

Mediating Agency and Structure in Sociology – What Role for Conversion Factors?

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Abstract

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The article argues that the Capability Approach can enrich sociology's capacity to link human agency and structure in dynamic analyses of social inequality and marginality. While many read the Capability Approach as excessively individualistic, the validity of this view is less obvious if we take into account the key role of *conversion processes* in this approach. People's possibilities to convert given resources into valued functionings do not lonely depend on individual characteristics (e.g. having a physical or mental impairment) but also on the multi-layered structures (e.g. of a physical, attitudinal, social or political nature) they face. Conversion processes can help us to capture the factors hampering or enabling human agency (individual and collective) – and of the transformation of such factors. As empirical case, the paper discusses the efforts of persons with disabilities to combat exclusion and achieve full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.

Keywords

Capability approach, conversion processes, functioning, agency, structure, disability, sociology

Introduction

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Since the early 1980s, we have witnessed a striking divide between the evolving Capability Approach of Amartya Sen and Martha C. Nussbaum on the one hand and the main theory developments in sociology on the other hand. The two strands of theoretisation have largely evolved in parallel and isolation from each other, despite considerable overlap in the issues they have addressed and even in the terminology they have used in analysing these issues. Sociologists have tended to express ambivalence about the Capability Approach, pointing to what they see as its limitations or raising doubts about what sociology has to gain from engaging with this approach (e.g. Jackson, 2005; Holmwood, 2013; Walby, 2012; Dean, 2009; Sayer, 2012).

Only recently we have seen substantial efforts to move beyond the sharp divide between the two strands of theorisation and research (e.g. Zimmermann, 2006; de Leonardi et al 2012; Kremakova, 2013; Hobson 2014; Gangas, 2016). This article aims to contribute to the exploration of the potential for closer dialogue and cross-fertilisation between the two strands. We ask *how the Capability Approach can enrich the ways in which sociology deals with dynamic linkages between agency and structure in sociology*.

Leading sociologists have offered a range of proposals for how one can capture the linkages between agency and structure – or alternatively, the linkages between micro and macro levels in social analysis (e.g. Giddens, 1984; Alexander et al., 1987; Huber, 1991; Archer, 1996, 2000; Stones, 2005; Turner, 2005; Elder-Vass, 2010). Meanwhile, key proponents of the Capability Approach have focused on agency and the impact of various multi-layered structures on the possibility to exercise agency, they have usually had other issues in the forefront than elaborating a perspective on agency/structure dynamics.

In this paper, we seek to show that the Capability Approach provides important conceptual tools for sociology's understanding of such dynamics. In brief, this approach distinguishes between *capability inputs* (commodities, resources in a broad sense, etc.), the *capability set, achieved (or effective functionings* – and not the least, *conversion*, through which a person's access (or exposure) to various *capability inputs* and the resulting capability set may come to serve as basis for achieving the functionings that the person has reason to value. *Conversion factors* – the structures constraining or facilitating conversion – play a key role in this paper.

More specifically, we ask whether conversion processes are not only determining persons' achievement of effective freedom and actual well-being but also the extent of their active agency, including the *capacity to modify initial structures (i.e. the sources of capability inputs and the diverse potential conversion factors)*. In doing this, we seek a better understanding of agency / structures dynamics as *virtuous circles*, where a person – perhaps together with others in a similar situation – over time achieve more desirable functionings through subsequent cycles of change. Alternatively, conversion processes may help us to grasp the mechanisms behind *vicious circles*, reproducing disadvantage. If we use the conceptual tools of the Capability Approach to theorise about such virtuous or vicious circles, we may improve our understanding of agency/structure dynamics. This will be the case to the extent that we come at better grips with the processes linking agency and structure, that is, succeed in filling the conceptual gap between the two.

As empirical reference for discussing these questions, we use the conditions for persons with disabilities being able to achieve full and effective participation on an equal basis as others. First, compared with persons without disabilities, people with disabilities are worldwide at a substantially higher risk of poverty and exclusion from social and economic participation. Second, we are talking about a substantial part of the world population. Estimates suggest that around 15 per cent of this population are living with disabilities (WHO & World Bank, 2011). Third, with the adoption and ratification of the 2006 UN Convention

on the rights of persons with disabilities in a growing number of countries across the globe, we see stronger and more systematic efforts to reduce the gap in capabilities, well-being and agency between persons with and without disabilities (UN CRDP, 2006). Fourth, networks and associations of and for persons with disabilities are strongly engaged in these efforts, as they were in the process leading up to the adoption of the UN CRDP (Ad Hoc Report, 2006; Degener, 2015). The success of this engagement illustrates the difference that disadvantaged groups' active agency and participation can make in changing social and political structures, even on an international scale.

Finally, concern for the situation of persons with disabilities has played a central role in the development of the Capability Approach from the late 1970s and onwards. For both Sen and Nussbaum, disability has been a key example of the kind of human diversity that a satisfactory theory of human well-being and social justice needs to take into account. For these reasons, the situation of persons with disabilities is a highly suitable context for discussing how to capture agency / structure dynamics in combating exclusion and promoting full and effective participation. Before we discuss the potential of the Capability Approach to enhance our understanding of agency / structure dynamics in general and of the conditions for change in disabled people's participation in particular, we will briefly compare two relatively prominent attempts to capture such dynamics in sociology.

Structuration and Critical Social Realist Approaches compared

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The Structuration approach is closely associated with Anthony Giddens' work, going back to the early 1970s and later developed in a number of publications, for instance Giddens (1984). Structuration theory presents a meta-sociology and a social ontology about how we can understand the social world and its elements, rather than a set of clear propositions about how this social world actually works. Giddens highlights the role of social practices in the linking of agency and structures, seeing social practices as producing structures but also as produced by structures. Giddens rejects, however, the idea that structures have an existence independently of social actors. Instead, he argues in favour of regarding structures as rules and resources, which actors produce and reproduce through their practices. This conception of structures, as well as other features of structuration theory, have meant the many people have seen it as overly abstract, open-ended and indeterminate, making it difficult to adopt as guidance and framework for empirical research.

One of the strongest and most persistent critics of Giddens' Structuration Approach has been Margaret S. Archer. She has argued that Giddens' Approach conflated agency and structure, with a bias towards agency (Archer, 1982). She has formulated an alternative, the Morphogenetic Approach, initially inspired by the Systems Theory of Buckley (1967), later also by the Critical Realist theoretisation of Bhaskar (1993). Over a long period, she has developed the Morphogenetic Approach through extensive theoretical and empirical work (e.g. Archer, 1995; 1996; 2000; 2015).

In Archer's approach, *morphogenesis* is literally meaning the change of shape, in contrast to *morphostasis*, that is, the reproduction of shape. According to Archer, social morphogenesis depicts a dynamic relationship between agency and structure, where the structure predates the action that in turn may transform it and where the transformed (or reproduced) structure postdates this action. In other words, at Time 1, the initial structural distribution of resources ('structure') is the consequence of prior 'interaction'. This structure conditions the next iteration of Interaction among actors and their opportunities to achieve a change ('structural elaboration') from Time 2. Archer emphasises that these processes overlap in time, illustrating that the effect of the social preconditions does not peter out immediately, even if all members of society agree that changes are necessary (Archer, 1995: 78-79). Archer envisages an endless sequence – a never-ending story – of such cycles of 'Structure' -- 'Interaction' -- 'Structural elaboration'.

While there is very clearly an underlying time dimension in her general model, it does not specify positive or negative feedback loops. Yet, Archer have included such loops in less abstract models visualising complex or empirical cases of morphogenetic processes, (e.g. Archer 1995: 342; Archer 2000, pp. 162 & 260).

Over the last two decades, Rob Stones (2005) and Karen O'Reilly (2012) have developed and codified a theoretical strategy informed by Giddens' Structuration Approach with the explicit aim to make this approach more useful as framework for designing empirical investigation and analysing empirical materials than Giddens' original formulation allows. However, their strategy means that they de facto move closer to a Critical Realist position by reinterpreting key concepts like "structure". O'Reilly's (2012: 149-152) visual representation of the strategy brings out the dynamics linkages between structures on the one hand and practices and active agency on the other. In this model, 'external structures' include both constraints to and opportunities for action. The underlying assumption is that the actor experiences the strength or nature of external structures directly or indirectly in his or her micro context, even if the actor does not acknowledge them as conditions for action. 'Internal structures' refer to the actors' more long-term or lasting dispositions, world views and resources, as well as their more situated and time-dependent interpretation, learning, ways of thinking and responding. 'Practices' encompass the daily actions of agents in local contexts or communities of practice. 'Active agency' has three elements:

- Habitual or routine action
- Practical considerations and responses vis-a-vis events in wider or immediate contexts
- Projective action – imagining alternatives to the current situations, creating and pursuing goals

'Outcomes' include reproduction and transformation of social life, including the reshaping or shaping of external and internal structures, i.e. conditions for action. O'Reilly's visual presentation includes a rather simple and unmediated feedback loop from 'outcomes' to the 'external structures' in the next iteration of the structure/agency relationships. Yet, it is clear

that the ‘external structures’ in question are not limited to the agents’ immediate environment but may also refer to structures at higher levels or more distant from the agents.

A relatively high level of abstractness and generality characterise the models of agency-structure dynamics summarised so far. They primarily represent ways of *thinking* about such dynamics. None of the models spells out in detail *how* we can expect the linkages between agency and structure to develop over time and the exact *mechanisms* through which the linkages are likely to emerge, reproduce or change. In the next section, we outline a model of agency-structure dynamics inspired by the Capability Approach where such mechanisms are more explicit. Our aim is to show how using concepts of conversion processes and factors improves our ability to identify the dynamic relations between agency and structure. However, first we give a condensed introduction to the Capability Approach.

Key elements of the Capability Approach

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In Sen’s original formulation of the Capability Approach, the key issue concerned the ability of a person has to perform acts or reach states of being that the person has reason to value. He adopted *capability* as a term for “the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or to be – the various ‘*functionings*’ he or she can achieve” (Sen, 1993: 30). He has emphasised that the person’s capability to achieve functionings constitutes the person’s effective freedom – the freedom actually enjoyed by the person (Sen, 1992: 40, 81).

However, Sen has left it quite open exactly what functionings (combinations of doings and beings) that one would generally expect a person to want to achieve. He has argued that individuals are likely to give different weight to diverse functionings (perhaps beyond some basic capabilities). Nussbaum has found Sen’s position unsatisfactory and proposed an elaborate list of basic human capabilities grouped under ten headings (life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment), while stressing that the list is open-ended and likely to be modified (Nussbaum, 2006: 76–78).

Furthermore, Sen has repeatedly underlined that even if the volume and nature of the various *means* (commodities, goods, resources broadly defined, etc.) that a person has access to, influence his or her capability set, these means do not determine this capability set in a uniform or definitive way. Sen’s Capability Approach sprang out of a criticism of other scholars’ reasoning about and evaluation of the relationship between the access to such means and the likely outcomes in terms of well-being, welfare, utility, etc. In the 1979 Tanner lecture on “Equality of What?” (Sen 1979), Sen based to great extent his original and tentative formulation of the Capability Approach on a critique of John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* (1971), and not the least, on how Sen found that Rawls’ theory of justice as fairness dealt with persons with severe disabilities in an unacceptable way.

Through several steps, Sen has developed the idea that diverse characteristics or circumstances of a person may affect his or her prospects of being able to translate access to

means into a capability set, and in the next instance, into achieved functionings. Since the experience of such characteristics or exposure to such circumstances are likely to vary between persons, their ability to *convert* or transform means into a capability set (and next into achieved functionings) will also differ. For these reasons, Sen has argued that it is insufficient and misleading to evaluate distributions of outcomes (however defined) solely based on knowledge about persons' access to the means to reach such outcomes, and without taking into account human diversity and the heterogeneity of needs.

While *conversion* in this way came to play a crucial role in Sen's overall line of argumentation for the Capability Approach, for a long time he relied on a rather limited number of suggestive examples of characteristics or circumstances that could be significant for such processes. Arguably, this lack of systematic elaboration of such characteristics or circumstances is in line with the general thrust of his version of Capability Approach, that is, a framework for others to use in specific contexts or spaces and fill in with detailed contents and assumptions about the precise mechanisms behind the issues under study.

Yet, Sen has referred to a diversity of characteristics or circumstances of individuals, *as well as* to a range of social factors and differences in social and natural environments, which are likely to influence conversion processes. Over three decades, Sen's discussion of conversion has become considerably more multi-dimensional, wide-ranging and "sociological", in the sense of echoing relational perspective on poverty and social marginality from Georg Simmel (1906) and onwards (e.g. Sen, 2000). In some of his more recent publications, Sen has identified five main sources of variation in the conversion of capability-inputs into capability sets and functionings (Sen, 1999: 70-71; Sen, 2005: 154; Sen, 2009: 254-5):

- *Personal heterogeneities* [diversity in individual characteristics, physical and mental capacities, knowledge & skills]
- *Distributions within the family* [intra-family distribution of paid and unpaid work, earnings and purchase power; gendered divisions of labour,]
- *Differences in relational positioning* [e.g. cultures, social norms and conventions negatively affecting the respect of others as well the person's dignity, self-respect and "the ability to appear in public without shame", Adam Smith quoted in Sen 2000: 4]
- *Varieties in social climate* [e.g. the quality of public services and community relations]
- *Environmental diversities* [e.g. climate, differential exposure and risk of illnesses]

In her influential codification of Sen's Capability Approach, Ingrid Robeyns distinguishes between three main types of Conversion Factors influencing *the extent to which* a person can transform a resource into Functionings (Robeyns, 2005: 99; 2011; Crocker & Robeyns, 2010: 68):

- *Personal conversion factors* (e.g. metabolism, physical condition, sex, reading skills or intelligence)

- *Social conversion factors* (e.g. public policies, social norms, gendered divisions of labour, social practices that unfairly discriminate, societal hierarchies or power relations)
- *Environmental conversion factors* (e.g. the physical or built environment in which a person lives, climate, pollution, geographical location and topography)

An observation here could be that not only are the examples that Sen and Robeyns give of conversion factors likely to interact with each other; in addition, we have good reasons to expect interdependencies *between* the types. For instance, a person's reading skills will to a great extent be dependent on the existence of a system of universal education and the quality of the education it provides. In this sense, the indicative examples and types of convergence factors are invitations to sociological theorisation about such interrelationships, rather than a strict sorting of factors of relevance for conversion.

In one context, Sen refers to conversion factors by using the term *parametric variability* in the relationship between the means on the one hand and the actual opportunities on the other (Sen, 2005: 154). Wiebke Kuklys and Ingrid Robeyns discuss conversion factors as *non-monetary constraints* when the individual seeks to transform monetary inputs into outcomes, i.e. desired functionings (Kuklys & Robeyns, 2010, pp. 5 & 11). In one paper, Sen (2004: 3) tried out the notion of "conversion handicap", to refer to the disadvantage that a person may have in converting money into a good living.

While these ways of talking about conditions for Conversion are suggestive, they may unwittingly limit our attention to factors that make Conversion processes difficult. For instance, several authors have demonstrated how persons with disabilities tend to be less able to convert financial and other resources into the ways of life they desire than persons without disabilities because of the extra needs or restrictions on time use that many persons with disabilities experience (Zaidi & Burchardt 2003; Burchardt 2004; Burchardt 2010; Kyklus 2010).

Yet, given the broad scope of the examples of conversion factors already mentioned, we could imagine that some of these factors also serve as *facilitators* and *enablers*. Perhaps most persons experience a combination of factors (conditions) constraining and enhancing such processes? For instance, there may be discriminatory practices, but also positive action on the part of governments or employers (i.e. special efforts to provide jobs or accommodations for persons belonging to underrepresented groups). Similarly, while some might assume that persons with disabilities are generally unable to be active in organisations or political affairs, there is substantial evidence that under enabling conditions many persons with disabilities are involved in collective action on equal basis with others (Beadle-Brown et al. 2017). The concept of conversion factors sensitizes us to the empirical variability of constraining and enabling conditions, including the actual scope for active agency even by persons with severe disabilities, that is, when this appears to happen "against all odds". In this sense, the Capability Approach may open our eyes for the unexpected.

After this review of key concepts, we return to the article's main question: How can the idea of conversion processes improve our analyses of agency/structure dynamics? How to model these dynamics?

Modelling agency/structure dynamics in terms of the Capability Approach

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In 2000, Ingrid Robeyns presented a first simplified codification and visual representation of the Capability Approach. Her model involved the following elements: (1) 'Means to achieve' [referring to what she later termed 'Capability inputs'], (2) 'Freedom to achieve'" [referring to the capability set] and (3) 'Achievement' [referring to achieved functioning]. At the same time she highlighted (4) the linkage between (1) and (2) ['Personal and social conversion factors'] and (5) the linkage between (2) and (3) ['Choice'] (Robeyns, 2000: 5). The model had no explicit consideration of possible developments in and interactions between these items and relationships over time, for instance illustrated by some sort of explicit time dimension or feedback loop.

A few years later, Robeyns published a considerably more elaborate and complex version of the 2000 visualisation, now highlighting various sources for capability inputs and specifying a number of dimensions of the social context for individual conversion factors and preference formation (Robeyns, 2005: 98). Again, the model is apparently non-dynamic, that is, without any clear indication of the time dimension. Nevertheless, Robeyns' visualisation has had great impact on other scholars' ways of operationalizing the Capability Approach for use in empirical analyses. Among these analyses, Mario Biggeri and Andrea Ferrannini (2014) have presented one of the richest and most ambitious visualisation of the Capability Approach. Their model builds partly on Robeyns' models, partly on earlier elaborations by Biggeri and his colleagues. Significantly, the Biggeri-Ferrannini model is clearly dynamic, as it contains several feedback loops, although at the cost of considerable complexity. Bearing the mind of the risk of reduced clarity and lack of parsimony if one aspires for completeness, we here adopt a comparatively simple model but one including feedback processes (see Fig.1) **[FIGURE 1 HERE]**.

Here, 'Inputs for capability' may for instance be earnings from economic activities, income transfers, services provided by public or private agencies, various forms of support from families, friends and neighbours, voluntary organisations, positive action or efforts of potential employers as well as strengths and weaknesses of the individual and his or her circumstances. Broadly speaking, we assume that one will find broader societal, economic and political structures behind the generation and social distribution of capability inputs.

Similarly, we assume that broader societal, economic and structures are influencing the nature of – and interaction between – what one singles out as conversion factors. We interpret such factors as consisting of a mix of patterns of some duration or stability, partly shaped by broader societal, economic and political structures, partly by the individual's background, circumstances and life course.

We see the initial conditions – both in the form of capability inputs and conversion factors – as varying by scale, from macro via meso to micro level. This is significant, since most people on their own are mainly able to influence their immediate environments, whereas collective actors and alliances between collective actors may under given circumstances be able to influence larger structures at meso and macro levels.

Following Stones (2005, 100-104), ‘active agency’ refers partly to the dynamic complex of persons’ self-reflection, evaluation of their own experience and observation of the world around them. These aspects of Active agency include their internal dialogues, critical awareness of possibilities for change in the world around them, planning, decision-making, choice, discussion and interaction with others. Active agency refers also to the practical steps – action – that a person takes to achieve some particular aim or outcome, single-handed or together with others. We assume that Active Agency is responsive to but not simply determined by or dependent on contextual, social and environmental processes, whether directly experienced or mediated in one way or other. Our interest is not only how persons’ Active Agency influence the conversion between a Capability Set and Achieved Functionings. A key question is whether – and to what extent – achieved Functionings enter into (or serve as basis for) their Active Agency in the next instance, with the potential result of changing the Capability Set, the Capability Inputs, or even the Conversion Factors, whether locally or more broadly, for better or worse.

Empirical case: exploring disabled prospects for participation on an equal basis with others

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A final issue is what mileage a model of agency-structure dynamics informed by the Capability Approach offers in analyzing disabled people’s participation in society. An overarching goal of the UN CRPD is the notion of “full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”. In the European project, involving comparison of nine countries on which this article is based, we found it fruitful to interpret “full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with other” as being able to achieve the realisation of three basic sets of values in contemporary societies, which we summarise under these headings (Bickenbach et al. 2017, Beadle Brown et al. 2017):

‘Security’: Enjoying social protection against major life risks (such as illness, poverty, violence etc.), avoiding major uncertainties and serious contingencies or the need for individual risk-taking (for instance in relation to financial matters), and living without constant worries about the future.

‘Autonomy’: Enjoying opportunities to live independently, exercising freedom choosing the life and daily activities one has reasons to value and avoiding dependence on or interference from others.

‘Influence’: Instead of living with a feeling over powerlessness, participate in discussion and decisions setting the framework for one’s own life, as well as taking part in public deliberation and decision-making aimed at the promotion of the common good and regulating social behaviour, given the interdependence of human action.

The three set of values are analytically distinct but interrelated and overlapping in practice. Moreover, the three sets of values span commonly valued Functionings in many societies. The three set of valued have some affinity to Sen’s emphasis on respectively ‘well-being’, ‘agency’ and ‘democracy’. Yet, the three sets of values have more in common with the items of Nussbaum’s list of ten Central Capabilities (Nussbaum 2000, 78-79; 2011: 33-34), although there is no simple one-to-one relationship:

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|------------|--|
| Security: | 1. Life, 2. Bodily Health, 3. Bodily Integrity, 7. Affiliation, 8. Other Species, 9. Play, 10. Control over One’s Environment. B. Material |
| Autonomy: | 4. Senses, Imagination, and Thought, 5. Emotions, 6. Practical Reason, 7. Affiliation |
| Influence: | 7. Affiliation, 10. Control over One’s Environment. A. Political |

More specifically, Table 1 summarises what recent discussions in many European countries have identified as the more active aspects of being a human being in society framed in terms of the three sets of values and what implications they may have for the practices of persons with disabilities [TABLE 1 HERE].

For a start, we note that when elaborating these aspects, their implications for persons with disabilities and assumptions about enabling and constraining conditions for persons with disabilities being able to achieve these values, the Capability Approach is helpful, especially in relation to assessing these areas, for instance:

Security: The Capability Approach reminds us that we in principle should be able to take into consideration whether persons with disabilities have extra costs that will reduce their effective purchase power compared with persons with same disposable income but not extra costs related to the impairment, transport, housing, accessibility or other aspects the social or built environment. We should ask whether the public cash benefit system of a country is for such extra costs.

Autonomy: Following the suggestions of Sen and Nussbaum, we do not limit our interest to the extent to which persons with disabilities enjoy more narrowly defined government-managed or market-provided freedom of choice. Rather, we use as standard whether persons with disability achieve effective freedom and real opportunities in the wider Capability meaning of having the possibility to choose the way of life one has reason to value and pursue the ambitions and goals of life that one has reasons to cherish.

Influence: The Capability Approach also emphasises that we need to be sensitive not only to formal limitations in the rights to co-determination and participation in deliberation and decision-making for persons with disabilities but also to the possible gaps between formal possibilities for co-determination and participation and the effective possibilities for such co-determination and participation.

More generally, the Capability Approach helps us to identify factors that enhance or hamper the process of moving from having a formal scope for achieving the three sets of values to being actually able to achieve them.

As next step, we map the agency / structure dynamics more systematically: To the extent that persons with disabilities have access to Capability-inputs, what factors are enabling or constraining the Conversion of these inputs into Capability Sets with regard to the three set of values (i.e., understood as commonly valued Functionings) and the type of Conversion Factors in question? Tables 2a-2c show some possible connections between the three set of values and three types of Conversion Factors. [TABLES 2a-c) HERE].

As Zimmermann (2006, p. 480), Salverda et al. (2009: 8-9) and Hobson (2014: 14) have suggested, the personal characteristics, social arrangements and environmental structures serving as the sources of (i) capability inputs and (ii) the personal characteristics, social arrangements and environmental structures functioning as conversion factors are *not* by nature or intrinsically distinct from each other. Rather this is a question of the researcher's *perspective*, whether one focuses on personal characteristics, social arrangements and environmental structures as sources of Capability Inputs, or whether one alternatively focuses on them as potentially important Conversion Factors, i.e. factors affecting the transformation of Capability Inputs (or Sets) into Functionings (e.g. in terms of security, autonomy or influence).

Tables 2a-c) illustrate how one may go about defining specific personal characteristics, social arrangements and environmental structures, seeing them respectively (i) as sources of Capability Inputs and (ii) as Conversion Factors (and vice versa).

Moreover, there are weighty analytical as well as normative reasons for not focusing exclusively on the nature and social structuring of Conversion Factors. Especially in terms of global inequalities, including the worldwide disparities in the conditions of persons with disabilities (WHO and World Bank, 2011), there are strong reasons for giving attention to the basic adequacy and social distribution of resources, interpreted as Capability Inputs.

Referring back to Fig. 1, we argue that a complete empirical analysis of agency / structure dynamics with regard to possible change in the conditions for persons with disabilities needs to *switch* systematically between the two perspective-dependent roles of personal characteristics, social arrangements and environmental structures (as potential sources of Capability Inputs versus as Conversion Factors; i & ii):

- First, in both instances we regard the personal characteristics, social arrangements and environmental structures as “initial structures” (at Time N) that – directly and indirectly – serve as *conditions* for the extent to or way in which persons with disabilities (individually or collectively) exercise active agency.
- Second, in both instances we look for evidence of *stability or change* in the personal characteristics, social arrangements and environmental structures (at Time N+1), that we have strong reasons to see as result (outcome) of persons with disabilities having exercised active agency or what Archer calls “structural elaboration”.

Evidently, structural changes of significance for persons with disabilities may happen independently of the collective agency of persons belonging to this group. Yet, a critical issue or evaluative aspect is whether we find solid evidence that the Active Agency of persons with disabilities – individually or collectively – has contributed to changes in the conditions for achieving the three sets of values the subsequent period. Such changes include what Stones and O’Reilly call “internal structures” (i.e. “actors’ more lasting dispositions, world views and resources, or their more situated and time-dependent interpretation, learning, ways of thinking and responding”), as well as changes in what they more conventionally call “external structures”. For instance, it is well documented that national and international organisations of and for persons with disabilities played a very active role in drafting what the UN General Assembly eventually adopted as the UN CRPD, 2006 (e.g. Ad Hoc Group, 2004).

More specifically, a complete empirical analysis of agency / structure dynamics needs – for each set of values – to follow these steps:

- To investigate the extent to which existing personal characteristics, social arrangements and environmental structures (as sources of capability inputs or conversion factors) are hindering or enabling persons with disabilities in realising these values.
- To map *how* persons with disabilities target their active agency and go about exercising it.
- To collect and analyse data about the extent to which the use of active agency leads to improvements in the achievement of commonly desired Functionings for persons with disabilities
- To collect and analyse data about the extent to which these improvements next contribute to observable changes initial structures (personal characteristics, social arrangements and environmental structures), whether seen as sources of Capability Inputs or Conversion Factors, that is, a full cycle of agency / structure dynamics.

Obviously, to undertake a complete analysis with these steps is a complex task and involves substantial challenges related to methodology and the quality of the “informational basis”; the

completeness, relevance and quality of the data that are possible to collect. Even if demanding to apply in practice, this kind of model of agency / structure dynamics formulated in terms of the Capability Approach helps the researcher to focus the attention and more systematically investigate such dynamics. The model allows the researcher to clarify theoretically under what conditions persons with disabilities – both as individuals and as collectives (corporate actors) – are most likely to succeed (or fail) in achieving changes toward the realisation of the three sets of values. Based on such achievements, persons with disabilities may next accomplish further modifications in initial internal (personal) structures and/or initial external (social and environmental) structures.

Similarly, with the model we have outlined, it is possible to elaborate the ways in which changes in the sources of Capability Inputs and Conversion processes influence the conditions for strengthening both individual agency and collective (corporate) agency of persons with disabilities and characterise more precisely the relationships between the two levels of agency (cf. Archer, 2000).

Concluding comments

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The paper has sought to clarify how an engagement with the Capability Approach can contribute to a better understanding of factors hampering or enabling human agency – both individual and collective – and the processes reproducing or transforming the structures people face, and through this, improve sociology’s ability to theorise about agency / structure dynamics.

We have asked whether we can imagine that conversion processes are not only effecting persons’ achievement of effective freedom and actual well-being but also their active agency, including the capacity to modify initial structures (i.e. the Capability Inputs and their sources, as well as the Conversion Factors). If so, the result could be a better understanding of agency / structures dynamics seen as *virtuous or vicious circles*. In the first case, the issue is whether a person – perhaps together with others in a similar situation – over time improve his or her situation and achieve more desirable Functionings through subsequent cycles of change. In second case, the issue is how understand the ways in which agency / structure dynamics reproduce social disadvantage. In discussing answers to these questions, our empirical reference has been the conditions for persons with disabilities achieving full and effective participation in society. Our main conclusion is that a model informed by the Capability Approach can help us to capture agency / structure dynamics.

We have argued that it would unfortunate if one with the term “Conversion Factors” only refers to structures that make conversion processes challenging or difficult. Rather than just seeing Conversion Factors as *hindrances* and *constraints*, it is equally worth asking

whether some conversion factors are serving as *facilitators* and *enablers* for desirable outcomes.

In the course of our discussion, we have also observed that the various types of Conversion Factors that scholars within the Capability Approach have identified are likely to be interrelated in a number of ways, rather than being clearly separate and independent of each other. From a sociological point of view, an important task is to clarify the interrelationships or interactions between different types of Conversion Factors.

Similarly, we have underlined that (i) the kind of personal characteristics, social arrangements and environmental structures that according to the Capability Approach (i) serve as sources of *Capability Inputs* and (ii) the kind of personal characteristics, social arrangements and environmental structures that function as *Conversion Factors*, are not intrinsically distinct from each other. It is rather a question of *perspective*; what we are choosing to *focus on* as capability inputs and what we – given this focus – are seeing as potentially important conversion factors, i.e. factors affecting the transformation of these inputs into achieved Functionings.

Given these caveats, we think that sociology will have much to gain from incorporating the Capability Approach's notion of Conversion Factors in its analyses of agency / structure dynamics. Broadly speaking, the Capability Approach's concept of conversion processes can sensitize the sociologist to factors and mechanisms that can make it understandable why change in social structures does not happen in circumstances that appear to be favourable to change, and vice versa, why change sometimes happens in circumstances that do not seem to be promising for achieving personal and social change. *In other words, the Capability Approach's concept of Conversion processes can be an important tool to understanding the unexpected!*

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Appendices: Figures and tables

<text, tables, figures>

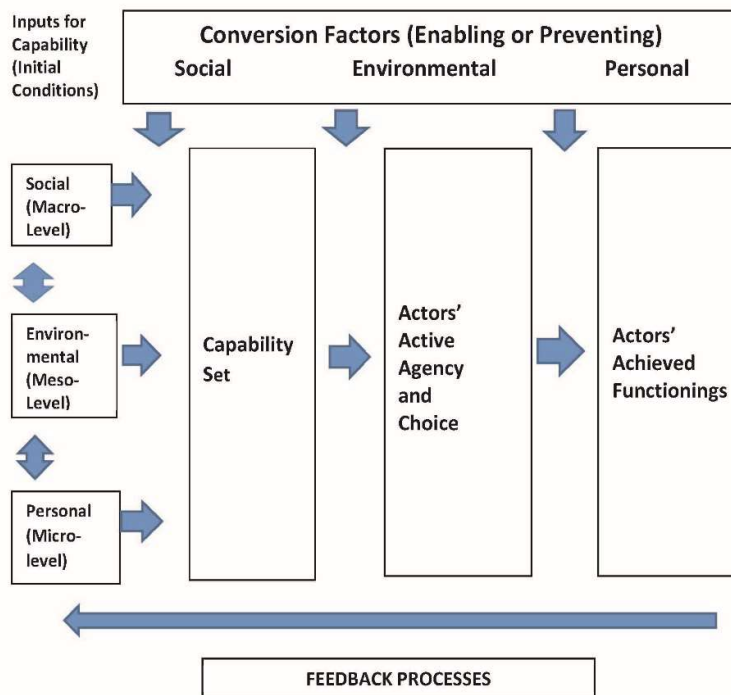


Figure 1: A simplified model of the dynamic relationships between multi-level structural conditions, the exercise of active agency and possible change formulated in terms of the Capability Approach of Amartya Sen (inspired by Robeyns, 2000: 5 and Robeyns, 2005: 98)

Table 1: Commonly valued ‘Functionings’ (Sen) or ‘Central Capabilities’ (Nussbaum) grouped as three sets of values for a good life – examples of their relevance for the practices of persons with disabilities

Sets of values for a good life	Practical implications in general	Examples of practices on the part of persons with disabilities
<p>‘Security’: Enjoy social protection against major life risks (such as illness, poverty, violence etc.), avoid the need for individual risk-taking (for instance in relation to financial matters), and avoiding constant worries about the future.</p>	<p>Being able to exercise both rights and duties on an equal basis with others in society; experiencing reciprocity between one’s own and the community’s responsibilities</p>	<p>Participate in paid work according to qualifications and capacity Claim rights to adequate transfers and services and fulfil reasonable and appropriate duties in return for these</p>
<p>‘Autonomy’: Enjoy opportunities to live independently, exercising freedom choosing the life one has reasons to value and avoiding dependence on or interference from others.</p>	<p>Being able to enjoy independence in everyday life, exercise freedom of choice; being able to take responsibility for one’s own future and risk-protection on an equal basis with others</p>	<p>Live independently in the community; Participate in individual or collective efforts to achieve greater autonomy (e.g. independent / community living, access to paid work, full accessibility to transport, buildings, ICT; personal assistance, mobility or communication supports)</p>
<p>‘Influence’ Participate in discussion and decisions setting the framework for one’s own life as well as in public deliberation and decision-making aimed at the promotion of the common good and regulating social behaviour, given the interdependence of human action.</p>	<p>Being able to exercise co-determination, individually or collectively, participate in self-organised, voluntary and political activities and taking part in the life of the community & civil society</p>	<p>Participate in discussion with authorities / service providers to influence quality and contents of own personal services Participate in campaigns, organisations & conventional politics to combat exclusion and discrimination and fight for full implementation of the UN CRPD</p>

Sources: Hvinden and Halvorsen 2013, p. 20; see also Halvorsen et al 2017.

Table 2a: Some possible relationships between three types of Conversion Factors and the realisation of security as a set of values for a good life of relevance for people with disabilities

		Conversion Factors		
		Personal factors (E.g. Age, gender; ethnicity Capacity & activity restrictions Dispositions, ways of seeing and doing, Perceptions of self; Education, knowledge, Critical awareness about existing structures, their impact and the possibility of change in these)	Social factors (E.g. Institutional arrangements, economic, political & social structures and relations, social norms)	Environmental Factors (E.g. Natural and human-made physical habitat, nature of built environments, transport systems. Housing, information & Communication systems (ICT), degree of universal design and accessibility of all)
Set 1 of values for a good life	Security	E.g. Capacity restrictions adversely affecting the conversion of high education into employment & economic self-sufficiency High education counterbalancing the conversion of capacity restrictions into employment & economic self-sufficiency.	E.g. Social service and other supports counterbalancing the conversion of personal dispositions and perception of self (related to experience with social exclusion, long-term dependence on others, self-stigmatisation & adaptive preferences) into ability for independent living	E.g. Inaccessible built environments, transport systems and workplaces adversely affecting the conversion of high education into employment & economic self-sufficiency

Sources: Beadle-Brown et al 2017; Halvorsen et al 2017.

Table 2b: Some possible relationships between three types of Conversion Factors and the realisation of autonomy as a set of values for a good life of relevance for people with disabilities

		Conversion factors		
		Personal factors (E.g. Age, gender; ethnicity Capacity & activity restrictions Dispositions, ways of seeing and doing, Perceptions of self; Education, knowledge, Critical awareness about existing structures, their impact and the possibility of change in these)	Social factors (E.g. Institutional arrangements, economic, political & social relations, social norms)	Environmental Factors (E.g. Natural and human-made physical habitat, nature of built environments, transport systems. Housing, information & Communication systems (ICT), degree of universal design and accessibility of all)
Set 2 of values for a good life	Autonomy	E.g. Personal dispositions and perception of Self (related to experience with social exclusion, long-term dependence on others, self-stigmatisation & adaptive preferences) adversely affecting the conversion of social service and other supports into independent living	E.g. Social service, personal assistance, budgets, and other supports counterbalancing the conversion of personal dispositions and perception of self (related to experience with social exclusion, long-term dependence on others, self-stigmatisation & adaptive preferences) into ability for independent living	E.g. Inaccessible built environments, transport systems and lack of universally designed housing or reasonable accommodation of housing adversely affecting the conversion of social service and other supports into independent living

Sources: Beadle-Brown et al 2017; Halvorsen et al 2017.

Table 2c: Some possible relationships between three types of Conversion Factors and the realisation of influence as a set of values for a good life of relevance for people with disabilities

		Conversion factors		
		Personal factors (E.g. Age, gender; ethnicity Capacity & activity restrictions Dispositions, ways of seeing and doing, Perceptions of self; Education, knowledge, Critical awareness about existing structures, their impact and the possibility of change in these)	Social factors (E.g. Institutional arrangements, economic, political & social relations, social norms)	Environmental Factors (E.g. Natural and human-made physical habitat, nature of built environments, transport systems. Housing, information & Communication systems (ICT), degree of universal design and accessibility of all)
Set 3 of values for a good life	Influence	E.g. Personal dispositions (related to experience with social exclusion, long-term dependence on others, self-stigmatisation & adaptive preferences) adversely affecting the conversion of more open political opportunity structures into social mobilisation, organisational involvement and political activity	E.g. Social support from family, friends and neighbours enhancing the conversion of more open political opportunity structures into social mobilisation, organisational involvement and political activity	E.g. Enforcement of universal design and full accessibility legislation for the built environment, transport and ICT systems positively influencing the conversion of more open political opportunity structures into social mobilisation, organisational involvement and political activity

Sources: Beadle-Brown et al 2017; Halvorsen et al 2017.

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