A Capability Theory of the Quality of Work (QoW)

A potential conceptual framework

Panel of the Human Development and Capability Association Conference, Antwerp, 21 September 2022

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Agenda

1. The problem. How the Capability Approach can address issues with job quality.
2. Requirements for a Capability Theory of QoW.
3. A proposed Capability Theory.

Today I’m presenting a way we could conceptualise Quality of Work (QoW) using the Capability Approach – bringing together various literature on the CA and work.

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

My particular interest is how conversion factors and the capability set can be understood in the context of work.
Section 1

The problem
There is considerable disagreement about what a ‘good job’ is:

- We agree job quality is multi-dimensional, but disagree about which indicators and dimensions are important and how they relate to human “wellbeing” (or some other ‘good’ outcome of choice).
- Three particular problems:

People in “bad” jobs often report high subjective wellbeing:

“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 (2019: 666-681)

Seemingly very different levels of ‘wellbeing’ from the exact same jobs:

“We were … taken by some of the diametrically opposed views of the same job … 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.”


Debate over how work characteristics relate to functionings and capabilities:

- Compared with other areas of social policy, much more debate over extent to which work is an intrinsically important functioning (eg Bartelheimer, 2022) or a “characteristic-providing activity” (Suppa, 2019).
- Contested intrinsic functionings:
  - Capability to aspire?
  - Capability for work?
  - Meaningful work?
The Capability Approach could navigate these issues:

• But to do this, we need to go beyond simply inferring wellbeing from peoples’ job characteristics in peoples’ current circumstances (their functioning vector). We should do two things:

  1. Develop a conceptual framework for how work relates to our wellbeing. This requires a definition of wellbeing; an articulation of which work-related resources are important to our wellbeing; and a process for relating them to functionings.

  2. Place work in its wider context. Overly-simplistic to state Job characteristics \( \rightarrow \) “Wellbeing.” We need to measure how work-related resources interact with people’s wider circumstances – their capability set and conversion factors.

• This would uncover new dimensions of job quality which don’t feature in existing multi-dimensional indices.

• People in bad forms of work may face a triple deprivation:
  o Work reduces their wellbeing;
  o Personal, household and societal conversion factors exacerbate this;
  o They have limited alternative opportunities inside and outside of work (a narrow capability set).
New dimensions of job quality – some examples:

- The exact same work can create or reduce wellbeing, depending on conversion factors and the capability set:
  
  - Unpaid volunteering might raise the wellbeing of an older well-paid professional with a range of job opportunities, but lower it for a younger person with no job and no alternative work opportunities.
  - Platform labour in the gig economy might provide useful resources for a single person in training for a permanent job later in life, but not for someone with no other work opportunities, a family, and no prospect of long-term security for them or their dependents.

- A life course model for job quality: Advantaged people in society negotiate access to forms of work which best enhance their wellbeing, at various life intervals:
  
  - Advantaged people they might take money from insecure ‘poor jobs’ during training or education, helping them access to better, secure work later in life.
  - Disadvantaged people experience a mismatch between job characteristics and conversion factors. They lack the power to force employers to build work around their lives.
Section 2
Requirements for a Capability Theory of QoW
This paper builds on existing approaches by developing a comprehensive Capability Theory of quality of work (QoW):

- Existing literature provides elements of a Capability Theory, but not all elements. As Ingrid Robeyns (2017) highlights, on its own, the CA is “open-ended and under-specified.” To become a capability theory, some normative decisions external to the CA need to be made, and it needs to be used for a specific purpose.

- We need to meet five requirements:
  1. Identify the ‘space’ of interest. Which set of ‘resources’ are we interested in?
  2. Decide the ‘good’ outcome of interest used to identify important functionings and capabilities. If wellbeing, you need an account of what wellbeing is.
  3. Describe how resources relate to this good outcome. Are they functionings in themselves (intrinsically important aspects of wellbeing), or a means to an end of achieving functionings (instrumentally important), or a mix of the two?
  4. Establish the role of the capability set and conversion factors. How critical are they for this particular application of the CA? How do we define them?
  5. Operationalise the framework.
Section 3
A potential Capability Theory
Stage [1]: Work as the ‘space’ of interest

• ‘Work’ is broader than paid employment, and encompasses productive activity people do across all their lives (see Cooke et al, 2013).

• Should include unpaid activity (incl. care and volunteering), self-employment, the informal economy and having more than one job.

• Important to distinguish between characteristics of the work vs. the individual: job skill level is a characteristic of work, but qualifications are related to the individual (though potentially an important conversion factor).

• Work characteristics are the ‘resources’ in our framework. They encompass any and all aspects of the work people do – hours, pay, task discretion, etc.

• At this early stage in building the theory, no normative judgement is being made about which of these resources are important or not important. This comes later.
Stage [2]: Wellbeing (through important functionings and capabilities) as the ‘good’ outcome?

- Functionings and capabilities on their own are not ‘important’. We identify them based on their effect on an external ‘good.’

- Wellbeing is a widely used ‘good’ in the CA literature. It incorporates both objective and subjective forms of wellbeing, as well as the concept of wellbeing freedom inherent in the CA (Sen, 1992).

- However, alternative conceptions of the ‘good’ do exist – eg a ‘thick’ conception of human need (Dean, 2009).

- We may also wish to add other external normative theories at this stage – eg is the CA consistent with a life course model (Bartelheimer, 2022)?

- A person’s work-related wellbeing could therefore be assessed in terms of the effects that work resources have on their wellbeing. Wellbeing could be equated with a range of dimensions of important functionings and (ultimately) capabilities.
Stage [3]: How work relates to wellbeing, functionings and capabilities:

- Work has intrinsic and instrumental value. Essential we understand both aspects. There is a philosophical basis for two intrinsic aspects of work:
  - Meaningful work (Weidel, 2019)
  - Capability for work (Bueno, 2021)
  - ... Recognition that to have a capability, we need to aspire to it and know we have it (cf. capability to aspire literature)

- Beyond this, work has instrumental value as a characteristic-providing activity (Suppa, 2019). We can assess its impact on high-level functionings, eg Nussbaum’s ten Central Capabilities.

- We need a radical conception of the all-pervasive effect of work. Bad work stunts peoples’ abilities and development (Sayer, 2012). Eg:
  - Long and unsociable hours would affect the ability to participate in society (affiliation, play) and damage health (life, bodily health);
  - Intense work with low task discretion would not be worthwhile (meaningful work) and hinder the development of practical reason.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nussbaum’s Central Capabilities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Life</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Bodily health</td>
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<td>3. Bodily integrity</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Senses, imagination and thought</td>
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<td>5. Emotions</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Practical reason</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Affiliation</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Other species</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Play</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Control over one’s environment</td>
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Stage [4]: The role of the Capability Set and Conversion Factors

- The importance of the capability set and conversion factors depends on the research topic (e.g., see Vallentyne, 2006).

- In the space of work, I argue that both are critically important for understanding how work affects our wellbeing.

- Conversion factors – necessarily broad and encompass individual, household, institutional and societal factors – inside and outside of work.

- For the capability set, I argue researchers have broad and narrow options:
  - Narrow = Range of jobs you can do: all the important (high-level) Functionings you can achieve with the range of work resources available to you
  - Broad = Range of all things you could do or be: All the important Functionings you can achieve with all the resources available to you, in and out of the space of work.
Bringing this together – potential applied conceptual framework:

Stage 1: Work as the ‘space’ of interest. Broader than paid employment and encompasses all forms of paid and unpaid activity.

Your current circumstances

Stage 2 and 3: Work has intrinsic and instrumental value. ‘Good work’ identified based on effect of Nussbaum’s ten Central Capabilities. Recognition of intrinsic value of meaningful work and capability for work.

Stage 4: ‘Broad’ view of Capability Approach in the space of work.

Stage 5: Functionings and Capability Set inferred through wider household, life circumstances, etc outside of space of work.

Individual work characteristics

Functioning Vector

Functioning Vector: A set of dimensions of job quality identified, consisting of indicators which have a significant effect on important high-level Functionings.

External conversion factors

Effect on important Functionings

Capability Set

Range of Functioning Vectors

All potential combinations of things you could do or be
Stage [5]: Operationalisation:

- Modified index score
  - Conversion factors
    - Indicator α
    - Indicator β
    - Indicator γ ... n

- Dimension 1
  - Indicator A
  - Indicator B
  - Indicator C ... n

- Dimension 2
  - Indicator D
  - Indicator E
  - Indicator F ... n

- Dimension 3
  - Indicator G
  - Indicator H
  - Indicator I ... n

Potential synthetic index of QoW:

- Decisions on index score determination, cut-offs, etc similar to other studies of multi-dimensional job quality.

- The key difference is that a set of resources outside the space of work need to be measured and introduced: Conversion Factors and the Capability Set.

- For the capability set and conversion factors, final index score could either be weighted based on these characteristics or determined by cut-offs.

- Whilst measuring the capability set directly is a challenge, potentially useful proxies exist in household data – eg household characteristics, wealth, assets, skills.
Selected literature:


