I want to talk for a few minutes about my dissertation research among the indigenous Mixtec people of Oaxaca, Mexico. In December of 2004, I returned from conducting seventeen months of ethnographic research in Oaxaca. Because I still have quite a bit of analysis to complete, I am not going to venture any conclusions or findings. Instead, I would just like to take these few minutes and present my research questions, which I think raise important questions for the Capability Approach.

My research examines the work of Mixtec activists to design alternative approaches to models of development that better resonate with their cultural characteristics. Especially during the last decade, Mixtec activists have been working to rescue and revitalize their culture, with the aim of ultimately using Mixtec cultural principles as a foundation for constructing the future. Recognizing the diversity of experiences and interests that coexist in communities, the research project examined whether there were differences within Mixtec communities in how individuals perceive the activists’ ideas about Mixtec culture and development. In addition, I compared these perceptions with villagers’ perceptions of mainstream development practitioners’ ideas. For the case of the latter, I focused on the Mexican Opportunities Program.

The Opportunities Program is working to address rural poverty in the most impoverished communities in the country. Through the Program, women representatives from qualifying families receive monthly payments. The latter are contingent on the whole family attending an annual medical exam at the local clinic; school age children attending school; women representatives attending monthly talks at the clinic; and adolescents attending monthly talks at the clinic. The talks at the clinic deal with a variety of themes, including family planning, reproductive health, dental hygiene, self-esteem, and other topics.

Women and men often have divergent interests related to the family because of their different roles in social and biological reproduction. Thus, I focused within these two ‘development models’ on ideas about the Mixtec family, to examine the extent to which the two ‘models’ can respond to the diversity of interests in communities. In particular, focusing on notions of the ideal family raises issues about reproductive health and rights, and raises the potential for individual rights based on bodily integrity to come into conflict with larger communal rights to cultural integrity.

I spent the bulk of the research period, twelve months, in a small village (1200 people) in the Mixteca Alta region of Oaxaca, examining how villagers perceive these two models. Most importantly, the research examined whether local differences related to gender, socioeconomic status, or age relate to differences in how Mixtec villagers perceive these two models.

The research examined an area where basic rights often come into conflict. Although proponents of the Capability Approach advocate participatory approaches that would
enable communities to define their primary values or rights, the approach does not address the difficulties that arise when one recognizes that interests within communities often diverge.

One side note: I was surprised to find that villagers expressed very little concern about losing their culture, when defined as language, dress, tradition, or custom, despite such changes in neighboring communities and despite the recent history of cultural revitalization efforts by Mixtec activists.

**Questions**

Des Gasper: Is it possible that people were working with a different conception of culture than the researcher? For example, the researcher may have been employing a definition of culture as tradition and the past, while locally people employed a definition of culture that focused more on aspirations for the future.

Holly Dygert: There was a lot of difficulty related to communicating concepts such as culture within the community. People in the community have had a wide variety of experiences, most importantly relating to education, migration and employment. In many cases, these different experiences have shaped different groups' abilities to communicate in ways that prohibit communication within families, as is the case in families where grandparents and grandchildren do not share a common language.

Miguel Martinez-Saenz: Is it possible that people in the village were not concerned about losing culture because they are more in need of getting their basic needs met?

Holly Dygert: Yes. People often explicitly said that when I asked them if they had concerns about any of the changes they had witnessed over the last twenty years, for example. Although some pointed to concerns over the direction they are headed in, more expressed great relief over having basic necessities like food, beds, and soap.