



Sen and Bourdieu: understanding inequality

Dina Bowman

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Dr Dina Bowman is a Research and Policy Manager Centre at the Brotherhood of St Laurence and an Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Political and Social Sciences, University of Melbourne. This paper is based on a presentation at the International Sociological Association's XVII World Congress of Sociology in Gothenburg in July 2010.

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Brotherhood of St Laurence
67 Brunswick Street
Fitzroy Vic. 3065
ABN 24 603 467 024
Phone: (03) 9483 1183

www.bsl.org.au

and

Centre for Public Policy
University of Melbourne
Vic. 3010
Phone (03) 8344 6820

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Abstract

Amartya Sen's capabilities approach has become increasingly popular in Australian social and economic policy making circles. While it has much to offer, it emphasises normative understandings of freedom or capability and overlooks the role of culture in shaping the choices that men and women make and perceive as possible or reasonable. In this paper, I draw on my experience of a joint longitudinal study that examines the employment, retention and advancement of low-paid workers in Australia. A key element of this work is an examination of motivations and aspirations. I reflect on my use of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts in analysing how the men and women in the study make sense of and respond to their circumstances as they move in and out of low-paid work. I argue that while a capabilities approach is useful in evaluating inequality, Bourdieu's concepts of field, forms of capital and habitus—especially as they have been developed by feminists—enable a deeper understanding of the processes and experience of inequality.

Introduction

I start with three assumptions. First, all social policy and practice reflects ideologies and beliefs. Some analysts and commentators may describe their positions as pragmatic rather than ideological, but this is a ploy to discredit other perspectives and understandings. Second, theory is important because it provides us with the frameworks to make sense of complex phenomena. Third, sociological theory and practice provides important tools and perspectives to inform the understanding of social issues and the processes by which they may be addressed. As a sociologist, I am interested in the processes and patterns of advantage and disadvantage, and I am also interested in how sociological research can inform change.

This paper draws on the work of Amartya Sen and Pierre Bourdieu. Sen is an economist and Bourdieu is a sociologist¹. Both are philosophers, and both have sought to extend the narrow boundaries of their disciplines. So, while their work is rooted in different disciplinary frameworks, they have much in common. Sen (1933–) and Bourdieu (1930–2002) were contemporaries, and according to at least one source, they were friends (Hobsbawm 2007). The work of each draws on the ideas of Aristotle and is concerned with inequality. Sen developed the capability approach as an attempt to fill in the gaps of mainstream economic theory (utilitarianism and welfare economics), which tends to rely on 'assumptions of maximising behaviour, market equilibrium, and stable preferences' (Becker 1976, p.5). Sen argued that '[i]ncome may be the most prominent means of a good life without deprivation, but it is not the only influence in the lives we can lead' (Sen 2000, p. 3). As an economist, he sought to expand the reach of economics to include aspects of life other than the material. Nevertheless, his work remains rooted in economics and is constrained by the limits of that discipline.

As a sociologist, Bourdieu sought to understand the processes of inequality and to use those understandings to effect change. While his work is often unfairly criticised for being

¹ Bourdieu died in 2002 but I use the present tense because his work lives on.

overly abstract and complex, Bourdieu's sociology is practical (Calhoun & Wacquant 2002). Like Sen, Bourdieu was a public intellectual, and like Sen, he understood the importance of resources beyond the economic. Bourdieu's influence is growing in Australian sociology, but his ideas have been less influential in Australian social policy, which, perhaps, reflects the dominance of narrow economic discourse, as well as the relatively underdeveloped role of sociology in social policy in Australia (Gilding & Marjoribanks 2007).

By contrast, Sen's capability approach has become increasingly popular in Australian social and economic policy circles (Henry 2007, 2009; Pearson 2005, 2009a, 2009b; Simons 2000), and has informed the development of social indicators that seek to measure inequality in Australia (Boese & Scutella 2006; BSL 2007; Australian Government 2010; Kimberley & Simons 2009; Scutella & Smyth 2005). Sen has been influential, in part, *because* he engages with and extends, rather than seeks to challenge, the dominant economic discourse.

In this paper, I draw on my experience as partner investigator in a longitudinal study that examines the employment, retention and advancement of low-paid workers. I reflect on my use of Bourdieu's concepts in analysing how the men and women in the study make sense of and respond to their circumstances as they move in and out of low-paid work, to argue that such an approach complements a capability approach, and provides a deeper understanding of the processes and experience of inequality. Before discussing the study, I will briefly introduce Sen's capability approach and Bourdieu's concepts.

Sen—the capability approach

Economics as a discipline tends to enact and reinforce a particular world view (Callon 1998; England & Folbre 2005; Granovetter 1996). Sen sought to extend economic analysis beyond one based on 'utility and primary goods' (1980, p.222) by 'shifting attention from goods to what goods do to human beings' (1980, p.218). The 'capability approach' aims to provide a broader understanding of the nature of poverty, going beyond that related to income or consumption. Instead, a capability approach aims to evaluate what people are able to be and to do.

The capability approach in its dominant form is characterised by three interrelated elements: functionings, capabilities and agency. For Sen, functionings are 'the various things a person may value being or doing' (1999, p.75), which may include being healthy, safe, happy, educated and participating in the community. Capabilities are 'the substantive freedoms' that allow an individual to 'lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value' (Sen 1999, p.87). The third element is agency, which is a key concept for Sen (Alkire, Qizilbash & Comim 2008). In a recent co-authored work, Drèze and Sen describe their approach as a 'people centred view of economic development that focuses on human agency and social opportunities' (2002, p.7). Sen understands agency as the capacity to act and bring about change. For him, agency is important in evaluating 'what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important' (Sen 1985, p. 203).

To some extent, Sen acknowledges the socially constructed nature of choice or value (2003), but he does not explore this in any great detail. His focus is at once abstract and pragmatic.

For example, in answering the charge that he does not address power in gender relations, Sen—who has described himself as a ‘feminist economist’ (Sen et al. 2003, p.322)—argues that power is incorporated in the terms capability, freedom, agency or threat and vulnerability (Sen et al. 2003, p.324).² In a recent lecture (2010), Sen described the capabilities approach as addressing the removal of ‘diagnosable injustices’ by focusing on the ‘actual lives of people’. In that lecture, he suggested that the difference between the concepts of ‘power’ and ‘capability’ was rhetorical rather than substantial. Rather than speaking of power relations, Sen refers to ‘capability failure’ (where individuals are unable to speak or act freely). While he now concedes that there can be conflict between capabilities, his more recent acknowledgement of power remains underdeveloped.

Sen’s focus on self-help, self-reliance and agency may be a clue to his growing popularity. Hartley Dean characterises the capabilities approach as ‘in essence a restatement’ of the liberal ideal ‘which assumes that citizens are constituted as formally free and equal and that participation in the public sphere is open upon the same terms to everybody’ (Dean 2009, p.271). Dean acknowledges that the capabilities approach ‘is not and does not purport to be a theory of social change’. He suggests that consequently it obscures fundamental biological and structural constraints on freedom. Sen has faith in the power of individuals to assess and reject such constraints through what he calls ‘critical agency’. For example, he suggests that an ‘adequate realisation of women’s agency’ involves the freedom to ‘question and reassess’ as well as the ‘freedom to act’ (Drèze & Sen 2002 , p. 274). For Sen, such critical agency is closely allied to economic development.

The capabilities approach goes beyond a focus on utility or resources and seeks to capture other aspects of life such as wellbeing; but, paradoxically, this approach can be used to minimise the importance of the economic, and therefore fail to address structural inequalities. For example, in his 1997 article ‘Inequality, unemployment and contemporary Europe’, Sen argues that even though ‘an income received through a governmental transfer payment is much the same as an income earned through employment’, unemployed people still feel a sense of exclusion, through not participating in employment. He cites one study as evidence of the ‘many other serious side effects of unemployment’ to suggest that to focus on income inequality alone is ‘particularly deceptive’ (Sen 1997, p. 157). He goes on to argue that ‘If we are really concerned with inequalities that matter, we have to take an interest in disparities in political and social position, in addition to other aspects of inequality, of which income distribution is a part’ (1997, p.159). This argument is important, but there is a danger that it can be used to divert attention from the need for greater income equality.

Mick Carpenter observes that the capability approach ‘tends to be prescriptive and evaluative, rather than explanatory’ (2009, p.355). However, like Dean, Robeyns (2003, pp.62–3) points out that the ‘capability approach is a framework of thought, a normative tool, but it is *not* a fully specified theory that gives us complete answers to all our normative questions’. For this reason, while useful, alone it does not enable an understanding of the processes or experiences of inequality.

² He also counters the charge of not being interested in the role of power in gender relations by referring to his chapter ‘Gender and cooperative conflict’ in Irene Tinker (ed.) 1990, *Persistent inequalities: women and world development*, Oxford University Press, New York; and to his chapter on ‘Women’s agency and social change’ in *Development as freedom* (1999).

Bourdieu—field, habitus and forms of capital

Bourdieu's concepts facilitate a more finely grained explanation of inequality. His concepts of habitus, field, and capital can help 'to make sense of the relationship between objective social structures (institutions, discourse, fields, ideologies) and everyday practices (what people do and why they do it)' (Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002, p.1). His ideas enable an analysis of *how* power persists (Moi 1991, p.1019).

Drawing on his familiarity with rugby, Bourdieu uses the interrelated metaphors of field and game (Calhoun 2003). He uses the metaphor of 'field' to describe any system of structured positions, such as academia, politics, business or the economy. As Hage (2009) points out, fields are an intellectual construct. Fields are not fixed; they change as they reflect and respond to the games that shape them and to the other fields that they intersect and overlap. Bourdieu uses the metaphor of the 'game' to refer to the struggle for positions of power within a field. He argues that individuals implicitly accept and reinforce the value of the game by participating in it. As he puts it: 'Those who take part in the struggle help to reproduce the game by helping—more or less completely, depending on the field—to produce belief in the value of the stakes' (Bourdieu 1993, p.74). However, as Toril Moi points out, this 'does not necessarily mean that everyone will play the game in the same way' (1991, p. 1022). Participation in the game also depends on each individual's *habitus*, their 'feel for the game' and their various forms of capital.

The term 'habitus' describes our beliefs, values, tastes, predispositions and commonsense. Habits and dispositions 'become durably incorporated in the body' (Bourdieu 1993, p.86). Each field generates its own habitus or system of embodied 'lasting, transposable dispositions' (Bourdieu 1977, p.83). Importantly, as Beverley Skeggs (1997) has pointed out, the concept of habitus incorporates not only our individual histories but also our collective histories: we inherit understandings of what it means to occupy a particular social space.

Bourdieu refers to the apparently unconscious awareness of how the field works as a 'feel for the game' that 'realises itself' in relation to the field and 'allows for and demands invention and improvisation' (Bourdieu 1990, p.52). Where habitus and field fit, power relations are normalised and seem unremarkable and natural; in this way habitus is related to cultural capital. Indeed, Bourdieu argues, 'the *habitus* is a capital, but one, which, because it is embodied, appears as innate' (italics in original Bourdieu 1993, p.86). Habitus reflects and reinforces class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality and other social classifications. Habitus is social *and* individual, in that it reflects and reinforces social classifications and is a reflection of an individual's lived experience. In this way, there can be a welfare habitus (Peillon 1998) or a masculine habitus, but it is not fixed because the social interacts with the *particular* lived experience and social trajectory of an individual (Wacquant 2004).

Bourdieu uses the metaphor of capital to describe different interrelated forms of power, including financial capital (money, wealth, assets), social capital (social relations, connections and networks) and cultural capital (including symbolic, educational and linguistic capital). Individuals have different combinations or 'packages of capital' (Silva & Edwards 2004, p.3). Different forms of capital have different values depending on the field in which an individual is operating; indeed, Bourdieu and Wacquant stress that a particular form of 'capital does not exist and function except in relation to a field'

(Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, p.101). Furthermore, an individual's habitus frames the value and use of the various forms of capital to which they have access (Skeggs 1997, p.9). Capital can be converted between or within fields, but this requires an awareness of the conversion possibilities.

Capital, field and habitus work together. Habitus reflects social classifications and the judgements associated with those classifications, so that those who possess authority in the form of symbolic capital frame what is legitimate within a field. For example, economists may cast sociologists' contributions as illegitimate and peripheral, and thus affect their ability to participate effectively in economic policy. As Skeggs puts it: 'Legitimation is the key mechanism in the conversion [of capital] to power ... Capital has to be regarded as legitimate ... before its value is realizable' (2004, p.17).

Bourdieu's concepts are useful because he understands that individuals have 'contradictory goals' and 'conflicting pressures' (Townsend 2002, p.3). Using his concepts enables an analysis that highlights how power structures are imposed on and incorporated in individuals. Bourdieu (1998) suggests that those who are dominated unconsciously collude with their domination through misrecognition of the processes of domination. For Bourdieu this misrecognition is an embodied belief rather than an intellectual awareness or understanding. As a result, he argues that change cannot come about solely as a result of the 'awakening of consciousness'; rather there needs to be a 'transformation of the objective structures' that have produced and sustained the dispositions and beliefs in the first place (1998, p.121). Sudden changes in social arrangements can lead to changes in belief, but this only happens if individuals are aware of the processes by which belief and dispositions are reproduced and sustained. However, he also argues that even where crises cause the world not to appear 'natural', those in power will seek to manage understandings and preserve 'a universe of that which is taken for granted' (Bourdieu 1977, p.170).

Reflections on studying inequality

The conceptual frameworks of both Sen and Bourdieu have been extremely influential, but because they developed within different disciplines they tend to be used in different areas. In Australia, Sen's work has been particularly important in social policy and in welfare economics; Bourdieu's work has been important in education, but until recently it has been less influential in Australia than in Europe and the USA. Increasingly, Australian researchers are drawing on his concepts, but this tends to be within education, sociology and anthropology, rather than social policy.

In my previous research, I found Bourdieu's concepts useful in making sense of wealth advantage and gender (Bowman 2007, 2009). So when I joined the Brotherhood of St Laurence in 2009 and took on the role of partner investigator in a study related to employment, I drew on these concepts to try to make sense of poverty and disadvantage.

The 'Employment retention and advancement of disadvantaged jobseekers' or ERA study, commenced in 2007. It is jointly conducted by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (part of the University of Melbourne) and the Brotherhood of St Laurence and funded through the Australian Research Council Linkage program. The project includes examining the employment experiences of people who have moved into

paid employment after participating in employment services funded by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR)³.

The project seeks to identify the factors that facilitate job retention and advancement of people who have been unemployed or out of the labour market (such as sole parents). Participants were recruited from the clients of three partner organisations: Mission Australia, a large charity that provides a range of services including employment assistance; Job Futures, a national network of community and not-for-profit organisations which provide employment, training and related services; and CRS Australia, which provides employment services to people with a disability, injury or health condition.

Questionnaires were mailed to 8302 clients from June to November 2008. Of these, 1265 were returned, a response rate of 15%. Follow-up questionnaires were sent to these clients in 2009, and were to be sent again later in 2010. Around half of respondents were clients of CRS Australia; the rest were clients of Job Futures or Mission Australia. The questionnaire covers topics including the health of participants; their education; parents' work history; attitudes to work and advancement; information on their current job; their satisfaction with their employment assistance case manager; their work history; income; and personal details. The surveys also include a space where respondents can indicate 'what would help' them get and keep a job, and advance in their chosen career. In the first survey wave, 60% of respondents were female; around one-quarter of respondents were sole parents⁴, and roughly a quarter were in a partnered relationship. The respondents tended to be mature-aged, with 41% aged over 45 and only 15% aged 25 years or younger. Two-thirds lived in metropolitan areas, a quarter were born outside Australia; 65 respondents identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. Levels of schooling were low, with almost 70% of people not having completed year 12: to some extent, this reflects the age profile of the respondents.

Most were employed at the time of the survey⁵. Just over half worked in small business. The respondents worked in intermediate clerical, sales and service roles (49%), as labourers (23%), and as intermediate production and transport workers (10%). They were low-paid, with most (78%) earning A\$600 or less per week, which was just over half the average weekly full-time earnings of A\$1145 in 2008 (ABS 2008). Only 37% were employed on a permanent or ongoing basis; half were employed on a casual basis, 10% were on fixed-term contracts, and 3% were self-employed or had temporary employment arrangements.

In addition to the surveys, semi-structured, face-to-face and telephone interviews with a small subsample of the respondents provide further insight into the aspirations, opportunities and constraints of low-paid workers. This paper draws on interviews of 16 women and 14 men in 2008–09.

³ Now Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR)

⁴ Most sole parents were women: only 37 out of 255 were men.

⁵ Some 72% were employed in wave one but only 66% in wave two. Detailed comparative analysis has not yet been completed.

Aspirations and choice

In an initial analysis of the survey data, Perkins, Tyrrell and Scutella (2009) examined the respondents' career aspirations. They found that career advancement was important for over half (57%) of the respondents. They concluded that:

conventional notions of advancement, were equally if not more important to workers in lower-skilled occupations, suggesting that the so-called middle-class view of advancement is equally applicable to those at the lower end of the labour market in Australia (p.3).

This finding suggests that career advancement is something that people have reason to value. In other words career advancement could be seen as a 'functioning' and the extent to which individuals are actually able to advance could be seen as a 'capability'.

A capability approach highlights capability sets: what individuals are *actually* free to be and do. In the context of this research, a capability approach would seek to identify the aspects of life that constituted the capability sets for individuals and groups, and measure the degree to which they were free to 'lead the kind of life he or she has reason to value' (Sen 1999, p.87). This approach can be useful in identifying what needs to change to enable such freedom of choice, but it is a limited analysis because it does not adequately address the social and cultural nature of choice. As Beverley Skeggs points out, choice is 'a particularly middle-class way of operating in the world, dependent on access to resources' and a sense of entitlement (Skeggs 2004, p.139). It is also a particularly gendered approach. For many of the interviewees, choices were framed by their circumstances and by what seemed reasonable to them, which is shaped by their habitus, which in turn is framed by class, gender and 'race'. To illustrate this, I briefly discuss how interviewees spoke about their choices.

Many interviewees had invested in caring, either as single mothers rearing their children, or as family members caring for their parents. Most of the older women were single mothers; and several of the men and women had cared for parents or grandparents, which affected their ability to engage in paid employment.

For example, Agnes⁶ was 47. She was a qualified mothercraft nurse and integration aide. Agnes was divorced and lived with her two teenage daughters. With little support from her former husband, she was 'battling' on her own. A back injury made it difficult for her to manage her work, but her priority was to provide for her girls. Rather than continuing to work as a part-time integration aide, Agnes 'begrudgingly' made the choice to work as a casual, which increased her take-home pay:

I had to make a choice between the two because [local college] pays less and I only had 13 hours a week, whereas I'm getting 20 hours a week with [bus company]—well I should be anyway—and they pay a bit more. So I begrudgingly had to go with the one that paid more, because I've got Elizabeth at uni and everything, so I've got to.

She explained that she 'can't climb up a hierarchy ladder or anything like that, it's basically this kind of work or bus work. But eventually I would like to sort of get the integration [work]—even to obtain an ongoing position would be great'. Her primary

⁶ Pseudonyms have been used throughout.

motivation was ‘providing for my girls ... and making it so that they don’t go without’. This commitment shaped her decision-making and her aspirations.

The married women’s ability to participate in paid employment was also shaped by their family relationships. For example, Sharon was in her early forties. She was married with two teenage children. Her story illustrates the effect of a work-related injury, casual, intermittent employment and the unpaid work she did to support her husband’s self-employment as a painter. Her husband wanted her at home so he could rely on her work, but at the same time needed her to supplement his sporadic income. As she said, ‘Bloody hell, I can’t win, can I?’ When I asked whether she was paid for the work she did for her husband, she replied:

Well, business has been so slow that really it’s pointless him having me on his books for five hours a week. We did try it a few years ago for me being on the books 15 hours a week, but I’m not doing that many hours. And it seemed pointless. I mean, I get paid by me going with the credit card. His money’s my money; it’s pointless putting me on the books for five hours a week.

She had been unsuccessful in her search for retail work. She understood that her job opportunities might have been affected by her unpaid work for her husband, and yet she didn’t seem to see an alternative. She explained:

He says to me: ‘I don’t want you to get a job’. And I said: ‘Why?’ And he said: ‘Because I’m used to you being here and being available for me when I’m at work and I need particular things or items to help finish the job off. I can ring you up and say, “Bub, can you go and get this, can you arrange that?”, and you go and get it for me, and I’ve got it for the next day’. But then he’ll say: ‘Get a job, we need more money’, so it’s sort of like you’re stuck.

Marlene was a 42-year-old single mother who was also caring for her parents who have dementia. She had grown up ‘on the showgrounds’ and continued her transient lifestyle for much of her adult life. This lack of stability had affected her ability to get and keep jobs. She felt locked into doing the work that she could do rather than the work she would like to do. She earned ‘just the award wage—it’s crap. That’s why I have two jobs’. Work dominated her life: ‘I just sleep, then go to work or go to work then go to the other work, then go to sleep. I’m lucky if I get four to five hours sleep a night’. Nevertheless, she said she ‘loved’ her work and emphasised the positive non-monetary rewards of caring work. She said, ‘I haven’t advanced in fifteen years—I’m still where I was. And the wages are less’. She thought this lack of progress was due to the tight networks in her industry: ‘They get people that they’re friends with ... I see it all the time. I try not to let it get to me though—I’m there to do a job’. She would like to advance in her work, but said, ‘I’m not an arse-licker’.

For the women I interviewed, choice was constrained. Gender, family background and lived experience frame what individuals have ‘reason to value’ and shape the nature of choice. Furthermore, their ‘choices’ come at a cost, as they may not be considered reasonable or legitimate by employers or by the income support system.

How people understood the meaning of work revealed much about their habitus (shaped by their ethnicity, gender, age and class, among other things) and the degree to which they had internalised dominant ideas about self-reliance and fulfilment through work. For some individuals, the main game was not employment, and a job was something that just wasn’t

central. For example, Glenn (48) had left school when he was in year 10 and since then had ‘flown by the seat of his pants’, working in various managerial roles, as a self-employed handyman and more recently in a rural supply company. The most important thing for him was providing for his family. For Glenn, work was ‘just another facet of your life, that’s all’ and ‘purely a source of income ... a means to the end’.

Indeed, for most interviewees, a job was a means to an end. For example, Jess (24-year-old, single medical receptionist) explained:

I like to have a good job and I like to work hard at a job, as long as I get rewarded as well. But as for a career sort of thing, I’m not completely ... ‘fussed’ is probably not the right word. I mean, I want a good job and everything, but lifestyle and everything is really important to me as well. I’d like to be able to earn enough money to live comfortably, so that’s probably a huge thing, because I hate struggling all the time. Just being able to have the holidays, just work normal hours, which I class as Monday to Friday, sort of 8 to 4, 8 to 5, or whatever—that sort of a thing, like not weekends. Just so you can have time with friends and family, and go away and stuff.

Not surprisingly, for those who wanted a job, but were unable to get one, paid employment was more important. These people desperately wanted the financial, social and symbolic capital that can come from paid employment. For example, Sharon (41, married with two children) wanted to work for the symbolic value:

It is because it makes me feel that I’m not just a mother, I’m not just a housewife, I’m not just my husband’s bookkeeper or worker. I’m me and I’m an individual and I need it for my own personal feelings, to know that I’m human too and I’m capable of being more than just being here and looking at four walls all the time ... It may not be much, but you’re helping to put food on the table. You’re helping to pay a bill. You’re helping to pay the mortgage.

Sharon had internalised the idea that work is only productive or valuable if it is paid. Her references to her work as a mother, housewife, and her husband’s bookkeeper or worker were all prefaced by the word ‘just’. Her more regular, albeit smaller, contribution was also vital to the household’s finances, but she minimised its importance, by adding:

Sure, like I said, I’d love to work four hours a day, and earn big dollars like my husband, but I’m not capable of doing that. He earns heaps more than me when he does his work. One job he could earn \$3000 profit in three days. But then he might not get any work for six weeks.

Gender, class, race and lived experience shape dispositions and understandings of what seems reasonable or possible. Habitus incorporates a ‘feel for the game’ but it does not shape the rules of the game or the nature of the field. Gareth, who was 39, said he was ‘technically homeless’ and lived in a bed-and-breakfast after falling out with his brother. When interviewed, he had been out of full-time work for five years, ‘Because basically I’ve been quite ill with depression. It’s been very difficult, because I don’t have a lot of money I can’t get decent help’. Gareth came from a middle-class family, and had gone to private school and university. He had access to cultural, economic and social capital. His ill health and disability, along with the falling out with his family, had caused him to lose money and relationships, and, his situation kept ‘getting worse’. Lack of stable housing and paid work combined to exacerbate his situation:

It's definitely connected and also I suffer from depression, so it all feeds back into my depression. I live in a small room ... I'm not really convinced that this is such a fantastic situation as the government and the politicians keep trying to tell us they're doing all these wonderful things. Well, they are actually not, because no-one is helping the long-term unemployed and that's also linked into homelessness. That's how people become homeless, because they can't get a job.

Gareth was educated, articulate and angry, but he felt powerless to achieve change—he said, 'I have dreams; I don't really have plans'. Indeed, many interviewees responded to circumstance rather than actively planning. As Eve (56, single mother) put it: 'My life's always been driven by circumstance –something's happened, then something else happens, you know? I don't know if most people are like that or not, but I have always been '.

Some interviewees, like Gareth, thought they understood how things worked—'the rules of the game'—and were disappointed and angry when the rules seemed to change. This was especially the case for people who had fallen on hard times. They felt angry that their expectations had been ruptured. For example, John had come to Australia with his wife some 40 years earlier. Together they developed a successful small business, which they had to sell when he became seriously ill. Since then, a series of tragedies and misfortunes had caused him to go 'from being at the top of the town, to the bottom end of town'. For John, knowing the rules of the game wasn't sufficient: he needed the economic capital to engage in the social fields to which he had been accustomed. John was active in a number of community organisations and said that he and his wife kept up a 'pretty brave face' and were 'the life and soul of the party and all the rest of it, but underneath, we're struggling'. The pressure to keep up appearances took its toll, and later in the interview he said, 'I'm quietly dying inside ...' Downward mobility can be accompanied by a sense of shame and powerlessness, which compounds the experience of poverty:

I would certainly like to see an awful lot more recognition of what's really going on at street level, the pain behind a lot of these front doors ... I think we demean ourselves as a society to turn our backs on these situations and demean ourselves as individuals to turn our backs. I mean, I'm not in the position to do anything about it. I'm at the receiving end of this ...

While most interviewees appeared to have internalised the judgments of others, they also resisted being categorised as 'bludgers' or 'slackers'—at least to some extent. Some interviewees had analysed in detail what was wrong, but very few felt able to change things. For those few who planned and felt a sense of competence and possibility, change in their personal circumstances seemed possible. However, most did what they could. For example, the older women tended to focus on meeting their responsibilities as mothers and carers. They made 'reasonable' choices that made sense to them, even if these choices came at a financial cost.

Gender, age, class and race also shaped how people made sense of their circumstances and how they used the various forms of capital to which they had access. Sam was 29; he had struggled to find his niche in life. He had married quite young, but with the breakdown of his marriage, his life became chaotic and he had been living rough for a while. At the time of the interview, he was living in a rooming house. Sam was seeking help for his anxiety and depression and emphasised that he needed guidance and support to find his way in life.

In explaining his difficulties in getting and keeping a job, Sam analysed what he thought shaped his previous employer's behaviour:

I guess their philosophy, which is a good philosophy, is they employ a minimum of staff and get them to work all over the place, so the staff have to be very efficient, and they have time frames for each task, just how long it should take. So you're always under pressure. I really had a hard time.

He didn't challenge the casualisation and 'just in time' nature of current retail employment; indeed he acknowledged its logic, but at the same time he found it hard to work within such a system. He had 'mixed feelings' about work, but acknowledged that he would do what he was required to do:

I'd really love to find work, something that I enjoy—something that is meaningful. But so far, my experience has been that it isn't like that at all. I guess I think that no-one enjoys their job all the time, it's always a struggle at points, but my experience is it's *always* been a struggle instead of being anything to enjoy. And I guess I find it hard to comprehend doing that again ... but at the same time, I've got to live and like I say, I'm on Centrelink, and also ... the job agency, so I kind of am willing to do what they tell me to do. So I guess if I rock up tomorrow and they say, 'Go get a job or we're cutting you off', then it's kind of what I have to do.

In their analysis of the survey data, Perkins, Tyrrell and Scutella (2009) concluded that low-paid workers aspired to advancement. My analysis of the interviews with a subsample of thirty low-paid workers suggests that most did what they could. There is a gap, however, between aspiration to advance and the ability to do so. A very few felt able to plan for personal advancement. For others, the pressure of their circumstances inspired dreaming rather than planning, which caused distress and pain as the gap between their dreams and reality widened. Several interviewees gave detailed analyses of social ills; others appeared to understand the structural processes that affected their lives, and yet they also internalised the responsibility for their lack of success. There is here a form of 'symbolic violence', as they are caught between a desire to advance and an inability to do so.

Room for more than one idea

Sen argues that it is important to focus on what people can 'actually do'—the substantive freedoms that they have. My analysis drawing on Bourdieu's concepts shows that what one can 'actually do' is framed to a large degree by gender, class, age, race and personal expectations of what is reasonable or possible. For people who have long experienced disadvantage, the choices that seem reasonable or possible may be limited. For others, choice may be constrained by personal circumstance such as disability or ill health, and the forms of capital which they can access.

Sen acknowledges that an individual's real freedom of choice depends not only on resources but also on the ability to convert those resources (Sen 1992, p.82). In considering a capability set for gender equality, Hobson and Fahlén argue that there needs to be a more nuanced examination of how institutional resources convert into agency. They suggest that such a model requires recognition that capabilities are shaped by not only 'laws and specific policies, but also norms and values that are legitimated and reproduced in policy

and discourse' (Hobson & Fahlén 2009, p. 16). What Bourdieu's concepts do is to enable understanding of the processes that enable and constrain choice.

A capability approach is useful in measuring and evaluating inequality but, as Ingrid Robeyns (2003, p.64) points out, 'it is *not* a fully specified theory that gives us complete answers to all our normative questions'. Further, she observes that 'normative frameworks always depend on explanatory or ontological views of human nature and society, and Sen's capability approach does not defend one particular world-view'. But Sen is policy focused—and explicitly engages with social and economic frameworks. As an economist and a philosopher his approach is rooted in the abstract and theoretical, yet he seeks to influence policy and practice. Dean (2009, p.275) observes that the 'capabilities approach is well suited to a consensual approach, but a politics of need should be about struggle, not consensus'. He argues that, by devaluing non-market aspects of life, the capability approach does not address the processes by which 'capitalism distorts our perceptions and our experience of work'. Further, he suggests that within global capitalism the ability to chose a life we have reason to value 'may necessarily be achieved at the expense of others' freedom' (2009, p.273).

In this paper, I have argued that the capability approach can be usefully complemented by Bourdieu's concepts of field, capital, and habitus to provide more finely grained insights into the processes and experience of inequality. By contrast, narrowing the field of discourse reduces not only what can be studied, but also what conceptual tools can be applied. As Sen observed, the tension between approaches arises only if we only have room for 'at most one idea' (Sen 2009, p.308). Not only is there room for more than one idea, I suggest that there is a *demand* for more than one idea. Indeed, because social and economic policy have been hijacked by narrow economic and psychological frameworks that focus on individual 'choices' and behaviours, there is an urgent need to embrace broader frameworks that enable an understanding of the social and cultural constraints on choice *and* the processes that shape the persistence of disadvantage and poverty.

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