Chapter 15

System and Life-Course Perspectives on Capability to Work and Capability Through Work

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15.1 Introduction

The many dimensions of the meaning of work and the contemporary challenges related to an older workforce require interdisciplinary perspectives in order to capture the essence of capability in relation to working. The research field of work science focuses on the contexts and values of work and working conditions for both individual workers and groups of workers in society. The scientific interest in the meaning of work and how work has significance for capability has a long history and has engaged many disciplines. The occupational health perspective was already being developed in the seventeenth century, with an attempt to better understand how diseases that arose through working conditions could be prevented. In the 1920s, a focus began to emerge on the productive workforce and how to monetise and rationalise human activities at work. Examples of this can be found in Taylorism and Scientific Management. Nevertheless, this was based on a human view that does not correspond with the capability perspective. The human body was seen as a machine and the focus was to adapt humans to the demands of work in order to increase organisational efficiency – and not to adapt work to the values of individuals. Today, the work science perspective often includes a strong criticism of this

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view of workers, when individuals' capabilities are neglected in relation to the demands of production at work. Still, work science studies also focus on how synergies between values related to production can be balanced with the values of individuals. This requires cross-disciplinary collaborations to challenge the perspectives of balances and synergies. Our perspectives taken from work science research often shed light on working conditions that create imbalances and inequalities between working individuals and groups of workers. Such imbalances can arise across organisational levels and work systems. From this perspective, the capability approach is useful as a theoretical framework complemented with system theory.

This chapter reports findings from interdisciplinary work science studies from the sociology of work, ergonomics and occupational health, as well as organisational and leadership studies. The studies of individuals' values and their chances of a long and healthy working life include broad applications of data, including register and panel data, health data and longitudinal qualitative interviews, as well as both qualitative and quantitative analyses. The capability approach in work science is demonstrated using a system theory framework, to contribute to more holistic understandings of the capability through work (work as a function and consequences of work) and capability to work (resources and conversion factors). The system theory includes a practice perspective, describing the conversion factors that form the effective opportunities for working at older ages. This often demands integrated handling of perspectives across system levels.

The capability approach is not only relevant to gaining a better conceptual understanding of individuals' abilities and motivation to work, it can also be employed to map and explore the potential consequences that various working conditions have for people when they reach old age. More specifically, we suggest that, since individuals' health, and thus their capabilities, is affected by both current and/or previous working conditions (Nilsen et al., 2014; Dellve et al., 2003), perceived capability (or lack thereof) is also determined through work. In line with this, the capability approach can be employed to better understand various aspects of work, and the consequences thereof, at older ages: work as a defined function and an indication of being part of society (Nussbaum, 2001), work as a goal that the individual has reason to value (Sen, 2009) or factors at work that affect individuals' opportunities to achieve other goals. The chapter includes descriptions of central working-life resources for capability at all system levels. Regarding theoretical foundations, the chapter applies (a) the classical system theory approach developed by Bronfenbrenner (1999) and later modified to work science studies by Bone (2015) and complemented with perspectives of conversion factors by Dellve and Eriksson (2017), and (b) the central concepts in the AgeCap capability framework, described by Rydberg Sterner and colleagues (see Chap. 3 in this book).

To support practical applications, we suggest important conversion factors for crafting capability to work across system levels and patterns of interactions between capability to work and capability through working-life resources. Firstly, central working-life conditions as resources are defined at all system levels. Thereafter,

conversion factors for crafting capability to work across system levels are described. Last but not least, we provide some examples of studies focusing on patterns of interaction between capability to work and capability through work.

15.2 Working-Life Conditions as Multi-component Resources for Capability to Work

Both system theory and the capability perspective place the individual at the centre and focus on individuals’ values and preferences in life (Fig. 15.1). However, as shown in Figs. 15.1 and 15.2, this does not mean that the individual is studied in isolation; instead, she is situated within a larger context where factors operating at different system levels are assumed to continuously affect her abilities and to condition her values and preferences. System theory divides the different systems into areas, which all have their own system and make important exchanges with all other system levels, i.e. the individual level, the micro-level (the area that is directly related to the individual in the workplace and at home), the meso-level (the wider organisation beyond the direct workplace), the macro-level (the societal level) and the chrono-level (which takes the life-course and changing conditions into account). These levels, and their significance for aspects of capability, are described in the following.

The individual level includes individuals’ resources for capability in terms of knowledge, demographics, work orientations, values, skills, behaviour, lifestyle, self-concept, health and general wellbeing. But the individual perspective also includes the meaning that work has for the individual. Health and wellbeing are

Fig. 15.1 The integrated system theory: resources and conversion factors for the capability set to work, from Dellve and Eriksson (2017)

Fig. 15.2 A model of working capability process when experiencing deteriorating health

strongly connected and interlinked parts of an individual's capability. The most important resources for work-related health have been identified through several literature reviews, incorporating evidence-based knowledge, especially at the individual level and micro-level. These are also described below from each system level, and are related to the capability to work.

As part of a research tradition on the meaning of work (Bellah et al., 1985), Bengtsson and Flisbäck (2017, 2021) and Bengtsson et al. (2017) have analysed the existential dimensions of work in relation to individuals' meaning-making in the retirement process. By applying a qualitative, longitudinal design – in the form of interviews with Swedish employees both before and after retirement in order to capture the transitional nature of the retirement process – the conceptualisation of having a calling as a work orientation was foregrounded in order to capture the existential meaning dimensions of work. Bengtsson et al. (2017) outline five main components of a calling: (1) work appears as an external summons, (2) the purpose of the work activity is to serve a higher cause, (3) work is carried out using personality as a tool, (4) work involves self-sacrifice and (5) work gives rise to elevation.

In Sweden, the calling construct has previously been used mainly in relation to meeting human needs in nursing, or combatting exploitative working conditions in female-dominated jobs in the human service sector. In this type of research, work as a calling has been shown to include the risk of exhaustion and/or earlier retirement (Dellve et al., 2003). Even though Bengtsson and Flisbäck (2017) emphasise that there is a 'potential dark side of calling', such as being overworked, exploited and making sacrifices in non-work domains, their studies demonstrate that the calling can in fact be a resource for capability. To relate to, or construe, work as a calling can function as a resource because the individual positions her work within a broader existential context. Thus, this orientation towards work can be a tool for interweaving threads from various life experiences and spheres. According to Bengtsson and Flisbäck (2017, 2021) and Bengtsson et al. (2017), this seems to be especially important in the meaning making that is accentuated during the retirement process, i.e. when the individual exits occupational life on the way towards a new life situation as a pensioner.

Micro-level systems are settings and interpersonal relationships that are directly experienced by the individual workers and include the direct work environment, the workplace and the work group. Capability is directly practised at the micro-system

level, and is one significant factor for maintaining health through the concepts of control over one's work and an experienced sense of coherence. In this respect, the most important psychosocial challenges to sustainable occupational health have been identified in several reviews as high job demands, lack of control, imbalance between one's effort and perceived rewards, poor support, organisational injustice (procedural and relational) and poor working climate (Dellve & Eriksson, 2017). Supportive conditions are strengthened psychosocial resources through feedback, recognition, rewards and development opportunities and closer social support, social climate and social capital (Englund et al., 2016; Rydström et al., 2017). Nevertheless, despite years of occupational and public-health research, which has identified the most important micro-level factors constituting a risk of negative health outcomes across occupations and countries, there is still a lack of knowledge about effective interventions that support resources for capability. This may be due to interacting organisational and societal resources and conversion factors.

Berglund et al. (2017) analysed *work-related* factors affecting a prolonged working life for the older workforce in Sweden. The significant effect of age is an indication of the strong values and norms associated with retiring when coming into age. This means that a job for which one is physically fit becomes less and less of a reason to stay the closer the employee gets to the upper retirement age. The study also demonstrated a retaining effect of support from workmates the older one gets. However, physical working conditions and job satisfaction 8 years earlier were the best predictors of a prolonged working life among older individuals. Feeling fit to handle the physical job demands and being satisfied with the job while in one's fifties seem to be vital to be able to continue working. From a policy perspective, it thus seems important to keep employees in their fifties satisfied with their jobs and to support them in taking care of their physical status. The dynamic nature and development of the preference to work or retire was also indicated in a survey distributed to 10,485 public sector employees of older ages (55–67 years) (Selden et al., 2020). Among the reasons for taking earlier retirement were the desire for more free time and poor health conditions, while choices to continue working at older ages appear to be motivated by perceptions of having meaningful work tasks, social cohesion and the capacity to work. These reasons were often rated in parallel, demonstrating the dynamic nature of preferences.

Meso-level systems consist of formal and informal organisational programmes, structures and company culture. In this respect, having reasonable working hours per week and an equitable employment contract are significant for individuals' sustainability in working life. Management and different kinds of organisational support are also important for decent and safe working conditions that increase work participation (Dellve & Eriksson, 2017; Dellve et al., 2008). Broader involvement in issues regarding decent working conditions are often highlighted as important for the capability to work (Dollard & McTernan, 2011).

In our questionnaire-study with 350 eldercare managers in Sweden, their quality work was successful in integrating perspectives of capability both for the employees and the eldercare recipients. This was supported by system perspectives on the conditions for a good learning climate, e.g. an organisation that supports a learning

climate for operative managers, a more active learning climate in the work-group and a development-oriented leadership style. Meanwhile, managers' work overload and lack of support significantly decreased their ability to handle the multiple perspectives on values of eldercare in their organising (Dellve, 2018). Thus, capability may be achieved through the organising of service, working conditions and managerial work. Other studies have also shown the interrelated negative impact of managers' work overload and hard governance control in healthcare and eldercare for the organising of sustainable working conditions and the impact on the care provided (Larsson Fallman, 2020; Biswas et al., 2020). Thus, integrating capability perspectives (from the perspective of the users, the older workers and the managers) can have a broad impact on the sustainability of organisational improvement work.

Macro-level systems comprise the labour market structures and institutions that describe the cultural or social context. They include public policy and politics when they have an impact on work and living contexts, socioeconomic conditions and cultural ideologies. Workers may or may not be directly involved at this level, but regulations and practices shape, influence, constrain and/or strengthen the opportunities for work and work characteristics. In Sweden, policies and regulations that aim to control and support good working conditions include, for example, regulation of the social and organisational work environment, the Work Environment Act and other employment acts and regulations. The macro-system also defines the social insurance system around work-related health, which is comparatively generous in Sweden.

Despite acts and regulations, there are distinct gender and social class differences related to ill-health and capability to work among older workers in Sweden (Halleröd & Gustafsson, 2011). A majority (70%) of older workers in jobs with low educational requirements stated that they needed to continue working in order to secure sufficient future incomes (Selden et al., 2020). The results gathered by Kadefors et al. (2017) also indicate a tendency to pass on the societal costs of early labour-market exits to different economic compensation arrangements, as well as to the individuals themselves. Additionally, accumulated living/working conditions, coupled with social class/gender inequalities, tend to further increase the socioeconomic divide, worsening the situation (including morbidity and life-expectancy) for already disadvantaged groups. Thus, a key to organisational sustainability are measures at the workplace addressing health and wellbeing among disadvantaged groups.

The chrono-level encompasses the dimension of time as it relates to the work environment. Developments and changes consider personal, work-group, workplace and organisational levels. There are many factors and conditions that may facilitate trustful developments for individuals and groups. An individual's capability for development (the capability set) and the effective opportunities to live a life one values are influenced by the time in which we are living and the setting. Thus, the chrono-system's proximal processes and mechanisms for crafting resources across system levels for sustainable working life are central for capability. Below, we will highlight some of these conversion factors.

15.3 Conversion Factors – The Crafting of Resources at Work for Capability Across Systems

Despite rather good knowledge about important conditions at each level, the interactions between individual, group and organisational factors often have stronger effects than single factors. Likewise, resource conditions at several levels have stronger effects than those based on a single system level (Marmot, 2005, 2007). Therefore, conversion factors for capability need to handle interactions between conditions across different organisational levels.

Halleröd and Seldén (2013) have identified and applied multidimensional measures of capability concepts at all system levels. They found that accumulated correlations between arenas trigger vicious circles; that is, processes whereby lack of wellbeing in one specific arena cause problems in other arenas and may in the end create a situation of overall accumulated ill-health. Such problems tend to accumulate over time. Thus, suffering economic hardship is related to accumulated lack of well-being. In the following, such conversion factors are described in relation to older workers.

Individual/Micro-level Conversion Perspectives – Individuals use strategies to proactively deal with reduced resources, e.g. through adaptation, coping, recovery, selection and optimisation (Demerouti, 2015). Health is commonly viewed within the context of wellbeing as it relates to the capacity to achieve or experience a meaningful life (Nussbaum, 2001). How we respond to age-related diseases is a complex process which is based on what is already innate and how we learn to adjust to the experience.

In their studies on the retirement process, Bengtsson and Flisbäck (2017) and Bengtsson et al. (2017) argue for the need for a deeper knowledge of how existential dilemmas interact with institutional practices and political decisions. For example, an individual who embraces their calling as an existential work orientation may experience retirement as an institution in which the welfare state ‘de-calls’ their mission. Here, retirement seems to represent a tension, because the calling as a life task cannot easily be limited to a specific time or place. Thus, individuals have various experiences of the process: accepting and embracing the situation, relief at letting the ‘dark side’ of the calling go or rejection when the meaningful activities of work cannot be replaced with other types of activity. Also, Bengtsson and Flisbäck point out that the meaning of work seems to be transformed in an individualisation process, with social demands to embrace self-development as a pensioner rather than clinging to work as a calling. They identified three strategies for handling the situation of retirement, i.e., of being encouraged to pursue other types of activities than paid work, such as caring for grandchildren or self-development projects: (1) conserving work as a calling with access to temporary work; (2) learning and, in some cases, embracing the process of ‘becoming a self-oriented subject’; and (3) ‘redefining’ the calling by transferring the work commitment to other activities. When following the first strategy, the individual can be on standby for temporary work opportunities, and thus maintain the capability developed in relation to their

existential work orientation. Concerning the second strategy, the individual ‘practises’ socially legitimised activities that aid individual self-development, such as travelling or cultural experiences. With regard to the third strategy, sacrifices they have previously made in non-work domains, which may have followed a strong commitment to work, can be transferred to commitment to other activities. This means that the individual, as a pensioner, can listen to callings from other social domains, such as devoting substantial time to caring for grandchildren.

Micro/meso-level conversion perspectives – Leadership can be considered both an important resource and, likewise, an important conversion factor for creating resources at work. Managers’ work and organising are often viewed as keys to bridging and handling the multiple components of risks and resources for individuals and groups of workers, both over and across system levels (Tengblad, 2012; Dellve & Eriksson, 2017). Some leadership approaches are more associated with employees’ health and conversion of resources, e.g. servant leadership and distributed leadership to support influence and participation within the organisation (Gunnarsdottir et al., 2018). The micro-/meso-level conversion perspectives also include organisational practices related to an organisation’s norms, culture, management styles and communication. For example, designing work and providing autonomy to enable individuals to proactively reduce their job demands and/or increase job resources.

From longitudinal studies of older female human service workers with chronic diseases, we identified important factors relating to their capability to work (Dellve et al., 2016; Ahlstrom et al., 2013, 2017), forming a chain of conversion factors (Fig. 15.2). When employees experience deteriorating health and work ability, it is significantly important that there are adjustment opportunities at work, as well as push and pull factors promoting work participation. From a capability perspective, there was a dynamic interactive process between capability to work and the crafting of control and adaptation to handle symptoms. In this process, the individuals’ job-crafting of adjustment opportunities was important, and the effective opportunities to work (freedom of choice and means to achieve) were important for their capability. Figure 15.2 describes a model of a ‘working capability process’ when experiencing deteriorating health. The model is inspired by the sickness flexibility model (Johansson & Lundberg, 2004).

Meso-/Micro-/Individual-level conversion perspectives – The employer’s willingness to hire and retain older workers and their active engagement at the workplace level are critical to changing retirement behaviour (Vickerstaff et al., 2003). Measures in workplaces are often included in the term ‘age management’, implying an explicit focus on age in human-resource policies (Ilmarinen, 2005; Naegele & Walker, 2006). Through age-conscious policies and practices, employers can offer work adjustment, training and development opportunities so that the capability and motivation of older workers can be maintained. Earlier studies indicate that European employers have few or no measures in place to recruit or retain older workers (Conen et al., 2012).

In health and eldercare, Jonsson and colleagues (2020) have described the lack of readiness and capability to retain older care workers due to factors such as

line-managers’ high workload, universal HR policies and the absence of age-management strategies. Thus, organisational measures and employer engagement are critical, and the Swedish Commission on Pension Age has suggested more actions at the organisational level to enable longer working lives in the general population (SOU, 2013:25). In labour market sectors experiencing labour shortages, such as eldercare, retaining older healthcare workers can mitigate some of the need for more personnel. However, the mean retirement age of workers in eldercare is strongly intertwined with the economic aspects provided through regulations for disability pensions in the social insurance system and to retirement regulations. Thus, there may be situations in which large groups of workers cannot retire due to age despite poor health. Despite changed regulations for retirement and social benefits, desired developments may be facilitated by crafting resources for sustainable conditions, through better integrating the values and perspectives of users of eldercare and older employees in eldercare. To attract and retain older workers, organisations need to develop strategies and create the right preconditions. Our questionnaire-study indicated improved organisational measures of different kinds to retain older public employees (Table 15.1). Organisational measures to strengthen resources supporting workers’ freedom of choice and value-based work were most common. About half of the older workers had participated in measures to transfer competence or strengthen physical or psychological resources.

Indicated associations with preferences to continue working in older ages were seen where there existed improved resources to boost capability for freedom of choice in terms of participation and influence over decisions, as well as improved learning and competence development. In a study, Jonsson and colleagues (2021) identified the opportunities to make individual deals that match one’s competence and experience as the most important for public-sector employees’ retirement preferences (Jonsson et al., 2020).

Table 15.1 Organisational measures to increase resources for older workers in the public sector and the proportion of older workers who participated in the measures

Organisational measures to strengthen	Provided and participated (%)
<i>Functional resources</i>	
Physical resources	48%
Psychological resources	44%
Social resources, cooperation	64%
Technical development	70%
<i>Resources for freedom of choice</i>	
Participation and influence over decisions	66%
Career development	58%
Competence development	65%
<i>Values at work</i>	
Trust in work-group	65%
Value-based work	73%
Mentoring, competence transfer	48%

15.4 Interaction Between Capability to Work and Capability Through Work

Factors of central importance for decisions to continue working and not retire are: generally good health and working conditions, a meaningful job, socio-economic issues and also the organisational learning climate, measures to strengthen resource adaptation and adjustments to work as one gets older. The integrated system theory model is suggested in order to better understand the multi-component key resources for capability at work among older workers, and also the conversion factors – capability through work – at the individual, micro, meso, macro and chrono levels. A system theory of important conditions has already been developed in many other aspects, but the capability approach contributes with conversion factors and conditions to better understand the complex social practices. These acknowledge the positive effect of crafting interactions, ‘bridgings’, and crossing over systems boundaries.

In practice, when supporting capability and finding ways to better analyse how to manage the retirement phase, the focus must be on what individuals value, and taking a view of retirement as a process that can make visible existential meanings. Nevertheless, as seen above, Bengtsson and Flisbäck (2017) and Bengtsson et al. (2017) interweave the individual’s existential concerns with forces at a macro level, what sociologists (cf. Kohli, 1986; Beck & Beck Gernsheim, 2002) have conceptualised as individualisation processes in late modernity. Welfare-state institutions do not only enable self-development, but in each life phase, even at later stages, individuals become increasingly forced to choose. This ‘institutionalised individualism’ does not always bring forth self-developing practices, but may be about counteracting risks, for example of an ecological, financial or health-related character. This is a social inequality issue because individuals in old age have different prerequisites to develop their life chances (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2017; Bengtsson et al., 2017). In other words: capability in the form of existential meaning that the individual can gain from activities relating to paid work or retirement interacts with social and economic resource structures.

Likewise, and given that most individuals spend a vast amount of time at work throughout life, it is far from surprising that working conditions, as well as differences in economic conditions generated by the labour market, contribute to disparities in living conditions between different social groups. For instance, socio-epidemiological research has repeatedly demonstrated that such differences cause inequalities in both health and longevity (Marmot, 2005, 2007; Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003). By extension, this means that they also affect individuals’ capability throughout the entire lifespan. For instance, with regard to dementia, a strongly age-related neurodegenerative disorder, Hasselgren et al. (2018b) have demonstrated that occupational class could in fact moderate the effects of the apolipoprotein E (*APOE*) $\epsilon 4$ allele, which is currently considered the major genetic risk factor for Alzheimer’s disease (Blennow et al., 2006). Likewise, Hasselgren et al. (2018a) have employed the validated Job Exposure Matrix (Johnson & Stewart, 1993) to

show that control over one's work is both a potential mechanism linking occupational class differences to dementia, as well as a possible moderator of *APOE* $\epsilon 4$. However, in both cases, the results differ markedly between the genders. Consequently, if we are to better understand how capability is determined *through* work, it is crucial to attend to the structural determinants of differences in working conditions, e.g., social class and gender, as well as to their interrelations and interactions with lower-level factors.

In conclusion, being part of working life can be a goal in itself, but having a reasonable degree of control and influence (freedom of choice) at work can have a great impact on health and wellbeing, as well as on work ability and the capacity to work. This requires an organisation that is characterised by promoting a general learning climate and participation in decision-making, and where employees have opportunities to make individual deals that match their competence and experience. Additionally, the broader perspectives and applications of capability in working-life studies require a range of methods for critically examining how capability is formed in various contexts and from different perspectives, i.e. what aspects of capability are present, for whom, under what conditions and to what outcomes do they lead (wellbeing, power, influence, decent working conditions)?

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