

The role of the Capability Approach in measuring 'Good Work'

Building a conceptual framework

Presentation prepared for the 'Work and Employment' thematic group
of the Human Development and Capability Association

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Agenda

1. **The problem.** Issues with the measurement of job quality.
2. **Work in the Capability Approach:** a review of previous literature.
3. **Some requirements for building a conceptual framework using the Capability Approach.**
4. **A potential conceptual framework:** proposed answers to these requirements.

This talk draws heavily from the UK job quality experience, but I'm very keen to discuss the experience of other countries and incorporate this into the conceptual framework.

Today I am **not** presenting or analysing data, but this framework is being developed with operationalisation very much in mind.

Section 1

The problem



There is considerable disagreement about what constitutes a 'good job'

- There is broad agreement that job quality is a multi-dimensional concept, but debate over which indicators and dimensions are important and – crucially – how they relate to human wellbeing (or some other 'good' outcome of choice).
- Particular debate over the role of subjective vs. objective indicators in multi-dimensional job quality, and the paradox of why the same jobs are good for some and bad for others:

*"We were ... taken by some of the **diametrically opposed views of the same job** presented to the Work and Pensions Select Committee earlier in the year. Hearing one person describe a job as the best they have had followed by another person describing the same job as highly stressful or exploitative highlights the challenge for policymakers in seeking to promote better work for all."*

- Matthew Taylor, 'The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices in the UK.' London, HMSO (2017)

"It is not unusual to find employees expressing high levels of job satisfaction, even though it is generally agreed that they hold 'poor quality' jobs."

- Lene, 'Job satisfaction and bad jobs: **why are cleaners so happy at work?**', Work, Employment and Society, Vol. 3, Issue 4, 28 Feb 2019, pp. 666-681.

This has impeded progress in developing multi-dimensional measures of job quality

- Across the EU, a very large number of measures of multi-dimensional job quality have been developed since the late-1990s, but they have had an inconsistent impact on European employment policy (Piasna et al, 2019).
- In the UK, the Taylor Review fell short of recommending a way to measure job quality. It instead recommended that the Government 'identify a set of metrics ... reporting annually on the quality of work on offer in the UK.' (Taylor, 2017, p. 103).
- Since then, despite many dedicated academic studies on multi-dimensional job quality in the UK (Brown et al, 2007; Green, 2007, 2009; Green et al, 2021), progress in developing an 'official' measure of job quality in the UK has stalled:
 - A UK Government-commissioned academic working group recommends a set of job quality metrics covering 18 aspects of work (Irvine et al, 2018).
 - In response, the Government recommends the Industrial Strategy Council consider this working group's report (BEIS, 2018, pp. 7, 17).
 - The Industrial Strategy Council has since only endorsed the employment rate, the unemployment rate, hard-to-fill vacancies, sickness absences and job satisfaction. Job quality largely discussed in context of productivity (Taylor, 2020; Industrial Strategy Council, 2019 and 2021).

I argue that the Capability Approach has the potential to navigate these issues

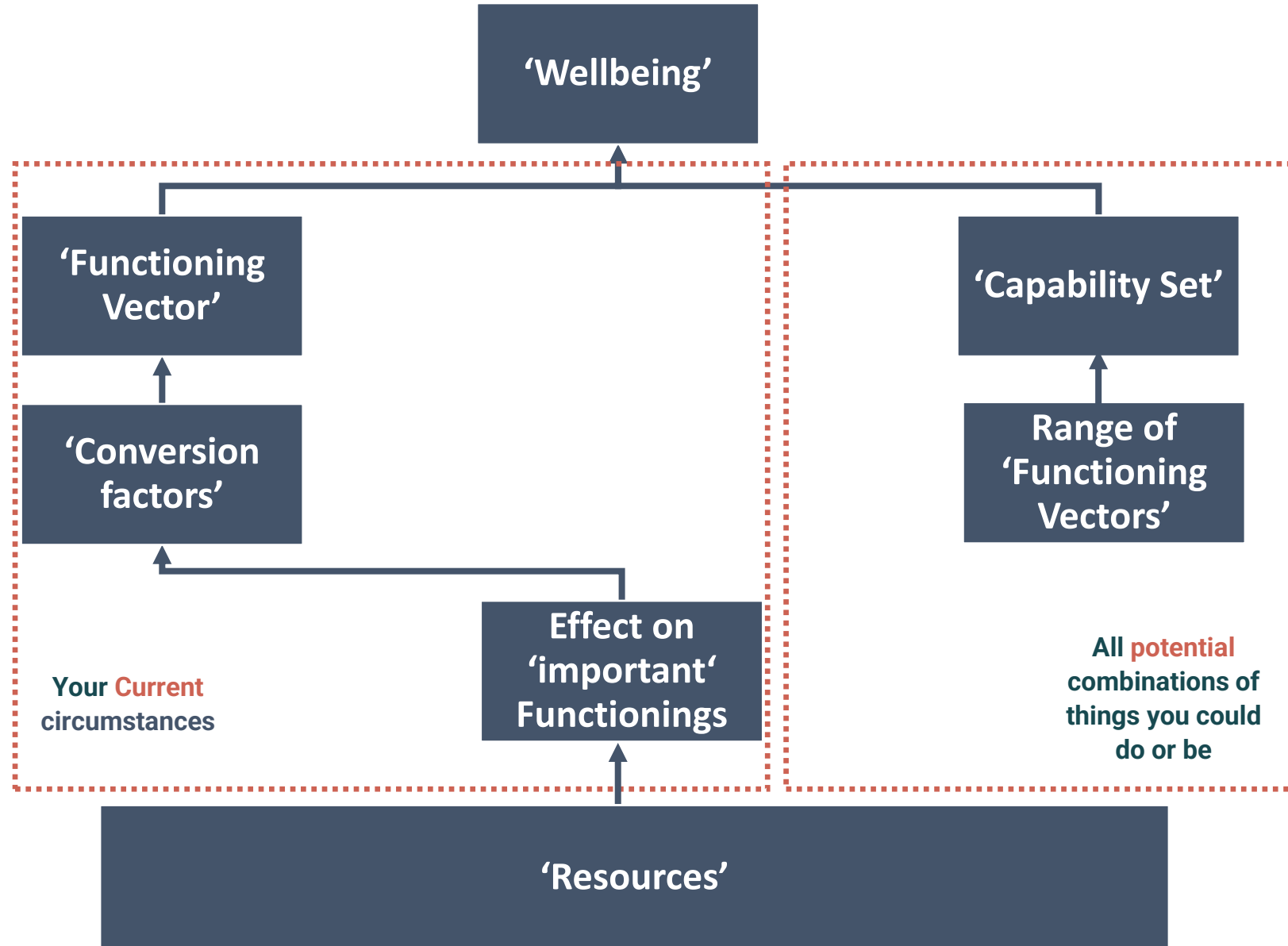
- In order to properly understand how work relates to our wellbeing and develop measures of job quality, we need to do two things:
 1. **More clearly specify exactly how work relates to our wellbeing.** This requires a definition of wellbeing; a clear articulation of which work-related resources are (and are not) important to our wellbeing; and a view on whether work-related resources are intrinsically important, instrumentally important, or both.
 2. **Place work in its wider context,** looking at how work-related resources interact with people's wider circumstances, rights and opportunities – the Capability Set and Conversion Factors.
- I suggest that many existing attempts to measure multi-dimensional job quality are under-specified in these two respects.
- Job characteristics only part of the JQ -> Wellbeing relationship. Also important to understand how poor JQ and 'Capability deprivation' interact: **do people in 'bad' jobs face the double deprivation of 'narrow' Capability sets? Does this explain the dissonance between subjective job satisfaction and objective job characteristics?**

Section 2

Work in the Capability Approach

What is the value of the Capability Approach? A (very) brief overview:

- Resources eg income not an intrinsic feature of wellbeing, but a means to an end. Criticised approaches to wellbeing which looked solely at income (eg GDP) or subjective wellbeing.
- Our wellbeing is the *important* things we are able to do and be (our Functionings).
- We also can't equate our wellbeing to our combination of *current* Functionings. We also have to understand:
 - How our circumstances affect conversion of resources into Functionings (Conversion Factors)
 - The range of combinations of Functionings available, *whether we choose them or not* (Capability Set)



Work is a central aspect of human activity, and a constant thread running through Sen and Nussbaum's literature

- Sen wrote a dedicated study on employment and development before formulating the Capability Approach (Sen, 1975). *Poverty and Famines* (Sen, 1981) was prepared expressly for the ILO's World Employment Programme.
- Implicitly or explicitly, both could be read as endorsing a broad view of the work characteristics important to human wellbeing:
 - Job characteristics and relationship to modes of production explain the difference in the outcomes of landless waged labourers vs. share croppers in the Great Bengal famine, because at least for share-croppers “a share of the food output does have some security advantage in terms of exchange entitlement.” (Sen, 1981, p. 5)
 - Nussbaum's work frequently cites examples of work being crucial in women's empowerment. Its importance extends beyond the wage alone (Nussbaum, 2000, 2007, 2011).

Further comments from Sen

- In earlier writings, he endorsed a multi-dimensional approach to understanding work (Sen, 1975), and advanced a multi-dimensional approach to unemployment in international development (Sen, 1973).
- Sen takes a broad view of what activity should be defined as work, arguing that informal and unpaid work are in scope (Sen, 2000).
- He has argued that unemployment needs to feature in our assessment of the various 'spaces' of inequality, considered alongside e.g. international wage inequality (Sen, 1997, p. 159).

However, neither Sen nor Nussbaum provide a clear framework for conceptualising work and wellbeing

- There is no dedicated, comprehensive text on work and wellbeing in the Capability literature.
- In his few articles dedicated to work (Sen, 1997, 2000), Sen says little on the Capability Approach.
- Nussbaum has built a list of important Central Capabilities, but her more applied research interests have lay elsewhere.
- There is no 'employment' dimension in the Human Development Index, and the OPHI also recognises quality of work as a 'missing dimension' of poverty (Lugo, 2007; Cassar, 2010).
- In consequence, we still need a Capability-based framework to understand the issues raised in the introduction.

More recent scholars have made inroads into the conceptualisation of work and the Capability Approach

- *Robeyns, Wellbeing, freedom and social justice: the Capability Approach re-examined (2017).*
Develops a modular framework for applying the Capability Approach:
 - On its own, the Capability Approach is deliberately open-ended and under-specified. Further normative judgements needed to apply it to a specific purpose with a specific goal – ie a Capability Theory.
 - Eg you need a normative framework to identify *important* Functionings and Capabilities.
 - Importance of factors such as the Functioning Vector vs. Capability Set depends on the purpose you're using it for (eg see Vallentyne, 2006).
- *Suppa, Work and Wellbeing: A Conceptual Proposal, OPHI Working Paper No. 131 (2019):*
 - We need to decide whether work is an intrinsic dimension of human wellbeing (eg Bonvin, 2012) or a 'characteristic providing activity.' Specifies functionings at a higher level of abstraction.
 - Labour activity can be considered multi-dimensional, but important to "distinguish the multidimensionality of labour activities carefully from the multidimensionality of human wellbeing." (Suppa, 2019, p. 13)
 - Conversion factors (both individual and social) affect how work characteristics create wellbeing.
 - Capability Set crucial for understanding the impact of labour activities which severely restrict freedoms or limit choices, even if people in these circumstances have high wellbeing in their current Functioning.

Section 3

Some requirements for a conceptual framework

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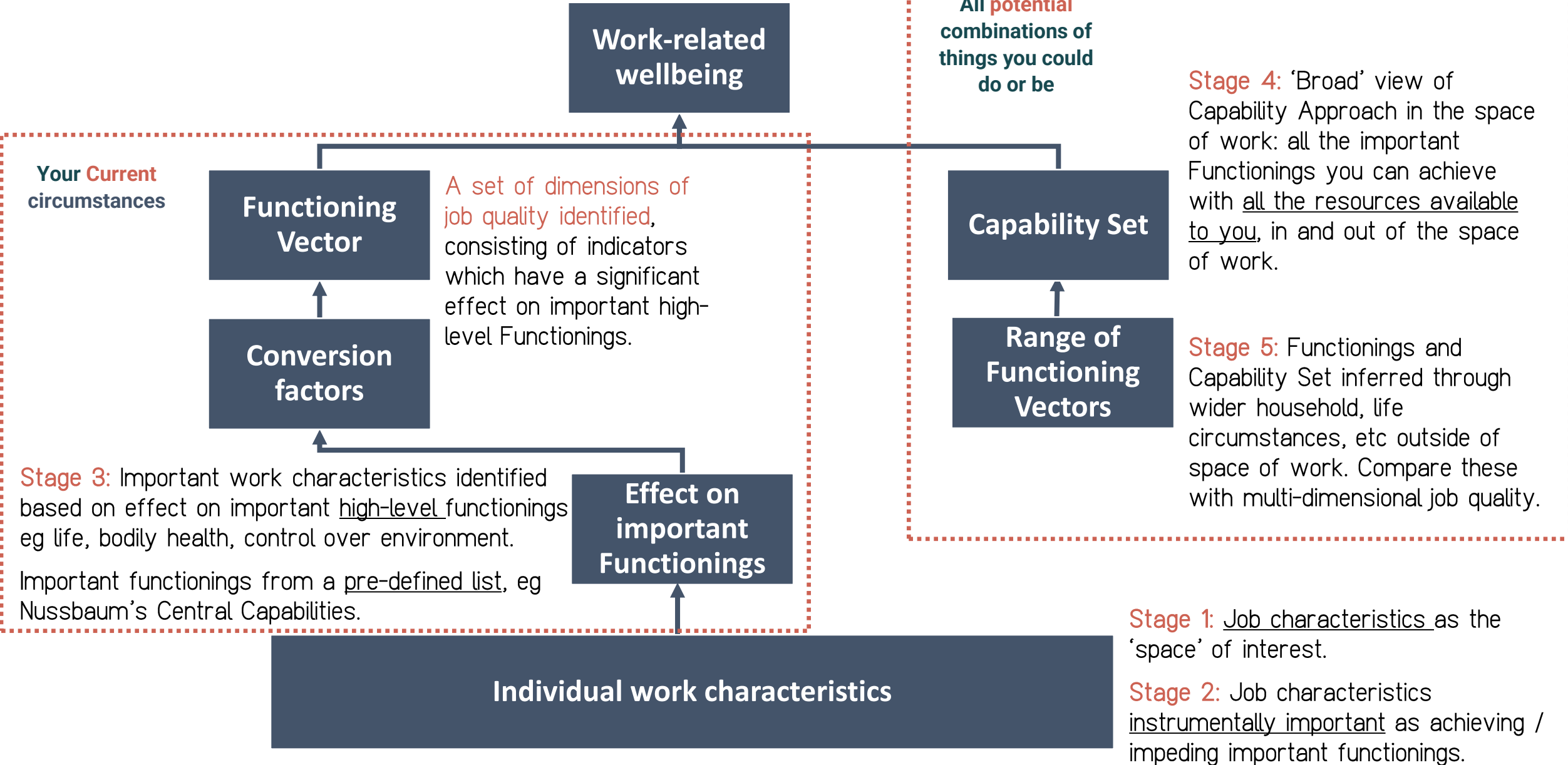
Bringing this literature together, we need to do at least five things to build a conceptual framework to measure job quality:

1. **Decide the 'space' of interest.** Which set of characteristics are we interested in?
2. **Decide whether our characteristics are a dimension of wellbeing, or a characteristic-providing activity.** Are they intrinsically or instrumentally important?
3. **Specify the normative framework,** used to identify 'important' Functionings.
4. **Establish the role of the Capability Set and how we define it.**
5. **Operationalise the Capability Set and Conversion Factors.**

Section 4

A potential conceptual framework

Potential applied conceptual framework



[1.] Work as the 'space' of interest

- Job characteristics are our space of interest. This includes all characteristics of the jobs people do when carrying out work activity – hours, pay, conditions, etc.
- Should ideally encompass self-employed, and those with multiple jobs.
- Arguably 'work' should encompass both paid and unpaid activity (Sen, 2000), but it is in practice difficult to measure both. In most national surveys, only those in paid employment are asked about job characteristics. Far too little is known about the self-employed.
- Important to think carefully about characteristics of the job vs. the individual: the skill level of the job is a potentially important job characteristic, but the qualifications of the individual are not an aspect of work.

[2.] Job characteristics – intrinsically or instrumentally important aspects of wellbeing?

- Following Suppa (2019), I too favour an approach to viewing work as a ‘characteristic-providing activity’ rather than an intrinsic aspect of wellbeing.
- This is not to say that work characteristics *can’t* be intrinsic aspects of wellbeing. However:
 - Even if they are, are they not marginal when set against the benefits / disbenefits work brings across our wider lives?
 - Is it not easier to identify important work characteristics if we simply look at how they impact higher-level Functionings, without specifying important Functionings at such a low level?
- This means we identify indicators of job quality which are important in fulfilling or impeding important Functionings.
- It is useful to group similar indicators into dimensions, but these dimensions should not be confused with dimensions of wellbeing.

[3.] Identifying a normative framework to find 'important' Functionings

- On their own, Functionings are not 'important.' Only a normative framework enables us to identify important Functionings (Robeyns, 2017).
- Can identify functionings 'a priori' or through social participation / consultation. In practice there is a strong overlap between different lists (Qizilbash, 1996, pp. 155–159).
- For the purposes of measuring work and wellbeing, I agree there is a strong case for specifying Functionings at a higher level (Suppa, 2019).
- Important work characteristics can be identified based on how they help (or hinder) the fulfilment of high-level Functionings in a given list, eg Nussbaum's Central Capabilities (see right).

Nussbaum's Central Capabilities

1. Life

2. Bodily health

3. Bodily integrity

4. Senses, imagination and thought

5. Emotions

6. Practical reason

7. Affiliation

8. Other species

9. Play

10. Control over one's environment

[4.] What is the 'Capability Set' in the space of work?

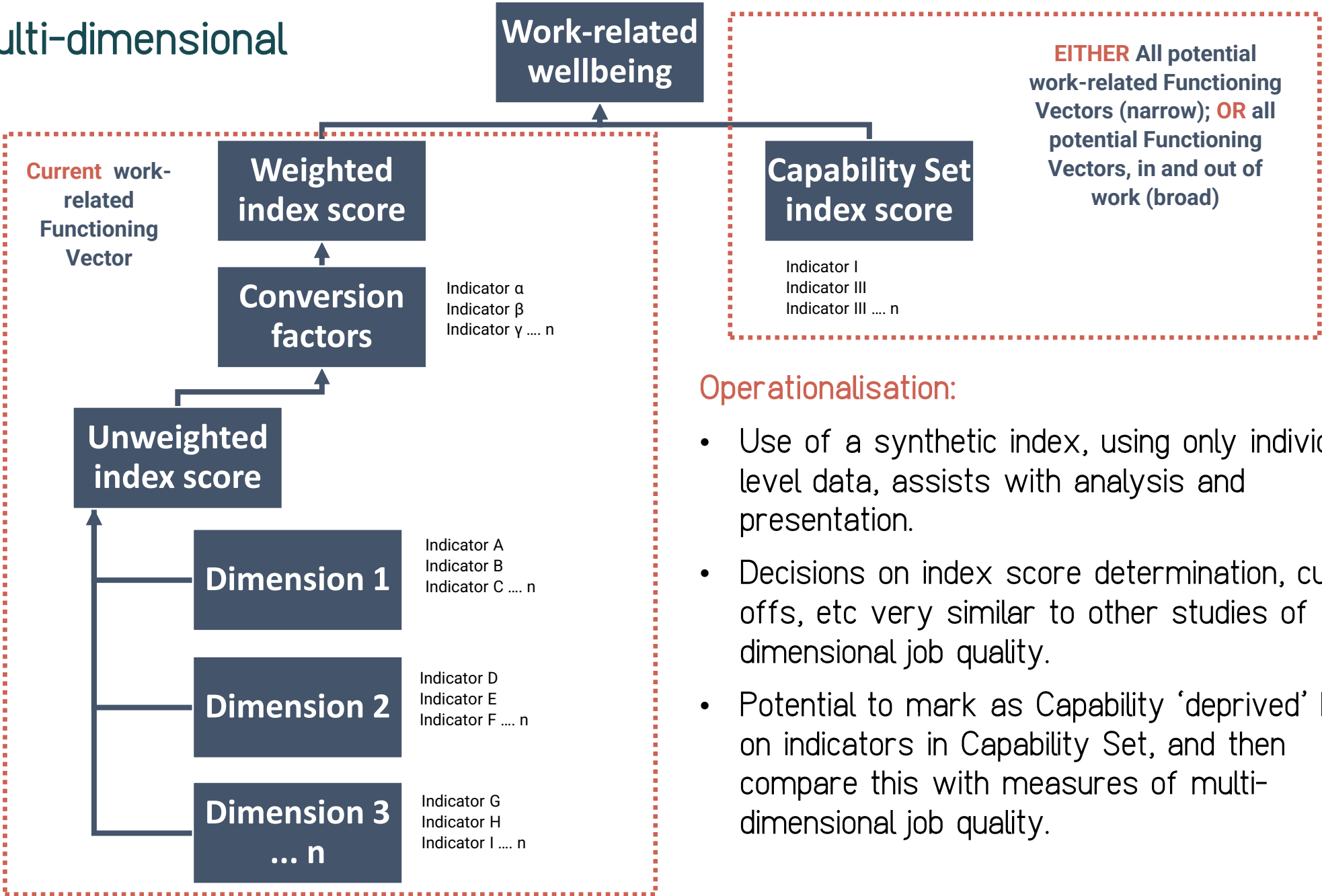
- Even after you've identified the 'space' of interest for Functionings, you need to identify the 'space' for the Capability Set. *I'd argue these are in fact two separate exercises for applied Capability research.*
- I argue a broad and narrow way of framing it in job quality:
 - **Narrow:** all the the important Functionings you can achieve with the range of work resources available to you. Eg unemployment "a reduced choice set of labour activities" (Suppa, 2019, p. 15)
 - **Broad:** All the important Functionings you can achieve with all the resources available to you, in and out of the space of work.
- The preferred framing depends on your research interest:
 - Understanding the realisation of capabilities within the work space, eg the Capability Set for Work questionnaire (Abma et al, 2016) (*narrow*)
 - ... Or studying how poor job quality relate to people's and narrow Capability Sets across their wider life: do people in 'bad' jobs have 'narrow' Capability Sets? (*broad*)

-> My research interest

[5.] Operationalising the Capability Set and Conversion Factors

- Despite this, there are considerable and well-known challenges with operationalisation:
 - How do we measure or infer a counter-factual (all the potential Functionings, even if not achieved)?
 - Even if we favour a narrow approach to the Capability Set, are there even indicators distinct enough to separate these two concepts out? Eg skills.
 - How do we distinguish between indicators important for Conversion Factors and indicators important for the Capability Set? Eg household characteristics.
 - If we introduce Conversion Factors into multi-dimensional job quality, how do we avoid challenge about potentially arbitrary adjustments to job quality index scores?
- However, with a sufficiently comprehensive national survey, insight could be gained from introducing measures of the Capability Set into multi-dimensional job quality:
 - Potential to mark people as 'Capability deprived' based on a series of indicators – skills, household factors, etc.
 - Look at its relationship to multi-dimensional job quality and subjective wellbeing.

Potential multi-dimensional index



Operationalisation:

- Use of a synthetic index, using only individual-level data, assists with analysis and presentation.
- Decisions on index score determination, cut-offs, etc very similar to other studies of multi-dimensional job quality.
- Potential to mark as Capability 'deprived' based on indicators in Capability Set, and then compare this with measures of multi-dimensional job quality.

Summary

Summary

- Important to have a clear conceptual approach to understanding how job characteristics relate to wellbeing. In most cases, it seems appropriate to specify Functionings at a higher level and see work as a characteristic-providing activity.
- Job quality cannot be measured through work characteristics alone. This neglects Sen's essential argument: wellbeing is only created through the interaction of resources with the Capability Set and Conversion Factors.
- There are 'broad' and 'narrow' ways of understanding the Capability Set in job quality measurement, but in any event considerable issues with operationalising either concept.
- Potential for future research to look at how job quality interacts with the Capability Set and Conversion Factors. This may help navigate current issues with the measurement of multi-dimensional job quality, explaining differences in attitudes to the same job and the gap between objective job characteristics and subjective wellbeing.

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