

Getting Off the Fence: Is there a role for intrinsic work Functionings in the Capability Approach?

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Work and the Capability Approach: what are intrinsic work Functionings?

- Most conceptualisations of the Capability Approach to work argue one or several aspects of work are important ‘beings and doings’ (Functionings) in themselves. Eg:
 - Bueno (2021, 2022): Capabilities ‘**in work**’ and ‘**for work**’;
 - Weidel (2018): a Central Capability for ‘**meaningful labour**’;
 - Bonvin (2012) and others: a ‘**Capability for Voice**’ inside (and outside) the workplace;
 - Hobson and Zimmermann (2022): a ‘**Capability to Aspire**’.
- I suggest conceptualising this research as proposing one, or several, **intrinsic work Functionings**. They are saying that some ‘resources’ within the space of work enable the achievement of *important* Functionings in this same space.
- By ‘important Functionings’, they are making an inherently normative statement: these are Functionings *people have reason to value*. A philosophical (Nussbaum, 2011) or democratic (Alkire, 2005; Sen, 2004) process should be followed to make this statement.
- This contrasts with the **instrumental role of work**, in enabling/preventing the fulfilment of Functionings outside the space of work, eg Central Capabilities (see Suppa, 2019).

Navigating the debate

- **This debate matters.** Identifying important Functionings is the first step towards assuring/guaranteeing the opportunity to achieve them; is crucial for conceptualising inequalities in the experience of work; and informs measurement of job quality.
- However, **current scholarship lacks a shared approach to agreeing why work Functionings are ‘important.’**
- To identify intrinsic work Functionings, I suggest we consider Alkire’s (2005) criteria:
 - They must be “valued as being of special importance ... to a significant proportion of the relevant population” to which an individual belongs; and,
 - “Socially influenceable” Functionings that “social and economic policies have the possibility to influence directly.”
- But in any complete framework of work and wellbeing, these must be considered alongside the instrumental role of work.

Moving forward: a role for intrinsic work Functionings?

- I tentatively suggest some intrinsic work Functionings satisfy these criteria, for example the **freedom to carry out a range of work activities**, and to **engage in meaningful work**. However, I advise caution at either extreme of the debate:

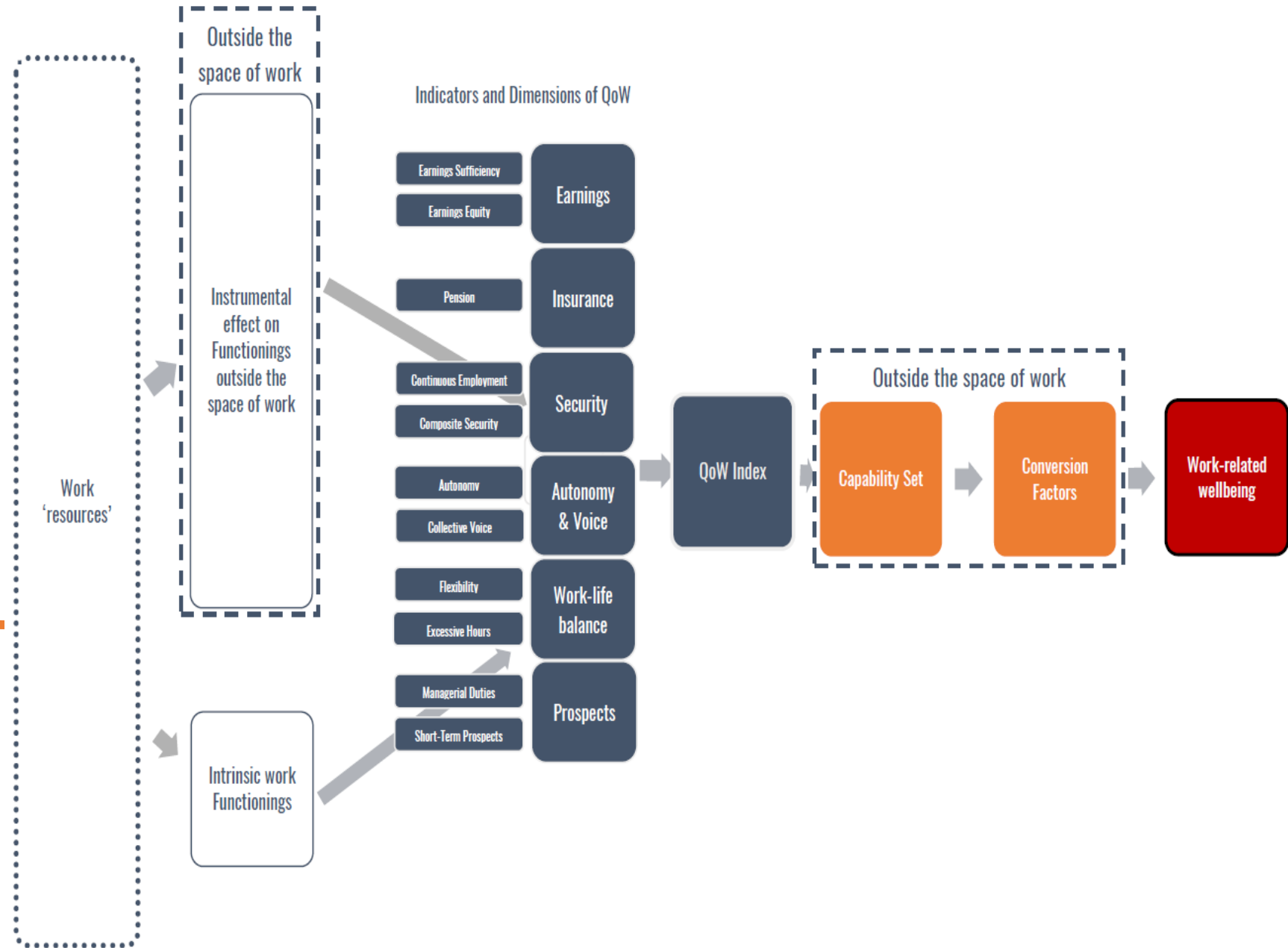
Intrinsic approaches:

- Risk of neglecting the (greater?) instrumental role of work. Many bad jobs bad because they severely impede cognitive development (Sayer, 2012); family- and life- goals; and, in the worst cases, virtually all our life freedoms (Suppa, 2019).
- This perhaps contrasts with some other applied areas of the Capability Approach, eg health, because work permeates all areas of our lives (Stephens, 2023).
- Literature could do better to distinguish different normative statements involved in identifying an important *Functioning* vs. a *right/Central Capability* vs. a *Capability* – eg a Functioning for meaningful work doesn't mean all work must be meaningful.

Instrumental approaches:

- Suppa's (2019) framework risks neglecting some important and justifiable work Functionings; the *practical* difficulty of incorporating them into a framework does not justify the *normative* decision to exclude them.
- This, plus a focus on high-level Functionings, prevents us from viewing the range of achievable work Functionings as part of a Capability Set (eg Bueno, 2022; Bartelheimer et al, 2012).
- This risks neglecting some important inequalities in the quality of work: eg how those with fewer work opportunities access jobs, vs. those with more.

Bringing this together



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