Widening Participation and the Capability Approach

Michael F Watts
mw362@cam.ac.uk
Defining the capability approach

The capability approach is concerned with ‘the extent to which people have the opportunity to achieve outcomes that they value and have reason to value’ (Sen, 1999, p. 291) and that are constitutive of the truly human life (Nussbaum, 2000, 2006).

Nussbaum explains that the:

‘core idea seems to be that of the human being as a dignified free being who shapes his or her own life, rather than being passively shaped or pushed around by the world in the manner of a flock or herd animal… The idea thus contains a notion of human worth or dignity’ (2002, p. 130).
Nussbaum’s central human functioning capabilities

- Life
- Bodily health
- Bodily integrity
- Senses, imagination and thought
- Emotions
- Practical reason
- Affiliation
- Other species
- Play
- Control over one’s environment (including political and material environments)

(*inter alia*, Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 78-80)
Sen describes functionings as ‘the various things a person may value doing or being’ (1999, p. 75) which ‘can vary from such elementary things as being adequately nourished, being in good health, avoiding escapable morbidity and premature mortality, etc., to more complex achievements such as being happy, having self-respect, taking part in the life of the community, and so on’ (1992, p. 39).

The capability approach ‘does not judge the worth of being and doing in a hierarchical way, as with the policy interpretation of aspiration. Rather a functioning is seen to have value if it allows the individual to flourish’ (Hart, 2007, p. 41).
Capability

A capability is ‘a person’s ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being’ (Sen, 1993, p. 30) and is ‘thus a kind of freedom… the freedom to achieve various lifestyles’ (Sen, 1999, p. 75).

‘The best interpretation of what Sen means by ‘capability’ is that it connotes a certain sort of possibility or opportunity for functioning… For Sen, capabilities are options or choices open to the person, possible functionings from which a person may choose’ (Crocker, 1995, p. 162, original emphases).
Nussbaum on education

‘Senses, Imagination, and Thought. Being able to use the senses, to imagine, think, and reason – and to do these things in a “truly human” way, a way informed and cultivated by an adequate education, including, but by no means limited to, literacy and basic mathematical and scientific training. Being able to use imagination and thought in connection with experiencing and producing self-expressive works and events of one’s own choice, religious, literary, musical, and so forth. Being able to use one’s mind in ways protected by guarantees of freedom of expression with respect to both political and artistic speech, and freedom of religious exercise. Being able to search for the ultimate meaning of life in one’s own way. Being able to have pleasurable experiences, and to avoid non-necessary pain’ (Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 78-79, italicised emphasis added).

‘women who have become literate find literacy valuable and even delightful… they report satisfaction with their new condition [and] the transition in their lives begun by literacy is not one they would wish to reverse’ (2000, p. 152).
Sen on education

The public participation which is central to his conception of capability gives ‘further reason for attaching importance to such elementary capabilities as reading and writing (through basic education)’ (Sen, 1999, p. 242).

Education can benefit the individual ‘in reading, communicating, arguing, in being able to choose in a more informed way, in being taken more seriously by others and so on’ (Sen, 1999, p. 294).

‘through education, learning, and skill formation, people can become much more productive over time, and this contributes greatly to the process of economic expansion’ (Sen, 1999, pp. 292-93).
Key features of the capability approach

- Opportunity not outcome
- Conversion factors
- Adaptive preferences and counterfactuals
- Human diversity & multiple realisability
Adaptive preferences and counterfactuals

‘The capability approach is concerned with the substantive freedoms individuals have to choose and lead lives they value and have reason to value but its ethical remit extends beyond the freedom to choose and lead the lives they have chosen: capability is an articulation of the real opportunities individuals have to make choices that shape their lives and it must, therefore, address more than the realisation of those choices. To assess these opportunities it is necessary to turn to its counterfactual nature. Counterfactuality is a key element of the capability approach and gives it added value over other means of assessing well-being but it is difficult to comprehend and typically overlooked (Comim, 2008). Nonetheless, it is particularly significant in identifying adaptive preferences as it offers a means of apprehending what people would do if they were not constrained by the circumstances of their adaptation. Care, however, must be taken to avoid confusing adaptations to the ends and the various means of well-being’ (Watts, 2012).
The value of non-participation in higher education

‘Drawing upon Sen’s capability approach... the functionings of these young people (that is, those ‘doings and beings’ they valued and had reason to value) included, but were more than, obtaining satisfying and rewarding work. Employment had both intrinsic and instrumental value to them: it could be satisfying in and of itself; and it was also a means to other ends, such as enabling an enjoyable social life and developing independence. For these young people, neither the intrinsic nor the instrumental value of employment would necessarily be enhanced by higher education; and, moreover, participation in higher education may have inhibited the achievement of these and other functionings’ (Watts & Bridges, 2006, p. 284).
Social discipline

‘If social conditioning makes a person lack the courage to choose (perhaps even to ‘desire’ what is denied but what would be valued if chosen), then it would be unfair to undertake the ethical assessment assuming that she does have that effective choice. It is a matter of concentrating on the real freedoms actually enjoyed, taking note of all the barriers – including those from ‘social discipline’’ (Sen, 1992, p. 149, original emphases).
Accessing Oxbridge

‘There is nothing wrong with students choosing not to apply or not to take up offered places if such choices are made on the basis of reflective and informed consideration. There is everything wrong with such choices being distorted by the unjust weight of social conditioning... The capability approach shifts the conception of equality from outcome to opportunity and this necessarily shifts the understanding of the social inequalities associated with access. Whereas Bourdieusian analyses articulate with the application and acceptance rates and emphasise the high volumes of cultural capital typically required of students progressing to Oxbridge, the capability approach offers a more nuanced interpretation acknowledging that the freedom to make choices includes the freedom to reject the maximal option (measured here by the high levels of cultural capital accruing from an Oxbridge education). However, bounded by the perceptual limitations imparted by their cultural capital, appropriately qualified students from non-traditional backgrounds are less likely to have opportunities to make informed and reflective choices about what they are able to do with their academic capital; and they may adapt their preferences so that they do not consider Oxbridge to be within their reach’ (Watts, 2012).
Recognising human diversity

‘Governmental policies seeking to address social inequalities typically aim to increase participation in education but education and educational contexts can generate adaptations. Moreover, there is often a tendency to prioritise participation in certain forms of education as the end of well-being rather than as a means to that end. This failure to acknowledge the significance of what Nussbaum refers to as multiple realizability risks overwriting the human diversity that is central to the ethic of the capability approach; and the subsequent attribution of adaptations to young people’s lives can widen rather than close the capability gap. This is not to devalue the importance of education but to suggest that great care needs to be taken when conducting capability assessments of education and educational opportunities’ (Watts, 2011, pp. 199-200).
References


