



Ordinal Assessment of Nussbaum's "Central Human Capabilities" by Younger and Older Adults



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INTRODUCTION

Subjective well-being has been studied extensively as one of the central foci of positive psychology (e.g., Keyes, Shmotkin and Ryff, 2002; Ryff and Singer, 2008). The notion of individual well-being and well-being within society has been a focus within the philosophical literature pertaining to justice and human development, as well. As Anand, Hunter and Smith (2005) have succinctly posited, "...it is the opportunity to live a good life, rather than the accumulation of resources, that matters most for well-being, and that opportunities result from the capabilities that people have" (p. 10). The capabilities approach formulated by Sen (1993) and advanced by Nussbaum (2000; 2006; 2011) are therefore relevant, in any attempt to define the notion of well-being and living a good life.

Nussbaum (2011) argues that in order for individuals to flourish and lead a dignified life, a number of "central capabilities" must be realized. She proposed ten capabilities which include, "being able to have good health"; "being adequately nourished"; "being free from unwarranted search and seizure".

There has been robust discussion in the philosophical literature, about whether some of these human capabilities might be seen as *more* salient than others (Arneson, 2005). For example, Riddle (2020) has suggested that, although all potential capabilities are important, failure to realize some capabilities might result in "corrosive" disadvantage, in that it would "adversely impact one's ability to secure other goods or opportunities". That is, although all capabilities are important, it might be useful to characterize some as having higher priority than others.

The purpose of this study was to allow respondents to rank-order various human capabilities in terms of their importance.

METHODS

Participants were asked to rank-order their "top ten" capabilities from a list of 20 capabilities derived from Nussbaum's ten "Central Capabilities". Although Nussbaum proposes only ten capabilities, some of the descriptions represent what could be called "conglomerate capabilities" consisting of separable entities. For example, the capability labelled "Life", is somewhat straight-forward and is described as "Being able to live to the end of a human life of normal length: not dying prematurely, or before one's life is so reduced as to not be worth living". Other capabilities, as described by Nussbaum, are too complex for simple responding.

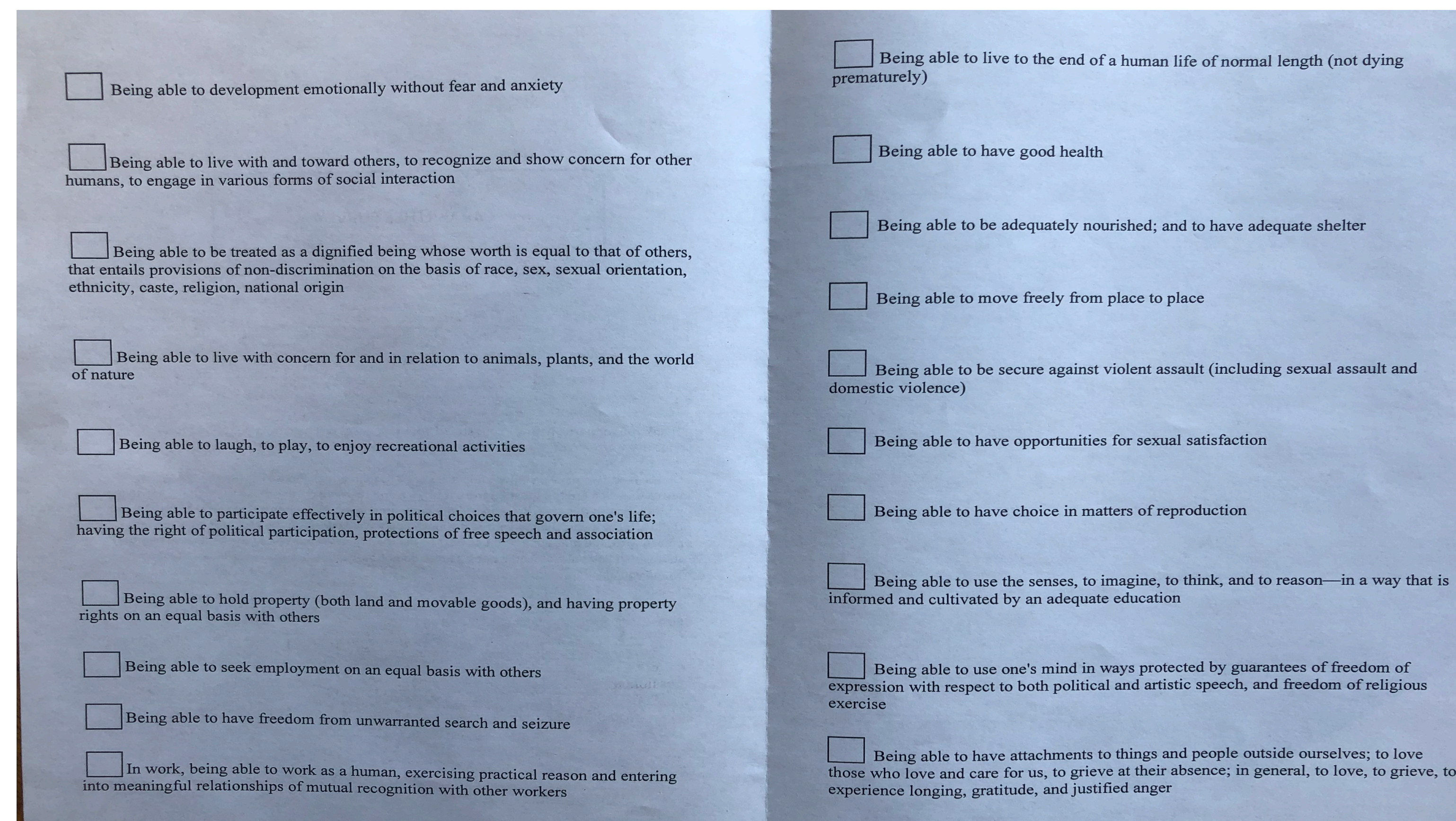
For example, here is Nussbaum's capability labelled "Control over one's environment":

"Control over one's environment. (A) Political. Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association.

(B) Material. Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis as others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis as others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers (p.34).

In this case, it would be impossible to interpret a participants' ranking of this capability as a singular entity. For example, one would not be able to dissociate rankings for "freedom of speech", "equal employment" or "holding property" if Nussbaum's capability of "control over one's environment" were not further differentiated. Our differentiation of Nussbaum's original capabilities list yielded a list of 20 capabilities to be ranked by participants (see below).

In order to investigate possible differences in responses associated with different age groups, approximately half of the respondents were traditional-aged college students; while the other respondents were college staff.



RESULTS

A total of 87 participants (68 female; 19 male) ranked their top ten capabilities. Forty-four of the respondents were students; while 43 were college staff. The difference in mean age for student and staff respondents was statistically significant (M = 20.28 yrs. and M = 45.19 yrs., respectively; t(85) = 12.85; p<.001).

The most salient finding from this research is that respondents clearly *did not* perceive the 20 capabilities as equipotent. Mean rankings for individual items ranged from 0.47 to 7.28 (for staff), and from 0.27 to 6.16 (for students). Interestingly, of the 20 capabilities, the following four were ranked (on average) as most important by *both* younger and older adults – 1) good health; 2) food and shelter; 3) attachment to loved ones; and 4) non-discrimination.

A series of t-tests were conducted to compare the mean rankings of the capabilities by students and staff. Student respondents ranked the ability "to develop emotionally without fear and anxiety" higher than staff respondents (t(85) = 1.99; p < .05). Students also ranked the ability "to use the senses to imagine, to think, and to reason – in a way that is informed and cultivated by an adequate education", higher than staff (t(85) = 2.66; p < .01). Staff respondents ranked the ability "to move freely from place to place", higher than students (t(85) = 2.60; p < .05).

RESULTS

STAFF	t-test	STUDENT	ITEM	STAFF	ITEM	STUDENT	ITEM
1.33	1.99*	2.68	develop emotionally	*	ITEM	*	ITEM
3.60	0.72	3.07	social interaction	7.28	good health	6.16	good health
4.60	1.22	5.57	non-discrimination	6.21	food and shelter	5.84	food and shelter
1.84	0.84	1.39	animals and nature	5.70	attachment to people and	5.66	attachment to people/thi
2.86	1.33	3.75	laugh and play	4.60	non-discrimination	5.57	non-discrimination
1.70	0.19	1.59	political choice free speech	3.60	social interaction	4.66	use senses to imagine/thi
1.14	1.04	0.73	hold property	3.47	normal length life	3.75	laugh and play
1.09	0.5	1.32	equal employment	3.26	no assault	3.07	social interaction
0.74	1.41	0.27	freedom from search	2.98	use senses to imagine and	2.89	no assault
1.63	0.02	1.61	work and workers	2.86	laugh and play	2.68	develop emotionally
3.47	1.09	2.57	normal length life	2.44	freedom of expression	2.61	freedom of expression
7.28	1.49	6.16	good health	1.84	animals and nature	2.57	normal length life
6.21	0.5	5.84	food and shelter	1.70	political choice free speec	1.61	work and workers
1.40	2.60*	0.36	move freely	1.63	work and workers	1.59	political choice free speec
3.26	0.53	2.89	no assault	1.40	move freely	1.45	choice in reproduction
0.47	1.03	0.82	sexual satisfaction	1.33	develop emotionally	1.39	animals and nature
0.91	1.36	1.45	choice in reproduction	1.14	hold property	1.32	equal employment
2.98	2.66**	4.66	use senses to imagine and think	1.09	equal employment	0.82	sexual satisfaction
2.44	0.26	2.61	freedom of expression	0.91	choice in reproduction	0.73	hold property
5.70	0.05	5.66	attachment to people and thing	0.74	freedom from search	0.36	move freely
				0.47	sexual satisfaction	0.27	freedom from search
AGE							
45.19	12.85**	20.28					

* mean reversed rank (i.e., higher numeral value indicates greater importance)

DISCUSSION

When asked to rank a series of human capabilities "in terms of which are the most important to you", students and older adults clearly indicated priorities in their rankings. That is, some of the capabilities posited by Nussbaum are ranked as being more important than others. These results are consistent with interview data collected by Wolff and De-Shalit (2007), which similarly indicate bodily health and integrity; affiliation and belonging; and sense, imagination and thought as among the most important to respondents.

Although these data do not specifically address the issue of "corrosive disadvantage" when some capabilities are not realized (Riddle, 2014), they do argue for a schema in which not all capabilities are "created equal". These data also are reminiscent of Maslow's seminal work and his suggestion that, "Human needs arrange themselves in hierarchies of prepotency. That is to say, the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent needs" (Maslow, 1943; p. 370).