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INVITED OPEN PEER COMMENT



Capabilities and Housing: Questions of Application

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ABSTRACT

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Focus article (This issue), which explores how a capabilities approach (CA) might be applied to housing policy. We believe that the CA holds much promise in orienting apparently disparate approaches to housing scholarship, and in fostering interdisciplinary collaborations that explore the relationship between housing and human flourishing. However, it is our assertion that application of the CA requires explicit articulation of the norms and values used to specify housing-related functionings and capabilities, and that such specification should precede attempts to apply the approach. Accordingly, we respond to two aspects of the focus article, which make normative claims that require further exposition and debate. Firstly, we consider the difference between the capabilities approach and a capabilities application and highlight the normative moves this involves. Secondly, we consider the import of these normative moves in relation to the Focus article's discussion of functionings and capabilities relevant to housing. We conclude by suggesting that the full potential of the CA in relation to housing lies in its integrative and normative scope, and that a research programme exploring this potential would commence with critical analysis of the normative underpinnings of contemporary housing theory, policy and practice, prior to considering questions of application.

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Introduction

The Author's (This issue) Focus article is timely and critical given the emergence of the capabilities approach (CA) in housing scholarship and its increasing prominence in social policy internationally (see, for example, Batterham 2018; Clapham, Foye, and Christian 2018; Coates, Anand, and Norris 2015; Haffner and Elsinga 2019; Nicholls 2010). We agree that the approach can make a significant contribution to housing scholarship and policy debate. However, we also argue that application requires prior and explicit consideration of the normative assumptions or taken-for-granted notions identified in the Focus article. The normative aspect of the *application question* is critical precisely because of the ongoing legacy of utilitarian and welfare economic values evident in housing research and policy. Thus, the aspiration of policy-relevant analysis – answers to questions about what should be done and by whom – requires preliminary work that could be guided by a CA, and reflection on what the approach means for 'doing' housing scholarship. We claim that this will lay the

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groundwork for employing the full conceptual power of the CA as a tool for thinking about housing and fostering meaningful inter-disciplinary dialogue and debate.

Accordingly, we respond to two aspects of the focus article, which make normative claims that require further exposition and debate. Firstly, we consider the difference between the *capabilities approach* and a *capabilities application* and highlight the normative moves this involves. Secondly, we consider the import of these normative moves in relation to the Focus article's discussion of "functionings and capabilities relevant to housing" (Focus Author Date, 9). We conclude by suggesting that the full potential of the CA in relation to housing lies in its integrative and normative scope, and that a research programme exploring this potential would commence with critical analysis of the normative underpinnings of contemporary housing theory, policy and practice, prior to considering questions of application.

Normative Aspects of a Capabilities Application

The CA remains an open-ended and under-specified normative theory for thinking about human flourishing. In broad terms, a normative theory makes "hypotheses or other statements about what is right and wrong, desirable or undesirable, just or unjust in society" (Scott and Marshall 2009). The CA is open-ended in the sense that it can be "developed in a range of different directions, and for a range of different purposes" and under-specified because "additional specifications are needed before the capability approach can become effective for a particular purpose" (Robeyns 2017, 29). Its status as an incomplete normative theory reflects this open-ended nature and few theorists, with the exception of Nussbaum (2011), have attempted to develop the CA into a fully formed normative theory. Thus, Robeyns (2017) emphasizes the importance of distinguishing the *capability approach*, on the one hand, which is open-ended and under-specified, from its use as a *capability theory* or *capability application* on the other, which is tailored for a specific purpose and may involve several normative decisions to close or specify its parameters.

Normative Moves: Identifying Housing-Relevant Functionings and Capabilities

The section titled *Applying the Capability Approach to Housing Studies: Functionings and Capabilities Relevant to Housing* includes some initial suggestions for how the CA might be specified; that is, taken from an open-ended approach to a specified capability application within housing studies. The Focus Author (Date, 9) suggests "a need for explicitly stating housing-relevant-functionings" as a mechanism for "re-orienting the main focus of housing policy" and for informing the identification of a relevant capabilities set. The Focus Author acknowledges that such discussion is not intended to be definitive or closed from debate. However, this preliminary discussion involves important specifications to the CA that are not made explicit. The normative moves in this initial discussion constitute the substance of debate regarding the application question and should precede the development of any list of capabilities; however formative or speculative they are intended to be. We thus draw attention to three aspects of the application put forward here that we think require more explicit consideration and debate; namely, the question of *which*

functionings and capabilities, the related issue of conflation of normative moves this involves, and finally, the role assumed for the housing scholar and policymaker.

Which Functionings and Capabilities?

The core concepts of the approach – functionings and capabilities – are inherently value-neutral; that is, the CA does not argue that certain capabilities or functionings are inherently “good” or “bad” (Sen 1993). Several capability theorists have made the point that many “beings” and “doings” might be considered bad (Carter 2014; Nussbaum 2003; Robeyns 2016), such as being homeless or having the capability to murder. However, a common mistake in applying the CA is to conflate the normative move of identifying a range of possible functionings with the normative project of assigning them a value (Robeyns 2016). The former step is normative in the sense that it establishes the range of possibilities of which we can conceive. The latter points to that which we consider as holding a positive value or “good”. Both moves are naturally influenced *inter alia* by our knowledge, experience, values, social norms and cultural context.

These normative moves are not inherently problematic. They only become problematic when the norms and values involved in their specification remain opaque or where there is assumed to be agreement about their merits. (The question of who should identify these merits is addressed further below.) Instead, Robeyns (2017, 61) argues that the process of deciding *which* functionings or capabilities to consider

is a deeply normative question, and touches the core of the difference that the capability approach can make. After all, the dimensions that one selects to analyse will determine what we will observe – and also, equally importantly, what we will not observe since the dimensions are not selected.

As such, the value attached to capabilities emerges from its application to a specific issue, whether it is used in a normative, evaluative or prescriptive way.

Consequently, consideration of *which* housing-related functionings and capabilities is secondary to understanding the premises upon which their identification is based. These premises specify the CA for housing studies and are the mechanism through which it ceases to be “overly vague and open” (Focus Author 2019, 9). More specifically, the values, norms and assumptions underpinning any attempt to frame housing-related capabilities or functionings provide the conceptual specifications to which scholars and policymakers can respond. This kind of specification is made explicit in the Focus article when discussing what is meant by the term “housing” and the rationale for using the term “residing”. It is this process that needs to be carried through the application discussion such that the mechanism for specifying the CA is made clear. As such it is the values and norms that provide the intellectual linchpin for inter-disciplinary discussion and debate. This level of clarity is fundamentally important to any capability application but is particularly important for housing-related debates precisely because of the legacy of taken-for-granted notions in contemporary policy and practice articulated in the Focus piece. Without such clarity, we risk uncritically reiterating or embedding pre-existing values and norms onto the CA in a way that undermines its potential as a framework for reviewing housing policy directions.

The Role of the Housing Scholar

Another and less obvious way in which the capability approach is specified in its application relates to the role assumed for the housing scholar/analyst. This is critical for several reasons but of note here are its implications for theorizing, policy making and evaluating the relationship between housing and living “a good life”. The Focus article engages with the question of how to think about housing using the CA by considering “the extent to which the capability approach can be applied to housing studies and thus can contribute to discussions on housing policy directions.” (Focus Author 2019, 2). In doing so, the article tends to treat the CA as a theoretical framework that can be *applied* to the existing terrain of housing scholarship, without the kinds of specifications discussed above. This treatment is more consistent with Nussbaum (2011), whose 10 basic capabilities attempt to specify the approach for broad application. However, one of the ways in which this attempt has been criticized relates to the role Nussbaum assigns to the theorist. Robeyns (2016), for example, notes that:

Nussbaum’s view presupposes that the political theorist is like a mediator or a broker of citizens’ comprehensive views. On this view, the political theorist is not one among citizens – even if we acknowledge that she is a theorist-citizen with a specific responsibility, based on training and expertise, to clarify thoughts, introduce concepts, and scrutinize doctrines. Rather, **she stands above** her fellow citizens as a theorist-mediator. But this is not the only available view. (411, emphasis added).

This same stance of *standing above* is evident in the Focus article (This issue). This is apparent in the degree to which the application question is related to an attempt to “diagnose”, “define” and debate what might be considered important housing-related-functionings. In doing so, it could prematurely foreclose the scope of consideration, limiting the space of evaluation to capabilities relevant to a functioning of well residing, and risks conveying that determination of valuable functionings are within the purview of the individual researcher/scholar/analyst. Alkire (2005) noted as part of the inherent intent of the CA that “... it is not entirely up to any researchers, however august, to operationalize the capability approach – to ... fill in all of the boxes with information and value judgments.” (128). Commenting on the different ways of operationalizing a capabilities approach, Alkire further highlighted its potential to be a “... collaborative enterprise, with many researchers working on different aspects at the same time” (130).

Finally, the CA used as an unspecified theory has the potential to “flatten” its dynamic and situated nature to the extent that policymakers could measure housing-related-functionings in the same way that they consider measures of housing satisfaction. That is, with a view to the *means* of housing rather than an evaluation of its complex relationship to human flourishing. Such functionings risk losing their highly contextual and situated properties and could be reduced to the kind of benchmark that is detached from the complexity and diversity “a good life” comprises.

This complexity is expressed in the assertion that functionings and capabilities are always a plurality. Nussbaum (2011, 18) for example, argued “... the most important elements of people’s quality of life are plural and qualitatively distinct: health, bodily integrity, education, and other aspects of individual lives cannot be reduced to a single metric without distortion.” Robeyns (2017, 52) noted

... what is relevant is not only which opportunities are open to us individually, hence in a piecemeal way, but rather which combinations or sets of potential functionings are open to us ... The point about the capability approach is precisely that it is comprehensive.

As has been noted by housing scholars for some time, " ... adequate housing is a necessary but not sufficient condition" (Batterham 2018, 7); that is, a good life is not secured solely by the provision of housing. The CA is an invitation to explore the interconnections between housing and the substantive freedoms available to people to live (be and do) in ways they value.

Conclusion

The open-ended and underspecified formulation of the capabilities approach signals its methodological potential for the field of housing scholarship, in which there are multiple disciplinary and professional perspectives informing research, theorizing and practice. The multidisciplinary nature of housing theory, research, and practice has been identified as a challenge in housing scholarship (Clapham 2018); however, capabilities thinking reframes methodological and disciplinary pluralism as a strength, whereby different perspectives on how to specify the CA complement the overall analysis. As an integrating framework, the CA holds much promise in orienting apparently disparate approaches to the field towards a shared goal (housing and human flourishing), and in fostering the cross-field collaborations that follow from the socially embedded nature of housing. It is our assertion that these collaborations require explicit articulation of the norms and values used to specify the CA, and that such specification should precede attempts to apply the approach. Regarding the roles of theorists, researchers and analysts, given the potential breadth of considerations involved in exploring housing as it relates to capabilities, we argue that interdisciplinary and collaborative research is a prerequisite rather than a desirable characteristic of its comprehensive articulation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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