

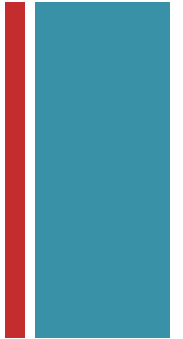


Social Work, Social Justice and the Capability Approach

Anna Gupta - BASW 2015



International Federation of Social Work - Definition



- “Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. **Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work.** Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing”

+ Challenging times: Poverty and Inequality in Austerity Britain



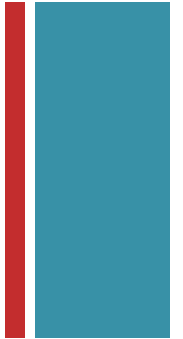
+ Social work and inequality

- The UK is on course to take the no 1 spot for most unequal country in the developed world (Oxfam, 2015).
- There is a *very strong* link between ill health, social problems and inequality *within* countries (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009)
- **We have become a much harsher, less caring and more judgmental society**





Social Work in times of austerity



- **Some crucial questions:**
- What is happening to social work in times of austerity?
- What does social work stand for these days?
- Does CP work define social work or can social work help construct a more humane and socially just CP system?
- What responsibilities do we have as individual social workers and collectives to respond to policy and practice developments increasing inequality and injustice ?



The current policy context in the UK – the case of neglect



- *‘We are leaving them to endure a life of soiled nappies and scummy baths, chaos and hunger, hopelessness and despair. These children need to be **rescued**, just as much as the victims of any other natural disaster’.*
- *‘Children and young people do not encounter disadvantage because they have been in care. They are in care because they have had to be **rescued** from disadvantage’.*





However at the same time.....

Whilst the vast majority of parents living in poverty do not neglect or abuse their children, there is an undoubted association between poverty, neglect and some forms of abuse that has been highlighted for many years.

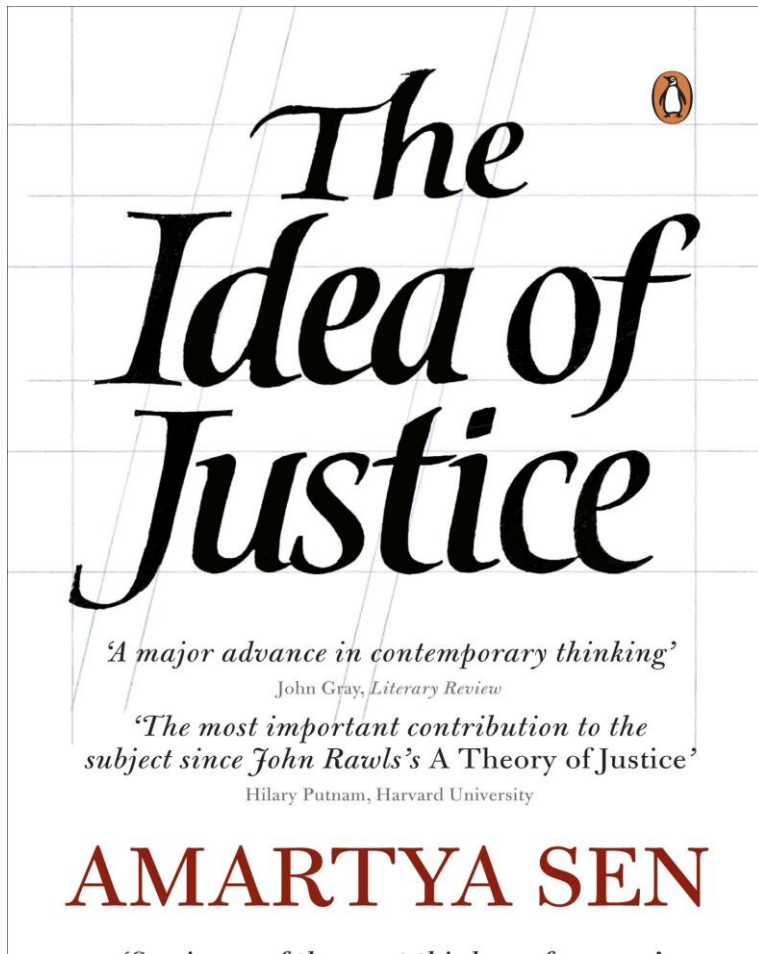
Poverty makes parenting harder however in the last few years:

- Local authority budgets cut and family support services closed
- High thresholds and large caseloads in local authorities
- Increasing numbers of child protection referrals and care proceedings
- Bywaters (2015) deprivation the major explanatory factor for children on CP plans of in care in England.
- But where are the links being made in the dominant CP discourse?





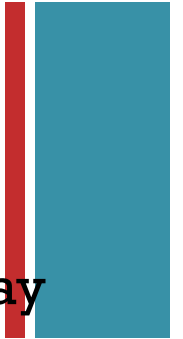
What can the Capability Approach offer social work within a social justice framework?





What is the Capability Approach (CA)?

- It provides a theoretical framework concerning wellbeing, human development and social justice – promoting human dignity and flourishing.
- Argues from a moral standpoint, the state has an obligation to ensure that all persons have access to a life worthy of human dignity – links to human rights
- Influential in an array of disciplines (economics, development work, political philosophy) and policy domains (UNHDI)
- It is generally conceived as a flexible and multi-purpose framework, rather than a precise theory of well-being (& can be combined with other theories) for:
 - the assessment of individual well-being
 - the evaluation and assessment of social arrangements
 - the design of policies and proposals about social change in society



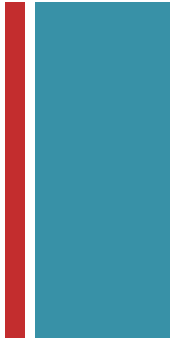
- A person's capabilities represent the effective freedom of an individual to choose between different kinds of life that she may value and has reason to value.
- . People differ in their ability to convert means into valuable opportunities (capabilities) or outcomes (functionings). Three sets of 'conversion factors':
 - **Personal conversion factors**
 - **Socio-structural and cultural conversion factors**
 - **Institutional conversion factors.**
- CA recognizes that people are not equally placed to realize their human capabilities, owing to barriers arising from structural inequalities of class, 'race', disability, gender and sexual orientation. Tackling these is central to CA's theory of social justice

+ The CA and Poverty

- Poverty is regarded as capability deprivation because it interferes with a person's ability to make valued choices and participate fully in society.
- Recognises the psychological impact of poverty and inequality - shame is at the 'irreducible absolutist core' of the idea of poverty.
- It stresses the intrinsic importance of people's capabilities – a normative and ethical dimension
- Predicated upon a contextual notion of causality that is flexible enough to incorporate both individual and social causes into social analysis.
- When considering the absence of a particular capability attention is directed to the relevant causal pathways responsible (including poverty)



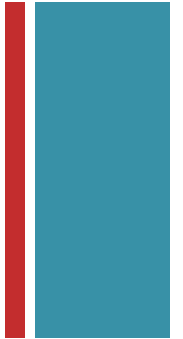
Poverty is not just about lack of money....



- Poverty and inequality do have structural causes – with complex psychological and social consequences
- Lister (2013: 112) defines poverty as not only being about material disadvantage and economic insecurity but also a:
 - *‘shameful social relation, corrosive of human dignity and flourishing, which is experienced in interactions with the wider society and in the way people in poverty are talked about and treated by politicians, officials, professionals, the media, and sometimes academics’.*

+ English Child Protection System – A Just Society?

- Families living in poverty are increasingly being deprived of the means for basic capabilities, such as for adequate nutrition, warmth and shelter.
- The reduction in family support services also diminishes the buffers to deal with the effect of adversities - social and environmental ‘conversion’ factors that would support their capabilities and functionings.
- Families involved in the child protection and family court systems face a ‘triple jeopardy’ of punitive practices that fail to recognize the socio-economic context of their lives





Abdul's story

- Abdul was a Somali man who came to the UK seeking asylum. He was granted Indefinite Leave to Remain 3 years ago, lives in West London and works on the minimum wage
- His 3 children were taken into care due to his ex-wife's severe mental health problems. The children were placed in foster care. The local authority did not want to place the children in his care because he had not obtained suitable housing. This was seen as reflecting his 'lack of commitment' to the children. He attends contact three times a week, including unsupervised contact all day on Saturday. The children want to live with their father.
- An approach based on the CA would recognise that obtaining private rental property is a challenge in many parts of London, but especially so when on a low wage with little chance of saving a deposit and rent in advance. It would not involve a dismissal of concerns about his emotional relationship and commitment to the children, but would recognise his strengths as well as work with him to understand and address any identified deficits.

+ The Capabilities Approach





Why the CA is important for SW

- *It is about all of us* – promoting social justice, human dignity and flourishing
- Incorporates analysis of the psychological and social/ structure and agency – not presented as binaries
- Places poverty and inequality as central – material and emotional impacts
- It enhances a human rights approach by shifting the focus from formal rights to the ability of people to exercise those rights in practice.



Creating Capabilities

THE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM

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Should this not be for social work?



There is no passion to be found playing small in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living.

- *Nelson Mandela* -