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New insights on the persistence and reproduction of educational inequality and injustice: Towards a synthesis of Nussbaum’s capabilities approach and Bourdieu’s theories

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Abstract

Education is one of the most powerful means by which to advance equality, equity, and justice, yet it is also one of the most powerful mechanisms by which inequality, inequity and injustice are reproduced. Although academics have developed various ways for understanding these phenomena, the dichotomy between agency and structuralism persists, and is often regulated by people’s capabilities ‘to do and to be’, and the social and psychological constraints on agency. These shortcomings have stimulated us to reconsider their interactions. The aim is to explore how we may more insightfully understand the mechanisms that reproduce injustice and inequality in education by bringing together sociology and normative philosophy using Martha Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach and the theories of Pierre Bourdieu.

1. Introduction

The Capabilities Approach, broadly understood, is a normative evaluative exercise on issues of social justice. It concentrates on the ability of persons to lead the lives they value and to expand the choices they have to lead those lives in ways that are not merely economically productive (as in human capital approaches), but which also enhance their wellbeing and freedom. It was developed first by the economist Sen (1985, 1993, 2008) in response to his dissatisfaction with common economic measures of wealth, such as the Gross Domestic or National Product, because they cannot capture the extent and nature of inequality or a person’s ability to convert resources (whether money, goods, services, or opportunities) into valuable activities. The approach was developed substantially by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum who brought insights from Aristotle (2004) such as eudaimonia or flourishing; Kant (1998), the fundamental and inherent dignity of the person; Adam Smith (1759), the power of education; and Marx (1988), the idea of species being and the necessity of plurality for truly human lives. The approach is widely used in the fields of human development, such as the United Nations’ Human Development Reports (2018) and Human Development Indicators (2020), which are focused on ‘people and their opportunities and choices’, and is embedded in ‘People, Opportunities and Choices’. The approach is also used in public health ethics, influencing, for example, the work of the World Health Organisation, and in educational justice and disability rights (Terzi, 2014).

While there are now many varieties of the Capabilities Approach, they have in common two normative claims: that the freedom to achieve wellbeing is of primary moral importance; and that wellbeing should be evaluated in terms of a person’s ‘capabilities’ and
‘functionings’, technical terms that correspond to the opportunity freedom to effectively bring about wellbeing (the capability) and the active realisation of the capability (the functioning). The evaluative question a capability theorist will ask is: what is this person able to do and to be, given her particular circumstances, interests, dispositions, and what she values? The Capabilities Approach is not concerned with ideal theory (such as metaphysical states of being extracted from reality, complete theories of justice or perfectly just societies), but with the practical, on the ground effects of injustice, and how to evaluate the impact on individuals’ abilities - or capabilities - ‘to do and to be’, in order to make the world less unjust.

Bourdieuian sociology, similarly, is not concerned with ideal theory (or a grand theoretical system) but with how, using a set of related conceptual tools, power, capital, and privilege are maintained and reproduced over time, and the role of practice and embodiment in social life. As will be well known to scholars and students of his work, Bourdieu (1977) developed a theory of practice centred on the idea of habitus, and a theory of cultural and educational reproduction and praxis in which he examined how the possession of capital conferred advantage to elites such that the discourses and values they embodied were naturalised, transmitted, and reproduced over time (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1992). It is the task of sociology, Bourdieu (1998b, p.1) argued, ‘to uncover the most deeply buried structures of the different social worlds’ that constitute ‘the social universe, as well as the “mechanisms” that tend ensure their reproduction or their transformation.’ A prominent tool in this sociological task is ‘misrecognition’ wherein everyday social processes are not recognised for what they are, because not cognised (or are barely thought about), but are misattributed to some other event, situation, or process, so concealing the real source of inequity or injustice. A classic example of misrecognition concerns the relationship between educational success and social advantage, sustained by examples of less- or- underprivileged students who succeed in the system despite lacking the requisite cultural or economic capital: the pars pro toto fallacy (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1992).

The aim in this paper is to explore how we may better understand the processes, mechanisms and reproduction of injustice and inequality in education by bringing together two analytically powerful approaches from sociology and applied ethics/normative philosophy. There are a number of reasons for doing so: the Capabilities Approach (hereafter, the CA), indeed, philosophy in general, tends to underestimate the role of social structures (though see the work of Fricker, 2007), and misrecognise the reproductive mechanisms that impede justice and equality, and their consequent effects on agency – the person’s authentic ability, in capability language, ‘to do and to be’ the things she has ‘reason to value’ (Nussbaum, 2006). The habitus and its generative principles, one’s position within the social field, and acquisition of various kinds of capital, can act as powerful constraints on agency, limiting what a person can do and be; and, therefore, how one can convert capabilities into desired functionings. An examination of Nussbaum’s version of the CA, in conjunction with structural constraints, the habitus and other sociological tools, then, may afford an innovative analysis of educational disadvantage.

Bourdieuian sociology may benefit from the normative fruits of applied ethics and philosophy, while challenging the, perhaps, over-socialised aspects of a theory of practice. Further, the CA takes the person as the moral unit of analysis and holds good to the idea of the equal moral worth of the person, who is an ‘end’ in herself and who ought to be the end product of justice – a different starting point from Bourdieu (though he was not uninterested in individuals); while groups of people are harmed by injustice and inequality, the effect on the individual is erased or overlooked if the focus is only on the power that inhere in social structures which shape and condition the disposition of agents within a field.

To date, few have taken this analytical approach to inequality and injustice in education. Those who have use Sen’s version of the capabilities Approach. Hart (2012), for example, created a Sen-Bourdieu analytical framework to explore social justice in relation to widening participation in higher education in England, drawing on Bourdieu’s conception of habitus and cultural capital Sen’s conversion factors. In other work, Hart (2016) has explored how her model can help us understand how aspirations and capabilities are hindered or promoted by ‘values and dispositions, forms of capital and resources, and ‘social context and cultural influences’ (p.31). Gokpinar and Reiss (2019) have also developed a model that synthesises Bourdieu’s key concepts of habitus, social and cultural, and Sen’s conceptualisation of functionings to explore students’ science related capabilities. The aim is to highlight the distinction between science-related functionings, the outcomes achieved by individuals, and science-related capabilities, the ability to achieve desired functionings (p.1278). Lemistre & Ménard (2019) draw upon Bourdieu and Sen to analyse the trajectories of science graduates in France, and how cultural and economic capital either inhibits or encourages students to choose a science education. Researchers who draw on reproduction theory and the capabilities approach focus on Sen’s version. So far as we could establish, there is, as yet, no work that seeks to synthesise Nussbaum and Bourdieu, to draw sociological, normative, and philosophical analyses on injustice and inequality in the education system, rather than a discipline (science) or a policy (such as widening participation).

As readers of this special issue on cultural reproduction, cultural resources and reading, and this journal may be less familiar with the CA than with Bourdieuian theory of practice, we will begin by presenting an outline of the CA as advanced by one of its key architects, Nussbaum (2000, 2006, 2011). While Sen’s version is highly influential, and arguably more popular, we use Nussbaum’s version because of its philosophical and normative underpinnings, its avowedly feminist stance, and because, contentiously, she devised a list of ten central capabilities which we deem to be extremely useful for evaluating injustice and inequality in education.

2. The capabilities approach: an outline

Nussbaum in her account of Nussbaum (2000) begins her justification of the approach by stating that women across the world ‘lack support for fundamental functions of a human life’ (p.1). In many parts of the world, women are more undernourished than men, are more poorly educated, are everywhere more vulnerable to sexual abuse and violence, and too often subject to coercive control: 31.7% in South Asia, 31.5% in Sub-Saharan Africa and 26.3% in Europe and Central Asia (United Nations Development Programme, 2018, p.7). Women, even in advanced economies, confront obstacles in the workplace arising from prejudicial gender stereotypes, gender discrimination and sexual harassment, and are underrepresented in the political sphere. The Human Development Indices and
Indicators report (United Nations Development Programme, 2018) states that gender inequality is still ‘one of the greatest barriers to human development’ and that the ‘average HDI for women is 6 percent lower than that of men’ (iii), with the widest gaps in low-income countries. Progress is such that ‘it could take over 200 years to close the economic gender gap across the planet’ (iii). The human development gap in gender equality is attributable to lower educational attainment and lower income than men. In simple and profound terms, women’s entitlements to basic justice and equality are insecure the world over. They are regarded as the means to others’ ends as wives, mothers, carers, unpaid domestic workers, and sexual partners, rather than as ends in their own right. This analysis is the basic idea of the inherent worth of the person which is taken Kant’s moral philosophy (and see below).

What women and girls need, argues Nussbaum (2000, p.5), is an account of ‘basic constitutional principles that should be respected and implemented by the governments of all nations, as a bare minimum of what respect for human dignity requires.’ According to Nussbaum (2000), the best way to secure this basic social minimum in education, health, employment, is to focus on human capabilities, on what people are authentically able to do and to be since formal equality before the law often does not translate into practice (in areas of, for example, protection from domestic abuse, inheritance rights, and the right to education). Unlike other capability theorists, such as Sen (1985, 2003), Nussbaum has drawn up a list of ten central capabilities, substantive freedoms which support human development. These capabilities, she argues, are essential for a life worthy of human dignity and to support ‘truly human functioning’ (Nussbaum, 2003, p.40), an idea she developed from Marx (1884 Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts). The list is aspirational and to be understood as a set of ethical goals which all governments, if they are to be minimally just, should strive to realise. Importantly, the ten central capabilities are described in very general and abstract terms in order that they can be contextualised to any context, and further specified as befits local norms, customs, values or traditions. The list is open-ended, not definitive, and has been shown to work empirically (see below).

The list is not without its critics (see, for example, Moller-Okin (2003)), and Nussbaum’s response (Nussbaum, 2004; Robeyns, 2003 who argues for a procedural approach to selecting capabilities). Sen (2009) himself has refused to endorse a specific list on the grounds that it should be decided through public deliberation, even though education, health, civil and political liberties, choice of occupation feature so prominently in his work as indices of well-being. Further, the central capabilities are to be understood as a ‘species’ of human rights, and, like human rights (such as the United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities), are an integrated set of fundamental entitlements which are essential to living a dignified and flourishing human life (Nussbaum, 2006, 2011). Further, the Human Development Reports which are based on the CA, assess countries against 13 key areas that advance human wellbeing. The reports include: health, education, income, gender, poverty, work, and human security, each of which can be readily mapped onto the ten central capabilities.

In summary, the ten central capabilities are described as a follows: 1. Life: being able to live life to a normal length; 2. Bodily health: being able to enjoy good health; 3. Bodily integrity: being free from assault, sexual and reproductive rights, moving freely from place to place without fear of violence; 4. Senses, imagination and thought: freedom of speech and expression, having opportunities to develop these through education, including the humanities, arts and the sciences; 5. Emotions: being able to have attachments to people and animals without fear, anxiety or harm (brought about by abuse, neglect or trauma; or social, racial or religious prejudice), being enabled to express the full range of emotions in ways that are not deformed by gender based beliefs; 6. Practical reasoning: being able to engage in a plan of life that accords with one’s own interests, dispositions, goals, aspirations, or beliefs, such as the kind of education, degree or profession one wants to pursue; 7. Affiliation: this has two aspects: 1. Being able to associate with people different from oneself, to imagine their situation; 2. Having the social bases of self-respect, not being humiliated or degraded on account of one’s sex, sexuality, gender, colour, faith, ethnicity, language, etc.; 8. Other species: being able to have a relationship with and enjoy the natural world, and to care for other species; 9. Play: being able to enjoy recreation and recreational resources; 10. Control over one’s environment: this capability also has two aspects: 1. Political freedom; 2. Material, the right to hold property, access to employment on the basis of non-discrimination.

For a country to be minimally just, these capabilities must be sought for each person. The ethical belief on which this pursuit rests is the Kantian moral obligations to treat ‘each as an end and none as a mere tool of the ends of others’ (Nussbaum, 2000, p.5). Exploitation is morally odious, as is treating others as mere instruments for one’s own gain, such as creating settings in which children are set or streamed on the basis of supposed ability and/or class stereotypes, in order that one class of students may advance advantageously through the education system.

3. The idea of ‘functioning’ in the capabilities approach

A further basic requirement of social justice, and an idea that is unique to Nussbaum’s account, is that the capabilities be secured at a ‘threshold level of functioning’, below which human function is difficult to achieve. In the case of the UK, a wealthy, advanced liberal democracy, the threshold level of functioning is very high in comparison to, say, a low-income country on the official development assistance list (World Bank, 2022): the UK provides free and universal education up until the age of 18, free and universal health care (The National Health Service), and welfare support for low-income families or unemployed citizens. Arguably, however, within the UK, despite the existence of free and universal education, many children do not achieve threshold levels of functioning in accessing education, or in basic literacy and numeracy for a variety of complex reasons, including deprivation, disability, class and ethnicity, and practices which select, set and stream children according to perceived ability and intelligence (Francis et al., 2018; McGuckian, forthcoming).

As we discussed above, not only is there scepticism about specifying capability lists, there are also questions about how to determine threshold levels of functioning, especially in high income countries such as the UK. However, good empirical work has been achieved in this area. For example, Anand et al. (2005, 2008, 2011), Coast et al. (2008), and Burchardt & Vizard (2011) have used
quantitative primary data to operationalise the capability approach and to draw up lists. More recently, Anand et al. (2021) have shown that with the right datasets (survey measures based on their original Oxwell survey and which reports on 29 capability indicators clustered under five domains: home, work, community environment and services), the approach can sustain multi-dimensional measures of poverty and analyse the drivers and consequences of low levels of capability in the UK, USA and Italy (p.80). Qualitatively, threshold levels of functioning will necessarily be a subjective question, since how a person feels about, say, fairness in school, discrimination, racism, sexual violence, or access arrangements, will vary from person to person, and from context to context. These subjective evaluations will, naturally, be influenced by social conditioning (familial, peers, education, and community). Subjective evaluations of appropriate levels of functioning will also vary across time, having both diachronic and synchronic dimensions (the work of McGuckian, 2022, has shown this very clearly), depending on what researchers want to know. Further, turning capabilities into functionings, the doings and beings within a capability (bodily health, for example), and across the capability set, will be heavily influenced by a person’s personality traits, dispositions, and skill sets, the ability to deal with adversity, and the environments in which the person is located, including the structural features of the institution, community or economy, as Bourdieu’s work has clearly shown. These conditions, further, will have, to varying degrees, either corrosive or fertilising effects. This is why the approach is explicitly individual and why we cannot here, in this predominantly theoretical paper, discuss how we would settle on thresholds. What has been established is that both Sen and Nussbaum’s versions of the approach can be operationalised qualitatively (see Wolff & de-Shalit, 2007; Hart, 2012) and quantitatively (Anand et al., 2009, various). The data is such that it can provide rich heterogeneity and analyses, especially if combined with Bourdieusian tools.

The Capabilities Approach then, on Nussbaum’s account, is a partial and universal theory of justice. It is designed to be general, flexible, and abstract in order to be responsive to any context in which it is used, and refrains from prescribing what governments must do, beyond asserting that they should secure the central capabilities. The approach is also plural about value, recognising that individuals have different and diverse interests, values, and aspirations, and will differ in their ability to pursue them, all of which have an effect on fertile or corrosive agency (see our Bourdieusian analysis below). For example, Nussbaum is at pains throughout her substantial body of work (Nussbaum, 2000, 2006, 2011) to point out that governments should provide the conditions in which a capability can be secured or made fertile, but should not, in most cases, insist that a person function in that capability. One should have the capability (political freedom) to vote but the exercise of that capability, to function as a voter – the ‘doing’ - is left to the individual to decide, in most liberal democracies at least. This restraint respects individual choice. Too, and against the charge of over-prescription and cultural insensitivity, Nussbaum developed the list in consultation with thinkers from a diverse range of countries, including India, Chile, and South Africa (Nussbaum, 2000, 2011) so that the list represents John Rawls’ (1990) idea of ‘overlapping consensus.’ That is, a general agreement on a heterogenous list of ‘primary goods’ (such as rights, liberties, income and wealth, and the social basis of self-respect) that citizens anywhere would agree are important to a flourishing life (see Rawls, 1971, pp.62–65).

4. Non-fungibility of the capabilities

In key areas, however, freedom to choose functionings (active doings and beings such as being healthy and fit or attending further or higher education) should be curtailed or restricted. Few would disagree that children between the ages of 5 and 16 (the ages may vary depending on the country) should attend school, given the central importance of education to a person’s quality of life. The government may even specify how the child functions in school by providing a national curriculum which all must follow. It is also legitimate that governments secure, both formal and active, protection for children against abuse and neglect, and harmful practices such as smoking and drinking. Giving the child a choice in respect of their capabilities for Bodily health (being healthy) or Bodily integrity (being free from violence) if the functioning causes harm to the long-term capabilities for good health and integrity, is surely wrong. However, it would be wrong to insist that all children play the drums or perform in plays: that would be intrusive and too directive. The capability for Play should be enabled (by providing playgrounds or fields, resources for the arts and physical exercise), but how the child functions beyond insisting on a minimum requirement of so many hours of PE, music, or drama, should be up to the child (as far as possible). Of course, some children may not be able to choose to function as a drummer, actor, or sprinter if the school or parent lacks the resources or if the child has been dissuaded from pursuing these activities (such as for religious reasons or erroneous beliefs about ability). In such cases, the capability to do and to be in these examples would be absent or limited.

Nussbaum (2000, 2006) is emphatic that the central capabilities are distinct in quality, inextricably inter-related and non-fungible. It makes no sense to trade in more bodily integrity for bodily health, since the functioning in one affects the functioning of all the others. For example, sexual assault is a clear violation of the capability for Bodily integrity. The impact on physical and mental health, the capability for Emotions (elevated levels of fear and anxiety, compounded by anger if the justice system refuses to hear the case in court) are clear. Practical reasoning (day-to-day decisions and long-term planning) is also affected if the victim is too fearful to go certain places, to go to school consistently and concentrate in class, or maintain intimate relationships. The corrosion of practical reasoning similarly corrodes Senses, imagination and thought. Fear and anxiety can stifle the imagination, render the victim hypersensitive in certain situations, under-sensitive in others because of the effects of alexithymia (van der Kolk, 2015). Then, of course, the victim lacks a sense of Control over her environment if she feels that it is unsafe to travel alone at night or comes up against an education system that is unable to understand how trauma affects her ability to learn. Minimal justice requires that the social, economic and political conditions are such that, in the case of gender-based violence, a whole system approach is taken to protect women and girls from sexual violence: meaningful relationship and sex education in schools where the onus is on boys to respect girls’ bodily integrity and to speak out against male violence instead of, as is sometimes the case at present in the UK, expecting girls to behave and dress appropriately (Oppenheim, 2019). Effective capability protection also requires sensitive police training and education, a criminal
prosecution process that refrains from traumatising victims further, strong rape laws and public safety policies (Gillen, 2019).

The Capabilities Approach recognises that individuals have different powers, capacities, skills, interests, and dispositions, and that we are not equally endowed with innate skills or have fair or equal opportunities to aspire to or realise these within unjust structures. Among the reasons that the approach was developed was to focus attention on the fact that, even with abundant or redistributed resources, individuals differ in their capacity to convert their resources into functionings, an inability that philosophers of distributive justice, such as Rawls (1971) and Nozick (1974), overlooked. Sen (2008) uses the example of a disabled person to explain the point: the disabled person can do far less with his income than the able-bodied person. Regardless of how wealthy a wheelchair user is, if public buildings do not have wheelchair ramps, lifts or wide door frames, the disabled person will not gain access to these buildings. Similarly, if the pavements are uneven or there are no pavements, the wheelchair user will be restricted in where she can go. This is why we need to look at the lives that people can actually lead, rather than what their income should theoretically enable them to lead. This is particularly true for historically marginalised groups of people such as women, children, disabled people, ethnic minorities, those from low socio-economic strata, and non-heterosexual persons.

5. Preference de/formation: adaptive preferences

Persistent inequality within unjust structures can distort an individual’s beliefs about their quality of life and what is actually open to them, while also distorting the distinction between what she prefers and what she has been made to prefer (Techsel & Comin, 2005) through socialisation, habit, cultural norms, low expectation, intimidation, or adverse circumstances. Adaptive preference formation is a psychological process that is formed unconsciously, or barely consciously, such that whatever a person might have desired, had the background conditions been more propitious, is revised downwards or replaced (Elster, 1983; Nussbaum, 2000, 2011). Adaptive preference formation (or deformation) may also result in ‘entrenched satisfaction’ even with unhealthy, unsanitary, unequal conditions, malnourishment, or discriminatory pay structures (Nussbaum, 2000). Put simply, if a desired goal, such as university education, is persistently out of reach for a person or class of people, such as women, they will adapt their real preference for higher or further education (HE/FE) to reflect the realities in which they operate, in this example, that HE/FE is not for them.

Preferences are also shaped by orthodox interpretations by powerful others of what constitutes a flourishing life – that, for example, women and girls should aspire to marriage and children, even when a university degree has been obtained; or that the ‘right’ education are ‘caring’ degrees for women and STEM for men. The Gender Human Development Indicator (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2020) for Saudi Arabia, for example, shows that the share of graduates from science, technology, engineering, and mathematics in tertiary education for women is 36.8, and 63.2% for males. In the UK, the figures are 38.1% and 61.9%, respectively; while Norway, which is ranked first for human development, the figures are 28.5 and 71.5%. In his 1992 Nobel acceptance address, Gary Becker observed that women and minorities frequently underinvest in their education and skills because they have been conditioned to believe, and internalise the belief that, they cannot achieve in these areas (Becker, 1992). Their habituation into prejudiced beliefs (stereotyped reasoning) about their supposed capacities and powers qua women or minorities mean that they perpetuate the status quo and their unjust treatment. The centrality of the central capabilities to the approach stems from the idea that they are bulwarks against preference distortion because they are universal (they should be available to anyone without distinction), general and abstract, and can be regarded as objective goals for human flourishing.

Education should be the primary means by which to disrupt praxis, advance equality, equity, social mobility and, therefore bring about social justice. However, in the UK at least, education is the most powerful and entrenched means by which inequality, inequity, social immobility, and social injustice are perpetuated (Archer et al., 2018; Mazenod et al., 2019; Furlong & Lunt, 2020; Jerrim & Sims, 2020). These iniquities are sustained by educational policies and structures that support state funded selection by school with respect to class, ethnicity, and special educational needs, and once they are in school, by ability setting (top, middle and lower sets) or streaming according to general ability. Although secondary education is very nearly comprehensive across the UK, it has been argued that ‘we have one of the most hierarchical higher education sectors in the world, driven by different degrees of selection across institutions’ (Blackman, 2020, p.35).

What impact does selection have on the preferences and flourishing of those who are not selected for the best schools or top sets? Research reveals common themes: feelings of inferiority, anger, shame, and stigma, which hinder positive relations with teachers and peers (Papachristou et al., 2021; Rix & Ingham, 2021). Selection and ability setting research has shown that expectations of students are lowered and their entry to subjects restricted or capped (to serve accountability metrics), not only on assumptions of intelligence, ability, or aptitude, but also on gender, ethnicity or able-bodiedness or able-mindedness (McGuckian, 2022). Research also suggests that setting has a small negative effect on low attaining students, and a small positive effect on high attaining students. In addition, it is reported that students in lower sets tend to be taught by less experienced teachers, who hold lower expectations for the students (Educational Endowment Foundation, 2022). In Bourdieusian analysis, such assumptions would be classified as symbolic violence.

As we will next discuss from the perspective of symbolic violence and cultural legitimacy, adaptive preference formation need not always be downwards or deformed, and neither need this process only occur in seriously unjust conditions (note the impact of habitus). Students can clearly overcome socio-economic obstacles and adverse school experiences and succeed in FE/HE. Students will also make strategic decisions about what college or university to attend, and which degree courses to choose based on heterogenous factors – aspiration, income, motivation, opportunities, family and school support, beliefs about ‘natural’, sex/gender-based capacities, for example (and see Hart, 2016). A conceptual assessment of choice based on adaptive preferences must, as Watts (2013) has argued, leave room for multiple realisations of the capabilities and be mindful of nuance (and which Bourdieusian analysis permits). Arguing in the context of widening participation in HE, Watts (2013) suggests that a student may, for example, set herself unrealistic aspirations that will actually reduce choice if an apprenticeship or college education might have suited her better. Similarly, a student may choose...
to enter HE simply because she knows it is worthwhile and choose any degree (provided it is within her range of aptitude). In this case, the student revises her preference for HE upwards and selects a degree course because it represents HE and is therefore of good value (Watts, 2013). In Bourdieusian terms, we might refer to this as the effects of a ‘practical habitus’

However, as the research amply demonstrates, and Bourdieu and Passeron’s (1992) analysis clearly showed, accessing HE/FE from a disadvantaged position in any context (whether in the UK, USA, India or China), can limit students’ substantive freedoms to do and to be because of the power of social conditioning and misconceived structural constraints.

6. Symbolic violence and cultural legitimacy

How can a capability analysis flow into a sociological one to yield a comprehensive view of injustice and inequality? Absent from the capability framework is an analysis of power and power relations, and how it shapes and sustains both persistent and systematic injustices – or symbolic violence. The systemic, persistent, and symbolic nature of this violence means that alleviating injustice and inequality will be very difficult if these mechanisms are not understood, are misperceived or misrecognised.

Bourdieu argues that class power is not exerted through coercive force but through symbolic violence that enables dominant classes to impose their meanings as legitimate on dominated classes (Bourdieu, 1992). This attempt is mainly accomplished through an imperceptible strategy that manufactures people’s minds to command their perceptions, attitudes, judgements, and behaviours (what would be described as adaptive preference in the CA). When people take the existing social structure for granted, it is very difficult for them to discern the power relations embedded within social cultures. In a sense, this submission is attributed to the orchestration between their minds and this political imposition, although this phenomenon does not result from a ‘voluntary servitude’ or a deliberate will because dominant beliefs have been inscribed in their bodies. If instilling certain forms of value into social members’ thoughts is able to gear their schemes of perception and disposition, then knowledge of bodies serves as a nexus between free will and social control. In this way, social order is enshrined within their bodies, through which they are affectively bound to the environment. This built-in device automatically ushers in the mechanism of self-monitoring and collective surveillance, the combination of which creates corresponding relations between dispositions and the social structure (Bourdieu, 2000). Value transmission is heavily reliant on social culture, due to its natural and unconscious state in the eyes of the public. This situation converts cultures into a political instrument enabling dominant classes to fabricate people’s self-knowledge (Bourdieu, 1971b). Due to this association, dominant classes need to promote their culture to become the orthodox form (Bourdieu, 1990a):

In other words, the various systems of expression, from theatre to television, are objectively organized according to a hierarchy independent of individual opinions, which defines cultural legitimacy and its graduations... within the field of consecrated culture, they (consumers) feel measured according to objective norms, and forced to adopt a dedicated, ceremonial, and ritualized attitude (Bourdieu, 1990a: 95).

Regarding cultural legitimacy, writers play a crucial role in creating values and beliefs convincing people to accept the existing power structure:

The artistic field is a universe of belief. Cultural production... it must produce not only the object in its materiality, but also the value of the object, that is, the recognition of artistic legitimacy. This is inseparable from the production of the artist of the writer as artist or writer, in other words, as a creator of value. (Bourdieu, 1993: 164)

Further, liberal professionals, including writers and artists, are situated in ‘the intermediary position between economic power and intelligent prestige’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 170), which engender cultural and economic capital simultaneously (Bourdieu, 1993). These correlations indicate that cultures carry out the political function of educating people how to think and act. In addition, even though individual fields have their own properties and rules of operation, the boundary between cultural and political fields is not especially strong (Bourdieu, 1994) because schools are able to integrate political, economic, and scholastic fields into a single entity, aiding middle-class power to increase its advantages (Bourdieu, 1990a). If one wants to consider how specific capabilities can be actualised through the education system in a way that is reflective of the individual’s own practical reason, then it is possible to see how, for example, the capability for Senses, imagination and thought will be strongly influenced by prevailing cultural and political thought since the school is the mechanism, to a significant degree, of cultural legitimacy and the sustenance of symbolic violence. The threshold levels of functioning for different classes of student will inevitably be higher for middle class students since the education system is designed to their advantage, with the consequence that many working-class children experience corrosive and ongoing disadvantage in schools (Reay, 2017). A capability analysis alone would fail to pick out the operations of symbolic violence and cultural legitimation.

7. Cultural capital and academic performance

While cultural legitimacy underpins the practice of symbolic violence, the class power structure is reproduced through symbolic capital, due to its renowned social reputation and recognition, by which its possessors can sustain their privileged status (Bourdieu, 2000). As economic capital and cultural capital are its constituent components, these dominant groups devote themselves to securing their legitimate status (Bourdieu, 1990b). Accordingly, cultures transmitted in schools are no longer in pure forms, but reduced to a specific formation often consistent with the middle-class culture. From this viewpoint, cultures need to be described as cultural capital legitimised and advocated by schools (Bourdieu, 1971a).
The meanings that fall within the sphere of legitimacy all share the fact that they are organized according to a particular type of system, developed and inculcated by the school, an institution specifically responsible for communicating knowledge, organized into a hierarchy… The existence of consecrated works and the whole system of rules defining the sacramental approach presuppose an institution whose function is not only one of communication and distribution but also one of legitimation (Bourdieu, 1990a: 96–7).

This means that the practice of symbolic violence is reliant on cultural capital serving as a proxy maintaining cultural reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). For Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital consists of objectified, embodied, and institutionalized forms, referring to substantial educational objects, manner/conduct, and educational certificates, respectively. More importantly, educational certificates embrace dual functions – scholastic capital and economic capital – through which political, economic, and cultural capital are no longer separate but integrated. This integration helps middle-class culture occupy the status of orthodoxy, enabling middle-class people to implant their thoughts, lifestyles, and values into school curricula (Bourdieu, 1971a). Consequently, its contents address theoretical concepts and their logical relations, whereby a built-in-exclusive selection favouring middle-class students’ cultural competences implicitly operates (Bourdieu, 1973). All these linkages infer a principle that the winners of school ordinations are not mainly determined by mental faculties but cultural capital, which operates as a hidden factor renovating the hereditary system of feudal society into modern society. The offspring of aristocracy now retains its privileged status not in wealth, but in academic aptitudes for which they are crowned with sacred titles (Bourdieu, 1998a), serving as ‘symbolic property that gives them a right to the profits of recognition’ (Bourdieu, 1990b: 135). These correlations designate a rule that education serves as a political apparatus, concealing the interplay between class power, ability, and social stratification. Schools deliberately transform students into unconscious agents who are consciously concerned with educational attainment without understanding how its relations are associated with cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1993), and which, by extension, limit the capability for practical reasoning (the active choosing of one’s own scheme of means and ends):

… the institution of the school, whose function is consciously (and also, in part, unconsciously) to transmit the unconscious or to be precise, to produce individuals equipped with the system of unconscious (or deeply buried) mastery-patterns that constitute their culture… through the very logic of its functioning, the school modifies the content and the spirit of the culture it transmits and, above all, that its express function is to transform the collective heritage into a common individual unconscious (Bourdieu, 1971a: 194).

The extent to which a person ‘can do or be’ (Nussbaum, 2000) will be more or less constrained by the opportunities she has to acquire and exercise the requisite cultural and scholastic capital, in addition to the doxastic effects of power (or adaptive preferences). In order to illustrate how the power structure perpetuates itself from the macro level of the social structure to the micro level of families, Bourdieu introduced two related concepts – habitus and social space.

8. Social space and habitus

Habitus refers to certain types of disposition registered within its holders’ schemes of perceptions, appreciations, judgements, and acts, through which learning outcomes are affected (Bourdieu, 2000). In this sense, habitus can be viewed as an inner logic managing the learner’s familiarity with outside information, including pedagogic messages, so that its dispositions serve as the precondition of academic success (Bourdieu, 1973, 1992). Because the educational system is generally directed by the dominant culture and thus favours middle-class students, their habitus easily meet the demands of schooling, and this in turn allows this student group to seize a privileged position. Conversely, working-class students are situated in an unprivileged state (Bourdieu, 1973). While habitus exerts a profound influence on students’ learning outcomes, its developments are unevenly distributed to different types of social class family. Middle-class students are likely to develop an academic habitus, while their working-class counterparts often display a practical habitus. Their differences are rooted in their parents’ abilities and educational plans. As economic capital is the prerequisite for purchasing cultural capital, middle-class parents enjoy a high degree of latitude to enact educational projects due to their better incomes. Further, their rational minds induce long-term visions that regard educational returns as the result of a long-term investment. In contrast, working-class parents are restricted within the sphere of short-termism, without recognising this relationship (Ball et al., 1997; Reay, 1998). All these linkages highlight a principle that the features of social space are fabricated by the volume of cultural capital, which is affected by economic capital:

Social space is constructed in such a way that agents or groups are distributed in it according to their position in statistical distributions based on the two principles of differentiation which in the most advanced countries… are undoubtedly the most efficient: economic capital and cultural capital. It follows that all agents are located in this space in such a way that the closer they are to one another in those two dimensions, the more they have in common; and the more remote they are from one another, the less they have in common. (Bourdieu, 1998b: 6)

These correlations imply that the distribution of cultural capital is regulated by the agent’s position in the division of labour, which mainly dispenses his/her economic capital accordingly (Bourdieu, 2000). Furthermore, middle-class parents are apt to optimise the advantages of cultural capital in familiar strategies consistent with the specific logic of schools (Bourdieu, 1998b). These two conditions account for why this parent group is capable of constructing an academic social space (Bourdieu, 2000). As habitus is an ongoing process, it crosses timelines from the past to the present and finally the future, the continuum of which engenders a natural trajectory that reduces people’s critical faculties (Bourdieu, 1977). More importantly, there is a corresponding relation between the
actor’s mind and the contextual features he/she confronts, which is established through socialisation. As a result, he/she often sees the existing social structure as a natural outcome, and this situation enables habitus to operate unconsciously without rational calculations (Bourdieu, 1993, 2000):

One of the major functions of the notion of habitus is to dispel two complementary fallacies, each of which originates from the scholastic vision: on the one hand, mechanism, which holds that action is the mechanical effect of the constraint of external causes; and, on the other, finalism, which, with rational action theory… the action being the product of a calculation of chances and profits. Against both of these theories, it has to be posited that social agents are endowed with habitus, inscribed in their bodies by past experiences… without any explicit definition of ends or rational calculation of means, to generate appropriate and endlessly renewed strategies, but within the limits of the structural constraints of which they are the product and which define them. (Bourdieu, 2000: 138)

Another feature of habitus is the collective. While individual children advance their own habitus within their family social spaces, habitus often projects collective features related to social classes because of the economic-cultural-capital formation (Bourdieu, 1997). More specifically, better economic capital facilitates middle-class parents to invest a high volume of cultural capital in their own social spaces, through which their children progress an academic habitus compatible with the reasoning ability required by school curricula. As their working-class counterparts do not have such advantages in economic and cultural capital, their children often display a manually orientated habitus that leads to failure in school (Bourdieu, 1977, 1993, 2000). This phenomenon designates the effect of orchestration on habitus, which is generated by the same condition of existence coordinating the harmonious relations or mutual knowledge between a social class actor and the environment. Unsurprisingly, a collective enterprise is enshrined into different types of habitus, reflecting their own social origins. In this case, habitus ‘is the basis of an implicit collusion among all the agents who are products of similar conditions and conditionings’ (Bourdieu, 2000: 145). Habitus also incarnates another character – constructive structuralism. While actors construct their own habitus, they often have no choice but to obey the imperatives of the context in which they are located (Bourdieu, 1990b, 2000). This compliance indicates that after they internalise the contextual features, their attitudes, manners, and acts are often resulted from these features, so that habitus flags the character of constructing structuralism or structural construction, either of which is greatly administered by structural constraints (Bourdieu, 1990b, 1998b):

No doubt agents do have an active apprehension of the world. No doubt they do construct their vision of the world. But this construction is carried out under structural constraints… firstly, the fact that this construction is not carried out in a social vacuum, but that it is subjected to structural constraints; secondly, that the structuring structures, the cognitive structures, are themselves socially structured, because they have social origins. (Bourdieu, 1990b: 130–1)

As habitus is a result of historical experiences derived from social contexts (Bourdieu, 1977), it is bound with its social origins, and this association makes it traceable. In other words, a certain type of habitus often mirrors its social origin Bourdieu, (1990b, 1993, 2000). However, even though habitus is a system of durable dispositions and structured structures operating unconsciously (Bourdieu, 1993), it may become rational, as manifest in transformations provoked by crises when its holder moves to another social space that is greatly different from its previous one (Bourdieu, 2000; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Since the primary moral claim of the Capabilities Approach is freedom to achieve wellbeing in the ten central capabilities, and that no person should be treated as a mere means, a Bourdieusian analysis reveals how difficult this really can be in practice. The logic of the habitus with is generative principles is a powerful force that in the educational context at least, serves to advance the interest of one class over another, and individuals of that class over individuals from the less privileged class overall. As a capability theorist, unless one is aware of this logic, and the symbolic violence that inheres within the habitus, a realistic evaluation of the doings or beings of an individual student can only be partial, even superficial. Education, while not a central capability, permeates them all, and is essential to a good life and for making meaningful choices. However, as has been demonstrated here, education systems systematically and structurally tend to favour primarily the middle class, and this neither fair nor equitable.

9. Critiques on the concepts of cultural capital and habitus

Overall, the one-way convertible relation from economic capital to cultural capital has been well documented (Het & Kraaykamp, 2015; Katartzis & Hayward, 2019; Lancee & Werfhorst, 2012). Related studies have further discovered that this relation is activated by educational beliefs that acknowledge the advantages of educational qualifications (Notten et al., 2015). This situation often happens in high SES families due to their better incomes, which empower parents, particularly mothers (Reay, 1998), to achieve their educational schemes in cultural capital. This is witnessed by their commitment to providing their children with its objectified form (Blanden & Gregg, 2004; Pishghadam, 2011) and embodied form (Kraaykamp & Van Eijck, 2010; Gracia, 2015; Bodovski, Jeaon & Byun, 2017), through which cultural capital is successfully transferred to their children (Lareau, 2015). Consequently, these children acquire academic habitus, as evident in learning skills (Cheng & Kaplowitz, 2016) and reading competences (Araujo & Costa, 2015; Bodovski et al., 2017), which support them to become excellent learners in schools. These correlations explicate why high SES students have better educational attainment than their working-class contenders in primary schools (Yang, 2001), secondary schools (Cheng & Kaplowitz, 2016; Mollegaard & Jager, 2015), and higher education institutes (Matherly et al., 2017; Saravi, 2015). It was further found that high tier universities significantly contributed to the combination of three forms of cultural capital because these places gathered a considerable number of high SES students with taste. This socio auto-reproduction aligned its embodied form with institutionalised forms and this alignment fused these three forms into a single entity bolstering the reproduction of the power structure (Börjesson et al., 2016). Regarding the theory of habitus, it has been reported that either habitus transformation (Lehmann, 2013),
habitus evolution (Davey, 2009) or habitus segmentation (Jin & Ball, 2019; Reay et al., 2009) occurs when students move into new circumstances that are different in character from the previous one in which they were situated. Without such huge gaps, habitus remains stable. More importantly, it produces the mechanism of atavism, securing the privilege of high SES families across generations (Mellegaard & Jæger, 2015).

Even though Bourdieu’s theories of cultural reproduction have been validated by the above studies, as his structural-based approach posits a linear relationship between cultural capital and educational performance, it largely overlooks the influence of agency on the economic-cultural-capital formula and then the development of habitus. The school of cultural mobility, for instance, points out that this assumption of linearity neglects the various returns of cultural capital which are conducted by environmental conditions (Andersen & Jæger, 2015; Bæck, 2005; Jæger, 2011). More importantly, this structural-led approach interprets social members as an appendage of the social structure, so that when they need to comply with structural constraints, the space of their agentic actions is no longer an object. Although the notion of symbolic violence addresses the idea that people’s minds can be manipulated through the strategy of knowledge of bodies, in a sense, this top-down model again ignores the fact that agency has been exerted by dominated groups, as evidenced by Gramscian studies unmasking a doctrine that working-class students constantly adopting resistant actions for sustaining their independent subjectivity and collective identity (Chiang, 2019; Corrigan, 1979; Heb-dige, 1979; Jefferson, 2000; McLaren, 2015; Ogbu, 2004; Willis, 1977). Similarly, for researchers of critical pedagogy, the dominated group can exert agency to emancipate themselves from an authoritarian society and to establish a democratic one, when they develop independent values through democratic education (Chiang, 2021). Theoretically, if educational practitioners such as teachers and school administrators can exercise agency to recognise the interplay of educational results, social classes, cultural capital and habitus, the phenomenon of cultural reproduction will be ameliorated. However, related studies have pointed out that their minds tend to be heavily dominated by instrumental rationality (and social conditioning, such as that achieved by adaptive preferences, even where circumstances are not overly adverse) as evidenced by the fact that they often attribute educational inequity to students’ mental situations rather than cultural competence similar to habitus. More specifically, teachers’ mindsets are filled with teaching techniques instilled through the framework of teacher education, which is mainly based on psychological courses addressing teaching efficiency (Apple, 1988, 1990; Giroux, 1981), not necessarily on what the individual student can actually do and be. This techno-efficient approach thus reinforces the strong combination of teacher professional identity and academic curricula, through which most teachers are imprisoned within a mental framework of instrumental rationality, taking intellectual students as the main source of their identity (Ashendon et al., 1987), or teaching efficiency (Chiang et al., 2020, 2021). However, this doesn’t mean that agency has disappeared; rather, it needs to be activated through re-education, as argued by Althusser (1971), aided by philosophical and normative analyses that exposes the effects of processes on education systems, class structures, and ultimately on the individual. That is why it calls for empowering teachers in order to make them perform as transformative intellectuals (Giroux, 2004) who dedicate themselves to reducing inequity in education results (Giroux, 2000).

10. Conclusion: bringing the capabilities approach and bourdieusian analysis together

The above cogent evidence articulates a tenet that agency is not only encapsulated in people’s mindsets but also benefits them to initiate creative actions in the social world. While Bourdieu emphasises the reflexive nature of habitus in the idea of habitus transformation, this notion is still constrained within the aspect of either constructive structuralism or structural constructivism because this transformation is steered by contextual features rather than agency. This is why, we suggest, Bourdieusian analysis can help reveal the constraints on converting capabilities into functionings, and, indeed, the value of deploying a list to assess human flourishing in key areas such those articulated by the Human Development Reports. Furthermore, habitus transformation has not explained how actors can be released from structural constraints, while a capability analysis could reveal the effects of that entrapment on the individual. Given the fact that rational capital often assists its holders to enhance the rewards of cultural capital, if they use its applicable methods properly, this principle denotes that both actors and contextual features contribute to the gains of cultural capital. Nevertheless, such returns are heavily regulated by rational capital often held by high SES actors. High SES families are able to improve the advantages of cultural capital even though their children are positioned in an oppressive context constituted by educational policies, as was evidence in research on Sino-Malaysian high school graduates (Chiang et al., 2022). This picture shows that visionary agency performed by high SES parents is embedded within the economic-cultural-capital formation. Accordingly, social members are not always subject to structural constraints if they can (be enabled to) exercise creative actions in their search for cultural capital. This possibility was confirmed by another study, which revealed that agency permitted excellent working-class students to function as cultural capital constructors, who were good at mobilising educational resources available in social spaces other than that of the family, in which cultural capital was severely lacking (Chiang et al., 2020). These agents were able to engage in practical reasoning, to effect some control over their environment, and affiliate profitably to acquire the necessary capitals and seek habitus rupture.

Although excellent working-class students can and do succeed in the education system, and acquire the qualifications necessary to enter high-quality, research-intensive universities, they tend to overrepresent their class. The apex of the education system, the university, is probably the most selective institution of all, and some universities are renowned for their selectiveness. Agency can breach the institutional habitus but does not obviate the fact that the education system is powerful means by which to reproduce inequality. For too many young people, working-classness is seen as without taste, culture, or responsibility. If they are to succeed in the system, working class students, especially boys, must conform with respect to language, accent, style, bodily movement and behaviour, dispositional compliance which may impact on their sense of identity, self-worth, and sense of belonging. The consequences for their actual doings and beings, their functionings – or opportunity freedoms - within the education system will be constrained or terminated if working class students eliminate themselves from school, and further or higher education, rather than contend with
social and psychological practices that delegitimate or devalue who they are and what they know, while the middle classes are set or streamed into the top bands.

The preceding analysis can be summed up in the following diagram.

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**Capability evaluative question:**

What is this person able to do and to be? Assessed via ten central capabilities and functionings.

Constrained/fertilised by:

**Theory of practice:**

Structured structures/structuring structures

Symbolic violence which shapes the habitus, the acquisition of capital, confers cultural/educational legitimacy.

Reproduction of inequality/corrosive or fertile human development

The Capabilities Approach can offer a valuable means to evaluate how an individual student is faring in the education system. The key question of the approach, ‘what is this person able to do and to be?’, can be answered by exploring how far above or below a threshold level of functioning that person is operating within the ten central capabilities: in Senses, imagination and thought - does the curriculum accord with the interests and experiences of the student; do beliefs about the innate abilities of the sexes constrain what courses young men and women choose?; Practical reasoning – to what extent can the student authentically make decisions about the kind of life she wants to lead, the career she wants to follow? Control over one’s environment – what subject choices are really open to the student, and how is agency enacted or experienced in hierarchical, disciplining and gendered learning environments? and Affiliation – to what extent does the learning environment enable the development of relationships and support the social bases of respect, such as not isolating or excluding students who cannot or who are unwilling to comply with class rules (sitting still if one has ADHD, for example, or feeling distress in autism unfriendly environments).

A Bourdieusian analysis can offer powerful analysis because of the in-depth analyses it provides on structuring structures, symbolic violence, misrecognition, and the generating principles of the habitus both synchronically and diachronically, since inequalities tend to be persistent and systematic. Asking what a person can do or be is an evaluative question. It is not designed, we believe, to examine the role of social structures and so may misrecognise the reproductive mechanisms that sustains privilege and impede justice and equality. This is a limitation of the capability approach. However, the answer to the evaluative question can suggest what we ought to do once we know the consequences of those constraints on the agent.

Therefore, adding a theory of practice means we can better examine how adaptive preferences, the opportunities to achieve capability security, and realise functionings through resource conversion, will be constrained or enabled by the inner and outer logic of the habitus, and the degree to which she has acquired the requisite amounts of cultural, economic, and scholastic capital. A limitation of sociological analysis is the lack of attention to normative ethics and questions of justice, as we said at the beginning of this paper. The task of realising this Bourdieusian-Nussbaumian synthesis has yet to be achieved in practice. However, since researchers from the fields of science, social policy and sociology have already undertaken similar research with Sen’s capability indices, we have reason to feel optimistic that this synthesis could likewise achieve rich, heterogenous qualitative and quantitative data using Nussbaum’s philosophically and ethically inspired capabilities approach.

**Declaration of Competing Interest**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.