

Agency and responsibility: Conceptualizing responsibility for structural injustice in capability and development applications

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Despite the large literature in the capability approach, its concept of responsibility has not been developed in depth. My work intends to examine this and articulate a conception of responsibility that I believe to be more appropriate for its applications, drawing from within the capability approach literature, from the contemporary literature on responsibility in political philosophy, and from an ongoing development research project in the Philippines.

In doing so, I hope to contribute not only to the conceptual underpinning of the capability approach, and to its responsible applications in development projects, but also to the broader literature in political philosophy on responsibility.

This project follows Sabina Alkire, director of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, in asserting that the capability approach seeks to address structural injustice. She defines structural injustice as a situation in which “multiple agents coordinate joint action, the fruits of which are unjust - thus multiple agents would have to act differently in order to reverse the injustice,” in contrast to situations in which there is one specific agent that causes the injustice.

Moreover, the multiple agents whose actions lead to unjust effects act in and through institutions which have been “designed to take into account and further some set of interests, but are not designed to take into account other interests that they harm, certain capabilities that they can cause to contract, or opportunity costs that their operation entails” (Alkire 2006, 47-48).

Of particular interest to my project is the agency of those who “have to act differently” against the unjust structure in order for change to happen. In the same text, Alkire identifies a subgroup of agents she calls “partially decisive powerbrokers” who are in positions of relative power within the structure who can drive change and raises the question of *how* and *why* such people become motivated to change.

I find it curious that her discussion of such “collective action problem” does not emphasize the agency of other participants: affected persons, bystanders, and committed activists. While indeed particular people are positioned to influence structures, is it not also the case that continuing to participate in such a structure, despite my relative lack of power within it, perpetuates that structure?

This leads to the question of responsibility: *who is responsible for responding to structural injustice?* Save for a handful of instances, the capability approach literature only implicitly recognises the responsibility of all agents who participate within a structure to address injustice - whether it is the participation of consumers as in Crocker’s (2008) work on responsible consumption, Sen’s (2000, 2010, 2015) recognition of the importance of public participation, or how responsibility can conceptually be used as a measure of agency (Nebel and Herrera Rendon Nebel 2018).

According to Robeyns (2017), the dearth of discussion of responsibility apart from the responsibility of the state or inter-state agents could be due to the reluctance to make the

‘victims’ of injustices responsible for the suffering inflicted upon them by others. Though understandable, such sentiment overlooks the freedom and agency of individuals, regardless of their position of power or lack thereof. Beyond the efforts to integrate the participatory approach and the capability approach (a recent survey of which can be found in Clark et al. 2019), there has been little exploration of the concept of responsibility, specifically the responsibility of agents within structures of injustice, within the capability approach.

Drawing from existing literature within the capability approach and the broader literature in political philosophy on responsibility, I argue that the capability approach requires a broader conception of responsibility, which recognizes the multidimensional nature of human development; promotes the freedom of individual agents; and accounts for the tension and interplay between individual agency and the factors beyond the individual’s control, recognizing the agent’s positionality as the locus of personal and social responsibility.

To develop this, I draw primarily from the work of Iris Marion Young (2013), who has proposed a *social connection model* of political responsibility. Young points out that contemporary social movements appeal to individual and collective agents’ sense of responsibility for their current participation in unjust structures on a large scale, mediated over time and space.

In contrast, the predominant philosophical conceptions of responsibility - individual responsibility and collective responsibility - are focused on how to conceptualize accountability for previously committed unjust actions. These conceptions of responsibility-as-accountability are focused on identifying particular individuals or collectives who are exclusively at fault for an action and its consequences and delimit the action and its consequences to a specific place and time.

This is a useful conception in the realms of morality and law, but not so much in the realm of structural injustice, in which individuals could be acting within the law and according to a moral code, yet still perpetuate injustice.

It is against these inadequacies of existing conceptions of responsibility that Young proposes her social connection model, specifically for situations of structural injustice, i.e., injustices perpetuated through institutions and processes in which individuals and groups inextricably participate and have repercussions across space and into the future. Responsibility in this context implies the transformation of structural processes in order to reduce unjust outcomes which, I argue, resonates significantly with the capability approach.

There is, however, a lacuna that not even Young’s social connection model of responsibility has: the responsibility of the agent from various positions/relations within structures. Young’s model was formulated through reflecting on the anti-sweatshop movement, in which the recognition of responsibility came through the consumer relationship.

But what of the recognition of one’s responsibility for structural injustice on the basis of my positionality as a small trader? Small financier? A producer who feels trapped into supplying the goods for these unjust structures?

It is here that my field engagement with the *Land Use Change in the Uplands Impacts and Drivers (LUCID) project* (<https://lucid.essc.org.ph/>) makes a valuable contribution. Through discussions with corn farmers, traders, and creditors in Bukidnon, I hope to confront the

social connection model of responsibility with the daily lives of people participating in the structural injustice of farming genetically modified corn in the uplands of southern Philippines.

This is an abstract of the paper presented by Pamela Joy (PJ) Mariano Capistrano at the 2020 Human Development and Capability Association (HDCA) online conference hosted by Massey University in Auckland, New Zealand on 1 July 2020. PJ is an Instructor at the Department of Philosophy, School of Humanities, Ateneo de Manila University. She is a PhD candidate at the Université de Namur under an ESSC-LUCID research scholarship. PJ can be reached through her email: pamela.mariano@student.unamur.be.