

Developing the capability for well-being

Hazel R Wright, Anglia Ruskin University, UK

Concerns about the quality of life are now so prevalent that in November 2010, the government launched the National Well-Being Project (Cameron, 2010). This was to be led by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) and to start with a national survey to establish relevant domains and measures (www.ons.gov.uk).

However, global and independent organisations were already working in this area. For instance, The New Economics Foundation (NEF), an 'alternative think-and-do-tank' established in 1986 aims to promote change. NEF is currently working on proposals to 'reverse engineer' society by establishing hard outcomes (environmental sustainability; equitable economic justice; and high levels of human well-being) and working to achieve these. The organization recently surveyed 22 European countries to create National Accounts of Well-being (NEF, 2009, p.4) that capture people's experiences of well-being, defining this under five key themes: 'emotional well-being (positive feelings and absence of negative feelings); satisfying life; vitality; resilience and self-esteem (self-esteem, optimism and resilience); and positive functioning (which covers autonomy, competence, engagement, and meaning and purpose)'. The survey found social well-being to have two main components: supportive relationships, and a feeling of trust and belonging (NEF, 2009, p.4): a claim that closely resonates with Putnam's (2000, p.19) definition of social capital as 'connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them'.

The NEF survey found that the UK, with an overall zscore of 0.02, occupies a mid-position (13th) in the cohort. Citizens are less satisfied than their western European neighbours, more satisfied than those on Europe's northern, southern and eastern borders (www.nationalaccountsofwellbeing.org). This is not a placing that commands praise but it is better than that of the UK's children who, a few years earlier were found to occupy the 'lowest' position

among rich countries (UNICEF, 2007), triggering an earlier ONS study (2009) *Current Measures and the Challenges of Measuring Children's Wellbeing*.

In May 2011 the Organization for Economic Development (OECD) published an experimental set of measures, the Better Life Index, to support work inside and beyond national borders (www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org) and this clearly includes income and jobs alongside softer topics like community and life satisfaction, in recognition that economic factors closely underpin well-being. Indeed, Wilkinson and Pickett's work on equality in global society uses a significant range of statistical sources to demonstrate how inequality within a nation harms the entire population, the wealthy as well as the impoverished. The epidemiologists' claim is that:

Rather than blaming parents, religion, values, education or the penal system, we will show that the scale of inequality provides a powerful policy lever on the psychological well being of all of us.
(Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009, p.5)

Economic strategies and well-being initiatives are intricately entwined and dependent. When we access work on well-being it is important to deconstruct its aims and objectives and consider whether the goal is genuinely overall well-being or whether social concern masks a deeper interest in human capital development and economic productivity for their own ends. It is reassuring, to me, to find that the National Statisticians (ONS, 2011) refer to the work of the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) and the United Nations Human Development Index for both these initiatives draw on the influence of Nobel prize winning Economist, Amartya Sen, whose Capability Approach seeks to alleviate human suffering and whose ideas form the subject of this paper.

Sen has long been troubled by inequity in society, seeking ways to combat inequality through policy – national and international. His work is predominately theoretical and focused on the developing world but it is also refreshingly people-centred and one of his main works, *Development is*

Freedom (1999) is written in a style that specifically aims to encourage public discussion. Working with Bernard Williams in the early 1980s, Sen began a critical analysis of the dominant ways that policy makers establish options, inviting a range of influential thinkers to put the arguments for and against the differing theories of public choice in a book *Utilitarianism and beyond* (Sen and Williams, 1982).

Historically, policy makers have favoured a Utilitarian approach, developing Bentham's notion that we should seek 'the greatest amount of good for the greatest number' (SEP, 2009) and, while this is morally sound in its consideration of other people's good as well as one's own, it is notoriously presumptive in administration. Decision-makers determine a 'preferred' option and assume that rational humans would choose that option if left to decide for themselves. Thus, the decision-maker is seen to adopt an impartial stance, and this has been equated to fair treatment for all (and criticized accordingly).

Following World War 2, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights refocused concerns on equality and likewise tried to establish impartiality by legalizing the notion of treating everyone the same, sometimes as a form of contractualism (Scanlon, 1982). Over time, it has been recognized that to create an equal society we must do more than ensure equal treatment: some people require additional support and resources to achieve the same status as others. Britain's welfare state and the more recent Labour Government's social justice agenda were both intended to provide a safety net and ongoing support for those with lower levels of economic resource and social capital – and did so with some success. Within the Early Years, the Every Child Matters legislation (DfES, 2003) made a real start in addressing the needs of our youngest members. These policies do, however, stem from a deficit model of society.

Sen's work on the Capability Approach sought a theorized policy solution that would enable a fairer society through the concept of choice. Focused mainly on the developing world, Sen's discourse uses examples within the Indian subcontinent but increasingly his ideas are being applied more universally. My

own study, for example, applies the capability approach to adult women in England who choose to train to work in childcare (Wright, 2011). The premises with which Sen starts his theorization are highly relevant to adult education, for Sen is a liberal thinker and his desire to improve real life echoes the humanist tradition (Rogers, 1993) common within our domain. For Sen, too, it is people and personal satisfaction that matters not outputs buried within statistical tables. As Sen famously claims 'ultimately the focus has to be on what life we lead and what we can or cannot do, can or cannot be' (Sen, 1987, p.16).

Sen believes that both Utilitarian and Rights based policy disguises inequality. He recognizes that it is not just the availability of resource that matters but its 'conversion', what a person can do with it. For example, he argues that 'a person who is disabled may have a larger basket of primary goods and yet have less chance to lead a normal life (or to pursue her objectives) than an able-bodied person with a smaller basket of primary goods' (1999, p.74). He also argues that the common practice of using the household unit as the base for distribution disguises inequality within the family, for frequently the weaker members – the women and children, the ill and the elderly – go without. Conversely, the head of the household (and often other male members, too) claim more than their share of resources. The 'breadwinner' may see this as a right and a necessity and other family members may accept this view and consequently suffer diminished well-being.

Unfortunately, Sen's work is often criticized inaccurately for issues that those who have read his work deem inappropriate. His view that the individual matters is very different to, and should not be confused with, the pursuit of self-serving individualism described by Beck-Gernsheim (2002). As Robeyns (2008, p.90) claims, Sen's work is ethically individualistic: in other words 'structures and institutions will be evaluated *in virtue* of the causal value they have for individuals' well-being'. Sen's work is also sometimes accused of insensitivity to women by feminist researchers. Robeyns (2008, p.101) finds these criticisms to be unsubstantiated. She actually claims:

Sen's capability approach has much more potential to address gender issues and feminist concerns than most other well-being and social justice theories

but she uses the wording 'feminist concerns' in the chapter title where it impacts on nonreaders.

Sen believes the right to choose is essential to human well-being and demonstrates how, in reality, this often minimizes wastage as people take up the opportunities that they desire rather than receiving goods or opportunities that they do not value and do not fully use. He recognizes a novel conceptual space within which policy makers can formulate plans – that of 'capability'. Sen sees capability as 'the potential to achieve' and believes that governments could offer an array of credible choices and allow individuals to decide for themselves which options they would like to utilize (or convert to 'functionings'). Sen realises that infinite choice is unhelpful and unachievable but his notion of the 'capability set' neatly applies boundaries to the range of choices that are possible. This is a multi-level concept showing how – at different structural levels – the choices of individuals and collective groups can be identified. In my research, early analysis led me to create a 'model of integrated lives' that showed how the women lived within a triangle of options relating to family, work and education. When I found that they focused on their current 'beings' and 'doings' I became aware of the relevance of the capability approach and recast my model as the women's collective capability set, demonstrating the relevance of the CA to real lives.

Deeply committed to choice, Sen deliberately leaves the capability approach 'an open-ended framework' (Robeyns, 2008, p.86), encouraging every user to adapt it to his/her own needs. This is what I did, and adding the notion of 'greedy institutions' (Coser, 1974) to the theorization I was able to demonstrate how a three-way tension kept the women's lives stable and coherent. As Ball (2008) points out, this openness also allows the more affluent to manipulate choice to create personal advantage. This is a legitimate criticism but cannot be directly attributed to Sen's thinking, rather its

users. However, it could be argued that a policy-maker does have an obligation to consider how a policy mechanism can be abused as well as how it can be used. Certainly, Hartley Dean (2009, p.262) believes that 'the capabilities concept distracts from rather than assists the struggle to name and claim our human needs'.

My empirical research used the capability set to explore the range of options valued by a group of adult women students, and drew from their narrative interviews a range of ideas that they considered to be important. These, 'capability indicators' (Wright, 2010) capture the factors that the students believe constitute their sense of well-being. I coined the concept of 'capability chains' to demonstrate how different indicators interact with agency to enable a range of occupational outcomes to be achieved. Thus, in some small way my research and its associated conceptualization mirrors the work of the larger well-being projects described earlier, but uses data grounded in in-depth biographical investigation.

These connections will be discussed more fully in the presentation, which will start with an outline of the capability approach before discussing how the CA relates to the theoretical concept of well-being and its application. Indeed, well-being is a term that Sen frequently uses in his early writings (1985a, 1985b, 1987, 1992, 1999) and reiterates again in 2009. Sen believes that capability 'is also a kind of power' so it 'carries implications regarding a person's duties and obligations' (2009, p.271). Thus capability conveys notions of responsibility in a way that well-being does not. Sen believes that this gives capability a significant role in the pursuit of social justice whereas well-being is simply equated with happiness. This raises the question of whether well-being is the most appropriate goal for society – for surely the individual needs a well-developed sense of responsibility towards others too? Only then can we persuade wealthier individuals to reduce their consumption in order to 'save' the planet and to create more equal societies at local, national and global levels.

References

- Ball, S J (2008) *The education debate*, Bristol, Policy Press.
- Beck-Gernsheim, E (2002) *Re-inventing the family: in search of new lifestyles*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Cameron, D (2010). PM speech on wellbeing, [available at <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pm-speech-on-well-being>].
- Coser, L (1974) *Greedy institutions: patterns of undivided commitment*, New York, Free Press [accessed online at www.questia.com].
- Dean, H (2009) 'Critiquing capabilities: the distractions of a beguiling concept', *Critical Social Policy*, 29, 2, pp.261-278.
- DfES (2003) *Every child matters*, Green Paper, London, HMSO.
- NEF (2009) *National accounts of well-being: bringing real wealth onto the balance sheet*, London, New Economics Foundation [available at www.neweconomics.org/projects/national-accounts-well-being].
- OECD (2011) *Better life index* [available at www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org].
- ONS (2009) *Current measures and the challenges of measuring children's wellbeing* [available at www.statistics.gov.uk].
- ONS (2011) *Measuring what matters: national statistician's reflections on the national debate on measuring national well-being*, London, Office for National Statistics [available at www.statistics.gov.uk].
- Putnam, R (2000) *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*, New York, Simon and Schuster.
- Robeyns, I (2008) 'Sen's capability approach and feminist concerns', in F Comim, M Qizilbash and S Alkire (eds), *The capability approach: concepts, measures and applications*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Rogers, C (1993) 'The interpersonal relationship in the facilitation of learning', in M Thorpe, R Edwards and A Hanson (1993) *Culture and processes of adult learning, a reader*, London, Routledge.
- Scanlon, T (2008) *Contractualism and Utilitarianism*, in A Sen and B Williams (eds) *Utilitarianism and beyond*, Cambridge. Cambridge University Press, & Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.
- Sen, A (1985a) *Commodities and capabilities*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press.

Sen, A (1985b) 'Well-being, agency and freedom: the Dewey lectures 1984'.
The Journal of Philosophy, 82, 4, April 1985, pp.169-184.

Sen, A (1987) The standard of living (edited by Geoffrey Hawthorn),
Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Sen, A (1992) Inequality reexamined, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Sen, A (1999) Development as Freedom, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Sen, A (2009) The idea of justice, London, Penguin.

Sen, A and Williamson, B (1982) (eds) Utilitarianism and beyond, Cambridge,
Cambridge University Press, & Paris, Editions de la Maison des Sciences de
l'Homme.

SEP (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) 2009. The History of
Utilitarianism, Friday, 27 March [available at
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/utilitarianism-history>].

UN (1948) Universal Declaration of Human Rights [available at
<http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/history.shtml>].

UNICEF (2007) Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being
in rich countries, Innocenti report card 7, Florence, Innocenti Research Centre
[available online at www.unicef.org.uk].

Wilkinson, K and Pickett, R (2009) The spirit level, London, Allen Lane.

Wright, H R (2011) Women studying childcare: integrating lives through adult
education, Stoke on Trent, Trentham Books.

www.nationalaccountsofwellbeing.org.

www.ons.gov.uk.

Published as:

Wright, H.R. (2012) Developing the capability for well-being. In P. Armstrong, R.
Bagnall, E.J.Tisdell, P.L. Bush, P. Cook, J.E. Coryell, J. Daniels, C. Doutor, L. Marrocos,
& H. Quintas (eds) Adult Education and Well-Being, Proceedings of the 42nd Annual
SCUTREA Conference, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK, Tuesday 3rd to Thursday
5th July 2012.

For preference, please cite the published version.