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REPLY TO COMMENTS



Author's Reply


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I am grateful for the opportunity to receive such insightful commentaries. Most of them are in fact additional contributions that enrich the discussion about the capability approach in the housing studies community rather than just comments on my paper. It has been a pleasure to read the open reviewers' critical discussions coming from various perspectives and different research areas – from the perspective of Sen to that of Nussbaum and of Rawls, and from the research area of homelessness to the welfare state and social investment. I sincerely appreciate the editors for bringing this diversity to the discussion as well as for providing this meaningful platform to open a discussion on how to apply the capability approach in housing studies.

Given the breadth of the topics covered in the commentary articles, I will have to mainly focus on clarifying those views of mine that may have been misinterpreted or were less clear for reviewers. My paper has primarily focused on a critical review of the taken-for-granted notions in the discussion on housing policy from the capability perspective and on the question of what the end goal of housing policy should be, which is then linked to the subject of the evaluative space of well-being and housing policy. Clearly, it is impossible to discuss in one article all the foundational ideas and components of the capability approach and the critical debates surrounding it, and this is also far beyond the scope of my Focus article. For this reason, I sincerely appreciate the open reviewers' contributions which have brought up many important aspects of the capability approach as well as the potential risks involved in applying this approach and other wider subjects connected to the approach. It would be impossible to have an invariable agreement with all the arguments in each contribution, but I have learned from reading them.

Perhaps it is good to begin by responding to the concerns about the selection of capabilities relevant to housing – i.e. about how and who decides the set of relevant capabilities – because it appears to be the main concern for many reviewers (Foye this issue, Betterham this issue, and McCallum and Papadopoulos this issue). This topic is indeed a vital issue for a researcher attempting to apply the capability approach in empirical research. Although it is not my intention to focus on the subject of a “set” of capabilities and to say that the set must first be defined in order to use the capability approach, I understand that to some extent my Focus article may have given this impression. I hope that this subject does not overshadow the broader implications of the capability approach for housing studies – such as foundational perspective matters, concerns on what should be the final end goal of a policy (increasing resources?

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satisfaction levels? substantive freedoms?), and the other meta subjects of ethics, pluralism, human flourishing, agency, and freedoms.

In making this point, I thank Watt and Fitzpatrick (this issue) for placing the discussion in the wider context of ethically informed research, analytical philosophy, and the value pluralist perspective, which the scope of my article did not permit me to address properly. I believe that it is important to see the capability approach from a broader perspective, which would allow us to have a better understanding of the approach and its implications. For the same reason, I also appreciate Hemerijck (this issue) for discussing the capability approach in the wider context of concerns on the good polity, social rights, and underpinning perspectives of the welfare state as well as for his discussion on housing within this broader picture. Much of my paper elaborates on the functionings and capabilities relevant for housing, in order to articulate their concepts and implications, which can be used as a foundation for further discussion. I wish that this is read only as one part of interpretation of the capability perspective in the housing context. The foundational ideas of the capability approach are, of course, not limited to the subject of “capabilities” and “functionings”, and my discussion on these subjects was only meant to critically unpack the notions underpinning the housing policy discussion.

Taylor (this issue) and Batterham (this issue) comment on the importance of connecting capabilities to justice. I fully share their concerns, and I have also been working on this subject in the context of housing studies. A topic that I would like to open up for future discussion is the matter of issues other than “capabilities” that are relevant to housing (such as institutions, distributive patterns, principles, and/or polity) that have to be taken into account when discussing the question of justice. If I may borrow Sen’s words on this matter, “[c]apabilities cannot do that work any more than primary goods can [in the Rawls’ theory of justice]” (Sen 2009, 299). For instance, Sen’s capability perspective does not stipulate a specific formula of distribution (although this is commonly misunderstood, as it strives for an “equality” of capabilities for justice), and thus there is always space to be partially complemented by other theorists’ principles on distributive pattern rules and their reasonings.

Keeping the broader foundational ideas in mind, I will now move my response to the concern about the practicality and selection process of capabilities relevant to housing. Foye (this issue) reads my paper as overselling the “practicality” of the capabilities informational base. This is, of course, not my intention, and I actually share many of the concerns he addresses, including the risk of reproducing paternalism and majoritarianism. However, my personal stance is a bit more open to partial applications of the multiple tenets of the capability perspective. Sometimes a partial application, when accompanied by sufficient scrutiny and sound reasoning (such as the Human Development Index), can make positive contributions to producing change by merely switching the evaluative space and thus by leading us to see things from a different angle, even if the application does not perfectly align with all the foundational ideas of Sen’s capability perspective. This flexible stance of mine might have been embedded in my argument in general, and I imagine that this could have created the impression of my overselling the practicality.

Betterham (this issue) and Foye (this issue) are worried that my article takes little consideration of the procedural and epistemological issues regarding the selection of housing capabilities and functionings. I am certain the reviewers understand that the scope of my paper does not allow me to cover the subject of justification

methodologies for selecting the capabilities. Thus, in my paper, I could only briefly note that the selection matter requires more discussion in another space. In this respect, I appreciate that Foye (this issue) has elaborated on the procedural issue. I agree with him that process is an important component to be considered when one applies the capability approach to housing research. As Foye (this issue) and also Batterham (this issue) point out, when Sen's perspective is applied, a deliberative democratic process is considered to be one of the best ways to justify a selection of capabilities and functionings. I share their concerns on the potential risks or dilemmas of a deliberative democratic procedure – not only the risk of adaptive preferences and the tyranny of the majority that both reviewers have mentioned but also the requirement of some pre-requisites that enable an effective deliberative democratic process, such as certain basic capabilities or social arrangements.

The potential problems of the deliberative democratic process have been continuously debated in the capability literature. This is clearly one of the many sub-topics to examine in housing studies. It would definitely be worth exploring the multiple justification methodologies of selecting capabilities as well as how capability researchers have attempted to avoid (or minimize) the problems while adhering to the key tenets of the capability approach – such as the combination of ultimate normative theory and deliberative procedure, or the application of the concept of the “impartial spectator”, whose role Sen has emphasized. Meanwhile, I am reluctant to define the deliberative democratic procedure as the one closest to the ideal process. It appears that there is a broad spectrum of justification methodologies (each methodology having its own good reasoning) rather than a simple binary distinction between a procedural (Sen) and a normative philosophical approach (Nussbaum). The ideal process might be defined differently either at the theoretical or practical level depending on the purpose of the research. I thank the open reviewers for bringing up this important subject of the selection process, and I hope that various justification methods will now be further discussed.

I have noticed that there are a few misinterpretations of my discussion. Batterham (this issue) points out that the examples of the housing capabilities in my paper are problematic because of the unclearness of their origin. And the reading of McCallum and Papadopoulos (this issue) assesses that the “stance of *standing above* is evident” in my paper because they believe my discussion attempts to “diagnose”, “define” (highlighted by the reviewers) and debates what housing-related functionings are important. My paper certainly does not attempt to define important functionings relevant to housing. I assume that these comments come from a simple misunderstanding about the examples I described in the text and in Table 1. The examples are only for elaborating the abstract conceptual discussion in a concrete way and should in no way be interpreted as proposing specific capabilities or functionings that everybody should look at. It might be helpful to explain here that I decided to include several examples because I had found it useful when explaining my conceptual ideas to other housing scholars who were not yet fully familiar with the concept of capabilities. At the same time, I appreciate Batterham's comment because the examples I listed should not, of course, be used as a reference in empirical research without proper reasoning. I agree that the selection of one or more capabilities (and functionings) needs a clear reasoning process, something that Batterham (this issue) has highlighted by citing Alkire's words.

I sincerely welcome the comments by Hemerijck (this issue) and Taylor (this issue) from John Rawls' perspective and their discussion on the linkage (or complementary aspects) between the perspective of Rawls and that of the capability approach. The debates on the linkage or difference between the two are found in many books and papers within the capability community. Also, Sen himself often notes the influence of John Rawls on his work. I look forward to more such debates coming up in the housing context. Talyor argues that Rawls' metric of primary goods should not be dismissed, and I fully agree with her. In fact, Sen does not dismiss primary goods (as he always emphasizes the importance of resources as well). The main concern for him has been the variations in individuals' opportunities to convert resources (primary goods) into capabilities. I think, as Batterham (this issue) also suggests, this concern on the conversion aspect should be one of the key research areas in housing studies, especially concerning the role of housing policy.

I turn now to the comments about housing as a part of social policy and a good life. Taylor (this issue), Batterham (this issue), and McCallum and Papadopoulos (this issue) are worried that my paper's focus on the housing domain ignores the complexity and interrelation between housing and the broader context of human flourishing, a good life, and social policy. I have perceived that there are two ways to use the capability perspective for housing policy discussion: one is to look at housing as one of several variables of a good life (housing as a means); and the second is to consider housing (i.e. residing in a way that a person has reason to value) as consisting of multiple variables (housing as an end). Because these two directions are not always diametrically opposed to each other – or because, as Hemerijk (this issue) phrases it, they are “two interrelated angles” – my article does not make a clear division between them. But the general focus is indeed intended to be on the second direction, which has been examined insufficiently in the literature on both housing and capability. I certainly agree that housing is only one of the multi-dimensions of a good life and that the concerns about the complexity between them should continuously be taken into account in the discussion about housing – particularly regarding the conversion factors between housing and a good life. I would simply respond that my paper is about housing and thus the main focus is placed on interpreting the capability approach in a housing-specific context.

I might not agree with Taylor's (this issue) statement that “there is nothing ‘special’ about housing as a policy area [and] we should not be looking to develop a framework to apply the capabilities approach in a housing-specific context”. Each sub-domain of social policy surely requires more specialized and in-depth insights due to its distinctive characteristics and problems. For this reason, the capability approach is increasingly been used both at the narrowed-down level of a sub-domain, such as education, health, and employment, and at the broader level of overall well-being across various policy areas. From my perspective, a continuing attempt to interact between the housing-specific context and housing in broader contexts seems to be the best way.

It has been my pleasure to hold a discussion through this Focus article platform. I have limited my reply to a clarification of my views and intention, but there have been many topics and arguments in the commentaries that have inspired me to initiate further discussions. I once again express my gratitude to the open reviewers and editors. I have enjoyed and benefited from reading all of the commentaries.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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