

Capability

Capability is the core concept of the capability approach, which is a broad normative framework for the evaluation of individual well-being and social arrangements, and the development of policies and social change. The central claim of the capability approach is that these evaluations and proposals should rely upon an analysis of the (expected) changes in the capabilities of individuals or groups. Although the precise terminology has changed a little over time, the most widely-used description of capability is the real opportunity or freedom to be the person one wants to be, and do the things one wants to do. These beings and doings are called functionings. The expansion of people's capabilities is the central normative goal of the human development approach, which is best known from the Human Development Reports which are annually published by the United Nations Development Programme.

The concept of power is relevant for the capability approach in two ways. The first is at the ontological level: the concept of capability refers to human power. In ordinary language, 'capability' refers to an undeveloped or unused faculty of a human being, without reference to her environment. In this sense, 'capability' is a human power. However, this is not how 'capability' is conceptualised in the capability approach. Nussbaum (2000:84) explains that the philosophical-technical 'capability' has three components: the innate capabilities such as the capability for speech and language; the internal capabilities which are the developed states of the person herself, and the external conditions which are needed for the exercise of the functioning. If all three components are present, a person is said to have a capability. Having a capability thus implies having the necessary internal powers, but goes beyond them by stressing the external conditions too. If we rephrase this in terms of the concepts of ability and ableness, then the notion of capability corresponds to the notion of ableness, since it is not just about our abilities to do what we can do and be the person we can be, but also about the right external conditions which enable us to fulfil our abilities should we wish to do so.

Power plays a second, and rather different, role in the capability approach. Structures and relations of power in society, organisations and human interactions, influence the capability sets of individuals. Yet it has been argued that by shifting the focus of analysis from the determinants of people's quality of life to a discussion of what precisely entails that quality of life, a capability analysis is insufficiently able to analyse these power structures. Stated differently, the critics assert that the capability approach would focus too much on conceptualising, evaluating and measuring people's well-being, thereby losing sight of the political and economic analysis of the causal factors that determine well-being, including structures of power.

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See also: ability, ableness, distributive justice, freedom, opportunity.

Further Readings

Nussbaum, M. (2000). *Women and Human Development. The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Sen, A. (1999). *Development as Freedom*. New York: Knopf.