SOCIAL JUSTICE

The Capabilities Perspective: A Framework for Social Justice

by Patricia McGrath Morris

Abstract

The concept of social justice is deeply rooted in social work. The theoretical framework most often embraced by the profession is John Rawls’ A Theory of Justice. However, like most frameworks it has limitations. This paper examines Rawls’ social justice framework as interpreted by social work and offers an alternative, called the “capabilities” perspective, that emerged nearly a decade after Rawls’ 1971 seminal work. Developed by welfare economist Amartya Sen and further articulated by political philosopher Martha Nussbaum, this perspective builds on Rawls’ distributive justice approach and adds the dimensions of human dignity, self-determination, and well-being to its justice framework.

Moreover, what are the benefits and responsibilities—the outcomes—of a just society? How does a society balance between individual rights and responsibilities and the common good? Depending on one’s perspective or theoretical framework, answers to these fundamental justice questions will differ. It is not surprising, therefore, that social justice has multiple meanings in the profession and lacks a clear and unified definition (Saleebey, 1990).

Today, John Rawls’ 1971 A Theory of Justice is typically cited as the social justice theoretical framework embraced by social work (Figueira-McDonough, 1993; Swenson, 1998; Wakefield, 1988). It is often viewed as providing “a rigorous philosophical argument for long standing social work values” (Swenson, 1998, p. 529). Developed as an alternative to moral utilitarian theory, Rawls challenged “the tendency of economists to neglect issues of distributive justice” and opened the way for alternative conceptions of justice (Kiron, 1997, p. 239). Rawls’ theoretical justice framework captures an essential dimension of social justice for the profession—that of distributive justice (Van Soest, 1995; Wakefield, 1988). However, like most frameworks, it has limitations.

This paper examines Rawls’ social justice framework as interpreted by social work and offers an alternative, called the capabilities perspective, that emerged nearly...
a decade after Rawls' 1971 seminal work. Built on the work of welfare economist Amartya Sen, and further articulated by political philosopher Martha Nussbaum, this perspective focuses on the fair distribution of capabilities—the resources and power to exercise self-determination—to achieve well-being.

Background

By the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century, the profession’s remedy to eliminate poverty had begun to shift away from a perspective of charity to that of social justice. Emblematic of this shift was the 1910 election of Jane Addams, social activist and cofounder of Chicago’s Hull House Settlement, as president of social work’s mainstream forum, the National Conference of Charities and Corrections (NCCC). Furthermore, by 1917, this organization had changed its name to the National Conference of Social Work (NCSW) and practitioners, once called charity workers, now commonly referred to themselves as social workers. Reflecting on the name change in her presidential address before the annual conference, Grace Abbott said, “we have since, by changing the name, tried to unload as belonging to the dead past all mistakes we have made in the name of charity; and perhaps we are also trying with this new name to make ourselves believe that we have arrived at the day when social justice and scientific social treatment make charity and correction unnecessary” (Abbott, 1924, p. 4).

Since then, social work’s commitment to social justice has “at times been more rhetoric than reality” (Reeser & Leighninger, 1990, p. 70) and today, as in the past, the profession struggles to incorporate it as a unifying value across both micro and macro practices.

Throughout its history, social work has upheld a commitment to both social and individual change (Abramovitz, 1998; Gibelman, 1999). Often, however, these two approaches to change have been seen as competitors—each “mutually exclusive and divisive” of the other (Haynes, 1998), resulting in “a historical divide between macro and micro practice” (Gibelman, 1999, p. 300). Social reformers have asserted that their practice arena has been neglected or even abandoned by permitting clinical practice to dominate (Bruno, 1933; Coyle, 1940; Specht & Courtney, 1994; Walz & Groze, 1991). For example, during the height of the largest economic depression in the United States, Frank Bruno, in his 1933 NCSW presidential address, cautioned that the profession’s emphasis on the “emotional factor in personality” makes itself open to the danger of “neglecting its social philosophy while it refines its scientific technique” (Bruno, 1933, p. 7). Practitioners in micro practice have experienced a similar feeling of professional neglect, most notably during the tumultuous decade of social unrest in the 1960s. During this time, clinical social workers felt that “clients’ problems were being viewed simplistically as a function of social and environmental factors solely and individuals were being deprived of needed attention” (Goldstein, 1996, p. 9).

Today, the profession continues to struggle with how, and if, the dual missions of individual treatment and social reform could be better integrated. As far back as 1911, some have asserted that the pursuit of both individual and social change diminishes the ability to do either well. Our frontier posts cannot serve under the double standards of adequate relief and adequate treatment without dragging both standards in the dust” (Richmond, 1911, p. 294). There are some in the profession today who view this dichotomy as a “false distinction between micro and macro social work” (Abramovitz, 1998, p. 524) and challenge the profession to “move away from an either/or position” toward a “both/and posture” (Witkin, 1998, p. 484).

The Rawlsian Perspective and Social Work’s Interpretation

Traditionally, social justice has been more easily integrated into macro practice through its social change models of community organizing, advocacy, and social welfare policies (Figueira-McDonough, 1993). The fit has been more problematic for micro practice in which change models focus on individual, family, and group therapeutic work. This split in practice goals has at times created a “justice-therapy tension” within the profession (Wakefield, 1988, p. 354). Jerome Wakefield, in his two-part 1988 series, Psychotherapy, Distributive Justice, and Social Work, proposed that John Rawls’ justice framework could help integrate social justice in both micro and macro practice and has “the power to make sense of the social work profession and its disparate activities” (1988, p. 194).

In John Rawls’ 1971 A Theory of Justice, fairness is viewed from a distributive justice perspective in which the greatest benefits are required to go to the least advantaged in cases of unequal distribution. Until Rawls, utilitarian philosophy had been widely accepted by political philosophers and welfare economists as the
framework within which a moral or just society was defined. According to utilitarian philosophers, a just society is one that maximizes the sum total of a groups’ utility, satisfaction, or happiness. From this perspective, a just society is not concerned with equity of distribution or with individual satisfaction or well-being. In contrast, Rawls claimed that it was not permissible for a just society to bring harm to some of its citizens even if it could be justified by benefitting the greatest number in society (Swenson, 1998).

Rawls, following in the tradition of social contract theorists, claimed that the aim of a just society “is not a specific ideal of human good,” but rather “an institutional framework that embodies a set of basic freedoms and rights” (Kiron, 1997, p. 240). He bases his “justice as fairness” perspective on the premise that a group of individuals, without prior knowledge of their eventual place in society—or what Rawls calls “behind a veil of ignorance”—would protect their basic liberties first and would then minimize disparities in resource allocations in the event that they might become a member of a disadvantaged group. Rawls’ position was that humans act primarily from self-interest and based on this sets forth two principles of social justice in a “lexical order.” First, taking precedent over all others, is “equal liberty,” which means that each person is to have an equal right to maximum liberty. The second, and the one social work tends to emphasize (Van Soest, 1995; Wakefield, 1988), is a systematic method of a fair distribution of “social primary goods.” Rawls further articulates two principles to be imposed on societal institutions in cases of inequitable distribution of “social primary goods.” The first, called the “maximin” principle, requires that the greatest benefits of social primary goods go to the least advantaged, and the second requires that there be a “fair equality” of opportunity (Rawls, 1971).

Rawls makes a distinction between “social primary goods” and “natural goods.” Natural goods, which include health, intelligence, and imagination, are considered by Rawls outside the purview of society’s control and thus not relevant to social justice. While his social primary goods are primarily financial and material resources, Rawls does recognize self-respect as an essential social primary good. The inclusion of self-respect as a social primary good becomes the construct that Wakefield uses to argue that Rawls’ social primary goods go beyond material goods to include psychological goods. Wakefield claims that psychological goods “are a kind of social benefit for which justice requires an attempt at a fair distribution” (1988, p. 194). Wakefield “untangle[s]” the set of psychological traits that he says are encompassed in Rawls’ notion of self-respect and argues that each satisfies Rawls’ criterion of a primary psychological good. Wakefield identifies self-respect, self-esteem, self-confidence, self-knowledge, problem-solving skills, assertiveness, self-organization, and social skills as “social primary goods, all necessary to effective goal-oriented action, all tied to justice, and thus all properly within social work’s natural domain” (1988, p. 361). Wakefield concludes that any “psychotherapy-style interventions, aimed at imparting such psychological goods, would play an integral role in a justice-oriented profession” (1988, p. 194).

Wakefield claims that Rawls’ distributive justice perspective, and in particular his “maximin” rule, buttresses social work’s core mission of helping meet basic human needs. For Wakefield, meeting basic needs now encompasses psychological as well as material goods. The maximin principle is what Wakefield terms “minimal distributive justice” which “leads to a social minimum of primary goods below which nobody is allowed to fall” (1988, p. 200). Basic needs are defined by Wakefield as “those goods every person requires in order to pursue his or her life plan at some minimal level of effectiveness” and which are guaranteed by justice to everyone (1988, p. 208).

As early as 1913, social work has recognized that “social justice demands a minima below which no individual or family, fit to be a member of a community shall be expected to exist” (Tucker, 1913, p. 7). Yet social work has another mission, equally essential in the profession’s Code of Ethics—which is “to enhance human well-being” (NASW, 1999). While Rawls’ theory of justice does not capture this, it is an important justice dimension for the profession. For example, Grace Coyle in her 1940 NCSW presidential address called on social workers to “bend every vital energy, in every individual contact, in every local community, and in the wider areas where certain established social institutions must be remodeled to allow human potential its fullest development” (Coyle, 1940, p. 14). More recently, Gill claimed that the goal of clinical practice “is to help humans achieve self-actualization” and the goal of “political practice is to transform the prevailing social order into one conducive to the self-actualization of every human being” (Gill, 1979, p. 112). Gill argues that these two goals are complementary and could thus help integrate micro and macro practices.
The Capabilities Perspective

Pioneered by Amartya Sen, the 1998 Nobel Prize winner in economics, the capabilities perspective focuses on the fair distribution of capabilities—the resources and power to exercise self-determination—to achieve well-being. This is a sharp departure from Rawls’ focus on the fair distribution of liberties and social primary goods. While the capabilities approach recognizes the importance of social primary goods as valuable resources necessary for well-being, it views them as means to an end, not an end in themselves. Sen argues that “as a direction to go, concentration on the possession of vital commodities seems fair enough. The more exciting question is not whether this is the right direction to go, but whether taking stock of commodity possession is the right place to stop” (1985, p. 15). Sen claims that “while well-being is related to being well off, they are not the same and may possibly diverge a good deal” (1985, p. 15).

Sen asserts that resources, including Rawls’ social primary goods, “do not tell us what a person will be able to do with these properties” (1985, p. 9). He argues that people’s abilities to convert them into valuable functionings vary greatly across individuals and it is this variability that has important implications for distributive justice. He illustrates this with the relatively common example of a person required by physical challenges to use a wheelchair who would need more resources than a person without such challenges to participate to the same degree in community life. He concludes that “in judging the well-being of the person, it would be premature to limit the analysis to the characteristics of goods possessed. We have to consider the functioning of persons” (1985, p. 10).

In contrast to the Rawlsian institutional framework that defines society’s social justice principles, the capabilities approach examines the conception of what makes a good life for an individual and builds on this to develop the capabilities framework for a just society (Sugden, 1997). Sen defines individual well-being as the achievement of valuable functionings. Sen asserts that achieved functionings are dependent on a person’s capabilities and thus distinguishes between a functioning, which Sen states “is an achievement, whereas a capability is an ability to achieve” (Sen, 1985, p. 36).

Ultimately, Sen claims a just society has to center on a person’s positive freedoms to achieve valuable functionings—“what life we lead and what we can and cannot do, can and cannot be” (Sen, 1985, p. 16). Sen acknowledges that well-being is dependent on a person achieving valuable functionings. However, he also recognizes the power in self-determination—the ability of a person to shape her or his own life. For Sen, it is the choosing from “all the alternative combinations of functionings” that constitutes a person’s capability to achieve well-being (1992, p. 40). Capability is based on what a person wants to achieve and what power she or he has to convert primary goods to reach her or his desired ends. Sen’s classic example illustrates why a just society’s goal should focus on capabilities rather than on functionings is the instance in which two people are starving, one because she lacks financial resources to obtain food and the other because she chooses to do so out of religious conviction. Sen states that “in one sense their functioning achievements in terms of nourishment may be exactly similar—both are undernourished.... But one is fasting and the other is not. The religious faster is choosing to starve, whereas the other is exercising no such choice over whether to starve or not” (1985, p. 37). Sen also sees an intrinsic value in the freedom to choose. “Choosing may itself be a valuable part of living, and a life of genuine choice with serious options may be seen to be—for that reason—richer” (1992, p. 41).

Martha Nussbaum, a contemporary philosopher, builds on Sen’s work. She uses the concept of human dignity as the foundation for her capabilities perspective. She also identifies specific valuable functionings, or what she calls “central capabilities,” essential for well-being, and explores issues of oppression in her capability framework. Nussbaum’s work emerged from a period of collaboration with Sen beginning in 1986 at the United Nations University’s World Institute for Development Economics Research, in Helsinki. Nussbaum asserts that human dignity is the basis of the political claim of each and every person to the right to have “the chance”—the power to exercise self-determination—to achieve valuable functionings. In contrast to utilitarian philosophy, Nussbaum argues that a person should never lose her or his individuality by being considered only as part of an aggregate group or a mean. She claims that valuable functionings are essential for each person and that it is “profoundly wrong to subordinate the ends of some individuals to those of others” (1999, p. 234). She states that “to treat a person as a mere object for the use of others” is at the core of exploitation (1999, p. 234).

Issues of justice and well-being go hand in hand in Nussbaum’s approach. She embraces Aristotle’s conception of human good in which the political planner
must satisfy Aristotle’s primary condition for a just polity—that no one lacks for sustenance. This requirement of political justice implies a safety net for the disadvantaged. Nussbaum’s safety net is much broader than either a fair distribution of Rawls’ social primary goods or of Sen’s range of capabilities—the positive freedoms—to achieve well-being (Crocker, 1997, p. 305). Nussbaum’s safety net is a set of “central capabilities” necessary for a person “to live in a truly human way” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 34). Nussbaum asserts that her central capabilities provide a “threshold level,” a level which “all citizens have a right to demand from their governments” (2000, p. 12). Unlike Rawls, who assumes a scarcity of resources and, at times, an unequal distribution of social primary goods, Nussbaum claims that it is “morally unacceptable” to permit trade-offs between central capabilities. She views each as “distinct in quality” yet part of the “irreducible plurality” of the whole (2000, p. 81). Each capability is of “central importance in any human life” and to make trade-offs would negate a person’s capability “to live in a truly human way” (2000, p. 74). She concludes that “we had better get to work and design a future in which such conflicts do not confront families” (2000, p. 118).

Similar to social work’s perspective of person-in-environment, Nussbaum’s central capabilities are comprised of what she calls “combined capabilities”—capabilities that require both internal and external states of readiness. She asserts that to realize a central capability “entails not only promoting the appropriate development of people’s internal powers, but also preparing the environment” to secure the capability to achieve well-being (1999, p. 239).

In contrast to Rawls, who classifies “health” as a “natural primary good” and thus excludes from his justice model, Nussbaum includes health as one of her central capabilities. She argues that while governments can’t make all citizens “healthy” or “emotionally balanced” because some of the determinants are “natural or luck-governed,” governments can “deliver the social basis of these capabilities” (2000, p. 81). She adds that the capabilities approach “insists that this requires doing a great deal to make up for differences in the starting point that are caused by natural endowment or by power” (2000, p. 81). Nussbaum’s central capabilities are: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one’s environment (see Appendix for detailed descriptions of these capabilities).

While Nussbaum asserts that her set of central capabilities is composed of universal values, she also attempts to remain ethnoculturally sensitive. She views her list as “facilitative rather than tyrannical” (2000, p. 59–60). She assumes that her central capabilities “can be more concretely specified in accordance with local beliefs and circumstances” (1999, p. 235) and asserts that her list remains “open-ended and humble” and should be perceived “as a proposal put forward in a Socratic fashion, to be tested against the most secure of our intuitions” (2000, p. 77).

Like Sen, at the core of Nussbaum’s approach is the notion of self-determination. Nussbaum’s central capabilities are in fact unrealized valuable functionings. Nussbaum asserts that it is capabilities and not functionings that are the appropriate political goal for a just society. While well-being and not capabilities “are what render a life fully human ... nonetheless, for political purposes it is appropriate that we shoot for capabilities, and those alone” (2000, p. 189). Just governments should provide the opportunity for persons to achieve well-being—“to be able to live with a full menu of opportunities and liberties, and thus be able to have lives that are worthy of the dignity of human beings.” She adds that governments ought to have “respect for the dignity of persons as choosers” (2000, p. 60). She argues that a person with plenty of food may always choose to fast, or a person who has the opportunities for play may always choose a workaholic life. But she asserts there is a great difference between those chosen lives of fasting and working and lives constrained by lack of food and insufficient labor protections, or the “double-day” that makes women unable to be adequately nourished or to play in many parts of the world. It is these differences that just political institutions should capture. Nussbaum also places constraints on self-determination. She recognizes that individuals can not act in isolation when choosing how to live. Rather, she argues that human dignity requires that a person “shape his or her own life in cooperation and reciprocity with others” (2000, p. 72).

Like social work, Nussbaum struggles to understand how a person can be exposed to a full range of choices. She claims that people’s choices—their preferences and desires—are at least in part economically and socially constructed. She hypothesizes that as people achieve more capabilities they will develop more-informed desires and adaptive preferences. For support of this position, Nussbaum reports her experience with women in India in self-help groups who did “drop[ping] habitual preferences and adjust[ing] aspirations in accordance
with a new sense of their dignity and equality” (2000, p. 161). These women went “through a two-stage process of awareness: coming to see themselves as in a bad situation, and coming to see themselves as citizens who had a right to a better situation” (2000, p. 140).

But Nussbaum also recognizes that societal barriers restrict self-determination, especially for the oppressed. For Nussbaum, oppression is the lack of internal and/or external power to exercise self-determination to achieve valuable functionings. She asserts that it is caused by both material constraints and social constructions. She argues that people living in oppression are not “free to do as they wish,” resulting in the denial of basic liberties and meaningful equality of opportunity (1999, p. 231). Working in the area of women and development, Nussbaum focuses on women’s oppression. She argues that while women may have the legal right on paper to an education “it requires being in a material position to exercise those rights” (1999, p. 231). Nussbaum further argues that even if women have the financial and material resources they may live in a repressive marriage or in a society of traditional hierarchies in which they would likely be prevented from making “true choices.” Nussbaum adds that a woman herself may limit her choice through social constructions informing her preferences, desires, and emotions (1999).

The social construction of oppression limits the effectiveness of resource-based justice approaches, even those sensitive to distributive justice such as the Rawlsian approach, according to Nussbaum. She argues that in countries where women encounter societal barriers from traditional hierarchies or prejudices, more resources are required, for example, to educate women than men. Nussbaum claims that “for women who begin from a position of traditional deprivation and powerlessness [they] will frequently require special attention and aid to arrive at a level of capability that the more powerful can more easily attain” (2000, p. 69). Nussbaum asserts that assessing needs based on resources doesn’t go deep enough to examine these societal barriers, and thus often reinforces entrenched inequalities for women and other oppressed groups.

**Conclusions and Implications**

The capabilities perspective, and in particular Nussbaum’s approach, builds on Rawls’ distributive justice framework and adds the valued social work dimensions of well-being, self-determination and human dignity. Unlike Rawls, the capabilities perspective incorporates social work’s twin missions—enhancing well-being and meeting basic needs—into its justice framework. The capabilities perspective could thus extend the profession’s social justice outcome measure beyond meeting “some minimal level of effectiveness” (Wakefield, 1988, p. 208) to one of a threshold level of capabilities that makes it possible for each and every person to live in a fully human way.

The differences in outcomes between the Rawlsian and capabilities perspectives results in differences in the benefits allocated. Rawls’ benefits are composed primarily of material and psychological social primary goods to meet basic needs. In contrast, Nussbaum develops a set of 10 central capabilities as the minimal threshold level of valuable functionings necessary to live in a fully human way. To illustrate one of the differences between Rawls’ benefits and Nussbaum’s, one might examine Nussbaum’s central capability of “bodily health.” Not only does she include such Rawlsian social primary goods as nourishment and shelter, but she sets the standard for allocation of these resources to that of promoting “good health.” If this capability were implemented in United States policy, one would expect the government to increase food stamp benefit allotments in order to promote health rather than to provide a “minimally adequate diet” as it currently does.

Nussbaum’s identified capabilities extend far beyond Rawls’ vision of social primary goods and are central to social work practice. For example, Nussbaum’s capability of “bodily integrity” emphasizes a person’s ability “to be secure against assault, including sexual assault, child sexual abuse, and domestic violence” (2000, p. 78). Another of her capabilities, “emotions,” includes a dimension of “not having one’s emotional development blighted by overwhelming fear and anxiety, or by traumatic events of abuse or neglect. And Nussbaum’s capability “play” follows in the Settlement House tradition of recognizing the importance of recreation to well-being.

Like social work, Nussbaum also recognizes that it takes both the internal powers possessed by an individual and the conducive material and social conditions to provide the real opportunity for individuals to achieve valuable functionings. Her central capabilities therefore reinforce the profession’s person-in-environment perspective, and suggests that each of her central capabilities be viewed from a bio-psycho-social-spiritual perspective. Thus, in assessing a client’s “bodily integrity”—an ability “to move freely from place to
place”—a practitioner might want to know if the client (a) is a person with any physical disabilities; (b) feels psychologically safe; (c) lives in a safe neighborhood and has access to public transportation; and (d) is able to get to her place of worship. Furthermore, Nussbaum’s complete set of capabilities should be included in any assessment as she views each as both distinct and an “irreducible” part of the whole.

Self-determination, the right of each person to shape her or his own life, is at the core of the capabilities perspective and plays a pivotal role in social work. Under the capabilities perspective, just societies should make Nussbaum’s threshold level of valuable functionings available to each and every individual in order to create an “environment of choice” for all. It is then up to citizens to exercise their right to choose “in cooperation and reciprocity with others” (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 72). This approach, like social work’s empowerment practices and strengths perspective, gives the power back to the individual rather than letting governments or social work practitioners decide what is in the best interest of its citizens or clients. Nussbaum’s “bodily health” central capability illustrates the potential power in self-determination. Under the Rawlsian perspective, housing could simply be provided to a family in need, with little or no input from the family. Under the capabilities perspective, the family would be free to choose, like other consumers, where to live given certain financial constraints. Under the capabilities perspective, the family might choose its housing based on proximity to work, the educational quality of neighborhood schools, the safety of the neighborhood, and/or the quality of the housing. By giving groups, such as the homeless, the poor, and minorities, voices as consumers, their choices would empower them as individuals and potentially create a new demand as their collective voice gains greater power in the marketplace. Inversely, Nussbaum also asserts that oppression, the lack of power, is the inability to exercise self-determination. Unlike Rawls, Nussbaum’s approach begins to incorporate the profession’s two major social justice emphases—economic justice and oppression.

Human dignity, the philosophical foundation of Nussbaum’s capabilities approach, is also a core value of the profession (NASW, 1999). Moreover, Nussbaum’s assertion that each person is of equal worth incorporates a fundamental value of the profession into a social justice perspective. Valuing human dignity reaffirms the profession’s commitment to placing the individual front and center in its practice, rather than emphasizing its therapeutic techniques or society’s social or economic structures.

Although neither Rawls nor the capabilities perspective give much attention to the notion of social responsibility and the common good, it should be included in any of the profession’s social justice definitions. It is seen as a core value in the profession (Gordon, 1965), and the profession’s Code of Ethics calls on its own membership to “elevate service to others above self-interest” (NASW, 1999, p. 5). The concept of social responsibility, however, is rarely highlighted in any of the profession’s discussion on social justice.

Nussbaum’s capabilities perspective, along with a concept of social responsibility, could create a definition of social justice. It would thus be defined as the right of each person to have the opportunity—the resources and power—to develop a threshold level of capabilities in order to live a fully human life and to have the social responsibility to respect the dignity of each and every person in her or his own pursuit of achieving the same end.

Perhaps the capabilities perspective can serve as a holistic, integrative social justice framework for micro and macro practices. The capabilities perspective is still evolving and is only beginning to be known in social work. If the capabilities perspective is to become meaningful for the profession, more research and critical thinking at the theoretical and applied levels are needed. Several preliminary practice principles for all levels of social work are offered in the hope that this will begin a dialogue that enriches and elaborates on the skeletal framework outlined in this paper.

- Employ a capabilities perspective of focusing on valuable functions essential for living a truly human life rather than on a deficiency model of meeting basic needs.
- Consider each of Nussbaum’s capabilities as both distinctive and as an irreducible part of the whole set of capabilities.
- Incorporate a bio-psycho-social-spiritual perspective within each central capability.
- Explore the meanings of each of Nussbaum’s 10 central capabilities and their applicability to social work and your clients. Do Nussbaum’s capabilities get at the core of what social work sees as valuable functionings necessary for well-being?
- Frame self-determination within the constraint of respecting the human dignity of each and every other person to also be able to achieve well-being.
- Be ethnoculturally sensitive when assessing a client, community, or policy from a total central capabilities perspective.
**Appendix: Martha Nussbaum’s Central Capabilities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Capability</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life</td>
<td>“Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bodily Health</td>
<td>“Being able to have good health, including reproductive health, to be adequately nourished; to have adequate shelter.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bodily Integrity</td>
<td>“Being able to move freely from place to place; having one’s bodily boundaries treated as sovereign.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senses, Imagination, Thought</td>
<td>“Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason—and to do these things in a ‘truly human’ way... Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing self-expressive 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.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>“Being able to have attachment to things and people outside ourselves... Not having one’s emotional development blighted by overwhelming fear and anxiety, or by traumatic events of abuse or neglect.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practical Reason</td>
<td>“Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>“Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show as a dignified being who worth is equal to that of others.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Species</td>
<td>“Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animal, plants, and the world of nature.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Play</td>
<td>“Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Control Over One’s Environment</td>
<td>“Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one’s life; being able to hold property, not just formally but in terms of real opportunity; and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure.”</td>
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- Articulate a tighter connection between economic justice and oppression.
- View the U.S. social welfare policy measure of human need from a total capabilities perspective rather than from a poverty or material well-being perspective.

**References**


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1 Excerpts are from Nussbaum, 2000, p. 78–80.


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