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Operationalizing the Capability Approach for social work practice and research

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Abstract

In this paper we briefly introduce the Capability Approach (CA) and focus on its opportunities for social work practice and research. As the CA is purposively underspecified, we provide theoretical handles for operationalization by pointing to four topics particularly relevant to social work theory: 1) conversion factors; 2) clustering of capabilities and/or functionings; 3) adaptive preferences; 4) negation of human diversity. In order to spark practical dialogue between the multifarious perspectives on social arrangements we propose a conceptual framework for evaluating interventions and arrangements. This framework aids to construct an integral account of direct and indirect versus intended and unintended consequences of the intervention or arrangement. As such it provides promising first steps towards a practical operationalization of capability theory in social work and social work research.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Capability Approach (CA) as developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum is a promising theoretical and political framework for social work research and social work practice. In a symposium during the ECSWR-2016 in Lisbon the potential of the CA for social work was explored identifying several advantages of the CA over traditional functioning-focused approaches to quality of life.

The purpose of the current paper is to operationalize the CA for social work research by (a) distinguishing four topics within capability theory in which limitations in the positive freedom of individuals require the attention of social workers and social work researchers, and (b) providing a practical method for the dialogical evaluation of social arrangements through the lens of the CA.

2. THE CAPABILITY APPROACH: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The CA offers a normative-scientific perspective on persons in their personal, environmental and social contexts, while acknowledging human diversity and plurality in the lives people have reason to value. As such it combines an account of individual development and flourishing with a view on the mechanisms by which contextual factors affect the individual. Thus, the CA enables an integral perspective on the lives people actually live.

Central to the CA is the acknowledgement of diversity and plurality in human lives. Moreover, the CA places emphasis on social justice in such a way that respect for people entails acknowledging the right to a dignified life for all. What is dignified, can only be determined by the person herself, therefore a key statement is that wellbeing is constituted by the degree to which a person is able to be who she wants to be and to do what she wants to do, thus to lead a life she has reason to value (Sen, 1999). Thus, it is assumed that the positive freedom to pursue the life one wants to live is essential to wellbeing.

In the CA the core concept is the distinction between *capabilities*, realistic opportunities, on the one hand, and *functionings*, well-being achievements, on the other (Sen, 2009, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). Each individual is confronted with the task of converting resources situationally available to her into valued opportunities (capabilities) and consequently into the functioning of her choosing. This process is referred to as the *conversion process* and is affected by situationally determined personal, environmental and social factors that may limit or enhance the actual opportunities (Robeyns, 2005), the so-called

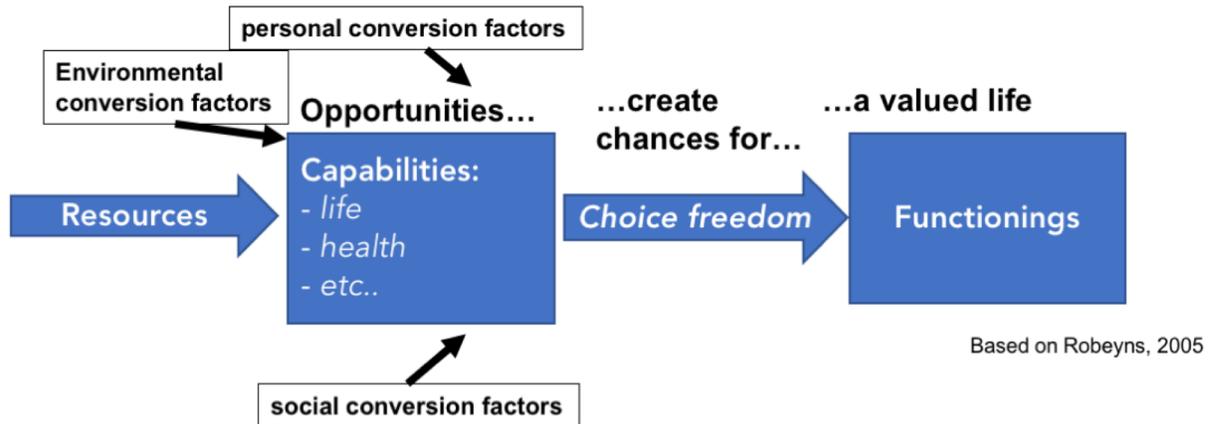


Figure 1. The conversion model (adapted from Robeyns, 2005). From left to right: resources at the disposal of person, are converted into capabilities (realistic opportunities) from which a person chooses the functioning that suits his or her valued life best. This process is influenced (and the capabilities are limited by) personal, environmental and social conversion factors.

conversion factors. As freedom of choice is considered of primary importance, the essential space for measuring equality is the level of capabilities. Capabilities represent final ends, rather than either resources, which are mere means uninformative on what people can do with them, or functionings, which provide insufficient information on the freedom experienced by the individual. The conversion process is depicted in Figure 1.

3. CONNECTING THE CA AND SOCIAL WORK

In this section we will focus on four theoretical areas of interest within capability theory that deserve special attention of social work and social work research, because they represent threats to the positive freedom of individuals. Therefore, exploring these topics provides particular opportunities for furthering insight in and enhancing social work practice. These topics are, respectively, (1) the conversion factors, (2) the clustering of capabilities and/or functionings, (3) adaptive preferences, and (4) negation of human diversity. We will explain these briefly below.

3.1. Conversion factors

The first topic limiting people's positive freedom concerns the conversion factors that influence the degree to which a person is able to convert her realistic

options (capabilities) into functionings. Among others, these conversion factors can be personal such as disabilities or special talents, or social such as bonding social capital or institutional structures. More specifically, many conversion factors represent variables and mechanisms causing or worsening inequality, and they may explain why some individuals are less able to benefit from an opportunity or life chance than others.

Taking into account the complex effects of these diverse factors in people's lives is a core focus of social workers. Individual differences in the realistic opportunities at people's disposal arise from the interaction between personal and contextual factors and a thorough understanding of this supports social counteraction.

3.2. Clustering of capabilities or functionings

The second topic is the clustering or interaction of capabilities and/or functionings, e.g. when a deprivation on the capability for social relations leads to disadvantages on capabilities such as education or building up social capital. These may have corrosive effects: its negative consequences cascade over various domains (Wolff & De-Shalit, 2007). On the other hand, a well-developed functioning such as enjoying education may be fertile in developing practical reasoning and critical reflection which are

conditional to a whole range of other capabilities. In all cases, these interdependencies only become apparent if quality of life is assessed in an integral way.

Because social workers generally employ such an integral perspective on people's lives, they are well-placed to detect the complex clusterings in capabilities and/or functionings that emerge in those lives.

3.3. Adaptive preferences

Third, social work (research) should be critical with regard to processes leading to or perpetuating deeply entrenched inequalities based on mechanisms of stigmatization and adaptive preferences. This may, for instance, be the case with people with disabilities who are engaged by others in a demeaning way but also tend to regard themselves as less able and therefore less entitled to full participation.

For social work this aspect relates closely to the arguments provided for the previous topic: being able to detect the complex and latent effects of adaptive

preferences requires a firm integral perspective on the lives people live and have reason to value. Moreover, it requires a normative stance on professional action and what constitutes quality of life. This is particularly well-suited to the practice and theory of social work.

3.4. Negation of human diversity

The fourth and last topic concerns the need to be aware of tendencies to absolutize dominant social norms thereby decreasing tolerance and denying human diversity, e.g. in the marginalization of minority groups by downplaying their social and cultural norms. It is at the basis of a democratic society that pluralism in values and backgrounds is fostered and protected.

This aspect is in line with the notion that social work as a profession is aimed towards enhancing processes of street-level democracy (Spierts

& Oostrik, 2014). As such social workers' professional ethics lean heavily on values such as human diversity and equality. Among others this is visible in the international definition of social work (IFSW, 2014).

In the next section we will provide a conceptual framework that allows researchers or practitioners to assess these four attentive topics critically in a situated case.

	Direct effects	Indirect effects
Intended effects	1a. What are <i>direct and intended</i> consequences? 1b. Which capabilities involved (+/-)? 1c. Which conversion factors at play? 1d. Clustering effects? 1e. Adaptive preferences? 1f. Room for diversity?	2a. What are <i>indirect and intended</i> consequences? 2b. Which capabilities involved (+/-)? 2c. Which conversion factors at play? 2d. Clustering effects? 2e. Adaptive preferences? 2f. Room for diversity?
Unintended effects	3a. What are <i>direct and unintended</i> consequences? 3b. Which capabilities involved (+/-)? 3c. Which conversion factors at play? 3d. Clustering effects? 3e. Adaptive preferences? 3f. Room for diversity?	4a. What are <i>indirect and unintended</i> consequences? 4b. Which capabilities involved (+/-)? 4c. Which conversion factors at play? 4d. Clustering effects? 4e. Adaptive preferences? 4f. Room for diversity?

Figure 2. *Capability effects dialogue frame*. Factorial design ordering direct versus indirect effects per intended versus unintended effects of an intervention or arrangement on capabilities of persons involved.

4. USING THE CA FOR CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The above topics are often implicit and hidden in everyday social practices and therefore require thorough critical scrutiny. We propose a framework that allows for a systematic evaluation of social arrangements or interventions in which special attention is given to the four attentive topics.. To this purpose with a given social arrangement or intervention the *indirect* versus *direct* effects and *intended* versus *unintended* effects on people's capabilities are plotted in a factorial frame. The frame is shown in Figure 2.

Direct and intended effects generally represent the focus of the active element of an intervention. *Indirect and intended* effects refer to secondary consequences that may count as "added bonus" or objectives that cannot be reached easily in a more direct way. Intended effects will generally be beneficial for people's wellbeing. *Direct* but

unintended effects present side-effects or often unexpected (dis)advantages of the intervention. They manifest in a direct way and may be either beneficial or detrimental, and will often become apparent quickly. Finally, *indirect* and *unintended* effects represent an interesting category in which consequences are often unexpected and not clearly discernable. Therefore, this category may often contain unforeseen and implicit detrimental consequences, and reveal the blind-spots in less formal or systematic evaluations.

For each of these categories a number of dialogue questions can be helpful. First, the capabilities at play are identified. Second, attention should be paid to potential effects from conversion factors, capability or functioning interactions, adaptive preferences or negation of diversity, respectively.

An example, but simplified, case of an evaluation of the wellbeing effects of web-based support and on-line interventions runs as follows. As a direct and intended effect support for previously hard to reach target groups may be more accessible, for instance with socially shameful issues. As an indirect but intended effect this may increase individuals' overall agency and feelings of autonomy apart from the initial support question. A direct but unintended effect, however, may be that the relation between client and professional is less steady and therefore easily terminated. An indirect and unintended consequence may be that financing of such interventions becomes problematic if beneficiaries are anonymous.

Thus, an analysis of effects in this frame provides an integral account of the (wellbeing) consequences an arrangement or intervention evokes. Integral assessment then involves the balancing of these different classes of effects. More detail can be added if consequences are specified as capabilities or capability domains. Such an integral perspective is particularly well-placed to guide the discussion on complex interventions - as social arrangements are nearly always complex social practices - including diverse vantage points and multiple interests. It is meant as a means to produce dialogue and public deliberation for the purpose of stimulating collective responsibility for social support and community care.

5. CONCLUSION

Starting from the four topics in capability theory we identified as potentially productive for social work (research) we presented an evaluation frame for social arrangements or interventions. This frame allows for the integral assessment of consequences of an intervention or social arrangement. The primary purpose of the frame is to stimulate dialogue among local stakeholders to exchange perspectives. However, practical application of the frame requires advanced analytic skills warranting further operationalization. In spite of the latter, we believe that our framework enables social work(ers) (researchers) to adequately recognize and acknowledge the above-mentioned attentive topics and thus forms a promising direction for operationalizing the CA in social work.

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Biography

Both authors work at the Research Center for Social Support and Community Care at HAN University of Applied Sciences. Erik Jansen (PhD) works on social learning processes in social innovation, the application of the CA for social work practice and the use of network analysis in community oriented social work. Lisbeth Verharen (PhD) focuses on empowerment of vulnerable groups, the collaboration between formal and informal networks and between social work and healthcare.