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Fatal Attraction? Feminist Life History Research and the Capabilities Approach.

Yvonne Downs and Michael Watts

This paper asks 'is using the capabilities approach compatible with a feminist life history project?' The question is tackled both from a methodological and ethical perspective focusing not only of the place of capabilities within the project, but also on the implications for capabilities when it is used for an academic exploration of relative privilege. Mindful of Skeggs' (2002) robust critique of the academic habit of appropriating whatever is useful in the constitution of the academic self, I conclude that whilst capabilities is methodologically enriching, there is still some tough negotiation ahead before capabilities and my project are reconciled.

Introduction

This paper gives an account of Yvonne's PhD research, a feminist project which uses a life history methodology to focus on the value of higher education for women 'like her', middle aged women graduates who were born into working class families and who were the first in those families to go into higher education. Although it is Yvonne's story and accordingly will be told in the first person from this point on, Michael is the 'absent presence' throughout the narrative. Having been introduced to CA by Melanie Walker who was my tutor when I did an MA in educational research at Sheffield in 2006, I met Michael when he delivered a paper on capabilities and adaptive preference at a conference I was also attending (Watts 2008a). Our conversations and email correspondence since that time comprise the bedrock, the touchstone and the lynchpin of this paper. It is the story to date of what might be termed an obsession. I have been striving for some time to understand why I was intuitively drawn to the capabilities approach (CA), interrogating it in order to ascertain whether it is compatible with my research philosophy and methodology and, if so, how it might be incorporated into and support my research aims. [1]

The initial and immediate attraction of CA for me, and this was on a purely intuitive level, was its potential to circumvent narrow instrumental, utilitarian and, specifically, economic definitions of the value of higher education. However, my aim was not to discount these definitions completely, nor to focus solely on the intrinsic value of education. I was persuaded that perpetuating the 'good/bad' dichotomies that Halsey, Heath and Ridge (1980) identify as marking much of the discussion and thinking around education, would have amounted to little more than bickering with

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prevailing discourses. Indeed, the women I spoke to for my research had themselves a way of sidestepping these dichotomised positions (although I also accept my influence in shaping what they say). Nor was my aim to find a normative framework within which to analyse stories 'top down' about the value of higher education. A fundamental principle of my methodology is that theory arises out of the conversations between participants and (scholarly) theory. In other words I was seeking to find a way of talking about the value of higher education that resonated and harmonised with the stories told and vice versa and I 'felt' that CA could provide that. [2]

I begin therefore with an account of the genesis of my research and then move on to a consideration of its underpinning philosophy and methodology and the work capabilities might be required to do within such a framing. I then focus more sharply on my understanding of life history and feminist research and whether CA is congruent with that. Finally I turn my attention to some of the issues that still need to be addressed before my research and CA could be considered reconciled. In so saying I make clear that my concern is not just about the compatibility of CA with my research. I also address the implications for CA when it is used in a study of what might be termed 'privilege'. This is at least my intention. However, the paper is less a performance than it is *performative* and I will at various points be interrupting myself to hear comments on what I am saying. Therefore it may well be that the paper takes on a life of its own. [3]

Before I proceed, however, I wish to clarify that it is primarily Sen's ideas from which I draw. I am not arguing here that Nussbaum's ideas run counter to or undermine those of Sen. Nor do I maintain that Nussbaum's intentions were intended as prescription. However, the provision of a specific list hinders the plasticity required for historically specific and contextualised understanding of capabilities and thus meshes less easily with my methodology. Moreover, whilst the adaptability and 'athleticism' of CA can itself be criticised (Hinchliffe 2006), the presence of a list can attract too much attention to itself and divert attention away from the work it is required to do. As it is the latter that is my central concern, I find Sen's handling of CA less problematic. [4]

1. Genesis of my research

The provisional title of my PhD thesis is 'what is the value of higher education for white working class women?' I say provisional but it has remained constant for

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over three years and I have yet to be tempted to consider anything else. I have become increasingly aware that it does a lot of work, carrying much meaning seemingly effortlessly. Although there won't be time to unpack these meanings fully, I will of course be returning to the notion of 'value' later in the paper. I am aware, sometimes uncomfortably, that my interest in this question is intensely personal, and indeed my story is also included in my study. It may well be therefore that my entire project could be deemed an exercise in self-indulgence and vanity (Van Maanen 1988, Maynard 1993 *inter alia*). I am not pointing this out in order to demonstrate my 'reflexivity' but because of its importance to my consideration later in the paper of the potential implications of for CA itself. [5]

However, neither was my interest solely self-centred. I worked for just over a year as Aimhigher co-ordinator in a FE College before it became impossible for me to continue in that role because I had become increasingly concerned about the way higher education was promoted to the groups of 'non-traditional' students with whom I was working. The seeds of my research interests emanated from the issues that arose at that time, not least the idea that existing notions of 'value' attaching to higher education were not making much sense to the students I was working with, or indeed to me. I will therefore briefly outline some of the tensions that arose which also serves as the springboard for my discussion of CA within my study. [6]

1.1 Conflicts and confusions

I was never entirely 'on message' with Aimhigher and I struggled to reconcile certain conflicts within myself. On the one hand I did want every student to be aware that higher education does not have to be seen as an elite activity and that further study may also be an option for them, even if they had not considered it before. I didn't want any student to discount higher education simply because they thought it was 'not for the likes of them'. I was aware at that time of Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' but also struggled to reconcile this with a more dynamic and empowered notion of agency. Sayer's (2005: 22 -42) reading and critique of habitus which has since been helpful in this respect was not available to me at that time and I continued to feel conflicted about what I was saying to students. [7]

Nor did I want them to discount higher education because of the costs involved. I am not referring here to purely financial costs but also, for example, the cost of leaving a supportive environment for one in which they may not 'belong'.

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From my own experience and observations I felt that the value of higher education could not, and indeed should not, be measured in terms of the job you got or in straightforward economic terms. I did feel that a more expansive understanding of 'costs and benefits' needed to be factored in, but in such a way as to avoid assuming or creating dichotomised positions. For instance, in my own case one of the costs of going to university was the creation of distance between me and my birth family but, conversely, the person I became through going to university was also better able to re-establish connections over the course of time. [8]

So I did want to encourage students to *consider* the possibility of higher education but I became increasingly dismayed at my inability to articulate why I thought they should consider it. It was also difficult to resist the inference that if a particular student on my 'list' decided not to participate I or they had somehow 'failed'. I knew, again through experience and observation, that those who decided not to participate in higher education were not necessarily deficient in aspiration nor necessarily lacking in any other way. Notwithstanding the constraints and limitations inherent in and shaping the concept of choice (Reay et al 2005) and the thorny issue of what I came to know as 'adaptive preferences', where constraints on one's freedom to choose are internalised and reconfigured as preferred outcomes, non-participation could also be construed as a positive choice (cf Ball, Maguire and Macrae 2000, Watts and Bridges 2004 and 2006). Moreover I strongly suspected that for some students, higher education may not significantly enhance their life and may in fact make their lives more difficult. This suspicion gained credence in discussion with colleagues who were part of the Aimhigher project and I provide a simplified account of this below. [9]

1.2 Desperately seeking theory

Part of my role was to manage a team of mentors, all of whom were women and all of whom were graduates. I recall us having a good laugh when we read somewhere in the Aimhigher literature that graduates earn on average £423,000 more than non-graduates over a working life (it is unfortunate that I did not keep a copy of the pamphlet in which this appeared because this statement now seems to have disappeared from the Aimhigher literature and Aimhigher websites). This led to discussions about why they were mentoring and not doing other jobs that paid more. It could be argued that some employers would simply see them as overqualified for these jobs but this view could be challenged. In particular, the bus company in our area were desperate for bus drivers and had announced they were actively recruiting

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in Poland. It is unlikely therefore that the company would have discounted them as potential employees simply because they were graduates. The hourly rate for bus drivers was more than that of mentors in the college. [10]

Likewise, although gender issues certainly need to be factored in, the hours offered to bus drivers were designed to attract, amongst others, women with school age children. Moreover, none of the mentors, at least not overtly, debarred themselves from bus driving on account of their gender. Leaving aside the matter of driving skills, for full training was provided, what stopped them applying was that they saw themselves as *graduates*. Now this does not mean simply that they thought they were 'overqualified', because they were also overqualified for the mentoring jobs they were doing. But somehow, being graduates, driving a bus was not something they would consider doing. [11]

It took me some time to make some sense of this situation and this was via the conceptual language of CA, which enabled me to theorise thus. Being a graduate also entailed a process of including and excluding certain 'beings and doings'. This sort of decision making, moreover, was qualitatively different from that in which 'adaptive preferences' are in play (Nussbaum 2000). Of course it may equally be argued that the idea of driving a bus did not have any intrinsic appeal. However, I contend that what we come to value is not immutable nor displaced from its contexts, be those historical, situational, temporal, experiential, discursive or whatever. It became clear to me therefore, through access to the language of capabilities, that higher education was a powerful influence on what we (the mentors and I) had come to value and, moreover, on what we had reason to value. [12]

At this stage of my research I thus saw the potential of CA as a way to move from the anecdotal and descriptive to the analytical and theoretical. It also provided, moreover, a conceptual language with which that could be accomplished, something I had identified as lacking in much of the talk about the value of higher education. However, for reasons which will become more defined when I consider capabilities in relation to feminist research, I was mindful not to make of the approach a normative framework into and around which the words of my participants could be accommodated. This is not to say I reject the notion of a normative framework. Indeed I identified the need for such in my research design. However, it was essential for me to develop this in conjunction with the participants themselves. [13]

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2. My research and capabilities – a suitable match?

This leads me now to consider the attractions of CA for my study. Echoing a key principle of my methodology, I outline some of the key elements of my research and set these in conversation with CA. The weakness in structuring my points this way is that it suggests that I am happy to use CA piecemeal, cherry picking what is useful and ignoring or discarding what is not. This is not the case, not least because I agree with Skeggs (2004) that such a manoeuvre is part of the doctrine of appropriation that marks the new cult of the self, itself a legacy of modernism's individualism. But before I incorporate CA, indeed any framework in my research, theoretical or otherwise, I have to be satisfied that it can be fundamentally reconciled with my research philosophy to do feminist research with an ethical aim, a moral purpose and a reflexive impetus and also with my chosen life history methodology. [14]

I have already subjected the various elements of my philosophy and various 'paradigms', theories and theorists to the same 'compatibility test'. For example, many feminists are able to work with Foucault, despite the problems inherent in doing so, not least due to his disregard not only of gender but also of women (see Hekman 1996 for a discussion). However, his stance on the punishment of rape (briefly, it is the violence that should be punished not the sexual aspect of the crime because this would entail an encroachment on sexual freedom) is indicative of irreconcilable differences with my understanding of feminist research. Thus I do not work with Foucault, not because I disagree with this reading of rape (although I do), for disagreements may be resolved and clearly some feminists have achieved such a resolution. However, adopting a Foucauldian analysis would render *my* work fundamentally incoherent. Specificity is essential. Thus I am insistent that, if CA is to work for me in this particular project, I have to be satisfied it will not undermine the unity of the whole. And this 'compatibility test' is not a one-way street. There are (important, ethical) implications for CA when it is used in an analysis of relative privilege rather than of deprivation, a point I return to in more detail later. [15]

2.1 Talking the same language – theory and experience

Despite some of the challenges it presents, therefore, initiating conversations is a cornerstone of my methodology. Because academic interest in graduates tends to be confined to matters of social mobility and employment (but see Dyhouse, 2002

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and Aiston 2005) I decided that interpolations between what was said in the stories and what was said in the literature would yield more nuanced, sophisticated and adaptable theories and analyses. I am differentiating this way of working from 'grounded theory' where the idea is that theory emanates primarily from the 'data', not least because it seems perverse to isolate and individualise a study that purports to be rooted in *social science*. However, this way of working also eschews the construction of any pre-formed analytical or theoretical scaffolding that remains external to the data. I identify two interlocking issues here; the place of theory and the importance of the language used to express it. [16]

Official and commonsense discourses around the 'benefits' of participation in higher education differ in significant respects. But what they have in common is the articulation of a narrow economic understanding of value expressed in the language of the free market. In this respect they are mono-lingual and foreclose on the possibility of asking questions outside the parameters they set (Sikes and Goodson 2003). What is required therefore is a way to redefine those parameters using different, more dynamic languages in which to speak. CA is helpful to both the project of re-definition and to the linguistic aspects of this because it is not a rigid or prescriptive theory but a 'broad normative framework', closer to a paradigm (Robeyns 2003:5). There is also a specific lexicon attaching to CA which can provide a richer conceptual language in which to talk about the value of higher education. However, this would count for nought if it was out of tune with what was being said by the women graduates in my research. [17]

Unsurprisingly, given the pervasiveness of dominant discourses around the value of higher education, the women I have spoken to do not speak outside of these discourses at all times. But what is remarkable is that sometimes they also speak in terms that challenge and problematise dominant economic understandings of value (Downs 2009). For example, one participant, Linda, likens going into higher education to giving birth for the first time, where the focus is solely on the birthing itself and not on what happens afterwards. This is an articulation of issues around means and ends that makes sense to Linda, who had three children in quick succession shortly after graduating. It is impossible to imagine that such a conceptualisation, expressed in such evocative terms, would find its way into official rhetoric. However, CA with its concepts of well-being and agency, of freedom and achievement, of means and ends, of intrinsic and instrumental value and of 'beings and doings' that we value and have reason to value is in harmony with the richly

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nuanced inflections of Linda's words, providing a more meaningful vocabulary than that, for example, of increased earnings potential. [18]

To summarise therefore, CA seemed to offer me a way to move beyond the anecdotal and descriptive without a slip into prescriptive theorising and the imposition of theories about what 'should' constitute the 'good life'. It also offers participants a chance to make sense of their own stories and to reconfigure their perceptions of their 'failure to achieve'. However, would CA be similarly compatible with my methodology? I pursue this question below through a consideration of CA within my understanding of life history and feminist research. [19]

2.2 Life history research and capabilities

I have already stated that interest in 'non-traditional' students seldom endures beyond graduation, other than to explore issues of 'social mobility' or employment issues, which in itself says much about how the value of higher education is construed. And yet I was aware from the discussions I held with mentors when I worked in Aimhigher that graduate stories clearly had something to offer. Thus I decided that I would focus on graduates and more specifically on women 'like me', which, I hoped, would also allow me to make sense of my own experience. I therefore also decided to use an auto/biographical approach (Stanley 1992) where the slash indicates the complexities of authoring or interpreting stories of a life lived. I rejected doing an 'autoethnography' because, such was my state of unknowing, I would not have been able to proceed. I sought out women 'like me' to hear their stories in the hope this would provide a way forward, as indeed it has. However, I also made the decision to frame the stories as life histories, rather than life stories per se. [20]

There is no consensus on what constitutes life history research and I agree with Tierney (2000) when he says that those of us using life history tend to 'talk past' each other rather than disagree. In essence I agree with Goodson and Sikes (2001) that what sets life history apart and distinguishes it from life stories is the importance of context, be that historical, social, cultural, political, institutional, discursive or whatever. In this way 'the life story individualizes and personalizes; the life history contextualizes and politicizes' (Goodson and Sikes 2001: 87-88). I am not as certain about the separation of the personal from the political. Nor is there agreement on whether the contexts of the stories are 'nested' in the stories themselves, to be

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excavated from them (Fine et al 2000), or whether stories told are then discretely placed in context (Goodson and Sikes 2001). I actually employ a mixture of the two, sometimes using a hybrid and sometimes swinging from one method to the other which reflects my rejection of the separation of the public and private, the individual and the social and so on. [21]

Thus I did not perceive a general or fundamental mis-match between CA and narrative (in this instance life history) research per se. In the first place Sen himself argues for an appreciation of the context in which evaluations are made. Secondly Robeyns (2005:193) points out that, according to Sen, CA can be used for 'different types of analysis, with different epistemological goals, relying on different methodologies'. Thirdly, there are examples of how narrative methodologies (Deneulin and Hodgett, 2006) and a focus on the 'nano-level' of 'little lives' (Hulme, 2004) can be used within a capabilities framework. Moreover, Michael has demonstrated the usefulness of Sen's approach to an analysis of 'the real opportunities... research participants have to tell the stories they value and have reason to value' (Watts 2008:99). [22]

2.3 Analysis and individualism

In detailing the life history methodology that I am using, I wanted to emphasise that a focus on the 'little life', is not synonymous with individualising experience. Individual experiences are located in, shaped by and contain the traces and echoes of the broader contexts in which they are situated. I conceptualise this as living life within the context of a 'script', that is within parameters that are not individually authored even while they must be individually enacted (for a fuller discussion see Downs 2007). Similarly individual experience also acts upon those contexts and how they come to be translated into 'lived realities'. In other words there is a dialogic relationship between the two. Thus the idea is not to generalise or provide meta-narratives nor is it to theorise out from individual stories or to impose theory or meta-narrative on 'small stories'. It is not to identify links between the social and the individual, the public and the private and so on but to acknowledge the embedded-ness, each within the other, of lives and the circumstances in which they are lived. [23]

This position clearly articulates with criticisms of CA that it is too individualistic and fails to appreciate the embedded-ness to which I refer. This had for while been a

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sticking point for me, despite Sen clearly stating his recognition of wider societal forces in the lives of individuals (Drèze and Sen 2002). Empirically I could appreciate that CA did not dis-locate the individual from their social, cultural or institutional settings. However, I struggled to understand this on a conceptual level. My conversations with Michael often returned to this theme. I thus found Robeyn's (2003) distinctions between ethical, methodological and ontological individualism helpful because she points out that an ethical concern with the individual is not at odds with an appreciation of how social structures and constraints shape and impact on our experiences and the outcomes of those experiences. This argument resonates with those I use for a focus on individual stories as a starting point for theory and enabled me to reconcile CA within my understandings of life history research. [24]

In the same paper Robeyns also suggests a reason for the assumption that Sen is not sufficiently mindful of external constraints and influences on the individual; namely that he does not offer fully formed or self-supporting analyses of the *mechanisms* by which these constraints and structures come to bear upon us. Assuming for now that Sen does not offer such analyses, I would not necessarily construe this as a weakness of CA at this point (although I am less upbeat later in the paper). Indeed, in my particular study it supports a more plastic reading of the effects and interplay of, for example class and gender, gender and ethnicity and class and ethnicity. It also leaves room for new ways of analysing. For example I am interested in how the *moral* significance of class impacts on participants' own interpretation of their class positions. Moreover, rather than subscribing to theories of class and gender that construe these as monoliths, the absence of rigid analytical categories provides a space in which these may be conceptualised as relational and mutable. [25]

Before I leave the subject of analysis and move on to a consideration of CA and feminist research, I would also add that I could see no friction between CA and the notion of narrative analysis, that is the embedding of analysis in the story itself (Polkinghorne 1995). I use this method because it allows me to keep the stories 'whole' and avoids the kind of fragmentation that would, I contend, run counter to my ideas of ethical practice. This desire to keep the stories whole has other implications for analysis, in that it forecloses on the idea of categories and of analysis taking place against any pre-ordained checklist. My original intention was to approach analysis *along* certain analytic *dimensions* (cf Rose 1999). However, the analytical spaces

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opened up by the concepts of agency freedom, agency achievement, well-being freedom and well-being achievement are potentially even less restrictive and tolerant of diversity than that and would even accommodate the notion of analytic dimensions within those spaces. [26]

2.3 Feminist research and capabilities

As with life history research, using the term 'feminist research' is open to interpretation. My understanding of what it means to do feminist research has been shaped by Kum-Kum Bhavnani's (1993) response to Donna Haraway's engagement with questions of 'feminist objectivity'. Part of this response was to move away from a definition of feminist research that can be summarised by the expression 'by, with and for women'. Instead, Bhavnani sets out the following three underpinning principles which I outline below and briefly indicate how this might articulate with CA.

1. The design, conduct and dissemination of feminist research should address how it deals with difference.

Robeyns (2003) points out that at the heart of CA is its insistence on the recognition of human diversity and in this sense CA and my feminist principles are compatible. However, as an aside, I would also argue that ideas of difference and diversity are as problematic for CA as they are for feminism, because how is diversity to be reconciled with a rejection of individualism? Here compatibility does not resolve the dilemma. Although Sen makes clear that the idea of freedom expressed in the concept of 'capabilities' is not a synonym for 'freedom to choose', both feminism and CA, I would argue, need some extra support here. I suggest that perhaps Levinas' (1957/1998) notion of 'infinity' may offer some assistance. Briefly, infinity is the very expression of heteronomy, the foregrounding of 'otherness', the appeal for inclusion, the recognition of historical exclusion and the accommodation of poly-vocality. Thus it provides a way to insist on human diversity, even while it rejects the atomising and individualising of human experience. [27]

2. Feminist research should not re-inscribe the researched into prevailing representations (and feminist research should not just confine itself to the

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study of 'women'), but at the same time, it should not downplay structural subordination or romanticise the people you are researching

I have already indicated above how I think CA connects with this principle. Indeed, it is the conceptual spaces that CA can provide and prise open that constitute the conditions for a richer, more complex, multi-dimensional reading of human action and human lives. Thus when I asked the women in my study about how they viewed their achievements, all but one told me that they felt they had underachieved and had not 'lived up to' expectations nor fully 'capitalised' on the opportunities participation in higher education afforded them. However, when I pursued this, using the conceptual language of capability, they were all able to re-configure themselves as 'successful' in the achievement of what they had reason to value. [28]

However, this is not as straightforward as this brief account would suggest. For example most participants stated that they valued personal relationships above all. Thus, it might be argued, they were simply adapting their preferences to conform to gendered notions of 'femininity' and caring for others. However, there were other examples that were less open to this critique. For example, and I include myself here, some of us were also able to use the benefits of higher education to avoid the 'double shift' of work and childcare. Thus not climbing the career ladder was not the result of failure (because some of us had also had successful careers) but the outcome of a conscious decision about what we valued (Sally, another participant, expressed it thus: 'I want a life as well as work'). [29]

Lack of time and space prevents me from elaborating here and I am aware that I am grossly over-simplifying. For example, the (gendered) reasons for the existence of a double shift merit much closer attention. Moreover, extracting fragments from the whole is by its very nature unsatisfactory as it precludes any sense of the complexity of inter-connected themes and ideas. My only recourse here is to ask you to suspend your disbelief and accept, without access to the whole, that using the language of capabilities not only made sense to the participants but was also in tune with the stories they told. [30]

3. Feminist research should highlight both the micro-political processes that are in play during the conduct of research, in particular, 'the relationships of domination and subordination which the researcher has negotiated'

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(Bhavnani 1993:98). It should also give a sense of the macro-political setting in which research is taking place.

I have already alluded to some of the ways in which I believe CA is compatible with this principle and I will not repeat this here. This principle is, however, the reason why I do scrutinise my methods. It is not simply that introducing a discordant note will undermine the integrity of the whole. The implications reach further than this. In claiming the identity of 'feminist researcher' I am also acknowledging that I use various methods in the constitution of that identity. For, as Skeggs reminds us, it is the 'method that is constitutive of the self, not the self of the researcher that always/already exists and can be assumed in research' (2002:348). Skeggs goes further and argues that as researchers we mobilise resources for the display of 'cleverness' and 'to shore up the composite of the academic self'. She was referring specifically to the 'appropriation' of stories in narrative research but I want to hold on to this idea as I move into the final part of the paper to ask questions about the implications of 'appropriating' CA in my research. [31]

3. Capabilities and Feminist Life History – A Fatal Attraction?

I have thus far been upbeat about the compatibility of CA and my study. I am also aware that I may have skipped rather too merrily away from a more incisive critique of the weaknesses of the approach. This is in part a result, as it always is, of working within the constraints of the paper. Partly it reveals that I am still in the process of familiarising myself with it. However, it is in part also deliberate because my focus is not primarily on the finer detail of CA and its internal tensions. Indeed, as I touch on below, I believe 'the academy' has a disproportionate interest in the qualities of CA rather than its applications. In order to redress the balance, however, what follows is a brief outline of what I consider to be more significant stumbling blocks to my wholehearted embrace of capabilities. [32]

3.1 Inviolate purity or splendid isolation? Positioning the Capabilities Approach

Robeyns states that one's discipline largely determines the nature of one's interest in CA.

While an Anglo-American political philosopher will want to investigate the robustness of the use of the term 'freedom' by Amartya Sen, the applied social scientist will not bother but instead worry about how the capability approach can be applied to study poverty or inequality (2003:3).

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The apparent simplicity of this 'statement' is misleading because it fails to recognise the hierarchical ordering of scholarly interest and the power attaching to various hierarchical positions. How much more clout does the Anglo-American philosopher have compared to that of the (generic) social scientist? How much more rigorous and scholarly the words 'robust' and 'investigate' compared to 'bother' and 'worry'? How easy the slippage from plurality to the universal singular, for a few sentences after the statement quoted above, Robeyn's goes on to say the following:

Most theoretical writings on the capability approach require familiarity with abstract reasoning and an interest in theory and *philosophy* (2003:3, my italics). [33]

From my own experience I can say that what put me off using CA in my work was that it seemed overly complex, conceptually over-burdened and inaccessible. I wondered if I would be equal to the task of pitting myself against the welter of theory, analyses, arguments for and against and all the philosophical niceties attaching to the term 'Capabilities Approach'. I had the impression that I would first need to devote myself to a study of the approach as a bounded philosophical and academic entity before I would be in a position to actually use it. I also approached writing this paper with a considerable degree of trepidation. It seemed to me that in some respects CA had become the end not the means. It is not simply that CA is open to interpretation, as all theories are. Indeed, it is precisely the fact that Sen did not conceive of CA as a prescriptive theory that creates the problem. Put simply, do I take Sen at his word? Having established the compatibility of CA with feminist and life history research, can I just simply use it in my study? The danger here is not (just) that I might be found wanting in my grasp of the complexities as I will now go on to discuss. [34]

3.2 Feminist Life History, Capabilities and Ethics

Robeyns (2003) also points out that scholarly interest tends to hinder the application of CA in 'real world' settings by, for example, activists working 'on the ground'. Skeggs' (2002) critique has salience here in the sense that it would seem that scholars have appropriated CA for their own ends. Moreover, as a consequence of this appropriation, CA may have been shepherded away from the very locations where it may do most good. Put baldly, are the careers of scholars across various disciplines in different institutions throughout the globe taking precedence over tackling the real effects on 'little lives' of the conditions of deprivation? For example, I have devoted the majority of this paper to a consideration of how I might incorporate (appropriate?) CA within my own study, a study moreover, of relative privilege. I ask

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'Could I use the Capabilities Approach'. But what of the question 'Should I use the Capabilities Approach?' Belatedly perhaps, this now shifts attention from methodological to ethical concerns. [35]

Arguments that support a certain position may not be so easily transposed into different settings. For example, in line with my principles of doing feminist research, I am careful not to inscribe my participants as 'white trash made good'. This has led to criticism that I have failed to account for the categorisation of working class women as 'white trash' in prevailing discourses (cf Skeggs 2004). What then does my avoidance of such categorisation and inscription mean, for example, when applied to poor, white city dwellers in a deprived neighbourhood (Fine et al 2000)? In other words, what are the implications of bringing privilege into the same arena as deprivation when it is likely that privilege is better resourced to gain the upper hand? Might it be stretching CA too far to expect it to cover analyses of advantage and privilege? If so, what might be the consequences of it losing its shape? [36]

3.3 Theorising the invisible – Capabilities and heterosexuality

I had not planned to include a consideration of heterosexuality in my research, indeed it would not have occurred to me to do so. However, it became clear to me that I would need to account for some of the things I was told. For example Liz maintained that falling in love with her husband had had the greatest impact on her life; several women had relocated geographically several times as they followed the career trajectories of their husbands and boyfriends; when there was a conflict of interest between her job and the man she had fallen in love with, Heather chose the latter. These are just a few of the many examples in the stories. Although feminism has a long history of theorising heterosexuality I struggled at first to make sense of what I was hearing but found that the work of Hockey, Meah and Robinson (2007) provided a way in. [37]

Hockey et al conducted an empirical study of heterosexuality in order to supplement feminist theory. They concluded that heterosexuality is an organising principle in the maintenance of social difference, a social rather than a sexual category. This in itself is not problematic for CA because Sen recognises the influence of social and structural factors on individual lives. However, I suggest that heterosexuality poses several additional challenges to CA as follows:

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- It is simultaneously able to be dominant, pervasive and normative and taken for granted, whilst the mechanisms whereby this status is achieved remain hidden and/or invisible.
- As an organising principle it shapes our gender identities and patterns our lives.
- This is achieved through 'doing' heterosexuality rather than 'being' heterosexual.
- This 'doing' is manifested and perpetuates itself in both 'extreme' ways (for example 'falling in love', marriage, having children) and mundane ways (for example going shopping, going to the pub, doing housework).
- Heterosexuality is not a homogeneous concept. At any point in time it can take on many different forms and has also proved itself to be responsive to other changes through space and time. [38]

In short the challenge to CA is how to accommodate such a powerful and insidious influence, particularly within the conceptual spaces of agency freedom and achievement and, to a lesser extent well-being freedom and achievement. The separation of beings from doings poses a further conceptual challenge. But the thorniest issue here is, I would argue, how what we value and have reason to value articulates with heterosexuality. It may be said that we have good reason to value heterosexuality because to step outside its embrace is to be categorised not only as 'different' but also as 'deviant'. More importantly, it is in effect to place yourself outside the social. This would be difficult enough to tackle were we conscious of the mechanisms involved. However, because of its hidden or invisible influence, reconciling heterosexuality with capabilities will require some hard work. [39]

Conclusion

This paper did not seek to present a fluent narrative, aiming instead to give an account of my involvement with CA and the powerful pull it has for me as a means of analysing and theorising what I have before only been able to intuit and describe. Although I am satisfied that the approach is compatible with my understanding of life history and feminist research, nevertheless I have still have reservations. I clearly still have issues to resolve around the interface of capabilities with a concept of heterosexuality as an invisible organising force. However, I am persuaded that in time and with some further work these issues can probably be resolved. [40]

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I am less buoyant when I frame my consideration of CA in ethical terms. Mine is a small study that like as not will quietly disappear onto the library shelves. It is unlikely I will be causing Sen too many sleepless nights. However, this does not exempt me from addressing these concerns. It's the principle that counts. In particular I have concerns around where the boundaries can be set between incorporating it into my study (because feminist and life history research and CA are compatible and mutually supportive) and appropriating it as a resource in the formation of my academic identity. Is it a fatal attraction as far as CA is concerned? I have the power to decide whether or not I step back. CA does not and, lest we forget, what is at stake is not simply a normative, conceptual and/or evaluative framework but the potential to make a difference to real lives. [41]

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Postscript

Thanks to all who took part in the discussion of this paper. Any further feedback will be more than gratefully received. Please send to:-

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