

Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative (OPHI)
Oxford Department of International Development
Queen Elizabeth House (QEH), University of Oxford



OPHI *WORKING PAPER NO. 131*

Work and Wellbeing: A Conceptual Proposal

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October 2019

Abstract

Labour is of utmost importance for human wellbeing. Yet a comprehensive framework that can reflect the empirical diversity of labour activities along with each activities' manifold effects on human wellbeing is still lacking. An additional challenge for any such framework is to adequately handle fundamental moral ambiguities, which are inherent to many forms of work. This paper argues that a conceptualisation of labour within the capability approach can meet these requirements. Specifically, I argue that labour can be conceived as a characteristic-providing activity, where obtained characteristics are then transformed into functioning achievements, while accounting for both individual and societal heterogeneity. Additionally, paying adequate attention to unfreedoms experienced by agents turns out to be vital for a comprehensive account. Finally, the paper discusses policy handles, offers suggestions for particular applications, and identifies several other benefits for labour economics.

Keywords: human wellbeing, capability approach, working conditions, labour economics

JEL Classification: I31, J80, J01

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This study has been prepared within the OPHI theme on multidimensional measurement.

Acknowledgments

This paper benefited from very helpful comments and suggestions made by Sabina Alkire, Ortrud Lefßmann, Ingrid Robeyns, and by the participants at the annual conference of the Human Development and Capability Association (2015). Thanks to Ann Barham for copy-editing this manuscript.

Funding information:

The author also gratefully acknowledges funding from the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities' Juan de la Cierva Research Grant Programs (IJCI-2017-33950), the European Research Council (ERC-2014-StG-637768, EQUALIZE project); and the CERCA Programme, Generalitat de Catalunya.

Citation: Suppa, N. (2019). 'Work and wellbeing: A conceptual proposal.' OPHI Working Paper 131, University of Oxford.

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1 Introduction

The importance of labour or work for human wellbeing is hard to overstate.¹ Most people do work to survive or to make their ends meet. Work is, however, also vital for human wellbeing beyond its monetary benefits. Indeed, initiatives to measure poverty and wellbeing more comprehensively endorse a work or employment dimension in one form or another (OECD, 2011; Stiglitz et al., 2009; Atkinson et al., 2002; Ranis et al., 2006; Alkire, 2007). Additionally, more specialised efforts seeking to improve both actual working conditions and their measurement, like the Decent Work Agenda of the International Labour Organization (ILO) or the Quality of Employment initiative led by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), also reflect the significance of work for wellbeing (Burchell et al. 2014 offer an overview). Many of these efforts are based on previous research that is, however, fragmented across numerous disciplines, including social psychology, economics, or medical sciences. Yet, a comprehensive conceptual framework, which can guide specific empirical exercises and unify the results from different disciplines, is still missing.

Amartya Sen advocated repeatedly for comprehensive frameworks for the assessment and evaluation of human wellbeing (Sen, 2000b), but also for work-related exercises (Sen, 2000a).² The present paper argues that the capability approach (CA), as developed in Sen (1980, 1985a,b, 1992, 1999), offers a convenient and comprehensive normative framework to explore the role of work in human wellbeing more rigorously. Normative frameworks allow both evaluative and prescriptive exercises, if appropriately specified, and may well be supplemented by alternative explanatory theories. Indeed, the capability approach has been deliberately left ‘underspecified’ to allow for different applications such as poverty measurement, cost-benefit analysis, and theories of justice (e.g., Robeyns, 2005a). Consequently, there is sufficient room to integrate different theories of choice or study various economic mechanisms, as well as allow for other discipline- or purpose-specific demands. Additionally, the capability approach is also general enough to be applied to both developing and advanced economies (unlike, e.g., the basic needs approach). Finally, the capability approach has a profound philosophical foundation.

Even though some important work on the labour-wellbeing nexus has already been done

¹Throughout this paper I use the terms ‘work’ and ‘labour’ interchangeably.

²Specifically, Sen (2000a, pp. 120–121) argues that selecting specific groups of employed runs the risk of neglecting others (e.g., formal versus informal sector employment or employed versus unemployed) and that sometimes ethical trade-offs may arise, where concerns of different groups may have to be balanced (e.g., softening labour regulations to create new jobs).

from a capability perspective, somewhat surprisingly, it is not yet entirely clear how to conceptualize labour from a capability perspective. While Sen frequently refers to examples like unemployment, child labour, bond labour, or female labour market access to illustrate specific aspects of deprivations (e.g., in Sen, 1999), he usually does not enumerate work or labour as a functioning or capability (see also Leßmann, 2010, pp.3–4). However prior to the development of the capability approach, Sen (1975) had indeed pointed to the principle importance of non-monetary benefits of work.³

Within the wider capability literature most labour-related studies focus on one particular aspect, such as unemployment (e.g., Schokkaert and van Ootegem, 1990; Sen, 1997; Olejniczak, 2012; Egdell and Graham, 2017), voice and employee participation (e.g., Bonvin, 2012), labour market liberalization (Lehwess-Litzmann, 2012), specific forms of labour like care-work (Lewis and Giullari, 2005), the decent work agenda (Leßmann, 2010), the concept of job satisfaction (Leßmann and Bonvin, 2011), or gender aspects (Robeyns, 2003).⁴ Additionally, some studies were initiated in order to understand work as a dimension or capability on its own (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2006; Bonvin, 2012). Nonetheless, it is currently far from clear how to conceive of labour within a capability perspective and more research on this topic is frequently called for (e.g., Richardson, 2015, pp. 169–170). Particular challenges in doing so include (i) the diversity of activities in which labour can manifest (ranging from crop-farming to mining to shoe cleaning to neurosurgery), where (ii) the prevalence of specific manifestations varies considerably across both place and time. Additionally, (iii) every single labour activity affects wellbeing in many distinct ways and, finally, (iv) many forms of work are morally ambiguous (i.e. ambiguous in their valuation). Robeyns (2003, p. 80) for instance argues that care work and paid work ‘pose interpretation difficulties because they cannot unambiguously be seen as contributing to the wellbeing of the worker’. Indeed, a general account of the work-wellbeing nexus should be able to adequately cover all forms of work, including child labour, bonded labour or slavery, and help to handle moral ambiguities.

The present paper explores the idea of understanding labour as activities that provide specific characteristics, as initially suggested by Lancaster (1966a) in his new approach to consumer theory. Each characteristic may, however, in turn have different impacts on different functionings (i.e. dimensions of human wellbeing), as briefly indicated in Sen (1985a). Additionally, I use the term ‘functioning’ more conservatively to refer to what previously has been

³Specifically, Sen (1975) distinguishes (i) production, (ii) income, and (iii) recognition aspect of work.

⁴These and related aspects have been discussed in two special issues (see Bartelheimer et al., 2012; Abbatecola et al., 2012).

called ‘universal’ or ‘general’ functionings (Robeyns, 2017; Alkire, 2002b), whereby homogeneity in ends emerges through diversity in means. Moreover, I argue that many forms of labour can be modelled well by the characteristics they provide. A comprehensive account of the labour-wellbeing nexus, however, requires a coherent concept of freedom. Otherwise, key elements for normative assessments of the labour-wellbeing link are likely to be missed. Indeed, uniting the argumentation for the functioning-space with an account of freedom is a unique contribution of the capability approach (Alkire, 2005, p. 118). As this paper seeks to make a conceptual contribution, the proposal has to remain equally applicable across places and time. In fact, selecting relevant dimensions of human wellbeing and forms of work (including the level of abstraction) is part of each particular capability application, whereby context-sensitivity is established.

The present paper also seeks to harness the capability approach for different questions in labour economics. Several advantages for topics studied in labour economics follow. As a conceptual framework, the capability approach can first help to consolidate both theoretical and empirical research across different disciplines such as economics, sociology, or psychology – a case in point being the research on the loss in life satisfaction associated with unemployment (Winkelmann and Winkelmann, 1998; Clark, 2003; Knabe et al., 2010; Hetschko et al., 2013). Additionally, the capability approach can supplement conventional economic choice analysis to allow for a more refined analysis of, for example, labour supply decisions. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the capability approach provides a normative framework for treatment evaluations that seek to study outcomes related to human wellbeing. Likewise, normatively challenging topics like child labour, which may exhibit moral ambiguities can be studied more rigorously as well.⁵

Finally, the present paper also argues that capability applications in labour economics may strongly benefit from advancements in similar capability applications – such as the measurement of multidimensional poverty (e.g., Alkire et al., 2015). Common questions include the selection of the dimensions of human wellbeing, the concept of advantage, setting critical thresholds in attainments, and choosing weighting schemes for dimensions. Additionally, I suggest explicitly spelling out both the functionings potentially affected and the forms of labour possibly involved in a particular exercise. Lists of relevant forms of labour (along with their characteristics) may prove useful in concrete exercises, similar to ‘capability lists’ as a tool to select dimensions (Alkire, 2002a). Importantly, the suggested approach remains comprehensive and underspecified to allow for diverse concrete applications.

⁵For surveys on child labour see Basu (1999); Edmonds (2008).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: section 2 briefly reviews two key approaches that have been employed to study the work-wellbeing nexus whereas section 3 introduces the individual elements of the conceptual framework. Section 4 provides an extensive discussion and section 5 offers some concluding remarks.

2 Previous Literature

This section briefly introduces two particularly helpful models that have been used to study specific aspects of the work-wellbeing nexus, namely the so-called latent functions model and the vitamin model.⁶

First, social psychologist Marie Jahoda (1981, 1982) provides an early account of the non-monetary *latent functions* of work. This line of psychological research exploits the stark contrast between employed and unemployed people, rather than within employment differences. Eisenberg and Lazarsfeld (1938) offer a survey of the early literature. Starting with the observations from the famous Marienthal study (Jahoda et al., 1974), Jahoda identifies five latent functions of employment, which the unemployed lack – in addition to the manifest function of earning an income.⁷ These latent functions include (i) the time structure provided by employment, (ii) the social contacts outside the family resulting from work, (iii) collective goals and purposes that go beyond the individual, (iv) status and identity that are provided by work, and finally (v) mandatory activity. Subsequent research highlights the relevance of labour's latent functions following the growth of welfare states during the postwar period Jahoda (1979). While Jahoda's latent-functions account has recently been invoked to better understand the dissatisfaction of the unemployed (Hetschko et al., 2013; Schöb, 2013), the goal pursued here is more broad. Several criticisms of this account have been voiced (e.g., Fryer, 1986, pp. 7–14), including that working conditions are routinely problematic by themselves (and thus only offer a poor benchmark) and that the non-occupational environment, which is crucial for the unemployed experience, varies widely. Moreover, the paternalistic patient view as has been criticised because 'individuals vary widely in the values to which they subscribe, ends they pursue, what they require and expect of life' (Fryer, 1986,

⁶A comprehensive survey of the literature that addresses particular aspects of this nexus is beyond the scope of this paper. Related research examining, for example, job characteristics (from a slightly different perspective) include the theory of compensating wage differentials (Rosen, 1974, 1986) the job characteristics model of Hackman and Oldham (1980), the demand-control model of Karasek (1979), or the literature on the statistical value of a life (Viscusi and Aldy, 2003).

⁷This study was conducted in the Austrian town of Marienthal in the early 1930s and was first published in German in 1933.

Table 1: The vitamin model

Feature	Description
1. personal influence	having some discretion, opportunity to make own decisions
2. using your abilities	having the opportunity to apply skills or expertise: (a) using skills, (b) building up new skills
3. demands and goals	being required to achieve job outcomes that are challenging: (a) level of task demands, (b) conflicting demands
4. variety	variation in activity and/or place
5. clear requirements & outlook	knowing what is expected, how you're doing, and what might happen in the future
6. social contacts	interactions with people: (a) amount of contacts, (b) pleasantness, helpfulness
7. money	being paid well for what you do
8. adequate physical setting	acceptable physical working conditions: (a) pleasant and (b) safe working environment
9. a valued role	being in a job that is personally significant to you: (a) status level, (b) contribution to other people, (c) opportunity to enhance your feeling of self-worth
10. supportive supervision	having bosses who support your welfare in working well
11. good career outlook	being able to look forward to a good future: (a) current job security, (b) opportunity for promotion
12. fair treatment	being part of an organization that treats employees and others fairly

Notes: Table based on [Warr and Clapperton \(2010\)](#).

p. 11). Additionally, the latent functions approach also ignores alternative institutions providing similar functions (such as voluntary work) and focuses entirely on the fulfilment of functions, while ignoring their actual appreciation (e.g., enforced social contacts, oppressive clocking, etc.). Finally, the difficulties in operationalizing and applying the latent functions model to a particular research setting have also been lamented.

Second, work psychologist Peter Warr developed the so-called *vitamin model*, which was deliberately devised to include, but go beyond previous approaches, including Jahoda's latent functions model ([Warr, 1994](#), p.94). Essentially, this line of research identified and refined several 'environmental features' of work that are relevant for mental health ([Warr, 1987, 2007](#); [Warr and Clapperton, 2010](#)). Table 1 provides an overview of relevant job features along with a short description. The eponymous element of this model is that the effects of a job's features on mental health may be nonlinear, similar to vitamins. More specifically, some job features, like an adequate physical setting, improve mental health up to a certain point, whereas additional improvements become ineffective (similar to vitamin C consumption). Other job features, like social contacts, also improve mental health up to a point. Social contacts beyond this threshold however reduce mental health, similar to vitamin A.

[Warr \(1987, pp.20–21\)](#) enumerates several advantages of his approach, including that such a framework allows the description and study of all jobs, either a single job, groups of occupations, or all together. Additionally, it is supposed to be applicable to unemployment, and, moreover, different environments, domestic work, retirement, or voluntary work. Finally, the model also entails implications for measurement. Thus, in several ways the vitamin model seizes on the critique of Jahoda's approach. The vitamin model, in turn, was criticised

among other things for not carefully distinguishing between the social environment of a person and its interpretation by the experiencing individual (e.g., [Ezzy, 1993](#), p. 46).

In contrast to these previous approaches, the present paper refines the work-wellbeing relationship (i) by defining job characteristics more narrowly in the Lancaster-sense, (ii) by permitting the nonlinear influence of job characteristics to vary parametrically with conversion factors, and (iii) by introducing additional outcomes, thereby allowing a multidimensional approach to human wellbeing. Additionally, the freedom embodied in the concept of the capability reduces the degree of paternalism and reveals certain fundamental unfreedoms consequentialist approaches tend to ignore. Finally, the present proposal is developed within the capability approach, which has a thorough philosophical foundation and entails ample research on different particular capability applications.

3 Conceptual Framework

Lancaster's characteristics approach

[Lancaster \(1966a,b, 1971\)](#) argued that characteristics of commodities, rather than commodities themselves, provide utility to the consumer. A commodity bundle $x = (x_1, \dots, x_k, \dots, x_K)$, however, provides a specific set of characteristics $c = (c_1, \dots, c_j, \dots, c_J)$. Specifically, a single good may provide several characteristics and the same set of characteristics may be obtained from different commodity bundles. For instance, a certain dish provides both a specific amount of calories and a specific nutritional composition. Both, however, may be obtained from a different diet as well. Lancaster introduced $\phi(\cdot)$, the so-called consumption technology, to describe these relations, i.e. $c = \phi(x)$. Characteristics are objectively attached to the goods and are measurable in principle. In many instances, the component functions of $c(\cdot)$ may be assumed linear, but sometimes nonlinear forms may be reasonable as well (see p. 12, but also [Lancaster 1966b](#), p. 135).

Already [Lancaster \(1966b, pp. 145–148\)](#) extended the analysis of characteristics to activities (e.g., labour, leisure, and occupations), which are defined as consuming time when undertaken. The essential feature of any labour activity is its contribution to production, i.e. the 'production aspect' of labour. Each labour activity provides a certain bundle of characteristics. As for goods, job characteristics are considered to be objective to the activity and measurable, at least in principle. Labour may or may not earn an income (e.g., wage labour or voluntary work). For convenience, all choice variables are stacked into one vector, giving

Figure 1: An illustration of a consumption technology matrix

	wage labour		self-employed		domestic work	
contracted wage	yes	yes	no	no	yes	no
permanent contract	yes	no	no	no	yes	no
pension claim	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	no
empl. protection	yes	no	no	no	no	no
hours limit	45	none	none	none	48	none
...
auton. decision	few	few	many	med	med	med
repetitive tasks	high	med	few	few	few	few
...
risk injury	0.02	0.5	...	0.04	...	0.04
risk fatality	0.08	0.15	...	0.01	...	0.01

$$\mathbf{x} = (L_1, \dots, L_j, \dots, L_n; x_1 \dots x_k \dots x_K) \quad \text{and} \quad \mathbf{c} = \phi \mathbf{x}. \quad (1)$$

Job characteristics could be the time exposed to harmful conditions, the risk for occupational accidents, the type of contract (e.g., permanent, fixed, none), the type of remuneration (e.g., contracted hourly wage, profit, none), core responsibilities performed (ranging from varied to repetitive), opportunities or requirements for a certain skill application, or calorie consumption requirements. Both economists and psychologists have already studied several job characteristics from various perspectives.⁸

Forms of work

Using this setup allows one to consistently describe many otherwise quite different manifestations of labour. Specifically, forms of labour can be defined implicitly by certain characteristics; see figure 1 for an illustration. Wage-labour, for instance, could be characterised by its remuneration – a contracted hourly wage, for example. Domestic work, instead, may or may not provide a contracted wage (or even no remuneration at all), but it could be identified

⁸Prominent lines of research in economics using job characteristics include compensating wage differentials (e.g., Rosen, 1974, 1986) and the statistical value of a life (e.g., Viscusi and Aldy, 2003).

via the environment in which the labour takes place. Working in subsistence agriculture is usually not associated with any remuneration at all. In fact, this view allows many different forms of, for example, wage labour, which is sensible, since wage labour may be very diverse with respect to other job characteristics (e.g., risk of injury). Moreover, an individual could also combine several work activities.

The approach of defining forms of labour implicitly through the job characteristics they manifest is flexible enough to allow both more job details and more forms of work if needed. Concrete applications will however have to select a subset of job characteristics and forms of work pertinent to that specific exercise. Local labour markets in the metropolitan area of London and rural Ethiopia naturally require different classification, just as cross-country comparisons require a higher level of abstraction. At this stage lists of common forms of work and important job characteristics may prove helpful in a concrete application to ensure comprehensive coverage and manageability.

The resource constraint

Many labour activities earn a wage. Let w_j be the wage rate for labour activity L_j . While $w_j > 0$ for most labor activities, for some labour activities $w_j = 0$, e.g., for voluntary work. For convenience, the total amount of time available is normalized to 1, i.e. $\sum_j L_j = 1$. Moreover, market goods $x_1, \dots, x_k, \dots, x_K$ can be purchased for prices $p_1, \dots, p_k, \dots, p_K$. Thus resource constraint is

$$\sum x_j p_j = \sum w_i L_i + R \quad (2)$$

where R is nonworking income. It is straightforward to extend this equation to explicitly cover, for example, the tax-transfer systems, saving decisions, interest-bearing endowments, etc. Appropriately extended, it can capture all societal mechanisms relevant to the resource allocation to households. Important for the present study is that the resource constraint highlights two aspects that introduce more complexity to the work-wellbeing nexus, namely the ‘income-aspect’ and the ‘time-aspect’ of work. Specifically, while being entirely located in the space of resources, the budget constraint connects and constrains different functioning achievements.

Functionings and the capability set

The capability approach argues functionings to be the constitutive elements of human well-being (Sen, 1985a, 1992). Functionings are the doings and beings individuals have reason to value (e.g., being well nourished). Achieving functionings, such as actually being well-nourished, requires resources – for example, food or, more precisely, nutrients and calories. The production of functionings can be written as

$$b_i = f(c(x), z_i, z_s, z_e). \quad (3)$$

As transforming resources into functionings varies with individuals, societies, or environments, so-called conversion factors z_\bullet are introduced. For instance, people of different ages, pregnant women, or people with metabolic diseases all require different bundles of nutrients and calories (i.e. characteristics) to achieve being well nourished. The capability of an individual is the set of functionings an individual can actually choose and can be written as

$$Q_i = \{b_i \mid b_i = f(c(x_i), z_i, z_s, z_e) \quad \forall x_i \in X_i\}. \quad (4)$$

Capabilities have been characterised in different ways, including as ‘positive freedoms’ (Sen, 1985b, 1988), ‘real opportunities’ (Sen, 1992), and ‘option-freedoms’ (Robeyns, 2017). Broadly speaking, capability sets describe the different lives an individual actually can lead. An important feature is the capability set reflects all kinds of constraints (whether external or internal) that reduce an individual’s options. It is important to note that, depending on the exercise at hand, the actually achieved functionings, the whole capability set, or severely reduced capability sets may be of prime interest (e.g., Sen, 1993a), see also section 4.3. Other crucial features clarify that capability sets are not to be confused with conventional budget sets as usually invoked in economics. In particular, not-chosen functionings may nonetheless be valued, and thus evaluational exercises need to register if such an option (e.g., political participation) is eliminated from the choice set. Moreover, the actual presence of non-chosen options may affect the evaluation of chosen options. For instance, assuming equal nutritional achievements, actually available but not-chosen functioning achievements distinguish the fasting from the starving person (e.g., Sen, 1988, pp. 290–291). Finally, the process of choice is of ultimate relevance as well. One could argue ‘choosing the life one has reason to value’ to be a functioning on its own (e.g. Sen, 1985a, 1992). It is important to note that, while this process-aspect of freedom is of ultimate importance as well, only the opportunity aspect

of freedom is immediately embodied in the concept of a capability (see, e.g., [Sen, 2002](#)).

For the present paper I use the terms ‘functionings’ and ‘capabilities’ more conservatively than often observed in the literature. Specifically, I choose a higher level of abstraction and refer to functionings only in the sense of what previously has been called ‘general functionings’ ([Alkire, 2002b](#), p. 31) or ‘basic functionings’ ([Williams, 1987](#), p. 101). Similarly, [Robeyns \(2017, p. 40\)](#) distinguishes ‘universal functionings’ from ‘context-dependent functionings’, where the former abstract from the current social circumstances. The higher level of abstraction introduces an invariance in the sense that it facilitates comparability over place and time, but also supports the level of agreement for a particular functioning.⁹

Labour and wellbeing

Labour may have numerous and diverse effects on human wellbeing, i.e. different functionings. The effects of certain labour activities on health, for instance, are by now so established that they have a common name: occupational diseases. Prominent occupational diseases are silicosis, miners’ nystagmus, and postural defects, which result from exposure to hazardous working conditions, a relevant job characteristic (e.g., [ILO, 2010](#)). Moreover, mental health might be reduced by post-traumatic stress disorder, burnout, fear of failure, and depression (e.g., [Warr, 1987](#); [ILO, 2010](#)). While the effects on health are relatively well documented and widely accepted, things are different for more complex functionings. While research has begun to explore the effects on happiness or life satisfaction, more detailed research is still needed, since jobs are often only measured rather crudely using employment status (e.g., [Benz and Frey, 2008](#)).¹⁰ Deprivation in ‘appearing in public without shame’ or ‘social participation’, two other important functionings, may originate from the stigmatization of certain jobs (e.g., cleaning activities) but also joblessness ([Kunze and Suppa, 2017](#)). Labour activities may play a crucial role in achieving agency, meaning the ability to strive for self-set goals. More specifically, jobs can be viewed as devices for achieving these self-set goals (as is often true of doctors, politicians, journalists, or researchers). Thus, there is also an association between vocation and calling. Indeed, previous research in labour economics notes the relevance of the mission of both the organisation and the employee as well as their match ([Besley and Ghatak, 2005](#)). The ‘mission aspect’ of work lately received renewed attention in

⁹For instance, the level of abstraction can be increased from ‘wearing a suite for a wedding’ to ‘wearing adequate clothes for a wedding’ to, for example, ‘participating in social life’ and ‘respecting yourself’. See also, for example, [Sen \(1992, pp. 108–109\)](#) and [Robeyns \(2017, pp. 96–97\)](#).

¹⁰Being happy can be conceived as one particular functioning among others ([Sen, 2008](#)).

the conceptualisation of meaningful work (Cassar and Meier, 2018).¹¹ Other more complex functionings related to work include the *flow* experience, which may occur while playing the violin or while working on the assembly line (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990), but also *contributing one's share*.¹²

Indirect effects

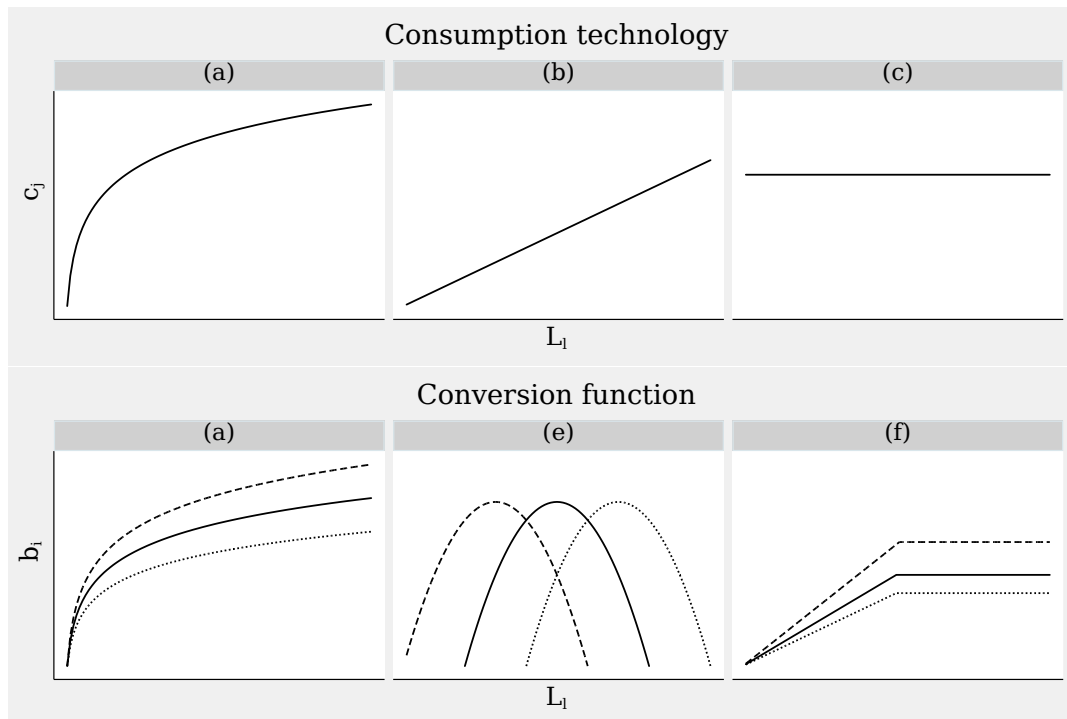
The previous paragraph highlights direct effects of labour on human wellbeing. However, labour also affects human wellbeing indirectly through the resource constraint. First, the 'income-aspect' of labour is for most people the crucial determinant of their level of consumption (and therefore also of the capability set). Consequently, low wages or no remunerated work at all threatens not only the level of consumption but ultimately also functioning achievements, like being well-nourished or being sheltered. Second, long hours worked may drain time from other activities (e.g., meeting friends and family, doing sports, or reading), thereby also potentially reducing other functioning achievements (e.g., being healthy or participating in social life). Both the income-generating and the time-consuming aspect of labour introduce important interdependencies across functionings. Thus, both aspects render a comprehensive assessment of the labour-wellbeing nexus an even more intricate exercise.

Conversion factors

Conversion factors modify the influence of work on a certain functioning or wellbeing more generally. Consequently, they are also the prime source for examining and understanding differences in the labour-wellbeing nexus across both time and region. For instance, whether or not 'cleaning work' or joblessness result in stigmatization hinges on social norms (e.g., Clark, 2003), which can be conceived as social conversion factors. The same characteristics may have different effects on functionings in different countries, as norms do vary. Likewise, social norms about the 'normality' or 'appropriateness' of women working outside of the home may also modify several achievements (see e.g., Sen, 1999, pp.115–6). Despite being possibly legal, not choosing a job outside the family may appear to be more rational,

¹¹Note, however, that recent studies on meaningful work propose a wider notion than what is described here as agency. In fact, other functionings (but also job characteristics) are frequently subsumed under meaningful work, including physical safety and associated social relations or relatedness (Spencer, 2015; Cassar and Meier, 2018).

¹²In economics this literature is referred to as research 'pro-social preferences', see Meier (2006) for a survey.

Figure 2: Linking labour activities and functionings

once the social cost associated with this work is taken into account (which is of course not a justification). Importantly, whether the job characteristic of a contracted wage ultimately renders functionings less precarious also depends on a working judicial system. Regulations like sick pay and their take-up, which result from legal and social norms, shape the influence on health, as well.

Individual conversion factors also matter (though are less interesting from a policy perspective). For example, how rescue forces deal with traumatic experiences in part depends on both initial mental and physical conditions. Likewise there are individual differences in what overtaxing workloads and choices constitute.

The labour-wellbeing nexus

Drawing on both the consumption technology and the conversion function offers a versatile way to describe the link between labour activities and functioning achievements. The consumption technology describes how much of some objective job characteristics can be obtained with a given amount of time spent on a certain labour activity. Figure 2 shows three plausible functional forms of consumption technologies. Case (b) depicts for instance a lin-

ear or even proportional relationship, which could describe the exposure time to a harmful condition (e.g., the time spent in an asbestos-contaminated room), whereas case (c) describes a binary characteristic – for example, if the person receives a *contracted* wage or is performing a ‘cleaning activity’.

The conversion function introduces another source of nonlinearity; this time, however, it is between the characteristics objective to the labour activity and the different functioning achievements. As already stressed by psychological research on the vitamin model, cases (e) and (f) of figure 2 do empirically matter, at least with respect to mental health (they correspond to vitamin A and C, respectively). Other nonlinearities, such as decreasing marginal effects in case (d), can however also be modelled. While the consumption technology is the same for all individuals (because characteristics are objective to an activity), the effect of a given amount of characteristics may, however, parametrically vary between individuals due to conversion factors (as illustrated in figure 2). For instance, the optimal amount of social contacts or variety in tasks may vary with, for example, innate predispositions and physical conditions.

The outlined perspective highlights two further aspects: First, empirical studies may want to carefully distinguish between characteristics that are really objective to the labour activity (e.g., amount of social contacts) and the individual’s assessment of this (e.g., what is optimal). Moreover, one may want to account for different amounts of characteristics due to different hours worked. Second, each labour activity provides several characteristics and can thus be considered multidimensional. Each characteristic, in turn, can affect several functionings. Therefore, it seems adequate (i) to view labour activities as a multipurpose means for achieving human wellbeing (similar to income) and (ii) to distinguish the multidimensionality of labour activities carefully from the multidimensionality of human wellbeing.

The role of freedom and capability deprivations

Much of the previous argumentation relies on the distinction between the resource space and the functioning space. The key contribution of the capability approach is however to unite the argumentation for the functioning space with an account of freedom, which manifests in the concept of the capability set (e.g., [Alkire, 2005](#), p. 18). This perspective allows the reconceptualizing of old ideas in novel ways. Development, for instance, can be conceived as expanding actual freedoms, i.e. capability expansion ([Sen, 1990](#)), whereas poverty can be understood as capability deprivation, i.e. specific forms of unfreedom ([Sen, 1992](#), ch. 7). Both views figure prominently in [Sen \(1999\)](#). The concern for certain unfreedoms and the

expansion of actual freedoms makes a difference for work-related evaluations of wellbeing or social arrangements more generally. Four short examples may help to illustrate different, but related aspects.

First, slavery and bond labour were, and still are, often characterised by hazardous and horrible working conditions. However, even if slaves in the pre-Civil War South of the United States, for instance, had similar incomes and, moreover, life expectancies were not particularly low, as claimed by [Fogel and Engerman \(1974/2013\)](#), a freedom-centered perspective immediately points to the fundamental deprivation people suffer: both an alarmingly degenerated capability set and a grave violation of process freedoms (see, e.g., [Sen, 1999](#), p. 113).¹³ Note that occupational bans – for example, on ethnic minorities – or the limited options of women working outside the family can be conceptualized in a similar way (although these are usually less drastic in practice). In effect, then, the functionings one has reasons to value cannot be realized by a specific subgroup of the society under consideration (or their realization comes at a particularly high cost) due to (usually) a combination of legal and social norms.

Recent estimates suggest that about 25 million people worldwide still suffer from conditions of forced labour ([ILO, 2017b](#)). This report emphasises that the forced labour situation follows from a person's relationship to the 'employer' – irrespective of the other working conditions ([ILO, 2017b](#), p. 16). In line with this, according to the ILO Convention 182 III, the worst forms of child labour, a subset of children in employment, include 'all forms of slavery or similar to slavery', or as [Sen \(1999, p. 115\)](#) put it: 'The system of child labor – bad enough on its own – is made much beastlier still through its congruence with bondage and effective slavery.' A freedom-centered perspective thus contributes substantive insights that a purely consequentialist perspective would overlook, whereby additional depth is added to the normative assessment of, for example, child labor.

Second, some forms of capability deprivations are probably best understood as a choice resulting from a painful dilemma. Individuals may have to choose between two valued functioning achievements, or ways of living more generally, because they cannot attain both simultaneously. Drawing on his own recollection, [Sen \(1999, p. 8\)](#) gives the example of Kader Mia, a Muslim day labourer, who had to choose between feeding his family and protecting his health, as he only found work in a Hindu neighbourhood in troubled times. Quite similar in

¹³In fact, the inability of the utilitarian (and other consequentialist) approaches to register the fundamental deprivation of 'happy slaves' is one of Sen's critiques (e.g., [Sen, 1999](#), p. 62). A capability perspective explicitly allows severely deprived people to experience flow or 'take pleasures in small mercies' ([Sen, 1985a](#), p. 14).

nature to this problem are the choices that people, especially women, have to make between family life and a professional career (another example would be gay football players). See also [Wolff and de-Shalit \(2007, pp. 1–3\)](#) for similar examples.¹⁴ Although conceptually clear, these sorts of deprivations are difficult to detect and examine, as both a multidimensional account of wellbeing and information about the feasibility of a not-chosen option matter.

Third, an instructive illustration is the historical emergence of wage labour, see [Suppa \(2014\)](#) for more details on this. This transition from slavery and serfdom to wage labour was, *inter alia*, characterised by free access to labour markets, moving about freely, and abolishing various regulations of the guilds regarding marriage and owning land. Indeed, [Marx \(1990, p. 875\)](#) considers this development as an ‘emancipation from serfdom and from the fetters of the guilds.’¹⁵ Marx, however, also notes that the new wage labourers were ‘robbed of all their own means of production, and all the guarantees of the existence afforded by the old feudal arrangements’, which usually included basic economic support in case of illness or protection against robbery. A capability perspective reflects both the extent to which capability sets are expanded by overthrowing the old regime and the novel constraints preventing individuals from achieving higher levels in human functionings.

Finally, both specific labour activities and unemployment are typically associated with several different forms of deprivations. For instance, [Sen \(1999, p. 21\)](#), points out that unemployment goes beyond a loss of income since¹⁶

it is also a source of far-reaching debilitating effects on individual freedom, initiative, and skills. Among its manifold effects, unemployment contributes to the ‘social exclusion’ of some groups, and it leads to losses of self-reliance, self-confidence and psychological and physical health.

In fact, [Sen \(1999, pp.21–22\)](#) refers to unemployment in more affluent countries as one example where the perspective of poverty as capability deprivation entails a significant difference compared with the conventional income-centered view. The suggested framework reflects unemployment as a reduced choice set of labour activities, implying the unemployed lack several (Lancaster-) characteristics (which are conventionally obtained through labour activities), leading them to finally end up with low functioning achievements. Additionally, the

¹⁴The indirect effects of time and income may often play an important role in these matters.

¹⁵Interestingly, Marx is worried that ‘bourgeois historians’ would only see this aspect, whereas most economists actually would only emphasise the *instrumental* relevance of these freedoms, i.e. the efficiency of markets, see also [Sen \(1993b\)](#) on the intrinsic value of freedoms.

¹⁶See also [Sen \(1999, pp.94–96\)](#) [Sen \(1997\)](#) on this.

systems of social and legal norms may prevent them from pursuing alternative activities that would restore self-respect or enable them to appear in public without shame. Obviously, the extent to which unemployment translates into low functioning achievement is subject to conversion factors (including social and legal norms) and hence may vary with time and place.

4 Discussion

4.1 Policy handles and policy implications

The capability approach as such does not entail any claims about specific economic or social mechanisms, rather its interface allows for competing theories (Robeyns, 2017; Suppa, 2014). Consequently, it does not offer any immediate policy implications. Neither does the capability approach as such provide any political priorities or other prescriptions. More specifically, advocating for institutional changes in social arrangements (e.g., regarding the labour market) or for certain minimal capability sets to be guaranteed to every person, or criticizing practices by the authorities, are all certainly doable within a capability perspective. However, the capability approach then has to be further specified into a particular capability theory – for example, of human rights (Sen, 2004b, 2005) or minimal social justice (e.g., Nussbaum, 2007). These additional decisions, however, have to be made explicit and require additional justification.¹⁷

What the general framework does offer are different policy handles to which policy measures can refer. For instance, there are good reasons to abolish and outlaw some forms of labour, including slavery, serfdom, or child prostitution. As Sen (1999, p. 115) put it: ‘The starkness of slavery yields a forceful case for more vigorous enforcement of antislavery as well as anti-child-labor legislation.’ However, a profound policy recommendation certainly would require a thorough analysis in addition to this. Furthermore, job characteristics represent an important, though heterogeneous, set of policy handles that could be regulated or modified, or carefully analysed in the first place. For instance, working under certain hazardous conditions (e.g., a contaminated working environment) could be declared illegal, restricted in time, or be allowed only with proper protective clothing. One should note that the presented approach also highlights that the combined characteristics for all labour activities a person pursues are what matters. Additionally, many conversion factors actually can be changed

¹⁷See Robeyns (2017) for a similar line of argumentation.

through social and legal norms, including stigmatization and prestige associated with certain activities. Finally, both the income and the time aspect of work (which are entirely located in the resource-space) are also subject to important policy levers including the tax-transfer system, working time regulations, but also, for example, child care availability. The present approach emphasises that income and time introduce a constraint across functionings. Consequently, behavioural responses that may cause a shortfall in another dimension require a more rigorous analysis.

Needless to say, a thoughtful in-depth analysis should precede policy recommendations in the first place, as the entire choice problem has to be studied including all the alternative options actually available to the agent. Moreover, there might be numerous and ambivalent effects on wellbeing, trade-offs across functionings, or severely reduced capability sets. For instance, outside work options, which depend on the social security system, may affect risk-taking behaviour, just as child care availability usually matters more for the female than for male labour supply. By focusing on functionings achievement (or the failure to achieve), a capability perspective highlights the different conceptual intervention levels and yet ensures such analysis does not confuse means with ends.

4.2 Fundamental ambiguities in valuation

Labour activities certainly can contribute to leading a fulfilling life of human flourishing. However, labour activities may also lack a reason to value them. For some particularly grim manifestations of labour, like slavery and serfdom, moral disapproval is relatively easy to establish and widely shared.¹⁸ In many cases moral value may vary more gradually, and thus it is more difficult to establish. In fact, it may even depend, for example, on hours worked, as argued in [Robeyns \(2003, p. 80\)](#).

The normative assessment of child labour, as reflected in prominent conventions of the International Labour Organization, may further illustrate this point.¹⁹ One could, for instance, hold the view that child labour is unconditionally bad and hence children should not work, where the moral disapproval is stipulated from the outset. This normative assessment may or may not be accompanied by a prescription for a general ban on child labour. In fact, the ILO convention C138, passed in 1973, comes close to this position in the sense that article

¹⁸Article 4 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for instance, denounces slavery and servitude. Needless to say, however, human rights are frequently violated.

¹⁹A more detailed discussion of child labour is beyond the scope of this paper, see, for example, [Basu \(1999\)](#); [Edmonds \(2008\)](#) for more comprehensive treatments.

1 requests signatories to ‘ensure the effective abolition of child labour and to raise progressively the minimum age for admission to employment or work to a level consistent with the fullest physical and mental development of young persons’ – even though neither child nor employment is explicitly defined. C138 reveals its concern for the ‘physical and mental development’ of children and that it seeks to curb certain critical activities that are ‘likely to jeopardise the health, safety or morals of young persons’ (article 3). C138 is comprehensive in the sense that its goal of abolishing child labour applies to all industries, occupation, or concrete working conditions (though article 5 excludes work within the family).²⁰ Even C138, however, already recognizes exceptions. While the general minimum age for work is set to 15, particular critical activities require an age of 18 (article 3) and ‘light work’ (which must neither be harmful to health or development, nor prejudice school attendance) is considered acceptable for children aged 13–15.

The ILO’s C182, passed in 1999, prioritizes the ‘elimination of the worst forms of child labour as a matter of urgency’ (article 1). Evidently, some forms of labour are considered more detrimental to the development of children and more morally reprehensible than others. According to article 3, the worst forms include slavery, practices similar to slavery, prostitution, the production and trafficking of drugs, and other activities that are ‘likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.’ Even though the definition of the latter is subject to national legislation, the associated recommendation R190 enumerates several examples of hazardous work explicitly, including activities that expose children to ‘physical, psychological or sexual abuse’, to ‘work underground, under water, at dangerous heights or in confined spaces’, to ‘work with dangerous machinery, equipment and tools, or which involves the manual handling or transport of heavy loads’, to ‘work in an unhealthy environment which may, for example, expose children to hazardous substances, agents or processes, or to temperatures, noise levels, or vibrations damaging to their health’, but also working under ‘difficult conditions’ like long hours, or during the night.

Similarly, to assess the global prevalence and trends of child labour, the Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour (SIMPOC) of ILO distinguishes three different forms of child labour (ILO, 2017a, pp.59–62). First, children in employment refers to all children in employment aged 5–17, whereas children in hazardous work additionally requires children to work in hazardous industries (mining, quarrying, construction), in hazardous occupations (defined in ISCO codes), in other hazardous work (e.g., night work), or

²⁰The preceding ILO conventions on minimum ages had more specific coverages, such as industry (C5), agriculture (C10), non-industrial employment (C33), or underground work (C123).

to work long hours (more than 43 hours a week). Finally, child labour is defined as children in hazardous work plus employed children aged 5–11, plus children aged 12–14 who are working more than 14 hours a week.

For the present argumentation it is sufficient to note that both the ‘worst forms of child labour’ and ‘children in hazardous work’ are more narrowly defined than children in employment, which means that some forms of work are considered more morally reprehensible than others.²¹ In short, the evaluation of child labour calls for a nuanced approach. Notably, both the worst forms of child labor and hazardous labour are characterised in terms of job characteristics to a large extent.

Finally, policy measures for curtailing child labour received lots of attention. Prominently discussed measures include an unconditional ban on child labour, an intervention through international labour standards, or labelling requirements for products to allow consumer boycotts (e.g., Basu, 1999; Edmonds, 2008). For the present context it is important to note that rejecting a general (or even more specific) ban on child labour as a policy instrument as futile or even counterproductive does not entail any implication for the principle normative assessment. Conversely, a ban could be justified for its normative signalling effect. Naturally, such a policy recommendation, however, could not be ignorant of other potentially adverse consequences.

4.3 Applying the capability approach

The suggested capability-centered account of labour and wellbeing is left underspecified on purpose, just as the capability approach itself. The advantage of using the same approach for different purposes, however, comes at a cost: concrete capability applications have to further specify the capability approach to their specific needs. The capability approach can be applied for different purposes, which may suggest different bundles of functionings (or capabilities) and allow for different accounts of human diversity or agency. For instance, a cross-country assessment of child labour imposes different demands than a treatment evaluation of a certain training programmes for the long-term unemployed in one particular region. Therefore, most decisions depend on both purpose and the specific context.

Capability applications are often however similar and thus can learn from each other. For

²¹In line with this Satz (2003), who examines child labour normatively, argues that not all forms of child labour are equally morally objectionable – in fact with recourse to effects in other dimensions (including health and education).

instance, [Alkire \(2008, p. 97\)](#) identifies five commonly applied methods for choosing dimensions, including (i) existing data or convention, (ii) based on assumptions about what people value, (iii) public consensus on a certain list that achieved some legitimacy (e.g., human rights), (iv) participatory processes (e.g., focus group discussions), and (v) empirical evidence regarding people's values.²² Naturally, these methods can be combined and 'capability lists' ([Alkire, 2002a](#)) may be considered as a useful tool in this decision process. Similarly, a list of commonly observed forms of labour (including their characterisation in terms of job characteristics and associated unfreedoms) may prove useful in capability applications for labour.

Even though the capability approach as such does not entail specific policy implications, it is not hard to envisage differing results of an evaluative exercise, depending on the chosen dimensions. If, for instance, a governmental employment program of digging holes and filling them back up again is implemented to maintain a certain consumption level of the employees, then this program may perform as well as any other program that secured the same amount of income for the workers. Adding, however, additional dimensions like 'respecting yourself', 'agency', 'appearing in public without shame', or 'contributing one's share' may provide a more nuanced assessment of that programme.²³

In fact, the present approach could be used to (normatively) evaluate specific forms of labour (rather than stipulating the moral value from the outset). An exemplary purpose could be to evaluate common forms of child labour in one particular national context. The analysis would include the selection of relevant dimensions of human wellbeing (e.g., education, physical, and mental health) and the selection and description of pertinent labour activities (e.g., work under hazardous conditions). Additionally, we may have to account for the not yet fully developed aspects related to the agency of children (e.g., [Biggeri et al., 2011](#)), which, moreover, may lead us to choose wellbeing achievements, rather than wellbeing freedoms, as the preferred conception of advantage. A subsequent empirical analysis would provide evidence on the respective dimensional achievement associated with each labour activity and may be complemented with an assessment of associated unfreedoms.²⁴ The task could be set to identify critically low levels of achieved wellbeing. Consequently, one would have to assign weights to dimensions in order to allow aggregation across dimensions. It is important to recognise the inescapably normative nature of these decisions, which necessitate

²²For the debate on selecting dimensions, see also [Alkire \(2002b\)](#); [Sen \(2004a\)](#); [Robeyns \(2005b\)](#)

²³Note however that [Keynes \(1997, p.129 and p.220\)](#) actually acknowledges that there are more sensible income-generating activities for a community to rely on.

²⁴Indeed, these questions already received a fair amount of academic attention. Using a broad definition of child labour, evidence for profound effects on health remains to be established. Neither does school attendance seem to be affected by moderate hours works ([Edmonds, 2008](#)).

value judgements (e.g., Sen, 1999, p. 75). Finally, based on empirical findings and the previous normative decisions in the evaluation exercises, the final normative assessment can be reached. In many ways, the structure of such an exercise (including the normative decision) resembles the identification step of multidimensional poverty measurement (see, e.g., Alkire et al., 2015). A major advantage of this procedure is that normative assessments are sequenced into distinct steps, through which factual pieces of the analysis are delimited from normative aspects, whereby both transparency and cogency of such an exercise improve.

4.4 The dissatisfaction of the unemployed

Empirical research documents a substantial dissatisfaction of the unemployed (e.g., Winkelmann and Winkelmann, 1998). The underlying reasons and mechanisms are however not yet well understood and more research in this direction is certainly needed.²⁵ Subsequent research (which in fact is motivated by Jahoda's model) actually provides evidence for the relevance of identity utility (Hetschko et al., 2013; Schöb, 2013) but also that social participation may help to understand the dissatisfaction of the unemployed (Kunze and Suppa, 2017). Moreover, while several studies found that job loss had no effect on health (e.g., Salm, 2009; Schmitz, 2011), Bloemen et al. (2018) document a substantial increase in mortality.

Assuming life satisfaction contains some information about what individuals do value, a capability perspective offers an array of potential functionings that may help to explain the dissatisfaction of the unemployed, and each of the previous channels are consistent with a capability perspective ('being healthy', 'respecting yourself', 'participating in social life', or 'agency'). A capability perspective also directs attention to potential conversion factors such as social norms, some of which might be empirically proxied by the local unemployment rate. Additionally, the present approach also points to the respective job characteristics and their implications for the various functionings, implying that differences among employed (broadly defined) are more carefully scrutinized. Therefore, drawing on other similar forms of work may offer new directions of research and novel insights. In contrast, assuming only 'having a job' and 'earning an income' appears to be a very incomplete description.

Another more specific line of research may explore the so-called agency restriction hypothesis, which has been developed in psychology based on the critique of Jahoda's approach

²⁵From a capability perspective, seeking to understand the empirical phenomenon of the unemployed's dissatisfaction with life is also an interesting and relevant exercise, and does not require one to adopt a utilitarian or welfarist approach. Essentially, 'being happy' can be understood as one functioning among others (e.g., Sen, 2008), see also Robeyns (2017, ch. 3.8)

(see [Fryer, 1986](#)). Broadly speaking, it conceives individuals as agents ‘who strive to assert themselves, initiate and influence events’ and act based on their interpretation of the reality ([Fryer, 1986](#), pp. 15–16). While agency is fundamentally limited through the environment, the degree may however vary with different forms of work. In the case of unemployment, it is argued that the necessary interpretation of the current situation is aggravated, inter alia, by (i) long-held habits and beliefs that are challenged through coping, (ii) problems that were never anticipated and have to be solved, (iii) advice and pressure from others (creating a stigma) while (iv) suffering from material deprivation. To explore this direction further seems promising in particular because both the agency restriction hypothesis and the capability approach emphasise the relevance of agency, allow a comprehensive understanding of work, and, finally, permit both social norms and the environment as moderating variables.

Naturally, there is also room for more behavioral economic explanation (e.g., referring to a time structure for the day). Finally, it should be noted in this context that research on the dissatisfaction of the unemployed is actually already the interdisciplinary work of economists, sociologists, and psychologists. Hence a cross-disciplinary framework seems appropriate.

4.5 Is work a dimension of human wellbeing?

A natural alternative to incorporating labour into the capability approach would be to conceive of it directly as a functioning or capability, i.e. as a dimension of human wellbeing. Indeed, some studies make explicit use of this terminology ([Bonvin and Farvaque, 2006](#); [Bonvin, 2012](#)). In this section I first clarify that neither the moral ambiguity nor the manifold effects of labour on human wellbeing preclude this alternative conceptualisation in principle. However viewing labour as a (Lancaster-) characteristics providing activity, as outlined in this paper, has several advantages including an analytical structure for the analysis of the individual effects on human wellbeing and, through a high degree of abstraction in the functioning space, it can be coherently applied across place and time. Both aspects simplify the actual application of the capability approach significantly. Additionally, an employment capability runs the risk of rigidifying a historically specific form of work as a benchmark against which other forms are to be evaluated and suggests employment to be one dimension of life among others. I address these aspects in turn.

Functionings are not associated with a positive value by nature, so there are also ‘bad functionings’ like murdering and raping, which lack a reason to value them (e.g., [Stewart and Deneulin 2002](#), p. 67 or [Nussbaum 2003](#), p.44–46). Thus forms of labour are valuable, but

others are not. So, in principle, the moral ambiguity seems manageable, though possibly more confusing and more difficult to communicate, as the employment functioning would sometimes be ‘good’ and sometimes be ‘bad’, whereas, for example, ‘health’ is always ‘good’. A second challenge is the important observation that labour activities can cause substantial functioning shortfalls outside the domain of work (e.g., health problems or through excessive hours of work). This feature can also be reconciled with the view of an employment functioning in principle. More specifically, the capability approach explicitly makes room for the instrumental relevance of functionings for achieving other functionings (in addition to their ultimate relevance).²⁶ Leading examples include health and education.

A key advantage of the proposal to conceive of work as a characteristic providing activity is that it provides an analytical structure for the wellbeing analysis of labour activities. First, it prompts empirical scrutiny of potential effects on the various dimensions of human flourishing, which is important, as they may vary with place, time, and form of work. Second, it highlights the relevance of conversion factors. Third, as argued in section 3, labour can be considered to be multidimensional in terms of characteristics, which should not be confused with, and, in fact, should be clearly distinguished from, the constitutive multidimensionality of human wellbeing. An explicit account of job characteristics moreover provides a reasonable interface to connect to previous research, be it economics or psychology. Fourth, the approach suggested here also emphasises that a comprehensive assessment work with respect to human wellbeing has to take note of the specific institutional context (e.g., the welfare state, among others). Finally, the analytical structure actually helps to establish the moral value of a particular form of work, but it can guide and simplify other applications as well.

Moreover, the capability approach allows one to work with the premise that similar functionings are valued across societies and have been valued across time. This certainly makes sense when referring to ‘general’ or ‘universal’ functionings like being well nourished or respecting yourself. While the particular means for achieving good nourishment or self-respect may vary over time, the functionings remain the same. This comparability, however, becomes limited if more specific or concrete functionings, like choosing the latest washing powder (Williams, 1987), are introduced. In terms of labour, for instance, many forms of work only existed in certain times or regions. Specific functionings would vary considerably. The conceptual move to understand labour as characteristics-providing activities in combination with a more conservative use of functionings as general functionings places this variation on the level of means, not on the level of ends.

²⁶Sen (1999) discusses intrinsic and instrumental relevance in some detail.

On the other hand, explicitly introducing an employment capability comes with at least two particular difficulties. First, there is the real risk of an ‘employment fetishism’, meaning that a historically specific manifestation of labour is elevated to the general functioning level, where it serves as a benchmark for other forms of labour and implicitly entails byproducts (like a clear labour-leisure distinction or institutional preconditions). A problematic implication is that the understanding of labour might become unnecessarily narrow and one may overlook certain forms labour that manifest in entirely different ways (volunteer work, domestic work, chores, etc). Instead, the suggested approach to view labour as a characteristic-providing activity is better suited to capturing the various manifestations of labour and evaluating forms of labour in an open and unbiased way with respect to human wellbeing (and conditional on the respective institutional setting). Second, using the term ‘employment capability’ suggests work to be just one dimension of human wellbeing among others. Given the multiplicity of direct effects on different functionings and the other complexities surrounding work (i.e. the income and time aspects and the importance of freedoms), the view of labour as a single functioning seems difficult to defend.²⁷

It should be noted that the present paper agrees with [Bonvin \(2012\)](#) on many aspects in terms of substance, i.e. what a capability perspective should register or reflect. However, if too many aspects are directly situated in the capability space, the entire capability approach seems unnecessarily difficult to manage and apply. For instance, [Bonvin \(2012, p. 13\)](#) defines the capability of work as ‘the real freedom to choose the job one has reason to value’; he also adds that a job in turn contains a ‘plurality of dimensions’ (p. 13), i.e. he acknowledges job quality to be a multidimensional phenomenon (including work-life balance and benefit entitlements). [Bonvin \(2012, p. 13\)](#) also notes that a capability of work has to be ‘defined in connection with all components of the capability sets’. Finally, his approach seems to entail an implicit aggregation across aspects of job quality in order to obtain the ‘degree of capability for work’ (p. 14) – which may be needed in some, but not all, exercises and certainly should be made explicit.

Finally, I do not see an inconsistency if a particular capability *application* nonetheless makes use of an employment dimension. It may well be reasonable for a given purpose – for example, if only a few forms of labour are to be studied or if only certain effects are to be examined where many other interdependencies can be ruled out or are for some other reason negligible. Naturally, such an approach comes with the a high risk for confusion and misunderstandings, and thus requires a clear communication.

²⁷Maybe it is more sensible to conceive of labour or work as a domain of life.

5 Concluding Remarks

The present paper argues that a capability perspective offers a convenient way of analysing the role of work in human wellbeing more rigorously. Specifically, the paper suggests that single labour activities provide a set of characteristics in the Lancaster-sense, which are in turn converted into different dimensions of human wellbeing. Work, in this sense, is a multipurpose means of producing wellbeing, similar to income. It is, however, a two-tier process from the activity through the consumption technology to characteristics and further through the conversion function to the achievements in every single dimension of human wellbeing. Such an approach explicitly allows for both empirical diversity in forms of work and effect heterogeneity on different dimensions of human wellbeing. Additionally, both ‘time’ and ‘income’ aspects of labour introduce important interconnections between dimensions of human wellbeing. Finally, only a freedom-centred perspective can adequately take note of critically degenerated capability sets, violations of process freedoms, and mutual exclusively choices between functioning achievements – all of which figure prominently in both past and present workplace realities.

The suggested approach entails further advantages. First, drawing on the capability approach provides a conceptual framework and language that allows one to consolidate both theoretical and empirical research across different disciplines. As a synergy effect, a capability perspective may also suggest new directions of research (e.g., as in the case of the dissatisfied unemployed). A conceptual framework is, however, also important as disciplines usually have different research programmes or paradigms, different methods, and, usually, highly specific jargon. A common conceptual structure introduces shared concepts and thus helps to align research to some extent. Moreover, variation across regions and time is also conceptually provided for, which is important when distinguishing results from different environments or institutional settings. Thus both the multidimensional account of wellbeing and the openness of the capability approach to alternative theories and specific applications may help to better synthesize and guide wellbeing-related research.

Second, while the capability approach does challenge the utilitarian account of human welfare, the outlined conceptual frame is not inconsistent with a conventional economic choice analysis. In fact, different theories of choice can be integrated into the capability approach (Robeyns, 2017). One may, for instance, refine the analysis of labour supply by accounting for different functioning achievements associated with different labour activities or by adding subpopulation-specific constraints.

Third, the capability approach offers a framework for ethical (or normative) evaluations. Therefore, any labour activity can be subjected to such a normative evaluation, including those for which moral ambiguities are to be expected (e.g., the different types of child work). Exercises along these lines may benefit from the methods and experience of related fields, such as the measurement of multidimensional poverty. A transparent handling of the underlying value judgments is, for instance, vital to both kinds of exercises – just as both exercises require a choice of dimensions of human wellbeing. Applications in multidimensional poverty measurement, for instance, have successfully used, inter alia, capability lists, participatory methods like focus group discussions, and public discourses. Normatively grounded accounts of child labour may not only allow improved and better justified measures, but also can suggest new directions in the theoretical analysis of child labour.²⁸

Finally, the outlined approach may also complement the current workhorse in empirical labour economics – the methods for treatment or program evaluation – with a framework for ethical evaluations. That different outcome variables may result in different evaluations is not surprising (e.g., [Alkire, 2002b](#); [Robeyns, 2003](#)). The key question then again becomes how to select outcomes and how to aggregate across dimensions, on which substantial progress has already been achieved. Therefore, philosophically grounded and empirically solid assessments of treatment effects on human wellbeing seem feasible.

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²⁸So far few studies have theoretically explored the role of the ‘worst forms’ of child labour (e.g., [Dessy and Pallage, 2005](#); [Rogers and Swinnerton, 2007](#)), partly because conventional conceptual approaches have difficulty with accurately reflecting their nature or adequately assessing them normatively.

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