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PROJECT

The Widening Gap in Capabilities: a Multi-Dimensional Approach

Recent public debate and research have focused on the widening gap in inequalities across regions and countries and within societies. Whereas most of this research revolves around inequalities in income and wealth, I deepen and nuance this conversation by focusing on inequalities in capabilities with respect to transnational migration and integration, precarious employment, work-life balance, access to care, and diversities in agency inequalities.

The specific aims are to provide conceptual models and strategies for socio-logical research with a more dynamic institutional analysis of 1) the salience of global institutions, processes, and actors that shape individual capabilities in European societies; 2) various dimensions of wellbeing that reveal the diversities in capabilities, such as gender, social class, ethnicity/race, age, family situation, citizenship and migrant status, and their intersections.

The project will expand my earlier analytical models operationalizing Sen's multi-dimensional, dynamic, agency-centered approach, integrating the macro-institutional contextual, meso-societal (civil society actors; community networks and public discourse), and individual experiential levels. Here, I seek to extend the theoretical borders and empirical applications of the capability approach 1) by elaborating the subjective/cognitive level of capabilities through two mechanisms shaping the conversion of capabilities to agency freedoms applied in my earlier studies: the sense of entitlement to make claims and perceived scope of alternatives; and 2) by incorporating complex dimensions of agency and capabilities emerging in multi-ethnic European societies related to citizenship, integration, and social membership.

Recommended Reading

Hobson, Barbara. "Gendered Dimensions and Capabilities: Opportunities, Dilemmas and Challenges." *Critical Sociology*. Advanced online publication, January 2017.

Hobson, Barbara and Susanne Fahlén. "Competing Scenarios for European Fathers: Applying Sen's Capability and Agency Framework to Work-Life Balance." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 624 (2009): 214-233.

Hobson, Barbara. *Recognition Struggles and Social Movements: Cultural Claims, Contested Identities, Power and Agency*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Imagining Alternatives through the Lens of Sen's Capability and Agency Approach

Recent debates and research on inequalities have focused on the widening gap in wealth and incomes across regions, countries and within societies. Sen's approach offers a broad multi-dimensional framework that engages with agency inequalities from many perspectives, among which I have studied precariousness and insecure employment, work-life balance, migration and social membership, and mis-recognition. For political sociologists like myself, the capability approach, whose architect is an economist, provides theoretical space in which to address variations in different institutional and societal contexts and the diversities in agency and capabilities within them with respect to gender, class, ethnicity/race, disability, family situation, migrant status, and their intersections. Sen's concept of agency and choice, the cornerstone of his approach, appeals to many researchers seeking more dynamic frameworks. Rather than asking individuals what they have chosen to do, their current situation, Sen's capability approach poses the question of what individuals would choose if they had opportunities (capabilities) for alternatives ways of living that would enhance wellbeing and quality of life. My title "Imagining Alternatives" reflects the possibilities for making change and developing new life projects; however, agency freedoms to achieve such goals are bounded by our individual, institutional and societal/normative context. Sen's framework, in particular, his concept of agency and choice, pose many challenges for sociological empirical research. In my research, I have taken up this challenge.

I have developed models that adapt the capabilities framework to the complexities and multi-level dimensions in which agency is situated and embedded. These encompass layers of institutional/societal context, not only within the nation state (laws, policies and welfare state regimes (policy configurations), but also above the state (global processes, actors and institutions) and beneath the state; including the firm level, components of civil society, including stakeholders, social movements and media, as well as the role of social norms. I have introduced two mechanisms that reach the subjective experiential aspects of agency, lynchpins in the conversion of capabilities into achievements, the perceived scope of alternatives and the sense of entitlement to claim rights, to challenge unfair practices, as well as seek other options.

My presentation will begin with the why, what, and how of capabilities. Then I provide two concrete examples of how I have applied the capability approach employing two analytical models. Both of which address the question of the extent to which institutional context can limit or expand opportunities for choosing alternatives. The first of these is based on our recent book, "Worklife Balance: The Agency and Capabilities Gap" that considers several European countries and Japan. The second, to which I will devote more time, is my current WIKO project on trans-national migrants, markets and domestic work in Spain and Sweden, two societies that differ in their welfare, migration, and employment regimes. This study, a work in progress, highlights the capabilities to aspire among a vulnerable group with weak capabilities.

PUBLICATIONS FROM THE FELLOW LIBRARY

Hobson, Barbara M. (Budapest, 2018)

Revisiting recognition and redistribution and extending the borders

<https://kxp.k10plus.de/DB=9.663/PPNSET?PPN=1670849597>