

Agency and the Process Aspect of Capability Development: Individual Capabilities, Collective Capabilities, and Collective Intentions

John B. Davis, Marquette University/University of Amsterdam

john.davis@mu.edu

Recibido: 20 de mayo de 2015

Aceptado: 31 de agosto de 2015

Abstract: This paper addresses the process aspect of capability development in connection with the debate in the capability approach over the relationship between individual and collective capabilities by combining Sen's 'privateness' interpretation of different aspects of the self and Granovetter's social embeddedness framework. It interprets Sen's commitment aspect of the self in collective intentionality terms, uses this to explain his view of 'identification with' social groups, and then uses social identity theory's distinction between relational and categorical social group identities to explain a general relationship between individual and collective capabilities. The paper applies this analysis to three broad domains of social embeddedness – market activity, public deliberation, and community participation – in order to explain the process aspect of capability development in terms of how each domain balances individual and collective capabilities.

Keywords: Sen, process aspect, Granovetter, collective capabilities, self, collective intentions, social identity

Resumen: En este trabajo se aborda el aspecto procesal del proceso de desarrollo de capacidades en relación con el debate del enfoque capacidades sobre la relación entre las capacidades individuales y colectivas, mediante la combinación entre la interpretación de Sen de la privacidad de los distintos aspectos/facetas del "yo" y el marco de arraigo social de Granovetter's. Este artículo interpreta el aspecto del compromiso del "yo" planteado por Sen, en términos de intencionalidad colectiva, usa esto para explicar su mirada sobre la identificación con grupos sociales, y luego usa la distinción que hace la teoría de la identidad social entre capacidades del grupo social relacionales y categóricas para explicar una relación general entre capacidades individuales y colectivas. Se aplica este análisis a tres amplios dominios de arraigo social: la actividad del mercado, la deliberación pública y la participación de la comunidad- para explicar el proceso de desarrollo de capacidades en términos de cómo cada dominio armoniza las capacidades individuales y colectivas.

Palabras clave: Sen, aspecto procesal, Granovetter, capacidades colectivas, yo, intenciones colectivas, identidad social.

1. Introduction: Agency and capabilities

Agency is addressed in the capability approach through attention to the process aspect of capability development. Sen treats poverty as capability deprivation, and argues that the alleviation of poverty –an expansion of people’s capabilities and functionings – has two distinct aspects: an opportunity aspect and a process aspect (Sen 1999a, p. 17; also Sen 2002, p. 585). The opportunity aspect concerns what things people are able to achieve that they value, “given their personal and social circumstances.” The question is: what opportunities do people have? The process aspect concerns their freedom of choice and ability to act as agents in regard to their capabilities, which can be constrained “through inadequate processes (such as the violation of voting or other political or civil rights).” The question here is how successfully can people act on their capabilities? Much work on the capability approach has been devoted to the opportunity aspect, and to how people’s capability sets can be expanded. Less attention has been devoted to the process aspect, and to how people’s freedom of choice and agency can be strengthened. Likely this is partly due to the difficulties associated with explaining the nature of agency and the determinants of freedom. There are two difficulties in particular. First, there are many things involved in how social processes work, and it is not easy to say how they contribute to or limit freedom of choice and agency. Second, saying what agency is in and of itself involves many difficult issues concerning the nature of action and what it means to have an ability to act.

This paper’s focus is the process aspect of capability development, framed in terms of these two difficulties. It assumes that they need to be addressed together in that the nature of agency and people’s ability to act depends on the character of the space in which people act. The paper also assumes that this space can be seen as broadly comprised of three relatively distinct domains: market activity, public deliberation, and community participation (Leßmann 2011). Following Granovetter (1985), these domains are distinguished in terms of their ‘social embeddedness’ or according to the extent to which they each determine the nature of interaction between individuals and social structures. Granovetter’s own approach is a little different. He argues that economics has an ‘undersocialized’ conception of this interaction, placing greater weight on individuals and less on social structures, whereas sociology has an ‘oversocialized’ conception of it, placing greater weight on social structures and less on individuals. The argument of this paper is not about economics and sociology but about how these three domains each constitute the space determining freedom of choice and the nature of agency. Setting aside the pejorative meanings he attaches to these terms, it treats the market as an undersocialized domain, community participation as an oversocialized domain, and public deliberation as a

mixture of both. Our understanding of the process aspect of capability development, then, can be developed in a sequential manner by first explaining individuals' ability to act according to their social embeddedness in each of these domains, and by second focusing on individuals' different locations across these domains.

To take the first step one needs to say something about how interaction between individuals and social structures is understood in the capability approach. This can be usefully framed by the debate over individual and collective capabilities. While there is disagreement in the capability literature over what collective capabilities are and over how individual and collective capabilities relate to one another, this paper lays out a way of understanding the latter and the relation between the two that appears consistent with Sen's thinking. It then applies the Granovetter framework to say how markets, democracy, and community differ in degrees of social embeddedness by interpreting this as a matter of how they differently balance individual and collective capabilities. Sen (1985) has laid the groundwork for this strategy in his 'privateness' interpretation of different aspects of the self. Essentially we can associate his different aspects of the self with these three social domains. The paper then argues that when we come to the most socially embedding domain, community, where collective capabilities are especially important, Sen's 'fourth' aspect of the self, as associated with being able to make commitments to others becomes especially relevant. Following Davis (2007), the individual-social structure relation that underlies the relation between individual and collective capabilities is explained in terms of individuals forming shared or collective intentions with respect to social groups.

Thus the paper aims to explain agency and the process aspect of capability development by saying what 'privateness' and social embeddedness tell us about individual and collective capabilities. Section 2 begins by reviewing current thinking in the capability approach about individual and collective capabilities, emphasizing Sen's position on the matter. Section 3 discusses his 'privateness' interpretation of four different aspects of the self, and reviews how he links his fourth commitment aspect of the self, identity, and social groups. Section 4 explains Sen's fourth commitment aspect of the self in terms the ability people have for form collective intentions, and distinguishes his particular conception of social groups. Section 5 returns to individual and collective capabilities, and offers an interpretation of the latter and the relation between the two derived from Sen's 'privateness' framework when combined with collective intentions. The discussion draws on social identity theory's distinction between relational and categorical social identities to explain two ways in which people identify with social groups. Section 6 uses this account of individual and collective capabilities

and Granovetter's social embeddedness framework to differentiate three broad domains of social interaction: market activity, public deliberation, and community participation. It argues that the process aspect of capability development needs to be understood differently in each domain. Section 8 closes with a discussion of the process aspect of capability development in regard to the relationship between individual and collective capabilities.

2. Individual and collective capabilities

Much of the interest in the capability approach in the idea of collective capabilities as a distinct kind of capability is associated with the issue of how social interaction is relevant to capability development.¹ Thus, in an exchange with Sen, Evans first states that "some of the greatest intrinsic satisfactions in life arguably come from social interaction with others who share our interests and values," and then goes on to say that the kind of capability this involves is "a collective rather than an individual capability" (Evans 2002, p. 56). Further, he associates collective capabilities with what he terms organized collectivities – he lists as examples unions, political parties, village councils, and women's groups – which are understood to engage in collective action. Organized collectivities, that is, are social groups, so Evans' position is effectively that collective capabilities are social group capabilities. While he allows that the capabilities of organized collectivities or social groups depend in important ways on their members' individual capabilities, his emphasis on collective action puts this in the background. Collective capabilities are thus basically a distinct kind of capability. In Evans' mind this means that further opportunities for explaining capability development have gone unexploited. "For those already sufficiently privileged to enjoy a full range of capabilities, collective action may seem superfluous to capability, but for the less privileged attaining development as freedom requires collective action" (Evans 2002, p. 56). Developing collective capabilities is consequently complementary to developing individual capabilities, and is also particularly important for Evans at earlier stages of a society's capability development.

In reply, Sen agrees with Evans' statement that "some of the greatest intrinsic satisfactions in life arguably come from social interaction with others who share our interests and values" (Evans 2002, p. 56; Sen 2002, p. 85), but denies that collective capabilities in Evan's social group sense are relevant to the capability approach. The reason is that collective capabilities in this sense – which Sen allows involves a very real kind of capability – do

¹ See Ballet *et al.* (2007), De Herdt and Abega (2007), Ibrahim (2007), and Uyan-Semerci (2007). I discuss the exchange between Evans (2002) and Sen (2002) in order to bring out Sen's influential view of the matter.

not have any specific connection to individual capabilities, and he accordingly recommends that we rather refer to “socially dependent individual capabilities” when we want to emphasize the effects of social interaction on individual capability development.

The intrinsic satisfactions that *occur in* a life must occur in an individual's life, but in terms of causal connections, they *depend* on social interactions with others. The socially dependent individual capabilities have to be distinguished from what are genuinely ‘collective capabilities,’ such as the capability of a world nuclear power to kill the entire population of the world through nuclear bombing Similarly, the capability of Hutu activists to decimate the Tutsis is a collective capability in the genuinely integrated sense, since the ability to do this is not a part of any individual Hutu's life. There could also be more positive – more admirable – collective capabilities, such as the capability of humanity as a whole ... to cut child mortality drastically. (Sen 2002b, p. 85).

Collective action such as is associated with social groups such as Hutu activists creates “a collective capability in the genuinely integrated sense,” but this means that it cannot be “a part of any individual Hutu's life.” Such capabilities are thus altogether removed from the “intrinsic satisfactions” associated with people being able to exercise their individual capabilities, and are accordingly irrelevant to the capability approach. In effect, then, Evans' tying collective capabilities to social groups, which on anyone's social ontology do not experience satisfactions of any kind, severs their connection to the capability approach.

Can Evans' and Sen's positions be reconciled? They agree that collective capabilities exist, and agree that they derive from social interaction. Their positions also both accommodate Granovetter's embeddedness framework in which social structures influence individuals and individuals influence social structures. Sen's “socially dependent individual capabilities” expression exactly captures the idea that social structures influence individuals, and Evans states that “[i]ndividual capabilities depend on collective capabilities” (Evans 2002, p. 56). Both presumably also agree that collective capabilities at least implicitly depend on individual capabilities, so for both individuals also influence social structures.

Where they disagree is over whether “a collective capability in the genuinely integrated sense,” as Sen characterizes Evans' social group organized collectivities idea, has any specific connection to individual capabilities in terms of the “intrinsic satisfactions” people derive from exercising individual capabilities. Put in terms of Granovetter's framework, the barrier to linking collective capabilities to individual capabilities in terms of how each influences the other lies in the absence of a way of explaining how social groups, seen as highly integrated, influence and are influenced by

individuals on the level of “intrinsic satisfactions.” But social groups are of course a part of social structure. So it seems that if both Evans and Sen’s views are roughly consonant with Granovetter’s framework, in principle it should be possible to extend this common ground to the relationship between individuals and social groups as a way of explaining the relationship between individual and collective capabilities.

Sen, in fact, has discussed the relationship between individuals and social groups in connection with the concept of social identity (Sen 1985, 1999b, 2006). The next section reviews his basis for these views in the agency analysis he develops for the person in his ‘privateness’ interpretation of different aspects of the self. Central to this account is how he redevelops his original understanding of the concept of commitment in terms of non-self-regardingness and self-assessment. The section following the next one then goes on to discuss how Sen applies this concept of commitment in his identity account of individuals’ social group affiliations, and further develops his suggestion that the means by which people make such commitments is their ability to form collective intentions.

3. Sen’s ‘privateness’ interpretation of the different aspects of the self

Sen distinguishes three aspects of the self, concepts of the person, or ways in which individuals act as agents in standard economic theory (where they are typically not clearly distinguished), and then adds his fourth sense associated with his concept of commitment. The three aspects we find in standard economics are:

Self-centered welfare: A person’s welfare depends only on her own consumption and other features of the richness of her life (without any sympathy or antipathy toward others, and without any procedural concern).

Self-welfare goal: A person’s only goal is to maximize her own welfare.

Self-goal choice: A person’s choices must be based entirely on the pursuit of her own goals (Sen 2002a, pp. 33-4).²

Note two things about this taxonomy. First, Sen’s three types of ‘privateness’ can be ranked in terms of decreasing self-regardingness or increasing other-regardingness. Self-centered welfare concerns only the individual’s own satisfaction, self-welfare goal allows other individuals’ satisfactions to enter into an individual’s satisfaction through sympathy or antipathy, and self-goal

² See Sen (1985) for a slightly different statement of these aspects.

choice allows for non-welfarist goals of all kinds (for example, the pursuit of social justice). Second, this decreasing self-regardingness is coupled with a “discipline of self-assessment” (Sen 2002a, p. 33) whose exercise increasingly mediates the individual’s own concerns by concerns that reach beyond the individual. Only self-centered welfare is largely independent of such considerations; individuals are only concerned with themselves, and their self-assessment is limited solely to what affects their own lives. But with self-welfare goal individuals’ self-assessment includes concern for others’ welfare, and with self-goal choice individuals’ self-assessment includes concerns that transcend their welfare altogether. That is, when they judge what their goals are, they find that their goals include the goals of others. Thus, across the three forms of ‘privateness’ individuals’ choices are both decreasingly self-regarding and their “discipline of self-assessment” depends increasingly upon attention to others.

On this foundation, Sen re-explains his “Rational Fools” (Sen 1977) concept of commitment. Originally his emphasis rested primarily on how sympathy and commitment were different, and this meant that commitment had to be defined relative to welfare. Sympathy is always welfare increasing, but acts of commitment can produce “a lower level of personal welfare,” and thus drive “a wedge between personal choice and personal welfare” (Sen 1977, p. 329). But in his ‘privateness’ framework commitment follows after non-welfarist self-goal choice, not after self-welfare goal, and so occupies a further step away from welfare and self-regardingness concerns. Sen also associates commitment with what he comes to calls “the fourth aspect of the self” (Sen 2002a, p. 36) and frames this all in terms of his new emphasis on the individual’s “discipline of self-assessment.” Indeed, as falling altogether outside standard economic theory’s three aspects of the self, commitment has little to do with how choice and the person are understood in standard welfare economics. Sen emphasizes this in characterizing the self-assessment a person engages in when forming commitments in terms of “reasoning and self-scrutiny” (Sen 2002a, p. 36), an ability that altogether lacks meaning in standard economics’ conception of choice.

A person is not only an entity that can enjoy one’s own consumption, experience, and appreciate one’s welfare, and have one’s goals, but also an entity that can examine one’s values and objectives and choose in the light of those values and objectives (Sen 2002a, p. 36).

Standard theory, of course operates exclusively with an instrumental reason understanding of choice as always motivated by payoffs, and this view of rationality underlies the first three aspects of the self above. In contrast, the reasons-based view of rationality that Sen expresses above does not require

that choices be motivated by payoffs (though they can be³), and this marks off his fourth sense of the person as qualitatively different from the first three aspects. This difference is implicit in “Rational Fools” but Sen’s reference to “reasoning and self-scrutiny” – which occurs repeatedly in his subsequent writings on capabilities – signals a change in course.

Note also then, that individuals who are able to reflect upon their values and objectives must have some sense of what their own identities involve. In effect, self-scrutiny means they are able to stand back from themselves to assess who they are, and also, it follows, an ability to see how their identities might be affected by the choices they make. Sen’s fourth aspect of the self, then, provides a specific conception of individual identity – or personal identity – which involves being able to reflexively reach beyond one’s own concerns in making commitments to others. It is an important idea that personal identity (and thus autonomy) is explained in terms of one’s relationships to others, not in some sort of *Homo economicus* way in terms of one’s own characteristics alone. But who are these ‘others’ to whom people make commitments? Of course the commitments a person makes to others can range from those made to particular people (such as a promise to a friend) to people’s ‘causes’ (such as peace or the environment). But Sen has an intermediate target in mind when he associates commitments and identity, namely social groups:

We all have many identities, and being “just me” is not the only way we see ourselves. Community, nationality, race, sex, union membership, the fellowship of oligopolists, revolutionary solidarity, and so on, all provide identities that can be, depending on the context, crucial to our view of ourselves, and thus to the way we view our welfare, goals, or behavioral obligations (Sen 2002a, p. 215).

Consequently, our individual personal identities somehow involve “many identities,” which derive from the different social groups to which we may simultaneously belong, each of which “provide identities that can be, depending on the context, crucial to our view of ourselves.” We may characterize these commitments as identity commitments. But how exactly do people’s identity commitments come about? And if commitment is associated with a high degree on non-self-regardingness, how are identity commitments compatible with a person still being a single individual and having a personal identity? To answer these questions, the following section discusses Sen’s suggestion that we form commitments through our ability to

³ The difference between a reasons-based, non-instrumental rationality and instrumental rationality in this regard is that for the former reasons dictate choices, not payoffs, whereas for the latter payoffs dictate choices, and in effect determine what is rational. For a reasons-based account of commitment close to Sen’s original treatment of commitment, see Searle (2001, pp. 167ff).

express collective intentions toward others, and then argues that collective intentions both explain social group identity commitments and are also personal identity-preserving.

4. Sen on commitment, social groups, and identity: the collective intentions view

How does one have an identity as a member of a social group? In social psychology's social identity theory⁴ the identities that social groups provide us – our social group identities – are the product of our identifying with those groups by seeing ourselves as members of them. This 'identification with' idea is what Sen refers to when he speaks of our association with social groups in terms of non-self-regarding commitments we make to them. But there is an ambiguity in the 'identification with' idea that permits two interpretations. First, since the relationship between individuals and social groups in the simplest sense is explained as membership, individuals who form commitments to social groups and identify with them could be said to fully replace their identities as independent individuals by their identities as group members. In this strong sense of 'identification with' they are defined entirely by their membership status, and are indistinguishable from all other social group members. However, this is clearly not Sen's sense of 'identification with' as shown by his rejection of Evans' idea of "a collective capability in the genuinely integrated sense" and preference for the socially dependent individual capabilities idea. So while commitment diminishes one's self-regardingness, it somehow modifies rather than eliminates one's status as an independent individual.⁵

Second, then, the 'identification with' idea can also be understood to combine membership in a social group with remaining an independent individual. Sen suggests one way of understanding this in his statement above that we have "many identities" associated with having multiple social group memberships. Basically, if one is a member of multiple social groups, one cannot be reduced to being a member of a single social group. In effect, one is the 'common denominator' of all one's social group memberships. It could of course be the case that a person who is a member of many social groups has no common denominator, and fragments into many memberships, but this is not Sen's view either. He is emphatic elsewhere when he speaks about identity (Sen 1999b, 2006) that people have the ability

⁴ There are different social identity approaches. See Hogg *et al.* (1995) for an overview.

⁵ One can nonetheless employ this strong sense of 'identification with' and speak of 'individual' capabilities as strictly member capabilities by explaining "group capabilities" in terms of their members' "average capabilities" (Stewart 2005). The idea of "group capabilities" is similar to but still quite different from Evans' collective capabilities, as associated with collective action.

to deny social group claims made upon them by evaluating and reasoning about their values and objectives – as reflected in the passage above (Sen 2002a, p. 36). This implies that individuals retain some sort of autonomy, and are not reducible to sets of social group memberships.

How, then, does Sen capture the second sense of the ‘identification with’ idea? Here he hints at the importance of collective intentions and our use of first person plural speech.

The nature of our language often underlines the forces of our wider identity. “We” demand things; “our” actions reflect “our” concerns; “we” protest at injustice done to “us.” This is, of course, the language of social intercourse and politics, but it is difficult to believe that it represents nothing other than a verbal form, and in particular no sense of identity (Sen 2002a, p. 215; also Sen 2002a, p. 41).

Sen does not explicitly connect our ability to express collective intentions and use ‘we’ speech to how individuals identify with social groups, but that is clearly the context at hand. Nor does he explain just how collective intentions allow us to simultaneously identify ourselves as members of social groups and yet remain at least relatively independent individuals. But let us consider what such speech involves, paying particular attention to the concept of commitment as Sen understands it.

Collective intentions expressed in ‘we’ speech and personal intentions expressed in first person singular ‘I’ speech differ significantly in terms of their respective conditions of success as speech acts. To be a successful act of communication, the expression of an intention in first person singular ‘I’ speech needs to be understandable but has limited uptake requirements for those to whom it is expressed. Whether they agree or disagree with the intention expressed is largely immaterial to its expression. In contrast, the expression of a collective intention using ‘we’ speech not only needs to be understandable but also needs to meet conditions of acceptance for those to whom it is expressed. If someone says ‘we’ and those to whom it is said deny what is expressed applies to them, then that collective intention has failed. We may thus say that collective intentions are inherently relational in nature, while personal intentions are basically autonomous in nature.⁶

Notice also then, that the burden of satisfying the condition of acceptance for a collective intention rests on the person expressing that intention, not on those to whom it is expressed. Thus, when using ‘we’ language, one must impose upon oneself the requirement that one’s statement be acceptable,⁷ and in imposing that burden upon oneself one individualizes oneself relative

⁶ See Uyan-Semerci (2007) on the relational nature of ‘we’ speech.

⁷ If that statement is not frivolous, deceptive, or involves some sort of authoritarian ‘royal’ we.

to the audience addressed. That is, obligating oneself – self-obligation – through the expression of a collective intention secures the individual's autonomy in relation to those to whom it is expressed. This analysis can then be applied to explain how individuals identify with social groups in an individual identity-preserving way. If, as Sen suggests, one identifies with a social group by making a commitment to it expressed in collective intention terms, one achieves both membership in that group and yet also individualizes oneself relative to that group.⁸

Sen associates his fourth sense of the self – the “reasoning and self-scrutiny” sense of the self – with the ability to form commitments to others (not only social groups). It is this particular ability, inherent in our very nature and thus not an acquired capability, which ultimately provides the basis for our relative autonomy as socially embedded individuals. Let us, then, apply this understanding to explain the relationship between individual and collective capabilities.

5. Individual and collective capabilities revisited

Evans contrasts individual and collective capabilities, and explains the latter as the product of collective action carried out by social groups. Sen sees this as “a collective capability in the genuinely integrated sense,” and denies its relevance to the capability approach. In light of the discussion above, it seems fair to say that Evans employs the first sense of the social group ‘identification with’ idea, where individuals are defined entirely by their membership status, are indistinguishable from all other social group members, and at least when acting as group members do not function as relatively independent individuals. In contrast, we saw that Sen employs the second sense of the ‘identification with’ idea, which when framed in collective intentionality terms allows us to explain people simultaneously as social group members and as relatively independent individuals. Thus Sen has a different understanding of social groups, namely, social groups which are not fully integrated in Evans’ sense.

We also saw that Sen agrees with Evans that individual capabilities depend on people's social interactions, and so characterizes them as “socially dependent individual capabilities.” But since he also sees social groups as important to people, and sees individuals' commitments to them as being important to those groups, it seems that he also, at least implicitly, operates with a parallel notion of ‘individually dependent collective capabilities,’

⁸ Like Ballet *et al.* (2007), the argument here regarding self-obligation draws on a reasons-based deontological reasoning, but is different in deriving this from collective rather than personal intentions.

which would refer to the capabilities that (not fully integrated) social groups have as a consequence of individuals making commitments to them. That is, if we go beyond Evan's view of social groups with its strong individual capabilities-collective capabilities dichotomy, and use Granovetter's framework in which individuals and social structures are mutually influencing, then we not only need a way of talking about how individual capabilities are influenced by social groups, but also need a way of talking about how individuals influence what social groups in Sen's sense can achieve. I suggest that when we talk about what social groups in this not fully integrated sense can achieve, we are talking about social group collective capabilities in a way that is consistent with Sen's thinking. The advantages of such a concept over the collective capabilities concept that Evans employs is that it escapes his strong individual capabilities-collective capabilities dichotomy, and also provides us a way of thinking about "socially dependent individual capabilities" and 'individually dependent collective capabilities' in relation to one another. In particular, this provides us a further way of understanding the idea of "socially dependent individual capabilities" as not just the product of how people's social interactions influence their capabilities, but as also, at one remove, the product of individuals' influence on their social interactions in connection with their participation in social groups.

Social group collective capabilities, then, have a dual relation to people's individual capabilities in that they result from the commitments people make to social groups (are 'individually dependent'), and in turn impact people's individual capabilities (which are "socially dependent"). This is exactly the opposite of Evans' view, since here social group collective capabilities have no status apart from this two-sided relationship with individual capabilities. Note, however, that the analysis is not symmetric with respect to individual capabilities, since they have a looser relation to social group capabilities. Some individual capabilities are indeed directly related to individuals' activities in social groups; they might be termed social group 'participation' capabilities, such as teamwork capabilities and shared deliberation capabilities. But other individual capabilities are "socially dependent" in virtue of the many other non-social group ways in which social interaction influences individual capabilities. That is, individual capabilities do not have a dual relation to social group collective capabilities. This reflects how individuals' relative autonomy is foundational in the capability approach.

But how exactly does this set of mutual influences between social groups and individuals operate? If we are to be confident we are working with a concept of collective capabilities not vulnerable to Sen's criticism of fully integrated groups, we need to show how commitment not only produces

individuals' social identification with groups, but also how social groups as a product of such commitments generate 'individually dependent collective capabilities.'

Needless to say, explaining individual-social group relationships in a concrete manner is a large task, and not only for the capability approach. But we can take a clue from Sen about how to begin by focusing on getting past the idea of a social group as fully integrated, where the meaning of that is that membership does not distinguish one person from the next. This idea of a social group is useful for explanations of collective action *per se*, but everyone knows (including Evans of course) that generally social groups are internally differentiated in terms of roles and responsibilities and that their members are distinguishable from one another in a variety of ways. In connection with Sen's fourth aspect of the self, this means that commitments to social groups are typically made to groups but with an understanding of the particular role and responsibility relationships the person making that commitment has to the group. Psychology's social identity theory captures this idea nicely in distinguishing two ways in which people socially identify with groups. They do so through their relational social identities, which are "(i) those that derive from interpersonal relationships and interdependence with specific others," and also through their categorical social identities, which are "(ii) those that derive from membership in larger, more impersonal collectives or social categories" (Brewer and Gardner 1996). Relational social identities are thus associated with a person's roles and responsibilities in the group, and categorical social identities are associated with a person's attachment to the group as a whole. The commitments people make to social groups include both aspects. Let us then consider capability development from both perspectives.

First, how people's commitments to social groups generate "socially dependent individual capabilities" is a matter of how their relational social identities enable them to develop their individual capabilities in the roles they occupy in social groups. These roles by themselves individualize them, but on the collective intentionality analysis above their commitments to others in their role relationships also enable people to individualize themselves relative to others. Indeed, roles are typically interlocking and consequently combine people with one another in partnerships and teams. In these within-group social interactions people develop their capabilities, not just in terms of what they can be and do, but in terms of what they can be and do in cooperation with others who are similarly developing their capabilities.⁹ This social group interpretation of "socially dependent

⁹ An excellent illustration of this is the account of families as social groups where mother-child role relationships create 'relational capabilities' (Uyan-Semerçi 2007). Her analysis is also based on 'we' speech.

individual capabilities” takes us beyond the basic idea that individual capability development occurs in a broad undifferentiated social space in which social forces generally influence capability development, because here we can tie the mechanism by which individual capabilities are developed to specific role sites of social interaction. Clearly this is important for understanding the process aspect of capability development, to which I return below.

Second, how individuals’ commitments to social groups – where they identify with them categorically – generate ‘individually dependent collective capabilities’ is a matter of how these commitments make it possible for people to achieve things in groups not possible when acting as unorganized collections of individuals. Here we are close to Evans’ collective action view, though in this case behind collective action and supporting it are people’s within-group relational social identities which structure the social group’s internal organization and provides it cohesiveness. That is, individuals’ relational social identification and categorical social identification with a given social group go hand in hand. Clearly there are many different ways in which these two types of identification interact – and not always smoothly. The breakdown of a role relationship might precipitate an individual’s abandonment of a group. Or conversely attachment to a group might facilitate a role opportunity.

As an illustration, consider the tensions that sometimes arise between women’s individual capability development and their gender social identities.¹⁰ In many societies, women are pressed to maintain traditional social roles in families and communities on the grounds that this is what ‘women’ should be and do. They are thus expected, in effect, to make a commitment to their categorical social identities as women by adopting traditional role relational social identities. However, should they reject these role identities they sometimes find themselves in the position of also rejecting their categorical identities as ‘women,’ at least in the traditional interpretations of those identities that prevail in many societies. Since their reasons for rejecting traditional roles are often their perception that their individual capability development is suppressed in such roles, we see that individual capability development is closely tied to the commitments women can make. Similarly the collective capabilities of women as a social group in such instances are closely tied to whether women find themselves able to make commitments to social roles available to them. Alternatively, where socially progressive social role opportunities are available to women, as in schools and women-led cooperatives, they often are accompanied new

¹⁰ Sen provides a related set of examples in connection with tensions between social roles and ethnic or national categorical social identities (Sen 2006).

definitions of their categorical social identities as ‘women’ as a result of their identification with these groups.

Notice, however, that this account of individual and collective capabilities is still very general, and does not distinguish different domains of social interaction. Since the nature of agency and people’s ability to act – the process aspect of capability development – depends on the character of the space in which they act, the next section distinguishes three broad domains of action – market activity, public deliberation, and community participation (Leßmann 2011) – and discusses how they differ in the ways that they balance individual and collective capabilities.

6. Individual and collective capabilities: market activity, public deliberation, and community participation

The general view here is that the social space in which people act determines the nature of agency and the determinants of freedom, and that market activity, public deliberation, and community participation can be broadly distinguished as three different kinds of social space according to Granovetter’s social embeddedness understanding of agency and social structures. The approach taken to Granovetter’s framework is to focus on individual and collective capabilities. Since the analysis above of individual and collective capabilities is a social group analysis, these three domains of social activity are compared in terms of how social groups operate within them. It is not assumed that social interaction in these domains is fully reducible to individual-social group relationships, so this discussion only partly implements Granovetter’s view. But it is assumed that social group membership is an important part of social interaction, and that individual-social group relationships are important in all three domains. For example, in markets, people belong to firms and households, in the political arena where public deliberation occurs people belong to parties, government agencies, and alliances, and in community participation people belong to community organizations, self-help groups, and tightly knit social networks.¹¹ As noted at the outset, the strategy of the analysis is to proceed in a sequential manner by first explaining the process aspect of capability development and agency in each of these domains and then addressing the interaction between the domains. How, then, do the three domains each balance individual and collective capabilities?

Markets, most would agree, are an undersocialized social domain in which individuals’ social embeddedness is relatively limited. Put in terms of the influences that individuals and social structures have on one another, the

¹¹ As associated with bonding (as opposed to bridging) social capital in social capital theory.

social structures that frame the market process (state regulation and social-ethical values) tend to promote individual market activity or place modest limitations upon it. In social group terms, firms and households have limited hold on individuals who enter and exit them on a regular basis (as measured by average number of lifetime employers and average number household lifetime partners). The market is a space in which people primarily seek to develop individual capabilities, though these are still “socially dependent individual capabilities.” In contrast, firms and households are constrained in their ability to develop their ‘individually dependent’ respective collective capabilities by individual mobility. When we think of their internal organization in terms of role relationships, individual opportunities for exit weaken firm and household cohesiveness. In terms of Sen’s different aspects of the self thinking, individuals’ privateness is high. In general the market promotes welfarist thinking. As individuals enter and exit firms and households, they may slide back and forth between self-centered welfare and self-welfare goal. Households provide a basis for self-goal choice and commitment, but this is always in tension with the two narrower aspects of privateness.

The political arena of public deliberation promotes individual capabilities and also many social group collective capabilities, and thus increases the weight that collective capabilities play in people’s lives over what we see in the market domain. Individuals’ identification with political groups often endures despite many other changes in their lives, and political groups (parties, government agencies, and alliances) arguably sustain their identities longer than do firms and households, and so more successfully develop ‘individually dependent’ collective capabilities. Nonetheless individuals also draw on political groups to advance their own “socially dependent individual capabilities.” This implies that the political arena is neither a particularly undersocialized nor oversocialized social domain but some mixture of both regimes. In terms of Sen’s different aspects of the self thinking, depending on the circumstances, individuals’ privateness ranges across the full spectrum of forms. Individuals use political groups to advance self-centered welfare, defend allies for self-welfare goals, formulate all sorts of political objectives in self-goal choice terms, and identify with parties (in relational and categorical social identity terms) through acts of commitment. Social embeddedness is thus neither low nor high in that individuals and social structures both influence one another.

For the capability approach, that community participation is a social domain distinct from both markets and the political realm is reflected in how important commitment is in sustaining community organizations, self-help groups, and tightly knit social networks.¹² Such social groups are often

¹² Social capital theory also emphasizes social networks, which include community participation.

characterized as ‘third way’ voluntary organizations or social enterprises, because they are neither profit-driven nor part of the state (Becchetti and Borzaga 2010). They consequently depend almost entirely on individuals’ commitment to them and strong identification with their overall goals and the role opportunities they create for members. That is, their collective capabilities are highly ‘individually dependent.’ At the same time, individuals exhibit the lowest levels of privateness in Sen’s sense, and their individual capabilities are particularly “socially dependent” in being especially tied to their roles and relationships in such groups.¹³ In Granovetter’s framework, the domain of community participation is in effect oversocialized in the sense that development of collective capabilities has a greater weight and social interaction has an especially strong influence on individuals. Indeed, Evans’ view of social groups as engaged in collective action captures much of what this domain involves, if not the understanding of social groups employed here.

In light of this, what can we say generally about the process aspect of capability development? In using this term, Sen couples freedom with the social space in which people act, and so in principle to analyze it we might disaggregate all the way down to individual functionings (Alkire 2005). The focus of the discussion here, however, has been on how we can understand agency and freedom when social group membership is important to individuals, and so intermediate to examining the process aspect in relation to individual functionings, the goal has been to understand it when people have different types of relationships to social groups. The debate in the capability approach over individual and collective capabilities has not brought out these differences, arguably because of lack of clarity over how the idea of a social group ought to be understood in the capability approach. Indeed, when social groups are seen as fully integrated, it is difficult to speak about the process aspect of individual capability development at all. Yet when we move to the idea of social groups as not fully integrated, we see that there are different kinds of social space in which people exercise choice, as reflected in the different ways in which individual and collective capabilities are related. Granovetter’s social embeddedness conception is helpful here in providing general guidelines for thinking about this relationship since it gives us a way of understanding not just how individuals are influenced by social interaction but also how social interaction is influenced by individuals. In the account here, that social embeddedness explanation combines Sen’s understanding of individuals in his privateness framework and an understanding of social interaction in terms of social group membership. The general conclusion is that we need to think of the

¹³ That is, they are ‘relational capabilities’ (Uyan-Semerici 2007).

process aspect of capability development according to how each social domain balances individual and collective capabilities.

7. The process aspect of capability development: Individual and collective capabilities

The process aspect of capability development concerns people's ability to act as agents of their own individual capability development. It does not concern social groups' ability to engage in collective action as agents of a collective capability development. So it might be objected to any discussion of collective capabilities that they are irrelevant to the process aspect of individual capability development. However, such a view presupposes a fully integrated view of social groups and a strong individual capabilities-collective capabilities dichotomy. On the alternative view of social groups advanced using Sen's 'privateness' framework, collective capabilities have a dual relation to people's individual capabilities, and so the process aspect of individual capability development makes what collective capabilities people are able to pursue together important to what individual capabilities they are able to pursue separately. Note that this is not at odds with the capability approach's ethical individualism as a framework for the evaluation of individual advantage (Robeyns, 2005) since the opportunity aspect of the capability approach is distinct from its process aspect. What opportunities we judge people to have individually is independent of their abilities to pursue those opportunities, which vary according to their social circumstances. That is, the evaluation of individual advantage is a matter that is different from the evaluation of agency.

It might also be objected to the explanation of agency in terms of these different social domains that this implies that individual agency is greater in market activity where individual capabilities dominate and almost unimportant in community participation where collective capabilities dominate. But this is a misconception since there being a greater or lesser relative role for collective capability development does not imply anything about the extent to which people are agents in the two domains. In particular, it does not imply that people are any less individual agents when participating in community; it only implies that collective capabilities play a larger role in generating their "socially dependent individual capabilities." To assume otherwise is to say that social interaction and cooperation by nature reduce freedom, and that freedom is greatest when individuals have limited social interaction in markets.

What the domain analysis of agency and the process aspect of capability development ultimately offer, then, are two things. On the one hand, it

provides us one way to be more concrete and specific about the circumstances in which people act as agents. Just as there are many ways in which people can develop their opportunities, so there are many ways in which they will be more or less free to do so. On the other hand, it provides us a way of thinking more clearly about what collective capabilities are and what their relation to individual capabilities is. In this way it accordingly provides a means of making social interaction more central to the capability approach.

References

- Alkire, Sabine (2005). "Subjective Quantitative Studies of Human Agency," *Social Indicators Research* 74: 217-260.
- Ballet, Jérôme, Jean-Luc Dubois and François-Régis Mahieu (2007). "Responsibility for Each Other's Freedom as the Source of Collective Capability," *Journal of Human Development* 8 (2): 185-201.
- Becchetti, Leonardo and Carlo Borzaga (2010). *The Economics of Social Responsibility: The World of Social Enterprises*, London: Routledge.
- Brewer, Marilynn and Wendi Gardner (1996). "Who is this 'we'? Levels of collective identity and self representations," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 71: 83-93.
- Davis, John (2007). "Identity and Commitment: Sen's Fourth Aspect of the Self," in F. Peter and H. B. Schmid, eds., *Rationality and Commitment*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- De Herdt, Tom and Séverin Abega (2007). "The Political Complexity of Pro-poor Policy Processes in the Mandara Mountains, Cameroon," *Journal of Human Development* 8 (2): 303-323.
- Evans, Peter (2002). "Collective Capabilities, Culture, and Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom*," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 37 (2): 54-60.
- Granovetter, Mark (1985). "Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness," *American Journal of Sociology* 91 (3): 481-510.
- Hogg, Michael, Deborah Terry, and Katherine White (1995). "A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory," *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 58: 255-269.
- Ibrahim, Solava (2006). "From Individual to Collective Capabilities: The Capability Approach as a Conceptual Framework for Self-Help," *Journal of Human Development* 7 (3): 397-416.
- Leßmann, Ortrud (2011). "Freedom of Choice and Poverty Alleviation," *Review of Social Economy* 69 (4): 439-463.
- Robeyns, Ingrid (2005). "The Capability Approach: A Theoretical Survey," *Journal of Human Development* 6 (1): 93-114.

Searle, John (2001). *Rationality in Action*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Sen, Amartya (1977). "Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6: 317-344.

Sen, Amartya (1985). "Goals, Commitment, and Identity," *Journal of Law, Economics and Organization* 1 (2): 206-224. Republished in Sen 2002: 206-224.

Sen, Amartya (1999a). *Development as Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sen, Amartya (1999b). *Reason before Identity*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Sen, Amartya (2002a). *Rationality and Freedom*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.

Sen, Amartya (2002b). "Response to Commentaries," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 37 (2): 78-86.

Sen, Amartya (2006). *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. New York: Norton.

Stewart, Frances (2005). "Groups and Capabilities," *Journal of Human Development* 6 (2): 185-204.

Uyan-Semerci, Pinar (2007). "A Relational Account of Nussbaum's List of Capabilities," *Journal of Human Development* 8 (2): 203-221.