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## Identifying and Tackling Inequality: A Challenge for Social Work

### Social work and inequalities: a contested topic

The value of equality is recognized as a core principle of social work. At an international level, the statement of ethical principles describes social work as a profession which “challenges injustices” and sees principles of “social justice” as fundamental.<sup>1</sup> The idea that social work is about combating inequalities generally provokes content among policy administrators and social workers. As stated in T. H. Marshall’s (2009/1950) essay on citizenship and class, the development of citizenship in the modern capitalist state was driven by attempts to ground the “principle of the equality of citizens to set against the principle of the inequality of classes” (Marshall 2009, p. 149). For him, the guarantee of social rights included in citizenship is closely connected to the institutions of “education and the social services” (Marshall 2009, p. 148), thus to social work. At the same time – as the classical Marxist reading of social work as a part of the capitalist state apparatus argues – social work always had the function of normalizing deviance, pacifying conflicts and policing the poor. Social work would – so the argument goes – itself produce stigmatization and exclusion and contribute to the stabilization and reproduction of (unequal, class-based) social relations. Hence, social work is trapped between its function of a palliative tool for the collateral damages of capitalism and an aspiration to act as a lever for social change and transformation. This “fundamental tension between social work as a force for social regulation and as a force for social development and emancipation” (Thompson 2002, p. 711), is a common reference point for social work policy and practice. Thus, social work has an ambivalent connection to inequality envisaged both as a problem to be addressed and a condition for the reproduction of the social order.

This issue raised considerable debate within the discipline of social work over the last thirty years (Brumlik/Keckeisen 1976; Autès 2004; Ferguson 2008; Stehr 2008; Kessler 2009; Lima 2011). Recently, the capabil-

ity approach – initially developed by Amartya Sen in the context of human development studies – has become an influential frame of reference considered as a possible normative foundation for social work and social policy (Nadai 2013; Otto et al. 2010; Schrödter 2007). The orientation towards a broad conception of human freedom and individual autonomy – so the authors – would make the capability approach an ideal reference framework for social work. These authors argue that the critique of undesirable states is necessarily bound to (implicit or explicit) normative yardsticks and that accordingly, critical social work is an explicitly normative endeavor. We agree with these authors that social work can be seen as a social institution that pursues the overall goal of social justice and that has accordingly to be grounded in some normative prescriptions. While these authors in turn have provided good reasons to draw on the capability approach for grounding critical social work, our contribution aims at deciphering the different normative foundations that can be mobilized to conceptualize social inequalities.

Indeed, the concept of (in-)equality is ambivalent and can be interpreted in a great variety of ways. As Sen has pointed out, all political and moral traditions since the Enlightenment are based on a conception of “equality of *something*”. Even if equality is deeply enshrined in the discourse on modernity and intimately bound with the historical development of democracy, this “*something*” varies from an author to another one, involving different conceptions of justice. Social work policy and practice are necessarily based on (implicit and explicit) judgements about existing disparities, some of them being assessed as illegitimate and therefore requiring a corrective intervention, other ones not. We argue that the question “Equality of what?” (Sen) is of central importance for exploring the relation between social work and inequalities, as it also indicates what should be equalized and what can remain unequal. Social work interventions, then, will look differently according to the responses given to this question. What inequalities require social work intervention and why? Who decides about this and who is not involved in this identification of unacceptable inequalities? Current theoretical debates within social work and capabilities try to tackle these questions through defining a concrete and practically usable yardstick of “central capabilities” (Nussbaum 2000; Otto et al. 2010, p. 158 ff.), often resulting in drawing up different lists of those capabilities and functionings persons should be entitled to. While both Sen and Nussbaum agree that the definition of a normative yardstick should not simply be left to the subjective assessment of persons, they sig-

nificantly differ when it comes to the content of such a list. Whereas Nussbaum advocates an approach which defines broad, universal basic capabilities, Amartya Sen puts a strong focus on democratic deliberation (Bonvin/Galster 2010). The participation in democratic deliberative areas, as well as the issue of representation, is less seldom explored. Our contribution aims at describing how a capability perspective on social inequalities allows tackling the complex interaction between inequalities, non-representation and barriers to participation, which is of outmost importance in social work contexts. Sections 2 to 4 emphasize the complexity of the issue of (in-)equality and the various conceptions in this field. Sections 5 and 6 show to what extent participation can make a difference when identifying and tackling inequalities. Section 7 concludes and suggests a stimulating avenue for a genuinely participative social work.

### **Organic thought and functional inequalities: a sociological version of “fair” inequalities**

In the everyday life, people do not always associate interindividual disparities or unequal treatment with social inequality or injustice, even when especially offending for themselves. Studies in social psychology have confirmed that in specific contexts, subjects develop justifications that lead to “see justice itself in social inequality” (Duru-Bellat 2011, p. 186). For understanding why inequalities may very well be perceived as “fair” (and not only by members of the most privileged groups), such studies have provided various theories, claiming in particular that “the belief in a just world” (Dalbert 2001, p. 2) has an adaptative function and corresponds to a kind of cognitive need.

In sociology, this idea according to which substantial interindividual or intergroups disparities may be perceived as “fair” has been subject to various interpretations. Among the most famous, Weber’s (1978/1921) theory of legitimacy focuses on the need for each society to develop a set of collectively shared ideas to explain and legitimize unequal and arbitrary relations between dominant and subordinate groups. While critical traditions have mostly focused on the notion of “ideology” (Gramsci, Foucault) or “illusio” (Bourdieu), conceived as a mean for dominant groups to maintain their privileges without necessarily having to use physical violence, the functionalist paradigm insists, by contrast, on what we could call “the hypothesis of necessity”. As we will show, its theoretical foundations explain why some disparities may be collectively perceived as “fair”, “just” or even “natural”.



Following Durkheim's (1973/1893) famous model of "organic society", modern forms of social organization are intimately bound with work division. Due to mechanisms of specialization, work division generates a great heterogeneity of social positions: like the tissues of organs, interindividual collaboration performs specific functions, whose complementarity ensures society's adequate functioning and development. Drawing on this "organism metaphor" (Levine 1995), the Durkheimian society "naturally" produces diversifications of positions and, we could argue, *needs* them for guaranteeing its prosperity and sustainability. As a consequence, disparities of class income and occupational status, as well as asymmetries of power between men and women, are considered as functional inequalities inherent to the social division of work.

While incorporating its basic assumptions on social systems, the American tradition of functionalism has complexified Durkheim's conception of functional inequalities. A pervading feature in Parsons' work is that structural asymmetries are legitimated by cultural norms and supported by a vast moral ranking system:

*Social stratification is regarded here as the differential ranking of the human individuals who compose a given social system and their treatment as superior and inferior relative to one another in certain socially important respects. Our first task is to discuss why such differential ranking is considered a really fundamental phenomenon of social systems and what are the respects in which such ranking is important.* (Parsons 1940, p. 841)

For our discussion, the most relevant fact is that both Durkheim and Parsons capture human hierarchies and disparities as *consubstantial with social organization*. Envisaged as a consequence of the heterogeneity of roles and functions, differences in life conditions appear to be irremediable, all the more so that contesting voices and behaviours are subject to sanctions inflicted by powerful institutions of social control (schools, prisons, hospitals). The subtlety of the functionalist conception comes from the fact that functional inequalities are not incompatible with a principle of equality between individuals. Indeed, what we would call nowadays "equality of opportunity" represents the theoretical counterpart of functional inequalities and the precondition of social mobility, conceived as the main mean to overcome social divisions. For equality of opportunity to be effective, demands are expressed in order to secure what Durkheim calls "the equality in the external conditions of struggle" (1973, p. 371), namely

by eliminating the impact of inherited privileges and emphasizing the sole individual merit. The theoretical legacy of functionalism implies thus a strong complementarity between functional inequalities and a policy of “equality of opportunities” based on individual merit. If such equality of opportunities is guaranteed, differential outcomes are seen as legitimate.

At a theoretical level, two interrelated critics can be formulated. First, functionalist analyses remain too much captive of the concept of “integration”, which leads to an overvaluation and reification of the social order. Slavery, to take a quite extreme example, is not incompatible with functional integration. On the contrary, one can ask what is more “integrated” than a slave whose body and soul fully belong to his/her master? From a conflict-theory point of view, the integration paradigm deflects sociological attention from mechanisms of domination that produce inequalities, and thus incurs the risk of “naturalizing” structural inequalities. Second, asserting the existence of irreducible inequalities can be seen *per se* as a mode of exercising power along the cognitive dimension, which in turn sets severe limits to what can realistically be changed by political means. Indeed, accepting the functional requirement hypothesis dramatically restrains the scope of political action. We argue that such a conception of inequalities risks amounting to a fatalist notion of social work which restricts itself to the integration of beneficiaries within a pre-given and undisputable social order.

### **Identifying the multidimensional and cumulative character of inequalities**

Since these pioneer studies, the sociological literature has stressed the complexity of inequality and the various forms it can assume. These arise first and foremost from the multiple angles through which inequality can be grasped and documented. While researches focusing on categories of actors (according to their occupation, race, gender, age, religion, geographical or social origin, etc.) or inequality criteria (income level, health status, social capital, mortality, wealth, etc.) identify substantial disparities, other approaches move away from such strictly descriptive perspectives to concentrate on socialization factors (family, peers, school, work environment, etc.), thus privileging an understanding of the processes by which inequalities are created, maintained or reinforced. In a similar perspective, qualitative approaches have demonstrated the crucial role of immaterial resources like social and cultural capital. In the realm of education, famous studies have found that school not only fails to annihilate the effect of social origin but sometimes increases social class disparities. Beside

institutional or organizational factors like segmentation and diversification of schooling pathways or racial and class homogeneity of school populations, scholars insist on the significant role played by educational codes, the “habitus” of teachers or a pupil’s family school choices. These aspects, hardly measurable and often remaining invisible when using quantitative methods, may however represent strong barriers to equal opportunity in education and training, with strong effects on social mobility. “Descriptive” and “explicative” approaches to inequality are both useful and should be considered as complementary. However, some scholars have recently underlined that the former incur the risk of generating an unending collection of inequalities, which can lead to a kind of undertheorized “social botanics” (Dubet 2011, p. 4).

These few examples highlight the need for a conceptual framing of inequality in terms of cumulativeness. Basically, this includes those mechanisms which confront individuals, both at a synchronic and diachronic level, to cumulative (dis-)advantages. In this respect, the realm of health illustrates with particular strength the interplay between social origin, educational level, living and working conditions, health behaviors and health conditions (e.g. Marmot/Wilkinson 2005). For an understanding of cumulative effects, Bourdieu’s (1966) theory of interlocking capitals and “class habitus” offers a powerful general framework. Quite recently, life-course approaches have included longitudinal perspectives, paying attention to the very mechanisms by which initial differences transform over time into comparative (in-)equalities that increase the gaps between groups, in terms of lived experiences, opportunities and achievement. They have offered convincing evidence against common conceptions of misfortune or “biological programming”, highlighting not only the role of social factors in the occurrence of illness but also its differential outcome on individual trajectories according to social capital and available resources. However, as Graham (2004, p. 101) puts it, “the social factors promoting and undermining the health of individuals and populations should not be confused with the social processes underlying their unequal distribution”. Thus, another important point in relation to cumulativeness concerns the unequal distribution of particular life-events that can affect other life-spheres. For example, while unemployment is often presented as a risk factor for health (e.g. Dooley et al. 1996; Kessler et al. 1988), especially when it lasts over a certain period, its distribution (i.e. the risk to face long-term unemployment) is obviously not independent from such variables as age, gender, race or educational level. Long-term analyses of life chances, health, or self-reported

well-being demonstrate the importance of taking the “long view” when studying inequality, because past experiences contribute to shape present and future life opportunities, but also because some risks lead to immediate effects, while others take considerable time to become manifest.

The concept of *intersectionality* is also a significant contribution in this field. It finds its origin in the development of *Black feminism* during the 70s and 80s, which has criticized “mainstream” (i. e. white and middle class) feminism for insufficient consideration of race in the analysis of women’s structural and historical domination. Leading scholars on intersectionality insist on the need to challenge domination and inequality but, unlike the feminist tradition, not solely or necessarily as gendered subjects but as “women whose lives are affected by their location in multiple hierarchies” (Zinn/Dill 1996, p. 321). Drawing on Hochschild’s (1983) seminal masterwork, studies focusing on child- and eldercare in western societies have reconsidered issues of equality/inequality in relation to the ever growing delegation of carework to women from poor countries of sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Latin America (Duffy 2007; Glenn 2000; Glenn 2010; Ibos 2013; Parreñas 2000). While some women, mostly white, delegate a part of the domestic work in order to recover a job and gain autonomy vis-à-vis their husband or men in general, other women, mostly non-white, leave their young children and elder parents to care for others in occidental countries. The massive hiring of non-white “nannies” and careworkers in the context of “transnational care economies” (Ibos 2009, p. 123) thus entails obvious racial dynamics, whose meanings deeply call into question the vision of (or claim for) women’s empowerment.

By bringing back racial issues and in particular “the Black women’s standpoint” (Collins 1990, p. 16) in *Gender studies*, intersectional approaches have contributed to reconfigure the cartography of feminist research and feminist movements. Focusing on the daily life of marginalized women of color, intersectional perspectives tend to refute all models that postulate *a priori* hierarchies between gender, class or racial inequalities, arguing that women often experience all of them simultaneously, though in different ways and along various configurations. Priorities within mainstream feminism have been thus refocused via attention to existing differences between women’s positions inside what Collins (1990, p. 225) calls a “matrix of domination”. In this perspective, people of the same race will for example experience race differently depending upon their location in the class structure (as employed or unemployed, as production worker or professional manager, etc.). Despite political and meth-



odological heterodoxy, studies on intersectionality have produced insightful analyses on inter-group disparities of wealth, power and privilege by articulating various social locations (especially race, gender, class and sexual orientation) and proposing diverse ways (e.g. group-centered, process-centered, system-centered) of understanding inequalities in practice (Choo/Ferree 2010).

The cumulative, multidimensional and intersectional character of social inequality, as well as its differential impact over time, thus highlights the crucial role of what Sen calls the “informational basis of judgement in justice” (IBJJ) (Sen 1990, p. 111). Insisting on the fact that all individual or social judgements rest on a specific set of information (hence implying the corollary exclusion of all other information), the notion of IBJJ draws the attention to the selection of sources and indicators through which social problems are defined, i.e. the way inequalities are rendered visible and measurable. In other words, when identifying inequality, some dimensions are emphasized while others are discarded. This cognitive framing of the problem has in turn great influence on the solutions proposed, i.e. the way public action and social work are designed to address the problem.

### **Contesting functional inequalities: social movements and the role of social work**

Drawing on studies focusing on the notion of *disadvantage*, one can find particular insights to re-specify the question of inequality and take account of the role of social movements in winning acceptance of alternative definitions of a problem. Historically, this concept is closely bound with the development of *Disability studies*, a research program born in the wake of collective efforts conducted since the 70s by activists, scholars and organizations to improve the inclusion of disabled people and tackle the supremacy of the medical discourse in the realm of disability. The critics of disability scholars are based upon two main arguments. On a scientific (knowledge related) level, the medical paradigm fails to grasp adequately – and often merely ignores – the experiences and narratives of people concerned with disability issues (Barnes et al. 1999; Oliver 1990; Thomas 1999). On a political (normative) level, it systematically privileges curative and rehabilitative policies, which *de facto* foster segregation and dependency of physically and mentally impaired people vis-à-vis non-disabled people (Albrecht 1992; Hahn 1982). While physicians and rehab professionals used to – and to a large extent they still do it – locate the problem within the individual, thus considering disability as a personal tragedy and normalization

as the ultimate goal of public action, *Disability studies* restore the viewpoint of disabled people by formulating a “social model” emphasizing the role of the social, political and cultural context in disablement processes (Shakespeare/Watson 1997).

The notion of disadvantage appears as the cornerstone of this reconceptualization: for a similar impairment, one can result very disadvantaged, i.e. very limited in his/her functionings, while another one succeeds in living the life s/he has reason to value. In other words, the concept of disadvantage refutes any mechanical correspondence between impairment and disability, insisting on the fact that issues of disability are not just questions of organic disruptions, functional limitations, or psychological disorders, but issues of local settings, administrative categorizations, and political will. While this model raises issues of generalization insofar as it focuses on “requirements of justice and equality” (Zimmermann 2006, p. 471) for physically or mentally impaired persons, empirical studies also point out the relevance of singularity, highlighting contrasted experiences and concerns, as well as variable contexts and functionings.

One can find similar tensions between generality and singularity in Wolff and De Shalit’s book (2007). Building on a pluralist conception, these authors define disadvantage in terms of “a lack of genuine opportunities for secure functionings” (Wolff/de-Shalit 2007, p. 182). Linking issues of disadvantage and social justice, they insist particularly on the necessity to eradicate what they call “corrosive disadvantage”, i.e. “disadvantage in one functioning that leads to disadvantages in others” (Wolff/de-Shalit 2007, p. 133). By contrast, some functionings are deemed to be “fertile” and have to be encouraged, because they can favor other functionings: “doing well in one functioning... will lead to improvements in other functionings” (Wolff/de-Shalit 2007, p. 133–134). The notion of disadvantage thus emphasizes that inequality cannot be detached from the processes and contexts within which it becomes practically significant in terms of functionings and opportunity sets. For this specific reason, general knowledge supplied by social scientists, experts or administrators cannot obliterate the practical knowledge of “insiders”.

At an ethical and methodological level, this implies a particularly demanding politics of inquiry, similar to the one developed by Fraser (1987) in her politics of needs interpretation, which requires minimally a double commitment from the researchers, namely as scientists and as citizens. Consequently, disability scholars have pleaded for a strong orientation



towards “emancipatory research”, in such a way that disabled people can reap the benefits of the inquiry to improve their situation and capabilities:

*Emancipatory research is about the systematic demystification of the structures and processes which create disability, and the establishment of a workable “dialogue” between the research community and disabled people in order to facilitate the latter’s empowerment. To do this researchers must learn how to put their knowledge and skills at the disposal of disabled people.* (Barnes 1992, p. 122)

Such an approach can be suitable for questioning the symbolic framing of issues with which social work is dealing. Instead of confining disability within a medical and rehabilitative approach, a “social model” perspective based on the lived experiences of concerned persons paves the way for initiatives geared towards alleviating the structural barriers to inclusion, contesting dominant oppressive representations and promoting inalienable rights instead of public pity (Shapiro 1994). The contestation of categories and ascribed identities through such an emancipatory stance has serious implications for social work policy and practice. Indeed, when disabled people internationally claim “nothing about us without us”, they do not reclaim anything else than unconditional participation to choose for themselves, which highlights the crucial importance of a participative orientation when selecting the IBJJ of inequality or disadvantage.

### **Inequalities and participation: a complex interaction**

A perspective which includes the subject’s experience for emancipatory research and acknowledges the value of situated knowledge of “ordinary” persons, calls for a sophisticated concept of participation. This cannot be restricted to a formal voting process, in which citizens select the “elites” by which they will be governed. More ambitious definitions of democracy see it intimately linked to processes of “public deliberation”. According to John Dewey, democracy takes the form of a collective “social inquiry” where experiences are mediated through public discussion, and in which citizens engage into a collective learning process. Such a process can be defined as a method of “organized intelligence” in which conflicts of interest are brought “out into the open where their special claims can be discussed and judged in the light of more inclusive interests” (Dewey 1999, p. 56). Unlike minimalist theories of democracy, participation is not limited to formal political institutions, but applies in every arena where collec-

tive issues emerge in relation to people's experiences and concerns. Such a deliberation enhances the probability of taking into consideration hitherto neglected or invisible opinions and allowing the people concerned to participate effectively in all normative and rule-setting processes.

Undoubtedly, this is a demanding perspective, both in its pre-conditions and in its procedural requirements. Indeed, there is reason to believe that participation and inequalities (both material and symbolic) may often take the form of a vicious circle: "an excluded group can overcome its exclusion only by initiating public deliberation, precisely what exclusion makes more and more difficult." (Bohman 1996, p. 124–125). In addition, there is little guarantee that latent forms of power and coercion can be cancelled out in deliberative arrangements, especially if these are solely based on notions of "formal" equality before the law and on procedural guarantees. Many studies have shown that despite formal equality, people from different social milieus have unequal chances to make their voice count and exercise their participation rights. Exploring the access of young adults facing multiple difficulties in a French urban district, Legube and Santelli (2004) observe that despite awareness of existing social work and integration services, the "worst off" do systematically not enter into public support schemes. These authors underline selfexclusive behaviors among the most disadvantaged youngsters, whose participation risks negatively affecting their identities and self-esteem by overexposing individual deficits and marking them as "losers".

These corrosive effects of inequalities on participation are even amplified in formalized settings. As Lijphart (1997) puts it, the "systematic bias [against the participation of the most vulnerable] applies with special force to the more intensive and time-consuming forms of participation" (Lijphart 1997, p. 1), like campaigning, organizing meetings with local elected representatives, implementing sustainable forums of discussion inside the community, etc. Studies providing situated analyses of local participative settings have interpreted unequal participation in the light of inter-group relations and identity dynamics. In this perspective, resistance or refusal to participate may represent a way to contest specific power relations or manifest disagreement with decisions perceived as illegitimate. Mazeaud & Talpin (2010) interpret underprivileged pupils' boycott of participative meetings initiated by a school administration as a "face-saving" strategy, a mean to avoid confronting themselves with what they consider as an oppressive universe from which they feel outsiders. One can then easily imagine that such initiatives may potentially lead to additional stig-

matization and, conversely, symbolic gratifications for behaviors compliant with the rules of “the institutional game”. Despite the declared will to foster inclusion and promote opinion-giving, the very dynamics of participative action can paradoxically increase disparities between groups and reinforce mechanisms of social marginalization.

Consequently, the evaluation of persons’ participation must rely on more holistic descriptions to highlight the social conditions under which one can fruitfully participate or decide not to participate. Pursuing such an ambitious research program requires taking into consideration the agency of actors in relation to their various affiliations, acknowledging the richness and complexity of people’s inscriptions in the world. This appears all the more urgent when considering the fact that disadvantaged people are, in most current public debates, more *objects* of social and political concern than *self-producers* of own discourses, and that initiatives and policies remain largely under the goodwill of other persons speaking in their name.

### **Reframing social inequalities through genuine participation**

Overcoming these limitations involves a model in which the normative views of persons could be fully considered. First of all, this requires to overcome the epistemological breakdown between, let us say, the “analyst” (by extension the “implementer”, hence also the “social worker”) and the “analysed”, which denies to the latter the ability to adequately represent his/her world and produce valid statements towards his/her own situation. Following pragmatist perspectives, such an approach would leave in the shadow the “concern for the good that persons are moved by, and ignore the question of what is just, leaving that to the conscientious attention of researchers” (Boltanski/Thévenot 2000, p. 208). For their part, intersectional approaches have provided case studies on multiple-underprivileged and dominated groups that demonstrate the epistemological unsubstitutability of their expertise and standpoint concerning the power-relations they have to deal with and the concrete implications these have in their everyday life. In this perspective, they are (using Thomas Nagel’s famous expression) not formulated from the “view from nowhere” (Nagel 1986) but from a “situated somewhere”.

In our view, the capability approach paves the way towards such an encompassing and requiring definition of both inequality and participation that allows integrating more dimensions and responding to most criticisms listed above. It insists that there is a strong connection between equality of opportunities and participation: in Sen’s words, silence or

absence of participation is the worst enemy of social justice and, we may add, inequality or social injustice is certainly the main obstacle impeding effective democratic participation. In such a perspective, participation and inequality are envisaged jointly. In our case, the non-inclusion of the voices of the most deprived may result in a poor public intervention when it comes to tackling inequalities and poverty affecting them; additionally, it may result in a reductionist view (a limited IBJJ) of inequality, e.g. focusing on income or wealth and discarding other relevant dimensions, or adopting a short-term perspective privileging quick-fix remedies whereas the cumulation of inequalities would require more time, or acting on one single dimension and occulting the intersectional character of inequalities. By contrast, an effective participation of people, esp. giving to disadvantaged persons the effective capability to voice their problems and make them count in the policy-making process and in social work practices, appears as a prerequisite for such an encompassing definition of inequality, which paves the way for the development of an extensive public action in this respect. Indeed, social work should not be pursued via paternalistic ways in which other people define the beneficiaries' needs and the best ways to satisfy them, but requires the active participation of all people, whatever their social background, educational level, gender, race, age, etc. Conversely, the reduction of inequalities, be they social, economic, cultural, etc. or at the very least the neutralization of their penalizing effects, is necessary for securing equal participation to all. This entails an extensive public action against all relevant inequalities, and not simply in the field of income or education. Without such an action, the subsisting inequalities may well impede the effective participation of the most disadvantaged.

It makes then sense to conceptualise social work as a possible contributor to securing the conditions of participation. Based on the capability approach, one can extend liberal conceptions of citizenship which usually see the granting of specific citizenship rights, such as the right to vote, to stand for an office, free speech, etc. as sufficient for securing participation in democratic deliberative exercises. In a wider conception, the ability to function as a citizen requires an "effective access to the goods and relationships of civil society" (Anderson 1999, p. 318). This extends much beyond formal rights of participation and requires the removal of all material and symbolic obstacles that impede access to the public sphere, which can "function well and improve public reasons only if all citizens can effectively exercise their freedom within it" (Bohman 1996, p. 110). Thus, participation depends on a range of symbolic resources that are partly outside



people's control. Identity markers like gender, race, class, etc. may impede "a view of oneself as the legitimate source of reasons for acting" (Anderson/Honneth 2005, p. 146), affecting in turn people's sense of self-legitimacy to have a say when it comes to take part to a collective decision. Such an approach invites to consider general as well as contextual sentiments of social disrespect or misrecognition as important obstacles to participation. As a consequence the "social conditions of being accepted by others, such as the ability to appear in public without shame, and not being ascribed an outcast status" (Anderson 1999, p. 317) are equally relevant. There are also material conditions to participation, such as the "effective access to the means of sustaining one's biological existence-food, shelter, clothing, medical care and access to the basic conditions of human agency, knowledge of one's circumstances and options, the ability to deliberate" (Ibid.). The securing of a decent level of living constitutes a precondition for a person to participate in collective decision-making processes.

### **The role of social work in fostering people's capability for voice**

In order to pave the way towards such an approach to participation, we draw on Bohman's work and suggest to use the notion of "capability for voice", which designates the extent to which people are allowed to express their wishes and concerns in collective decision-making processes and make them count. As Salais (2009, p. 18) puts it, "citizen participation in collective decision-making is irreplaceable. (...) The fundamental reason for social criticism lies in the real value of the knowledge arising from social practice that citizens possess". In other words, to what extent are people able and allowed to push their views when it comes to select a specific informational basis of the inequalities and deprivations affecting them? To sum up the various features mentioned in previous sections, such "capability for voice" relies on many conditions such as:

- a) the presence of *cognitive resources* that encompass not only access to information produced by others, but also, and even more significantly, the ability to produce one's own knowledge and information about one's specific situation. For instance, when describing the living situations of persons, if only the information produced by experts or representatives of public administrations is taken into account, this may result in a reductionist picture that will, in turn, result in a reductionist conception of public action and social work. Indeed, these data and information risk being informed by their external views on which inequalities should be tackled

and how this should be done. The availability of such cognitive resources often depends on the action of third persons (e.g. social workers) that translate beneficiaries' views and perceptions in such a way to make them count;

- b) the availability of *political rights* (e.g. constitutional guarantees for participation, access to public arenas, freedom of speech, etc.). In our case, the ability to create effective indirect "voice systems" is key (again social workers may play a significant role in this respect), although this raises the issue of representation, i.e. to what extent do representatives truly represent the viewpoints of the "represented";
- c) the availability of *material and symbolic resources*, considered here as primary conversion factors of political rights into real participation. Stigma, marginalized identity, as well as material deprivation move people away from arenas of public deliberation or, at least, restrain their power to make their voice count. Drawing on this argument, one can ask the following questions: What (material and symbolic) safeguards are put into place to fight against these mechanisms? To what extent are participative initiatives supported by social workers likely to supply these missing resources? As a matter of fact, such questions inevitably bring back issues of redistribution (Fraser 1997) and recognition (Honneth 1996) in the debates.
- d) the "*readiness*" of *interlocutors* – in this case representatives of public administrations, third sector local agents, but also social workers – to listen to the concerns expressed by disadvantaged people. In a capability perspective, lip service to people's voices would go against their capability for voice. Our concern here is with the actual influence of voice and this to a large extent depends on the readiness of institutional interlocutors and society at large to take into account this voice. The "grammars" and codes used in the decision-making processes may well have very penalizing effects, if they do not recognize the reliability of different ways of self-expression.

This list is far from exhaustive, it indicates some of the dimensions to be taken into account when it comes to investigate the degree of capability for voice enjoyed by people, esp. by the most disadvantaged among them, and identify the main obstacles in this respect. It unambiguously shows that promoting the participation of persons requires, at the same time, empow-



ering persons to take their part and creating arenas where they are allowed to effectively voice their viewpoints and wishes. In this perspective, social work policy and practices can be conceived as necessary spaces for collective deliberation processes and the corollary development of alternative (and more appropriate) definitions of inequality. Instilling such a challenging vision in the heart of everyday practice would be already an impetus towards social change.

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## Annotation

- 1 See for example the official website of The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and in particular its Statement of Ethical Principles. URL: <http://ifsw.org/policies/statement-of-ethical-principles/>.