

“Beyond well-becoming, towards well-being”- Young people and the Capability Approach

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Abstract

Until now there is only a minor debate about a capabilities perspective on childhood and youth or in other words about the development of capabilities and the process of becoming capable agent during these life stages. Whereas from a capability perspective in general it is argued for latitude of individual choices, it seems to be commonsense to a large extent in this field that during childhood and youth, freedom of choice has to be restricted in respect for developing future capabilities. We are arguing that if the focus is shifted from children’s and young people’s capabilities to functionings in this way, this risks sacrificing children’s and young people’s current well-being in view of their future well-being.

Challenging the dominant perception, we are discussing why children and young people should not only be seen as future, but also as current addressees of social justice. For this purpose, we are using Nancy Fraser’s analytical distinction of the “who of justice”, the “what of justice” and the “how of justice”, considering who can be an addressee of social justice, what can be the objects of distribution for young people, and how young people can be taken into account as capable agents, even though they are dependent on care.

Working on the “who of justice”, we are questioning the assumption that children and young people were only citizens in potential, and thus not yet entitled to express claims with respect to social justice. As they are concerned by various public decisions, we state that they should be allowed to participate in corresponding deliberative processes.

Working on the “what of justice”, we argue that functionings as well as capabilities for children and young people have to be taken into account. We advocate for an equal distribution of functionings in respect to future capabilities, but beyond this functionings approach we suggest to ensure capabilities as freedom of choice in order to enabling young people to make decisions about a good childhood and youth.

Working on the “how of justice”, we sketch a redefinition of self-determination. Instead of categorizing young people as autonomous or not, a concept of *punctual* self-determination allows to include them into deliberative processes. We state that self-determination might not be an attribute of a person per se, but related to different situations and processes of decision making.

Beyond a functionings approach for children

Until now there is only a minor debate about a capabilities perspective on childhood and youth or in other words about the development of capabilities and the process of becoming capable agent during these life stages. It seems to be commonsense that during childhood and youth primarily the development of functionings has to be taken into account in respect to developing future capabilities. Martha Nussbaum (2006b) points out, that within a

capabilities perspective obligatory school attendance during childhood can be legitimized in order to produce mature adult capabilities. Also Amartya Sen primarily puts emphasis on children's future capabilities. Even if he concedes, that also children should have certain latitude of choice, he insists that this freedom is affected with regard to their future: "It is the freedom they will have in the future rather than the present that should be considered" (Saito 2003).

Beyond these functionings approaches to the wellbeing of children there are some authors who recently started to develop a capability perspective on childhood.

For example both Mario Biggeri and Maria Laura Di Tommaso adapt Martha Nussbaum's list of basic human capabilities. Biggeri (Biggeri et. al. 2006) uses it to explore relevant capabilities for all children, Di Tommaso (2007) formulates a special list of capabilities for children in developing countries. So Biggeri as well as Di Tommaso are defining age specific capabilities, which they consider to be relevant during childhood and youth.

Jérôme Ballet and Hilde Bojer are going one step back behind this attempt and tackle the theoretical question in how far the capabilities approach (CA) can actually be applied to children. Ballet (2007) comes to the conclusion that children primarily have to learn decision-making before making real choices; so in fact he again basically advocates a functionings approach rather than a CA.

Bojer (2004) combines the idea of capabilities with Rawls' theory of justice to conceptualise "the good of children". Contrarily to Rawls, who explicitly excludes children from the social contract he proposes, Bojer argues for distribution over the life-cycle, using Rawls' thought experiment of the original position as argument.

In our contribution we would like to make another attempt to frame justice for young people from a capabilities perspective, in deepening the argument why young people should not only become functioning, but also be deemed as capable agents.

Justice for young people

Nancy Fraser (2008) offers a fruitful systematization for a meta-reflection on concepts of justice. She draws a distinction between the "who of justice", the "what of justice", and the "how of justice":

Working on these three questions we will frame the following questions:

- *Who* can be regarded as a participant in social justice? Here we will bring the argument forward that also children and young people should be addressees of social justice.
- *What* could be the objects of distribution for young people? Here we are arguing that it can be also capabilities and not only functionings.

- *How* can young people be taken into account as capable agents, even though they are dependent on care?

As mentioned above, one dominant perception stresses the importance of childhood and youth as a source for capable adulthood. Within this argumentation the early stages of life are not considered as intrinsically valuable, but tend to get reduced to instruments for later adulthood. Such an exclusively instrumental way of addressing childhood and youth seems to be contradictory to fundamental theoretical assumptions of justice within the CA.

Located in the tradition of political liberal theory the CA employs an ethical individualism, which considers the individual subject as the unit of moral concern. Accordingly, Nussbaum (2006b) emphasizes the importance to treat every person as his or her own end, rather than an instrument (e.g. for the community or the economy). This basic theoretical approach makes it quite implausible to immolate early life stages to later adult ones, as children and young people are not taken into account as current but as future addressees of social justice. There is only little doubt about causal correlations between early periods of life and the further development of individuals. However we will reason within the following sections why young people should be included within overall yardsticks of equal justice from a capabilities perspective.

Equality for whom? The “who of justice”

The proponents of the CA insist on treating each individual as its own end and as the unit of moral concern. Within this section we would like to question how this is synergizing with the model of citizenship suggested by Nussbaum and which other possibilities are there in order to identify the “who of justice”.

Following Nussbaum (2006b), the state is the institution which is in charge for distributing capabilities. The group of people who are entitled to express claims with respect to social justice to the state are “citizens”. Thereby, Nussbaum’s conceptualisation of citizens contains more than a formal status of full members of a nation state, but describes an ideal of well-educated subjects who are reflective, who can reason logically and who can thereby participate in forming and perpetuating democracy.

As a consequence of this model, Nussbaum points the importance of education for the cultivation of citizenship (e. g. Nussbaum 2002; 2006a). In some texts she thereby focuses on the role of higher education to prepare undergraduates for citizenship and to shape them for democracy. So by implication undergraduates may not be conceived as full citizens because they still have to be prepared and to be shaped. Yet they are not fully excluded from the status of citizenship either: Nussbaum points to their right to vote and their ongoing participation in political life (Boman et. al. 2002). Hence developing and exercising citizenship appear as simultaneous and overlapping processes in the case of undergraduates.

Nevertheless, this paradigm all the more excludes young people under 18 years from the status of citizenship.

Even though it is necessary for each individual in a democracy to develop functionings for decision making and deliberation during childhood and youth, it is still problematic to postpone children's and young people's capability to participate in forming justice to their future adulthood.

We are therefore questioning this concept of citizenship as a condition for being a recipient of justice in terms of the CA. This model largely ignores children and young people as current recipient of justice.

One alternative approach of deliberative participation is developed by Jean-Michel Bonvin (2009), with his concept of capability for voice. He states that one should have the opportunity to participate in every public decision and action by which one is "concerned".

Nancy Fraser (2008) suggests an analogical frame of parity of participation. She advocates that everybody who is subjected by a given governance structure which govern their interaction, should have the opportunity to participate in negotiations concerning these structures. With this "all-subjected" approach of participation she develops a frame, which is able to identify the institutional levels of governance within globalized times. These may be local and national but also transnational.

James Bohman (1996) elaborates how "deliberative democracy" can be realised to guarantee equal participation among citizens. He as well as Bonvin and Fraser claims inclusion of everyone who is "affected" by a decision.

Clearly, young people are concerned or affected by certain public decisions in the sense of Bonvin or Bohman, and they are subjected by several institutions in the sense of Fraser. Taking these authors serious, this would be a matter of fact which should allow them to participate, even though they are no full citizens in respect to Nussbaum yet.

Hence young people have to be entitled to participate in decision making processes in their families, schools and recreational facilities, but also in public action which affect their everyday lives. It is crucial to define how this participation can be conceptualised as the dilemma remains: Participating in democratic contests over justice requires functionings, like bringing arguments forward and comprehending the points of the other involved persons. These functionings have cognitive preconditions and they have to be practiced. Young people may not yet have full capacities in both aspects; the younger they are, the less probable it is that they have these capacities.

Summarizing the "equality for whom" question, we state that participation of children and young people has to be claimed in order to include them in struggles about justice. In the

following sections, we will make some suggestions concerning the realisation of this participation.

Equality of what? The “what of justice”

In order to discuss the “what of equality” in respect to young people we will now consider the instrumental as well as the intrinsic value of childhood and youth.

As the foregoing argumentation indicated, there is still an instrumental role of childhood and youth that has to be taken into account, even if young people are recognized as an end in themselves instead as means for e.g. human capital. The achievement of functionings in order to act as capable adult in the future plays an important role during this stage of life. Hence a functioning approach towards young people can be legitimized regarding to their future freedoms. But focussing on the development of young people’s functionings does not imply anything about the provision and distribution of functionings.

In order to ensure the development of functionings, the family is often consulted as ‘natural unit’ (Nussbaum 2006b, p. 250) of provision and concern. Thus the responsibility for children’s needs is often reduced to a family issue. But even if the family can provide basic capabilities, like love and care, and functionings, like different forms of interaction, it also has to be recognized as an institution which is constitutively pervaded by power structures.

On the one hand, in particular parents have the possibility to take various decisions which essentially affect their children’s living conditions, for example in terms of their education, nutrition, leisure. This power is largely unquestioned, perpetuated by traditions and institutionalised by laws. So the distribution of goods and subsequently also of capabilities between children and their parents or legal guardians has to be taken into account. As Nussbaum puts it (but in view of women): “seeing other family members as recipients of the largesse of a beneficent altruist is not the same thing as seeing them as agents, each with a life to live, deserving of both respect and resources” (2006b, p. 65).

On the other hand, parents are themselves equipped with unequal sets of capabilities and functionings. Accordingly the dependency of children on their family comes along with unequal starts to life and is consequently reproducing social inequality. Thus also the distribution of functionings and capabilities among children has to be recognized.

On the basis of this assumption we advocate to localize the responsibility for young people’s set of functionings outside the private sphere, but conceptualise it as a part of public policy. We thus consider functionings as a social good which is an issue of equal distribution. As mentioned the family may be one provider for the needs of their children, but the interpersonal dependency of young people within their families does also exclude them from social justice in terms of a publically provided distribution of functionings.

Beyond this functioning approach we suggest assuming childhood and youth as a capability in itself as these are important periods of life, where parts of Bildung in the sense of human development and cultural self formation takes place.

The opportunity to spend childhood and youth in terms of a moratorium is distributed quite unequally within national and global contexts. A moratorium is defined as the liberty of an enforcement of wage labour and provision for oneself and others, while having the right of being cared. Whether somebody is able to choose this moratorium depends highly on class, gender and origin. While some people are forced to early economic independence from their parents or adapt their preference to early labour market participation, others have the possibility to delay different kinds of work and instead of that participate in formal, non-formal and informal kinds of Bildung.

This kind of moratorium offers several ways of opportunities for developing functionings. Thus we suggest considering youth and childhood in terms of moratoriums as valuable social goods, which offer latitudes for human development. According to these assumptions we propose to conceptualize the possibility of choosing and defining a good childhood and youth as a capability in itself. While young people might not be able to make a decision about a good life as a whole, they are able to have reasonable desires in respect to a good childhood and youth.

In order to make this freedom of choice available, age specific capabilities are needed as preconditions for these decisions. In order to devise such age specific capabilities it seems to be necessary to differentiate between the particular age groups. Babies and very small children are very limited in their ability to make decisions concerning the conversion of capabilities into functionings. (But still there are few spaces for decisions, for example the time for and amount of the food, the beginning of speaking, using the toilette and so on.) In particular the relevance of specific capabilities for childhood and youth has to be differentiated in order to grasp a yardstick of capabilities that is as broad and adequate as possible.

Summarizing the “equality of what” question, we would like to advocate for an equal distribution of functionings in respect to future capabilities, but beyond this functionings approach for young people we suggest to ensure capabilities as freedom of choice in order to enabling young people to make decisions about a good childhood and youth. Defining a moratorium during childhood and youth as a capability means not to immolate this life stage to later adulthood, but treat it as an own valuable end and as part of human development.

Equality how? The “how of justice”

In order to make some tentative suggestions for the “how of equality” we go back to the dilemma that young people have to be taken into account as addressees for justice, even though they are dependent of advocacy and care.

According to Bonvin (2009), everybody should have the possibility to make reasonable choices about their personal conversion of capabilities into functionings. Beyond this, as mentioned before, every person who is concerned by a public decision should be allowed to participate within the process of decision-making in terms of deliberation. But the distinction of self-determined adults versus dependent and non-autonomous young people excludes the latter from these two kinds of freedoms. So we have to clarify how the status of self-determination as a major precondition for the availability of opportunity freedom and processual freedom is defined and might be redefined. For this purpose we can use two important criteria of self-determination which Micha Brumlik (2004) suggests:

1. Persons need to be able to have a coherent habit of language.
2. Persons need to have an adequate basis of information, in order to be able to phrase a plausible argument.

There has to be a broad debate about the measurement of plausibility and hierarchical assessment of different basis of information, but we will leave this debate out now.

However it can be reasoned out of the second aspect, that self-determination and autonomy might not be attributes of a person *per se*. Instead of categorizing young people as autonomous or not, the question if they are able to have a capability for voice has to be related to different situations and processes of decision making. As comprehensive self-determination is always an ideal, the assumption that young people are comprehensively lacking self-determination might be counterfactual in respect to certain concerns.

So even if young people have not reached the status of full autonomy and self-determination, which is an ideal typical yardstick anyway, their autonomy and self-determination might be recognized punctually. This punctuality can be related to a capability for voice, in order to include young people within claims for social justice. Consequently children should not only be seen as passive recipients of schooling, welfare, social services, but should be allowed to realize a capability for voice, in order to recognize them as current subjects of moral concern, instead of future citizens.

Even if paternalistic treatments of young people might be reasonable and necessary in many cases, they still have to be legitimized. Following our suggestion of punctual self-determination, it has to be legitimized if paternalistic and advocacy decision making is necessary or if young persons are able to argue for themselves.

Furthermore the exclusion of young people out of public decisions concerning them has to be legitimized. For example the organization of schools might be object of deliberative processes, where it seems to be an obligation to state reasons if young people are excluded. Beyond, the question still remains how to develop autonomy and self-determination during childhood and youth in respect to future adulthood. Therefore the aims of education or Bildung have to be discussed. As this would lead to far we don't want to grasp up this debate here.

Summarizing the "equality of how" question, not only realized functionings and skill capabilities have to be taken into account in order to include young people as current addressees of social justice, but also opportunity capabilities that allow access to participation and self-determination.

Conclusion

To sum up, we are arguing that in a capabilities perspective, children and young people have to be included as agents into conceptions of justice in order to reduce intergenerational inequality. This inclusion is complicated by the fact that young people's abilities differ from the ideal of autonomous adults, which underlies the conception of justice the CA proposes. While this dilemma cannot be resolved *per se*, several conceptual considerations allow considering children and young people as entitled addressees of social justice.

Summarizing the above, we argue that children and young people should be conceptualized as addressees of justice because their subjection to governance structures entitles them to influence these structures. Contents of the justice for young people should be both current capabilities which are enabling them to live a valuable youth, and functionings with a view to future capabilities. Even though we cannot expect reasonable and far-ranging decisions from young people in every single situation, their participation in deliberation processes still can be conceptualized. For this purpose, it has to be explored in every different context anew, if their knowledge base is sufficient to assess a certain participation process.

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