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Housing, Homelessness and Capabilities

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ABSTRACT In this paper the work of Martha Nussbaum (in which 10 “essential” functions required for human life are identified) is used as a framework for using “moderate essentialism” in the study of housing – or more specifically, to introduce moderate essentialism framed through the capabilities and critical realism, to a theoretical interpretation of what housing represents, as both an enabling and constraining force by which to attain these 10 essential functions. Data from a recent qualitative study of transitions through homelessness conducted in the UK is used to illustrate the resonance that these 10 functions may (or may not) have for individuals to live a “well lived” life. A fit is found; it is clear that housing is closely related, although this is a complex relationship with the capability to attain one function at times being at the expense of another. It is postulated that the intersection of these functions (and their “essentialist” nature) provides an approach for future consideration of the role housing has in enabling a “well lived” life.

KEY WORDS: Essentialism, Transitions, Basic needs

Drawing on the “capabilities” approach, this paper examines what housing should enable people to be capable of. The capabilities approach is synonymous with the work of Amartya Sen (1980, 1984, 1993, 2004a) and others, and is here particularly explored through the work of Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 1992, 2003, Nussbaum & Sen 1993). The paper especially draws on Nussbaum’s argument that there may be “essential” functions (capabilities) that humans value and require to live a “well lived” human life (Nussbaum 1992). Unique case studies representing the transitions through homelessness are examined. These manifest the different experiences, needs and circumstances that homelessness represents, along a continuum of housing need from rough sleeping, to temporary accommodation, to housed (Bramley 1988, Watson & Austerberry 1986).

Essentialism is drawn from here. This is a philosophy that has to be used carefully, “one whose definition and critique quickly get us into arguments which are as old as philosophy itself” (Sayer 1997:454). Essentialist notions of a structured “world” of external, measurable “truths” that can be abstracted and are immutable can be dangerously applied – for example, gender inequalities being justified as “natural” – and have been widely discredited (Assiter 1996).

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However it may also be that by rejecting any notion of an “essence” of what all members of humanity need, the baby is being thrown out with the proverbial bathwater (McLennan 1995, Nussbaum 1992, Sayer 1997). As Nussbaum postulates:

Once we identify a group of especially important functions in human life, we are then in a position to ask what social and political institutions are doing about them. Are they giving people what they need in order to be capable of functioning in all these human ways? And are they doing it in a minimal way or are they making it possible for humans to function well? (Nussbaum 1992:214).

There have been numerous attacks on relativist notions of human need (such as Doyal & Gough 1991). However Doyal & Gough (1991) advocate that human needs can be identified that are objective and universal, without allowing this assertion the breathing space it needs to survive – a space that incorporates social, political, historical and ultimately, individual context to this assertion. The capabilities approach, whilst sharing many of the concerns of basic need theorists, advances by bringing these concerns together “into a single, coherent, philosophical framework” (Clark, 2005:3). A further strength of the capabilities approach lies in the incorporation of context and agency, alongside an approach championing a normative essentialism relating to needs and rights.

For acknowledging some critiques of essentialism are valid does not invalidate all essentialist philosophy. Andrew Sayer (1997) has argued critical realism can be used to reframe a “moderate” essentialism, and this is the form that underpins the assertions in this paper.

Critical realism provides an ontology from which the open and complex nature of societies can be theorized and researched (Lawson 2006, Sayer 2000) and is a stance that, it is highlighted later, is not dissimilar to that of Amartya Sen (whose work is synonymous with capabilities), indicates in his writing (2004a, 2004b). In the next section this framework for exploring the empirical and social value of identifying “essential” functions, drawn from the capabilities approach is outlined.

The focus shifts in the second half of the paper, where homelessness is used as a case study. Drawing on a recent empirical study of transitions through homelessness, it is postulated that Nussbaum’s framework allows for a nuanced understanding of the role housing has as a component of the functions required to live a “well lived” life. This is particularly when applied to the tension found as people attempt to gain what is lacking – in the case of homelessness, a home. This reframes housing as more than a material resource, but as a mechanism that can act to enable or constrain the functions required for a “well lived” life. Without this, material goods are rendered “purposeless”, their value being dependent on the “role they actually play in human life” rather than their existence (Nussbaum 1992:233). The argument presented here develops one postulated by King (2003) who identifies homelessness as a unique case in point for understanding freedom. King argues that to undertake certain functions people must have a place to “be” (Waldron 1993 in King 2003:54). Housing provides this but King argues for a nuanced understanding of housing as a space enabling individuals to attain higher, as well as having basic functions. Indeed, as the argument presented here develops, it becomes clear that there is a tension inherent whereby basic and higher functions may at times be mutually exclusive and attained
only at the expense of each other, within certain contexts. Before going on to present this argument, however, the role of a form of essentialism informed by critical realism that underpins this is elaborated.

**Moderate Essentialism**

Essentialism is the identification of something as being: (1) an intrinsic and defining feature, shared by all things categorized as that “thing”; and (2) necessary for this “thing” to be categorized as such (Sayer 1997). Essentialist doctrine dominated the social sciences until the early 20th century, relying on an objectivist sense of realism. Realism is a philosophical doctrine that asserts: “a real world exists independently of our knowledge of it” (Somerville & Bengtsson 2002). If an objective world exists then it can be held, the “essence” or truths of that world can be abstracted through social science modelled on natural sciences. Such “strong” essentialism was later widely criticized by a number of sources; in many cases rightly so, due to the reductionist and biological assertions made about human differences and behaviour, e.g. gender (Assiter 1996) and race (Williams & Chrisman 1993).

Existentialist philosophy, asserting that “existence comes before essence” (Sartre 1988) has long offered a relativist challenge to essentialism. Relativism developed as an academic force throughout the 20th century, leading to an almost universal rejection of essentialism in social science in favour of the “cultural” turn of post-structuralism and social constructionism (Nussbaum 1992). Anthropologists such as Margaret Mead began to identify that, rather than biologically determined outcomes, the reproduction of shared traits among groups could be explained as socially constructed “cultural” forces (Rosdeth 1998). Cultural relativism such as this was supported by post-structuralist theory stemming from the work of linguists such as Saussure, who identified language formation as the means to categorize and create meaning rather than a descriptor of pre-existing “reality” or “essences” ready to be “spoken” about (Shusterman 1989). In sociology, Goffman’s (1959) and Mead’s (1967) theories of “performing social roles” and “self-fulfilling prophecies” (where people act as they are labelled) contributed to the dominance of social constructionism in social sciences, which arguably exists today.

Anti-essentialism has not been without opposition. For example, Taussig (1993) has asserted that it may be part of being human to construct oneself through culture. Therefore that this occurs does not deny that it is an essential component of being human, but rather may support the supposition. Anti-essentialist philosophy may itself manifest essentialism. The existential ideal that people construct their own identities is as essentialist as supposing identity comes from biology. It does not hold that because people perform social roles, there is no essence to what it is to be human, or indeed that this essential nature may not underpin how these roles are played out in any given context.

To claim that there are no essential features to human life, rather it is all a construct, is to render everything meaningless – “everything is up for grabs” (Nussbaum 1992:209). How for example could feminism have been mobilized without some identification of what it is to be a woman, or what women are, as opposed to say an animal or even a man? Identification of “essential” components of human life can be mobilized for egalitarian means when not confused with the strong...
essentialism Andrew Sayer critiques (1997). Sayer defends what he terms moderate essentialism:

[c]ritics of essentialism often assert that it invokes not merely essences but unchanging eternal ones (...) but there is no reason why all essences should be of this kind. (...) To say that an object or a social relation has an essence, that which makes it that kind of object or social relationship rather than another, is not to rule out any change within it (Sayer 1997:462).

Sayer argues “things” that are socially constructed, such as institutions or language, can still have features that are essential to them. Moderate essentialism only requires the identification of what is “essential” at that point in time for that object to exist as such. Identifying essential components does not have to presuppose a natural order or the hand of God at play. Nor is the form that playing out these essential aspects immutable, rather it is context dependent. So for example, what actually constitutes “recreation” can differ in different contexts and times. However all humans may still value the capacity to engage in acts of recreation, however they define this. For one person physical activity may be enjoyable, for another, reading alone. Over time, what is classed by one individual as an act of recreation may change to another act. The point is that all people will still seek out and should be capable of certain essential human functions, although attaining these functions may involve different acts for different people and in different times and spaces.

Moderate essentialism also presupposes and supports diversity rather than refutes it – for it is only in the identification of what is the same, among otherwise disparate things, that an essence can be claimed.

Perhaps the most pragmatic objection to anti-essentialism can be found in the assertion of the humanism of essentialism, promoting human rights and capabilities. In her 1992 paper, Nussbaum defends a humanist essentialism that asserts (1) human beings have some shared inherent nature; (2) to be human is to have this nature; (3) therefore the key functions that enable this to flourish should be identified and promoted to ensure people are capable of attaining a “well lived” life. The work of Nussbaum (Nussbaum 1992, 2003, Nussbaum & Sen 1993) and most notably, Sen (1980, 1984, 1993, 2004a) have been instrumental in developing a theoretical approach that incorporates this humanism, referred to as the “capabilities” approach.

The Capabilities Approach

Sen proposed in early work that to analyse social justice and inequality, the question “equality of what?” is central (Sen 1980). Rather than focus on measures of well-being or equity that are relative or intangible (such as asking people how content they are, when they may have little knowledge of anything other than poverty), or focusing on resources (such as the level of income) Sen has argued that the central consideration of social justice should be what are people capable of (Sen 2004a). By focussing on what people are actually able to do and be, from within the context they operate within, important limitations of other approaches to social justice can be negated (Sen 1993). Firstly, a concentration on greater equality of “goods”
accessible to all, found in some theories of justice (such as the level of income) does not account for difference between groups. Different means may be required for the same outcomes. So for example, a pregnant women or an older person with little mobility require different resources from each other, and different resources compared to an able bodied male, to attain the same outcomes, such as adequate housing, health or well-being. Just ensuring that there is a threshold of resources available for all does not take into account other factors that enable or constrain what humans are actually capable of with these resources (Sen 2004:332).

Secondly, agency is taken seriously in the capabilities approach – it is not what people do, but what they are capable of doing that is the focus. Therefore intangible measurements of equality that rely on what people actually do rather than could do are negated. The influence of context, difference and agency to the outcomes that occur can also be incorporated into the analysis. Applying capabilities to mental illness and recovery in the US, Hopper writes the capabilities approach:

...supplies a model of human flourishing that encompasses primary goods (material and cultural necessities) as well as more complex competencies (the exercise of practical reason and social connectedness) and representations of worth (Hopper 2007:20).

This is not to say that the capability approach is without critique. Clark (2005) highlights the unresolved problem of conflicting values or cultural preferences regarding the capabilities approach – how are “valuable” capabilities to be identified at a micro-level without returning to relativism? Nussbaum’s “list”, which is the focus of the argument in this paper, provides an identification of core functions, but has also been criticized for being paternalistic, and representing the views of a middle class North American philosopher, rooted firmly in Aristotelian ideals (Clark 2005, Stewart 2001). Robeyns (2003a) draws attention to the piecemeal development that capabilities approach informed theories have had. A range of different disciplines have adopted the capabilities approach, leading to different perspectives developing depending on the disciplinary lens the research question is being examined through.

The role individual agency or social structures have in constraining or enabling the capabilities that can be realized in any given context has also been raised. Hill (2003) argues that insufficient attention is paid to social power in a capabilities informed account of human functioning, and Robeyns (2003b) that the influence of both social construction and social structures on the choices people make regarding what they can do and be, has not yet been taken into proper account. Nevertheless it is argued in this paper that a capabilities informed approach can be usefully applied to an analysis of the role housing has in the development of central functions, particularly when a moderate essentialism, compatible with critical realist ontology, frames the discussion.

**Capabilities Epistemological Compatibility with Critical Realism**

The capabilities approach acknowledges that a “real” world exists and that people are embedded within this, without denying the importance of agency and constructed meaning to how that world is experienced and interactions played
out. It incorporates a need to identify central capabilities that relate to some shared essence of human existence, alongside an assertion of the context dependent and contingent nature of how attaining these central functions will play out. Therefore it appears that the capabilities approach is compatible with critical realism and that both are moderately essentialist. Consider for example Sayer’s (1997, 2000) account of critical realist causation in which he argues that critical realists:

...seek to identify properties which enable an object to produce or undergo distinctive kinds of changes, and indeed are a necessary condition for doing those things; in virtue of their physiological and cognitive structures human beings can communicate but not fly, they can kill one another, reproduce and assume or acquire (...) identities. We could refer to these properties as “essences” (of the generative kind). (Sayer 1997:471).

Sayer goes on to point out, whilst humans could kill other people, they do not necessarily do so, “results are not thereby predetermined, they depend on context” (Sayer 1997:472). It is what people (and objects) are capable of that is important, even if never realized. The outcome of exercising one’s capabilities will play out differently due to the context and time that this occurs within. This difference does not mean that core essential functions that are required to be human do not exist. So for example few would dispute that intimate relationships are not essentially important to humans. However these intimate relationships may take the form of marriage, or involve people living apart but still in a relationship. They may be between men and men, women and women, or women and men. Some people may believe in monogamy while others have multiple partners. Not all people at all times in their lives will be in a relationship. None of these differences diminish the importance of having intimate relationships, or of ensuring that intimate relationships can be engaged in on equal and just terms between each party, when and if they wish to do so.

So both critical realism and the capabilities approach allows for the ontological assertion that there are core capacities essential to human functioning, whilst also acknowledging the shape these take or how they are played out is context specific, changes over time, or may not ever be a capacity that is exercised.

Identifying Central Functions

It is due to the context dependent and complex nature of human societies that Sen has been reluctant to endorse a specific list of what it is that people should be capable of: “[s]ome of the basic capabilities (...) will no doubt figure on every list of relevant capabilities in every society” (an assertion of some moderate essentialism). In response to Sen’s reluctance, Nussbaum has been influential in developing a list outlining what she believes are central functions – the central requirements for a “well lived” life (Nussbaum 2003:40). This list, Nussbaum notes, is not set or exhaustive, but an informed framework of central capabilities that can be used for democratic development; it is a “thick vague conception of basic human functional capabilities” (Nussbaum 1992:222).
Democratic development of such lists has been operationalized in recent years. In the UK for example, Vizard & Burchardt (2007) developed a capability list for the Commission on Equality and Human Rights. Sen advocates that such lists, should they be developed, need to “take note of the purpose of the exercise” (Sen 2004b:79). In this case the focus was inequality. This exercise developed “a list of central and valuable capabilities in terms of which inequality in Britain can be conceptualized and appraised” (Vizard & Burchardt 2007:ii). A similar process is currently being undertaken in the US in the mental health field, again stemming from Nussbaum and Sen’s original work.

Despite “adequate shelter”, “housing” and “control over one’s space” or “enjoyment of home” being repeatedly core components of such lists (see Nussbaum 2003, Vizard & Burchardt 2007:6), the capabilities approach has not as yet been explicitly applied to housing as an enabling or constraining force for realizing such functions that Nussbaum identifies as essential (although see King 2003 for mention of Nussbaum with regard to housing). This paper therefore represents an exercise to do so, using an empirical subject matter – homelessness – that acts a key and unique example of a lack of what people should have. The list Nussbaum developed in her 1992 and then 2003 papers is used as the framework for this consideration. Before going on, the argument outlined in this section is summarized:

1. Essentialism has been widely criticized; however a moderate essentialism underpinned by critical realist ontology can overcome this (Sayer 1997). This asserts that there is a real world independent of our construction of it, but much of our social interactions within this world will be influenced by constructed discourse and institutions.

2. Acknowledging that there are central functions essential for humans to live a good life is a pragmatic humanist endeavour. Some moderate essentialism is required to support this claim. Sen’s capabilities approach has been instrumental in endorsing such an approach. This approach focuses on ensuring humans have the capacity to attain central functions, from within their own context dependent circumstance.

3. The exact nature of what humans need to be capable of to lead a “good” life is context specific and may change over time, but can be identified. Lists have been developed and one of the most influential of these has been that by Martha Nussbaum. It is acknowledged that such lists should be open to democratic debate and scrutiny to ensure their relevance (Sen 2004b, Vizard & Burchardt 2007).

4. Despite shelter/housing/home and control over environment figuring on these lists, there has been little explicit engagement with the capabilities approach from the housing field, or on the role of housing from those working in the capabilities field. Such an engagement could begin by examining housing as an enabling or constraining component of the central human functionings identified by Nussbaum, using empirical data on a specific case that highlights what is lacking – homelessness. This is done in this paper.
Homelessness and Nussbaum’s Central Functions

The 10 essential functions required for a “well lived” life that Nussbaum identifies (2003) are: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliations; other species; play; and control over one’s environment. If it is agreed that these are essential human functions then they can become politicized as human rights; as Nussbaum’s later work (2003), moving on from Aristotelian philosophy (1992) does. Here these 10 functions are contrasted with empirical data on transitions through homelessness, to see if this fits with a study of real lives, and real experiences of losing and gaining housing.

The examples given are taken from a qualitative longitudinal study of transitions through homelessness conducted in a city in the UK. In this study 28 people who were, or recently had been, homeless, were followed for a year in their lives. Homelessness was defined as being without permanent housing, such as legal tenancy (with the caveat that definitions of homelessness are complex and contested (Jacobs, Kemeny & Manzi 1999). All were engaging with social and voluntary sector services to assist them resolve their homelessness.

Life histories and a series of in-depth interviews were completed with each of the participants. Whilst at the outset of the research all of the participants were negotiating with problems such as addiction, mental illness, and had a low level of economic resources, many had also had periods in their lives when they were employed, and settled. Details of the research and the epistemological framework underpinning it have been published elsewhere (McNaughton 2006, 2008, McNaughton & Sanders, 2007, McNaughton Nicholls 2009). In this paper the participants’ experiences of making their transitions, and how their changing housing circumstances constrained or enabled attaining the essential functions of Nussbaum’s list, are considered.

Life

Nussbaum (1992) argues the avoidance of untimely death, and acknowledgement of mortality, are central to human functioning: humans both face and have an aversion to death. The people studied here had often faced death, sometimes at their own hand, through overdose or suicide attempts. Over a third reported having recently attempted suicide. In many studies of homelessness, traumatic life experiences (such as being threatened with death through violence) (Collins & Phillips 2003, Newburn & Rock 2005) or suicide attempts (Baker 1997) are reported. Therefore homelessness can be associated with an awareness of mortality and, often, an active negotiation with death.

Nussbaum (2003) argues that being able to live to the end of human life, or avoiding one so reduced that it is not worth being alive, is a central capability, that should be promoted through mechanisms of power, such as the state and civil society. The participants had often did not feel they had a life worth living, and they did attempt to end it themselves. One participant noted, for example:

I lay behind a building with an old carpet. You go like that, do you want to kill yourself, or do you want to die? There is no easy way out, how do you do it without the pain?
Their capacity for life was often lacking. Many of the participants discussed that prior to and during their homelessness they had reached the “bottom” and attempted suicide before they finally entered institutions and found some refuge, such as being admitted to a hospital and then into an accommodation project for homeless people. Complex factors intersected to lead to them feeling they “no longer had a life worth living”: addiction, mental illness, despair, destitution. This was compounded by homelessness however, and the lack of control that they felt when they were in the homeless system:

You get stuck in hostels, you can go right down as far as you can go and die or you try to get back up again. I had to go right back down before anyone would help me.

In this context the participants did not have capability to even have a life worth living, and it was often only when they almost lost that life (through overdoes or suicide attempt for example) and they entered institutions that this began to change. In this context their suicide attempts were the only capacity to escape the situation they were in, to take control over their lives by destroying it. This paradox is further illustrated in the next example.

**Bodily Health and Integrity**

Life relates to the next key aspect of human functioning: the human body. Humans are rooted in bodies (Sayer 1997). These essentially are “home”, which cultures, society and individuals work to build houses to dwell within. Having a body embeds in humans, needs – for food, water, shelter, warmth, mobility, contact, procreation (Nussbaum 1992). These must be viewed as universal human needs that should be promoted according to the capabilities approach of Nussbaum and Sen. The human body is central to Nussbaum’s (2003) second and third functions – bodily health and bodily integrity. People need to be capable of having good health, adequate shelter and nourishment, and to be free from assault and attack.

In this study the participants lacked both bodily health and integrity. Homelessness is by definition the state of lacking adequate shelter or housing. Most of the participants had poor physical and mental health, that had deteriorated further when they became homeless (other studies into homelessness have also found a prevalence of poor health; see Bines 1994, Connelly & Crown 1994). Obviously people had more capacity to improve their health and access health care when they are in settled housing, such as register with GPs, access medication to assist them manage their ill health, and eat regularly.

Bodily integrity (or a lack of) was also evident among the participants. Whilst being homeless (and for some, before being homeless), the participants had faced assault and sexual abuse. Almost all the women and some of the men reported being victims of sexual assault. Vulnerability to this can be compounded by being homeless, particularly if people have few secure places to go or have to rely on friends to stay with. For example, one man in the study had recently been assaulted by a group of youths on the street, and one woman recounted being assaulted in a hostel:
I had took an overdose, it was a proper cry for help, and they found me because they did a room check. A guy tried to rape me when I was blanking out. I was in hospital for three days and then moved to another hostel.

However, vulnerability to assault can also occur at home. One of the participants noted that she felt the most settled she had ever felt living in supported accommodation because:

All my adult life, this is the safest I’ve felt. Just going to your bed, “Is he going to beat me?” I’m 41 this year and this the safest I’ve felt. Ever.

Many of the participants had become homeless due to violence; they had lacked the capability to maintain bodily integrity from within the context they operated within without leaving, and losing their shelter. They had to choose one or the other, but could not maintain both from the context they operated within. In the case of leaving violent partners, some participants then moved into homeless accommodation (often after a period of rough sleeping or staying with friends). However this move into accommodation for the “homeless” is when an interesting splitting in their capabilities occurred.

The earlier quote told of a woman being assaulted in a hostel; however she was found and the attack halted by staff; the participant above felt safer in a supported accommodation unit than she had in her own homes previously. Homeless accommodation was a safe space for her. But when people in this study entered into temporary or supported accommodation they also often complained of control being taken away from them, with one man for example, shortly before moving to a long term rehab programme, saying that:

They’re [professionals] saying, you’re either in this [supported accommodation], or it’s rehab, or it’s the street. That’s my options; options? Choice? That’s no choice at all, that’s staying within the system, they’ve got choice for you, they’re choosing for you, they’re saying you’re going to the street if you stay on drink or drugs, or we can give you a nice rehab. No rehab is nice!

The participants perhaps had more capacity for bodily health and integrity when they were housed in temporary accommodation, but they often also had less capacity to attain other essential functions – they lost control over their environment and over how they lived their life – over what they could do or be. They lost their freedom.

This relates to an interesting point regarding the capabilities approach – what degree of responsibility do humans have in realizing what they are capable of? For example, many of the participants continued to use alcohol and drugs in temporary accommodation and once housed in social housing, and were sometimes evicted for this (for discussion of “choice” see Nussbaum 1992:225). Who decides or controls the actions that are permissible in the pursuit of essential functions? For example, in the case of the participants’ drug use, this may have been destroying their bodily health but was also felt to be the means they have to “enjoy” their life, and have affiliations with others they knew. Were they then negligible for the fact they lacked the capacity to attain shelter, health, and other components of a well lived life, or...
was it due to the lack of these components that they pursued some comfort, enjoyment or escape through these other means (such as drug use)? For, as the next example illustrates, this was also often the means they had to “play” or to attain some cognitive “escape” from the “reality” they were in. This was the means they had to function, but one that came at the cost of the other functions they required.

Thought, Emotion and Reason

The fourth, fifth and sixth central functions on Nussbaum’s (2003) list relate to cognition; the emotional landscape – sense, imagination and thought; and practical reason. Nussbaum (1992) would argue that humans should have the capacity for pleasure and for pain, and this is manifest subjectively through cognitive capabilities – to think, imagine, perceive – in a reflexive process. She also argues that they should have the capacity for rationality, to maximize the pleasure rendered from emotions, or to avoid pain. In this study of homelessness a complex “thin rationality” (Somerville & Bengtsson 2002) was found behind the actions that the participants engaged in, such as drug use or spending time with people who assaulted them. These acts damaged them physically and often emotionally, and they were aware that they could be damaging. However these acts were also the means they had to gain some escape, cognitively:

[In homeless accommodation] you want to … hide away. Keep your head down. But then it could be drinking, taking drugs just to escape it, people do turn to the streets and the drugs, you’re swept up with everybody and anybody.

or as another participant said:

you have to take drugs when you are homeless, to feel alive, and feel nothing about what that is like.

So there is a complex intersection. It was the very means that the participants felt they had to gain some meaning in their life, to be capable of pleasure, as a rational response to how difficult that reality was, that also constrained their ability to live a good life – acted to destroy it (this is explored in detail in McNaughton 2008). Acts that may lead to a maximization of pleasure in the short or long term can involve pain in the converse of this. What brings relief in the short term – drug use for example – can simultaneously lead to a shutting of off other capacities. The function being sought through this action however is some form of cognitive escape, relief or pleasure in the context of extreme suffering.

So when people were provided with some shelter in the form of temporary accommodation or their own social rented tenancy, after becoming homeless, their basic needs were being met, however they often had the capacity to attain other functions in their lives reduced. As Nussbaum notes,

... the list is, emphatically, a list of separate components. We cannot satisfy the need for one of them by giving a larger amount of another one. All are of central importance, and all are distinct in quality (Nussbaum 1992:222).
This nuanced understanding of essential needs (and of how different needs can compete with each other) is further illustrated by examining the next set of functions.

**Affiliations, Other Species and Recreation**

The next three functions Nussbaum identifies are the capacity to have affiliations, contact with other species, and play. Essential to humans are affiliations, and separation (Nussbaum 1992). Affiliations with other humans, and a sense of relatedness to our world and the creatures in it (including other species, Nussbaum would assert) is essential to “exist” and lead a “good” life. Social networks and the influence of relationships were found to be one of the key mechanisms that affected the transitions through homelessness the participants made in this study (and as influential in other research into homelessness – see Alexander & Ruggieri 1998, Lemos 2000).

It was often difficult for the participants to maintain relationships with people who were not experiencing homelessness. For example they could not have partners stay with them in temporary accommodation, and they could not spend nights away from their accommodation without risking eviction. Most of the participants had lost contact with their relatives when they became homeless: “when I was homeless I lost my family, I cut myself off from them. I don’t know if it was embarrassment because you are in a hostel”.

The participants’ capacity to maintain relationships and shelter was constrained by having to access accommodation for homeless people. For example, most accommodation projects are single sex, or single rooms, and so couples report sleeping rough rather than entering separate hostels (Owens & Hendry 2001). Even with regard to the capacity to relate to other species, it is reported that people experiencing homelessness who have pets do not enter hostels, but instead remain on the street because hostels will not allow animals.

Not all of the participants remained homeless throughout the study. Two thirds were housed at the final interview. Obtaining independent housing such as a social rented tenancy, after being in other forms of accommodation for the homeless, it would be assumed, should allow people to have the capacity to engage in affiliations, play, and so on. However it was found here that this capacity was rarely realized. Here another important splitting of housing as both an enabling and constraining force on individuals’ capacity to attain core functions occurred again.

The isolation that the participants felt when they were housed and no longer homeless was often intense – they felt that they no longer had the capacity to have affiliations and little opportunity for pleasure or recreation in their lives – not only because they lacked economic resources, but also because they lacked people in their lives that they could share affiliations with. As a 34-year-old man living in his own house by the final interview, who felt completely isolated, noted:

> I keep myself to myself, I’ve got no friends at all. I’m hiding the past, that I used to be an addict. So I don’t have any choice.

or as another woman said,
I don’t want to talk to the neighbours, I don’t want them to know anything about me.

The participants did not always have close affiliations with the people they shared homeless accommodation with, but there had been people around them and they had opportunities to have both affiliations and separation from them. There is a complex intersection at work here. Obtaining housing acted to enable the participants to have improved access to basic needs – they could improve their general health and well-being. In some cases it also meant that they had more freedom to pursue relationships, employment and so on. However even once housed in their tenancy, these capabilities were rarely realized but still sought. Often once they had their basic needs met, the participants actually found they had no capacity to develop the higher functions required to lead a well-lived life. This was down to many interrelated factors; however, housing was an important one of them. As one young man who had recently moved into his own tenancy noted, “being on my own is problematic now. Just keeping company with addicts, drugs, whatever, for a bit of company”.

Many of the participants were housed in areas where they felt they did not want to know their neighbours, because this would invite problems, and lived in areas with few employment opportunities. They also felt that they could not afford their rent (which was paid for by Housing Benefit) if they attempted to change their circumstances, by entering employment for example. Some only knew people that had also experienced homelessness, addiction, and so on, and had few means to develop other affiliations out side of this.

The housing that people can access, location, size, tenure and so on, will directly affect the affiliations (and separations from others) they are capable or not of having. Housing can be a negative as well as positive space to play out human functions – it is a space that can constrain as well as enable: it was isolation felt once housed that was often cited by the participants as the trigger for ongoing substance use, and with it an ongoing risk of homelessness. As one woman, living in her own tenancy after years of being homeless noted:

[Once you are no longer homeless] you’re stuck in house, nobody to talk to, apart from four walls, I mean you’ve got your telly, music centre, but something is missing, because there is nobody there. And that is why a lot of people give up their houses again, you are like, “What do I do now?”

So whilst their isolation was more than a housing problem, it was interconnected with it. Without all the central functions operating in their lives, the participants continued to try to obtain them through whatever means they had, often actions that led to them becoming at risk of homelessness once more when they relied on social housing (e.g. being evicted for drug use). Then they could also lose the security of housing they had. Housing was not the single “good” or outcome that they valued most; rather it was attaining an interplay of essential functions, all operating in their lives. This included the opportunity to think, have affiliations, to play, and enjoy life. As the previous quote from Nussbaum outlined, “all are of central importance” (Nussbaum 1992:222).
Control over One’s Environment

The 10th component of the list – control over one’s environment – is not only political, e.g. as in the extent to which people can “participate effectively in political choices that govern one’s life” (Nussbaum 2003:42) but also particularly relates to housing (although this is not brought out in Nussbaum’s work).

Nussbaum (2003) argues that this 10th component relates to the material sense of control over one’s environment that people can have, through their rights to property, to possessions, and to seek and engage in employment in the space they are in. The housing that people can, and do, access, – their “home” – is surely central to this. This housing embeds them within a material environment, where what they can be capable of may be realized or not (King 2003).

A capabilities informed approach provides a nuanced framework for considering this significance of housing as both a material space people can inhabit, and as a force that can constrain or enable the capability that people have to function and to attain the essence of what is important to all humans, in a layered system, of at times contradicting needs. Nussbaum does not explicitly draw out housing or home as a central enabler of the essential functions she identifies for living a good life, but it does have resonance to all the components on the list.

Work on the meaning of home (such as Gurney 1990, Kearns, Hiscock, Ellaway & Macintyre 2000, Somerville 1992) has illustrated that home has many subjective elements that relate to the components of Nussbaum’s list – security, privacy, spaces to play, to have affiliations, to nurture health and have bodily integrity. As King (2003) argues, to be safe and secure in one’s home is the essential starting point to attain many of the other components of this list of essential human needs, and to have control over one’s environment – “the essence of housing is that it allows us to meet our own ends as private individuals free from the interference of others” (King 2003:96).

Housing also embeds people in a time and space, and has an ontological as well as material influence on the reality that they are in, which can be negative as well as positive. To have adequate housing may be to begin to have the security from which other capabilities – and individual resilience – can be nurtured. However it can also be a “prison”, where people are trapped in isolation or in violent relationships, afraid of losing the basic security they have if they leave. Responsibility and choice are therefore also important to understand the role housing can play as people attempt to gain the core functions of Nussbaum’s list. It is housing that provides the private space from which to make choices and negotiate with consequences (King 2003).

This assertion of freedom fails however, in the examples presented in this paper, when social power and structures into play. These examples showed people “trapped” by social and economic poverty that had to choose either housing or freedom, but not both together. So Robeyn’s (2003a) criticisms regarding Nussbaum’s list – that it lacks acknowledgment of the role social power and structures have in constraining the freedom people have “to do and be”, does have resonance. Yet it is surely the point of Nussbaum and Sen’s work that it is these constraints that need to be recognized and tackled to ensure people have more than just their basic material needs met, and that they can flourish on higher levels. Agents have to be capable of this to be able to attain it.
Three key points can be made from this brief examination of the resonance these essential functions had to the experiences of people making transitions out of homelessness, and these are summarized here.

Firstly, there was some resonance in identifying essential functions that were being pursued as the participants made their transitions, which goes beyond that of basic needs being met. It may have appeared irrational to continue to use drugs in a hostel, if being caught would mean eviction, for example. However drug use was also the means to find some cognitive relief or pleasure, rationally, given the alternative. All people share a need for more than material resources. However the means they have to attain essential functions differ. In the case of the people studied, it was often transgressive acts such as drug use that they utilized to attain these higher functions. As is noted below, these acts then reduced the capacity they had to then experience other functions. Be it through legitimate or transgressive means, the outcomes – the essence – of what was being sought was the same for them as for any other individual; it was the context that differed and created differing outcomes (see for example Young (2006) on the difference and similarities of the “included” and “excluded” and Jenks (2003) on the universality of transgression). Yet what has also been raised here as a key issue is the extent to which individuals have a responsibility to choose certain means by which to attain these essential functions; and who decides what is, and is not, a responsible choice? A tension running through the capability approach, identified in the empirical cases presented here, is the extent to which it is individual agency or social power and structures that are the central force engendering outcomes within given contexts.

Secondly, from a policy perspective and with regard to people making a transition out of homelessness, it was paradoxical that at the same time as the participants could exercise a right to obtain shelter, such as a space in a hostel, they often had the capacity for other essential functions reduced. They lost control over their environment, and with it the choice of affiliations they had. Often people with needs, such as addiction, go through rehabs and supported accommodation before being deemed able to “manage” their own housing. However if they do relapse (or experience problems) this can lead to eviction, and the cycle of homelessness continues (Neale 2001). In the US a model (known as housing first) has recently developed. In this model housing is viewed as a human right, regardless of whether people are accessing treatment for their other problems or not (Tsemberis & Eisenberg 2000). This approach avoids the need for people to spend periods in institutional settings, such as supported accommodation, by providing permanent private rented accommodation and support immediately on entry to a homelessness programme regardless of the participant’s status as a substance user, or curtailment of this activity. After robust evaluations of the housing first approach it has been found that people deemed incapable of managing their own housing in traditional approaches (Sahlin 2005) can maintain long-term independent housing, (see for example, Padgett, Gulcur & Tsemberis 2006, Gulcur, Stefancic, Shinn, Tsemberis & Fischer 2003). The housing first approach illustrates the possibilities of policy and practice fitting within a capabilities informed framework – whereby housing is a human right, agency is taken seriously, and people can simultaneously be given the
capacity to attain each of the core functions of Nussbaum’s list, without conditions. They can be capable of one function without the others being shut off – so for example they can have a partner move into their housing, although they may still be using substances – they have affiliations but may also still be damaging bodily health. This approach speaks to a nuanced understanding of social systems that a capabilities approach informed by critical realism such as this underpins.

Thirdly, it was found in the illustrative cases used here that providing housing did not necessarily solve many of the problems that the (previously homeless) people studied had. Despite clear improvements to their material circumstance, many people who were housed at the end of the research were still lacking essential functions identified by Nussbaum. There was for many still “something” central missing.

It is hoped that this capabilities informed approach provides a useful framework for examining what housing should enable, regardless of the type of housing this is. Using this framework, a key question for social justice is not what housing can people access (as different types of housing may suit some groups more than others) but what functions are they capable of attaining when they live in this housing. So, for example, using a capabilities informed approach it is not necessarily problematic if some individuals or groups live in caravans, so long as they are capable of the essential functions outlined previously if they do so. It is only problematic to live in a caravan if they are not able to attain these functions. This provides a nuanced framework for assessing housing need, and also for promoting core essential human rights across diverse groups. The people studied here sought the capacity to play, to imagine, to have affiliations, to have a meaningful life, regardless of the material deprivation of homelessness they were experiencing. Even once housed they often lacked the capacity for such functions, posing serious questions regarding the environment their housing provided, and that relate to wider issues of equality and poverty.

The capabilities approach fits as a framework that incorporates nuanced concerns. Viewed through this lens considerations about housing, access to housing, types of housing people are accommodated in and what this situated material context actually allows them to be capable of, has to come into play in housing policy. This conceptualizes housing as more than a material unit, but as a part of a broader complex system of interconnected factors that operate to constrain and enable the capability that individuals have to lead a well lived life. With their own agency added, within this system, what an individual can do and be is realized – home is the space where individual can be free to be (King 2003). Yet it also appears to be the case (certainly amongst those whose transitions through homelessness were studied here) that in the case of those who are marginalized, they can rarely have both the security of (social or supported) housing and the freedom to “be” and enjoy it as a private space.

Conclusion

It has been argued in this paper that if moderate essentialism is adopted, it can be agreed that there are functions essential for all humans to lead a well-lived life. Casting this in critical realist epistemology, it can be further asserted that this life will be lived out in a complex social system whereby many factors converge to influence
the capabilities people have and the outcomes that occur. This complexity does not reduce the importance of these central functions or weaken the argument that these are essential human needs – rather it alerts us to the fact that being capable of these functions (the resources required to do so; the actual outcomes sought; and so on) will play out differently in different contexts. This does not mean they are not essential however or that for humans to live a well lived life, in whatever context, they need to be capable of these functions.

The work of Nussbaum has been used as a framework for identifying what these essential functions are. She argues (1992) there needs to be some clear recognition of what is good in human life, to be able to identify if it is missing and that it should be restored. Policy should function to do more than distribute material resources, “money and income are not good in their own right; they are good only in so far as they promote human functioning” (Nussbaum 1992:233) but to ensure capacity for all these function, for all citizens.

Material resources such as housing are important, clearly, as is food, water, opportunities for education, employment, and good health, to be managed and distributed within the social systems that people operate within. Other essential factors also need to be considered however, such as imagination, affiliations and recreation. Housing it appears is a key enabling or constraining force for all of this – the place where what we can do and be is, or at times is not, realized.

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Notes

1. The terminology is taken from Nussbaum’s 1992 paper.
3. A brief review of websites supports this; see http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/policy/policy-3474.cfm. These same sources also note the importance that these pets have as companions and comfort for people, who as this study also found, may lack some of the other key affiliations such as family.

References


