

## Supporting Capabilities: Using Psychosocial Concepts to Guide a Sennian Approach to Escaping Urban Poverty

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### Scholarly Abstract

Currently, more than half of the human population resides in cities. Over one-third of these cities are located in the global south, where many of the world's slum and squatter settlements are located. The unique experience of the urban poor has helped initiate a reconfiguration of poverty definitions, led by Amartya Sen's capabilities approach. Countless poverty alleviation programs have since incorporated his ideals, but with limited success. This paper attempts to address these issues by examining the role of psychosocial phenomena such as identity, social representations and stigma in the escape from poverty. Through unpacking the interactions between these phenomena against the background of poverty within Brazilian favelas, the author attempts to help inform a more concrete framework for the application of Sennian approaches to poverty alleviation in urban centers.

### Author's Note

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## 1. Introduction

For the fifty percent of the developing world that exists on less than one US dollar a day, no climb is more perilous than that which leads out of poverty. Many people living in poverty endure inadequate shelter, lack of access to health care, lack of clean water, and an inability to educate or provide for their children. While this description most readily aligns itself with images of rural communities in developing countries, globalization has transposed a similar reality upon urban landscapes. Thus those who go to cities to seek economic opportunity often find the cities poorly lacking. This influx to urban areas has led to exponential increases in slum populations around the world, presenting a challenge to those attempting to address poverty in the world's largest cities.

While the importance of a stable income in mitigating poverty is indisputable, we must suspect the notion that economic opportunity alone will

translate to improved livelihoods. It is quite likely that this illusion has been propagated by the very manner in which states of poverty are defined. Neo-liberal doctrine has long placed the roots of poverty within the individual and his inability to capitalize on life circumstances to achieve economic success.<sup>iii</sup> Urban poverty is a unique experience, however, which ties in a host of social factors such as high levels of crime, substandard housing conditions, and violence.<sup>iii</sup>

Unsurprisingly, this changing face of poverty has prompted a reconfiguration of poverty philosophies, led by Amartya Sen's capabilities approach. Sen rejects preoccupations with economic indicators; instead, he explores the barriers that prevent individuals from engaging in five basic freedoms: social opportunity, political freedom, economic facilities, transparency guarantees, and protective security. He suggests that the only way to truly achieve happiness is through addressing the deprivation of capabilities that prevent the individual from engaging in these freedoms.<sup>iv</sup> Sen's definition of poverty incorporates social phenomena such as social inequity, cross cultural stigmatization, and power imbalances. This incorporation has opened the doorway to more encompassing strategies against poverty and has inspired countless program efforts in the field since 2000. However, results have been mixed,<sup>v</sup> with scholars citing the inability of programs to appropriately consider the influences of these issues on the choices made by, and lived experiences of, the poor.

Such outcomes also highlight the absence of a framework capable of outlining how these freedoms can be actualized on the ground. The ability of psychosocial phenomena to describe the way that individuals interact with their world could potentially contribute to the establishment of a concrete pathway for actualizing Sen's freedoms. By highlighting the intricacies of the interface between society and the individual through the application of psychosocial theory, poverty reduction strategies incorporating Sennian ideals could be better informed and stand a greater chance of success. This paper will examine mechanisms such as social identity, social representations, and stigma with respect to Sen's capabilities approach, in order to illustrate the importance of psychosocial well being in Sennian approaches to poverty. Examples of these phenomena in the lives of the poor are presented in comparisons to one of the most famous sites of urban poverty: The Brazilian favela.

## 1.1 The Brazilian Favela

For decades, the favelas (Portuguese for „shanty town“) of Brazil have provided a window into the changing face of urban poverty. Their inhabitants reside in some of the most culturally rich environments in the world, albeit in one of the most unequal countries.<sup>vi</sup> Although informal settlements have existed in Brazil for over 100 years,<sup>vii</sup> the economic downturn of the 80s and 90s following the „golden era“ of the 60s is accredited for moulding once largely afro- Brazilian communities into the profile seen today: a mix of afro-Brazilian and poor white inhabitants.<sup>viii</sup> Over eighty percent of Brazil's population lives in cities, with more than 12 million

households residing in informal settlements. Access to services vary, with 26 million individuals unable to access water, and over 80 million without access to formal sewage systems.<sup>ix</sup>

The conditions within Brazil's informal settlements have not been static. Attempts to regenerate the favelas have ranged from removal policies in the 1970s, to upgrading programs in the 90s, such as the Favela Barrio regeneration program, launched in 1994.<sup>x</sup> Though living conditions in favelas have improved in recent years, favela life is still plagued by high levels of violence and crime. Drug trade is of particular concern in this respect; wars waged between drug lords and police officials often result in the deaths of innocent community members. Living in an environment with such complex social conditions has been proven to influence psychosocial well being;<sup>xi</sup> as such, social conditions warrant consideration in attempts to improve living conditions in the favelas.

## 2. Considering the Psychosocial: Social Identity, Social Representations, Stigma, and the Brazilian Poverty Experience

*Social identity theory* describes identity formation as the process by which individuals come to define themselves in relation to others in their world.<sup>xiii</sup> The process is thus heavily shaped by the nature of interactions with other people.<sup>xiii</sup> In a similar vein, *group identities* are formed by comparisons of the self to a set of individuals who compose an „in“ group (and thus share similarities in values and behaviours) and against those who are in the “out” group (and therefore representative of contradictory ideals and values).

In the favela, social identities are created in an environment where it is often difficult to find sources for positive self-validation. Brazilian culture is famous for its dominant masculinities. In such a culture, the ability to provide for one's family becomes a top priority and is cited by residents as the impetus for a move to urban centers.<sup>xiv</sup> The ability to act as a provider is also cited multiple times by Sen as a capability for individuals. In Pearlman's examination of poverty in the favelas, 70% of respondents said that finding a good job is the only real opportunity to escape chronic poverty. However, a lack of job opportunities in the urban marketplace makes unemployment a reality for many. In cases like these, when it is impossible to provide for the family, a huge blow can be inflicted upon the maintenance of a positive sense of self. As men attempt to maintain positive identities through other means, alcoholism and domestic violence are often infused into the home. As one favela community leader put it, “If a man is out of work, he doesn't help around the house, but he does get in the way more than ever. He's drinking and squabbling, blaming things on his wife.”<sup>xv</sup> Such statements also describe typical defensive behaviour in social psychology, through which individuals attempt to maintain a positive sense of identity through projection of fears and negative feelings and through placing blame on others.<sup>xvi</sup> Subsequently, many families are plagued by domestic violence, which is known to entrench individuals in the poverty cycle.<sup>xvii</sup>

What's more, in many families, economic opportunities that become available in the way of informal work for women or children may be rejected based on the dominant male's decision, fuelled by his need to remain acting head of household.<sup>xviii</sup>

Closely connected to this concept of identity formation is the idea of *social representations*, which have been described as the mechanisms through which individuals see and construct their worlds.<sup>xix</sup> The nature of this process involves interactions with peers in public spaces that allow the opportunity to formulate ideals and definitions that are used to help navigate one's social environment. Once formed, these representations can be understood as images, categories, and phenomena that organize meanings and allow individuals to classify circumstances and other individuals.<sup>xx</sup>

The theory of social representations has great value in unpacking the motivations behind responses to poverty alleviation programs in poor communities. Howarth, Foster, and Dorrer describe some key aspects of social representations theory, which can be applied to the favela experience.<sup>xxi</sup> First, social representation theory provides perspectives on the competing systems of knowledge across lay and professional spheres. For many poverty alleviation programs, which are characterized by the introduction of new knowledge and skills, the ability or inability of individuals to incorporate new information will heavily influence levels of success. Second, social representations have the ability to entrench and sustain stigmatizing activities and practices within a group.<sup>xxii</sup> Urban dwellings are often permeated by social, economic, and political variables that influence the opinions formed about actors and groups within a community. For example, in a community that has experienced failed program attempts from outside agents, existing representations may leave residents prejudiced and dubious of future initiatives.

Sen places a high importance on the ability of individuals to engage in political freedoms in the process of escaping poverty. Favela residents have developed representations to explain experiences of high crime and violence committed against them by government and public officials, and these representations deter them from involving themselves politically. There is instead a belief that government workers and officials serve the interests of the wealthy.<sup>xxiii</sup> Even in communities that have reached the level of participation necessary to improve situations of poverty, political experiences have not been positive, leading to a sense of defeat among favela residents. As one favela resident describes:

We built a police station with our own hands and money to curb the violence. The police agreed to come here after lots of pressure. They abandoned the station... after criminals destroyed it in a shoot out... finally we got fed up and tore it down with sledgehammers.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Negative social representations like these also carry the potential to interfere with the few economic opportunities that may present themselves. For example, in the wealthy communities that typically border Brazilian favelas, there is a representation of favela residents that dubs them as violent, active participants in the drug trade and other illegal activities, uneducated, and, of course, impoverished.<sup>xxv</sup> Though only a small proportion of favela residents actually fit this precise image today,<sup>xxvi</sup> the power that such false representations have on the daily choices and lifestyles of millions of the urban poor is unmistakable. As one favela resident reported, “If I say I am from [the favela] they’ll retract the job offer because they think we are all criminals here.”<sup>xxvii</sup> Another said, “One day a company called me for a job, but when they realized I lived in [the favela] they changed their minds, thinking that I was one of those... they couldn’t trust.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

This externally imposed representation of favela residents can damage their emotional well being, which reduces their self esteem and subsequently reduces the likelihood of engaging in job seeking behaviours after repeated interactions of this nature. These negative social representations often create widespread stigmatization from one group to another. In discussions of favela life, stigma is best defined as any negative thoughts, feelings, or actions directed towards a particular group of individuals.<sup>xxix</sup> In this context, the urban poor are impacted by the negative thoughts, feelings, and actions directed at them by the stigmatizers: Affluent members of society.

External representations and stigma towards favela residents are beyond their immediate control. This, however, does little to alleviate the negative impact and the ability of these factors to dictate their lived experiences. Repetition of the types of experiences explained above can substantially erode feelings of self worth. More importantly, they can damage the belief that one’s efforts can result in a significant change in one’s situation; this belief is a driving factor behind the uptake of poverty alleviation programming. In order to distance themselves from outwardly imposed negative representations, individuals respond with a range of behaviours.

Pearlman describes a typical example witnessed during her fieldwork in the favelas:

Young women... spend virtually their entire earnings on clothing and accessories that to them symbolize “south zone chic”. I spoke with one young man who had a cell phone, a pager, and a palm pilot hanging off the waistband of his baggy shorts... he confessed that none of them worked. They were merely fashion accessories.<sup>xxx</sup>

It can be safely assumed that this hyper consumption of material items is done with the intent to combat the stigma and negative representations associated with a life of poverty by projecting the image of affluence. From an economic standpoint, such testimonials point to a shift in priorities: incomes traditionally dedicated to helping a family escape from poverty are now being invested in maintaining a positive sense of self worth among the youth in the favela. Debt levels may increase within a home, and the effectiveness of economic opportunity is once again lessened.<sup>xxxi</sup>

The need to maintain positive self identities and self representations can also explain the high volume of gang related activities among youths in favela communities. Creating a positive sense of self is an important aspect of psychological development. As Howarth describes, in absence of other opportunities to assert positive identities and challenge stigmatizing sentiments, it is not uncommon for youths to join gangs.<sup>xxxii</sup> Gangs provide an opportunity for validation from a member’s peers, though this often occurs through engaging in negative activities. If poverty alleviation programming seeks to tackle such issues, it would follow that alternative means must be put into place for youth to find similar self-validation.

### 3. Discussion

The cities of the world house considerable potential. The work of international development agencies and grassroots organizations has led to the expansion of social opportunity, access to health care and education, and improvements in basic infrastructure in centers of urban poverty like Brazil’s favelas. Such efforts clearly encapsulate the freedoms that Sen deems pertinent in the escape from poverty on a theoretical basis. On the ground, however, these efforts have not been adequate in reducing the number of people who live in dehumanizing conditions within urban centers, indicating the existence of a missing link. Once the interlaced relationships between these three phenomena—social identity, social representations and stigma—are examined in light of Sennian ideology, the role of the psychosocial in escaping

urban poverty begins to take shape. A strong sense of self, fostered in part by positive individual and group identities, self efficacy (defined as the belief in one's ability to succeed in various tasks and often influenced by stigma and negative representations), and positive social representations of one's group in a broader cultural context, are as important as any program initiative. Ultimately, we have seen that psychosocial wellbeing can impact an individual's likelihood to engage in the facilities made available to him or her via public programming. The likelihood that an individual will take advantage of opportunities created by training programs, a social opportunity for Sen, engage in job seeking behaviour (economic opportunities), or participate in civic programming and political processes (political freedoms) are influenced heavily by the psychosocial wellbeing.

But what does this mean in a practical sense? How can this improved understanding of the poverty experience inform future poverty initiatives of the Sennian variety? The importance of psychosocial wellbeing is no secret. Research has long identified the role of social phenomena and psychological wellbeing in the lives of the poor,<sup>xxxiii</sup> yet the integration of these ideas into a single concerted approach was not attempted until quite recently. Despite advances in rhetoric surrounding poverty alleviation practices, interventions continue to operate in a vertical manner. Programming aimed at reducing poverty works within a vacuum, often separate from attempts to address social issues such as violence against women and gang related violence among youth. There are many examples of NGO-operated initiatives that seek to rectify this gap,<sup>xxxiv</sup> and could help to inform large scale programming which has yet to incorporate such practices, if given the real opportunity to do so.

This discussion has highlighted the ability of psychosocial barriers such as negative social identity, negative social representations, and high levels of stigmatization to inhibit the degree to which individuals can experience and interact with Sennian freedoms in their daily lives. It appears that for Sen's freedoms to be capitalized on, development programs must create opportunities for the urban poor to foster positive self-identities, formulate new representations of their place in society, combat the negative representations held by those outside favela communities. If these concepts were incorporated into the planning of poverty alleviation strategies, sustainable success could be far more attainable. The time for truly a multi-disciplinary approach is long overdue. Once the field of Sustainable Development takes into account the role of the psychosocial, the opportunities that cities provide for escaping poverty can be developed to their full potential.

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