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Towards a capability approach to careers: Applying Amyarta Sen's thinking to career guidance and development

Abstract

Sen's capability approach characterizes an individual's well-being in terms of what they are able to be, and what they are able to do. This framework for thinking has many commonalities with the core ideas in career guidance. Sen's approach is abstract and not in itself a complete or explanatory theory, but a case can be made that the capability approach has something to offer career theory when combined with a life-career developmental approach. It may also suggest ways of working that are consistent with educational (human capital) approaches to development in emerging economies.

Introduction: the Capability Approach

Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA) (Sen, 1993) can be understood as response to dissatisfaction with two alternative ways of characterizing well-being (Gasper, 2007). Firstly it is distinct from approaches to welfare economics that emphasize personal utility maximization. It moves away from these traditional utilitarian models and their assumption that people are best understood as rational economic actors. In contrast, Sen's approach implies a more sophisticated conception of human nature (Alkire, 2005). For Sen, income, possessions and similar objective measures are necessary but not sufficient to capture how people's lives are going; non-economic factors such as family relationships, friends, beliefs, health, exercise, and purposeful activity are also important (Gasper, 2007).

Secondly the approach is distinct from those that focus on subjective well-being as characterized by measures of happiness and life satisfaction. This perspective has begun to influence career theory (e.g. Walsh, 2008). The CA has developed largely separately from this psychological approach. People may sometimes knowingly make decisions that trade off their happiness or well-being against other valued goals, as illustrated by the extreme case of a hunger striker (Sen, 1993; Kotan, 2009), or in the more mundane example of a parent who foregoes rest and leisure in order to earn money to fund their child's education. So again, Sen sees measures of

subjective well-being as not sufficient if used in isolation. In essence, the CA requires taking into account a very wide range of information (which may include traditional economic or subjective well-being information) in order to make evaluative judgments about a person's quality of life. It offers a more plural view of well-being.

The lifestyles that people value are diverse, and increasing wealth is not the only way in which lives may be improved. In describing capabilities, Sen uses the phrase 'valued beings and doings' to capture those elements of a person's life that contribute to their well-being. He makes an important distinction between functionings and capabilities: *Functionings* refers to what people actually do; their achievements, lifestyle and identity; the current status of their 'beings and doings'. *Capabilities* refers to what they could become and do. These are the valued beings and doings that people could achieve in the future, taking into account all the factors that might constrain them. To be engaged in the occupation of school teacher and to live the associated lifestyle is a functioning.   To have the realistic potential to become a school teacher is a capability.

The inclusion of potential future lives is one of the things that makes the CA distinctive. It means that to evaluate someone's life and situation it is not adequate to look only at their current status or functionings, it is also necessary to look at what they are able to become and do. Potential attainable alternative lifestyles also matter in this approach. The means and the ends are sometimes overlapping (Robeyns, 2005).

The CA is couched in general terms and at an abstract level. It is a paradigm, or a framework for thought, rather than a theory (Robeyns, 2005). Sen has been reluctant to provide lists of capabilities or to specify the nature of well-being (Alkire, 2002; 2005), although others have attempted to do so, notably Nussbaum (2000). A key feature of Sen's CA is its incompleteness (Sen, 1993). The approach is intentionally under-specified (Robeyns, 2006). This risks making the ideas less persuasive, harder to communicate, and open to misuse (Gasper, 2007). It also raises unresolved issues of how these concepts can be operationalised or measured. On the other hand it has the advantage of making the approach adaptable to a wide variety of contexts. Sen allows others fill in the gaps in applying ideas to specific problem situations. It can combine with other ideas and evolve to fit the context. This enhances its cross-cultural applicability. In some of his writings Sen appears to go beyond the CA to adopt freedom as a central concept (e.g. Sen, 2001). It is clear that his notion of capability can be understood as the freedom to

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implement alternative lifestyles (Sen, 2008). As Kajanoja (2002) points out, ideas such as capability relate well-being to freedom and human rights.   In particular Nussbaum (2000) in her perspective on capabilities has stressed ideas of justice, law and politics more than Sen, whose work is perhaps more rooted in economics (Robeyns, 2005).

Linking Capabilities to Career Development

Having outlined some of the features of the CA, it is now possible to identify its commonalities with the concerns of career development, as well as areas where there is no overlap.

Valued Beings and Doings

The notion of 'valued beings and doings' has particular resonance with the work of career guidance, particularly when Sen's approach is applied at the level of the individual (as opposed to a community level which is also possible). A central question asked of individuals by their friends, family, teachers and career advisers is: "What do you want to *do?*" Sometimes the verb is substituted: "What do you want to *be?*" Whilst both questions typically concern choice of occupation, the latter question makes clearer what is also implied: choice of social identity.

Questions of being and doing (identity and occupation) are fundamental to educational and vocational guidance. Identifying the 'beings and doings' that an individual values is a core task of guidance. This is consistent with modern conceptions of career that reject a narrow definition of lifestyle choice and social identity in vocational terms. Both the notion of capability and a career development perspective are concerned not just with what people do now, but with the set of potential lives that are within their grasp but have not yet been realised. Both perspectives concern maximising the control an individual can exert over this possibility space.

Agency

The concept of agency is important in Sen's work. There are diverse interpretations of what is meant by agency and how it can be measured (Alkire, 2008). Kotan (2009) provides one workable definition: "a human agent is a person or collection of persons having the ability to exert power so as to influence the state of the world, to do so in a purposeful way and in line with self established objectives" (Kotan, 2009, p. 370). This definition combines three key ideas: power to

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influence the world; a sense of purposiveness; and goals that are self-determined. There are clear commonalities with career theory here: the ability to act on the world in order to implement career choices and realize a self-concept is important. Agency is an important concept in conceptualising career development and interventions to support it. Notions of agency used in career thinking derive primarily from social-cognitive approaches to psychology, and the most influential is undoubtedly the self-efficacy approach of Bandura (1997; 2001). This has directly influenced career theory (e.g. Betz & Hacket, 2006).

Psychological approaches to agency are pitched at a micro level, and are often intentionally operationalised in specific and narrow ways in order to facilitate measurement. The CA has some resonance with concepts of personal agency derived from social-cognitive theory, but Sen appears to have a much broader and deeper notion of agency, and one that includes a political and moral dimension. An individual's ability to act depends not only on their efficacy beliefs, but also on their abilities, their economic and social capital; on social norms and expectations, and also on the legal, policy, and human rights environment that they inhabit. A wide range of factors affect agency, and all need to be taken into account.

A Lifespan Perspective

Many of the core ideas of career development are evident in the CA, including identity, agency, and occupation. However one central notion is conspicuous by its absence: lifespan development. Here the incompleteness of Sen's conception is apparent. The notion of lifespan development is largely absent from the capability literature, but central to some psychological conceptions of career development. When directed at children the question "what do you want to be/do?" is often followed by the phrase "...when you grow up". A lifespan development perspective is well established as a key feature in career theory (Swanson & Fouad, 1999; Kidd, 2006). Furthermore, a lifespan perspective is likely to be an important feature of guidance internationally (Van Esbroek, 2008). The CA in practice will always need to be combined with other social theories (Robeyns, 2006), and it seems that a life-career perspective may be a necessary addition in this instance. Conversely, Leung (2008) argues that to operate across cultures career theory needs "indigenization" so as to develop approaches that are either derived from local understandings or, where ideas are imported they need to be adapted to the local culture. CA provides a broad foundation on which to build an indigenized theoretical framework, albeit one

that must be layered with local cultural understandings of maturation. This is consistent with Vondracek and Porfeli's (2008) argument for a developmental-contextual perspective on career that integrates an awareness of lifespan development, with an awareness of client's interactions with their environmental context.

Combining the CA with a career development perspective makes sense because people adopt and value different 'beings and doings' at different points in the lifespan. Their status, identity and social roles evolve with maturation. The plural is used as often people fulfill multiple roles (a combination of functionings) at any one point in time. Sen emphasizes plurality in judgments of well-being: capability implies the ability to make choices about what one values. Thus career choice depends not just on maximizing income, or even on maximizing satisfaction by choosing interesting work, but also on a complex reasoned choice balancing many factors depending on what people value: their health, their leisure, their housing and transport, the needs of their family, the fulfillment of breadwinner or carer roles; community and political roles; spiritual and religious activities; and so on.

A Holistic Perspective

This notion of multiple life roles is deeply rooted in career thinking as a result of the extensive influence of Donald Super, whose work brought together lifespan development psychology perspectives with the psychology of self-concept and identity (e.g. Super, 1981). Through this lens, the holistic idea of 'life-career' is to be preferred to a narrow conception of career as paid employment. This sense of holism continues to be strong element of contemporary career theory, and context, particularly local social context, also features prominently. Two notable examples are the life-design framework for career counselling (Savickas *et al.,* 2009), and the systems theory of Patton & McMahon (1999). A holistic contextualized view of functioning as a set of identities and activities not restricted to formal employment is very compatible with the CA. However it important to note that Sen's ideas stem from very different intellectual roots to the social constructivism that underpins much of contemporary career theory, including the life-design and systems perspectives. The CA has its roots in moral thought, political philosophy and development economics (Comim, 2008).

The Meta-Capability to Choose

Van Ootegem and Spillemaeckers (2009) suggest that perhaps there is a basic capability required, in order to cope with capabilities: that of making choices. More choices do not necessarily improve well-being unless one can cope with them:

So, having many options is important for well-being but it is not unambiguously positive.
Freedom could be a burden, because it is not always easy to make choices in life, and
'choosing can be losing'. Learning how to manage choices can influence well-being. It is
easier to manage when one knows what one wants and if one has a plan in life. (Van Ootegem
& Spillemaeckers, 2009, p. 389)

Similar themes are raised by Pugno (2008) who suggests that maintaining a personal identity and the ability to choose represent special kinds of capability. Wood and Deprez (2012) suggest that capabilities can be taught in the curriculum. It is a small leap to make the connection with career education, which seeks to equip people with the skills, knowledge and attitudes to manage their own careers through time. This appears to be an attempt to enable people to gain enduring choice making skills, at least in one domain of life.

Ethical Concerns

Sen's (1993) focus on valued goals and the capacity to act could provide a philosophical underpinning to guidance practice. Mulvey (2002) identifies key ethical principles underpinning professional practice: beneficence; non-maleficence; autonomy and justice. Arguably non-malificence has primacy for the medical profession, but it is autonomy that Mulvey posits as the central ethical concern of the career guidance profession. Here there is resonance with the CA with its concern not just with what people are and do, but with what they are able to be and do in the future. The good lies not just in current lifestyle but also in the future life that they can implement autonomously.

The purpose and objectives of career guidance can be problematic to define. Clearly outcomes such as improved economic status or happiness and well-being are generally desirable, but attaining them usually requires clients go some way beyond the help offered by career interventions – they have to make applications, succeed at interview, pass exams, and perform to the satisfaction of their employers. Career guidance interventions cannot guarantee outcomes as in most cases the client must act for themselves, and besides, the consequences of a chosen course of

action may be unknowable. The CA offers a way out of this dilemma. If the purpose of career guidance is to strengthen capabilities, then support that puts people in a better position to make sense of their situation, to make choices, and to act autonomously is in itself a good and desirable thing. Career guidance acts on improving what they are able to be and do in the future, taking into account all available information. But it leaves up to the individual the choice, the implementation of a lifestyle and the combination of functionings that can be achieved. It seems that the CA can point to a vision of the purpose of career development that is both realistic in practice and in tune with the values of the profession by seeking to promote enhanced autonomy.

Turning to the ethical principle of justice, the promotion of social equity is also a key concern of career guidance (Watts, 2008). Again there are resonances with CA: a focus on disadvantaged groups, most notably women in developing economies, has been a preoccupation of advocates of CA. Prominent among them is Nussbaum (e.g. 2000) who has sought to extend Sen's work to provide philosophy for just governance based on human rights.

A Capability Approach to Economic Development

The CA has been recognized by some governments, international development agencies and the United Nations, so it has some credibility in policy making circles (Robeyns, 2006). Its focus on economic development and human rights are central here. From the outset, Sen and other advocates of the CA have been concerned with issues of poverty reduction and improving life in developing economies. Sen (2001) argues that freedom is not just a consequence of development; rather promoting freedom is a means to achieve development. Capabilities can be enhanced by public policy, and interventions in health and education play an important role in combating poverty.

Alkire (2002) describes an evocative example of a capability approach to development work. In Pakistan a group of eight people living in poverty were supported by Oxfam to lease some land. They declined the most profitable option of rearing goats. Instead they chose to cultivate roses, which they made into garlands and sold to worshippers at a religious site. One of them, a widow, explained how this lifestyle change not only enabled her to meet her family's basic financial needs, but also the work left her clothes permeated with the scent of roses, and felt

meaningful because of its spiritual significance. She gained respect and began to 'walk without shame' in her local community.

Although it is only more recently that these ideas have begun to be applied in developed economies, Sen is strong in his critique of wealth inequality in affluent societies in general, and the large scale of unemployment in Europe in particular (Sen, 1997). He points out that the debilitating effects of unemployment go far beyond the loss of income; if they did not they would be readily solved by welfare benefits. Unemployment undermines capabilities and deprives people of agency in a way that goes beyond the effects of income deprivation alone (Sen, 2001). Bifulco (2012) describes case studies adopting a CA approach in the 'WorkAble' project, a European transnational study of disadvantaged youth in transition from school in nine participating nations. As part of this project Hollywood, Egdell, McQuaid, and Michel-Schertges (2012) outline attempts to operationalise young people's capabilities. They draw a distinction between three key areas: capabilities for work, capabilities for education, and capabilities for 'voice' or self-advocacy.

Capability and the 'Capitals Approach'

Education provision is important in this approach to development. In the CA, education may promote economic development rather than following from it. Abel and Frohlich (2011) suggest that the CA can usefully be combined with a 'capitals approach'. Economists have developed the term 'capital' as a metaphor to describe a variety of intangible assets, notably 'human capital' which refers to the skills and knowledge of the workforce (Blair, 2011; Burton Jones & Spender, 2011). Notions of human capital development are often conceived in an instrumental economic way, with a focus on promoting learning as a means to improving productivity (Sen, 2001). In contrast, the capabilities approach sees human capital development as an empowerment process, and emphasizes the multiple values of education including sustainable social and cultural outcomes. People are the 'end' for economic activity, and not just a means to an end (Pugno, 2008). Education provides not just job skills but also life skills and life options (Lanzi, 2007). Bourdieu's distinction between four kinds of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital is also useful in describing differences between lifestyles (Giddens, 2009), and adds sociological nuance to these economic explanations. There have been recent attempts to

apply a combined human capital and capabilities approach to poverty reduction using vocational education and training (VET) in Palestine (Hilal, 2012), and South Africa (Powell, 2012).

Towards a Development Role for Educational and Vocational Guidance

There can be little doubt that globalization presents the career guidance profession with significant challenges (Van Esbroek, 2008). The career guidance literature has tended to respond to this with a focus on the complexity of work in multi-cultural environments in Western developed economies. To have global relevance career guidance practice needs ways of working that are relevant in the emergent economies of Asia, Africa and South America. With the notable exception of publications for career guidance policymakers in lower income and transition economies (Watts & Fretwell, 2004; Hanson, 2006), this has been a neglected topic in the literature.

It is in these regions that millions of people may begin to need institutional support to navigate the complexities of educational and occupational structures that arise as a result of urbanization and industrialization. The alignment of career guidance systems with a capability approach to human capital development may promote economic gains in a way that tends to support human rights. Human rights are relevant because, as Watts (1999) pointed out, political systems can have a profound impact on the way in which individual life-career opportunities are distributed. In the case of authoritarian regimes independent career choices for some or all citizens can be curtailed, or at least not actively promoted (Watts & Fretwell, 2004). In other settings there may be reluctance to allocate resources to career guidance systems as their potential as drivers for social and economic change may not be recognized.

Informal cultures, social norms and religious practice may also constrain or channel choice as in the case of gender, class and age based roles. Capabilities are particularly concerned with the opportunity aspects of human rights (Sen, 2005); not whether people choose to take up a particular opportunity, but with every factor that may facilitate or hinder their access to it. Career guidance seeks to provide information about the full range of opportunities available in the public (work and e-learning) domain, and also to explore and support people in developing a full understanding their own characteristics, their circumstances, and routes to overcome barriers where possible. Guidance is seeking to maximize capabilities, and is closely allied with education in this enterprise.

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Identifying Capabilities for Careers

Through integrating some elements of this discussion, it is possible to tentatively identify a relevant list of capabilities. This is not unproblematic, but it is clear that some attempt must be made to flesh out Sen's approach for application to the domain of career guidance. The list provided in table 1 draws heavily on the notion of 'capitals' and implicit in this list of capabilities is the constraints and limitations placed by their absence.

Career capabilities represent potentialities for an individual to undergo a transition from a current set of career functionings to one of a set of viable future functionings, specifically a life-career that they have reason to value. Career resources can be converted into valued beings and doing. Six broad groupings are identified here: agency, life-career management, work and learning, social, economic, and health capabilities.

INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE

Clarification of three points is required here. Firstly, the capabilities presented above are not discrete categories; they interact and overlap. Secondly, this is not to be understood as a list of individual characteristics. Superficially, some elements in this list resemble a model of employability of the kind that has become influential in European labour market policy in recent years. These approaches tend to adopt a 'hollowed out' understanding of employability by neglecting the economic environment (the demand for labour), and conceptualizing employability as skills or attributes possessed by the individual (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). Vocational skills are meaningful only in specific industry labour markets, with access to specific technologies or resources at a particular place and point in time.

Similarly, possessing strong self-efficacy is necessary but not sufficient to exercise personal agency. For example, a young woman's cognitive belief in her study skills is not adequate in a culture of human rights that denies her access to education. Career-related capabilities exist in the person's relation to their environment; a deeper conception of the attributes of the individual arises from making sense of them within a social, political and economic context.

Third, one purpose of identifying capabilities for career guidance is to define what career guidance is seeking to achieve. Through this lens, effective guidance would include interventions that strengthen an individual's career–related capabilities. Through strengthened capabilities, an

individual has an increased chance of being able to implement a social identity and an occupation or lifestyle (beings and doings) that they have reason to value. This allows for a diversity of interventions, with diverse goals, and a variety of time scales at which capabilities might lead to fruition as functionings. It aligns career guidance more closely with the educational project in its broadest sense, rather than with an instrumental approach to promoting employability for rapid entry to the job market. Bergström's (2012) discussion of the capabilities of graduates suggests a similar concern about a narrow focus on employability by universities. She suggests that careers services have a key role to play in enabling individuals to convert their resources into work capabilities for the labour market, while valuing non-vocational education.

The CA demands that a rich range of information is required to judge an individual's well-being. This implies adopting a qualitative research strategy, because a psychometric approach used in isolation is likely to be too narrow in scope to be sufficient (Comim, 2008).

Conclusion

There are clear commonalities between the CA and a number of existing career theories. A number of shared concerns can be detected including social identity, occupation or lifestyle, agency, personal meaning, and the individual in a wider political and socio-economic context. The CA needs to be combined with other ideas to be effectively applied to career and career guidance. An attempt has been made here to show that in combination with lifespan development psychology and the 'capitals' approach, the CA can be used to develop a viable model.

Sen's CA offers a number of advantages in conceptualizing careers and career guidance, that enable it to make a distinct contribution. It is framed at an abstract level which gives it flexibility, and is appropriate for an integrative approach. This also means it is not culturally specific, and in particular there is evidence it can be applied to promote development via education in emergent economies. It may have political acceptability to international agencies, and provide a language to facilitate engagement with economists and policy makers. It links the individual to their political context, and links career guidance to the role of education in human capital development.

The CA helps to clarify the purpose of career guidance: not necessarily (or not just) to improve economic positions or to enhance well-being in current functionings, but to strengthen

capabilities. This is in tune with the key ethical concern in career guidance: the promotion of client's autonomy. It incorporates a focus on the future and valued goals.

To summarise then, "...the capability approach is a proposition, and the proposition is this: that social arrangements should be evaluated according to the extent of freedom people have to promote or achieve functionings they value" (Alkire, 2005, p. 122). Career guidance, in essence, is a service intended to facilitate people's freedom to choose to be (or become) what they want to be, to do things that they want to do, and seek a lifestyle that they find personally meaningful and have reason to value. It could be seen as a mechanism to maximise capabilities within given social arrangements. It may also support education in the improvement of those arrangements. Thus career guidance clearly has a potential role to play in the application of Sen's ideas. However several questions would need to be resolved to take these ideas forward. These questions include how best to combine the CA approach with existing career theory, how to adapt it to specific local cultural contexts, and how best to operationalise the resulting ideas for purposes of client assessment, research and evaluation of outcomes.

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