



Social Advantage and Disadvantage

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CHAPTER

2 The Capability Approach to Advantage and Disadvantage

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Abstract

This chapter outlines key features of Sen's capability approach; in particular, its multidimensionality and its focus on what people can do and be in their lives. These features give a distinctive flavour to assessments of disadvantage based on the capability approach, when compared to assessments based more narrowly on resources or on subjective well-being. The chapter outlines applications including the Multidimensional Poverty Index and the Equality Measurement Framework. Much less work has been done on what the capability approach may bring to our understanding of *advantage*. Here some promising avenues for further exploration are identified: the gaps in achievement on basic and central capabilities; the extent to which people are freed from trade-offs between valuable functionings; and the ability to exercise 'raw freedoms' that create or perpetuate disadvantage for others.

Keywords: capabilities, freedom, functionings, inequality, multidimensionality

Subject: Political Economy

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How should we evaluate advantage and disadvantage? Amartya Sen, pioneer of what has become known as the capability approach, argues there are three principal alternatives. The first is to focus on people's resources—typically, their income and wealth; the second, on their utility, or happiness; the third, on what people are able to do or be, or what he calls people's capabilities. In this chapter, we present an outline of the capability approach and discuss the contribution it might make to the study of advantage and disadvantage.

Recent years have seen growing attention to inequality in addition to the more traditional concern with poverty (Piketty, 2014; Atkinson and Piketty, 2014; Milanovic, 2011, *inter alia*)—or, following the theme of this volume, with *advantage* as well as with disadvantage. But while poverty is increasingly conceptualized and measured multi-dimensionally, including using the capability approach, the debate on inequality has focused overwhelmingly on single dimensions—usually income or wealth, and sometimes health or education. In contrast, the capability approach requires us to examine advantage and disadvantage across a range of dimensions.

The capability approach has been influential internationally, most prominently through the concept of human development, which provided the underpinning for the measurement of the United Nations' Human Development Index (HDI) comparing levels of education, health, and standard of living across countries. The capability approach has received much less attention in Social Policy—despite its relevance for understanding poverty and disadvantage. We believe the capability approach can 'add value' to the study of advantage and disadvantage compared with other metrics, though we recognize it raises methodological challenges, especially in a context of focusing on advantage.

p. 26 The following section outlines three competing ways to understand advantage and disadvantage, discusses the motivation for adopting a capability perspective, presents some issues that arise in applying it, and briefly outlines some key critiques that have been levelled at the approach. The second section assesses the distinctive features of capability analysis for the study of disadvantage, drawing on existing work, and its potential for conceptualizing advantage, where considerably less work has been conducted. The third section reviews some prominent applications of the approach, and the concluding section summarizes the 'value added' of the capability approach, as we see it, for understanding advantage and disadvantage.

2.1 Three Approaches to Understanding Advantage and Disadvantage

There are three alternative ways in which we might evaluate advantage and disadvantage. The first—focusing on people's resources—remains the dominant approach and is more fully explored in Chapters 7 and 8 in this volume. Work of this kind includes studies that examine the proportion of households falling below an income poverty line—understood either in relative terms (e.g. using an income poverty line set at 50 per cent or 60 per cent of national median income; Forster and Mira d'Ercole, 2005), or in absolute terms (e.g. a poverty line set at \$1.25 a day; Ravallion et al., 2009). It also includes studies comparing the wealth of nations on the basis of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (e.g. World Bank website, n.d.).

The second basis on which we might analyse advantage and disadvantage is subjective well-being, happiness, or utility, and there has been growing interest in this approach in academic circles (e.g. Layard, 2005; Dolan, 2014) and politically, with President Sarkozy in France and Prime Minister David Cameron in the UK both establishing commissions to look into ways of measuring national well-being that include happiness (Stiglitz et al., 2009; BBC, 2010). A key motivation has been evidence which shows that while developed nations have become much more wealthy in the last half century, they have not, in the main, become happier (Layard, 2006). Utilitarianism potentially offers a different goal for societies to that of maximizing GDP.

p. 27 The third way in which advantage and disadvantage might be understood is in terms of people's functionings and capabilities. A person's functionings are their activities and states of being (Wolff and de Shalit, 2007: 7)—studying, caring for an elderly parent, experiencing poor mental health, living in sub-standard accommodation, and so forth. It is an inherently multidimensional perspective. A person's capabilities are what they are *able* to do or be. Thus, while a person's functionings represent the outcomes they achieve, their capabilities reflect their real opportunity or freedom to achieve a variety of functionings. Finally, a person's *capability set* is the set of alternative combinations of functionings a person could achieve, from which they select one combination.

2.1.1 Motivations

According to Sen, there are two important limitations with the tradition based on resources. Firstly, people have different needs, and thus may require different levels and types of resources to achieve the same outcomes. For example, a person with a disability may need more resources than a person who is not disabled to achieve the same standard of living (understood as a functioning) (Zaidi and Burchardt, 2005). Secondly, a person's resources are just one determinant of what they can do and be; they may also face discrimination or other obstacles. These two arguments suggest that advantage and disadvantage in terms of income and wealth may not coincide with that of other domains. At a national level for example, life expectancy in the USA is lower than in Cuba, despite the GNI per capita of the United States being very considerably higher (UNDP, 2014: 160). A person's income and wealth may not correspond with his or her capabilities, and a country's GDP may not correspond with its level of human development.

On the other hand, the utilitarian perspective is, Sen argues, insufficiently sensitive to objective deprivations. People's expectations and preferences are adaptive—'a person who is ill-fed, under-nourished and under-sheltered and ill can still be high up the scale of happiness or desire-fulfilment if he or she has learned to have "realistic" desires and to take pleasure in small mercies' (Sen, 1987: 14). This relates to Runciman's (1966) study of deprivation referred to in Chapter 1 of this volume, in which he shows that people's sense of privilege or deprivation is relative to those with whom they come regularly into contact. Subjective well-being may be a valuable functioning, but judging advantage and disadvantage solely in terms of happiness, or subjective states more broadly, is inadequate because subjective states are not a good guide to objective deprivations. What matters is not so much whether people feel advantaged or disadvantaged as whether they *are* advantaged or disadvantaged.

2.1.2 Towards Application

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Moving beyond abstract examples requires us to answer the question of which functionings or capabilities should count towards an assessment of advantage and disadvantage. This question of the 'capability list', which remains one of the most contentious issues within the capability literature (see Hick and Burchardt, forthcoming, for a discussion). Sen has not identified a fixed list of capabilities, arguing instead that any list must be relevant to the particular circumstances of its application and decided by democratic deliberation and public scrutiny. It may not be helpful to prescribe a list of dimensions in advance when we do not yet know what kind of analysis we are undertaking (an evaluation of a rural development programme in Pakistan; a framework for assessing poverty and wealth in Germany; or a study of elites in the UK).

By contrast, Nussbaum has specified a list of ten central human capabilities that emerge from her Aristotelian analysis of human flourishing and the requirements necessary to secure human dignity. These capabilities are: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment (2011: 33–4). Nussbaum (2011: 71) argues that it is essential to specify a list of valued capabilities and questions 'whether the idea of promoting freedom is even a coherent political project', since some people's freedoms inevitably limit those of others. Nussbaum discusses the importance of restricting non-consensual sexual intercourse within marriage and suggests that 'any political project that is going to protect the equal worth and certain basic liberties for the poor and to improve their living conditions needs to say forthrightly that some freedoms are central for political purposes and some are distinctly not' (Nussbaum, 2011: 72). As we will argue below, such considerations have a particular resonance in the context of advantage since some forms of advantage may imply highly unequal power relations.

Despite these debates about whether and how a 'list' of capabilities is to be derived, analysis of the dimensions selected by various authors shows that, in practice, 'areas of consensus seem to emerge'

(Alkire, 2010: 19, 2002). Similarly, on the question of which dimensions make up quality of life, the Stiglitz–Sen–Fitoussi Commission (2009: 58) notes that ‘while the precise list of these features inevitably rests on value judgements, there is a consensus that quality of life depends on people’s health and education, their everyday activities (which include the right to a decent job and housing), their participation in the political process, the social and natural environment in which they live, and the factors shaping their personal and economic security’.

p. 29 An additional challenge emerges when seeking to operationalize the concept of *capability*, namely, considering the alternative functionings a person could have selected but did not, as well as the actual functionings observed. Most empirical analyses rely on information about people’s actual achievements (i.e. their functionings) and make inferences about their capability sets. It may be that a particular functioning is sufficiently basic that deprivation can be assumed to have arisen from a lack of real opportunity to achieve a better outcome, so the functioning and the capability are coterminous. For other dimensions, and in particular where preferences may play a role, additional ↪ information may be brought to bear in order to draw inferences about whether a particular outcome arose from choice or constraint. Such information may include asking people directly, or looking at their resources, or at their other achieved functionings (Hick, 2014). The more we move away from assessing disadvantage towards assessing advantage, the more significant the distinction between functioning and capability becomes, and the more pressing it becomes to find an appropriate empirical strategy.

2.1.3 Critiques

One common misapprehension is to regard the capability approach as a comprehensive theory of justice. It is not. It provides an answer to the question, ‘equality of what?’ that sets it apart from resource-based or utilitarian perspectives, but it does not address the question of, ‘how much inequality is unjust?’ In particular, endorsing a particular capability is not to say that advantage on that dimension is just, but simply that the dimension matters and should be included in the metric. A supplementary ethical or political theory is required to judge what degree of inequality, if any, is acceptable.

Even with such an addition, some have questioned whether the approach can be successfully operationalized. Sugden (1993: 1953), for example, notes that ‘given the rich array of functionings that Sen takes to be relevant, given the extent of disagreement among reasonable people about the nature of the good life, and given the unresolved problem of how to value sets, it is natural to ask how far Sen’s framework is operational’. It is certainly the case that the capability approach is more complex to apply than approaches based on resources or utility. Nonetheless, the period since Sugden expressed this reservation has witnessed a wide range of more or less successful applications of the approach, some of which we discuss in this chapter.

A second criticism levelled at the capability approach is that it is too individualistic and that it neglects the ways in which people’s capabilities are interdependent. Dean (2009) argues that human beings are defined through relationships, which both contribute to, and constrain, their autonomy as individuals. One person’s capabilities may be exercised in ways which limit those of another, or which enhance them (Dean, 2009: 273). Stewart (2005: 190) argues that groups also need to be given a greater emphasis within the approach, because group membership and group achievements ‘affect one’s sense of well-being’, because groups can have an instrumental impact on individuals’ well-being by achieving greater resource shares for their members, and because groups can influence their member’s preferences and behaviours.

p. 30 Dean and Stewart are clearly right that what a person is able to be or do depends crucially on what others have done in the past and are doing in the present. Moreover, people identify with, formulate their goals in relation to, ↪ and operate as members of, multiple groupings—families, ethnic groups, political parties,

and social classes to name but a few—as Sen has also analysed (2006). But we do not see that acknowledging this interdependency invalidates the assessment of the degree to which an individual has a more or less valuable capability set than another individual. The capability approach, is, in essence, seeking to ‘evaluate and interpersonally compare overall individual advantages’ (Sen, 2010: 242), whichever collectivities—including families and partnerships—those individuals are also part of, and however their capability sets have been created and influenced.

Robeyns (2005) distinguishes between ethical and ontological individualism. Ontological individualism, ‘states that only individuals and their properties exist, and that all social entities and properties can be identified by reducing them to individuals and their properties. Ontological individualism hence makes a claim about the nature of human beings, about the way they live their lives and about their relation to society’ (Robeyns, 2005: 108). The capability approach is certainly not individualistic in this sense. By contrast, the capability approach *does* subscribe to ethical individualism, which, ‘makes a claim about who or what should count in our evaluative exercises and decisions. It postulates that individuals, and only individuals, are the units of moral concern’ (Robeyns, 2005: 107). Ethical individualism is shared by almost all contemporary approaches to evaluating advantage and disadvantage, including theories of human needs, which place normative value on *individuals* rather than collectivities. Communitarianism is the exception (Taylor, 1985), which places value on cultures and identities, over and above the interests of the individuals who make up those groups.

A third line of critique of the capability approach comes from consideration of the needs of future generations. Liberal egalitarian theories developed in an era when the central questions were about fair distributions within nation states, and, sometimes, between them, but with increasing concern about environmental sustainability, analysis of distributional justice must adapt to include future populations as well as those currently living. Gough (2014) argues that the absence of a universal list of central human capabilities (or even an agreed method to derive one) makes the capability approach inadequate to the task, since it is not clear which capabilities we should be interested in preserving for future generations, or, for that matter, protecting for the currently living against the potentially limitless demands of future lives.

In practice, as noted above, there is a reasonable level of agreement between ‘lists’ about valued dimensions, whether these are derived from a capability approach, a theory of human needs, or an analysis of the human rights that have been claimed. One reason for this overlap could be that there is a degree of universality in basic human requirements and goals. Thus, we do not believe that a capability approach and a human needs approach are ↯ contradictory; on the contrary, there is scope for greater engagement between the two.

Finally, the capability approach is criticized for adopting an abstract, naive, or technical approach to the definition of what matters. Whether a capability list is derived in a philosophical way, following Nussbaum, through democratic deliberation, following Sen, or in an ad hoc way based on data availability (as is common in practice), Marxists point to a lack of appreciation that definitions of need are contested and negotiable, and that what is recognized now as a need or entitlement is the product of historical struggles rather than being an abstract or fixed entity (Dean, 2009). This is an important reminder about the contingent status of any capability list.

2.2 Advantage and Disadvantage through the Lens of Capabilities

2.2.1 Distinctive Features of Capability Analysis of Disadvantage

The vast majority of applications of the capability approach have focused on *disadvantage*. Disadvantage is viewed as being a restricted capability set—the inability of people to live a life that they value and have reason to value. This requires a multidimensional assessment of disadvantage, which can be contrasted with the unidimensional approaches based on resources or subjective well-being.

Applications of the approach have assessed disadvantage in a range of dimensions. For example, Brandolini and d'Alessio (1998) employed the approach to support a multidimensional poverty analysis focusing on health, education, employment, housing, social relationships, and economic resources, while Bonvin and Dif-Pradalier (2010) have emphasized the importance of the capability for work and the capability for voice.

Thus, the conception of disadvantage includes, but is not limited to, disadvantages which are imposed by resource constraints. This can point to quite different policy implications, than analysis which focuses on resources alone. For example, one of the most startling outcomes of the recent recession in Europe has been the rise in youth unemployment (i.e. for people under 25 years) which peaked at almost one-quarter of all young people across the twenty-eight EU Member States in 2013—and affected more than one-half of all young people in Greece and Spain (rates of 59.5 per cent and 55.5 per cent, respectively) (Eurostat, n.d.). While unemployment in many cases leads to income poverty, the disadvantage associated with unemployment cannot be remedied successfully solely by income transfer nor does it merit concern only when income poverty arises. Subjective well-being, health, relationships, skills, subsequent employment prospects, are also affected (Sen, 1997).

p. 32 People's capabilities can also be curtailed for reasons other than a lack of resources. One such example is immigration regulations, which can prevent a person from moving from one place to another in search of work or, indeed, restrict the ability of economic migrants to leave one employer to work for another (see also Chapters 9 and 13 in this volume on aspects of the quality of work—security, dignity, and worth—that are not captured by an exclusive focus on the financial rewards of employment). A prominent international example of this is the restrictions on Nepali migrant workers in Qatar, who may not be able to leave one employer to join another, or even to exit the country, without their employer's permission. More generally, immigration regulations form an important non-income impediment to human capabilities, especially, though by no means exclusively, for people from the global south.

2.2.2 How Advantage Might Be Conceptualized in a Capability Framework

In contrast to disadvantage, considerably less work has been conducted on the capability approach to conceptualize *advantage*. Here we take some tentative steps towards considering what a multidimensional and freedom-focused assessment might contribute. The approaches we discuss are descriptive and analytical—identifying relative advantage and disadvantage in terms of a given set of functionings or capabilities, and analysing the relationship between the creation of advantage and disadvantage. They do not reflect a comprehensive normative position, because the capability approach is not in itself a theory of justice; it requires a supplementary ethical or political theory to define which distributions or processes are to be considered unjust.

As a starting point, advantage can be conceived of as having a larger capability set: having additional (combinations of) functionings available to you, compared to a more disadvantaged capability set. These functionings could be of at least three types: (i) higher levels of achievement on commonly available functionings that people value and have reason to value (for example, accessing higher education rather

than just the statutory minimum); (ii) functionings in *combinations* unavailable to less privileged individuals (e.g. enjoying time off work *and* avoiding material deprivation); and (iii) functionings wholly unavailable to most people (e.g. influencing public opinion, or being insured against the effects of natural disasters).

p. 33 Which of these types of functionings is relevant to an assessment of advantage will depend on the purpose of the evaluative exercise. If we are interested in advantage as a contrast with disadvantage, in order to see more clearly who is in need and to understand the disparities that exist between people, we may wish to explore the distribution of achievement on commonly available and widely valued functionings—such as nutrition, shelter, education, physical security, and social participation. Advantage and disadvantage are in this case evaluated in the same ‘space’, and the focus is likely to be on actual achievement (functionings), rather than capabilities. Some indicators permit full distributional analysis (such as life expectancy or educational achievement), while others depend on examining the proportions of different population sub-groups who obtain functioning above or below a given threshold (for example, the proportions of men and women who are victims of violence).

However, one of the interesting ways in which advantage may manifest itself, and which the capability approach is particularly well-suited to explore, is the extent to which people are freed from trading-off between achieving their valuable ends. As discussed in Burchardt (2010), while a well-paid professional may be able to increase her leisure time without incurring material deprivation, a low-income couple with children may face a trade-off between time poverty and material poverty, and a lone parent with few educational qualifications may be able to escape *neither* time poverty *nor* material poverty, however she allocates her time across activities. To examine trade-offs, we can retain the focus on basic and central capabilities commonly used in analysis of disadvantage, but we need to move from consideration of functionings to capabilities. Such an approach is undoubtedly complex, especially if we are to consider trade-offs on more than two dimensions, and capabilities are, notoriously, not susceptible to direct observation or measurement. Nevertheless, examining the *combinations* of functionings (standard of living, health, and leisure) enjoyed by different groups (for example, men and women in higher and lower social classes) provides an indication of the range of possibilities open to people with that set of characteristics, and which combinations are unavailable to the less well-off. This can be supplemented with survey data on respondents’ own assessments of the extent to which they have ‘autonomy’ or choice and control over key aspects of their lives (see Burchardt, Evans, and Holder, 2015).

Finally, we may be interested in evaluating advantage because we think that advantage, and the mechanisms which secure and sustain it, contribute to the creation of disadvantage. Thinking about the causal relationship between advantage and disadvantage pushes us beyond thinking about the usual set of basic and central capabilities or functionings, because it is not only the fact that some people have higher educational achievement, for example, that disadvantages those with lower educational attainment (in relative terms), but also the fact that the privileged exercise their power in all sorts of ways that impede the chances of the less well-off. We thus need to consider functionings wholly unavailable to disadvantaged people, to identify what it is that the privileged can do and be that others cannot, and how this contributes to the creation and maintenance of inequalities.

p. 34 But which of the infinite set of possible functionings are relevant here? For disadvantage, analysis typically focuses on a group of dimensions which would be valued in any context—goals which are shared by all people, whatever else they value (see Hick, 2014 for a discussion). However, once we turn our attention towards the study of advantage, there is no reason to assume that valued capabilities would coalesce around a common core; instead, people might value and have reason to value very different capabilities. We could call this the *challenge of pluralism*, following Rawls (1988: 255–6).

Moreover, if our motivation is to understand the ways in which advantage and disadvantage are causally connected, we must consider the exercise of power that is harmful to others. Sen emphasizes that capabilities are what people ‘value and have reason to value’, and this excludes, by definition, the ability to harm others (e.g. murder), on the Kantian grounds that one cannot have reason to value a capability unless one can at the same time wish everyone else to have that capability too. So consideration of the exercise of power that is harmful to others implies going beyond capability space as defined by Sen.

An alternative is offered by what Goerne (2010) calls the *descriptive* as opposed to *normative* aspects of a person’s capability set. The former reflects all of the things that a person is able to do and be—their raw freedom—while the latter refers solely to beings and doings which a person has reason to value—true capabilities in Sen’s sense. While analysis of disadvantage can concentrate on normative capabilities, specifically basic and central capabilities that people have reason to value, a comprehensive analysis of advantage must extend into descriptive capabilities to make room for examining raw freedoms that are actually or potentially harmful to others. This would include, for example, the ability to perpetrate violence or threaten violence on others; to avoid or subvert legal challenge; to exercise exclusive rights over land, natural resources, and scientific advances; to exploit labour (paid or unpaid); to exert disproportionate political influence; and to define cultural norms and values. This is not an exhaustive list, but provides an indication of the very different types of freedoms that are relevant to the evaluation of advantage than those commonly used to assess disadvantage. The fact that the privileged possess and use some of these freedoms to their advantage is of course part of the mechanism that generates and sustains disadvantage for others, and exploring these connections opens up important areas for further debate and research.

p. 35 Two features of the capability approach, extended in this way, are relevant. The first is once again its multidimensionality. Whilst individuals who are advantaged in the areas listed above are all likely to be comparatively wealthy, they could have quite different levels of wealth—a warlord, a global entrepreneur, and a TV presenter, for example. If we consider advantage solely in terms of income and wealth, we may miss some of the mechanisms that operate on other dimensions.

The second feature is the inclusion of potential beings and doings as well as realized outcomes. A person in a position of power does not actually have to perpetrate violence or subvert justice or dismiss someone from his employment in order to gain advantage, he just needs other people to know he is in a position to do so if he chooses to.

The discussion in this section indicates that conceptualizing and evaluating advantage using the apparatus provided by the capability approach is not simply the flip-side of thinking about disadvantage. In particular, to understand the connections between the mechanisms of advantage and disadvantage, we may need to add ‘raw freedoms’, including those that have the potential to harm others, to the more familiar list of central and valuable capabilities. But key features of the capability approach—its multidimensionality, the way it captures trade-offs between valuable ends, and its focus on potentials as well as realized outcomes—suggest that it could offer important insights into the nature of advantage.

2.3 Applications

In this penultimate section we review a number of applications of the capability approach, each of which serves to highlight some of its distinctive features.

2.3.1 The Human Development Index and the Multidimensional Poverty Index

Perhaps the most prominent of all applications is that of the UN Human Development Index (HDI), which has formed the basis of the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Human Development Reports since their inception in 1990. The HDI is an aggregated measure of income, life expectancy, and education, and was proposed by the Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq to shift attention from *economic* development (as encapsulated by GDP per capita) to *human development* (which would be partially captured in HDI rankings).

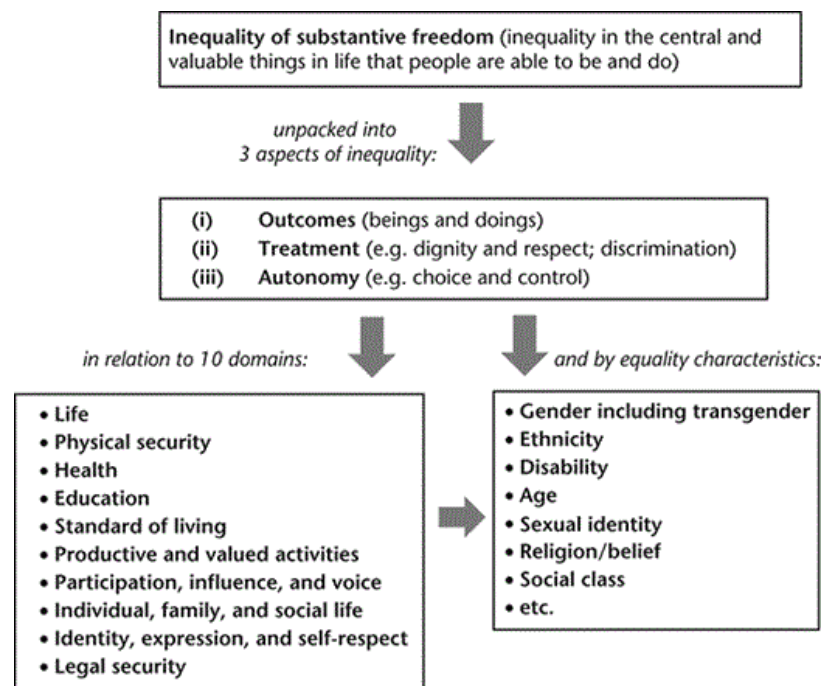
In focusing on just three dimensions, the HDI is a highly reductive form of the capability approach, as Sen himself has noted: 'These are useful indicators in rough and ready work, but the real merit of the human development approach lies in the plural attention it brings to bear on development evaluation' (Sen, 2000: 22).

p. 36 One of the limitations of the HDI, is that its three component measures do not come from the same data source. This means that while it can provide country rankings, it is not possible to explore the coupling of disadvantages *within* households. Partly for this reason, Alkire et al., (2015) have proposed a new Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) (see also Chapter 1 in this volume). This index is comprised of ten indicators relating to standard of living, health, and education but, importantly, the data are all collected in the same survey, enabling the examination of simultaneous deprivations within households (Alkire and Santos, 2010: 8). It thus allows combinations of functionings to be explored, and subsequently disaggregated by socio-economic and household characteristics, and so forth.

2.3.2 The Equality Measurement Framework

The Equality Measurement Framework (EMF) is a capability-inspired framework for monitoring equality and human rights in England, Scotland, and Wales (Burchardt and Vizard, 2011) (Figure 2.1). The framework assesses inequalities between individuals and groups in the 'substantive freedom' they enjoy. 'Substantive freedom' is unpacked into three aspects: achieved *outcomes* (or functionings), *autonomy* (or choice and control), and *treatment* (including issues of discrimination, or conversely, being treated with dignity and respect). This attempt to capture aspects of capability that go beyond observed functionings is one way in which the EMF is distinctive from other capability applications.

Figure 2.1.



The Equality Measurement Framework

Source: Burchardt and Vizard, 2011

The framework incorporates a capability list derived from international human rights covenants, which was refined through deliberative consultation with the general public and with groups at risk of discrimination and disadvantage (Burchardt and Vizard, 2011). The capability list is grouped into ten domains: life; physical security; legal security; health; education and learning; standard of living; productive and valued activities; participation, influence, and voice; individual, family, and social life; identity, expression, and self-respect (Vizard and Speed, forthcoming 2015). The EMF adopts a ‘dashboard’ approach—meaning that inequalities in the different domains are examined in their own right and are not aggregated into multidimensional measures of inequality. Arguably, this makes it easier to identify potential targets for policy intervention (EHRC, 2010), and to be sensitive to differences between groups and between dimensions, although it has the disadvantage of generating a mass of data which can be intractable, and which cannot readily be summarized or plugged into evaluations of cost-effectiveness.

The EMF adopts a principle of ‘systematic disaggregation’ of each indicator by a set of equality characteristics including age, gender, disability, ethnicity, and social class as well as, where possible, sexual identity and religion/belief (Suh et al., 2013). It shows how the capability approach can motivate an analysis which looks at the overall spread of achievement across multiple dimensions, as well as differences in achievements between sub-groups of the population (Burchardt and Vizard, 2011).

2.3.3 Hick's Analysis of the Distinctiveness of Multidimensional Assessment

One response to the greater complexity of multidimensional analysis is to investigate whether the results it produces are distinctive to those produced using a simpler, unidimensional approach, or whether they are effectively equivalent. Hick (2015) has conducted a capability-inspired analysis of the relationship between two measures of material poverty (low income and material deprivation) and seven dimensions of multiple deprivation (health, mental health, housing deprivation, limited autonomy, life satisfaction, financial stress, unemployment) in the United Kingdom, analysing the dimensions individually as well as in aggregate form.

p. 38 The findings show that the distinctiveness of multidimensional assessment depends significantly on whether one is interested in identifying vulnerable *individuals* or vulnerable *groups* and whether one is analysing aggregate or ↪ disaggregated measures. The measures of material poverty and multiple deprivation are found to identify substantially different individuals as being poor and deprived, irrespective of whether disaggregated or aggregate measures of material poverty and multiple deprivation are analysed. Greater consistency is observed in identifying the *groups* at risk of poverty and deprivation, though these remain distinctive when disaggregated measures of material poverty and multiple deprivation measures are employed. When analysing the aggregate experience of material poverty and multiple deprivation for thirty-five population sub-groups, there is a very high degree of consistency (the correlation between groups' aggregate material poverty and multiple deprivation scores was 0.92 in this exercise).

Adopting a more straightforward approach does not, by definition, account for the multidimensional mechanisms of advantage and disadvantage. Nonetheless, Hick's findings suggest that the distinctiveness of multidimensional assessment is not an all-or-nothing affair: it depends on whether one's interest is in identifying disadvantaged individuals or groups, and whether the focus is on disaggregated or aggregated dimensions. If our aim is to identify advantaged or disadvantaged groups (rather than individuals), then a simpler analysis may in fact take us quite far.

2.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have provided an outline of the capability approach and a discussion of how it can be employed to conceptualize advantage and disadvantage. We have argued that it offers a distinctive assessment of advantage and disadvantage compared to approaches based on resources or subjective well-being. The distinctiveness derives from two key features: its multidimensionality, and its focus on real freedoms as well as observed outcomes.

Multidimensionality ensures that important dimensions of advantage and disadvantage can be examined in their own right rather than overlooked or misrepresented by focusing on a single dimension like income or happiness, or by using aggregate or proxy measures. We can explore the relative position of individuals, groups, and countries in terms of a core set of central and valuable capabilities such as standard of living, health, education, physical security, political participation, and so on. Low levels of achievement indicate disadvantage while a higher level of achievement on one or more dimensions indicates advantage.

p. 39 Secondly, multidimensionality combined with attention to what real opportunities are available to people, draws our attention to the different trade-offs that people face. For example, a severely disadvantaged person is likely to be both in poor health and have a low standard of living. Someone ↪ with fewer constraints may face a trade-off: they can achieve a higher standard of living but only by taking a job that imperils their health or safety. The truly advantaged are freed of this dilemma: they can obtain a comfortable standard of living from the safety of their armchair! Thus looking at combinations of

functionings and the trade-offs between them for different groups is a key and distinctive contribution that the capability approach can make to analysis of advantage and disadvantage.

Finally, both the multidimensionality and the freedom-focus of the capability approach come into sharp focus when considering the causal relationship between advantage and disadvantage—that is, the mechanisms which generate and sustain inequality. Here we have argued there is a need to go beyond central and valued capabilities to a wider field of ‘raw freedoms’ including the exercise of power that may be harmful to others, such as the ability to subvert the course of justice. This opens up an interesting avenue for further debate and research.

There are however limitations and challenges to the capability approach. Controversy over which capabilities are relevant, how they are to be identified, and whether they can reflect ongoing struggles for recognition of diverse human needs continues (although in practice most capability lists for evaluating disadvantage show considerable overlap). Taking account of interdependency between people is a clear theoretical requirement, but can be difficult to implement empirically. Indeed, the informational and analytical demands of the capability approach are significant and remain an obstacle to reflecting the full conceptual richness of the approach in real-world applications.

Recent years have seen substantial attention devoted to the issue of advantage in addition to the more traditional focus on disadvantage. We would argue that this field has much to gain from a greater focus on the diverse ways in which advantage can manifest itself and, indeed, in the relationship between dimensions of advantage and their role in generating disadvantage for others. This is a newly emerging field, which despite its conceptual and empirical challenges provides the basis for a critical reframing of essential debates regarding our understanding of social advantage and disadvantage.

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