

Theorising multiply disadvantaged young people's challenges in accessing higher education

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This paper sketches an innovative conceptualisation of disadvantaged youth, shaped dialogically by the interactions of theorising and data from a case study at Orange Farm informal settlement in South Africa in 2013. The study focused on the challenges for the young people in this area in accessing higher education. Drawing on Sen's and Nussbaum's capability approach, complemented by a theorisation of vulnerability by Misztal and of oppression by Young, the study illustrates how the concepts should be interconnected to generate a framework for understanding the experiences of multiply disadvantaged youth, as well as issues of equity for them in accessing HE. The paper highlights the need to understand young people's experiences and aspirations using multidisciplinary theorising, in conversation with empirical lives. Overall, advantage is understood as having the freedoms (or capabilities) to live a life each person has reason to value, with genuine opportunities for secure functionings now and in the future. A disadvantaged life, by contrast, would have less or neither.

Keywords: higher education, youth, disadvantage, capability approach, vulnerabilities, oppression

Introduction

In this paper we develop a conceptual approach to understanding youth in one South African informal settlement, their aspirations for, and their realistic access to higher education (HE) opportunities. We suggest that these young people are both neglected in the access literature in South Africa and multiply disadvantaged along dimensions of the personal, social and economic. We develop a normative

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and analytical yardstick for the analysis of disadvantage by drawing together the capability approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000, 2011), with a conceptualisation of vulnerabilities (Miztal, 2011), and oppression (Young, 1990) to frame disadvantage in access to HE for the assessment of public policies and social arrangements as a matter of social justice. Following the capability approach, we assume that education is both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable: being educated is a valuable achievement in itself and education can help an individual to do many things that are valuable, such as increasing employment opportunities and developing voice and aspirations for, among other things, participating in public life (Sen, 1999). Although HE is the focus of the paper, the framework could be applied to other education sectors.

Capabilities and disadvantage

Of interest then is which theoretical framework can explain the complex lives of young people and capture the dimensions of multiple dis/advantage in intersecting biographies and structural conditions, while also taking into account their voices and aspirations.

We draw on data from a case study (see Walker and Mkwanzani, forthcoming, for a detailed account) to help us advance our conceptual approach through a dialogue between theory and research data. The study was descriptive in nature, using qualitative interviews to elicit illuminative data from eight young people and three of their guardians in one Orange Farm orphanage, and two graduates from within Orange Farm. We did not seek comprehensive data on what all young people in Orange Farm thought; rather we sought a small amount of rich and illuminative data to help us understand how disadvantage worked out in their experiences and perceptions. Given the sensitive nature of the study, participants were made aware that participation was voluntary and that the study was intended for academic dissemination. The young people interviewed had been living in the orphanage for between two and five years. All had lost at least one parent, and most of them knew little about their extended families. The three guardians interviewed had been working with young people for over four years. Their own experiences, combined with the number of years they had lived in Orange Farm, provided illuminative data about issues of poverty and other challenges that young people in the community experience. The female graduates were both residents of Orange Farm and they shared valuable insight into the challenges they had faced in accessing HE, and those that young people continue to face.

We deliberately selected an informal settlement as our site of investigation, because this group of young people does not appear in the access literature. On the other hand we also sought out a best case scenario by speaking to young people living in an orphanage; while they had lost their parents, they were materially well cared for and supported by the orphanage staff, more so than many of their peers.

However, this care ends at the age of 18 so that having future security based on current achievements is especially significant.

We used the capability approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum 2000) as our overarching normative framework to investigate and understand disadvantage with regard to young people's ability to aspire to and access HE. The approach offers a normative framework to evaluate well-being and quality of life as a matter of justice. It has been pioneered by Amartya Sen who (1992, 1999) challenged mainstream development approaches which focus on income and wealth, arguing that increased income should be viewed as a means to improve human well-being, rather than as an end in itself. For Sen, development involves expanding freedoms (human capabilities) and, hence, removing structural unfreedoms that stand in the way so that people have effective opportunities to undertake the actions and activities they want to engage in and to achieve who they want to be. These beings and doings are what Sen (1999) calls 'functionings;' valued functionings (being in decent work, reading a newspaper every day, doing well at school, having friends, providing for one's family, and so on) are chosen from the person's capability set. The well-being of persons is then evaluated with regard to how a person can function compared with others. For example, going to university would be the functioning; having the real opportunity to choose to go university would be the corresponding capability. Sen (1999) argues that, in evaluating well-being, it is also vital to look at the real opportunities that an individual has in order to lead a valued life. In other words, the quality of life that an individual enjoys is not only about what he or she achieves, but also about the options that he or she had the opportunity to choose from as an agent (Sen, 1999). In the case of a disadvantaged young person who does not choose to go to university, compared to a well-off young person who also does not go to university, we need to ask whether they both had the real opportunity to choose to go or not to go university.

Importantly, education can reduce disadvantage: the formation of human capabilities and the use of the acquired capabilities can be enabled through education, while education can act as a capability multiplier. Education contributes to the development of other human capabilities so that promoting access to a good education for young people will contribute to building their set of capabilities (such as the ability to read and write critically and confidently), as well as form them in a way in which they can pursue their goals (Walker, 2006).

However, basic capabilities need to be in place for higher learning. Sen (1992: 45) identifies these as a subset of all capabilities that have the 'ability to satisfy certain elementary and crucially important functionings up to a certain level'. In other words, this refers to the freedom to have access to basic things that are considered necessary for survival, for example, basic education, health and shelter, and adequate nutrition. Our Orange Farm participants had these basic capabilities in place.

The realisation of functionings is dependent on individual and structural conditions and contexts, because functionings require resources of different kinds to be achieved. For example, access to education requires finances (for tuition, books and other related costs), and these vary from individual to individual. But, while monetary resources are important means to functionings, they are not an end in themselves, nor do they tell us how well each person is doing. Also important are other conversion factors which comprise the personal (e.g. age, gender, language), environmental (physical environment and geographical location), and social (policies, social norms, social class) conditions of each individual's existence (Robeyns, 2005). According to Sen's (1992) example, we might be interested in a bicycle because it can take us to places in a faster way than walking. However, two individuals might not have the capability to utilise the bicycle in the same way due to their ability/inability to ride it. Thus, the bicycle might not provide the same function in enhancing mobility for two different individuals. Or if one's home is far from a university (an environmental conversion factor), and the roads are unsafe (a matter of public policy and a social conversion factor), it would not be possible to ride the bicycle safely, even if one knew how to. Thus, the capability approach accounts for interpersonal variations – how one person is able to ride and use the bicycle to get around and another is not – in the conversion of available resources into functions.

In doing so, the capability approach acknowledges human diversity (Sen, 1992) by focusing on: (i) the plurality of functionings and capabilities as important evaluative indicators - these wide dimensions of well-being include dimensions that might be of importance to some groups of people and not others; and (ii) personal and socio-environmental conversion factors that make it possible to convert resources into functionings, considering that each individual has a unique profile of conversion factors. Interpersonal variations in conversion factors can then occur due to different personal and socio-environmental factors intersecting (Robeyns, 2005). Social arrangements will influence capabilities; thus, in this study, the location of Orange Farm influences the social and economic activities that take place in the area which, in turn, affect young people's aspirations, opportunities and the extent of their agency in deciding on their futures and their freedom to bring about their goals (Sen, 1992). The question of 'who decides' (Okkolin, 2013) will be crucially determined by a wide capability set and plural functionings. Disadvantage would be signalled by the lack or absence of choices and the lack of freedoms to live a life a young person has reason to value. It would also be signalled by insecure functionings, for example, finishing school today would not guarantee secure income in the future unless other functionings were also in place.

At this point, we might define 'disadvantage' as a state 'when one's functionings are or become insecure' (Wolff & De-Shalit, 2007: 72), and a 'lack of genuine opportunities to secure functionings' (Wolff & De-Shalit, 2007: 84). Both aspects are shaped by conversion factors, and both have an impact on agency pathways and possibilities.

The capability approach has been further advanced by Martha Nussbaum (2000, 2011). She proposed a list¹ of what she identifies as the core central capabilities which are important public policy entitlements that all humans should have in order to be and to do well. More recently (2011), she has made clear that human dignity is foundational to her approach. Though Nussbaum's and Sen's views are closely related, Sen (1999) disputes the idea of endorsing one fixed list of capabilities, stating that communities should draft their own lists through an inclusive deliberation process. But, regardless of these differences, the essence of the approach is its focus on the development of individual well-being, understood as the formation of a wide capability set from which to choose plural functionings, as an agent.

We found the ideas helpful for our study in a number of ways. Firstly, functionings and capabilities are properties of individuals, meaning that each person is – ethically – taken into account in normative judgements about well-being (Robeyns, 2005). Thus, statistics which show that increasing numbers of black South Africans are accessing HE, while important, do not tell us about the lives of individuals who make up the statistics. By also taking into account social and environmental conversion factors that shape each person's life chances, we are able to account for societal influences such as communities and cultural influences on aspirations. The concept of 'conversion' recognises that converting a bundle of resources will differ from person to person. For instance, a black female from a poor and marginalised community will need more resources to access HE than one from an affluent home. Secondly, the approach deliberately seeks input from poor and disadvantaged populations in order to generate contextualised data which reflect individuals' capabilities, interpretations of freedom and the values they ascribe to their lives (Srinivasan, 1994). Lastly, due to its recognition of interpersonal and intercultural variations, and focus on freedoms and agency, we can look underneath choices at the real opportunities and challenges young people face in accessing HE, the capabilities and functionings that might enable them to have real choices, and the social arrangements needed to support their decision making. In this way, the capability approach can provide the 'informational basis of justice' (Sen, 1999) for policies that enhance the capacity of young people to determine, pursue and achieve their aspirations.

From the interviews with the young people, it was evident that each had their valued functionings and capabilities.

Table 1: Summary of the young participants' demographic profiles

<i>Participants (Pseudonyms)</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Origin</i>	<i>Years living in orphanage</i>
John	Male	18	Mpumalanga	5
Themba	Male	19	Eastern Cape	5
Ruth	Female	27	Zimbabwe	4
Antony	Male	18	Lesotho	5
Thabo	Male	15	Mozambique	5
Tshepo	Male	13	Gauteng	5
Thuli	Female	15	Gauteng	3
Abie	Female	17	Gauteng	2

We do not wish to draw up a list (although this could be done, it is not our purposes here), but rather to choose some of the functionings evident in the data to indicate what young people valued being able to be and to do. These functionings (as proxies for capabilities as potentials) that were identified as being necessary or present are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Affiliation – showing concern for others, being respected and, in turn, respecting others (see Nussbaum, 2000) – was indicated to be important. Some of the young people were concerned for their peers at school who smoked nyaope because it affected their school performance. Thabo noted that he wanted to be a policeman '[s]o that I can arrest thieves and people who smoke nyaope. They shouldn't smoke nyaope. Nyaope kills'. Most of the participants stated that they hoped for careers both to lead a successful life and to be able to help their community, with Ruth adding that, 'I would want to be able to take care of people, show them love and show them how life is'.

Having a good job was seen as significant. Ruth explained that, 'I wanted to study as well so that I could get a job and be able to support myself and be independent'. This ability to do work of one's own choice is then a guarantee of one's freedom (Nussbaum, 2011).

Having access to information was noted as an important functioning that was crucial for young people to be able to realise their aspirations. One of the graduates interviewed explained that it was important for universities to go to schools in disadvantaged communities to tell young people about the different programmes that they could choose, arguing that sometimes young people do not have the necessary means to attend orientations that take place at the universities. In other words, those who do not have the financial resources are deprived of information.

Having the finances to realise one's own aspirations was another valued functioning which was identified. Themba commented that, 'Law is the thing that I want to do and I don't have doubts about it so it's the issue of money that will affect my studies. It will be painful because there is nowhere else where I can say I depend on right now. The orphanage is the one that I depend on'.

The functionings further suggest young people's longing for an opportunity and freedom to use their senses and reasoning to achieve their aspirations through an adequate education. However, the personal stories of the young people indicated that they have valued goals, but no or limited means to get there. They have aspirations. but 'thin' pathways (Appadurai, 2004) to work towards these.

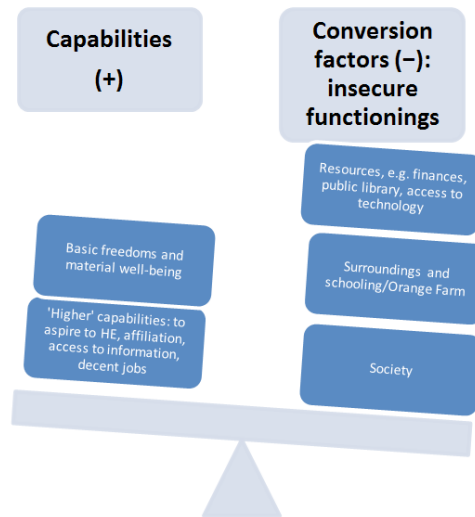


Figure 1 Capabilities and insecure functionings as indicator of disadvantage

Figure 1 presents the relationship between capabilities and disadvantage. It illustrates how the process of converting basic and 'higher' capabilities into accessing HE is dependent on various conversion factors (economic, social and personal) influencing individual agency and aspirations for HE. Access to HE should lead to achieved functioning, whereas a lack of access could lead to the deprivation of individual well-being (depending on what other choices are on offer) and what the person values being and doing. Achieved functionings allow individuals to live a life that they have reason to value, as well as to be and do what they value which, in turn, leads to more social justice and more advantage.

Our framework asks that we evaluate social justice in the space of capabilities – who gets to develop valued capabilities and functionings and who does not – and this is supported or constrained by social arrangements and public policy. But, because the capability approach is normative yet open-ended, it often has to incorporate

other vocabularies to account for conditions which are fair and just and to develop multi-dimensional accounts of justice, under the umbrella of the capability approach (Deneulin, 2014).

Vulnerability and disadvantage

In their work, Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2001) emphasise development as a process of widening individual capabilities and promoting valuable functionings, and so expanding the real freedoms that people have for a decent quality of life. It further requires that we broaden the informational base on disadvantage by investigating the deprivation of functionings and capabilities that enable and secure capabilities. In effect, what does disadvantage as insecure functionings look like? In this way, we have sought to complement and provide more sensitive dimensions of disadvantage to our broad definition by using Misztal's (2011) three forms of vulnerability – having secure capabilities would reduce vulnerability across her three dimensions. Dependence on others limits individual freedom, for example, economic dependence poses the threat of future poverty. Thus, the young people at the orphanage are economically dependent on the orphanage, yet have poor future economic prospects of their own. In this way, they are vulnerable. The unpredictability of human actions can be linked to any unforeseen influences on future well-being and functioning of individuals, resulting in the inability to tell what one will be able to do and be in the future. However, having a wide capability set ought to enable one to deal better with bad luck or reversals in the future. The vulnerability of irreversibility can be linked to capability deprivation caused by a multitude of factors such as family background and a history of poverty, which make it difficult or impossible to reverse bad circumstances. Disadvantaged youth would be more vulnerable to the three types of vulnerability, and the dimensions would be evident in their lives. These forms of vulnerability will be discussed below.

The predicament of dependence on others

Interdependence is potentially positive and desirable, as the valued capability of affiliation suggests. In the wider context of interdependency there are stages where we depend on others (Misztal, 2011; Nussbaum, 2000). But, because interdependence is a fundamental feature of the human condition, and because of the commonly approved affirmations about interdependence, we might fail to notice the issue of dependency. The young people we interviewed depend on the orphanage for the realisation of their basic capabilities such as food, accommodation, shelter and education. In addition, they all indicated that the orphanage is the only place from which they will be able to obtain financial assistance for HE. Thus, the relation of their aspirations to the resources available to them could lead to a compromised possibility of realising these aspirations. Hart (2013: 111) suggests that, in order to convert aspirations into a 'capability to realise,' positive conversion factors should be present. Thus, the inability to realise one's aspiration – noted by the young

people as a functioning that they value – might result in this type of vulnerability. It can be argued that, for a large number of people in disadvantaged communities, dependency is produced by society. This structured dependence is constructed by social policies and practices discriminating against disadvantaged people in matters crucial to their well-being, such as income, education, housing and other social needs. The manufactured dependence of most of the people in Orange Farm, created by the societal framework of institutions and rules, represents financial consequences of the past and present economic policies and social issues.

The predicament of unpredictability

The young people at the orphanage are faced with threats to their human security, particularly the issue of a home, because they may not stay at the orphanage forever. As they grow older, they will leave to make room for others needing care. As Miszta asserts (2011: 75), the inability to predict what the future holds makes us feel 'insecure and fragile'. A bleak scenario for these young people is the risk as to whether they will have a source of income, since poverty and unemployment rates are extremely high for young people. Their greatest uncertainty is that of entry into the labour market and the fragility of their social support system. These two factors of uncertainty and fragility infringe on the young people's need for security, reliability and stability (Misztal, 2011). Rising unemployment is a major cause for concern in regards to the unpredictability of future experiences of these young people. The issue of crime and drug use among high school students contributes further to the unpredictability of human actions. Such actions pose a huge threat to social relations and security of the community of Orange Farm and lead to an unpredictable social environment. Finally, the issue of high pregnancy rates among high school students and high rates of HIV/AIDS in the community also poses unpredictable future challenges.

The predicament of irreversibility

The risk associated with the past is that we cannot free ourselves from the consequences of past deeds, wounds, pains and traumas (Misztal, 2011). This is relevant for young people who have experienced not only losing their loved ones, but also finding themselves with no one within their families to care for them. The experiences of the young people interviewed depicted ordinary lives with past pains and sufferings. Misztal (2011) states that this form of vulnerability stems from painful experiences that diminish the emotional capacities of individuals, lower the possibilities of realising individual life plans, and reduce the chances of collaborative relationships with others who are seen as responsible for the experienced trauma and emotional vulnerability. Even though the orphanage guardians indicated that the young people are resilient, more than half of the young people indicated that they had no relations with either their families or extended families. One of the graduates also noted this form of vulnerability in her response:

I didn't have enough money. My uncle was paying for me and due to family problems and his wife did not approve of it, I had to drop out when he was no longer paying. Not having parents is a challenge on its own. At times you might not get the support that you need from family, like family members. Some will want to crush you, saying, 'Your mother died without a qualification, isn't it, you say you want to go to university, what do you think you will go there and do, will you pass, you are from a disadvantaged background, you have nothing, how will you pay for the university fees?' (Mpho)

Yet, in spite of the challenges identified by the young people, guardians and the graduates, a majority of the young people had high hopes for the future, for example, to become airline pilots or lawyers. Such hope is important, but it is equally crucial to provide support in order to promote potential aspirations, and for public policy and social arrangements to expand capabilities and reduce vulnerabilities. Hope without addressing dimensions of vulnerability could simply generate 'cruel optimism' (Berlant, 2006), potentially leaving young people worse off than before.

Oppression

Thus far we have a normative framework which evaluates well-being in terms of individual opportunities for secure functionings, sees education as a capability multiplier, and draws attention to dimensions of vulnerability which may compromise functionings, including being able to access HE. To further elaborate on what might stand structurally in the way of functionings to lead a decent life we draw also on Young's (1990) five faces of oppression. Less oppression would suggest less disadvantage and less vulnerability in actual lives. Moreover, the capability approach is somewhat vague on appropriate social and political arrangements and on how we might judge one context as more or less just, or on how we promote social arrangements where the achievement of young people's flourishing lives are at the centre of public policy and political arrangements. Here, Young is especially helpful. On the other hand, her focus on groups means we still need the capability approach for attention to individual lives and interpersonal comparisons.

The first face of oppression is marginalisation. It is evident from our empirical findings that young people in Orange Farm are socially and economically marginalised. Firstly, as recounted by the young people, universities do not visit their schools or community, yet they do go to others to encourage access. This lack of information leads to a lack of knowledge – which the young people identified as a necessary capability for the realisation of their aspirations. They end up being left out from accessing information, either directly from universities or through research on the internet, due to their lack of monetary means (as one graduate explained). Lastly, the fact that the young people still face similar challenges with regard to resources (conversion factors) as the graduates interviewed had faced (one of whom graduated over 15 years ago) is an indication of persistent inter-generational marginalisation. Young (1990) perceives this to be the most dangerous form of oppression as it restricts groups of people from participating actively in social life, subjecting them to

material deprivation. For example, if young people were not able to realise their HE aspirations, it would result in a lack of professional skills and they would be left out of the high-skills labour market. They would be unable to get decent, career-based employment because of low educational levels, a lack of jobs in their community, and the conditions of poverty, in this way increasing marginalisation. Finally, in addressing marginalisation, fair equality of opportunity needs to be realised. According to Brighouse (2000:112), young people should not have 'significantly better access to education simply because they have wealthy parents, or live in wealthier communities than others'. For example, in order to realise fair equality of opportunity, a young person growing up in rural South Africa as the child of a farmworker, ought to be just as likely as the child of a senior executive at an urban quality school to reach the position of the latter's parent, should she so wish.

Secondly, geographical isolation has contributed to Orange Farm's being pushed to the outer edge of society and excluded from useful participation in social and economic life. A lack of resources, with regard to both financing and information on access to HE, opens room for exploitation, Young's third face of oppression. The desperation for opportunities such as employment and access to HE might put young people at risk of exploitation by those who have resources and unscrupulous private colleges that notice the gap in accessing HE. Finally, owing to their lack of skills and minimum education, disadvantaged young people are prone to accept minimum wage jobs in future, which will expose them to further exploitation. Exploitation challenges the valued functioning of being treated as a dignified being who is worth of equal treatment to that of others.

Although young people have basic freedoms for survival, most of them have their freedom impeded when they do not have the power to communicate their thoughts and feelings, that is, to have a voice. The issue of powerlessness as Young's fourth face of oppression, can be further linked to Misztal's (2011) notion of the vulnerability of dependence on others and the predicament of irreversibility, which are additional examples in which young people have no power or control. In the case of Orange Farm, poverty is a key issue for social justice and a problem for freedom. As a result of the low levels of education, young people will end up in low status jobs; they will experience more powerlessness, both on the job and in the sphere of political participation, compared to their peers with professional jobs. Similar to exploitation, powerlessness cripples the ability to freely live with and towards others. In an oppressed society there is an absence of institutions that protect individual freedom and strengthen forms of affiliation. Finally, from the discussion on marginalisation it can be noted how the environment, as a conversion factor, is crucial in realising ones aspirations. As noted by one of the guardians, the environment plays a huge role in an individual's life, since it shapes one's abilities so that such conversion factors could be a form of, and ultimately contribute to, a cycle of powerlessness and exploitation.

Fourthly, according to Young (1990), violence is usually directed at members of a social group simply because they are members of that group; for example, it

can be in the form of exploitation or marginalisation due to poverty, vulnerability or being orphaned. Such oppression reduces and humiliates people by reducing their abilities to freely interact with their surroundings. This relates to violation of the right to human dignity in the South African Constitution, which states that everyone has inherent dignity that has to be respected and protected (Republic of South Africa, 1996). The concern by one of the guardians that the use of drugs is ruining young people and putting their lives in danger provides a dimension of a form of violence or harm, not to be taken lightly. High levels of crime also threaten physical safety. Unless young people's aspirations are fostered and HE access improved, it is a challenge to identify activities that will keep them away from violent and self-destructive behaviour and the predicament of irreversibility.

Finally, cultural imperialism involves the dominant meanings of a society that generates stereotypes and the universalisation of the dominant group's experience and culture. Dominant groups may have little or no understanding or desire to understand the lives of the disadvantaged who are blamed for their own failure to progress or do well. Or some forms of cultural capital might be more valued in accessing and succeeding in HE than others. Sen (1999) also notes that the lack of material goods associated with poverty is caused by social behaviour (influenced by culture) which is a form of rejection, exclusion and isolation by those whose culture is dominant, resulting in little realistic possibility of young people attaining their aspirations under conditions of dominance. While we have no direct evidence for this form of oppression in what our participants said, we can infer from the highly unequal social context that cultural imperialism is more rather than less likely.

Conclusion

The capability approach advocates the ethical freedom of individuals as its first principle; thus promoting individual choices and freedoms. But these freedoms vary from context to context. In a just society, access to knowledge and information is an access freedom allowing for informed decision making on the choice of programme, and the choice of HE institution, as well as the choice as to whether or not to proceed to HE. Secondly, in a just society, conversion factors would be in place for the freedom/capability to aspire, allowing for a positive force that drives agency. Therefore, deprivation of freedoms – disadvantage – can be viewed as a form of injustice, and failure to address these injustices can lead to the continuation of reduced access to HE for multiply disadvantaged young people. This means the marginalised will remain marginalised and powerless.

We have conceptualised disadvantage as evidenced by insecure functionings and unfreedoms as obstacles to having a flourishing life. A wide capability set and the agency to choose plural functionings would reduce disadvantage. But more vulnerability – dependence, unpredictability and irreversibility – would increase

disadvantage. We also suggest that social arrangements should promote flourishing lives; conversion factors are crucial in aspirations and realising functionings. These factors are shaped positively or negatively by the presence of more or less oppression: marginalisation, exploitation, violence, powerlessness and cultural imperialism in the society and among groups. To be disadvantaged is to have insecure functionings seen in vulnerabilities and compounded by oppressions.

The capability approach aligned with dimensions of vulnerability and oppression provides an expanded understanding of the challenge of HE access in our study. It helped identify the actual opportunities that are available to young people in pursuing their valued lives and improving their well-being. Misztal's dimensions enabled more specific attention to vulnerability, and incorporating Young enabled us to address young people's issues of access in the face of conditions of group oppression. The disadvantage framework that we have developed identifies, first, the influence of conversion factors on individual freedoms and agency and, secondly, the need for interventions to promote social justice, that is, reducing disadvantage and securing people's functionings. Public policy is crucial in this respect and should incorporate a comparative informational base of capabilities and functionings. The period of youth ought to be a 'capability space' to develop knowledge, skills and life plans. We propose, therefore, a capabilities-friendly social justice perspective to provide a comprehensive approach to all dimensions that influence access to HE for disadvantaged young people, indicating also the usefulness of a multi-dimensional theoretical approach to understand multiple disadvantage in young people's lives.

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