

# Work and Well-Being: A Conceptual Proposal

## Some Remarks

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The underlying paper is

- Suppa, N. (2019): Work and wellbeing: A conceptual proposal. OPHI Working Paper 131, University of Oxford.

### The basic idea

In order to conceptualize work from a capability perspective consider **work as a characteristic-providing activity** where

- ... characteristics are converted into well-being
- ... well-being is multidimensional
- ... fundamental unfreedoms can be taken explicitly into account

# The conceptual structure

## Capability set of individual $i$

$$Q_i = \{b_i \mid b_i = f(c(x_i), z_i, z_s, z_e) \quad \forall x_i \in X_i\} \quad (1)$$

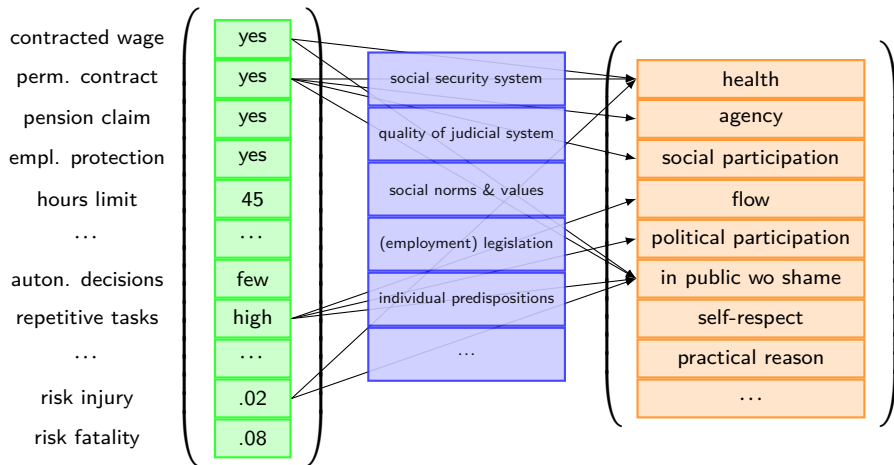
### Characteristics

- 1 are objective to goods and measurable in principle
- 2 all individual obtain the same amount from a given good
- 3 one good may provide several characteristics  
(and each characteristic may be obtained from different goods)

The resource vector  $x_i$  includes time and its various uses, including hours worked (potentially even in different jobs).

Note: [Sen \(1985\)](#) references [Lancaster \(1966\)](#) for characteristics (who also provides and illustration for occupational choice).

# The labour well-being link



# Key functionings related work

- health
  - ▶ silicosis, asbestos
  - ▶ miners' nystagmus
  - ▶ postural defects
  - ▶ occupational diseases
- mental health
  - ▶ post-traumatic stress disorder
  - ▶ burnout
  - ▶ fear of failure
  - ▶ depression
- without shame
  - ▶ stigmatization of jobs & joblessness
- agency
  - ▶ job as a means to achieve self-set goals
  - ▶ doctors, politicians, journalists, researcher
  - ▶ vocation or calling
- self-respect
  - ▶ comply with internalized norms and self conceptions
- (economic & social) security
- being in the zone (flow)
- contribute one's share
- happiness, education, practical reason

→ a job may be perceived as multi-purpose mean

## Some desirable features

- ① characteristics approach allows for **several jobs** and thus source of characteristics and, thereby, **more complex arrangements** (e.g., one job for more econ security; one for achieving self-set goals)
- ② natural **interface with previous research** (related data and theory); CA as such is underspecified
- ③ empirical appl. may be informed by related research on particular **section of the labour market** in a particular part of the world w.r.t. both **relevant characteristics and functionings** (e.g., health)
- ④ clear structure to study job-wellbeing relevant effects, **functioning by functioning** (while accounting for conversion factors)

## Some insights from poverty research

- 1 poverty is conceptualised as capability deprivation, so in the functioning space, but **across functionings** (as multiple deprivation)
- 2 conceptual structure facilitates deprivation **indicator construction**  
resources → characteristics → conversion factors → functioning
- 3 **'resource dimensions'** may be justified in applied work (e.g., poverty measures). Likewise, an **'employment dimension'** may make sense in a capability-framed poverty measure.
- 4 shared **structure and framework of measures facilitate transparency** despite varying content of the measure (different countries may have different dimensions and indicators)

# On the intrinsic value of work

- ① 'intrinsic value of work' can be found **in valuation and achievements in many functionings**, including
  - ▶ agency, respecting yourself, flow experience, happiness, contribute one's share, social & political participation
- ② the **content of 'meaningful work'** varies with both (i) particular individual and (ii) job(s) under consideration
  - ▶ for measurement: need for assumption (evidence & arguments)
- ③ oftentimes **high achievements** in those functionings may follow from non-work activities too (e.g., spiritual life style, hobbies, gardening, etc.)



# Some concerns regarding a capability of work

- ① huge **complexity within a single dimension of well-being**, which varies within and across countries and over time.
- ② risk of **losing conceptual strengths** of the CA
  - ▶ **characteristics are related to job and external** to the individual (other well-being relevant aspects may vary with individuals)
  - ▶ **conversion factors** are a natural way to conceptualize why same objective job characteristics may translate into effects for different dimensions of human wellbeing
- ③ nowadays work is often considered a specific domain of life almost distinct from the rest of our lives;
  - ▶ not an imperative necessity, but rather expression of how societies are currently organised (e.g., Taylorism, pervasiveness of wage labor)

# References I

Lancaster, K. (1966). A new approach to consumer theory. *Journal of Political Economy*, 74(74):132–157.

Sen, A. K. (1985). *Commodities and Capabilities*. North-Holland Publishing, New Delhi, 12 edition.