

Social protection and non-standard individual working lives. A combined approach using the capabilities model and the life course perspective

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the life course perspective has come to play an increasingly important role in policies promoted by the European Union (see Klammer, 2004; Klammer, Muffels and Wilthagen, 2008). This is largely due to the need to adapt to the changes taking place in individual working lives. Workers' trajectories have shifted from the linearity and stability characteristic of the Fordist production model to a high rate of discontinuity and variability. As a result, we can claim that only social policies that take these discontinuities into consideration are capable of offering effective worker protection (and by extension, effective protection for the rest of the population). Yet there are still very few studies that have examined to what extent social protection policies are truly adapted to the spread of non-standard working lives.

This need to assess the impact of social protection policies on individual careers is one of the main inspirations behind the CAPRIGHT project (short for "Resources, rights and capabilities: In search of social foundations for Europe") financed by the Sixth Framework Programme of the European Union. This paper presents some of the theoretical and methodological ideas developed during the first two years of work on the project. Currently, the CAPRIGHT project is trying to adapt the essential concepts of Sen's Capability Approach to conduct empirical research on individual working lives and to evaluate the effects of employment and social protection models on those working lives. In spite of the fact that the capability approach has been used in several fields of research, mainly in development studies, welfare economics, social policy and political philosophy, it provides neither a straightforward model for the study of society nor a methodology of inquiry. Developing such theoretical model and methodology of inquiry is the challenge addressed in this text.

LIFE COURSE PERSPECTIVE AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Changes in labour markets since the end of the 1970s economic crisis have produced a new scenario in which the relatively stable model of employment has been transformed into a much more "flexible" one. In this new scenario, many jobs are unstable and atypical (temporary, part-time, with changing timetables, etc.) and job rotation is frequent. As a consequence of these changes in the employment model, professional (and family) pathways have changed their linear pattern and stability for a high degree of discontinuity and variability through the entire lifecycle (Abonso, 2007). Furthermore, the greater individualisation of professional careers means increased chances of organising one's life course (Périlleux, 2005), yet it also means a substantial rise in the risks of (or vulnerabilities to) failure (Beck, 1992), and thus a closer connection between work and poverty than in the past.

As mentioned above, possibly the best way to evaluate to what extent social protection systems are adapted to a labour market that is producing increasingly unstable and changing pathways would be by taking a biographical perspective. As Rubery has noted (2004:1), "one of

the best ways to conceptualise and consider both the differences in current models [of social protection] and the pressures under which they are placed for change is to view these models through the lens of a lifecycle approach". When this has been accomplished, the applied perspective is methodologically close, to differing degrees and in different ways, to the life course approach (one of the strands within the biographical perspective). In fact, some years ago many core concepts used in these evaluation exercises, such as *stages*, *transitions*, *life events* or *turning points*, were highly circumscribed to the life course approach in sociology and social psychology (see, for example, Runyan, 1982; Heinz and Marshall, 2003; or Elliott, 2005).

Taking Runyan's definition, the life course approach analyses "the sequence of events and experiences in a life from birth until death and the chain of personal states and encountered situations which influence and are influenced by this sequence of events" (1982: 82). We can find a number of variations within this general definition. In more psychological studies, particular cases are examined along a long segment of the lifespan, or quantitative studies of behavioural continuity and change are conducted. However, there is no doubt that Elder's study entitled *The Children of the Great Depression* (1974) can be taken as the best example. In it, the author takes a quantitative perspective to identify "four main factors that shape the life course: location in time and place, social ties to others, individual agency or control, and variations in the timing of key life events" (Elliott, 2005: 73).

Among the works that use the life course concepts to some extent in order to evaluate social protection policies from a longitudinal perspective, salient ones include those by Schmid (1998; 2006), those financed by the *European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions* (Anxo and Erhel, 2005; Anxo and Boulin, 2005; 2006; Anxo *et al.*, 2007; Klammer, Muffels and Wilthagen, 2008), and those developed as part of the DYNAMO project (Rubery, 2004; Anxo, Bosch y Rubery, 2009).

It is important to note that none of the studies mentioned takes one of the key elements in the life course perspective into account: the effective development of agency. In other words, the evaluation exercises do not take into account – at least explicitly – either individual preferences or the degree or possibility of choice that public policies offer individuals. Taking this dimension into account would mean that the social protection measures would also be evaluated according to the degree of constraint they impose on individuals. Therefore, the models that are based on workfare, for example, should be assessed differently to those that entail no obligations for the recipients of the measures (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2005).

Setting aside the "methodological bias" that this would mean with respect to the dimensions taken into account in the original life course perspective, it is also important to note that not taking the decisions that individuals take (or can take) into account makes it more difficult to distinguish between formal rights and rights that can effectively be exercised. The addition of this element into the analysis would enable us to identify factors of inequality which stem from the impossibility of effectively using the resources or specific measures developed by the existent protection policies. In short, the goal is to see to what point, for example, the policies aimed at lifelong learning or the policies that facilitate the care of dependent persons enable certain collectives to gain equal footing in the labour market upon certain life events or stages, beyond purely formal rights. These aspects are examined in the following section.

THE CAPABILITIES APPROACH AS A BASIS FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION EVALUATION

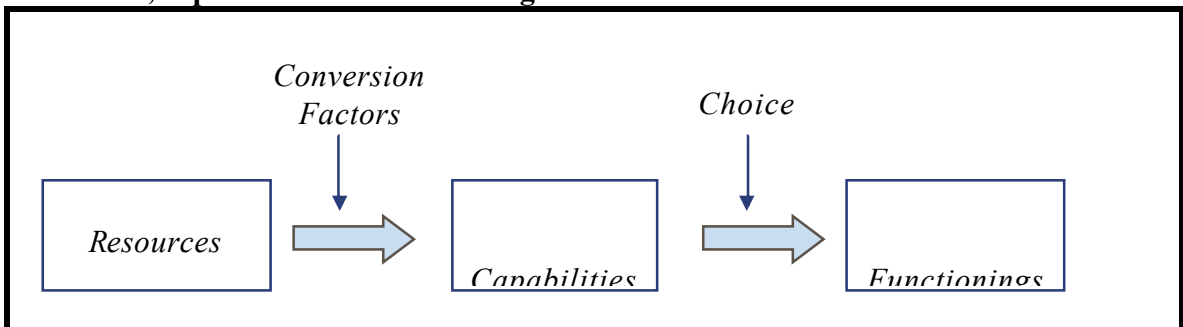
Within the framework of the life course approach, an evaluation of the degree to which public policies enable people to take control of their own biographies would mean placing the analysis of the decisions taken by individuals – or more specifically, the margin for decision-making they have – at the core. In view of this challenge, the Capabilities Approach developed by Amartya Sen offers suitable conceptual tools, given that it stresses people's choices and proposes, as Vielle and Walthery have pointed out, a "dynamic vision of the objectives of public policies based on individual fulfilment" (2003: 87).

The Capabilities Approach

The Capabilities Approach has been recognised and spread worldwide after Amartya Sen, its main inspiration, was awarded the Nobel Prize in economics in 1998. Sen's approach, summarised concisely, aims to offer a procedure for measuring equality among people. In response to the question "equality of what?", Sen answers by stating that a person's capabilities of achieving what they want to be or want to do must be taken into account, he would call this their capability to function (Sen, 1987). Following Gasper's point of view (2007), it is possible to summarise the elements that make the capabilities approach interesting for evaluative purposes into four main characteristics: a) it establishes the intuitively attractive idea that people should enjoy the same real freedom, beyond what formal rights might provide for; b) it goes beyond subjective satisfaction, acknowledging that at times preferences and values have an adaptive character so that in certain circumstances it might be necessary to consider to what extent the choices made were grounded on suitable information and proper reasoning; c) it takes into account individual differences in preferences and goals so that it is not based on global situations that are universally preferable to others; and d) it is mainly concerned with people's possibilities of transforming the resources they have into functionings, as compared to models that focus on the volume of resources available to individuals.

The analytical framework of the capabilities approach revolves around three fundamental concepts, whose interrelations are illustrated in figure 1.

FIGURE 1: Analytical framework of the capabilities approach. Relationship between resources, capabilities and functionings.



Source: Authors' own based on Bonvin and Farvaque (2006) and Bonvin (2008).

The first conceptual distinction is between capabilities and functionings. According to Sen, "the capability of a person reflects the alternative combinations of functionings the person can achieve, and from which he or she can choose one collection" (1993: 31). In turn, functionings are the set of ways of being and doing that a person ultimately puts into practice. The distinction between capabilities and functionings is the same as between what is effectively possible on the one hand, and what is ultimately done on the other. This distinction is extremely important in the capabilities approach because it connects directly with freedom of choice. In this way, capabilities reflect the real set of options a person has within his or her reach.

The distinction between resources and capabilities is also extremely important. Resources refers to the entire set of rights (or entitlements) and commodities that is assigned to a person in a given context. Why is this distinction important? As Salais pointed out (2005), given equal resources, not all people have the same skills at using them. Possessing the same amount of goods, for example, does not ensure that everyone can reach the same goals, given that they might be lacking the power or knowledge of how to use these resources. Stressing the importance of capabilities brings to the fore the *conversion factors* that might hinder or facilitate the transformation of the resources – taken as measures – into effective freedom (Sen, 1985). The most important contribution of the capabilities approach lies in its stress on conversion factors, i.e., on the proper conditions that allow formal rights and formal freedoms to be translated into real rights and real freedoms. The extent to which a person can generate capabilities from

resources and entitlements depends on "the factors that determine how smoothly this conversion can be made" (Robeyns, 2007).

As has been proven, the capabilities model is fundamentally abstract and open-ended, which makes it difficult to use as an empirical approach. This open-endedness and lack of specificity has led us to devote the section below to stressing which aspects of the approach should be further developed in order for it to become an approach that is useful for assessing to what extent the existent social protection measures enable us to properly cover the risks in working lives today.

Some Open Questions in the Construction of an Empirical Approach based on the Capabilities Perspective

Authors like Robeyns (2006), Farvaque (2008) and Comim *et al.* (2008) have developed extensive surveys of the kind of empirical applications to which the capabilities approach has given rise. Following these authors, these applications can be divided into two main groups: the macroeconomic ones that analyse countries' development or poverty, and the ones that analyse the effects of public policies on one individual aspect of inequality or welfare.

Within the second group of studies, the capabilities model has rarely been examined from a temporal dimension (see Corteel, 2004 and Yaqub, 2008), and to date it has never been combined with a biographical methodology focusing on the life course, which poses new theoretical and methodological challenges. An approach of this kind would entail examining to what extent social protection policies manage to correct or eliminate situations in which unequal resources or the influence of certain conversion factors hinders the subjects' chances of developing the kind of life or life course they desire. This evaluation would be conducted in situations of change, transition or at biographical turning points, given that these are the times that can influence the subsequent development of the entire biographical course. As Sampson and Laub have pointed out, "adaptation to life events is crucial inasmuch as the same event or transition followed by different adaptations can lead to different life courses" (1993:8). What would be evaluated would include the entire set of real options made possible by public policies for these adaptation needs.

This kind of endeavour requires us to complement the original capabilities approach with new theoretical or methodological contributions. The first of these new elements refers to the temporal dimension. The time variable is not explicitly taken into account in Sen's original model. However, if we wish to analyse the life courses of individuals and the degree to which public policies expand (or not) the range of their actions, the dynamic dimension must be included in the analysis. It is clear that the biographical situations in which individuals find themselves cannot be taken in isolation from the temporal organisation of their life courses. In this sense, the influence that both path dependency and the functionings and capabilities that the individual has had in the past exerts on both the present and future biographical states is indisputable. On the other hand, as Corteel (2004) and Zimmermann (2006) point out, the process-like nature of freedom unfolds over time, so that taking into consideration the person and their agency requires us to take into account not just past episodes but also their future aspirations and plans.

The difficulty of putting the concept of *capability* into practice poses a second obstacle that must be overcome in order to turn Sen's approach into a suitable framework for evaluating the effectiveness of public policies. The most common option chosen to identify the capabilities (the real set of options) available to people is inferring them based on the observed functionings; however, this kind of reasoning entails following the model of "revealed preferences" that Sen himself has criticised. One way to avoid this kind of inference is to examine the context of choice and the complete vectors of functionings instead of taking just isolated functionings (Sen, 1992). In this way, it is possible to identify the possible constraints that have led the subjects to choose a given option (Farvaque, 2008: 63). Burchardt and Vizard (2007), too, advocate a similar procedure: they propose a detailed analysis of individual functionings, supplementing this with a consideration of the degree of control individuals have exerted in order to obtain them. This is an issue that requires the original model to be developed both theoretically and methodologically, and

that does not solely affect a kind of longitudinal approach. Nevertheless, this becomes even more difficult if we want to consider the decisions of the subjects “situated” in key life moments or significant biographical transitions, given that the weight of the contextual biographical factors is added to the not strictly biographical factors. Below we shall address these contextual shortcomings, but for the time being we shall limit ourselves to pointing out that Farvaque acknowledges (2008: 70) that a solely quantitative application is not likely to be capable of including all the processes and conditions of choice, leading to a higher risk that the way the decisions were taken might be concealed.

There is an alternative tactic as a means of identifying the capabilities available to the subjects: it consists of examining the *conversion factors* that mediate (see figure 1) between the *resources* that an individual might potentially use and those that they effectively have available to them (the latter being their true *capabilities*). This is a way that has hardly been probed in the studies focusing on evaluating public policies which precisely require a major effort of contextualisation (i. e. a strong focus on sociological factors), which by force means inquiring into the factors that trigger inequalities in the access to resources. As Zimmerman has stressed, when sociologists are faced with Sen’s conception of the person, they will immediately ask themselves “equality of whom?” (2008:123) given that in the capabilities model individuals are reduced to entities with diverse preferences. Therefore, the capabilities model is susceptible to being developed and completed by taking into account not just individual differences in material resources and the means to access them but also the existence of different social groups and situations of inequality and conflict that generate a given social structure. In consequence, it is necessary to expand and “socially situate” Sen’s approach. Only in this way would studying the effects of social protection policies on work careers be meaningful.

Developing further into the pathway we have just pointed to means taking a methodological approach that is at least partly qualitative. As Farvaque (2008: 70) pointed out, capabilities are hard to identify without a contextual and comprehensive analysis, in that a solely quantitative approach is unlikely to be capable of capturing the processes and conditions of choice. It is extremely difficult to infer the choices made by individuals using quantitative information, and it is even more difficult to uncover the reasons for these choices. In short, the goal would be to conduct a longitudinal study in this field along the lines set forth by Thompson (2004) or Elliott (2005) with regard to other issues. The life course approach and the evaluation of public policies can be strengthened by using both quantitative and qualitative data, despite the unquestionably greater difficulties involved in terms of both gathering data and analysing and interpreting them.

CONCLUSIONS

Evaluating social protection policies at different points in working lives – especially in situations of change or transition or turning points – is especially essential in order to find out to what extent these policies manage to prevent situations of risk or vulnerability. However, the studies that have applied this logic tend to ignore the subjects’ decisions and/or preferences with regard to the policies, beyond the formal rights that they grant or the resources, which the individual is not always prepared to use. In this sense, the capabilities approach offers a conceptual apparatus that is ideal for this evaluation in that the subjects’ possibility for choice becomes the focal point.

Following this evaluative logic, a social protection system that follows or is close to the logic of capabilities would be the kind that develops a system of equal opportunities aimed at bolstering the real options (individual fields of action) offered to workers (and to the entire population in general) in situations of transition or at certain life events, so that it were possible to reverse or redirect a potentially risky life course.

Obviously, this application of the capabilities approach in a longitudinal perspective first demands that the time dimension be taken into account, something that is not present in the original approach. Yet this very need for biographical-temporal contextualisation cannot be achieved without a proper “social” contextualisation. This contextualisation would allow us to not only

situate the subjects' behaviour within the framework of certain power relations and group identification, rather they would also activate the concept of *capability*, which requires us to know the context of choice and/or the conversion factors that are acting on the resources that individuals formally have at their disposal.

However, a theoretical extension of the capabilities model in the direction indicated also involves a methodological extension. An application of Sen's model with the goal of evaluating the degree to which public policies enable people to develop the working lives away from situations of risk entails the need to overcome the quantitative methodological approaches that are overwhelmingly applied in studies aimed at evaluating public policies. Only in this way will it be possible to determine the degree of agency or control that individuals have when certain social protection measures are applied.

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