ensures the integrity of the procedures, particularly concerning proper conduct. This individual may be an impartial outsider or an insider that the participants respect and trust to remain objective. The moderator must be fully informed as to what each step entails and his or her roles and responsibilities throughout the process.

3. Sign Participant Pledge: All participants must sign a commitment regarding proper conduct during the discussion process. Such conduct includes but need not be limited to thinking critically, using reason over emotion, being confident in one's own views yet respectful of others, being open to changing one's mind and speaking only when one has the floor. Failure to uphold the standards of conduct as outlined in the pledge is grounds for dismissal. Participants who cannot read or do not understand this pledge must have it read and/or explained to them.

4. **Build Rapport:** To facilitate a fruitful egalitarian dialogue, comfort and trust are necessary between participants who may be strangers or have a relationship of a possibly hierarchical nature in another context. Ice-breakers and team-building exercises are a fun way to accomplish this goal, as in the these examples: “Find Someone Who...” (is afraid of spiders, for example) lets participants learn their peers’ names and likes or interests that are unrelated to charged socio-economic or political issues; “Count off” or “Untie the Knot” allow the group to work together to solve a problem in a game format.

5. **Stimulate Critical Thinking:** The process of generating a list of capabilities requires critical thinking about individual and societal values and ways of life. Paulo Freire's (1970) methods of critically reflexive and socially oriented dialogue, which he developed in mass literacy projects to unveil the reality of oppression and embark on social transformation, may prove fruitful to stimulate this kind of thinking. Briefly, cooperation is required to uncover the group's generative themes—the concrete representations of ideas, values, concepts, and hopes as well as obstacles to full humanization. To decode generative themes, Freire shows pictures or photographs of contextually relevant situations to participants; in describing what they see, participants reveal their values and material realities they face. Other methods, such as a participatory photography activity described in Essen (2005), in which participants took the photographs themselves and provided their own captions, may similarly elicit values and material realities.

6. **Articulate Purpose:** Before crafting the list may begin, the purpose of the list must be articulated so participants comprehend what they are working toward. This step also aims to fulfill Robeyns’ criteria of sensitivity to context and level of generality. Thus, it must be determined at this time what perspective and language should be employed, such as economic,

legal, political, or that which is appropriate for civic society, and if policy will actually be derived from this list.

7. Establish Just Outcome: Participants must also commit to a just outcome as advised by deliberative democracy theorists. A just outcome privileges social good over individual interests, prioritizes survival, security and growth in that order, closes the gaps of inequality in all sectors of society, and is arrived at by two-thirds majority vote. These characteristics should be considered a foundation for a just outcome that can be expanded or modified in actual application.

8. Brainstorm without Censor: In this phase, all participants offer suggestions for capabilities to be included in the list. So that all participants have a chance to speak, they may take turns by going around the room, passing a stick, or being called upon by the moderator. The moderator keeps a list of all suggestions as close to verbatim as possible. No evaluation of the suggested capabilities is to be made at this time.

9. Ensure Exhaustion and Non-reduction: After a break following the brainstorming session, participants review the list to fulfill the criterion of exhaustion and non-reduction. They work together to combine items on the list that are similar, add any new items that might arise, and eliminate items when it can be easily agreed upon to do so. The moderator facilitates this process by making sure that all participants contribute, that they speak only when it is their turn, and that they strictly adhere to the ethic of mutual respect.

10. Formulate Individual Informed Opinions: In preparation for voting and public debate on how the capabilities should be prioritized in the final list, participants should formulate informed opinions through individual research and reflection. Three methods are suggested for this research: 1) reviewing relevant literature that participants either find on their own or receive

from the moderator (in text or audio format); 2) observing material realities in their surroundings; and 3) interviewing their fellow constituents and others they perceive to be “experts.” Participants then reflect on this evidence, weighing it equally, and draw conclusions about how the capabilities should be prioritized. This phase ensures that the individuals’ votes will be well informed and that the ensuing debates benefit from full and deep participation.

11. **Vote on Prioritization:** The group then reconvenes briefly to submit their ballots containing their votes on how each capability should be categorized: high, mid, or low priority, or eliminated from the list. The moderator tallies the votes and identifies disagreements in prioritization of certain capabilities necessitating further discussion.

12. **Debate Disagreements on Prioritization:** To resolve disagreements, participants engage in an orderly debate in which each speaks for 1 or 2 minutes to explain his or her vote. In each explanation, reason is emphasized over emotion and mutual respect must be observed. The vote is then recast by paper ballot, and this process is repeated until an agreement based on reasons all can accept is reached. Participants should be prepared to spend a fair amount of time in this phase.

13. **Compare with Other Lists:** Comparing the list being generated with others helps to evaluate the included items for context-specificity, exhaustion, non-reduction, and suitability of prioritization. This step may occur concurrently with step 11 to facilitate an informed opinion and with step 12 to help resolve disagreements.

14. **Finalize Reasonable Agreement:** To complete the process, participants must finalize their agreement on the capability list and confirm that it adheres to the criteria of purpose and a just outcome stipulated at the start of the process.

Conclusion

This 14-step dialogic procedure for democratic selection of context-specific capabilities sketched here has benefited from insights drawn from critiques of participatory development, theories of deliberative democracy, and feminist approaches to ethnographic research. What is presented here may be considered a first draft: it undoubtedly needs refinement and should be modified to best suit the context in which it is applied. Still, this dialogic procedure for selecting capabilities with attention to agency, difference, and power advances a crucial stage in the important work of evaluating and enhancing their capabilities. This is the first step in empowering individuals to more significantly influence processes of change that affect their happiness.

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