

Identifying and measuring capabilities for career development in NEET young people

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Amartya Sen's Capability Approach offers great potential as a conceptual framework for promoting social justice and well-being through economic and educational engagement. Yet the capability approach presents researchers with formidable difficulties, not least because it is intentionally left incomplete, and little guidance is available on its application. It is therefore necessary to make choices in order to apply the approach to a specific context. This paper will introduce the issue of social justice in a career development context, and methodological challenges in researching capabilities. It will attempt to provide a rationale for methodological choices in four stages. Firstly, the choice of epistemology and ontology ; secondly, choices of level of analysis and disciplinary perspective ; thirdly, the choice of research methods. An example of career development with disadvantaged NEET young people (not in employment, education or training) in the United Kingdom will be considered.

Key words : Capability approach, NEET young people, career guidance and development, methodology.

I. Social justice in career development and the capability approach

Watts (2008) provides a thorough account of the relationship between career development and public policy. He demonstrates that where governments are willing to fund career related services it is because they expect that the outcomes will be not just benefit to the individual, a private good, but also a benefit to society, a public good. The three policy objectives that this investment serves are economic development through the effective functioning of the labour market ; as a lubricant in the education system, particularly at the transition between learning and work ; and also the promotion of social equality. Thus social justice is one key policy objective of career related interventions. Social justice continues to be seen as a central concern by the career guidance community, albeit often discussed in terms of the challenges it presents to practice (Arthur 2014 ; Irving, 2005 ; Müller, 2014 ; Sultana, 2014).

The capability approach (CA) has received little attention from career scholars. Yet its insistence that economies serve individuals rather than the other way round is consistent with the liberal values of career guidance. Both are concerned with supporting people to do and to be what they have reason to value ; both are concerned with practical autonomy and choice (Robertson, 2015). Both must be concerned not just with individuals but also with the realities of their social, legal and economic context. These two quotes highlight the convergent thinking in two quite unrelated literatures :

...utilizing the capability approach in education illuminates thinking about questions of justice and the distribution of schooling, gender equality, redressing poverty, politics, the link between school and the labour market, policy making, education measurement, institution building, management, and pedagogies... The capability approach... supports a human rights discourse but also goes beyond it in demanding that we ensure not only rights, be these conceptualised legally or morally, but also people's capabilities and functionings. Thus not only is the right to equal opportunities for students in education important, but also the capability to function as partici-

pants in equal-opportunity educational processes and outcomes (Unterhalter/Walker, 2007 :239-240).

Career education and guidance is a profoundly political process. It operates at the interface between the individual and society, between self and opportunity, between aspiration and realism. It facilitates the allocation of life chances. Within a society in which life chances are unequally distributed, it faces the issue of whether it serves to reinforce such inequalities or to reduce them (Watts, 1997 :351).

Whilst the CA has had little impact on the career guidance literature to date, there have been several attempts to apply it to welfare-to-work policies aimed at the unemployed including Bonvin & Farvaque (2006), Dean *et al.* (2005), Egdell & McQuaid (2016), Gotoh (2001) and Orton (2011). They suggest the CA implies something rather different to the dominant European approaches to unemployment. These have been “Work First” and “Human Capital Development” approaches to labour activation. The former defines positive outcomes in terms of rapid placement into employment, and the latter focuses on skills development also to serve labour market participation. These approaches work less well when jobs are scarce, in regions facing economic challenges or during downturns in the economic cycle. They may provide less sustainable outcomes than those derived from the CA, because they neglect to focus on choices that people value. These sources broadly agree that European labour market activation approaches have tended to be based on neo-liberal assumptions and result in the commodification of the worker : seeing people as a resource to be valued solely in terms of their contribution to the economy.

Economies exist in order to facilitate meaningful lives. The CA shifts the focus back on the way in which institutions support individual freedom to choose valued lifestyles and identities. The private good is no longer irrelevant to policy from this perspective. These sources agree that the CA implies no specific policy positions, but gives a broad way of thinking about policy. It seems likely

that career guidance is a key activity to support making valued choices and translating aspiration into reality. A CA approach to welfare-to work is likely to embed choice supporting processes such as guidance. Whilst other philosophical approaches to social justice are available, the CA has particular resonance with the concerns of those involved in career development and helping individuals to make transitions and navigate the education and employment systems.

The CA emerged from studies of international economic development, and concern for those living in poverty in “developing” and “emerging” economies, including nations in South Asia. Some justification may be necessary for considering its application to developed economies, but this is straightforward : «... the capability approach does not focus on poor countries, but rather on poor people» (Ibrahim, 2014 :5). Thus Sen has written about inequality in Europe (e.g. Sen, 1997).

II. Introduction to the methodological problems

Seeking to capture capabilities presents a series of problems. The solutions offered in this paper represent reasoned choices but not inevitable ones ; other approaches could be taken that are equally defensible. Initially it is necessary to outline methodological problems confronting the researcher.

Firstly, the capability approach is not a theory or fully formed description of the work ; rather it is an approach or a way of thinking. A key feature is its intentional incompleteness ; it is a skeleton to build on. It appears to leave many choices in the hands of those who would apply it. Sen has been reluctant to list capabilities, although he has not discouraged others from doing, so provided they do not become rigid “always and forever” lists. Before measuring capabilities, the researcher must seek to identify them.

Secondly, there is an inherent tension in the notion of measuring capabilities. Measurement in social sciences involves narrow definitions of concepts. This is particularly true of psychology where the operationalisation of constructs for

measurement needs to be highly specific. This process inevitably requires the discarding of information that is excluded from measurement. Yet the whole thrust of the capability approach is to expand the informational space used to make evaluations of how well a person's life is going (Comim, 2008). Indeed a key criticism of the capability approach is that it is so informationally demanding as to be impossible to operationalise (Burchardt/Vizard, 2014).

Thirdly, a key notion of the capability approach is that a person's well-being cannot be judged just by what their life is like now (functionings) but must take into account capabilities, what they can do and be, the potential lives that they can realistically implement. Capturing potentialities for measurement is problematic : capabilities are not directly observable, and at least partially elusive. But, as St Clair (2010) points out, the CA is a methodologically pragmatic approach, concerned with actual rather than theoretical freedom. Walker & Unterhalter (2007) suggest it may sometimes be necessary to measure functionings rather than capability to capture learning. Qizilbash (2008) suggests that Sen himself is willing to blur this distinction between functionings and capabilities where it helps to do so. Fleurbaey (2014) summarises a debate between Arneson and Nussbaum about the correct approach here. Arneson argues it is better to focus on functionings, as some capabilities and potential lifestyles may be of no relevance to an individual. Nussbaum argues that it remains important to focus on capabilities as this highlights choice, and to ignore choice risks paternalism.

Fourthly, some capabilities seem to be special in that they are particularly fundamental. Sen talks in terms of a small number of basic capabilities, and the capability to be educated is one (Terzi, 2007). Education is foundational to other capabilities, such as democratic participation. Van Ootegem and Spillemaeckers (2009) suggest that the capability to make choices is a kind of meta-capability. If capabilities are more or less basic and fundamental then this raises the issue of how to distinguish between these levels.

Hart (2013) provides what is perhaps the most systematic account of the key issues facing researchers seeking to use the capability approach. Her summary contains eight issues that must be addressed :

1. What is the purpose of inequality evaluation ?
2. What is the choice of informational focus ?
3. Should there be a threshold for any specified capabilities ?
4. Are functionings to be measured ?
5. Are capabilities to be measured ?
6. Is functioning an adequate proxy for capability ?
7. Is a list of context free capabilities to be generated ?
8. Are capabilities to be weighted ?

Hart provides a reasonably well developed account of applying capabilities to education settings, and to choices and transitions. So Hart's approach is applicable to this context.

III. Research philosophy : epistemology & ontology

Sen's writing are strongly rooted in philosophy, indeed he could be described as an economist who is also a moral philosopher. This is particularly evident when considering his writings on the topics of freedom and justice (e.g. Sen, 2001, 2009). Some of the philosophical preoccupations of social researchers seem to be absent from his work, however. He seems to show little interest in the polarised debates between positivism and anti-positivism, and between interpretivist and objectivist positions in the social sciences. This may reflect his grounding in economics, a discipline that is strongly quantitative, abstract (e.g. Sen, 1982), and largely traditional in its approach to the social sciences such that these debates may not be salient. He is an outspoken critic of the use (and abuse) of quantitative measures in economics, notably gross national product and gross domestic product (GNP/GDP). More pertinent to this discussion, he has been equally critical of the use of subjective psychological

measures of well-being, chiefly because people can adapt or become resigned to their circumstances. This means that the impacts on well-being of wholly unacceptable living conditions are not necessarily reflected by subjective measures.

Nonetheless Sen has been involved in quantitative measures, notably the Human Development Index (HDI), a broad brush composite measure of societal progress in developing nations, designed to complement GDP. He appears to see such indices as crude, and offering a very partial picture, but recognises they have some value. He is pragmatic about using whatever indices are available (Qizilbash, 2008). It is the over-interpretation of the incomplete picture given by quantitative measures that he objects to rather than their use per se.

There is no discussion of postmodernism in the capability literature, but some relativism can be inferred. Sen seems reluctant to list capabilities so as not to constrain their local application to specific situations. Others (notably Nussbaum, e.g. 2000) have been keen to develop universal lists of capabilities, a practice to which Sen has cautiously accepted. It is difficult to see how the capability to feed oneself is not universally desirable. Sen highlights the capability to “walk without shame” in one’s own community. So it seems the capability approach has an absolutist core, whilst allowing relativist elements (Papadopoulos/Tsakloglow, 2008). This is complicated by the fact that some functionings (like being well fed) are critical ; others are trivial or perverse so they cannot all be valued equally (Comim, 2008) : this does not support a hard relativist position.

It seems that the capability approach is not neatly pigeon holed as positivist or anti-positivist, interpretivist or objectivist. The researcher therefore must seek a philosophical approach that transcends these dichotomies. A solution is offered by the critical realism of Bhaskar (e.g.1998). Bhaskar’s philosophy is sophisticated and multi-faceted ; it is his approach to the social sciences that is of relevance here. He stresses the distinction between ontology and epistemol-

ogy, a distinction that is often conflated in new paradigm social research. It adopts an epistemology that is relativist and interpretivist, recognising that knowledge of reality is always partial and local.

However it rejects a “strong” version of postmodern interpretivism, by taking a pragmatic approach : it is useful to treat objects of study as if they are real. This holds true even of social phenomena which may not be as enduring as natural objects, or may not exist entirely independently of an agent’s conception of their actions (Outhwaite, 1987). Not all explanations may be equivalent in their ability to describe reality, and reality can be understood as complex and stratified, with different depths of explanation possible.

A realist ontology is the fundamental characteristic of critical realism, but it is not incompatible with a relativist epistemology (Bhaskar, 2002). Whilst new paradigm approaches may agree that knowledge is constructed and always from a specific perspective, they disagree about the ontological implications, i.e. on the nature of the observed reality (Johnson/Cassell, 2001). In Bhaskar’s terms, radical new paradigm approaches are guilty of an “epistemic fallacy” : blurring epistemology and ontology, whilst privileging the former over the latter.

Contemporary approaches to career development tend to conflate these concepts, or at the very least privileging epistemology over ontology. Career researchers assert not just that they can understand events through the lens of post-modernism, but also that the world is post-modern. The ontological implications of these positions are not made fully explicit, but instability in the labour market is used as a justification for an interpretivist world view. This does not seem to be in the spirit of Sen’s writings, and is an approach directly at odds with Bhaskar’s realist position which has at its heart that the social world need be understood as real (or at least treated as real) whilst still allowing for complex layered multiple understandings of that reality.

IV. Levels of analysis and disciplinary perspectives

A characteristic of the human and social sciences is that different disciplines adopt different perspectives and draw on distinctive literatures, even when their object of study may be same. Different perspectives are associated with different levels of analysis. When studying social phenomena such as careers, it is possible to adopt multiple levels of analysis. These include macro-level perspective (e.g. politics; labour market economics), or a micro-level perspective (e.g. psychology of individual behaviour or intra-psychic processes). Intermediate, or meso-level positions are also possible (e.g. the person in a group, organizational or community context). With few exceptions (most notably the systems theory framework of career development, e.g. Patton & McMahon, 1999) the level of analysis adopted is rarely made explicit, and multiple levels of analysis are often not accommodated.

The discipline which has been most prominent in the study of career development has been psychology, particularly the sub-disciplines of vocational psychology and counselling psychology. Its level of analysis tends to be at micro level. Quantitative measures are important in research in psychology. Psychological measurement involves operationalising constructs in a detailed and highly specific way that is by definition linked to observable behaviour (Murphy/Davidshofer, 2005). This means that they are likely to be characterised by narrowness of focus.

This is well illustrated by a consideration of the concept of agency. This is a concept of central importance for the CA, with its focus on choice and autonomy. In psychology there have been several attempts by psychologists to narrow down the notion of personal agency for the purposes of measurement, the most successful being the construct of self-efficacy (Bandura, 2001). Self-efficacy relates to a confidence in the ability to achieve goals and belief in the ability to have some impact on the world. Career scholars have found the concept of self-efficacy to be very useful in developing theory and in research, where it

has been extensively and successfully applied (e.g. Betz & Hackett, 2006 ; Gai-
nor, 2006 ; Betz, 2007).

From the perspective of the CA this psychological measure makes a valuable contribution, but captures only one element of agency. It neglects a wide range of contextual, social, political, legal and personal factors necessary to convert resources into results. For example, an immigrant lacking legal rights to work or study, may find that confidence is not a sufficient condition for career success. It could be persuasively argued that assessing career self-efficacy can capture the extent to which socio-economic barriers have been internalised by individuals in disadvantaged groups, and represents one valuable target for intervention to respond to this. Nonetheless, through the lens of the CA, narrowness in focus essentially means discarding information unwisely. This problem can to some extent be managed by use of multiple, hybrid or aggregate indices.

Psychology is often criticised from other social science disciplines not just for its lack of socio-economic and political insight, but also for its predominantly individualistic focus. Individualism is a charge that has also been made against the CA. Alkire & Deneulin (2009) seek to clarify this misunderstanding by distinguishing between different types of individualism. The CA adopts what could be described as 'ethical individualism' which means that the individual person is the ultimate unit of moral concern ; groups and social structures are important too, but can ultimately be evaluated by the effects they have on individuals. For Walker & Unterhalter,

Sen promotes the notion of the capability of the individual agent to critically reflect and make worthwhile life choices from the alternatives available to her. The point is that capability, he would argue, equips us to determine our own major goals in life, and we should not prescribe for adults how they should live (2007 :15).

This can be contrasted with ‘ontological individualism’ where society is nothing more than a collection of individuals, and ‘methodological individualism’ where all phenomena in the social world can be explained in terms of individuals.

In the context of career development a distinction must be made between assessing the status of an individual for the purpose of helping them, and researching capabilities or career well-being outcomes in a target group. Both interventions and research efforts may be targeted at an individual, group or community level. From the CA perspective, the individual remains the ultimate focus of concern across all these activities.

V. Choice of research methods

Detailed choices remain in conducting research. The choice between quantitative and qualitative methods is a fundamental one in social research. Choice of research methods must also be informed by the purpose : whether the researcher is seeking to identify capabilities or to measure them. If the purpose is to identify capabilities then this raises a number of the issues : what should the outcome of identification look like ? Will it be lists of capabilities ? If so, then what purpose do they serve ?

The identification of capabilities is a necessary precursor to their measurement. Ibrahim (2014) stresses that there is no agreement as to what domains of life to include in a list of capabilities, but suggests some characteristics of a good list. It needs to be explicit ; it needs to be defensible ; the process of choosing capabilities needs to be explicit ; choices need to be empirically based ; and it must avoid leaving out important capabilities. Alkire (2006, 2007) approaches these problems from a different angle, suggesting methods to identify capabilities that are participatory. Whilst accepting that pre-existing data and evidence, and expert analysis have a role to play, Alkire suggests in-

volving stakeholders in ongoing participatory process that elicit their perspectives and values. Capabilities may attain some degree of local political legitimacy if a public consensus is sought on their selection.

In identifying capabilities, an obvious step is to consult or involve the people whose capability is in question (Alkire, 2007). This would seem very much within the spirit of the CA, but it is not necessarily straightforward. One concern is that the concept is too abstract, and that this may be an obstacle to involving participants in research processes to identify capabilities. Al-Janabi *et al.* (2013) persuasively argues that this is not the case :

In summary, this study illustrates that individuals can understand and respond to questions about their capabilities. They can identify where their capability and functioning may diverge (for example in relation to their autonomy) and translate the capability concept into a lay understanding. (Al-Janabi *et al.*, 2013 :122).

This claim is qualified by an acceptance that some individuals may struggle with this process, but no more than in conventional research designs used in well-being studies. Similar sentiments are expressed here, in a study that rejected the dominant quantitative approach to capabilities in favour of a focus group approach : it turns out to be surprisingly easy to discuss issues related to the theory of capabilities, as the concepts are recognizable for the focus participants (Van Ootegem/Spillemaeckers, 2009 :384).

These authors are thinking in terms of qualitative approaches complementing quantitative approaches. A case could be made that qualitative approaches are essential precursor to quantitative research on capabilities if there is to be the kind of consultative process advocated by Alkire (2007) ; without this an expert viewpoint on what is good for people is likely to be imposed. Qualitative research is desirable to identify capabilities, which perhaps will then be measured and quantified.

This view of the role of qualitative methods is not the only or inevitable one ; very different approaches are possible, for example Anand, Hunter & Smith (2005) argue that capabilities can be inferred from statistical analysis of large social data sets. Similarly, but more specific to our context, Harreveld, Singh & Li (2013) use existing data sets to make sense of the capabilities of young people from different cultural backgrounds in transition in Australia.

VI. Capabilities in context : NEET young people

Almost all young people are confronted with transitions and career decision challenges. It is no surprise that they have been the dominant group of interest to those involved with career development. Of particular concern are those young people who experience difficulty in the transition to adult life, encountering periods of exclusion from work and learning. This diverse group is sometimes described as ‘not in employment, education or training’ (NEET). Policy responses to the needs of NEET young people, and their experience of barriers to inclusion have been extensively explored in the literature (e.g. Hutchinson, Beck & Hooley, 2015; Russell, 2016). The substantial growth in youth unemployment in Europe following the banking crisis of 2008 has only intensified the perennial concern about the effects of exclusion on young people, and its implications for wider society (e.g. ILO, 2013; IPPR, 2014).

The application of the CA to young people in transition in Europe has been pioneered by the transnational WorkAble project, funded by the European Union. Key publications emerging from this project include Otto *et al.* (2015), and a special edition of the online journal *Social Work and Society* (see Otto, 2012; Bifulco, 2012). These demonstrate the relevance and potential of Sen’s thinking whilst also highlighting many of the challenges in its application. In these efforts to operationalise capability for young people (Bifulco, 2012; Hol-

lywood *et al.*, 2012), and also in the work of Bonvin (e.g. Bonvin/Favarque, 2007), three broad types of capabilities emerge :

- a) *capabilities for work* : the freedom to choose valued employment,
- b) *capabilities for education*: the freedom to choose valued learning programmes,
- c) *capabilities for voice* : the ability to express views, needs and values, and to have them taken seriously.

This framework is the starting point for Egdell & McQuaid's (2016) account of welfare to work provision for unemployed young people studied through the lens of the CA. They studied two brief work activation programmes for young people in Scotland. They found evidence that participants were offered some genuine choice of work placement experiences during their programme, and what to do after their programme, thus to some extent they were empowered. External factors meant that there were potential tensions between young people's aspirations and the available opportunities in the labour market, There were also potential tensions between the goals set by funding agencies and the desire of staff to support participants to pursue their own goals – to be and do what they had reason to value. The threefold division of capabilities for work, education, and for voice provided an adequate structure to analyse participants' accounts of the programmes.

An alternative approach is to use a pre-existing capability list. Whilst still recognising the importance of 'voice', Sweeney's (2009) doctoral study sought to reframe Martha Nussbaum's (2000) listing of fundamental capabilities so as to apply it to NEET young people in Scotland, who attended '*Get Ready for*

Work'(an employability programme at a college of further education) . Nussbaum's conception of capabilities is rooted in a philosophy of justice that sees human rights as universal. Thus her framework is pitched at a general level, and requires some adaptation for Sweenie's specific context and participants.

Sweenie interviewed NEET young people and mapped their conceptualisations onto Nussbaum's framework, contextualising and adapting the framework to accommodate the views of her participants. This demonstrates that such an approach is viable. Sweenie's conclusions seek to validate the young people's often difficult experiences, and questions an education system that fails to adequately address their concerns.

Consistent with the arguments of Egdell & McQuaid (2016), Sweenie's work illustrates how the adoption of the CA can produce a very different view on the role of learning programmes, and one that may present a robust challenge to the dominant 'work first' and 'human capital' perspectives on welfare to work. The CA points to ways of supporting NEET young people that place their own preferences, objectives and aspirations as central, not peripheral considerations. These studies also illustrate that this is not straightforward and unproblematic to implement in a context shaped by funding and policy constraints.

In a current study the author is similarly seeking to identify career capabilities in NEET young people, also in Scotland. Underpinned by a critical realist research philosophy, and rooted in the discipline of psychology, this is qualitative research using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) based on the methods of Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009). Whilst acknowledging the importance of the higher levels of analysis, and the wider socio-economic and politic environment, this approach takes the individual and their experiences as the focus of concern. IPA requires the full individual analysis of participants' accounts, prior to integrating those accounts into a description of the main themes emerging across the sample. No pre-existing capability framework was

adopted; rather the perspectives of participants will ultimately be used to inform the development of a such a framework.

The approach is to look at young people's experience of a 12 week personal development course, and to identify those elements (active ingredients) of the programme that young people find empowering, and to identify the way in which they are empowered. This is intended to identify career capabilities appropriate to this key target group. The choice of this approach is based on the strengths of IPA as a method for capturing lived experience. This avoids discussing the notion of capabilities as an abstract concept. IPA requires participants to engage in reflection, recollection, and articulation of past and present experiences, and seeking to understand them, in so far as it is possible, through their eyes. Whilst IPA cannot capture experience in the future, it can be used to collect participants' accounts of the process by which they have gained agency, become better equipped to make choices, have become motivated or settled on life goals. To this extent it can contribute to our understanding of career capabilities.

Whilst no single definitive list of capabilities for NEET young people may emerge, it is possible that some commonalities may be found in the different perspectives researchers bring to this problem. This may subsequently inform interventions to promote career capability. Preliminary findings from this project were reported by Robertson (2016). It appears that through a variety of confidence building activities, the programme enables participants to reconnect with their life-career goals, and to redeploy unused but pre-existing resources at their disposal, including skills, qualification, experience and vocational preferences.

VII. Conclusions

Although Sen's work could be considered as a theory of justice, it is better understood as an approach to social justice. It defines social justice as basic capability equality (Arneson, 2006).

On the matter of translating the CA into a research methodology for the study of social justice issues in career development, there are some things that can be said with confidence. This challenge presents the researcher with difficult problems. These are problems to which there is no single correct or final answer. Rather the researcher has choices to make, which must be defensible. Arguably a feature of the CA is that it allows heterogeneous approaches to research and capability assessment. Attempts at measurement are best informed by involving or consulting people in identifying capabilities, and those factors or experiences that empower them. It follows from this that qualitative approaches are particularly well suited to this kind of question. Once capabilities have been identified they can later be converted to quantitative measuring instruments.

This effort is worthwhile as there is considerable resonance between the CA and the concerns of career development policy makers and practitioners. The promotion of social justice means viewing young people not solely in terms of their potential contribute to the labour market (or skills development to move them closer to this point). It means supporting young people to conceive of and implement lifestyles and identities that are personally meaningful.

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Theory : Amartya Sen's Capability Approach provides the central conceptual under-pinning to this paper. Rather than a theory designed to describe or predict, it is a way of thinking that locates freedom and social justice as central to any attempt to improve people's lives. It demands a broad view is taken of how people's lives are going, and that a wide range of information is used to measure well-being. It focuses on people's capability to be and to do that which they have reason to value. Careers and career development can be understood through the lens of the Capability Approach. Career development and the Capability Approach are distinct traditions, but they share an interest in the potential future lives that individuals can live. They also share a concern for social justice and supporting disadvantaged groups out of poverty. From this perspective we can understand the role of career guidance and development as a process to strengthen capabilities : to support individuals to have the autonomy to implement the social identities and lifestyles that they value. This approach has the potential to generate thinking that offers a useful alternative to the dominant 'work first' and 'human capital development' policy approaches to the activation of young workers into the labour market. It does this by focusing attention on their freedom and genuine choice to build lives that they value.

Method : This paper discusses the methodological challenges in seeking to understand and capture capabilities in context. These difficulties include adopting an appropriate research philosophy (particularly epistemology and ontology), selecting an appropriate level of analysis, and choosing a disciplinary perspective. In addition the purpose of such research may be to identify or to measure capabilities, and these will require distinct approaches to data generation and analysis. A research method is described to identifying career capabilities in disadvantaged youth: young people who are not in employment, education or training ('NEET'). This approach is rooted in a critical realist paradigm. It draws on the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an approach derived from psychology to the analysis of qualitative data that is generated in research interviews. This aims to understand young people's experiences of engaging with support on a 12 week personal development programme.

Discussion : It is difficult to operationalise the notion of capabilities but this can be done, provided the researcher makes choices that are defensible. There is no single correct method, and a diversity of approaches is evident in the literature. The method described is intended to allow the voice of a disadvantaged group to be heard in the process of identifying capabilities.

By involving them in the process they can help to identify both the lives that they have reason to value, and the factors that they find empowering as they try to improve their circumstances. This in turn may suggest approaches that will be effective in supporting them in transitions toward a new identity and lifestyle. The example of NEET young people is one that is particularly salient to the concerns of career guidance and development practitioners, as they seek to develop interventions relevant to the concerns and interests of an important client group. Although to date career theory and practice has not been greatly influenced by the Capability Approach, there is potential for its application to guidance and development work. Consultation with the main user groups for career guidance services is essential to inform the design of those services, and particularly important with NEET young people whose views are often marginalised in policy development.