

# Human Development & Capability Association (HDCA)

## Work and Employment Thematic Group

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### TG Work at 2024 HDCA Conference – Kolkata, India

“Crises, Capabilities and Commitment”, September 24-26, 2024

#### Reasons to value work – instrumental or intrinsic to wellbeing?

Conceptual issues in capability accounts of work and employment

Panel T0058, Thematic Panel, session will be held virtually.

Convenors: Thomas Stephens (London School of Economics and Political Science), Peter Bartelheimer (Social Research and Communication), Nicolai Suppa (University of Barcelona)

Theme: Methodological issues in operationalizing the capability approach

This session will be held virtually.

This panel explores the extent to which work should be viewed as having one or several intrinsically-important capabilities associated with it, and thus be a constitutive part of wellbeing. The panellists debate various ways of navigating this issue and propose some capabilities associated with work. They also discuss the considerable conceptual, empirical and practical implications of this issue.

#### *Keywords*

Capability Approach, Employment, Instrumental, Intrinsic, Job Quality

#### *Abstract*

##### Context

All capability literature recognises that work – both paid and unpaid – plays a vital and all-pervasive role in human wellbeing (e.g. see Nussbaum and Sen, 1993; Sen, 1987, 1983). Many modern crises are caused or exacerbated by capability deprivations associated with work – spanning themes of labour exploitation, poor-quality work, informal labour, the lack of paid work, insecure employment, and unpaid care work; and consequent inequalities in the experience of work by gender, race, age, class and other

characteristics. Labour environmentalism stresses the role of labour as “mediator between human and non-human nature” for sustainable work adapted to planetary boundaries (Räthzel et al 2021).

Despite this, there is considerable disagreement over the extent to which work has one or several intrinsically-important capabilities associated with it (intrinsic importance), versus whether work is a resource and thus the means to the achievement of other capabilities (instrumental importance). Many scholars have advanced potential capabilities such as meaningful work (Weidel, 2018; Yeoman, 2013), worker voice (Bonvin, 2012; De Leonardis et al., 2012), or capabilities for work (Bueno, 2022). Others have contested this and emphasised the instrumental role of work as a “providing activity” in enhancing or drastically impeding the fulfilment of other capabilities in life (Stephens, 2023; Suppa, 2019).

There is currently no agreed framework for capability accounts of work and employment. Even amongst scholars who argue for at least some intrinsic work capabilities, a diverse range of approaches exist for identifying, justifying and measuring them. As the Capability Approach is an intentionally incomplete framework, additional normative judgements need to be introduced before it can be applied, and the purpose for which it is being applied will have implications for which capabilities are considered (see Bartelheimer et al., 2012, pp. 95–96; Robeyns, 2005).

This question is of vital implications for measuring job quality, labour studies and industrial sociology. The lack of a shared conceptualisation of work has reduced the impact of the capability approach in debates on good or sustainable work or job quality (e.g. see Piasna et al., 2019). The debate also spans across disciplines, and permeates through academic and non-academic boundaries – of equal concern to workers themselves or practitioners involved in delivering welfare and labour market interventions as it is to academics and researchers. Resolving it is therefore of use to all areas of the application of the Capability Approach.

- Methodology:

The three coordinators of the Work and Employment Thematic Group of the HDCA propose this online panel so as to pursue this foundational issue in work and employment, and to involve the wider HDCA in the debate. The panel is therefore discussion-oriented.

The coordinators each come from different disciplines and have in the past taken diverse stances on the intrinsic vs. instrumental role of work in the Capability Approach.

They will serve as discussants, and their introductory inputs will focus the debate on identifying what aspects of work could be viewed as capabilities in themselves. This will be followed by an open discussion amongst attendees.

The inputs will each reflect:

1. the framework for agreeing capabilities – this depends on the purpose for which the Capability Approach is being applied, and implies a range of normative decisions.
2. functionings and / or potential capabilities associated with work using this framework – proposing how they are linked to the capability set and to individual wellbeing.
3. the implications for how to apply the Capability Approach – i.e. for conceptualisation, measurement and practice.

Analysis & Conclusion:

The panellists will argue that there are several capabilities associated with work. These capabilities can thus be seen as constitutive parts of our work-related wellbeing. However, some in the panel will caution against viewing work in solely intrinsic terms as a capability, and will also highlight the considerable instrumental effect that work can have on the achievement of capabilities across peoples' wider lives.

The panel will also discuss the implications this has for the way we apply the Capability Approach in research on work and employment. For example, they will discuss whether the capability set – i.e. the freedom people have to achieve different states of wellbeing – should incorporate the different types and range of work activities people are able to achieve. They will also discuss the implications this conceptualisation has for our understanding of the role of work in peoples' wellbeing and societal relations with nature, allowing the Capability Approach to potentially incorporate ideas such as worker power; life-course perspectives (Bartelheimer and Moncel, 2009); and exit, voice and loyalty (Hirschman, 1970) into our understanding of job quality, meaningful work and sustainable work.

Panel abstracts:

The below are shortened versions of the panel abstracts.

Peter Bartelheimer will argue that even in the alienated form of wage labour, the labour process as a specifically human useful and purposeful activity involves the worker as a person. In the same way as functionings in other dimensions of life, aspects of work and employment can be both instrumental for other capabilities and be of ultimate value, i.e. enter the individual capability set.

Nicolai Suppa will elaborate on his previously proposed idea that labour can be conceived as a characteristic-providing activity, where obtained characteristics are then transformed into functioning achievements (Suppa 2019). In particular, he will focus on implications for different empirical exercises (e.g., the measurement of job quality) and illustrate how the proposed approach can help to reveal assumptions underlying the indicator construction.

Thomas Stephens will develop his previous conceptual framework for measuring job quality using the Capability Approach (Stephens, 2023) to argue for the existence of at least three capabilities associated with work: capabilities to work, to engage in meaningful work, and to exercise worker voice. These capabilities, when considered alongside the considerable instrumental effect of work in other areas of life, allow us to develop a deeper and more accurate understanding of the impact of low-quality work on wellbeing in modern societies.

*Paper Peter Bartelheimer (Social Research and Communication)*

Capabilities at work – bringing the potential of the capability paradigm to labour studies  
Peter Bartelheimer

Even in its alienated form as wage labour, work is a useful and purposeful activity that involves the worker's person. Like functionings in other domains of life, aspects of work and employment can be both instrumental for other capabilities and be of ultimate value, i.e. individual capabilities.

Work, i.e. useful and purposeful activity, is specific to the "metabolism" (Marx) of humans with nature, and how work is organised socially is a determining feature of any society. A "world of work" separate from other domains of human existence and as an "opportunity cost" limiting "leisure" are rather recent societal ideas linked to wage labour.

As the capability paradigm is "underspecified" (Robeyns 2017), specific "accounts" of work and employment are called for in order to bring it to labour studies. But the capability and human development paradigms would be somewhat flawed could they not account for what workers have "good reason to value" in work ("ce que travailler veut dire", Zimmermann 2014).

The bundle of functionings ("beings and doings") that paid work and unpaid reproduction and care work involve may have both instrumental and ultimate value for the individual's capabilities. Depending on conditions of employment and work, the instrumental value of the wage and necessities and constraints may be dominant reasons for

holding a job. But other functionings that are considered as potential capabilities also have instrumental value. Like a job, health, education and housing can prove “corrosive” or “fertile” (Wolff/De Shalit 2007) for other functionings of ultimate value. Does that render them “morally ambiguous” (Suppa 2019)?

Other capabilities are institutionally framed and “socially dependent” (Sen 2002) to the same degree as work. As labour power cannot be separated from the worker’s person, even the most degrading job involves workers as subjects. As “reflexive creatures” (Sen 2013) defining and pursuing their own goals, workers bring their individual and collective yardsticks for valuable features of “good work” to the job.

The conceptual appeal of the capability approach in labour studies lies in its ability to model the interaction between personal and structural factors that defines and constrains a person’s “employability” and their aspirations in the work process. This presupposes that workers have reason to value work and to consider labour market or shop-floor conditions as more or less “capability-friendly”. To disregard work activities as capabilities may follow from the purpose of a specific capability study, e.g. of poverty. But a “theoretical exceptionalism” a priori excluding work from capability accounts and relegating it to a conceptually separate work-wellbeing-nexus (work as “providing activity”, Suppa 2019) would render the paradigm useless for issues like understanding subjective claims on and worker’s agency in the labour process, or “meaningful”, “good” or “sustainable” work.

*Paper Nicolai Suppa (University of Barcelona)*

Work and Wellbeing: A Conceptual Proposal

I will elaborate on the idea that labour can be conceived as a characteristic-providing activity, where characteristics are then transformed into functionings. I will focus on implications for different empirical exercises and illustrate how underlying assumptions can be revealed.

Labour is of utmost importance for human well-being (HWB) and that beyond generating an income. Accordingly, initiatives to measure poverty and wellbeing more comprehensively endorse a work or employment dimension in one form or another. Research efforts on the work-wellbeing link are, however, fragmented across numerous disciplines, including social psychology, economics, or medical sciences. A comprehensive and widely accepted framework which can handle (i) the empirical diversity of labour activities, (ii) each labour activities’ manifold effects on human well-being, (iii)

fundamental moral ambiguities and (iv) provides for diverse empirical exercises is, however, still missing.

Based on previous work (Suppa, 2019) I argue that a capability perspective (e.g., Sen 1999, Robeyns 2017) offers a convenient and comprehensive normative framework to explore the role of work in HWB more rigorously. In particular, several scholars recently engage in a discussion about the intrinsic value related to work (e.g., Stephens, 2023). While Sen himself frequently refers to examples like unemployment, child labour, bond labour, or female labour market access to illustrate specific aspects of deprivations (e.g., Sen, 1999), he usually does not enumerate work or labour as a functioning or capability. In this contribution I seek to partially reconcile both views by considering specific empirical exercises and their implicit levels of abstraction.

More specifically, I first elaborate on the previously proposed idea that labour can be conceived as a characteristic-providing activity, where obtained characteristics are then transformed into functioning achievements (Suppa, 2019). I discuss implications for different empirical exercises and showcase how the proposed approach can help to reveal assumptions underlying the indicator construction and, thereby, illustrate the value-added of this perspective.

The considered forms of frequently applied empirical exercises include (i) an in-depth analysis of single functioning for one (or more) jobs, (ii) a comprehensive assessment of one (or more) jobs with respect to the jobholder's HWB (all functionings / capabilities), and (iii) a comprehensive HWB assessment of an entire population (with particular attention to the domain of work).

Subsequently, I will also show how different exercises may entail different levels of abstraction and different degrees of coverage of the population and thus feature different degrees of universality. Finally, I will argue that the principal conceptual framework should be broad and general enough to frame each of these exercises. Only then the advantages of a general framework can take full effect (e.g., the guidance for the operationalisation of measure).

*Paper Thomas Stephens (London School of Economics and Political Science)*

The intrinsic role of work to human wellbeing: worker voice, worker power and the freedom to engage in meaningful productive activity

This paper argues that work is both constitutive of, and instrumental to, human wellbeing, and proposes three work-related capabilities (or intrinsic work functionings). It

suggests workers' freedom to achieve different combinations of these capabilities is crucial to work-related wellbeing.

Work plays a crucial instrumental role in human wellbeing. Low-quality work impedes the achievement of functionings or capabilities in every aspect of our lives. Work which is poorly-remunerated, involves excessive working hours, or provides few-to-no worker-oriented flexibility will prevent people from living flourishing and fulfilling lives as active participants in society (e.g. see Betzelt and Bothfeld, 2011; Laruffa, 2020), or achieving functionings related to family development. The worst forms of labour exploitation, such as slavery, involve the deprivation of all freedoms, and thus prevent the achievement of all functionings and capabilities (Suppa, 2019).

However, this paper argues that it would be wrong to view work solely in these instrumental terms. Philosophers, practitioners and workers themselves would argue that work is also a constitutive part of our wellbeing: a functioning (and thus ultimately a capability) in itself, and not merely the means to the achievement of functionings outside the space of work. Using a previously-developed conceptual framework (Stephens, 2023), I argue for the existence of at least three functionings related to work: (1.) a functioning to work (e.g. see Bueno, 2022); (2.) a functioning for meaningful work (e.g. see Weidel, 2018; Yeoman, 2013); and (3.) a functioning to exercise worker voice (Bonvin, 2012; De Leonardis et al., 2012; Hirschman, 1970; Regier, 2024).

This enables the Capability Approach to contribute to a deeper analysis of the nature and evolution of low-quality work, and the damage caused by the worst forms of labour, than would be possible by viewing work in exclusively instrumental terms. This is because a purely instrumental perspective does not allow work to be viewed as of part of a capability set. This is fallacious, because worker wellbeing must partly be assessed in terms of peoples' freedom to engage in different types of jobs in different ways, and in combination with other functionings, and to achieve meaning in their lives through various paid and unpaid productive activities. It depends also on their freedom to exercise genuine voice to shape the working environment around them. The nature and extent of this freedom determines a person's power to shape work around their own lives – refusing unwanted jobs, negotiating better terms, and having a range of achievable work opportunities.

Having developed this, I then outline the critical implications for measurement, policy-making and practice in the study of work and the good work agenda.