

Crossing the Boundaries of the Capabilities Approach: Capabilities and Agency from a Collective and Relational Perspective*

[English version]

Cruzando las fronteras del Enfoque de Capacidades: capacidades y agencia desde una perspectiva colectiva y relacional

Ultrapassando os limites da Abordagem de Capacidade: capacidades e agência a partir de uma perspectiva coletiva e relacional

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Abstract

Objective: This study contemplates two fundamental concepts in the Capabilities Approach (CA) as proposed by Amartya Sen: “capabilities” and “agency.” It does so by drawing on a documentary review and on the theoretical perspectives of various authors. **Methodology:** This qualitative research employs documentary review and theoretical-conceptual reflection to delve into CA principles and gain insights from other paradigms, thus transcending the confines of its conceptual framework. **Results:** The Capabilities Approach (CA) has revolutionized the understanding of human development and well-being, departing from traditional development theories. While this represents a significant advancement, further efforts are needed to develop a robust theory that addresses individuals and collectives on a human scale. First, the criticisms of the approach from various authors (some of whom accuse it of being individualistic) is considered. Next, conceptual proposals that emphasize the potential of the relational dimension within the concepts of “capabilities” and “agency” are explored, allowing for the expansion of CA boundaries. **Conclusions:** Despite the presenting ethical individualism, the Capabilities Approach cannot be characterized as individualistic from an ontological and methodological perspective. This condition allows the expansion of the conceptual foundation of the approach to encompass more relational and collective dimensions.

Keywords: Capabilities Approach; agency; collective capabilities; Amartya Sen; collectivity.

Resumen

Objetivo: reflexionar en torno a dos conceptos medulares en el Enfoque de Capacidades (EC) propuesto por Amartya Sen, ‘capacidades’ y ‘agencia’, a partir de la revisión documental y posiciones teóricas de diversos autores. **Metodología:** esta es una investigación cualitativa basada en la revisión documental y la reflexión teórica-conceptual, la cual permite profundizar en los postulados del EC y retroalimentarlos a partir de otros paradigmas que posibilitan cruzar las fronteras de sus nociones conceptuales. **Resultados:** el EC ha revolucionado la forma en que concebimos el desarrollo humano y el bienestar de las personas a partir de la ruptura con las teorías de desarrollo tradicionales. Si bien esto constituye un avance importante, se debe seguir trabajando por una teoría sólida que se ocupe de las personas a escala humana y colectiva. En un primer momento, se abordan las críticas que diversos autores le hacen al enfoque, los cuales lo acusan de individualista. Luego, se exploran algunas propuestas conceptuales que exaltan el potencial de la dimensión relacional en las nociones de

‘capacidades’ y ‘agencia’, lo cual posibilita ampliar el EC más allá de sus fronteras. **Conclusiones:** la principal conclusión es que, si bien el Enfoque de las Capacidades presenta un individualismo ético, no puede caracterizarse como individualista desde el punto de vista ontológico y metodológico. Esta condición permite ampliar la base conceptual del enfoque hacia dimensiones más relacionales y colectivas.

Palabras clave: Enfoque de Capacidades; agencia; capacidades colectivas; Amartya Sen; colectividad.

Resumo

Objetivo: refletir sobre dois conceitos centrais da Abordagem de Capacidades (AC) proposta por Amartya Sen, "capacidades" e "agência", com base em uma análise documental e nas posições teóricas de vários autores. **Metodologia:** trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa baseada em análise documental e reflexão teórico-conceitual, o que permite um estudo aprofundado dos postulados da AC e o feedback de outros paradigmas que possibilitam cruzar as fronteiras de suas noções conceituais. **Resultados:** a AC revolucionou a maneira como pensamos sobre o desenvolvimento humano e o bem-estar das pessoas, rompendo com as teorias tradicionais de desenvolvimento. Embora esse seja um importante passo à frente, é preciso trabalhar mais em uma teoria sólida que lide com as pessoas em uma escala humana e coletiva. Em primeiro lugar, abordamos as críticas à abordagem feitas por vários autores, que a acusam de ser individualista. Em seguida, são exploradas algumas propostas conceituais que exaltam o potencial da dimensão relacional nas noções de "capacidades" e "agência", o que torna possível estender a EC para além de seus limites. **Conclusões:** a principal conclusão é que, embora a Abordagem de Capacidades apresente um individualismo ético, ela não pode ser caracterizada como individualista do ponto de vista ontológico e metodológico. Essa condição permite que a base conceitual da abordagem seja ampliada para dimensões mais relacionais e coletivas.

Palavras-chave: Abordagem de capacidades; agência; capacidades coletivas; Amartya Sen; coletividade.

Introduction

Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen proposed the Capabilities Approach, which conceives of human development differently from utilitarian economics. It views development as the deprivation of basic freedoms and not merely the lack of income. From this perspective, the real freedoms and capabilities of each person matter more than measuring income, wealth, or capital accumulation. In other words, the Capabilities Approach is concerned the development on a human scale rather than a numerical one.

Development has to be more concerted with enhancing the lives we live and the freedoms we enjoy. Expanding the freedoms that we have reason to value not only makes our lives richer and more unfettered, but also allow us to be fuller sociable persons, exercising our own volitions and interacting with—and influencing—the world in which we live. (Sen, 2000, p. 31).

This article is based on a documentary review that enabled identifying various conceptual contributions from a collective and relational dimension. The aim is to address the criticism of individualism often directed at the Capabilities Approach. To begin the reflection, the key central ideas of the approach, revolving around the notions of “capabilities” and “agency,” are presented. According to Sen (1985), “capabilities” refer to the various combinations of functions that a person can achieve, expressing the agency to attain what is valued. Capability is, therefore, a type of freedom: the fundamental freedom to achieve various combinations of functions—or, in less formal terms, the freedom to attain different lifestyles—(Sen, 1985).

That freedom is to be able to do something, and in order to do “that something,” the ability to function is required. As Delgado (2017) makes clear, “the difference between function and capability is assimilated to what is realized and what is effectively possible; to achievements and freedoms or valuable options from which one can choose” (p. 204). In this manner, the crucial factor is that individuals possess meaningful opportunities manifested in capabilities, enabling them to live the kind of life they value, do what they desire, and become what they aspire to be. Functions constitute the achievements, and capabilities are the abilities to attain them.

For Sen (2000), “individual freedom” is a valuable notion within the concept of “development” because it is related to evaluation and effectiveness. From a normative approach, evaluation examines the freedoms enjoyed by individuals, and effectiveness allows for evidencing the initiative of the individual who acts

and provokes changes according to his/her preferences, taking into account the conditions sponsored by the normative and institutional context (Carvajal, 2014, 2015). In this sense, institutions complement capabilities and agency by fostering individual freedoms, which, according to Sen (2000), should be a social commitment. With this in mind, the author proposes a relationship between the agent and institutions, where the latter motivate, in the best possible way, the strengthening of freedom of agency.

Sen supports his concept of “capability in freedom” as both a means and an end. In other words, freedom should enable action based on the real opportunities that individuals have in a heterogeneous society (Comim et al., 2008). In the words of the Nobel economics laureate, “encompasses both the processes that make freedom of action and decision possible and the actual opportunities that individuals have, given their personal and social circumstances” (Sen, 2000, p. 55). The author assumes the conception of positive freedom and rejects the idea that all human beings are rational, free, and equal beings (Henríquez, 2013). Positive freedom indicates the elements that make its execution possible and guarantees real opportunities in accessing it (Carvajal, 2016).

Based on Sen's theory, Nussbaum (2012) has established a minimum of 10 capabilities for people to lead humanly dignified lives (Di Tullio, 2013). Sen (2004), for his part, has openly refused to endorse any version of basic or core capabilities as an important goal for the entire world population, connected to the very idea of social justice. “I have nothing against lists of capabilities, but I do rise up against a large, closed, and complete mausoleum of an exclusive list of capabilities” (Sen, 2004, p. 80). The author argues that people should be allowed to choose these matters on their own; otherwise, democracy would be obstructed by endorsing a set of fundamental entitlements. Each country and/or region should be in charge of choosing the minimums they consider valuable for living a good life. It must be taken into account that not all countries and cultures value the same things in the same way.

Now, in the Capability Approach proposed by Sen, the notion of “agency” has proven to be convenient. It is defined as the freedom enjoyed by the individual to act in accordance with his or her evaluative conception of what is good and valuable in life. This generates changes in the world in accordance with those individual evaluations (Sen, 1992). This notion implies the existence of individual intentionality and action based on desires, goals, or objectives that have been set; in other words, the action depends on preconceived intentionality. Thus, the agent carries out an action and, at the same time, is the judge of it (García, 2014), since only he or she can evaluate the success of the objective according to what he or she considers valuable.

“Agency” or “freedom of agency” is a notion that goes beyond welfare and other finite objectives. The Senian agency is broader; it is not limited to the achievement of a particular objective. There is, then, an open conditionality that is characteristic of freedom of agency and that is proposed in a transversal manner for the achievement of, among other things, a state of well-being and happiness (Sen, 2004).

Amartya Sen believes that human agency is paramount in breaking the social, political, and economic inequality gaps faced by many countries around the world. In *Development and Freedom* (Sen, 2000), the author confronts one of the most enduring inequalities in human history: sexual inequality. In light of this, Sen delves into the study of women's agency and how it has been important for the reconfiguration of traditional regimes that deny or hide female agency. The denial of female agency, then, is seen as a lack of recognition of the freedoms that make a woman an individual agent responsible for bringing about change. In their studies on women in India, Nussbaum (2012) and Sen (2000) show that lack of opportunities and/or combined capabilities are the reasons why women have been deprived of freedom of well-being and agency as well as capabilities.

Therefore, “human agency” is one of the pillar concepts in Amartya Sen's work because it not only helps to understand the world, but also how it is possible to transform it in such a way that freedoms are not a privilege for some but for all. Likewise, the commitment to the recognition of agency helps to reduce inequality gaps and drives toward a world with social justice, oriented toward the universality of individual agency freedom (Pereira, 2016; Pinzón, 2017).

The concepts of “agency” and “capabilities” have been important in CA, which has led authors from the social and economic sciences to pay attention to their analytical development while contributing in their construction. The authors of this article attempt to gather insights by CA scholars, in the interest of an interdisciplinary academic dialogue with a view to exploring other perspectives that allow the understanding of human action. In view of this, it was necessary to deepen the postulates of the CA by emphasizing two specific concepts, namely, “capabilities” and “agency.”

This concern also arises from multiple discussions among researchers who participated in the “Weaving political capabilities for transitions in territories” project, which is focused on the actions and capabilities of communities that have been affected by the armed conflict in Colombia as they strive to heal and overcome. This led to the initiation of a systematic review, which was conducted by consulting databases such as Jstor, Redalyc, Scielo, Redib, EBSCO, Web of Science and Scopus. With the exception of classic works, the idea was to search for publications no older than 20 years. The descriptors for the search were: agency, freedom of agency, capabilities, Capabilities Approach, collective capabilities and

political capabilities. From this research, 89 articles and books were obtained and subsequently reviewed, which were organized in the Mendeley digital library. An analytical file was prepared for each of these documents and the most significant ones were coded in the ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis program.

From the bibliographic review, the need to analyze the relational or communitarian orientation of CA became evident. In fact, the question that guided this reflection was: does the Capabilities Approach respond to an individualistic or a communitarian approach? The information related to this question was analyzed and systematized, resulting in research that culminates in this conceptual-reflective article.

After this introduction, a discussion on the criticism of individualism present in the CA follows. Subsequently, the article focuses on other analytical perspectives that propose categories that do not invoke the individual subject but rather the relational and collective subjects. Next, the concept of 'agency' as seen from the theories that announce its relational character is explored. Finally, the conclusions drawn from this documentary research are presented.

Criticisms of the Capability Approach from a relational point of view

According to Delgado (2017), the criticisms of CA proposed by Amartya Sen can be summarized as: a) the markedly individualistic orientation; b) the lack of a detailed description of all capabilities; c) the relationship between capabilities and rights is neither adequate nor relevant; d) it assumes capability only as opportunity; and e) it presents difficulties in measuring capabilities. For the purposes of this reflection, special attention will be given to the individualistic character and the conception of capacity as an opportunity of the approach.

Robeyns (2005), an outstanding disciple of Sen, recognizes that CA is based on ethical individualism, since individuals and only individuals are considered to be the ultimate units of moral concern. The starting point is the understanding of functions and capabilities as properties of specific individuals. The approach could not be qualified as individualistic from an ontological (there are only individual persons) or methodological point of view (everything is explained in reference to persons considered individually) (Colmenarejo, 2016). This approach is shared by Gore (1997) and Dubois (2007) when they state that it is necessary to differentiate ontological and methodological individualism from ethical individualism, where the environment, processes and social interactions are ignored. It would be a mistake to confuse the latter (ethical individualism) with

methodological individualism, because unlike the former, it acknowledges that individual choices and actions are not separate from society. This perspective is concerned with the ways in which social influence affects what individuals value (Henriquez, 2013).

Robeyns (2005) considers that the ethical individualism characteristic of the Capabilities Approach does not imply an incompatibility with social dimensions, relationships or the insertion of people in society. For her, the approach, at least theoretically, takes into account social relations, constraints and opportunities that social structures represent for individuals. The approach seeks a balance between the social and individual condition of the person. In the words of Sen (2010):

Individual freedom is essentially a social product, and there is a two-way relationship between 1) social mechanisms to expand individual freedoms and 2) the use of individual freedoms not only to enhance their respective lives but also to make social mechanisms better and more effective. (p. 49).

As can be seen in Sen's words, the approach acknowledges the impact of the social environment and social relations defining capabilities based on public debate; however, it considers it important to focus on individuals. "We are individual beings, we have different interests, values and judgments. One must start from individuals to arrive at social judgments, at judgments about social well-being or about the freedom offered by a society" (Sen, 2010, p. 4). In the words of De Munck (2014), the approach recognizes the need to contemplate the social genesis for understanding the process of capability formation.

This qualification does not imply denying social contents or collective concerns in the approach, but emphasizing that the evaluation of collective or group contents is not among its priorities. Neither does it seek to discuss the social concern of Sen, who has always shown a clear commitment to the vision of the relationship between individual freedom and social agreements, as acknowledged by his critics (Prendergast, 2005).

Gore (1997) bases his criticism of the approach on the argument that, by focusing on individual freedoms, it narrows the evaluation to what is good for individuals, for each one separately, but lacks an evaluation of well-being as a collective category. In other words, consciousness of freedom for Sen is consciousness of oneself as a unique person acting in the world. This interaction as a dominant value, according to Dubois (2007), could deepen the individualistic content of the approach and simplify the analysis of social inequalities. In other words, there is a risk of not being able to evaluate well-being as a collective category (Gore, 1997).

This is the major limitation: not recognizing that there are other objects of value for people, for the quality of their individual lives, but which are the property of society; which are not and cannot be found in the sphere of each person and which, nevertheless, must be included in the valuation of justice and individual well-being. (Dubois, 2007, p. 55).

Sen recognizes the limits of the approach and the need to broaden the view, however, he does not develop an alternative in an exhaustive manner. In response to this, authors affiliated with the communitarian stream in political philosophy, such as Gore (1997), Evans (2002), Dubois (2007, 2014), Reyes (2008), and Jiménez (2016), have suggested that Sen's theory fails to completely dissociate itself from ethical individualism, since the spheres of social interaction have a merely instrumental importance that excludes the relational aspect in the measurement of well-being. Therefore, it should be expanded to include group environments and collective spaces as inherent in the formation of subjects, and central in correcting unjust social structures. From this perspective, a merely instrumental conception of groups and social environments in evaluative terms is not possible, so the inclusion of "agreements, institutions and social assets is proposed as a substantial part of human development" (Dubois, 2007, p. 38).

Another criticism made of the Capabilities Approach is supported by the conception of "capability as opportunity" as it does not incorporate the role of the social environment, social structures, and power dynamics in their formation (Otano, 2015, 2016, Jiménez, 2016). These, according to Cejudo (2007), are part of the historical process of achieving social well-being. Van Parijs (1996) states that "a society whose members are truly free requires freedom to consist of security, self-ownership and opportunity, and not just the latter" (p. 42).

CA allows accounting for the impact of social institutions on individuals' real opportunities, but leaves out the analysis of social forces and the interactive role of human beings in the production of society. That is to say, it does not allow accounting for the dialogical relationship of individuals, social environments and social structures in the process of reproduction.

By giving lower priority to the processes of production and reproduction of social order, there is a risk of overlooking the power relations and struggles that shape the socio-institutional contexts, wherein the scope and meaning of freedom are determined (Deneulin & McGregor, 2010).

From another perspective, Ortner (2016) criticizes Sen's Capability Approach focusing on the concept of "individual agency." The author argues that this concept refers to deep ethnocentrism, as it prioritizes individuals over contexts and is grounded in Western ideas. She also posits that an overemphasis on individual agency simplifies the analysis of the impact that social and cultural forces

have on history, leading to the rejection of the pulse of collective “forces.” The relationship between intentions and outcomes is often overlooked, particularly in denying the significance of unintended consequences inherent in all historical processes.

In summary, the Capability Approach (CA) encompasses two major criticisms. The first criticism asserts that the CA does not sufficiently integrate the role of the social environment, social structures, and power dynamics in the development of capabilities, which are understood in terms of opportunities. The second criticism accuses CA of ethical individualism and neglect in considering collective capabilities in the measurement of well-being. In this view, the approach overlooks the fundamental role of social interactions, collective work, culture, history, and commonality in the creation of capabilities. The authors of this paper acknowledge both criticisms and recognize the contributions of CA in fostering a conception of human development rooted in positive freedom and the real opportunity to choose a life deemed valuable. However, they also admit the necessity of broadening the theoretical foundations to transcend the boundaries of the approach and achieve an interdisciplinary dialogue that contributes to both social and economic theory. The criticisms of the Capability Approach support the identification of conceptual contributions from a relational standpoint to complement the CA proposal.

Proposals to Broaden the Capability Approach

Public Goods, Irreducibly Social Goods, and Structures of Living Together

The literature review revealed that various authors, adopting a communitarian and relational perspective, have ventured to propose concepts that may enhance the Capability Approach. This section outlines concepts such as “public goods,” “irreducibly social goods,” and “structures of living together,” considering that they provide elements to conceive CA beyond their notions.

According to Dubois (2007), the notion of “public good” refers to a category of collective goods that are essential for understanding individual human well-being. “The extent to which a good is perceived as ‘public’ does not depend as much on its inherent characteristics as on prevailing social values within a given society” (Deneulin & Townsend, 2006, p. 23) The priorities and values inherent in each society are pivotal in determining the notion of a public good. This notion is not merely viewed instrumentally about individual welfare; rather, it is intrinsically desirable for the well-being of the community and remains

independent of an individual's welfare status. Examples of public goods include traditions and modes of celebration.

Additionally, Gore (1997), building on Taylor's framework, establishes a connection between irreducibly social goods and human development, a notion subsequently explored by Deneulin (2006). Gore considers that irreducibly social goods are not adequately considered in Sen's Capability Approach. "They are regarded as constituents of individual well-being, but are not recognized as collective goods worthy of evaluation without reference to their impacts on individuals" (Deneulin, 2006, p. 55).

Irreducibly social goods are items of value that resist reduction to a set of acts, choices or predicates, they cannot be divided into isolated components. In other words, they cannot be explained in terms of individual characteristics, nor can they be fragmented into a sequence of events occurring at an individual level. Irreducibly social goods transcend individuals, yet their existence is contingent upon being assumed or adopted by individuals. (Dubois, 2007, p. 54).

Irreducibly social goods form the foundational basis for the creation and choice of capabilities representing real opportunities for action. From this perspective, benefits arise from collective action, and an exclusively instrumental conception, as proposed by Sen in terms of evaluation, is not feasible. Gore's proposal constitutes a significant contribution to the integration of the Capability Approach into the systems of moral norms—both formal and informal, explicit and tacit—which define the legitimacy of actions and normative sanctions; the interpretative schemes, modes of discourse, and government, state-centric, and informal. These define the systems of power relations through which things are accomplished. According to Reyes (2008), "normative, interpretative, and power systems constitute the core contexts that demarcate and enable human activity. Simultaneously, they are shaped through that activity" (p. 143). Irreducibly social goods are the result of historical struggles, collective constructions, and community welfare valuations rooted in traditions and values.

Deneulin (2008) introduces the notion of structures of living together as a conceptual category originally from Ricoeur of structures of living together. This underscores that the subject of human development is not solely the isolated individual nor a collective entity; instead, both co-constitute each other. Structures of living together are based on Ricoeur's notion of "institution," understood as "structures that belong to a particular historical community, which provide the conditions for individual lives to flourish, and which are irreducible to interpersonal relations, and yet bound up with these" (Deneulin, 2008, p. 110). According to Dubois (2007), structures of living together are proposed to

designate collective goods and are closely related to irreducibly social goods. This concept reflects the idea that these structures emerge from the fact that people live together, constituting the real condition under which human lives can develop.

Before becoming an agent endowed with the capacity to make autonomous decisions, individuals must undergo development with the assistance of a community, and the establishment of interpersonal relations. The community precedes individuals. This is what imparts meaning to the lives of its members and provides them with identity. Human beings achieve their moral development, identity, and the meaning of their lives only through their connection with the community (Deneulin, 2008, p. 120).

Structures of living together exhibit core features to overcome the individualism and collectivism dichotomy in the Capability Approach: a) what is considered meaningful and valuable to be chosen can only be understood within the context of community and history; b) irreducibility to interpersonal relations; c) the explanation of success or failure of countries to foster capabilities that individuals choose and value; d) help to understand how the influences of what is considered valuable may reflect the interests of those with greater economic and political power.

Public goods, irreducibly social goods, and structures of living together share similar approaches. All three concepts seek to integrate the role of the social environment, social structures, and power dynamics in the creation and evaluation of capabilities. The aim is to illustrate that individuals are not passive agents who merely respond to offered opportunities; rather, they tailor opportunities and values that have become socially and institutionally legitimized.

Public goods, irreducibly social goods, and structures of living together are categories that encompass the logic of life as the way people organize themselves in a world that is inherently interrelational. Public goods include the social values that outline what qualifies as public good and what does not. For their part, irreducibly social goods transcend individuals, although they cannot exist without being influenced by them. In any case, the *raison d'être* of irreducibly social goods has a social, collective, and contextual explanation. Finally, structures of living together acknowledge the structural conditions under which individuals and communities develop. This acknowledgement is crucial for the cultural definition of collective values, which in turn, determines the scope of the kind of life individuals aspire to.

Collective Capabilities

The second major criticism of the Capability Approach pertains to accusations of strong notions of ethical individualism. Therefore, the theoretical assumptions asserting the significance of group capabilities and collective capabilities propose that these notions should be considered when theorizing and implementing instruments to measure human well-being.

Stewart (2005) emphasizes that group membership, directly and indirectly, affects people's well-being; he distinguishes, however, between the impact of primary or inherent groups in the development of a human being's life and voluntary participation in a group or collective setting. The existence of a group significantly impacts individual capabilities and, especially, in terms of well-being, whether directly or indirectly. In other words, group affiliation affects well-being, and such effects can be expressed in capability terms.

The affiliation to a community means a capacity of being part of, as it implies a consciousness as being related to other people and, in general, with the social world. According to Nelson (2004), "to belong to something larger and interdependent makes sense to existence in the world" (p. 314). Dubois (2007) states that membership should be taken into account in CA along with freedom as they are complementary. Membership has two functions: to make people feel more than themselves, and to enable them to undertake collective commitments. It should have a more explicit development in the approach, thus to understand the motivations of functions in the family within the society or in any type of collectivity.

Hence the need to include collective capacities and collective/relational spaces in the measurement of well-being. Ibrahim (2006) concerned about the need for a new theoretical-epistemological framework that allows the transition from categories such as "individual agency," "individual freedom" and "individual capacity," to wider and potential categories; "as a collective agency," "collective freedom," and "collective capacities." The expansion of the conceptual repertoire responds to the following reasons:

"Firstly, agency acts are mainly affected by prevailing community values and social structures" (Evans, 2002, p. 5). Secondly, the actors are built and make structures. Individual agency leads to change not only by individual performance, but by collective action; both formally and informally (Deneulin & Stewart, 2001, p. 16-17). Thirdly, in an individual agency a person individually pursues her or his own perception of good, "through acts of collective agency, individuals can pursue their perception of good, collectively, by connecting or participating in a group with similar goals" (Ibrahim, 2006, p. 405).

Collective agency calls for an expansion of human freedoms and capabilities, especially in those poor populations that seek to act and transform their environment. Thus, it is no longer a mere aggregation of individual capabilities, but they have their own and differentiated entity. According to Ibrahim (2006), what differentiates collective from individual capacities is that they are expressed only through collective action, and the fact of being collectives can benefit the results of action and not just the individual ones.

Collective capabilities are generated by the commitment with collective action, with social networks to which one belongs; it contributes to building life that is considered valuable (Otano, 2016). Ibrahim (2006) highlights the importance of collective capacity for poor communities, because their opportunities for access to financial, physical, and human capital are limited, and these communities turn to collective action to try to overcome this deficit in the name of group well-being.

Baser and Morgan (2008) define collective capacity as the collective ability or aptitude of an organization to perform a particular function or process inside or outside the system. As Evans (2002) stated:

My ability to choose the life that I value often depends on my ability to act with others who value similar aspects. The ability to choose (and act) in itself can be a collective capacity rather than an individual capacity. (p. 121).

Reyes (2008) proposes communities of meaning as collective capacities that arise from voluntary associations composed and organized by individuals and “modify values, beliefs, goals, or priorities of an individual, i.e. conception of good” (p. 151). Participation in a community of meaning has consequences in the process of building individuals’ identity, as well as the conception of good that develops thanks to the capacity for reflection and self-understanding. This development involves the individual's freedom of agency and it can therefore be characterized as a capacity under Sen's parameters. In other words, according to Reyes (2008), the establishment of a community of meanings has direct effects on capabilities as real opportunities, since the enlargement of the set of what is desirable generates enlarged possible options. To reach new goals and values can mean developing freedom of agency to other people’s welfare achievements, and to increase the capacity for reflection that ultimately allows a more careful analysis of the good and what is considered valuable.

The outlined collective capacity proposals refer to organized communities, people take on a commitment that is directed toward the kind of life they value. Freedom, affiliation and values, beliefs, purposes, or priorities of the person are involved and expressed as a consequence to the collectivities; it generates

new reflections and conceptions that lead development of collective capacities. Collective capacities are not antagonistic to individual capacities; they recognize history, are contextual, are given within social structures, and collective agency processes are key in their constitution.

The Concept of “Agency” from a Relational Dimension

From this review, it is considered that, as the concept of “capacities” can be expanded to integrate a more collective and relational dimension, the notion of “agency” can as well. Gangas (2016), for example, considers that with Sen this is not marked by an individualist conception. It allows a broader conceptual transition, the individual is not the only object of study but also the actions of groups or collectives. However, the concept of “agency” has been the theme of multiple analyses by authors who share Amartya Sen’s presumption, such as Deneulin’s, and others who differ themselves more like those proposed by Butler, Mahmood, and Ortner. In order to problematize the concept, some analytical perspectives are exposed although they are heterogeneous and not incompatible among them.

Deneulin (2008) proposes the notion of “socio-historical agency” as a category concerned with ways of living in community. From this perspective, the agency is located in a community structure in a specific historical context. There is no agency without a collective structure that has a social and narrative framework that governs human action in a given context.

To focus on the individual agency without confronting it with the limitations and possibilities offered by its historical reality, leads to a naive view of life; as if the achievement of well-being was a personal adventure that depends on each one to initiate correct and necessary actions, without taking into account the particular structures of “live together” that built it.

It is possible to frame Deneulin and Gore’s theoretical proposals within a political-relational interpretation of CA centered on its failures; it refers to social structures (institutions, systems of moral, interpretative, and normative norms), where the common understanding of economic, political, social conditions, and shared identity frames human action from socio-historical agency and, therefore, must be included in measuring well-being to have a comprehensive understanding of it.

Butler (2001) as Foucault, considers the idea that the individual is formed by power while enabling it. It means, power makes the invocation of the individual linked to power possible, it is constant becoming subordinate and, therefore, becoming a subject (Butler, 2001). This is what subjection or subjectivation is

about. However, subjection does not invalidate power,¹ but it makes it possible; just as it makes the individual itself possible.

Butler (2001) means that the individual is not only a production of power, but is also an individual of power; an agent of power that can even resist the power that created it, minimizing power through power. In Butler (1997), the agency capacity “is not a property of the individual, a will or an inherent freedom but an effect of power” (p. 228). Thus, agency arises into subordination or subjection, in the process of becoming an individual that is in a chain of social relations of power.

Butler and Athanasiou (2017) argue that individuals are produced from the process of subjectivation, as well as that they are also individual-disposed. According to the authors, “depossession” has two meanings. The first considers deprivation as a condition in which individuals are deprived (of land, a home, livelihoods, among others) and raped.² On the other hand, dispossession refers to the interdependent and relational life of human beings. (Butler & Athanasiou, 2017; Cano, 2017). In this way, “depossession” is a term that marks the boundary of human self-sufficiency, and establishes individuals as interdependent and vulnerable beings, thus they need co-existence. While deprivation implies the capacity for social relationships and links, it also refers to structural dependence on social norms that are not chosen or controlled by individuals (Butler & Athanasiou, 2017, p. 117). This is also important because it is an approach that marks a double dependency that ends up determining the possible subjects and their agency frameworks. In the social, institutional, and linguistic contexts, therefore, understanding the frames of reference of social, political, and performative action is important (Castillo, 2012).

In a similar way to Butler, the anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2019) takes refuge in the approaches on the constitution of the subject proposed by Michel Foucault. Mahmood shares the idea that the subject is a product of the power relations that subordinate him/her, while making his/her existence possible. However, Mahmood criticizes Butler for considering social agency as synonymous with resistance to power. The Pakistani author, instead of focusing on resistance, is interested, rather, in the capacity for action that certain specific relations of subordination create and make possible. It does not focus solely on the subversion of hegemonic norms, but rather on seeing other possible currents that can take social action in the midst of situations of subjection.

Now, continuing with his conception of “agency,” Mahmood argues that social agency requires docile subjects. With the term “docility,” the author

4 “Power” as the possible agency of the individual, or also as potential agency.

5 The authors oppose this type of dispossession because it is both forced and privative.

does not want to suggest an abandonment or absence of agency but, rather, an acquisition of skills necessary for social agency. For example, social agency as the capacity to “be taught,” which implies a condition of “being opened to being taught” (Mahmood, 2019, p. 11). The author makes her main argument about agency known in the following paragraph:

In a nutshell, my argument is this: if the capacity to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what "change" means and the capacity by which it is effected), then its meaning and sense cannot be fixed a priori, but must emerge from the analysis of the particular networks of concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectiveness. Seen in this way, what could seemingly be a case of deplorable passivity and docility, from a progressive point of view, may very well be a form of social agency, which must be understood in the context of discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of their representation. In this sense, the capacity for social agency is involved not only in those acts that produce (progressive) change but also in those whose objective is continuity, stasis and stability. (p. 13).

In the same vein as Mahmood, anthropologist Sherry Ortner (2016) considers agency not only as resistance or opposition to regimes of truth, but also as intentionality. Agency as intentionality refers to actions that pursue defined desires, goals and projects, both individual and collective (Ortner, 2016; Mora, 2008). For Ortner, agency is always culturally and historically constructed (while being strongly linked to power and inequalities).

This means that the form of the agency depends on the place and time in which it is located. This type of agency is called “project agency,” that is, when life is socially organized in terms of culturally constituted projects that provide meaning and purpose. Individuals seek to achieve an objective that they consider valuable in their own framework and with their own categories of value, around a local logic of the good and the desirable (Ortner, 2016).

For his part, Ibrahim (2006) also prioritizes what he calls “collective agency,” which invokes a relational action that affects an entire community structure. If a community shares a territory and also social rules and representations, then collective agency is, on the one hand, essential to maintaining the structure, and, on the other hand, to proposing agreements, goals, projects, objectives, customary and formal rules, among other things, in the name of the common good.

The agency invoked by a community is especially beneficial in precarious contexts where it is difficult to achieve individual objectives (Cota, 2019; Álvarez & Sebastini, 2019; García et al., 2018). Vulnerable agency is possible if the

approaches of Butler (1997; 2001; 2017) and Mahmood (2019) are taken into account, which account for the existence of an agency outside of power and scarcity. Precariousness, while generating discomfort, enables an agency from vulnerability that is not limited to resisting, but also to building other paths in the name of a better well-being, that are possible thanks to the same agency (Gandarias, 2019; Álvarez & Sebastiani, 2019; Santacruz, 2019).

In the same logic as some ideas presented above, relational sociology conceptualizes “agency” as an interrelational and interdependent phenomenon (Burkitt, 2016; López, 2004). Understanding agency in this way allows distancing from individualism and the autonomous subject acting on its own account. Agency cannot be individual and possessed by a reflective and autonomous subject, but rather emerges where, precisely, this autonomous subject ends. The capacity for action is possible because there are other interactants who are located in the same space-time, and who build joint actions through relational ties such as family, work groups, organizations, among others. A solo agent never faces a social structure, whereas a collectivity or group does (Burkitt, 2016).

Conclusions

The Capabilities Approach proposed by Amartya Sen represents an important advance in the conception of “human development.” The latter is understood as the overcoming of basic deprivations and freedoms. At the same time, this notion goes beyond the understanding of traditional economic paradigms that define development in quantitative terms. Thus, the approach does not ask questions such as how much wealth does a country have? But is interested in questions regarding what people are capable of being and doing. That is, the real capabilities and freedoms to enjoying a full and dignified life. Capacities, understood as the real opportunities that individuals have to lead the type of life they value, have a marked evaluative emphasis where the State is a fundamental actor for the guarantee of fundamental freedoms.

The CA represents an incomplete theoretical-methodological proposal that has been the subject of two fundamental criticisms. The first has to do with the marked individualistic approach and an informational base restricted to the evaluation of well-being at the level of individual agency, therefore, a new epistemological theoretical framework is necessary that allows the transition of categories, such as individual agency, individual freedom, and individual capacity, to broader and more potential ones, as collective agency, collective freedom and collective capabilities. The second criticism comes from some authors affiliated

with the communitarian current. These authors pay special attention to the omission of social processes, institutional agreements and power structures as constitutive parts of human development.

Different theoretical proposals emerge from the communitarian current, which seek to complement the CA from the relational field and respond to the shortcoming from the approach to social structures, institutions, and the inclusion of systems of moral and interpretive norms; components that allow a comprehensive understanding of human well-being. Categories emerge such as Irreducibly Social Goods (ISG), Structures of Cohabitation, and Socio-Historical Agency, all aimed at understanding economic, political, social, cultural, historical, institutional and identity conditions.

The proposal to include the category of collective capabilities in the measurement of well-being is also strongly identified, which are developed within the framework of power relations and are understood as those that arise from collective or organizational processes, where common objectives that are in a constant reflective process coexist.

Conversely, the concept of “agency” has also been essential for the theoretical formulations of the CA. However, the conceptual notion of “Senian agency,” although valuable, is limited and has been criticized for its individualistic character. Thus, to expand the referential framework of this category, contributions from the theory of practice (Ortner, 2016), post-structuralist ideas such as those of Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood, and insights from relational sociology were considered valuable.

The theory of practice assumes the importance of agency in practical and intentional terms, as well as its individual and collective character. Furthermore, it is important to note the existence of the determination of the socio-cultural and historical context, where the repertoire of a situated agency is developed, which, in turn, is found in a network of power relationships. Precisely, this last point constitutes a transversal axis in the constitution and development of the vulnerable, dispossessed, interdependent and linguistic-semantic subject that some post-structuralist authors mention. From this current of thought, “power” is a core notion to understanding the agency or power of subjects that is at a crossroads that represses it while enabling it; or, in other words, it is found in the paradox of subjectivation. Finally, relational sociology starts from the relational and interdependent agency that is found within a group and collective structure.

The previous theoretical postulates of agency, which are not specific to the CA, are essential if we want to complement and nourish the same approach in conjunction with other proposals, such as the communitarian one, that seek the inclusion of socio-historical agency, social structures, social institutions,

and collective capabilities, that complement the approach with other disciplines concerned with the theoretical development of human action.

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