

ABSTRACT

Many social assistance recipients experience mental health vulnerabilities when dealing with income support programs that they experience as limiting their financial self-determination. This presentation details those vulnerabilities and provides a psychological model based on the capabilities approach to address those vulnerabilities and enhance their capabilities through individual and systemic advocacy.

PURPOSE

While there is some literature on disparate mental health impact of unemployment based on the variables of gender, social class, age, geographic location, ethnicity and immigration less has been done on the disparate mental health impacts that surveillance practices have on social assistance recipients in terms of their psychological capabilities.

The purpose of this research is to examine, through qualitative interviews, service recipients' experience with provincial or municipal income support programs' practices in the context of their psychological capabilities. It supports the advocacy efforts of community legal clinics serving those with economic and psychological vulnerabilities and contributes to the rights-claiming efforts of lower-income people.

I argue that human rights psychology research grounded in a capabilities approach combines the best of positive psychology and the best of human rights research and provides psychologists with a fuller framework to work with marginalized people.

WHAT ARE CAPABILITIES

Martha Nussbaum lists ten capabilities that people require to flourish. When people lack the capability in any of these areas, they often claim the right in the cultural context to be able to ensure that they can be secured. These capabilities include:

- 1) *Life* (not to have one's life reduced so that it is not worth living);
- 2) *Bodily Health* (to be adequately nourished and to have adequate shelter);
- 3) *Bodily Integrity* (Being secure against violent assault, including sexual assault and domestic violence);
- 4) *Senses, Imagination and Thought* (being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing works and events of one's own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth);
- 5) *Emotions*: (being able to have attachments to things and people outside of ourselves...not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety);
- 6) *Practical reason*: (being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's life);
- 7) *Affiliation* (being able to live with and towards others...in various forms of social interaction...being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others);
- 8) *Other species* (being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature);
- 9) *Play* (being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities); and
- 10) *Control over one's environment* (to participate in choices that govern one's life, being able to hold property, having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others, possessing freedom from unwanted search and seizure, and enjoying the ability to enter into meaningful relationships)

METHOD

Through qualitative interviews with social assistance recipients experiencing surveillance practices from income support programs that they feel is thwarting their ability to flourish, I capture themes emerging from their experience.

Since my goal in this research is to capture their experience as it is actually lived it makes sense to us a methodology that is grounded in phenomenology. Robeyns (2016, p.1) observes that phenomenology, beginning with Husserl, urges that the world of immediate or lived experience takes precedence and the objective is to get as close as possible to the thing itself (i.e. the phenomenon).

Phenomenological psychologists developed a method to support accessing this kind of experience; interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Alise, 2017). Because phenomenological psychological researchers are looking at common life experiences, the sample of participants needs to be relatively homogenous.

In this research, the common experience is with the surveillance practices of income support programs that people feel is thwarting their ability to flourish. As a remedy for this, they seek support through a community legal clinic. The purpose of the legal clinic is to provide legal advice and assistance to residents of the District of Thunder Bay, particularly Indigenous people, who need assistance with poverty law issues.

This research supports the advocacy efforts of community legal clinics serving those with economic and psychological vulnerabilities and contributes to the rights-claiming efforts of lower-income people. It advances the goals and objectives of human rights psychology.

DISCUSSION

Capabilities relate to the development of both a person's functional capacity and to the social, political and cultural context that either supports or suppresses their psychological functioning. Thus, the capabilities approach in human rights psychology is attentive to the intersection between the political and social dimensions of human experience as it impacts marginalized individuals' and groups' cognitive and behavioural experience within an economic context. "The Capability Approach has pushed forward the analysis of women's human rights, the rights of the poor, and, more recently, the rights of people with disabilities. At the same time, arguing for the crucial importance of material redistribution" (Nussbaum, 2007, p. 22). Consequently, it is a fitting human rights framework for rights claiming.

REFERENCES

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Dr. Mirella Stroink: PhD Supervisor. Lakehead University. Thanks for all of her guidance, support, contribution, encouragement, and wisdom