

**Title: A Capability Approach to career development: An introduction and implications for practice**

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## **A Capability Approach to career development: An introduction and implications for practice.**

### **Abstract**

In the UK, the concept of employability is influential in current conceptualizations of career development. It is an example of a discourse underpinned by faith in individual transformation as a response to unstable labour markets, a position that is not unproblematic when structural factors are taken into account. This article introduces an alternative perspective, the Capability Approach (CA), to encourage debate about its value, and to begin to outline what it means for career counselling and development practice. An overview of the CA is provided, and the resonance between the concerns of the CA and those of career development practitioners will be highlighted. Key difficulties in applying the approach are identified before implications of the CA for practice are considered.

### **Introduction**

In the UK, an influential perspective on career development is rooted in the concept of employability (e.g. Guilbert, Bernaud, Gouvernet, & Rossier, 2016; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). This can be characterized as a top-down, policy-driven discourse that focuses the work of career services and other analogous organizations (public employment services; welfare-to-work agencies; vocational training providers) on promoting labour activation. This means transforming economically inactive individuals, both unemployed and students, into workers in paid employment. The focus is primarily on the supply of labour; the demand side tends to be neglected.

This policy is in part a manifestation of the underpinning belief that contemporary labour market conditions are ‘fluid’ and individuals must therefore take responsibility for re-sculpting themselves to meet this challenge, and for bearing and producing the risks associated (Eriksson, 2012; Van Berkel & Valkenburg, 2007). This view is widely accepted but not entirely unproblematic. It requires ‘talking up’ post-industrial labour market instability (e.g. Tractenberg, Streumer, & van Zolingen, 2002), whilst neglecting the partial persistence of stable bureaucratic careers in the West, and the industrialization of emerging economies. It locates responsibility for change within the individual. By implication a failure to adapt can also be attributed primarily to the individual, and rather less to the failure of social institutions to manage the consequences of socio-economic evolution. It is a discourse that is not fully adequate to respond to mounting evidence of widening inequality and the structural barriers to labour market participation (Egdell & Graham, 2016; Paull & Patel, 2012; Schmuecker, 2014). Often the assumption is made that if the individual behaves ‘responsibly’ that they will successfully integrate into the labour market. Thus there may be an over-estimation of individual agency in labour market (re)integration (Dahmen, 2014; Leppänen, 2014; Thompson, 2011).

Other perspectives are possible, and there is reason to believe that new starting points for thinking about career development may be welcome. With a growth of interest in social justice within career development (e.g. Arthur, 2014; Sultana, 2014), there is a recognition that individual career counselling must be complemented by attention to the role of social institutions in facilitating or obstructing freedom and equality. One alternative perspective is provided by the Capability Approach (CA). The aim of this article is to introduce the CA and encourage debate about its value, and to begin to outline what it means for career counselling and development practice.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Firstly, an overview of the CA is provided, together with an explanation of its terminology and central concepts. Key difficulties in applying the approach are identified. Secondly, the resonance between the concerns of the CA and those of career development practitioners is highlighted. Thirdly, some implications of the CA for practice are outlined.

### **An overview of the Capability Approach**

The CA was initially developed by Amartya Sen (1985a; 1985b; 1992; 1998; 2009) as an alternative approach to welfare economics and development – but has since been applied both as an analytical and measurement framework, to equalities and human rights, employment activation, education, organizational talent management and mental health for example (Burchardt & Vizard, 2011; Downs & Swailes, 2013; Egdell & Graham, 2016; Egdell & McQuaid, 2016; Kelly, 2012; Norwich, 2014; Orton, 2011; Otto et al., 2015; Reynaert & Roose, 2014; Simon et al., 2013; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). The CA contends that in order to understand wellbeing, attention needs to be focused upon the opportunities available to individuals and their freedom to make choices that they value (Sen, 1985a, 1985b, 1992, 1998, 2009). Those applying the CA to employment argue that it offers a useful way of thinking about labour market activation that draws attention to freedom of choice, motivation, what individuals value and access to resources (Bonvin & Orton, 2009; Egdell & McQuaid, 2016; Orton, 2011).

The core argument of the CA is that wellbeing should be understood in terms of what opportunities are available to the individual and substantive freedom of choice, taking account of external factors and personal characteristics, rather than solely focusing on what

they do and the outcomes which they achieve (Robeyns, 2005b, 2006; Sen, 1985a, 1985b, 2009). As such,

“the root of the capability approach is an insistence on referring to a wide range of types of information, notably about how people actually live – what they do and are – and their freedom – what they are able to do and be” (Gasper, 2007, p. 340).

A ‘good life’ from this standpoint is one where the individual can decide what they want to achieve, and not have values imposed on them by others such as State institutions and actors (Binder, 2013; Deneulin, 2011; Kotan, 2010; Sen, 1985a, 1985b; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). It is important to note that capabilities are not solely concerned with individual and internal skills or capacities. If the individual lacks capability this is an indication of the failure of wider society to provide real freedoms to that individual (Burchardt & Vizard, 2007).

Table 1 outlines the conceptual building blocks of the CA.

### **INSERT TABLE 1 AROUND HERE**

Sen (1983, p. 160) uses the analogy of a standard bicycle to describe the relationships between the building blocks outlined in Table 1. A bicycle is a commodity that can give a person the ability to move in a particular way (i.e. the capability of transportation). This capability can cause the person pleasure (utility) if they want to be able to move around in this way. There is a “sequence from a commodity (in this case a bike), to characteristics (in this case, transportation), to capability to function (in this case, the ability to move), to utility (in this case, pleasure from moving)” (Sen, 1983, p. 160). However, merely owning, or having access to, a bicycle does not reveal what the individual can do (functioning).

Conversion factors mediate the transformation of resources into functionings. For example, disability or lack of access to suitable roads may mean that the individual cannot use the standard bicycle (i.e., convert a commodity into a functioning). Even if the individual still gains pleasure from owning or having access to the bicycle they do not have the capability of transportation.

Thus, the five building blocks presented in Table 1 highlight a central premise to the CA: “the mere acquisition of a commodity does not guarantee the acquisition of its desirable properties nor does its possession reveal what can be done with it” (Kelly, 2012, p. 285). Equal inputs do not necessarily lead to equal outputs. This is because the transformation of capabilities into valued functionings is constrained by a range of conversion factors, whether they be external, individual or personal (Dean, Bonvin, Vielle, & Farvaque, 2005; Hollywood et al., 2012; Kelly, 2012). The achievement and operation of capabilities is also highly dynamic. Indeed, there are feedback loops as achieved functionings can shape the future capability set. In turn the feedback loops are related to the wider context which shape the capability set and the resources and the constraints faced by the individual and their attitudes (Biggeri & Ferrannini, 2014). Individual choice needs to also be accounted for as internal limitations, such as low self-esteem, may mean that the individual adapts their preferences, expectations and aspirations downwards (Nussbaum, 2000). Returning to the bicycle analogy, this may mean that even if the individual owns or has access to a bicycle, their capability for transportation may not be realized if they do not think that they are able to cycle due to poor confidence for example.

The building blocks outlined in Table 1 also highlight that the CA requires a reworking of the informational basis for judgements in justice (IBJJ). The IBJJ is the information that is

deemed relevant by actors, such as career development practitioners, when considering an individual or a situation (Sen, 1990). Accordingly, an individual or a situation should be assessed in terms of capabilities, functionings and preferences. The end goal should be “to design individualised policies that truly promote the individuals’ autonomy, not only as an end-product but throughout the entire policy process” (Bonvin & Farvaque, 2005, p. 286).

### **The Capability Approach and career development**

In spite of the entirely separate intellectual roots, Sen’s work has surprising resonance with the concerns of career counselling and development (Robertson, 2015). Both place the highest importance on what individuals want to do with their lives and what they want to be. The CA has at its core a concern for social justice; this concern is also deeply rooted in the career development movement, and evident in its earliest history (Peck, 2004). Social justice continues as an important concern of policymakers (Watts, 2008) and career scholars (Arthur, 2014; Blustein, Kenny, & Kozan, 2014; Blustein, Medvide, & Wan, 2012; Irving, 2005; Müller, 2014; Sultana, 2014). Both the CA and the career development profession seek approaches that allow for individual agency whilst still acknowledging the power of social structures. However, to date the application of the CA to career development policy and practice has been limited. There are exceptions, and an international literature is emerging (Berthet, Dechezelles, Gouin, & Simon, 2009; Natal’ya Galliot & Graham, 2014, 2015; Picard, Olympio, Masdonati, & Bangali, 2015; Picard, Pilote, Turcotte, Goastellec, & Olympio, 2015; Robertson, 2015; Skovhus, 2016). For example, Robertson (2015) argues that the CA offers a useful framework for conceptualizing careers and career counselling, and clarifying the purpose of career development activities. Berthet and colleagues (2009) use the CA to evaluate guidance policy and practice, arguing that it enables the formulation of a systemic and systematic analysis from the individual viewpoint. However, to date these

applications of the CA to career development have been confined to research efforts which choose to view pre-existing policies and interventions through the lens of Sen's framework. While these studies have found the CA relevant and meaningful in making sense of supportive interventions; no guidelines exist to help practitioners or leaders in the career development profession to design services and approaches consistent with the CA. This article seeks to start to address this gap.

### **The challenge of operationalizing the Capability Approach**

The CA has not been without critique. At the conceptual level the CA has been criticised for not acknowledging human interdependency and the relational nature of inter-subjectivity, and over-emphasizing rational cognitive action (Dean, 2009; Deneulin & McGregor, 2010; Taylor, 2011). Little attention is paid to the social construction of meaning in the value judgements made by individuals (Deneulin & McGregor, 2010). It has also been argued that the CA neglects power and structural inequalities, and the political contexts that give meaning to individual freedom (Carpenter, 2009; Dean, 2009; Navarro, 2000; Sandbrook, 2000). As such the "radical implications of the capabilities approach have been widely overlooked, primarily because of a tendency for the approach to be combined with inadequate theories of society, particularly regarding the external conditions enabling or limiting capabilities" (Sayer, 2012, p. 580). Some also highlight that there may be limitations to the value of the CA because of its complexity, multidimensionality, context-dependency and lack of specificity (Chiappero-Martinetti, Egdell, Hollywood, & McQuaid, 2015; Roemer, 1996; Srinivasan, 1994; Sugden, 1993).

Of particular relevance to this current article is that, despite the application of the CA to a wide range of policy areas the operationalizing of the CA remains complex, presenting a



range of challenges to researchers and practitioners (Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2015; Hollywood et al., 2012). There are three key difficulties in operationalizing the CA which raise concerns about the value of the CA for career counselling and development: (1) the lack of defined central human capabilities in the CA as developed by Sen; (2) the question of whether capabilities can actually be measured; and (3) the lack of a time perspective.

First, the CA as developed by Sen is “radically underspecified” (Robeyns, 2008, p. 3). Sen does not specify a basic list of central human capabilities, arguing that the definition of what people value should be open to diverse conceptions of good, justice and advantage (Sen, 2009). This would not sit comfortably with the creation of a-priori lists of capabilities. There is concern that the vagueness and lack of specification offered by Sen presents the risk that those applying the CA do in fact not adhere to the approach’s rationale and revert to ‘conservative’ forms of action (Gasper, 2007). Sen (2004) has responded to these criticisms by stating that theorists should not endorse one predetermined list of capabilities. The selection of capabilities should be a democratic process, reflecting that capabilities lists are used for different purposes (Robeyns, 2005b). By taking this stance Sen does not acknowledge the potential for conflict due to different conceptions of wellbeing (Deneulin & McGregor, 2010).

Nussbaum (2000) has proposed a list of ten highly general capabilities, which should be made more specific by the local people: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one’s environment. In creating this list Nussbaum (2000) aims at normative theory building (Robeyns, 2003, 2005a) but the question of whether a-priori list of capabilities needs to be developed for career counselling and development remain

unanswered. Serious consideration would need to be made of how such a list would be developed. Identifying career capabilities is potentially valuable for the structuring the assessment of clients, for identifying a focus for intervention, and for research and evaluation. Egdell and McQuaid (2016) have persuasively argued that three main career-related capabilities can be identified for young people: capabilities for work, capabilities for learning, and capabilities for voice (e.g. expressing needs and preferences). Whilst this works well as a broad-brush higher level descriptive framework for researchers and policy makers, more specificity is required by career development practitioners. Similarly, the conceptual distinctions between commodities, functionings and capabilities make sense at a level of generality, but these distinctions begin to blur when applying the framework to specific career development needs.

Second, the question of whether capabilities or functionings can be measured has been debated within the literature. Some argue that substantive freedoms and opportunities cannot be observed or measured and therefore only functionings can be evaluated (Chiappero-Martinetti et al., 2015; Verd & Andreu, 2011). In addition, Sen has been critical of the use of subjective measures of wellbeing (at least if used in isolation) because people living in relative deprivation habituate to their circumstances (Binder, 2013; Sen, 1987). Thus assessment and evaluation of capabilities informed approaches to career counselling and development are potentially complex, requiring a range of creative methods, which fully rework the IBJJ to take into account information on what service users have reason to value (Bonvin & Farvaque, 2005).

The third key difficulty in measuring capabilities is that they are hypothetical and lack a time dimension: “implicitly wellbeing freedom refers to the rest of an agent's life, and agency

freedom refers to the rest of history, if the agent cares for subsequent generations, subsequent life and non-life, or ongoing general causes” (Gasper, 2007, p. 351). As such it can be difficult to specify what is attainable for the individual, especially functionings that the individual has reason to value (Gasper, 2007). The absence of a time dimension is problematic as career biographies unfold over a working life (Robertson, 2015).

Thus the question remains as to how best to operationalize the CA for purposes of client assessment, design of intervention, research and evaluation of outcomes (Robertson, 2015). There have been promising recent attempts to operationalize career capabilities for the purposes of research (Picard, Olympio, et al., 2015; Picard, Pilote, et al., 2015), but we are not yet at the point where we can with confidence produce a list (or lists) of career capabilities for application in specific domains of practice.

### **Applying the Capability Approach to careers development practice**

As a radically underspecified approach, the CA is very far from offering prescriptive guidelines for practitioners. Its incompleteness must be addressed before viable practice can emerge from this perspective. Notwithstanding the difficulties in implementing the CA, it is possible to identify some of the implications for career development practice that flow from its logic. It is unlikely that the CA can operate in isolation as an inspiration for career development work; rather it needs to be combined and hybridized with other approaches, which serve to ‘fill in the gaps’ intentionally left by Sen.

#### *Goals for career development interventions*

A key potential contribution of the CA is to provide a language for talking about what career development is trying to achieve, and to articulate what a ‘good’ and a ‘bad’ outcome might

look like. In a sense, all social interventions will have the ultimate goal of promoting wellbeing. In terms of the CA applied to career development, this means that a good outcome is one where people choose for themselves what they will do and be, and that they are genuinely able to implement their chosen lifestyle. Career interventions may therefore seek to do the following:

- a) To extend the capability set available to an individual, i.e. make possible more potential 'beings' and 'doings'. This might be via positioning to allow access to career opportunities. It could include a change in perceptions, such as raising aspirations. In terms of Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) Bourdieusian approach, this might mean extending an individual's 'horizons for action' within which 'pragmatic decision making' can take place.
- b) To assist individuals to identify the life-career that they have reason to value. In a CA, values would not be seen as an individual difference variable that can be captured psychometrically - although the CA would not rule out any useful source of information. Choice must be genuine for capabilities to be meaningful, even though it is shaped by the socio-cultural context. More than that, the criteria for choosing and evaluating options must be selected by the individual.
- c) To assist individuals to recognize their career capabilities and to build on them. Here we can move away from a narrow conception of occupational and educational outcomes, towards a personal and professional development role for career counsellors. A focus on life-career management skills represents the most direct and obvious route for interventions to pursue. But any strengthening of an individual's

position, including their access to financial resources or development of their skills through engaging in learning experiences, may be relevant.

- d) Promote personal agency. The promotion of wellbeing will always be done by seeking to strengthen individual autonomy. Thus the CA can help to align the objectives of interventions with a core ethical principle of the career development profession.

### *The design of interventions*

There is a risk that those responsible for designing a service may impose their own views of which outcomes are valuable outcomes (Robeyns, 2006). A key consequence of the CA is that institutions must avoid imposing on people their own value systems, and consult service users. This idea is not new to career development (Arthur, Collins, & McMahon, 2009) but is far from being common practice. It is also problematic given that state career services are driven by the public policy objectives identified by Watts (2008), and controlled by government funding. The CA argues that there should not be a state imposed conception of a good life; and as such valuable options outside paid work, that challenge the existing normative framework, would need to be promoted (Deneulin, 2011; Orton, 2011). The design of interventions must find a way to incorporate the perspective and values of service users.

### *Career assessment*

In general, the CA demands a rich informational base, in order to assess an individual's position. This represents a challenge to vocational psychology where the empirical base relies heavily on the psychometric assessment of narrowly defined constructs. The CA does not imply discarding these tools, but points to their inadequacy in capturing the breadth of

available information about a person's life. The CA implies a holistic approach to assessment, and one that incorporates not just individual level information, but contextual information too. Any process of matching individuals to outcomes must allow people to identify the criteria by which their potential lifestyles will be judged.

### *Guidance for communities*

Whilst the CA is concerned with lifestyles that individuals can and do achieve, it is also concerned with communities. Whilst some have criticized it as individualistic perspective, it would be more accurate to say that whilst the individual is the ultimate focus of moral concern in the CA (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009), its focus for intervention can be at the group or community level. The CA implies that we judge our social arrangements by how well they facilitate access to desired lifestyles (Alkire, 2005). Thomsen (2012) has argued for a focus on career development as a collective practice; an institutional arrangement which should respond to the structural challenges faced by communities. It is through participatory community engagement that career development can become something more than an implement of governing processes in society.

### **Conclusion**

The CA offers a distinctive approach to issues of economic development and social justice in its focus on individuals' choice of lifestyle based on their own values. It brings a language that seeks to align policy making with the lives that people value. It brings a pragmatism that insists empowerment is not abstract but leads to real choice. It brings a focus on contexts and institutions. It offers a challenge to approaches to career counselling that over-emphasize self-transformation to gain labour market access. It also offers a challenge to policy approaches to promote employability that commodify workers, or treat the unemployed as

inert entities to be 'activated'. People are the end; not the means to an end. Through the lens of the CA, people are not there to serve the economy; rather the economy serves to enable people to live the lives that they have reason to value. Genuine choice and autonomy represent a good life.

Applying the CA to career development is problematic as it raises difficult issues, not least what we mean when we talk about career capabilities, and how to capture or quantify them. It is likely to mean merging the CA with other approaches to career development. At the very least, application of the CA requires addition of a resource based conception applicable to careers, and a time dimension. Four themes emerge as essential considerations when applying the CA to career development practice:

- a) Developing career capabilities involves promoting client autonomy as a central ethical principle and a unifying goal for practice;
- b) The genuine participation of service users is required in the conceptualization of capabilities for service design, and in generating individual understandings of the beings and doings that they have reason to value;
- c) The informational basis of the CA is very demanding, and implies a holistic approach to assessment; and
- d) Attention to the institutional arrangements for career development, and their engagement with communities is required.

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**Table 1: The Five Conceptual Building Blocks of the Capability Approach**

<b>Commodities</b>	Commodities are the material (e.g. money) and non-material (e.g. skills) resources to which the individual has access.
<b>Functionings</b>	Functionings are what individuals do and are. Functionings make up a person's life. They include an individual's current occupation, their life roles, their social identity, and their current state of wellbeing.
<b>Capability set</b>	The term capability set describes all that an individual can do and be i.e. all those functionings or opportunities that can be attained by the individual. As such functionings are a subset of an individual's capability set.
<b>Conversion factors</b>	Conversion factors are the personal, environmental and social conditions in which the individual is embedded that determine which, and the way in which, commodities can be turned into functionings. Examples of conversion factors include health, education, social status, training, labour market conditions, and welfare legislation.
<b>Choice</b>	Choice refers to the internal limitations and the individual's agency that can determine which, and the way in which, commodities can be turned into functionings. For example, individuals living in situations of deprivation may adapt their preferences, expectations and aspirations downwards.

Table 1 derived from: Goerne (2010, pp. 7–8), Gasper (2007), Hollywood et al. (2012), Nussbaum (2000), Biggeri and Ferrannini (2014).