Re-examining the Capability Approach: the significance of situated personal action competences

Pär Nygren

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to contribute to the development of the theoretical framework of the capability approach (CA) from a perspective emphasizing agency and the dynamics of human development situated in a socio-cultural context.

Re-examining the basic concepts in the framework of the CA, I address questions such as: What does “conversion”, i.e., the change from the moment a person is said “to have certain capabilities” to the moment when she is said “to have achieved the desirable functionings in practice”, really mean in the empirical world? How can the influences of the conversion factors and the social context, which exert their effects before, during, and after this change, be taken into account in the theoretical framework?

To begin with, I argue that the conversion of desirable functionings into real functionings should be understood as a dynamic transformation process structured in four phases: 1) formulation of desirable functioning; 2) creation/expansion of capability; 3) choice of capability; and 4) achieving desirable functionings as real functionings.

The main reason why the CA argues that it is better to focus on the ends (outcome) rather than the means, is that people differ in their ability to convert means into valuable outcomes (functionings) (Sen 1992: 26–28, 36–38). However, the framework of the CA lacks a theoretical conceptualization of the critical phenomenon referred to as “ability.” Hence it become impossible to answer important questions, such as how, in what way, does a person become “able” to utilize the relevant means and handle intrinsic and extrinsic conversion factors in order to achieve desired functionings.

By introducing a theory of the development of personal action competences (Nygren 2015), covering the aspects of beings and doings in a way that is compatible with the framework of CA, it is possible to address these important questions. I argue that the way the concept of human capability relates to the concepts of extrinsic factors (e.g., means, social context, extrinsic conversion factors) and individual intrinsic factors (e.g., gender, intelligence, knowledge, personal historical influences on preferences) as factors influencing the person’s ability to achieve desirable functionings in practice reveals that the concept of capability should be defined in relation to two underlying concepts denoting two aspects of reality as well as the bi-directional relations between those realities: “opportunities” and “personal action competences.”

I argue that personal action competences are necessary in order 1) to identify opportunities as opportunities relevant for the person’s desirable functionings; 2) to create the relevant opportunities, possibly together with other people; 3) to gain access to and to make use of the relevant opportunities in practice; and 4) to manage the potential restrictive influences of extrinsic and intrinsic conversion factors.

Finally, I transcended the dichotomy of “the potential functionings” (Capabilities) and “the achieved functioning” by presenting a model describing the dynamics of “The generative mechanism for realization of desired beings and doings” over time. I argue that a potential functioning, i.e., a human capability, is created as one of the results of this generative mechanism. This generative mechanism is fueled by the dynamic interactions between particular extrinsic and intrinsic conditions (including the mentioned “conversion factors”), where these interactions are mediated by the person’s personal action competences as a part of the generative mechanism.

1 Professor at the Research Centre for Child and Youth Competence Development, Lillehammer University College, Norway. E-mail: par.nygren@hil.no
1. Introduction

The Capability Approach (CA) has been developed by Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, and other scholars as a multidisciplinary approach with roots in economics, social science, psychology, and philosophy. This approach to people’s achievement of wellbeing highlights the differences between means and ends and between substantive freedoms (capabilities) and outcomes (achieved functionings) (Robeyns 2005).


The CA represents a critique of standard utilitarian theories of the evaluation of wellbeing, which focus on the measuring of individual’s achieved pleasure. Sen argues that our evaluations and policies for people’s wellbeing should focus on what people are able to do and be, on the quality of their life, and on removing obstacles in their lives so that they have more freedom to live the kind of life that they have reason to value. The CA has been advanced in somewhat different directions by Martha Nussbaum, who has used the capability approach as the foundation for a partial theory of justice.

In her theoretical survey of the capability approach Robeyns (2005) points out that Nussbaum and Sen have different goals with their work on capabilities. They also have different personal intellectual histories in which their work needs to be situated. Nussbaum aims to develop a partial theory of justice by arguing for the political principles that should underlie each constitution. Thus, Nussbaum enters the CA from a perspective of moral-legal-political philosophy. She has as a specific aim: to argue for political principles that a government should guarantee to all its citizens through its constitution. To perform this task, Nussbaum has developed and proposed a well-defined but general list of “central human capabilities” that should be incorporated in all societal constitutions. Accordingly, her work on the CA is universalistic, since she argues all governments should endorse these capabilities.

Sen, who was doing some applied work on poverty in developing countries, found empirical support for a focus on what people can do and could be instead of the measures that were more dominant in developmental economics in the early 1980s (see for example Sen, 1985a, 1988). While Sen has a situated contextual approach, Nussbaum argues from a more normative and universalistic point of view.

Both the general approach in this paper and the theoretical framework it applies in order to re-examine and develop the framework of the CA represent a broad socio-cultural contextual approach focusing on human agency. In many respects, this approach is therefore more in line with Sen’s context-oriented interpretation of the CA compared with the universalistic-oriented position of Nussbaum. But this is not to say that the importance of Nussbaum’s position in other respects is rejected. In contrast to Sen’s more economical and measurement-oriented position, Nussbaum pays more attention to people’s skills and personality traits as aspects of capabilities that increase the potential to understand actions, meanings, and motivations (Gasper and van Staveren 2003). In this respect, Nussbaum’s approach is more in keeping with the agency approach presented in this paper.

The overall aim of this paper is to contribute to the further development of the theoretical framework of the CA. In addition to re-examining some basic concepts and their relations, the general aim is to emphasize the significance of agency in the CA by presenting a theoretical model...
of the dynamics of human development of situated personal action competences, a model which can be incorporated in and hopefully enrich the framework for the CA.

In this paper I present an approach to human development of capability which take into account people’s actions, meanings, identities and motivations in dynamic developmental local processes. The aim is to take advantage of – and develop – Sen’s and Nussbaum’s approaches within a socio-cultural and context-oriented framework and at the same time transcend both the universalistic position (Nussbaum’s) and the economistic and measurement-oriented position (Sen’s).

The CA is not a theory in a strict sense, but rather a broad framework encompassing various interpretations of the basic concepts and their internal relations by different scholars. This fact creates some challenges for any attempt to re-examine critically and to develop the theoretical framework of CA further. Among other things, it becomes necessary to make clear which of the interpretations of the basic concepts in the CA are under scrutiny as points of departure for the critique and the theoretical development. In this paper, the theoretical survey of basic concepts in CA conducted by Robeyns (2005) serves as a helpful overview of the different interpretations and directions. In the section below I shall present the interpretations of CA’s basic assumptions, claims, and concepts that I have used as points of departure for my analysis. In addition, I try to clarify my own positions when interpreting and using some of the basic concepts in this analysis.

2. Points of departure, clarification of terminology and focus in the analysis
In this paper I shall take the following basic assumptions and claims in the CA as points of departure for my analysis:

- People strive to achieve particular functionings, which are perceived as valuable goods or freedoms.
- With regard to the dimensions of acting and being, it is argued that these valuable functionings (or desirable freedoms) can be divided into two categories: doings (e.g., working, resting) and beings (e.g., being healthy, being part of a community, being respected) (Robeyns 2005). These functionings could be either potential or achieved in practice.
- People undertake the actions and activities by which they can be the person they want to be and can get involved in the type of doings that they want to be involved in.
- A combination of several potential functionings can be described as a set of opportunities (Sen) or a set of capabilities (Nussbaum).
- People use commodities, services, and goods (freedoms) as means to enable desired functionings. These means are also defined as means which people use to create or expand their capabilities. They are said to function as “inputs” in the creation or expansion of their capabilities.
- People also use already achieved “functionings” in order to achieve new functionings with respect to certain desirable beings and doings (Robeyns 2005).
- “The relation between a good and the functionings to achieve certain beings and doings is influenced by three groups of conversion factors.” (Robeyns 2005: 99). These conversion factors, i.e., the factors influencing the person’s ability to convert the desirable goods into achieved real functionings, are described in three groups:
  1. Personal conversion factors (e.g., ability to convert the characteristics of the commodity into a functioning).
  2. Social conversion factors (e.g., public policies, social norms, discriminating practices, gender roles, societal hierarchies, power relations).
  3. Environmental conversion factors (e.g., climate, geographical location) (Robeyns 2005).
- When people try to convert desirable goods into real functionings, each factor in the three
groups of conversion factors can have a promoting, restrictive or neutral influence on the **ability** to convert the desired functionings into real functionings.

- **Given a certain set of already created capabilities/opportunities**, the person has to make a **choice** and to decide which of them he/she should make use of when converting particular desirable functions into real functionings. Two persons with identical capability sets can therefore end up with different types and levels of achieved functionings, as they make different choices owing to the fact that they might have different ideas of what a good life is. The choice is influenced by the **social context**, **personal history**, and **psychological factors**.

- **When a person has the ability** to convert a set of desirable goods into real functions, he is said to have the necessary **capabilities** (or opportunities) to achieve these functions in practice. In order to be categorized as a person having these capabilities (or opportunities), it follows from what is stated above that the combined overall effect of relevant conversion factors must not exert a type of influence which restricts the possibility of conversion, but rather a type of influence which either promotes the conversion or is “neutral” relative to the possibilities for the conversion.

As can be seen above, the use of concepts and terms are not always clear and used in a consistent way. For example, the use of the term “Achieved functionings” seems implicitly to refer to “achieved desirable functionings,” i.e., achieved functionings which the person wishes, or wished, to achieve. When I refer to the term “achieved functionings” in this paper, I understand these functionings as functionings which the person wishes to achieve.

In the formulation “The relation between a good and the functionings to achieve certain beings and doings is influenced by three groups of conversion factors,” scholars assume a causal link between a particular functioning and certain beings and doings; the particular functioning is assumed as a functioning which gives the person the possibility to achieve “certain beings and doings.” One interpretation of this is that when scholars talk about achieved desirable functionings, they are talking about certain achieved desirable beings and doings that are **results** of certain achieved functionings.

In line with this I shall in this paper use the term achieved “desirable functioning,” understanding this functioning as a **means** to obtain certain desirable beings and doings.

Many works by scholars working in the CA paradigm also use different terms or concepts interchangeably, as if they denoted the same reality. This goes even for the key concept which has given the name of the theoretical framework. For example, “potential functionings,” “set of opportunities,” and “set of capabilities” are used interchangeably. This tendency can be observed not only among various scholars, but also in the same text by a single scholar. In Sen’s earliest work, a capability seems to be synonymous with a **capability set**, which consists of a combination of potential functionings. This kind of terminology is in line with many social-choice theorists, who focus much of their analysis on the opportunity set. A person’s capability is then treated as equivalent to a person’s **opportunity set**. Robeyns (2005) explicitly treat a person’s capability set as, “Opportunity set of achievable functionings.” Other scholars working within the capability paradigm, including Martha Nussbaum, treat “potential functionings” as “capabilities” (Robeyns, op. cit.).

In this paper I shall use the term “capability” as being synonymous with “potential functioning,” i.e., as a latent “power” (cf. Harré 1997) which can be transformed or converted into real functionings with respect to particular beings and doings in practice. I argue that this potential
functioning, or latent power, is created as one of the results of a *generative mechanisms*\(^2\) fueled by the dynamic interactions between particular extrinsic and intrinsic conditions (including the mentioned “conversion factors”), where these interactions are mediated by the person’s *personal action competences* as a part of the generative mechanism. I shall call this mechanism “the generative mechanism for realization of desired beings and doings.”

Having the ambition to develop the concepts in the theoretical framework of the CA into more “theoretical concrete” and consistent concepts, I shall argue that the concepts “opportunity” and “capability” should not be treated as synonymous phenomena. In general, and as will be elaborated in more detail later, I argue that the term “opportunity” should be reserved for the *extrinsic* conditions, while the term “capability” should denote a *particular combination of both extrinsic and intrinsic factors*. This approach also paves the way for making use of important explanatory concepts such as the distinction between “necessary” and “sufficient” conditions for the emergence of a phenomenon, e.g., a human capability.

Given (or creating) an opportunity which is *necessary* for achieving a desirable functioning in practice, doesn’t mean that the presence of this opportunity is a *sufficient* condition for creating the particular capability necessary for this achievement. Even if a person is given (or has created) an opportunity as a necessary condition, he or she must be able to *identify* the *opportunity* and to *be able to access and make use of it in practice* in order to be considered as a person with a particular capability. For example, some of the extrinsic or intrinsic conversion factors, or both, could prevent the person not only from identifying, but also from making use of a particular opportunity. The same goes for capabilities, as Robeyns (2005) points out:

”It is, however, important to question to what extent people have genuinely access to all the capabilities in their capability set, and whether or not they are punished by members of their family or community for making certain choices of the kind of life they value.” (p. 102)

In this paper I shall also argue that an application of a simple dichotomy of “potential” and “achieved” functionings conceals the empirically dynamic processes involved when a person is *converting* her potential functionings into real functions with respect to particular beings and doings. I shall especially focus on the question how we can understand the mechanism involved in the very *transformation* of the potential functioning (capability) into the particular real functioning that generates the desired beings and doings in practice.

### 3. The conversion of desirable functionings into real functionings

When trying to go deeper into how scholars working on the CA understand the phenomena “ability to convert,” and when trying to understand the assumed process of actual “conversion of desirable functionings into real functionings,” one is immediately confronted by several unanswered questions.

One of these questions concerns the role of the conversion factors during the process of conversion. If we envisage a process in which a person starts to formulate his desirable future functionings and subsequently ends up with his actual achievement of those functionings in practice, then we must ask the following: where in this process do the conversion factors intervene and produce a significant influence on the creation of capabilities and on their conversion into achieved new real functionings?

---

\(^2\) The concept of “generative mechanism” is a key concept from the realist theory of science (cf. Keat & Urry 1975; Harré & Madden 1975; Bhaskar 1975; Nygren 1979). As this paper will demonstrate, this concept has nothing in common with a “mechanistic” view of the relation between the subject and the surrounding world. On the contrary, the realist standpoint taken in this paper strongly rejects all such types of dualism.
3.1. Conversion as a dynamic process

In cases where the influences of the conversion factors promote or hinder, or both, the person trying to move toward her goal of “actual achievement of new real functionings,” they can confront the person with new challenges, demanding new competences and new ways of handling the situation along the path toward the goal. However, the structure, content, and outcome of these social and psychological processes become hidden and out of reach for theoretical conceptualizations with the application of the dichotomy of “the potential functionings” (capabilities) and “the achieved functioning.” This dichotomy also obscures the possibility of different degrees of achievement toward the goal of “actual achievement of new real functionings.”

We obviously need a more stringent and nuanced analytical tool in order to go beyond this dichotomy. Taking our point of departure in the work of scholars within the CA paradigm, we can infer that the influence of the conversion factors can be assumed to take place at least at four times on the “theoretical time line”:

1. After a person has experienced/defined a need of something considered as a good and before she has formulated the desirable future functionings;
2. After the formulation of desirable functions and before the person can be said to have certain capabilities for certain functionings;
3. After the creation of relevant capabilities and before the person has made her choice on which of her capabilities should be used in order to achieve the desirable functioning;
4. After the choice on which capabilities to use and before she has converted her capabilities into new “achieved functionings.”

When treating the establishment of capabilities and the conversion of these capabilities into real functionings as a dynamic process over time, the influencing conversion factors are seemingly assumed to affect at least four relations. The conversion factors can intervene in a promoting, hindering or neutral way in these relations. By identifying these relations as significant “targets” for the possible interventions by the conversion factors, we can describe the influence of these factors in terms of a social and psychological process comprising four phases, each of them with a defined starting and ending point:

1. The phase from Need-of-a-Good to Formulated-Desirable-Functioning (Formulation of desirable functioning)
2. The phase from Formulated-Desirable-Functioning to Created/expanded-Capability (Creation/expansion of capability)
3. The phase from Created-Capability to Choice of Capability (Choice of capability)
4. The phase from the Choice of Capability to Achieved-Functioning in terms of beings and doings (Achieving desirable functionings as real functionings)

Obviously these four phases are sensitive to the influences from all of the three types of conversion factors (Personal, Social, and Environmental conversion factors). As will be shown later, the conversion factors are involved in all of the four phases as dynamic elements fueling “the generative mechanism for realization of desired beings and doings.”

Identifying these four phases do not only offer a significant theoretical tool for guiding the analysis of how the conversion factors influence the establishment of a capability and the transformation of desired functionings into real functionings. The four phases can also serve as targets for analysis of the person as an active subject who is participating in practices where the conversion factors influence his ambitions to achieve desirable functionings. Likewise, they can serve as targets in analyses of how the person (possibly together with other participants) creates relevant conversion factors and both actively and proactively tries to make use of and to cope with the
challenges represented by conversion factors not created by oneself. In his interactive exchange with the social, cultural, and material environment, the person’s “ability to convert” the desirable goods into real functionings is put to the test in all of the four phases mentioned above.

3.2. The ability to convert
When one acknowledges the person as an active agent, the concept of the person’s “ability to convert” stands out as a concept signifying a factor of great importance. It directs our attention to the heart of the theoretical framework of the CA. For example, if a person doesn’t have the relevant ability to convert the desired good into a potential functioning (capability), or if he doesn’t have the ability to convert this potential functioning (capability) into a real functioning, he cannot be defined as a person with the capability to achieve the desirable functionings in practice.

Although the works of many scholars in the CA paradigm do not always address the concept of the “ability to convert” explicitly as a theoretical concept, it is undeniably treated as “something” that can be “influenced” by the three types of conversion factors mentioned by Robeyns (op. cit.) Here comes the second unanswered question: What is this “something”? What is the “ability to convert”?

4. Introducing “Situated personal action competences” as a key concept
Let’s start with the concept of conversion before we focus on the “ability” (to convert).

4.1. The conversion process as a directedness in personal life trajectories
The conversion of important desirable functioning into real functionings often takes time. By acknowledging people as active participants in and across different social practices, I argue that this conversion should be understood as a result of a dynamic process situated in the people’s social practices within a particular social and cultural context. Scholars of the CA also acknowledge the importance of an approach where social processes play an important role, e.g., by the acknowledgment of the influences of social institutions, social and legal norms, other people’s behavior and characteristics, environmental factors and social influences on preferences and decision making as embedded elements in the conversion process.

However, the use of the dichotomy “potential or achieved” mentioned above, seems to obstruct the taking advantage of these theoretical insights in the construction of theoretical models. As can be seen in what Robeyns (2005) calls a “non-dynamic” model, we are instead presented with an “causal arrow” from a box with a set of capabilities to a box representing “choice,” and then with an “causal arrow” from the box with “choice” directly to a box representing “achieved functionings” (see Robeyns’ model in figure 1).

Important questions such as “what is happening inside these boxes” and “what is going on in the processes ‘between’ theses boxes” remain unanswered.
In order to address these questions, I argue that it is necessary to apply a dynamic socio-cultural perspective. With such a perspective we can understand the ways in which individuals actively compose and unfold their everyday lives while they maneuver in complex structures of social practice that variously restrict or expand the scopes for pursuing their concerns and commitments (e.g. Dreier 2008). We need to acknowledge that people’s participation in and across social practices is characterized by a personal directedness which changes over time as they continuously reflect on their experiences. An ambition to achieve a particular desirable functionings is an example of this kind of personal directedness. To understand the changes in this type of directedness fully, we should consider this aspect within a longer time frame and as a part of the person’s personal life trajectory, which stretches across the individual life span (Dreier 2008).

4.2. Ability versus Personal Action Competence
The main reason why the CA argues that it is better to focus on the ends (outcome) rather than the means, is that people differ in their ability to convert means into valuable outcomes (functionings) (Sen 1992: 26–28, 36–38). Obviously, the concept of ability (to convert) plays a critical role in the theoretical framework of the CA. Nevertheless, this concept seems to be used only as a common-sense word, not as an elaborated and defined theoretical concept.

In fact, in addition to the absence of a dynamic socio-cultural perspective on people’s everyday life, as pointed out above, the CA lacks a theoretical conceptualization of the critical phenomenon referred to as “ability.” Hence it become impossible to answer important questions, such as how, in what way, does a person become “able” to utilize the relevant means and handle intrinsic and extrinsic conversion factors in order to achieve desired functionings.

In order to address these types of questions, I shall analyze and evaluate the concepts of “ability” and “competence” as competing candidates for serving as a key concept. Drawing on the empirically based theory of personal action competences (e.g., Nygren 2004; Nygren & Fauske 2004; Nygren, P. & Skårderud, F. 2008; Nygren, 2008 a, 2008 b, 2008 c, 2008 d, 2015), I shall argue that the phenomenon which in the CA is referred to as “ability” is best theoretically
understood in relation to situated personal action competences.\textsuperscript{3}

At first glance, the two terms “ability” and “personal action competence” may appear synonymous. But is this really the case also when we go behind the terminological surface and try to identify possible differences between the theoretical concepts underlying these terms? Terminologically the differences between a “ability” and a “personal action competence” may appear slight, but there are – as will be demonstrated – some significant conceptual and theoretical dissimilarities.

The nuances between “ability” and “competence” can offer some clues in our search for possible differences on the deeper theoretical level. Ordinary dictionaries normally list these words as synonyms. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2009) groups ability, capability, faculty, talent, skill, competence, and aptitude as synonymous nouns, claiming that they all, “denot[e] qualities that enable a person to achieve or accomplish something.” While ability is defined as “the mental or physical power to do something,” competence is seen as something containing “the ability to do something satisfactorily but not necessarily outstandingly.” Here, ability is referred to as a mental or physical latent power to do something. This is consistent with Dreier’s (2008) argument, presented with reference to Harré’s (1997) concept of human powers, that abilities are the powers of personal agency in social practice.

As the dictionary demonstrates above, competence denotes a human phenomenon encompassing ability. Furthermore, competence is understood as a process where a person uses abilities in order to do something that the person himself or others, or both, somehow defines as satisfactory. Thus, when it comes to the processes involved in using human competences, the abilities and the actions relating to an object are described as being closely linked to each other. The concept of competence thus points to the internal abilities, the actions oriented toward an object, and the social practices in which the actions are realized, all inextricably related to each other within one unit: the human competence.

This contrasts with the description of the term “ability,” where the addressed phenomenon is treated as if it were separated from actions, from the objects of the actions, and from the social practices in which the actions take place. Even if Holzkamp (1983) stresses that ability is an ability to act, personal ability is understood as an internal state of mind of the individual. It is noteworthy that the interpretation of ability in the dictionary conforms to Dreier’s (2008) definition of abilities as general dispositions or latent powers residing inside the individual that should be seen in relation to situations with certain scopes for acting. This idea of human abilities as latent powers, interpreted as being a part of the prerequisites for participative actions, is important because it addresses the generative dimension in the prerequisites for human actions, a dimension I shall come back to below in the section addressing the development of personal action competences. However, as a key concept for understanding the mechanism involved in these prerequisites, the concept of “ability” is insufficient. Not only does it have a relatively abstract and general character, but it also introduces an assumption of the existence of a dualistic split between an internal and external world.

To overcome this dualism, it is not enough to combine the concept of ability with other concepts, say, concepts addressing external opportunities, social action, practice and contexts, in order to compensate for the missing qualities. The point made here is that the very concept of ability does

\textsuperscript{3} In the public debate and in other non-scientific discourses, the word “competence” has unfortunately acquired some connotations that support a belief that human competences are easy to measure as individual characteristics, by tests and standards in school, for instance. My notion of action competences differs completely from how competences are understood as they are deployed as a current political mantra in public discourse. It is sufficient to mention that the notion of the personal action competence presented here rejects the idea that competences neatly reside solely inside the subject and therewith that they can be solely measured as individual characteristics.
not capture the addressed phenomenon as being linked to the person’s actions situated in social practices and contexts. Indeed, as a concept it is not theoretically linked to any objects outside itself. Further, the construction of ability as a theoretical concept does not provide the necessary openings for, or any “prepared” links to, the parts of reality addressed by concepts like “actions” and “social practices.” In this sense, personal ability is a “theoretically sealed” concept that excludes a person’s social and material worlds.

In order to develop a deeper understanding of the prerequisites of a person’s conversion of desirable functionings into real functionings in practice, I call for the use of “situated personal action competence” as the key concept, instead of “ability.” This concept emphasizes both that a human action competence is always developed and used in a societally structured practice in a personal way and that the competence is inextricably related to concrete actions situated in social practices.

4.3. Ability as an integrated part of a personal action competence

My designation of personal action competence as the key concept does not entail the loss of descriptive and explanatory value of the concept of personal ability. On the contrary. Since ability can be considered as an integrated part of human competence, namely, the part denoting the potential power (to act successfully in certain ways), the specific theoretical value of this potentiality remains. As we shall see (cf. section 6), ability can be conceptualized as one of the operating elements in an ongoing mechanism that enables a person to generate actions and to develop action competences.

The notion that human competence encompasses ability is not new. An overview of the literature on competence and competence development in general (Paukert 2011) demonstrates that human competence is often conceptualized and researched as a phenomenon encompassing human ability. In almost all of the approaches reviewed by Paukert, the operative mechanism of the human competence is understood as a process linking the internal and external prerequisites for participating in social practices together in a more or less coherent way. Rychen and Salganik (2003) define a competence as encompassing an ability that is employed to meet complex demands successfully in the form of actions in a particular context through the mobilization of psychosocial prerequisites. In addition, these scholars consider the internal structure of competences to be composed of an individual’s “dispositions,” such as knowledge, cognitive and practical skills, attitudes, emotions, values, and motivations (Rychen & Salganik 2003). In order to act competently, these “dispositions” have to be activated, coordinated, and put into action in line with the aspired goal. Human competences become apparent in actions and they describe the premises for actions (Scharnhorst & Ebeling 2006).

The differences between the concepts of ability and competence in general are not, therefore, limited only to terminological differences. While the concept of ability is restricted to represent the potential to act in certain social practices within certain contexts, the concept of personal action competence encompasses both the potential to act and the very transformation of this potential into actions (competence shown in practice) in a social practice within a certain context. While the concept of ability denotes a phenomenon residing inside the person, the concept of competence almost compels us to incorporate 1) the potentials (powers) to act, 2) the transformation of this potential into actions, and 3) the actions as situated in social practices and contexts into a comprehensive conceptualization of a cohesive reality.

In his notion of a “personal action potency” to participate in different social contexts, Dreier (2003) seems to address this human potentiality as an integrated part of the human action competence. As will be further elaborated below, the Theory of personal action competences accounts for this “potency aspect” of human competence on two levels: 1) It is one of the five dynamic components
of the human action competence, namely, the “readiness to act” (cf. section 7). 2) It is present in the distinction between the two major forms of action competences: a) the historically situated action competences as “general and potentially relevant action competences” and b) the present and “concrete context-specific action competences” (cf. section 6).

5. The relation between Capability and Opportunity

As pointed out, in many interpretations of the CA (e.g., Robeyns 2005) the relation between “capability” and “opportunity” are somewhat blurred, or even treated as synonyms of the same phenomenon. As I hope to show below, a deeper elaboration of the concept “situated personal action competences” will clarify the relation between the concepts of capability and opportunity. When using the term “opportunity,” I shall refer to the common understanding of this term as it is defined in the Cambridge English Dictionary: ”an occasion or situation that makes it possible to do something that you want to do or have to do, or the possibility of doing something.”

Analytically, I define “opportunity” as a phenomenon that belongs to the category “extrinsic conditions” in people’s everyday lives. This kind of extrinsic condition can be created and changed by people’s individual and collective actions in social practices. While a person’s opportunity is an extrinsic phenomenon, capability is a phenomenon made possible only by a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic conditions in people’s everyday lives. It is therefore necessary to acknowledge capability and opportunity as two concepts denoting different, but interrelated, parts of reality. This implies that a person cannot be said to have a certain capability if she doesn't have access to certain opportunities.

The treating of opportunity and capability as two different, but interrelated, phenomena reveal the significance of the concept of situated personal action competences as a “bridge,” i.e., interconnection, between the extrinsic and intrinsic factors involved in the creation and expansion of human capabilities. This is demonstrated by the argument that human competences are necessary in order 1) to identify opportunities as opportunities relevant for the person’s desirable functionings; 2) to create the relevant opportunities, possibly together with other people; 3) to gain access to and to make use of the relevant opportunities in practice; and 4) to manage the potential restrictive influences of extrinsic and intrinsic conversion factors in a way that ensures the availability of the relevant opportunities in practice.

Moreover, I argue that certain capabilities are generated by a dynamic interplay between certain opportunities and the development of relevant personal action competences while the person participates in and across particular social and cultural practices. The same goes for when a person uses already established capabilities when she is trying to convert desirable goods into desirable real functionings with respect to certain beings and doings.

When a person, at a given moment in her life, is said to have certain capabilities, she has to engage in two main types of processes in order to achieve the desirable functionings. First, she has to participate in and across different social practices in order to make use of the relevant means, e.g., in order to succeed in neutralizing the influences which can hinder the conversion of the desirable functions into practice as achieved functionings. Secondly, she must engage in the processes of developing certain personal action competences as requirements for: a) the successful participation and actions in the aforementioned practices in which he or she makes use of relevant means and neutralizes any hindering influences from the extrinsic and intrinsic conversion factors; b) the establishment of, and successful participation in, the new social practices in which the person tries to realize his or her new desirable functionings as “real functionings.”
However, on the way to the goal of achieving the desirable functionings, there are not only the aforementioned extrinsic and intrinsic conversion factors to manage with the help of relevant action competences, but there is also a need for the type of personal action competences which are relevant for the successful navigation in the socio-cultural context, and for a successful handling of the promoting and restrictive forces embedded in this context, e.g. the influence of social institutions, power relations, social and legal norms, other people’s behavior and characteristics, environmental factors, and social influences on preferences and decision-making during the process. These contextual factors intervene in the process at various times and exert different types of influence: 1) the way the person identifies and formulates desirable future functionings; 2) the way the person makes use of already achieved functionings and chooses particular means (goods and services) in order to create or expand relevant capabilities for new desirable functionings; 3) the way the person creates or expands her relevant capabilities; 4) the way the person chooses between different opportunities perceived as accessible when trying to achieve the desirable functionings in practice; and 5) the way the person actually achieves and practices her new functionings in practice.

On the way toward the actual establishment of the desirable beings and doings (functionings) in practice, the person needs to make use of certain personal action competences or to develop such competences in new areas, or both, in order to become equipped to handle all the challenges and possibilities exposed to her as a result of the socio-cultural contextual factors as she moves along in the dynamic process outlined above. This also underlines the fact that this process – from initially becoming aware of desirable functionings, then to the creation or expansion of capabilities, and lastly to the establishment of the desirable real functionings in concrete practice – represents essential aspects of human development in general.

6. The dynamic development of situated personal action competences

The position taken here regarding how to understand the development of personal action competences conceptualizes this development as a result of an action-generating mechanism, a concept inspired by the Theory of causal powers developed by Harré & Madden (1975) within the framework of a realist philosophy of science. According to this philosophy of science, an “…adequate causal explanation require the discovery both of regular relations between phenomena, and of some kind of mechanism that links them. So in explaining any particular phenomenon, we must not only make reference to those events, which initiate the process of change: we must also give a description of that process itself. To do this, we need knowledge of the underlying mechanisms and structures that are present and of the manner in which they generate or produce the phenomenon we are trying to explain.” (Keat & Urry 1975: 30).

The generative mechanism involved in the development of personal action competences is situated neither in the mental structure nor in the social practices and context. Rather, it is situated in social and psychological transformations of the components of the personal action competences, for example, the person’s knowledge, skills, identities, degree of control of external conditions, and readiness to act (cf. section 7). Moreover, these transformations are mediated by the interface between the person’s cognitive-emotional world and his social and material world. Thus, when studying the development of personal action competences as prerequisites for a person’s conversion of desirable functionings into achieved desirable functionings in terms of certain beings and doings, we actually study a particular instance of a generative mechanism. This mechanism could be defined as follow: To different degrees, by virtue of the person’s and other persons’ activities, this generative mechanism enables the person to act successfully as a fully fledged participant in and across those social practices, in which the person must be involved in order to convert her desirable functioning into achieved real functionings, and to master specific tasks embedded in these practices (cf. Nygren 2004; 2008 b; 2015).
People’s personal action competencies, or their components, develop by being *transformed* by this generative mechanism. This transformative development occurs partly as a result of changes in the demands (represented by extrinsic conversion factors) or the person’s goals related to desirable functionings being pursued in the social practices, or both. It is a dynamic process, where an action competence works in two major forms across time and contexts. 1) One is as a *general action competence having potential relevance for participating in a present practice*, such as competences which were historically situated in social practices during the person’s former life trajectory, now having the status of *abilities* and being *potentially relevant* for the present social practice and context. 2) The other is as a present *context-specific action competence*: like competences now having the status of being the *present operative action competences*, situated in a present and ongoing social practice in a specific context. As illustrated in figure 2 this transformative development of action competences takes place as a result of the person’s participation in and across different practices, within different social arrangements and contexts over time.

When the person perceives new demands or changes in his personal goals for his future desirable functionings after entering a new or changed practice, the action competences which were developed earlier in other social practices can now be viewed as competences possessing a general *potential ability* to master demands, tasks, and pursuing personal goals in the new or changed practice and context. The person now mobilizes the “old” competences as *potentially* relevant for mastering present demands and as resources relevant for pursuing important concerns in the new or changed practice.

**FIGURE 2:** Graphic illustration of some of the important structural elements and relations in the person’s ongoing transformation of his personal action competences as he is confronted with new demands in a new or a changed social practice and context while negotiating and pursuing his shifting goals, e.g., to achieve desirable functionings. (After Nygren 2015)

At this moment, the “old” and potentially relevant competences are not yet negotiated and “tested out” in the ongoing practice and therefore not yet situated in the new context and practice. Instead they are situated in the person’s mental structure as *potentially relevant abilities* for the participation in a practice and context perceived as new or changed. By participating in this social practice over time, the person is involved in processes where he *negotiates* the relevance of his “old” action competences, or parts of these competences, with other participants. Ideally, these negotiations give the person an understanding of the opportunities, demands, tasks, goals, power-structures, and himself as a participator (self-understanding) in the new or changed social practice. I
am here referring to the opportunities, demands, and so forth that the person identifies as relevant and important to use and master in order to be recognized as a legitimate participant with particular interests, e.g. the interest of achieving particular desirable functionings in terms of certain beings and doings.

While the person is trying to convert his desirable functionings into real functionings by participating in different social practices, he is confronted with different kinds of opportunities and demands in institutional as well as non-institutional contexts. These opportunities and demands are embedded in the relations and structures of the social practices. Within these structures, and sometimes by changing them, people continuously co-create the possibilities to act and conduct their everyday life together with others. These structures, and the positions that the participators negotiate and hold in the social practices, also reflect the situated power-relations and the way in which the participants constitute each other’s conditions for participation. In the melting pot of these opportunities and demands, the person negotiate and transform his “old” action competences, or parts of them, into relevant context-specific action competences in order to pursue personal and collective concerns and goals, e.g. goals related to desirable future functionings in terms of beings and doings.

The transformations of the person’s “old” potentially relevant action competences occur both in explicit and tacit forms, accompanied by the aforementioned social negotiations: Which of my “old” competencies (or parts of them) are legitimate and necessary for my trying to solve specific tasks and pursuing important concerns in this new context? In which areas must I develop new competences, or new parts of my “old” competences, like new knowledge or skills, in order to become a full participant and to be able to pursue my goals?

In these processes, the person’s potentially relevant prerequisites (abilities) and the opportunities, demands, and power-structures embedded in the social practice and its socio-cultural context exert a mutual influence upon each other. As a result of these negotiations, reflections, and object-oriented actions, the person develops both new action competences and transforms elements of the “old” general potential action competencies. By integrating “old” and new elements in his new set of action competences, the person develops context-specific competences. These, to different degrees, enable him to participate in the new social practice fully in accordance with his personal goals and concerns. To be involved in these transformations is to be involved in social, emotional, and cognitive processes that, to different degrees, create both conflicts and the pressure to solve them.

Ideally, these transformative processes result in development of context-specific competencies, perceived by the person as satisfactory for his participation in a social practice which can promote his achievement of his desirable functionings. In this form, the transformed action competences are now situated in the individual’s cognitive-emotional mental structure as a psychological prerequisite for participation in social practices ideally resulting in the desirable beings and doings. As context-specific personal action competences, they are now situated in the ongoing transformative dynamic interaction between the person’s cognitive-emotional processes and the socio-cultural and material context in the social practice.

The social negotiations and conflicts, taking place in interaction with other participants in the specific practice, are important drives in these dynamic transformative processes. In these processes personal reasons, goals related to achievement of desirable functionings, demands, power-structures, perceived opportunities, tasks and the actual development of action competences condition and influence each other in an ongoing transformative process. These processes are far from streamlined and predictable. Sometimes a person has not one desirable functioning, but several, to pursue in a given situation. In some situations, the goals could conflict with each other.
Some goals associated with certain desirable functionings may be preferred in one situation, while other personal concerns or goals are pursued in another.

Given a particular situation where particular demands, opportunities, power-structures, and prioritized goals are at stake, the person tries to mobilize particular parts of his “old” potentially relevant action competences in order to transform them into particular context-specific action competences with the ambition of pursuing his goal by managing the tasks and demands. As pointed out, these tasks and demands are constructed within a particular power structure. Controlling or influencing the construction of the social structures, tasks, and demands thus indirectly gives control of or influence on the subject’s competence development. In general, politics is the struggle of control over external conditions and resources. In this regard, human competence development can also be described as the ongoing *micro-politics of everyday life* (Nygren 2004).

7. The general structure and components of personal action competences

In general, we can describe the structure and components of a personal action competence with reference to the following five main components and their dynamic interrelations (Nygren 2004; 2008 b):

- Knowledge
- Skills
- Control over relevant extrinsic conditions
- Identities
- Readiness to act

These five general components constitute the basic structure of all human action competences. The person mobilizes a set of interrelated action competences (Nygren 2004) when participating in a particular social practice in order to pursue important goals and tasks. In this “network” of mobilized interrelated competences, every single action competence, which is more or less relevant for participation in a particular type of social practice, is continuously modified or transformed as the person moves along in his life trajectory.

However, the successful conduct of everyday life in order to achieve desirable functionings also demands some regularity and directedness over time in the development and use of all the multiplicity of human competences. As is elaborated elsewhere (Nygren 2015), I argue that an overarching action competence on a higher level – a metacompetence for the conduct of everyday life – has this regulating function. Like any other human action competence, this metacompetence is built up of the aforementioned five major components.

In what way do these five general components serve as elements in the personal action competences that a person develops in order to be able to handle all extrinsic conversion factors and to convert his or her desirable functionings into real achieved functioning in respect of desirable beings and doings?

In order to be able to utilize all means and opportunities, to handle the extrinsic conversion factors, to participate in all institutionalized and informal social practices, and to make use of all personal characteristics relevant for the conversion of the desirable functionings into real functionings, a person obviously needs *knowledge* of society, culture, and his personal characteristics.

---

4 For a more in-depth and concrete description of the five components in action competence, see Nygren (2004).
Like all human skills, social skills are based on knowledge and are the result of trying this knowledge out in social practices. This component of the action competence is needed in social interactions with other participants in social practices of importance for the person’s possibilities for success in his ambitions to achieve the desirable functionings in practice. Other skills, e.g., technical skills or reading skills, may be necessary to have in order to succeed in identifying or utilizing some of the opportunities, services, and goods.

Achieving a sufficient degree of control over relevant extrinsic factors, e.g., material and social resources, in the relevant social practices and contexts, in order to pursue personal goals and concerns such as a particular desirable functioning, is another important prerequisite for success.

The person’s personal identity and identification with particular values that are embedded in social practices necessary to participate in to achieve particular beings and doings is the fourth component of the personal action competence. This component can be said to especially address the “desirable beings.” A person identifies himself as an independent and unique person (individual “identity as”) and with other people, common tasks, and values in different collective social practices (collective “identity with”) (Wenger 1998). Peoples’ understanding and experience of themselves in relation to others are significant prerequisites for being accepted as a legitimate member of important practices. Particular identities provide direction for action and guide participation in particular practices. Just as person’s self-understanding orients the way they conduct their everyday lives, it also orients their engagement in their trajectory towards a desirable functioning within a longer time frame.

The fifth component is the readiness to act. The person develops this readiness on the basis of an integration of the four previous components. This means that he, as a result of experiences of situated relevant knowledge, skills, control over extrinsic conditions, and identities, develops a particular action tendency. The person develops a tendency to act in certain ways (desirable doings) in particular types of situations, practices and contexts. Putting a variety of plans into action is necessary in order to convert desirable functionings into real functionings in terms of particular “doings.” This requires a flexible readiness to act in the social practices and contexts relevant for the “desirable doings.” The person must also take into account the relevant knowledge, skills, degree of control over relevant extrinsic conditions, and value-based identifications germane to his concerns and commitments.

We can describe the readiness to act as a relatively persistent readiness, which reveals itself as a tendency to repeat the same or similar actions over time in similar situations. This component of the human action competence lies “closest” to concrete actions in a social practice. It operates implicitly and more or less automatically, similar to the phenomenon that Polanyi describes in Personal Knowledge (1964) and The Tacit Dimension (1967). Thus, the person does not consciously reflect upon the readiness-to-act component, though he often does so when “something goes wrong” in the social interaction. Values and their ideological formations play an important role in the individual’s readiness to act, serving as a tacit ideological guide for the participation in particular social practices in line with “desirable doings” (Nygren & Fauske 2004).

The five major components of a personal action competence described here operate in a dynamic interrelationship. Each component mutually influences the others when the person transforms them into actions in attempts to conduct his everyday life in accordance to his shifting goals and concerns as he move on in his personal life trajectory, eventually towards a particular desirable functioning.

The question of direction in the development and practical use of personal action competences indirectly raises the issue of a normative versus a non-normative approach to human competence.
The stance taken in the theory of personal action competences represents a non-normative approach to competence development. An example can illustrate the implication of this stance. The non-normative approach allows for an analysis that regards young drug addicts as developing their social action competences when they collaborate effectively to obtain drugs – in fact, even when they collaborate to smuggle drugs. The motives for and results of their actions may represent values and ideologies that are rejected by general social values, rules, and norms. Yet the values, rules, and norms guiding the interpersonal interactions and collaborations among the young drug addicts in their social practices may represent values guiding high-level social competences, and can even be in line with general social norms and rules for how to form social interactions between human beings characterized by mutual care. From this point of view, the social competences of the drug addicts may be “well-developed.” The question about their social competences should thus not be answered normatively but examined empirically.

8. Putting it all together: Personal action competences as an integrated part of the framework of the Capability Approach

A close reading of Sen’s work makes it clear that he argues that capabilities are freedoms conceived as real opportunities (Sen 1985a: 3–4; 1985b: 201; 2002: chapter 20). For Sen, a person has a capability when there is a presence of valuable options or alternatives. He argues that opportunities do not exist only formally or legally, but they should also be effectively available to the person. In the approach presented here, I have shown that personal action competence is a significant (but not the only) factor making a particular opportunity “available” for a person.

The re-examination of basic concepts and assumptions in the CA and the presented theory of personal action competences made here suggest the following re-definition of the concept of human capability:

A person can be said to have a capability for achieving her desirable functioning as particular beings and doings if two criteria are met: 1) the relevant opportunity must be present and 2) the person must have developed a personal action competence, or a set of such competences, that is necessary a) for formulating her desirable function; b) for identifying and utilizing the necessary means for making the opportunity available; and c) for transforming the opportunity into the real functioning as particular beings and doings.

I propose the following definition of the concept of personal action competences as one of the basic concepts for the re-construction of the framework of the CA:

A situated personal action competence, or a set of such competences, is a particular combination of personal characteristics (knowledge, skills, identity, and situated readiness to act) and necessary degree of control over relevant extrinsic conversion factors enabling a person 1) to formulate a particular desirable functioning; 2) to identify and utilize necessary means in order to make available and to make use of a relevant opportunity; and 3) to transform this opportunity into the desirable functioning in practice as particular beings and doings within a given socio-cultural context.

As a result of the re-examination of the conceptual framework of the CA presented here, I suggest that the model of basic concepts of the CA and their internal relations should be re-constructed and supplemented in terms of what I call “the generative mechanism for realization of desired beings and doings.” Figure 3 shows a model of this mechanism. As can be seen in this figure, the person’s development and use of personal action competences ideally serves as a dynamic base for intervening in – and transforming – the influences of the conversion factors on his way to achieve desirable functionings in respect of particular beings and doings. As a dynamic transformation
process, the conversion process is structured in four phases (cf. section 3 for details): 1) formulation of desirable functioning; 2) creation/expansion of capability; 3) choice of capability; and 4) achieving desirable functionings as real functionings. The conversion phases are indicated by green text in the figure, while the different outcomes of each phase are indicated by red text in the figure. With the support of the particular personal action competences, which the person has developed when he has finished the achieving phase, he is able to practice the established real functionings in line with his desirable beings and doings in his everyday life practices.

FIGURE 3: The generative mechanism for realization of desired beings and doings.

The progression in this conversion process, as well as the various outcomes produced on the way, is influenced by some general and more or less given contextual frame factors, e.g., relevant resources (means), certain opportunity inputs (e.g., market production and net income), and goods and services. During all phases the person is not only dependent on these factors, but also on his ability to identify and utilize them in his own interests. This ability is made possible by his continued development of relevant personal action competences with respect to relevant knowledge, skills, control of extrinsic factors (e.g., resources as means), identities and readiness to act in a relevant way in different situations. In order to move forward in the four conversion phases, the person is also dependent on the ability to identify, utilize and handle the enforcing and hindering influences of the three main types of conversion factors in order to pursue his own interests. The existence and influence of these factors thus places particular demands on the development and use of relevant personal action competences.

As illustrated in figure 3, the development and use of personal competences operates as a mediating dynamic mechanism, ideally enabling the person to identify, utilize, and/or handle the influences of the conversion factors, as well as to identify and utilize resources and opportunities in a way that optimizes the outcomes of all phases in the conversion process. Starting in the upper-left corner of figure 3, the blue curved arrows illustrate how the adaptive development of personal action competences plays an important mediating role through all phases by enabling the person to identify, utilize, and transform the interactive influences of different extrinsic and intrinsic factors.
in order to formulate and convert the desired functionings into real functionings with respect to certain beings and doings in the end.

**Key words:** action competences, agency, capability approach, human development, situated learning, participation.

**References**


Cambridge English Dictionary


The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2009)