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:
  o Bueno (2021, 2022): Capabilities ‘in work’ and ‘for work’;
  o Weidel (2018): a Central Capability for ‘meaningful labour’;
  o Bonvin (2012) and others: a ‘Capability for Voice’ inside (and outside) the workplace;
  o 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
References


