Sen’s Capability Approach – A Theoretical Foundation for Work-Life Balance

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Abstract

After reviewing and summarising critical accounts of the Work-Life Balance (WLB) in two special issues in academic journals in 2007, the paper turns to Amartya Sen’s capability approach and Feminist economics to address shortcomings and gaps in the WLB concept. In particular, Sen’s capability approach can provide a substantial theoretical foundation for the so far conceptually underdeveloped and one sided WLB. Based on Sen’s ideas WLB might actually deliver what it promises.

“I believe that variety is part of human existence and in fact – though this is quite irrelevant – that is a valuable attribute, though that is a very late idea, probably not be met much before the eighteenth century” (Isaiah Berlin in a letter in 1986).
Freedom of Choice and Work-Life-Balance

An organisation promoting Work-Life-Balance (WLB) defines it as: “Work-life balance is about people having a measure of control over when, where and how they work. It is achieved when an individual’s right to a fulfilled life inside and outside paid work is accepted and respected as the norm, to the mutual benefit of the individual, business and society…” (Employers for Work Life Balance 2006, cited in Fleetwood 2007: 351). Closer to home, the Department of Labour in New Zealand defines WLB as: “effectively managing the juggling act between paid work and the other activities that are important to people” (cited in McPherson and Reed 2007: 14). Surveys and critical reviews of the WLB approach have recently identified considerable problems with this concept. Eikhof, Warhurst and Haunschild (Eikhof et al. 2007) provide a concise overview of these criticisms and highlights three major shortcomings of WLB:

1) The premise that work is bad, “… that individuals tend to have too much rather than too little work” (Eikhof et al. 2007: 326) and therefore working time arrangements are the point of intervention;

2) The premise that “life” can be equated with caring (mainly childcare) which is seen as a female responsibility and that women are therefore the primary target of work-life balance provisions;

3) The assumption “… that work and life are separable and in need of being separated” (Eikhof et al. 2007: 326).

If the first premise is true, logically overall reduction of working hours should be the primary goal. However, Eikhof et al. point out that “… the most common policy prescription is not to shorten working hours but to provide employees with more flexibility in their working hours, for instance by part-time working or flexi-hours” (Eikhof et al. 2007: 326/327). This solution is mainly driven by employers’ interests to service a 24/7 economy and does not necessarily lead to an employer-employee win-win situation (Lewis et al., 2007). Though narrowly focussed on the financial sector in Scotland an article by Hyman and Summers “… indicates the prevalence of management control of
the work-life balance agenda and management’s discretion in the operation of work-life issues” (2007: 367). Moreover, employees and their representatives seem to accept this control without challenging it. Employers perceiving recruitment and retention problems offer flexibility to draw into work the reserve army of mothers. The government shares this gendered perspective on WLP because its “issue is not having better lives but breeding new lives; more specifically the reproduction of the future labour force” (Eikhof et al. 2007: 328). This is the major concern of governments particularly in Europe in times of low fertility rates. In conclusion, state and employers commonly define the WLB problem as one of separating life and work in order to accommodate domestic and occupational responsibilities.

According to Eikhof et al. 2007, these standard WLB assumptions and the policy prescription based on them are too simplistic. The long working hours problem might be over-stated. Roberts argues that it may be that individual working hours are decreasing whilst the hours worked by households are increasing with more dual income and neo-traditional families as more women participate in the labour market (2007). Further work can be identified as satisfying, motivating and self-fulfilling. Empirical Research shows, regarding long hours as negative depends on the general attitude towards work and whether work offers, and is desired to have, social relations: “Single men and women are least likely to work long hours and recently singled women as well as widowed men and women most likely, suggesting work as sustenance in times of personal difficulty; providing opportunity for socialisation or distraction and an “escape from domestic stress”. For men there is no relationship between having children and working long hours; for women there is, but the evidence is mixed” (Eikhof et al. 2007: 330). If there is a trend of long working hours becoming desirable for both men and women to fulfil career ambitions and rising consumptive aspirations, this signifies a cultural shift to what is sometimes called “affluenza”. That is, a life style which emphasises material wealth and status, or in other words “conspicuous consumption” (Veblen 1899).

Moreover, the interdependence of fatherhood and long working hours points toward a traditional gendered definition of child care obligations. Consequentially women having to undertake a “second
shift” might not see long working hours as the source of their time squeeze but rather blame their male partners who insufficiently contribute to household chores and child care. Thus, Eikhof et al. conclude: “Better work-life balance might be attained not with flexible working for women but persuading men to finally shoulder equitable domestic responsibility” (2007: 331). Ransom introduces the idea of a ‘total responsibility burden’ to account for this equity issue as a matter of negotiation between adult partners in a household (2007).

In a nutshell, the implicit assumption that life equals child care and that work tends to be overwork does include a gender bias and does not fit all. Therefore, this specific use of the concept already somewhat limits the choice and self-determination of those who try to use it to achieve a higher degree and autonomy in balancing the demands of different types of activities (that is: paid and unpaid).

Having questioned the general validity of WLB’s premises, one should not overlook that overwork and the problem of combining child care responsibilities and a career are certainly prevalent for parents with dependent children in New Zealand (Calister 2005 and 2005a). However, as Harris and Pringle highlight owner-managers of SMEs and Chinese migrants to New Zealand might view work interests as synonymous with their preferred leisure and life passions and hence, the aforementioned premises of WLB do not apply to them (2007). There appears to be a cultural dimension in life style choices and arrangements which needs to be integrated.

Apart from being empirically questionable, WLB premises are mainly ad hoc assumptions and suffer from a lack of theoretical foundation. Guided mainly by state and employer interests to source the labour force pool of mothers with dependent children it does not include the notion of freedom of choice for all employees to fulfil their specific needs and interests (Fleetwood 2007a). Though the term suggests more freedom – a wider range of life opportunities and a process to attain and guarantee those is not systematically build into the concept of WLB (Fleetwood 2007: 352). What is regarded as a greater chance to enjoy life in all its varieties may differ according to cultural and ethnical background, social status, gender, age and other parameters (Fleetwood 2007: 353 and Lewis et al.,
A possible theoretical foundation with such an emphasis on having a better quality of life according to one’s own particular ambitions and talents is provided by Sen’s capability approach: “It represents the various combinations of functionings (beings and doings) that the person can achieve. Capability is, thus, a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person’s freedom to lead one type of life or another” (Sen 1995: 40).

Capabilities

Sen argues that not all aspects of agency and well-being are captured in the notion of maximizing utility. Translated into the world of employment and work this means: the optimal return on investment in human capital utilized on the labour market does not necessarily lead to the greatest degree of freedom of choice and happiness for all employees. The optimal use of human capital being the primary goals of employers and the government according to their vested interests. He states that well-being may even have nothing to do with momentary happiness or fulfilment of desires: “‘Being happy’ is not even a valuational activity and ‘desiring’ is at best a consequence of valuation. The need for valuation in assessing well-being demands a more direct recognition” (Sen 1992: 46). And: “While being happy may count as an important functioning, it cannot really be taken to be all there is to leading a life …” (Sen 1995: 54).

Moreover, cases are imaginable where individuals might value certain acts and their freedom to act very highly, though these acts might have no positive effect upon their well-being or even a negative one: “Indeed, the person himself or herself may have reasons for pursuing goals other than personal well-being or individual self-interest” (Sen 1992: 55). Sen’s favourite example to illustrate this distinction is ‘fasting’: “For example, ‘fasting’ as a functioning is not just starving it is choosing to starve when one does have other options. In examining a starving person’s achieved well-being, it is of direct interest to know whether he or she is fasting or simply does not have the means to get enough food. Similarly, choosing a life-style is not exactly the same as having that life-style no matter
how chosen, and one’s well-being does depend on how that life-style happened to emerge” (Sen 1995: 52). This highlights the strong relevance of the capability approach for life-style choice which is very relevant for WLB.

Freedom to choose is a value in itself, despite the utility resulting from an act: “If, for example, all the alternatives other than the one actually chosen, were to be eliminated, this need not affect achievement (since the chosen alternative can be still chosen), but the person clearly has less freedom, and this may be seen as a loss of some importance” (Sen 1992: 60). To illustrate this loss with an employment related example. Imagine someone is conditioned or channelled to become a highly capable and successful website designer, earning a high salary, and it could be determined that this would optimize his or her income and constitutes the way this person can contribute the most to society. Though this appears to be an optimal choice, still something is lost, if this individual is not allowed (does not have the capability) to try out other aspects (functionalities) of her or his personality (e.g. did not have the chance to become a third rate rock musician, janitor or stay-home-dad/mum). The freedom of process to attain goals is as important as the compatibility of our achievements with our preferences and their optimality in terms of providing utility (Sen 2002: 526). Sen points out, that preferences are relevant in judging processes in two different – though interrelated – ways:

“(1) Personal process concern: individuals may have preferences over processes that occur in their own lives;

(2) Systemic process concern: they may also have preferences over the processes that operate as general rules in the working of the society” (Sen 2002: 624).

The WLB approach is not alone in disregarding these process freedom issues. According to Sen this neglect is also apparent in the underlying dominant philosophies of economics and ethics: “Since utilitarianism and libertarianism have been very influential in ethics and welfare economics (in
different parts of them), the overall effect has been the neglect of process considerations as a part of any crucial valuational exercise” (Sen 2002: 628).

Though in most cases well-being might be related to agency, sometimes positive well-being might occur without any causal link between the acts of a person and his or her well-being (e.g. a patient in a hospital or the child of a caring parent). Thus, maximizing one’s own utility and the freedom to act are not the only welfare criteria either. Sen highlights therefore the distinction “… between ‘the occurrence of A’ and ‘the occurrence of A through our own efforts” (Sen 1995: 58).

To defend ones capabilities or freedom to act, not only negative freedom (absence of external coercion and constraints of action) but also positive freedom (autonomy in the sense of absence of inner pressure) has to be guaranteed (Berlin 1970). Only in case of given negative and positive freedom, agency might lead to self-fulfilment (Sen 1992: 56-7): “…, I have found it more useful to see “positive freedom” as the person’s ability to do the things in question taking everything into account (including external restraints as well as internal limitations). In this interpretation, a violation of negative freedom must also be – unless compensated by some other factor – a violation of positive freedom, but not vice versa” (Sen 2002: 586). These freedoms and distinguishing them from well-being are key for Sen: “Capability is primarily a reflection of the freedom to achieve valuable functionings. It concentrates directly on freedom as such rather than on the means to achieve freedom, and it identifies the real alternatives we have. In this sense, it can be read as a reflection of substantive freedom. In so far as functionings are constitutive of well-being, capability represents a person’s freedom to achieve well-being” (Sen 1995: 49).

John Davis’s interpretation of Sen’s approach leads to four different combinations of individual advantage: “These two distinctions yield four sometimes overlapping, but relatively distinct, concepts of individual advantage for Sen (see Table 1). They are; (1) well-being achievement, (2) agency

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1 Charles Taylor (1985 and 1989) supports Sen’s interpretation of Berlin’s philosophy stressing the importance of both freedoms whereas Berlin emphasised the detrimental effects of philosophies based mainly on positive freedom and therefore prioritised negative freedom (Berlin 1991).

2 The emphasis is in the original.
achievement, (3) well-being freedom, and (4) agency freedom …. The first represents the traditional
career of mainstream economics with individuals’ satisfying their own preferences. The second …,
careers individuals’ ability to achieve goals that do not involve their own well-being. The third
careers individuals having the freedom to pursue their own well-being. The fourth concerns
individuals simply having the freedom to pursue all their goals, whether or not they are successful in
achieving them (Davis 2002: 487).

**Table 1: Sen’s four concepts of individual advantage**

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<tr>
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<th>Well-being</th>
<th>Other goals</th>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom to achieve</td>
<td>Well-being achievement</td>
<td>Agency achievement</td>
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<td>(e.g. old-age pensions)</td>
<td>(e.g. heroic sacrifices)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom to pursue</td>
<td>Well-being freedom</td>
<td>Agency freedom</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(e.g. occupational choice)</td>
<td>(e.g. fasting)</td>
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Source: Davis 2002: 487.

Davis concedes that such a multi-goal framework might be criticized for its insufficiency in determining
social policy, however, its advantage is “… the flexibility it provides in being able to address the great
variety of different types of valuation problems that social policy confronts” (Davis 2002: 487). In regard
of our topic: WLB to attain well-being achievement (i.e. optimal use of human capital) or agency
achievement (i.e. being able to care for ones’ children) is not enough to guarantee a full freedom of
choice concerning ones life-style.

The approach of capability (agency) and well-being allows Sen and his colleague Martha Nussbaum to
come up with a universal catalogue of core human functional capabilities (Nussbaum 2000: 78-80), which
are indispensable for human well-being and agency. This is the list of headings of those central
capabilities: 1. life, 2. bodily health, 3. bodily integrity, 4. senses, imagination and thought, 5. emotions,
control over one’s environment (A. political and B. material). Though such a catalogue lays the ground
for interpersonal comparison of well-being, freedom and distributive justice, the concept remains
inevitably vague and demands for more detailed criteria that have to be discussed and agreed upon and might be cultural specific in its their concrete form (Gestalt) (Nussbaum 2000).

So, what can be learned from Sen’s capability approach for the WLB? Firstly, though there are some universal criteria of what well-being means. These are only broadly and vaguely defined. Well-being and other goals can be pursued either in “life” or in “work” or in both. Therefore, life cannot be per se good and work bad. How well-being is defined is individually, socially and culturally specific. If life is equated with (child) care activities and work mainly seen as overwork our capabilities are unduly limited. Secondly and related, the freedom to achieve and pursue a particular level of WLB has to be considered when implementing WLB policies. In this attention has to be paid to personal as well as systemic process concerns. According to the capability approach implementing WLB entails a process allowing for the widest possible range of meanings and combinations of WLB and a high degree of liberty and fairness in voicing all those alternative views.

The Gendered notion of Care

Further theoretical foundation for WLB can be gained from alternative economic theory developed by feminist economists and philosophers like Nancy Folbre, Martha Nussbaum and others3 (Davis 2002 and 2003).

According to Nancy Folbre’s arguments, it is mainly caring labour which provides the basic human needs and thus, well-being for children. She defines caring labour as: “… labor undertaken out of affection or a sense of responsibility for other people, with no expectation of immediate pecuniary reward” (Folbre 2003: 214). To foster caring through social policy is what WLB is mainly concerned about. Folbre points out: “… an emphasis on rewarding caring has somewhat anti-market implications, simply because the market does not elicit caring” (2003: 224). However, something has to be done to provide enough caring labour to sustain a certain society. “If you do not literally “value” caring labor, its supply may decline.

3 Compare e.g. England and Folbre 2002 and Himmelweit 2000.
But if you start running out, you cannot buy more at the corner store” (Folbre 2003: 224). “On the other hand, providing positive rewards, such as public remuneration for caring labor, could have the effect of reinforcing the existing sexual division of labor. … But we should also recognize that debates over public policy often hinge underlying values that, in the long run, influence both norms and preferences”. Thus, commercialisation of caring labour might undermine its primary non-monetary motivation and WLB practices focussing on work arrangements might cement the gendered division of household chores and childcare.

Davis suggests combining Sen and Nussbaum’s capability approach with Folbre’s structures of constraint (i.e. to be embedded in different kinds of social groups and their norms that form identities). From my point of view such an amalgamation with Sen’s liberal ideas about capabilities could lead to well founded concept of WLB. Folbre’s structures of constraint analysis, which is primarily concerned with the dilemmas that women face and the unequal division of care giving responsibilities between women and men offers an especially valuable framework for treating individual identity as a problem of negotiating multiple group identities. Davis’s arguments lead to certain evaluative criteria for social policy. The policies should “… place value on having opportunities that are not taken up, a person’s capabilities then need to be seen as the range of alternatives they have, even if none of these alternatives would have been preferred” (Davis 2002: 488). They should also allow men and women to freely and successfully negotiate a variety of different often complex group involvements over one’s lifetime including care responsibilities. Davis gives an example: “… a woman exercises her reproductive rights by not having children and electing to care for elderly or disabled family members” (Davis 2002: 493). Social policy according to him in this example should not only be evaluated in terms of allowing care successfully and efficiently given to the elderly or disabled person but also in terms of capabilities of the care giver: “In the case above regarding public compensation for family labor devoted to caring for others, public compensation needs to be defended not just in terms of promoting the capabilities of those who provide family labor, where this concerns being able to accomplish all the activities (or functionings) involved in
caring for others, but also in terms of promoting such individuals’ capabilities to move back and forth between caring and their other social group involvements” (Davis 2002: 493).

**Freedom and Work-Life-Balance**

This movement backward and forward from paid work to caring responsibilities on a daily basis and across the life cycle is the explicit aim of WLB arrangements though high levels of capability in this area are not widely achieved in practice. However, an encompassing WLB should allow for a wide variety of combinations of different functionings (for instance work and coaching a boys’ soccer team or other volunteer activities, reduced work load because of illness or particularly intensive or scattered work patterns according to cultural or otherwise individual specific consumption patterns).

According to Sen, the capability to freely choose between different sets of functionings, i.e. to find one’s own preferred combination of work and other activities and identities is based on freedom in several respects. It can mean to achieve a high level of well-being (for instance to stay healthy, to earn a living wage), the freedom to define ones level of well-being (e.g. to work like mad though it’s not healthy), to achieve non-work related goals (for instance to care for children, the elderly or sick or troubled friends) and the freedom to pursue goals like artistic or religious expression, trying to live off ones veggie garden, travel on a shoestring or jump off the cliff etc..

For a society to guarantee such a high level of capability, it is crucial to understand personal and systemic process concerns, that is, to organize negotiation and bargaining about WLB in a participatory way which allows for cultural diversity and equal voice for employers, employees and other interested parties. So far policies to attain WLB are designed without much consultation or participation of those who work and other functionings than childcare are largely ignored. Part of negotiation, debate and bargaining about WLB has to be whether work time arrangements adjust to other functionings or family and private time arrangements adjust to work demands. Such open and free processes require an equal power balance of all vested interests (employer associations, unions,
the government and other interest groups) and an inclusion of all kinds of possible functionings to account for all areas of freedom and well-being.

In my interpretation, whilst Sen’s capability approach defines and helps to distinguish between different aspect of freedom and well-being it offers a framework for developing a more open and less biased approach to WLB. Folbre’s work on caring labour and structures of constraint enable us to make some of the underlying biases in the use of WLB more explicit.

List of references


