

The Intrinsic Role of Work to Wellbeing

Worker voice, worker power and the freedom to engage in meaningful productive activity

Thematic Panel

“Crises, Capabilities and Commitment:”

2024 HDCA Conference, Kolkata, India

Parallel Session 9.06

Thursday 26th September 2024

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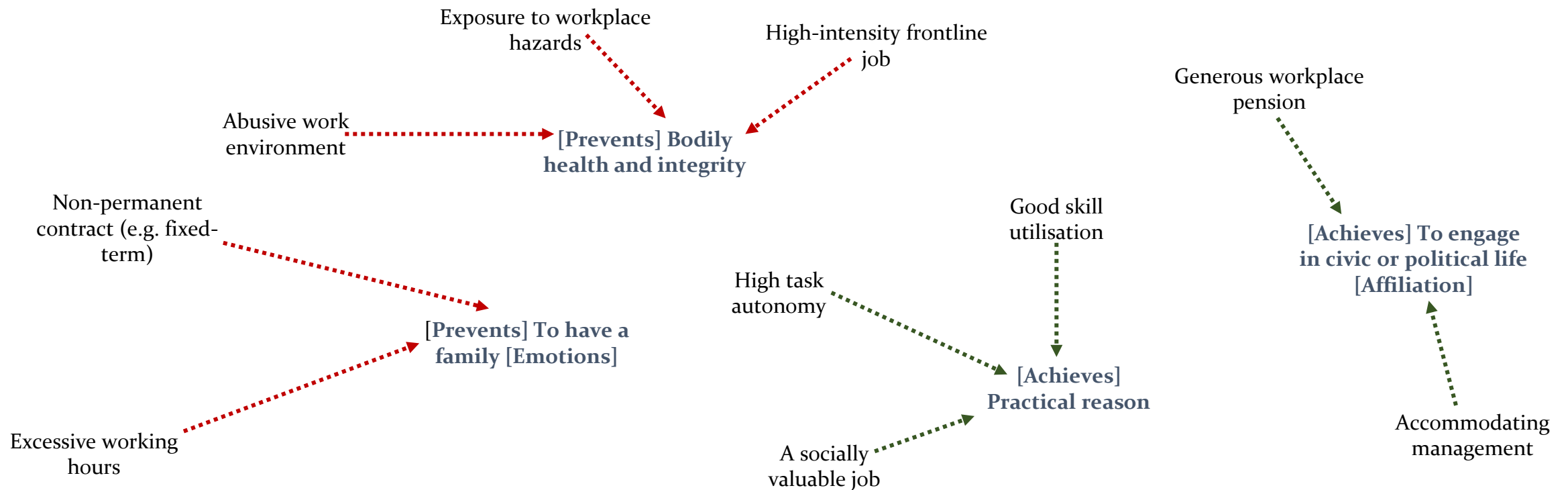
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A framework: two potential ways work affects (or embodies) human wellbeing

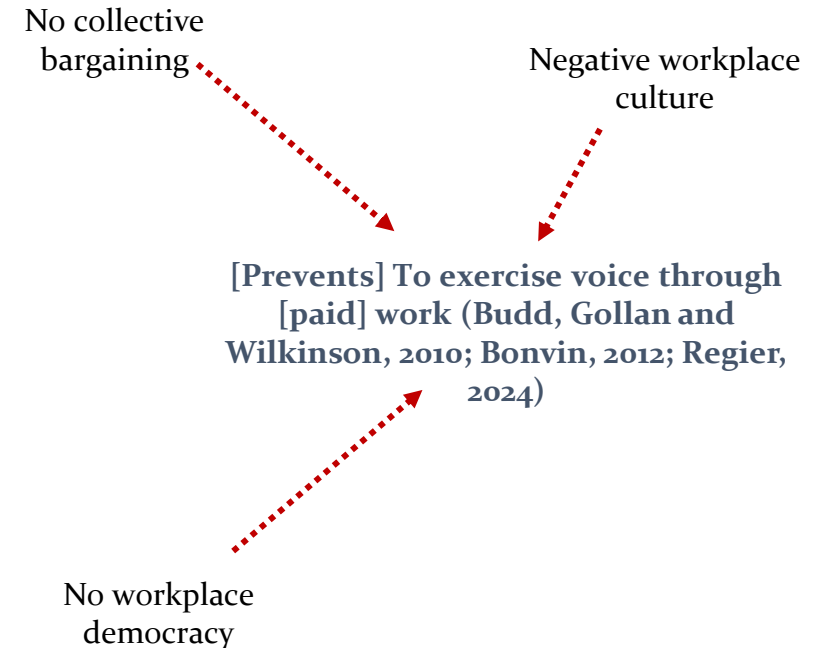
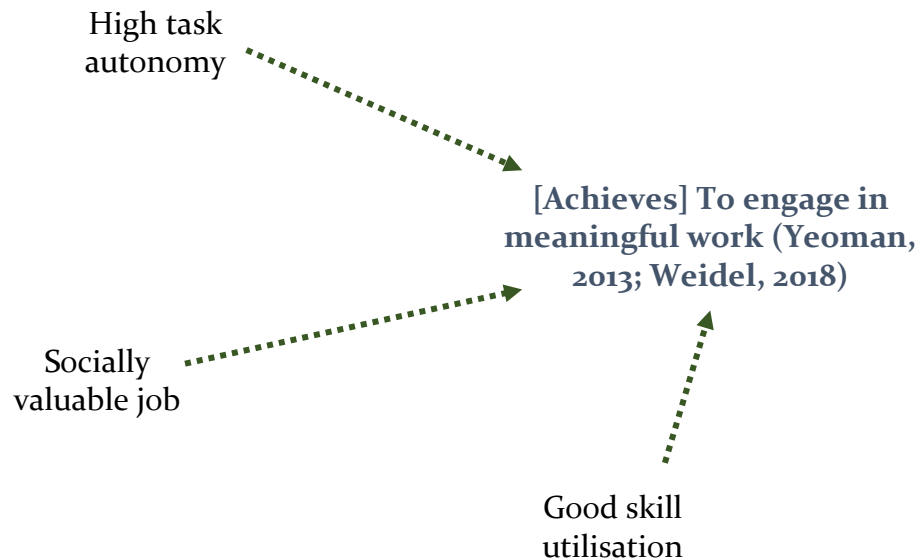
Two senses in which work relates to wellbeing. Within the Capability Approach (CA), this can be conceptualised through its effect on the achievement or non-achievement of valued “beings and doings” (Functionings) :

- 1. Instrumental.** Work characteristics (or “resources”) affect the achievement of Functionings outside the “space” of work. Some illustrations with reference to Central Capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011):



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2. **Intrinsic.** Alternatively, or in addition to, its instrumental role, work characteristics embody or affect the achievement of Functionings which themselves in the same space in which these work characteristics themselves belong. E.g:



My suggestion: crucial to recognise dual role of work to wellbeing

- At least as far as work quality and work-related wellbeing are concerned (other considerations may apply when the purpose of the application of the CA is different – see Robeyns, 2017), I have three key arguments / concerns:
 1. **Problems with an exclusively instrumental approach to work in the CA**, especially when we extend our analysis of work beyond the vector of *achieved* Functionings to *achievable* Functionings (the Capability Set) across the life course (Bartelheimer and Moncel, 2009; Bartelheimer, Leßmann and Matiaske, 2012).
 2. **Solely intrinsic accounts are also problematic**, neglecting work's wider pernicious effect on all areas of wellbeing achievement – again, from a life-course perspective.
 3. ... Notwithstanding the above, **the line between the two becomes very blurred once we go down to the dimension or indicator level of work quality indices**, with many indicators appearing to affect both intrinsic and instrumental Functionings.

Argument #1: Three cases for at least some intrinsic work Functionings

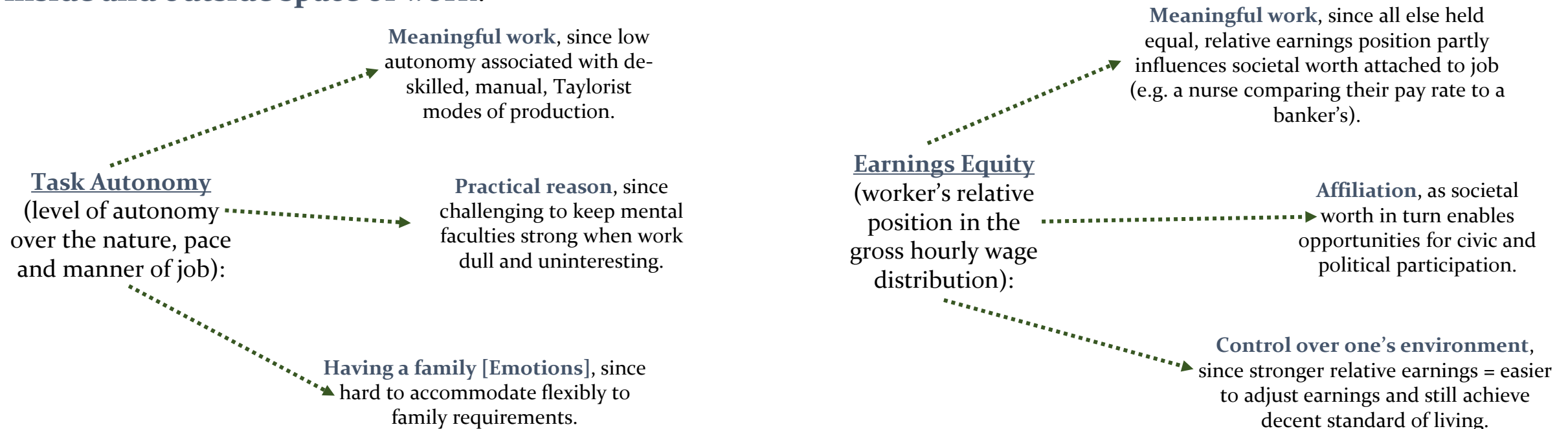
- **The normative case:** Functionings are *valued* beings and doings: they need to be established through philosophical deliberation (e.g. see Jaggard, 2006) or a participatory process (e.g. Burchardt and Vizard, 2011). CA research has arguably already provided the normative basis for some work Functionings – especially **meaningful work** and **worker voice**. *If* they are valued Functionings, they cannot be ignored.
- **The ‘disutility’ case:** Is work a ‘disutility’ (Spencer, 2010)? A solely instrumental account of work in the CA risks implying so: if work is done purely for the achievement of instrumental Functionings (or to avoid the opportunity cost of their non-achievement), then people cannot *value* work for its own ends, e.g. as a meaningful productive activity – because a Functioning, by definition, is an activity *someone has reason to value*.
- **The ‘worker freedoms and power’ case:** Sen defines wellbeing as freedom to achieve wellbeing: the potential combinations of Functionings available to the person (the Capability Set). If work is not itself a Functioning, this limits our account of work and labour market inequalities in the CA (Stephens, 2023b):
 - **Worker wellbeing partly determined by freedom to choose alternative productive activities:** the range of combinations of possibilities of engaging in meaningful production.
 - **This constrained choice over work partly what makes work so bad for most disadvantaged:** advantaged workers sometimes do same work, but in a different context.
 - **This choice partly determines workers’ power:** within the workplace, when accessing job, e.t.c – and thus their ability to fully realise work-related wellbeing.

Argument #2: The risks of an exclusively intrinsic approach to work

- Existing literature – inside and outside the CA – gives strong accounts of **work's damaging effect on all areas of Functioning achievement**, across the life course. At its worst, e.g. modern-day slavery, this extends to impeding *all* achievable Functionings (Suppa, 2019).
- **This effect is also pernicious**: it extends even to brain development at earliest years, and has a knock-on impact beyond the individual worker themselves: e.g. on children and families (Sayer, 2012).
- **Its damaging effect on work-related wellbeing is exacerbated by Conversion Factors**, e.g. in cases where workers in low-quality jobs also have low rates of conversion. This damage is especially apparent in form of instrumental Functionings, outside space of work – e.g. effects of an inflexible job held by a worker with family commitments on the achievement of Functionings related to social participation, leisure, e.t.c.
- ... All the above serves to illustrate that **instrumentally important does not mean “unimportant:**” a work characteristic can have a greater effect on instrumental Functioning achievement than another work characteristic that has a lesser effect on an intrinsic work Functioning.

Argument #3: The practical implications of this dual effect play out less clearly at the work quality index level

- I suggest the implications of this dual role very important outside the vector of achieved Functionings. But at achieved wellbeing level (which most/all work quality indices measure), important to “distinguish the multidimensionality of labour activities carefully from the multidimensionality of human wellbeing.” (Suppa, 2019, p. 13).
- This can be considered with respect to two indicators in a UK Quality of Work (QoW) index (Stephens, 2023a). **Many QoW indicators simultaneously contribute to (non-) achievement of Functionings inside and outside space of work:**



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