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**Keywords:** Social justice; spirituality; religion; Rawls; Sen; Nussbaum

**Abstract:**

This article examines two social justice theories, Rawlsian Justice and the Capabilities Approach of Sen and Nussbaum, in relation to congruence with four principles of spiritually sensitive social work. We find that although Rawlsian justice has valuable insights, it has some gaps for promoting spiritually sensitive practice. In contrast, the Capabilities Approach bears more promise for promoting spiritually sensitive social work as it meets all these ethical principles. Scholars could build on its insights to articulate a vision for spiritually sensitive social justice that can guide our profession's approaches to macro practice and social policy.

**Text of paper:**

**Comparing Rawlsian Justice and the Capabilities Approach to Justice  
from a Spiritually Sensitive Social Work Perspective**

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## Comparing Rawlsian Justice and the Capabilities Approach to Justice from a Spiritually Sensitive Social Work Perspective

The primary mission of social work is to enhance human wellbeing and to help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. Therefore, social work includes attention to matters of social policy and conceptions of social justice, as recognized in both American and international ethical principles (International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work [IFSW/IASSW], 2005; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008). This mission becomes spiritually sensitive when it is attuned to people's search for a sense of meaning, purpose, morality, and connectedness between themselves, the world, and transcendent or deeply profound levels of reality, and, when it is expressed through practice that respects the diverse religious or nonreligious spiritual perspectives and goals of clients and their communities (Canda & Furman, 2010; Derezotes, 2006; Sheridan, 2004, 2009). Although there are several discussions of principles for justice in relation to spirituality and religion in social work (e.g. Brenden, 2007; Canda & Furman, 2010; Cerny, 2004; Faver, 2004; Hodge, 2011; Nash & Stewart, 2006), there is no detailed examination of social justice theories with regard to their relevance to spiritually sensitive social work.

In order to redress this gap, we examine two major theories of social justice: Rawlsian justice (Rawls, 1971, 1999, 2001) and the Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2001, 2006; Sen, 1999, 2009). We have chosen them because Rawls is widely considered the most important social justice theorist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and is the most cited social justice theorist in social work, while the Capabilities Approach (CA) is an alternative with significant promise in promoting aspects of social justice envisioned by social work scholars (Banerjee, 2011; Morris, 2002; Pyles & Banerjee, 2010). Regarding CA, we focus on Sen's capabilities perspective, given its thoroughness, international prominence, and recognition by his reception of the 1998 Nobel Prize for Economics; we complement Sen's views with Nussbaum's conception of capabilities. We present these two theories and then critique their strengths and weaknesses with special attention to their consistency with major principles of spiritually sensitive social work.

Four principles are drawn primarily from the comprehensive framework for spiritually sensitive social work developed by Canda and Furman (2010) and other social work scholars noted above. Following Canda and Furman's usage of terms, spirituality as an aspect of individuals and groups refers to "A process of human life and development focusing on the search for a sense of meaning, purpose, morality, and well-being; in relationship with oneself, other people, other beings, the universe, and ultimate reality however understood...; orienting around centrally significant priorities; and engaging a sense of transcendence (experienced as deeply profound, sacred, or transpersonal)" (p. 75). People may express spirituality within religions (i.e., organized religious traditions and institutions) and also without them. Many people affiliate with religions that shape their spiritual perspectives and actions related to social justice. When we use the term spirituality, we include its religious and nonreligious expressions. Nonreligious spirituality refers to the ways individuals and communities pursue the above definitional themes (i.e. meaning, connectedness, central life priorities, and transcendence) outside of religions.

**Supporting full human development.** This principle of spiritually sensitive social work promotes social arrangements that allow actualization of the full developmental potential of individuals and

communities, including a sense of meaning in life, mutually fulfilling relationships, and transcendence of egoism, ethnocentrism, and other forms of harmful divisiveness. Maslow (1970) emphasized that societies should be arranged such that individuals who choose to extend their growth into self-actualization and self-transcendence can be supported. Wilber (2000) described social and political values associated with a healthy vision-logic mode of consciousness that is holistic, recognizes planetary interconnectedness of all humans and all beings, and promotes governance that supports full human development and diversity of worldviews. Fowler's (1981, 1996) representation of faith development suggested that the highest stage of universalizing faith involves nonjudgmental love and valuing for all people and beings and the ability to honor one's own faith commitments while understanding and respecting other faith perspectives, thus promoting commitment to nonegoistic and nonethnocentric forms of justice. Derezotes (2005), Faver (2004), and Nash and Stewart (2005) emphasized the connection between the spiritual development of individuals (including raising consciousness and levels of empathy and caring beyond egocentrism and ethnocentrism) and the importance of societal arrangements that allow for such development.

**Prioritizing the vulnerable.** This principle places priority on work with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people, including those who are targets of negative discrimination due to their religious or nonreligious spiritual perspectives. Concern and social activism on behalf of poor and oppressed people is common in religious traditions, though their priorities and values can vary widely (Canda & Furman, 2010; Hodge, 2011; Zweig, 1991). This principle, common in empowerment approaches to social work (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2012), is highlighted in Catholic social teaching and liberation theology's priority on poor and oppressed people (Brenden & Spandl, 2007; Gutierrez, 1973), and in the Gandhian social work value of *sarvodaya*, which means uplifting all and letting the benefits ripple to wider levels of society for the welfare of all (Walz & Ritchie, 2000).

**Addressing global/ecological interrelation.** This principle considers the whole world's human/planetary ecological interrelation by overcoming environmental racism, global socio-economic injustice, war, and the destruction of natural ecological systems. This principle was elaborated by Arne Naess (1988), the deep ecology philosopher, and applied to social work by Besthorn (2001), Coates (2007), and others. It resonates with ideals of ecofeminism (Besthorn & Pearson-McMillen, 2002), integral politics (Wilber, 2000, 2001), Indigenous approaches to social work (Gray, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2008), Buddhist social action (Macy, 1991; Pyles, 2005), and Christian conceptions of honoring nature as God's creation (Canda, Ketchell, Dybicz, Pyles, & Nelson-Becker, 2006; Fox, 1979).

**Respecting spiritual diversity.** This principle requires professional social work activities to demonstrate respect for diverse religious and nonreligious expressions of spirituality among people and their communities (Canda & Furman, 2010; Sheridan, 2004, 2009). This principle is consistent with the NASW and IFSW/IASSW ethical principles of nondiscrimination on the basis of religion, and the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

## Rawlsian Social Justice

### Rawls's Spiritual Background and Its Influence on His Conception of Justice

John Rawls grew up and spent most of his life in New England. During his childhood and youth, he was an Episcopal Christian (Freeman, 2007; Pogge, 1994). His devotion to Christianity was evident in

his undergraduate senior thesis on the meaning of sin and faith. He criticized “naturalism... in which spiritual life is reduced to the level of desire and appetite...” (Rawls quoted in Gregory, 2007, p. 187), leading to excessive individualism and loss of sense of connection with community and God. He considered going into seminary. His youthful concern with matters of the meaning of life and proper human relationships endured into adulthood and shaped his theory of justice. However, his religious views took a significant turn away from Christianity.

The turning point came during World War II (Freeman, 2007; Gregory, 2007; Pogge, 2007). When he graduated from Princeton, Rawls did military service for three years in New Guinea, the Philippines, and Japan. He specified three events that shattered his youthful faith. First, in 1944, in a combat situation, a Lutheran pastor preached that God aimed their bullets to hit the Japanese while protecting themselves from harm. Rawls was appalled at the wartime suffering around him and was angered that the pastor was giving a false view of divine providence in order to comfort the troops. Second, in 1945, a friend was killed in battle by Japanese combatants while he narrowly escaped. Third, he witnessed the aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima after learning about the horrible extent of the holocaust of Jews in Europe. He then questioned whether it made any sense to pray to a God for help who allowed millions of Jews to die at the hands of the Nazis and who seemed to selectively intervene in human affairs. He wondered at the sensibility of a Christian conception of God as a benevolent all powerful being who created the human species to be so corrupt as to engage in wars and atrocities. In his late life personal reflections, he wrote, “Those doctrines became impossible for me to take seriously... they depict God as a monster moved solely by God’s own power and glory. As if such miserable and distorted puppets as humans ... could glorify anything!” (Rawls quoted in Freeman, 2007, p. 10).

Rawls decided that morality does not need a god to justify it. Justice is justifiable by its compatibility with human good, orderly society, and progress toward a realistic utopia (Freeman, 2007). He rejected Christian pessimism about human nature (e.g., the doctrine of original sin) and instead relied on the ability of reasonable persons to bring their varied viewpoints into the public arena in a way that would lead to the wider good of society. However, he did not express hostility toward Christian theism or religion in general. He emphasized the importance of people, religious and secular, engaging in reasonable public discourse within a liberal democracy (Gregory, 2007). This attitude is consistent with a lifelong pattern of objections to incivility, from youthful dislike of what he believed were closed religious or secular systems of belief, to young adulthood abhorrence of atrocities in World War II, and into adulthood objection to the Vietnam War and to social injustice. The adult Rawls was concerned about spiritual matters of the meaning of human life, morality, and theodicy; but he was not religious or theistic. He hoped his views and procedures would promote distributive justice and make society egalitarian.

### **Key Concepts in Rawlsian Justice**

**Justice as fairness.** The foundation of Rawls’s (1971, 1999, 2001) two principles of justice and his conception of distributive justice is fairness to all U.S. citizens. Fairness implies avoidance of bias or maintaining objectivity as Rawls and his putative representative citizens go about formulating what justice would look like in an ideal society. In his hypothetical “original position,” which is a situation of primordial equality between reasonable persons, the representative individuals involved in choosing the

principles of justice would have no knowledge of their personal identities, or their respective vested interests, within the group as a whole. From this “veil of ignorance” the representatives choose principles of justice that would apply to all citizens in an unbiased manner while attending to the interests and concerns of others. The chosen principles of justice would determine the “basic structure” or social institutions that would govern the ideal society.

A basic question that Rawls addresses is how people can cooperate with each other in society despite subscribing to deeply opposed, though reasonable, comprehensive doctrines. This becomes possible when citizens share what he considered to be a reasonable political conception of justice. Despite diversities among members, Rawls states the representatives would arrive at one set of principles of justice fair to the entire group. In the first stage, the people choose the principles of justice. In the next stage, or the “constitutional stage,” the actual institutions are selected in line with the chosen principles of justice. The working of these institutions in turn leads to further social decisions at later stages as in the “legislative stage.” The imagined sequence moves forward step by step to completely just societal arrangements.

**Principles of justice.** The first principle is known as the *equal liberty principle* and guarantees basic political and civil liberties such as freedom of speech, assembly, religion, property ownership, and political participation to all. The second principle has two parts. In the 2001 version, the first part of the second principle is known as the *fair equality of opportunity principle* and it guarantees fair access to education and work for all citizens with equal ability and talent, irrespective of socio-economic background, gender, and race. The second part of the second principle is known as the *difference principle*, and it accepts some inequalities in social and economic institutions as fair, but requires inequalities benefit least advantaged citizens to the greatest extent possible.

**Primary goods.** Rawls stated all citizens require five primary goods, which are “various social conditions and all-purpose means necessary and required to enable citizens to develop” (2001, p. 57). Earlier Rawls (1971; 1999) had distinguished between natural and social primary goods. He had emphasized that the five needs were social primary goods because they were within the purview of societal influence. These needs were basic rights and liberties; freedom of movement and free choice of occupation from diverse opportunities; powers and prerogatives of offices and positions of authority and responsibility; income and wealth; and social bases of self-respect. But, he had considered health, vigor, intelligence, and imagination as natural primary goods because they were not under the control of social institutions. He was criticized for making this distinction between natural and social primary goods. Consequently he dropped the term “social” from primary goods and referred to them only as primary goods (Rawls, 2001).

Rawls stated, “All these primary goods are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these values is to everyone’s advantage” (1999, p. 54). This critically important equality clause is missing in 2001. Rawls stipulated that the primary goods are “indexed” (2001, p. 59). This means that a ratio of shares would be created on the basis of citizens’ “appropriate contributions ... to the good of others by training and educating their native endowments and putting them to work within a fair system of cooperation” (2001, p. 68). Thus, citizen’s index of primary goods could be low, medium or high based on the market value of their contributions. He changed the wording to emphasize incentive for work and productivity.

**Distributive justice.** Briefly, distributive justice has two requirements: (a) citizens and institutions must cooperate, and (b) the government must regulate social, economic, and political institutions, and determine these institutions' as well as citizens' duties and obligations based on his two principles of justice. When these conditions are met, the benefits and burdens of social cooperation are fairly distributed among all citizens and distributive justice results. In the context of social work, social cooperation means wage labor for those who do not have the capital to invest and investment by those who have the capital. Labor and investment take place in a more or less free market economy. A more or less free market economy means the government should regulate it only to prevent the formation of monopolies that could fix prices; otherwise it should be allowed to run its course because of its efficiency to coordinate and its ability to stabilize demand and supply (Rawls, 1971, 1999, 2001).

In this system, pay and benefits for wage earners are a pre-determined contract and tied to an individual's ability, merit, effort, and contribution as well as what the market is willing to pay based on demand and supply. When people are more talented, and consequently in higher demand, they should be paid more than those who are less talented and more easily available. When people are unhappy with their wages they should enhance their educational and occupational skills to earn more. The government is not required to have a full employment policy, or to set a minimum wage standard because both these actions would interfere with the functioning of a free market economy.

**Citizens and least advantaged people.** According to Rawls, citizens are people who are free, equal, normal, reasonable, rational, and willing to work together. Least advantaged people are those who have the least income and wealth (1971, 1999). In 2001, Rawls clarified that least advantaged people are those who have the lowest index of the five primary goods. Rawls (2001) softened his use of the term "least advantaged" by noting that the term "least advantaged" is not a rigid designator, rather it represents people who are worst off under a particular scheme of social functioning, but who might do well under a different system. Most importantly, they are not identifiable by gender, race, or nationality (2001, p. 59, note # 26). In other words, least advantaged people are any working poor citizens.

**Surfers and hard cases.** Rawls classified non-working poor citizens into two groups: able bodied adults who are able but unwilling to work ("surfers"), and people with health issues ("hard cases"). Rawls did not support public assistance for people who do not work and stated "surfers must somehow support themselves" (2001, p. 179). He did not discuss people's inability to work because he viewed all citizens as so-called "normal" working people. Rawls (1999) strictly restricted his discussion of justice to people whose physical and mental capacities were "within the normal range, so that questions of health care and mental capacity do not arise" (1999, pp. 83-84). In 2001 in a footnote Rawls stated we have to "duty" to help such people, but it cannot be covered under a political conception of justice, which is his revised conceptualization of social justice.

**Valid and invalid grounds for justice.** Citizens have a valid claim to distributive justice only when they cooperate with the system by contributing their labor or capital or both to socio-economic productivity. But Rawls recognized that a free market economy may not always meet "claims of need" (1971, p. 277). A valid claim of need arises only when: (a) people cooperate with the economy and work, but fail to make a living wage, or (b) people are unable to work temporarily because of ill-health, or (c) people are unable to work because of seasonal or temporary nature of their jobs. Only under these three circumstances of conscientious effort is the government required to pay a "social minimum" or

public assistance (1971, 1999, 2001). He did not address how much or what constitutes public assistance, but was clear that the social minimum should be less than the value of market wage to retain the incentive for work.

Judgments about people's moral worth, need, and allocative justice have no place in distributive justice. Rawls did not question deservingness or moral desert, but clarified, "moral desert as moral worth of character and actions cannot be incorporated into a political conception of justice in view of the fact of reasonable pluralism" (2001, p. 73). He stated "moral worth would be utterly impracticable as a criterion when applied to questions of distributive justice. ... Only God could make those judgments" (2001, p. 73). Because of a lack of agreement on what is good character and behavior, there cannot be any agreement on the nature of moral worth.

Rawls explained that allocative justice is concerned with the distribution of "a given collection of goods" which is to be "divided among definite individuals with known desires and needs," and "the goods to be allotted are not produced by these individuals" (1971, p. 88). Rawls reasoned that because the collection of goods to be allocated is not "the product of these individuals," they do not have any "prior claim" to the goods, and the collection of goods can be distributed according to need or desire (2001, p. 50). In his final thesis Rawls stated, "We reject the idea of allocative justice as incompatible with the fundamental idea by which justice as fairness is organized" (2001, p. 50).

### **Evaluating Rawlsian Justice for Congruence with the Four Principles**

**Supporting full human development.** Rawls' conception of justice supports human development in that he supports equal basic liberties and fair opportunities, especially with regard to education and work. He recognizes primary goods that are essential for full human development (especially basic rights and liberties, freedom of movement and occupation, income, and self-respect) and he stipulates a requirement for civil manner of justice discourse to avoid violations of human rights. These ideas represent a move toward a spiritually sensitive social work perspective, but are inadequate to meet the full human developmental needs of the most vulnerable people. Further, Rawls does not articulate any possibilities or goals for fuller human developmental possibilities such as loving relationships, creativity, and self-transcendence. In fact, his allowance for indexing of primary goods, his discounting of so-called "surfers," and the dismissal of so-called "hard cases" from his justice framework are incongruent with spiritually sensitive social work.

**Prioritizing the vulnerable.** Rawls demonstrates concern for the vulnerable by encouraging policies that promote egalitarianism (especially through promoting work and education) and by stipulating that inequalities should be for the benefit of the least advantaged. However, this concern is limited to the working poor. Those who are able but unwilling to work (surfers) and those with illnesses and disabilities that prevent work (hard cases) are relegated to a private sphere of voluntary care and excluded from his justice framework. Rawls' concern for the working poor and the welfare of society generally is congruent with spiritually sensitive social work. However, the restriction of justice concern to the working poor is incongruent.

**Addressing global/ecological interrelation.** Rawls's theory is oriented toward liberal democracies of the West, especially the U.S. In Rawls's later work (i.e., *The Law of Peoples*, 1999), he acknowledges other countries and states that certain accommodations for more hierarchically arranged traditional societies are needed, but admits that his two principles of justice would not work there. For

international justice, Rawls calls for civility but does not offer anything more to deal with global injustices. Further, the global/ecological interrelationship and such matters as environmental justice are not considered at all. So this aspect of Rawlsian justice is weakly congruent with spiritually sensitive social work.

**Respecting spiritual diversity.** Rawls' equal liberty principle specifies religious freedom. Rawls also makes an important contribution by emphasizing the need for civil discourse that does not privilege any particular religious or secular worldview, within, of course, his preference for a liberal and tolerant, open democracy. However, due to his insistence on civil discourse in the mode of rationality, the moral and emotional aspects of faith and compassion are neglected. Some critics argue that he is not sufficiently open to justice arguments on the basis of sincere religious commitment or spiritual experiences (Gregory, 2007; Yates, 2007). In this regard, Rawlsian justice is congruent with spiritually sensitive social work's commitment to respecting spiritual diversity, but does not go far enough.

## **The Capabilities Approach to Social Justice**

### **Sen's Spiritual Background and its Influence on His Conception of Justice**

Welfare economist and political philosopher Amartya Sen (1992, 1999, 2009) arrives at a theory of social justice for all "in a very broad sense" (2009, p. ix) from a very different vantage point in relation to Rawls. Sen was born in 1933 and educated in India and in England (Cambridge, B.A. and Ph.D.). He has lived and taught in India, the United Kingdom, and the United States where he is currently a distinguished professor at Harvard University. He grew up through the time of British colonialism in India, the freedom movement, and subsequent interethnic and interreligious conflicts, as well as the growth of India into a major nation state.

When he was 11 years old, he witnessed the killing of a poor Muslim man by Hindus in Dhaka, Bangladesh (at that time a part of India). As a child he was horrified that a man's religious identity could be held against him, and that the man's other identities, such as being a poor man who left home in search of work to feed his family despite his wife's pleadings to not go out as rioting was going on, had no bearing on the mob's decision to stab him (Sen 1999, 2009). Sen (2006) came to promote complex understandings of identity, including the intersections of a person's or group's religion (if any) and many other facets of affiliation. He is not supportive of overgeneralized characterizations of individuals or groups based on simplistic and stereotypical views of a person's religion or any other characteristic.

Sen draws on both Western (especially Adam Smith) and non-Western philosophies and intellectual histories, particularly from India, but also from elsewhere. He aims to clarify how to enhance justice and remove blatant injustices. He reports a major shift in his thinking about income and wealth as an economist by reflecting on comments by a woman scholar, Maitreyee, as reported in the Upanishads. During her discussions with her scholar husband she asked him: "If the whole earth, full of wealth" were to belong to her, could she achieve immortality with it? Learning that she could not, she remarked, "What should I do with that by which I do not become immortal?" (1999, p. 13). Reflection on this discourse led Sen to understand "the nature of the human predicament and the limitations of the material world" (1999, p. 13), so he shifted his focus from increasing a country's GNP to other valuable ways of living. Sen draws a parallel to Maitreyee's question by referring to Aristotle's Nicomachean ethics, "wealth is evidently not the good we are seeking; for it is merely useful and for the sake of

something else" (2009, p. 253). Believing "justice cannot be indifferent to the lives that people can actually live" (2009, p. 18), Sen refers to Buddha, who was deeply concerned by the "sight of mortality, morbidity, and disability around him" (2009, p. 225).

Because of his Indian background, Sen (2005) writes, "religion is not our only identity, nor necessarily the identity to which we attach the greatest importance" (p. 56). He clarifies in the extensive religious literature of India, doubt or skepticism is expressed about creation. To illustrate, Sen cites the *Rigveda*: "Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? ... perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows – or perhaps he does not know" (p. xi). Sen (2006) is not religious, though he is interested in matters of spirituality as we define it.

Instead of trying to get to ideal justice, Sen seeks to "merely" expand justice. Sen (2009) draws on the Magna Carta's idea, "To no man (sic) will we sell, or deny, or delay, right or justice" (p. 73). He also draws on the classical Sanskrit ideas of *niti* and *nyaya*, both of which stand for justice. *Niti* refers to rules and regulations and behavioral correctness in society; *nyaya* stands for a comprehensive conception of realized justice, or how people actually live in society. Sen (1999, p. 73) examines "the actual living that people manage to achieve" to assess the extent of justice. He asks: what are people able to do and be? What freedoms or opportunities do people have to develop capabilities that allow them to lead a dignified life of their own choice?

### **Key Concepts in Sen's Capabilities Approach (CA)**

The key idea in CA is that social arrangements should aim to expand people's capabilities, or their freedoms and opportunities to promote or achieve valuable beings and doings. Three core ideas are associated with CA: functionings, capabilities, and agency.

**Functionings.** Functionings are valuable activities that make up people's living and wellbeing, such as being healthy, safe, educated, or having the ability to participate in public discussions. Functionings are related to goods and income, but they describe what a person is able to do or be as a result of them. Because functionings are aspects of human wellbeing, some functionings may be basic (e.g., being nourished, literate, or clothed), and other functionings may be complex, (e.g., being able to appear in public without shame). Functionings can be general (e.g., ability to be employed) or specific (e.g., ability to be the President of the U.S.). Functionings relate to various dimensions of wellbeing and range from survival, relationships and self-direction, to arts and culture.

**Capabilities.** Sen (1999; 2009) states capabilities are "the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that a person can achieve. Thus, Capability is a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another ... to choose from possible livings" (1992, p. 40). In other words, capabilities are opportunity freedoms to be or to do what individuals value as worthwhile. For example, just as people with a lot of money can buy various goods, similarly, people with many capabilities can enjoy many activities and pursue varied life paths. Thus, capabilities imply a possibility or opportunity for functioning, but not specific functionings, because in CA people are agents who choose how to function.

**Agency.** Sen (1999, 2009) explains the idea of *agency* by noting the difference between fasting and starving. A person who is fasting is choosing not to eat because of political, religious, or health considerations. However, a person who is starving is not doing so out of choice, but rather is unable to

eat because of lack of food resources. The difference is that the fasting person could eat and chooses not to; whereas the starving person would eat if she could. So, agency refers to people's ability to pursue and realize goals they value and have reason to value. An agent is someone who acts and brings about change. An agent is not someone who is forced, oppressed, or passive. Moreover, agency can expand the horizons of concern beyond a person's own wellbeing to include environmental concerns, such as saving the spotted owl or helping people become free, such as Gandhi, M. L. King, Mandela, or Aung San Suu Kyi. Furthermore, along with the power of capabilities comes the obligation to help others (Sen, 2009). Thus, CA views people as active, creative, and able to act on behalf of their aspirations.

**Instrumental freedoms.** Sen (1999, 2009) focuses on five types of instrumental freedoms that enhance individuals' capabilities to lead a life that is valuable to them. Political freedoms focus on civil rights, including religious freedom, and cover opportunities for dialogue, dissent, and critique as well as voting rights and participatory selection of legislators and executives. Economic facilities refer to opportunities to utilize economic resources for consumption, production, or exchange with particular attention to availability and access to financial credit. Social opportunities refer to arrangements that society makes for education and health care so that all people can effectively participate in life. Transparency guarantees address the need for openness in relating to others under assurances of disclosure so that corruption, financial irresponsibility, and underhand dealings are prevented. Importantly for social workers, Sen strongly promotes protective security emphasizing the need for a social security net to prevent people from being reduced to abject poverty through the provision of unemployment benefit, supplementary income benefits, as well as ad hoc arrangements for relief or emergency public employment to generate income. Sen believes that these instrumental freedoms directly enhance people's capabilities, as well as supplement and reinforce one another.

**Substantive freedoms.** Sen identifies a broad range of substantive freedoms which range from being able to avoid "starvation, undernourishment, escapable morbidity and premature mortality, as well as the freedoms ... with being literate and numerate, enjoying political participation, and uncensored speech and so on (1999, p. 36). Sen (2009) believes when people have opportunities for healthcare and education, other opportunities open up for them.

**Diversities.** Sen has a nuanced understanding of diversities relating to human, social, and environmental factors that affect capabilities. His examples include, a pregnant woman needs more nutrition than a non-pregnant woman; older adults have special needs; people living in certain environments are more prone to diseases and infections than others; cold or warm climates require more resources for heating or cooling (Sen, 1999, 2009). Consequently, he believes we cannot arbitrarily set a list of basic capabilities that all human beings need, nor set a poverty line that will work uniformly for all people. In fact, a person with a disability may have more income than others, but due to a "conversion handicap" may need more resources as some disabilities may not be entirely correctable even with huge expenditures on treatment or prosthesis. Sen (2009) notes, individual and their needs - irrespective of differences - matter, and a just society is one that allows each individual to meet his/her unique needs.

Sen discusses intersectionalities of diversities among humans. He states, "A person belongs to many different groups (related to gender, class, language group, profession, nationality, community, race, religion, sexual orientation and so on) and to see them merely as a member of just one particular group would be a major denial of the freedom of each person to decide how exactly to see himself or

herself" (2009, pp. 246-247). He discloses, "I can be, at the same time, an Asian, an Indian citizen, ... an American or British resident, an economist, a dabbler in philosophy, an author, a Sanskritist, a strong believer in secularism and democracy, a man, a feminist, a heterosexual, a defender of gay and lesbian rights, with a nonreligious lifestyle, from a Hindu background, a non-Brahmin, and a nonbeliever in an afterlife (and also, in case the question is asked, a non-believer in a "before-life"). This is just a small sample of diverse categories to each of which I may simultaneously belong—there are of course a great many other membership categories too, which depending on circumstances, can move and engage me" (2006, p. 19).

**Health.** Sen notes that some capabilities are "natural goods," which means luck, genes, or socio-economic status at birth can play a role in their endowment. Thus, one's physical and emotional health to some extent can be determined by luck factors or genetic conditions. Therefore, irrespective of natural or social origin of health, the government should provide the social bases by making health care available to all. .

**Poverty and women's issues.** Sen emphasizes the life circumstances of economically disadvantaged people and oppressed women in some patriarchal societies. He discusses "coupling of disadvantages" of various sorts and notes that "relative deprivation in income can yield absolute deprivation of capabilities" (1999, p. 6). There are "adaptive preferences" when disadvantaged people lower and adapt their expectations and life styles to what is feasible for them. Sen (2009) promotes women's voice in the development agenda, focusing on a girl child's education, reproductive rights, and access to micro-credit for women in developing countries. Sen acknowledges that cultural differences and diversity of human values are significant. Consequently, addressing capabilities via policies and programs may appear paternalistic. However, he notes although there are certain cultural norms that may contradict some values, such as women's freedom to choose how to live, it is important to examine whether these cultural norms benefit or harm group members. While context shapes choice and aspirations, basic capabilities and aspirations exist across differences. Sen (2009) states that democratic discussion is a good vehicle for empowering oppressed people. Discussion allows people to understand other possibilities. He notes that certain prior conditions in legal, political, social, and economic spheres need to be created so that people can become capable of human flourishing.

CA's aim is to expand opportunities and freedoms for all so that each individual can lead a life of their own choosing. In Sen's view, it is erroneous to focus only on income in poverty and justice analysis because although income is an important indicator of what people can and cannot do in their lives, increasing income should not be the ultimate aim of social policy, as true human living is much more than merely making money and adding to a country's GNP. Sen clarifies that CA is greater than human capital theory, which focuses only on enhancing education and income generating power of people. Sen emphasizes human flourishing and gives low priority to income in relation to other capabilities that make a full life possible.

### **Insights from Nussbaum about Capabilities**

Martha Nussbaum (1995, 2001, 2006) is a leading CA theorist and her ideas complement Sen's ideas. Nussbaum and Sen agree on many points, including the importance of supporting people's capabilities within a justice framework. They agree that people incapable of minimal functioning at one point in time can acquire or develop the requisite capabilities over time with appropriate public

arrangements. They also agree that capabilities are inter-related and affect one another. The main differences between Sen and Nussbaum lie in their identification of capabilities (referred to as substantive freedoms by Sen and as core capabilities by Nussbaum), and in a threshold level of capabilities discussed by Nussbaum but not by Sen.

Nussbaum (1995, 2001, 2006) goes beyond Sen's capability space. She articulates *ten core capabilities* that all individuals in all societies must have to lead a worthy or dignified life, based on field work with non-governmental organizations in India and cross-cultural discussions with Europeans. These core capabilities are: *life* (i.e., to live to the end of a normal human life span); *bodily health* (e.g., physical health, adequate nourishment, and shelter); *bodily integrity* (e.g., freedom of movement and security against assault, including domestic violence); *senses, imagination and thought* (e.g., using all these faculties informed by adequate education, engaging in free self-expression, having freedom of religious exercise and choice of how to explore the ultimate meaning of life); *emotions* (e.g., attachment to things and people, and the ability to experience a full range of emotions); *practical reason* (i.e., reflecting on the nature of the good, planning, and making choices about one's life); *affiliation* (e.g., to live with and towards others on the basis of empathy and concern for justice, based on treatment as a dignified human being free of discrimination); *concern for other species*, (e.g., animals, plants, and the world of nature); *play* (i.e., to laugh, play, and enjoy recreation); and *control over one's political and material environment* (e.g., free political choices and participation along with equal rights to property and seeking employment). Nussbaum states that a full human being is one who is dignified, free, shapes her own life, co-operates and reciprocates, uses practical reasoning, and has self-worth. Nussbaum identifies practical reason and affiliation as "architectonic capabilities" (2006, p. 162) that pervade all other capabilities.

Nussbaum calls for a threshold level of each of the ten capabilities so that each person can then decide which capability to emphasize and how to function. She notes, "If people are systematically falling below the threshold in any of these core areas, this should be seen as a situation both unjust and tragic, in need of urgent attention—even if in other respects things are going well (2001, p. 71). She states when citizens lack the core capabilities, they are capability deprived. She notes that women tend to suffer from acute capabilities deprivation. Thus, all societies should aim to get capability deprived people above a minimal capability threshold so that they can lead a dignified life of their own choice. Her universal and normative capabilities list allows comparisons of quality of life among people or how one is doing in relation to others in a society as well as cross-societal comparisons.

Sen (2009) does not endorse Nussbaum's list of core capabilities, or her belief that individuals must achieve a threshold level in each of the core capabilities, because these assumptions violate human freedom to choose. He believes his loose and broad substantive capabilities along with his list of instrumental capabilities deserve societal attention, and he leaves individuals to decide which capabilities they choose to enhance or neglect, as we cannot know the limits of human possibilities.

### **Evaluating the Capabilities Approach to Justice for Congruence with the Four Principles**

**Supporting full human development.** Sen recognizes a wide range of human functionings that should be supported by justice frameworks. He acknowledges the importance of goods and income, but emphasizes that they are mere means to ends (i.e., people choosing and actualizing their own goals). He recognizes both basic (e.g., nourishment and shelter) and complex functionings that go beyond survival

to satisfying relationships, self-direction, and engagement with arts and culture. He supports capabilities as possibilities for choice among various life paths. He admires people's achievement of free agency and concern for others, national and international human rights, and environmental protection. Nussbaum's elaboration of core capabilities emphasizes the importance of everyone having the opportunity to equally achieve fulfillment of needs for survival, respectful affiliations, and a holistic blend of thinking, practical reason, emotions, senses, imagination, and other faculties. Sen's ideal implies a wide range of capabilities, but in the interest of avoiding assuming what is important to particular persons and societies and in order to promote freedom of choice, he does not itemize the capabilities.

CA thoroughly addresses justice issues related to what Maslow (1969; 1970) referred to as subsistence needs and self-actualization needs of freedom, creativity, and loving relationships. CA also implies the possibility of people choosing to pursue to further development of what Maslow called self-transcendence needs, such as expanded states of consciousness, widely encompassing altruism, and sense of communion with the divine or oneness with the universe. This focus on basic needs, self-actualization, and the potential for self-transcendence is congruent with spiritually sensitive social work.

**Prioritizing the vulnerable.** CA supports freedoms for all people in a broad sense. Sen includes consideration of protections for the most vulnerable, such as through access to education and healthcare, maintenance of a social security net, and ad hoc programs to assist as needs arise. Sen and Nussbaum place strong emphasis on issues of poverty, oppression of women, and the full range of human diversities and intersectionalities of diverse characteristics as individuals choose to identify them. They do not restrict their justice concerns only to people who work. They include children, women, elderly, and people with disabilities. Nussbaum (2001) even includes other species, such as animals, plants, and the world of nature. She (2006) discusses in detail the protection of non-human animals' capabilities and habitat. Overall, this discussion is highly congruent with this principle of spiritually sensitive social work.

**Addressing global/ecological interrelation.** Given the highly international nature of Sen and Nussbaum's experiences, it is not surprising that they address international issues to a significant degree, in the context of respectful affiliations, as Nussbaum describes it, and agency to choose functionings, as Sen puts it. They highlight the importance of shaping justice conceptions and social policies to be culturally appropriate in relation to particular communities and nations. They also recognize the importance of addressing protection of the natural environment and Nussbaum highlights the value of respectful affiliation with nonhuman beings and nature. These values are highly congruent with spiritually sensitive social work.

From Nussbaum's (2006) discussion of a safety net for animals and nature, she extends her understanding of capabilities much beyond Sen. However, there is insufficient discussion on ecological balance. It is unclear whether CA encompasses spiritually sensitive social work's deep ecological awareness that respects nature and all beings and promotes wellbeing of nonhuman beings and the earth based on their intrinsic worth (Besthorn, 2001; Coates, 2007).

**Respecting spiritual diversity.** CA places great importance on human freedoms, including respect for diverse religious and nonreligious worldviews and support for people's freedom of (and freedom from) religion. Respectful discourse and dissent based on various religious and secular positions are supported in the CA framework. Violence perpetrated in the name of religion or secular ideologies is not supported. Further, CA takes a holistic view of human functioning and does not attempt

to limit justice discourse to reason. Sen's discussion of justice takes into account insights from many different religious and philosophical positions. These commitments of CA are highly congruent with spiritually sensitive social work.

## Discussion

### A Comparison of Rawlsian Justice and the Capabilities Approach

Rawls develops his theory of social justice based on the notion of "social contract" among hypothetical individuals to create an ideal society. Sen develops his theory of justice based on the notion of "impartial spectator" from real life examples both past and present for current life realities. Both social contract theories and impartial spectator premises have drawbacks due to an unrealistic portrayal of justice discourse. Yet, Rawls is more parochial than Sen in terms of the range of philosophical, cultural, and global perspectives used. Rawls focuses on income and wealth or goods and resources to bring about justice while Sen views income and wealth merely as a means to justice. Sen emphasizes that the actual freedoms or capabilities that people have affect the actual lives that people are able to lead and, as such, the ends of justice. Sen's differentiation of *niti* and *nyaya* helps to demonstrate the stark contrast between procedural justice promoted by Rawls, and his own notion of realized justice in CA. Sen acknowledges income and wealth are important to wellbeing and quality of life, but notes that there is no country in the world that is happier because of its greater GNP. He asserts wellbeing and happiness result from achievements; what people are able to do and be. CA highlights that achievements are related to freedoms of people to choose and enact capabilities.

Unlike Rawls, CA keeps health disadvantages, educational deficits, various personal, social, economic, and environmental diversities, environmental sustainability, and global justice within the scope of justice. Thus, Sen's CA has a much wider range than Rawlsian justice, which excludes many of these elements and is restricted primarily to the U.S. and only for its citizens.

Nussbaum believes each of the 10 capabilities is equally important and seeks a threshold level of each capability. While we concur with Sen's cautions, we believe that Nussbaum's elaboration of the range of capabilities helps social workers to think about how to identify and develop awareness of capabilities for spiritually sensitive social work. Yet Sen appears to be consistent with the social work value of self-determination in stating we cannot decide how people should lead their lives or place equal weight on each of Nussbaum's identified capabilities. Sen emphasizes that it is important to have democratic discussion and through such discussion it is possible to empower people to believe that many capability options can be viable for them. He distinguishes between patients or clients and agents, and states that agents are people whose freedom to decide what to value and how to pursue what they value can extend far beyond what outsiders think is possible for them. Overall, CA's stance on capabilities allows social workers to enhance social justice in a spiritually sensitive manner because it retains strong respect for human dignity, self-determination, and diversities.

The previous comparison of Rawls and CA with regard to four principles of spiritually sensitive social work shows that both justice theories are concerned with societal arrangements to support human development, to address vulnerable people, and to respect diversity. Both Rawls and Sen were motivated to develop social justice theories by witnessing violence committed due to religious and other kinds of conflict. This led them to encourage respectful and nonviolent interchange of religious and nonreligious views in particular societies and in international relations. These features of the theories

are congruent with spiritually sensitive social work. Rawls has already made a major impact on thinking about social justice in social work, while CA is less well-known.

However, Rawls' theory is weaker than CA in its conception of human potential and in elaboration of various capabilities. Rawlsian justice promotes concern for the vulnerable only with regard to the working poor, while CA encompasses everyone and gives special consideration to poor, oppressed, and marginalized people. Rawls did not develop a thorough international vantage point on justice and neglected the global/ecological interrelationship. In contrast, CA pays attention to cultural and religious appropriateness of justice policies and practices, and encourages global justice and natural environmental protection.

Rawls and CA agree diversity of religious and nonreligious worldviews should be respected and cooperative discourse between them should be encouraged within societies and the world. However, Rawls excludes explicit use of religious rationales in justice discourse and engagement of any other faculty than detached reasoning. CA includes religious and secular discourse about justice and also recognizes it is important for people to engage all their faculties of thinking, feeling, sensing, imagination, creativity, and mutually respectful affiliations.

As a result of this comparison, we conclude that CA to justice is more congruent with social work's mission and values in general and with the four principles of spiritually sensitive social work identified here. It is valuable for spiritually sensitive social workers to be familiar with Rawls's foundational contributions to justice theory, because of its influence on our profession and wider political discourse. However, we believe that CA is a more comprehensive and congruent justice theory for spiritually sensitive social work. Scholars, educators, and practitioners engaged with spiritually sensitive social work could build on the insights of CA to articulate a vision for social justice that can guide our profession's approaches to macro practice and social policy. This would also require a more detailed examination of CA regarding its possible strengths and limitations regarding the degree of its articulation of the full possibilities of human development (including the self-transcendence needs and transpersonal levels of consciousness) and a fully nature-respecting stance such as addressed by deep ecology.

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