The Complexities of Adaptive Preferences in Post-compulsory Education: Insights from the Fable of The Fox and the Grapes

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The Complexities of Adaptive Preferences in Post-compulsory Education: Insights from the Fable of The Fox and the Grapes

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Abstract

Adaptive preferences are a central justification and ongoing problem for capability analyses of well-being. Orthodox interpretations of what constitutes human flourishing may lead to the misattribution of adaptive preferences and therefore downgrade the importance of human diversity in capability analyses. The complex interplay between adaptation and the multiple realizability of capabilities is addressed in the context of post-compulsory education. Care needs to be taken to distinguish between adaptations to education in general and particular forms of education. Elster’s interpretation of adaptive preferences, which he illustrates with reference to the fable of The Fox and the Grapes, is used to offer a conceptual framework that is sensitive to such distinctions. A series of hypothetical examples, located in the field of post-compulsory education, show how freedom of choice can be limited by downgrading and upgrading the inaccessible. It is argued that approaches to human well-being (such as the capability approach) that recognize the validity of different realizations of the good life must also be sensitive to different realizations of adaptive preferences. Although the argument is illustrated with reference to the field of post-compulsory education, its ethical concern makes it pertinent to other aspects of human flourishing.

Key words: Adaptive preferences, Choice, Sour grapes, Post-compulsory education, Higher education

Introduction

The adaptive preference problem is a central justification for capability-based assessments of human well-being. The unequal distribution of resources in unjust social structures can distort the individual’s perceptions of her quality of life, blurring the distinction between what she prefers and what she has been made to prefer (Teschl and Comim, 2005). The capability approach seeks to address this by considering what she values and has reason to value (Sen, 1992, 1999). However, judgements on the value of particular choices are often made by and within hierarchical social structures and
this can generate further difficulties when orthodox interpretations of what constitutes human flourishing, and the optimal choices needed to achieve it, are articulated by powerful groups. A failure to recognize that there may be different means to the same end of well-being can potentially overshadow the respect for human diversity that is at the heart of the capability approach (Alkire, 2002; Bonvin and Farvaque, 2005; Comim, 2008; Clark, 2009) through the misattribution of adaptive preferences. This can be seen in the field of education, which is typically underwritten by the often unspoken belief that more is better. More and higher levels of education can increase well-being but the unquestioned presumption that more is better can also distort capability analyses (Watts, 2009, 2011; Watts and Bridges, 2006) and lead to misunderstandings of the adaptive preference problem. Preference deformation can reify the status quo as individuals acquiesce in the continuation of inequalities that delimit their freedoms but the misattribution of adaptive preferences can deny the importance of freedom and choice, including the freedom to make what may be considered sub-optimal choices. These complexities are explored here through the example of post-compulsory education.

The counterfactual nature of the capability approach enables it to address the problem of adaptive preferences formed in adversity, but it is more difficult to identify adaptations made under less deprived circumstances. This difficulty may arise when assessing well-being relating to a range of capabilities ‘which involve a good deal of variation amongst the people of even the richer countries, and which raise questions of assessment and valuation’ (Sen, 1985, pp. 46–47). It is illustrated here with reference to higher education as an example of what is habitually acknowledged as an optimal choice in the field of post-compulsory education. There is a global trend to encourage wider participation in higher education, making it more accessible to members of historically under-represented and disadvantaged social groups; and capability assessments may address progression to, through and/or beyond higher education (Walker, 2006; Watts, 2007). However, my current concern is to use it as an example of the difference between adaptations to a general capability (education) and a specific realization of that capability that is typically invested with value (higher education). The argument pursues an analysis of the sour grapes phenomenon (Elster, 1983) that illustrates the complexity of adaptive preferences in non-extreme circumstances and so allows room for more nuanced interpretations that are faithful to the concept of multiple realizability (Nussbaum, 2000). Using higher education as an example enables the argument to sidestep concerns about sub-threshold adaptations and also highlights: the non-trivial distinction between encouraging realistic and unrealistic aspirations; and the epistemological differences between counterfactuals (what a person would do if her circumstances were different) and counteridenticals (what she would do if she was a different person).

Elster’s (1983) interpretation of the adaptive preference problem as the ‘sour grapes phenomenon’ is compared with Sen’s and Nussbaum’s concern with adaptation as resignation to extreme deprivation. As this fails
to provide an appropriately subtle framework for addressing the lack of freedoms caused by preference changes in non-extreme circumstances—Sen by not addressing them, Nussbaum by pragmatically dismissing them—I then return to a more complex analysis of the concept of sour grapes. Higher education and other forms of post-compulsory education run throughout the paper to illustrate the extent to which different forms of adaptive preference constrain individual freedoms. This argument is then taken further by suggesting that normative discourses promoting higher education over other forms of post-compulsory education may generate other (albeit counterintuitive) forms of adaptation through the fostering of unrealistic aspirations—what may be termed the ‘sweet grapes phenomenon’. The argument is that such unrealistic aspirations also limit choice by upgrading inaccessible options to the detriment of those options that are accessible. This dissonance reduction is the hallmark of the adaptive preferences problem.

**Adaptation as the Sour Grapes Phenomenon**

Elster (1983) identifies adaptive preference formation as one specific type of preference deformation in his seminal work *Sour Grapes*. For Elster, adaptive preference formation is a non-conscious psychological process that causes the individual to change her preferences without being aware of it. He uses the fable of *The Fox and the Grapes* to highlight the self-deception and irrationality of adaptive preferences and to distinguish them from other forms of preference change such as character planning and adaptations induced by self-abnegation. In the fable, the fox is almost dying of hunger and sees a bunch of grapes high up on a vine but is frustrated by its inability to reach them. However, there are two different versions of the fable that lead to two significantly different resolutions (although Elster explains—rather unhelpfully—that the differences can be difficult to discern in reality). In what is sometimes referred to as the English version, the fox concludes that the grapes must be sour and so are not really desirable, and the fable concludes with the moral that it is easy to despise what you cannot get. In La Fontaine’s French version, however, it retroactively rationalizes its preference change by misperceiving the vermillion (i.e. the red and therefore ripe and sweet) grapes as green and therefore sour and so only fit for churls (*faits pour des goujats*). Both versions of the fable indicate the downgrading of inaccessible options but Elster uses the French version as an example of rationalization rather than adaptive preference formation, and so I will address the English version here before considering the French in more detail below.

The English version of the fable illustrates the key characteristics of Elster’s adaptive preferences. Preferences require a ranking of alternatives and so the fox must have had an original preference for the grapes (whether it particularly likes grapes or whether they are merely a source of sustenance does not matter), which it reverses because of external circumstances. Having the grapes is not a feasible option because they are out of reach and there is, therefore, a ‘state of tension between what [it] can do
and what [it] might like to do’ (Elster, 1983, p. 117). The fox resolves the frustration this generates by a process of dissonance reduction: it retroactively revises its original preference (persuading itself that it prefers not having the grapes to having them) by constructing a logical but false justification: ‘I like sweet grapes; these grapes are sour; therefore I do not want them’. As there is neither empirical evidence nor an epistemologically justifiable belief that the grapes are sour, and therefore not worth having anyway, the adaptation of preferences is self-deceptive and irrational. This particular form of preference change is also reversible (Teschl and Comim, 2005, p. 233), unlike that generated by genuine learning: if the grapes were to come within reach, the fox would revert to its original preference for having them over not having them.

Translating this fable into the higher education setting may seem fairly straightforward: because it is out of reach, the prospective student concludes that a university degree is not worth having. However, there are significant differences between the interpretation of adaptive preferences offered by Elster and by Sen and Nussbaum. Elster’s condition of autonomy for preferences (whereby reversals of preferences should not occur if the individual’s feasibility set changes) is pertinent to the problem of adaptive preferences within the capability approach but: his interpretation requires a change of preference initiated by a change in the individual’s feasibility set, and so excludes adaptation as self-abnegation; it does not rule out trivial adaptations; but it does exclude preference change through rational argument.

Elster, Sen and Nussbaum all critique utilitarian approaches to human well-being because of its failure to deal with the problem of adaptive preferences. However, Sen and Nussbaum also critique Elster’s sour grapes interpretation. Nussbaum, for example, argues that it ‘is rather narrowly focused’ and suggests that his ‘somewhat romantic preference for striving and yearning makes him suspicious of any desire that is formed through adjustment to reality’ (2000, pp. 136 and 137). Moreover, his interpretation of adaptive preferences excludes the reality of lifelong habituation to reduced circumstances—that is, to the self-abnegation that is illustrated by ‘the usual underdogs in stratified societies’ who ‘come to terms with their deprivation because of the sheer necessity of survival’ (Sen, 1999, pp. 62–63).

Elster’s formulation requires that the individual’s change of preferences be caused by a change in her feasibility set: the original preference (in the sour grapes example, the preference for being well-nourished) changes because of some external circumstance (the source of nourishment being out of reach). If the original preference of the fox had been to be undernourished (because, perhaps, that is the condition to which it had been habituated) then the inaccessibility of the grapes would not have caused it any frustration and there would have been no preference change, according to Elster’s definition. It should be remembered that he is concerned with such preference deformations elsewhere in Sour Grapes but he does not consider them to be adaptive preferences. However, these are the conditions under which Sen’s ‘broken unemployed’ or ‘tamed housewife’ (1985, pp. 12–16)
exist. Sen’s concern is that they have adapted their preferences—that is, they have become resigned to their reduced circumstances—because a better life is out of their reach. Elster’s formulation would require them to have previously been unbroken or untamed; and, assuming their initial preferences were to be unbroken and untamed, external changes—the breaking and the taming—caused them to change their preferences. This is more than a clever grammatical point because it marks the distinction between those adapting to a life that becomes reduced and those born into a life already reduced. Nussbaum (2000) cites Rabindranath Tagore’s (2008) ‘The Wife’s Letter’ to illustrate resignation to extreme deprivation but there is nothing to suggest that she had ever experienced anything other than that extreme deprivation. The wife could see that others had a better life but she did not desire it for herself because it had never been within her reach. As it had always been out of her reach, there were no tamed and untamed alternatives to rank and prefer, and so, according to Elster’s interpretation, no preferences to adapt. This is so whether one considers her resignation as an example of Elster’s adaptive preferences (i.e. the sour grapes of the English fox) or rationalization (the French fox’s means of reducing its cognitive dissonance).

Adaptation as Self-abnegation

If the key characteristic of Elster’s adaptive preference formation is its reversibility (Teschl and Comim, 2005, p. 233), those born into reduced circumstances have no change of preferences to reverse. Here, where there may well be ignorance of alternative existences, people may become ‘implicit accomplices to injustices that are reified through traditions, norms and social rules’ (Watts, 2007, p. 25), but Elster’s concept of adaptive preference formation falls short of acknowledging this: as the individual has not changed her preferences, there can be no adaptive preference formation and therefore her stated preference has validity even though she may be living in circumstances of extreme deprivation. His conception of adaptive preferences, then, concerns a narrower range of circumstances under which people become resigned to their deprivation than is to be found in the capability approach. Even though it is close to starvation, the fox’s adaptation that causes it to reject the grapes is considerably different from the adaptation of the ‘thoroughly deprived person, leading a very reduced life’ (inter alia Sen, 1992, p. 55) who may reinterpret her malnourishment as a preferred withdrawal from the world in order to reduce the dissonance between what she can do and what she may like to do.

Whereas Elster’s concern is with what the individual did prefer, Sen and Nussbaum are concerned with what she would prefer. Although they interpret adaptive preferences differently, they both consider them as self-abnegation—that is, as resignation to a reduced life. Sen considers adaptive preference to be negative products of adversity because they limit individual freedoms. However, it must be remembered that he typically deals only with extreme examples of deprivation. Nussbaum’s interpretation is more nuanced
and she argues that adapting to one’s circumstances can be beneficial, especially if this dissuades people from pursuing unrealistic aspirations (2000, p. 138). Yet, she also indicates that what may seem impossible may only be improbable. These differences notwithstanding, both Sen and Nussbaum are concerned with the constraints adaptive preferences place upon individual freedoms and, in order to represent the true circumstances of those such as the ‘thoroughly deprived person, leading a very reduced life’ who accepts hardship with ‘non-grumbling resignation’ and makes ‘great efforts to take pleasure in small mercies and to cut down personal desires to modest—“realistic”—proportions’ (Sen, 1992, p. 55), both address not simply what the individual values but what she has reason to value. Again, they have different interpretations of what individuals have reason to value: Sen advocates a democratic approach to the relative weightings of capabilities, whereas Nussbaum provides a normative list of central human functioning capabilities. Either way, the capability approach transcends Elster’s concern with individual preferences by focusing on what the individual has reason to value. This formulation seems to have two implications: that there should be individual justification for whatever is held to be of value (i.e. there is an informed valuation); and that there is a good reason to value it because it is, in Nussbaum’s phrase, constitutive of the truly human life (see also Sen, 2002, pp. 300–324 and 583–658).

What the individual has reason to value provides an index of what the individual would do if, in Sen’s (1992, pp. 64–69) words, she controlled the levers of power. The counterfactual nature of the capability approach therefore allows well-being assessments to consider what the individual would do if her circumstances were different. Would, for example, the ‘usual underdog’ or ‘thoroughly deprived person’ choose to accept her hardship with non-grumbling resignation if she could do something about it? Similarly, returning to the example of higher education, would the working-class student consider going to university if she could negotiate the barriers impeding her progress? Given the benefits that a higher education supposedly confers—and the benefits of non-participation notwithstanding (Watts and Bridges, 2006)—it seems reasonable to assume that she would consider this (and it should be remembered that, from a capability perspective, the concern here is with her freedom rather than any decision to go to university). However, the circumstances that prevent the working-class student progressing to higher education typically inform her value-system (Archer et al., 2003; Moore, 2004). Educational choices are typically framed by the tensions generated between structure and agency (Boudon, 1974, 1981; Foucault, 1979, 1980; Giddens, 1986, 2009) and this internalization of external constraints is what Bourdieu refers to as the habitus, the perceptual filter that delimits the individual’s understanding of what it is reasonable for her to expect (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p. 226). This may well cause her to adapt her preferences as far as higher education is concerned, but it does not follow that she adapts her preferences in terms of what she has reason to value (Watts, 2009, 2011; Watts and Bridges, 2006).
When considering what the individual would do if she controlled the levers of power, then it is important to ensure that counterfactual questions are not usurped by counteridentical questions (Watts, 2009, 2011). It is one thing to consider the counterfactual of what the working-class student would do if her circumstances were different. As respect for human diversity is central to the capability approach, however, it is another thing altogether to ask the counteridentical question of what she would do if she was a different person—for example, a middle-class student for whom progression to higher education is the norm. There is a significant distinction between the adaptive preference formations generating aversions to higher education and to any education at all; and negotiating the counteridentical problem demands a more subtle framework than that needed to address the simple question of whether individuals from the middle classes are more advantaged when accessing higher education (the answer to which is a resounding ‘Yes, of course they are!’). Such a framework also allows clearer insight into the adaptation of preferences in circumstances that are less extreme than those typically depicted in the capability literature whilst also allowing for the orthodoxy of the educational field to be problematized. To sketch out such a framework, I want now to return to La Fontaine’s French fox.

Sour Grapes Revisited

Elster makes a distinction between adaptive preferences and the rationalization of adaptive perceptions. However, he notes that they can sometimes hardly be distinguished from each other and then turns to the French version of the fable to rather unhelpfully illustrate this. La Fontaine’s fox misperceives the grapes and wrongly believes them to be green (either sour or unripe) rather than vermillion (red, sweet and ripe). Here, the grapes are still out of reach but the fox retroactively rationalizes its preferences by persuading itself that it no longer wants them because they are sour (and, in this context of social stratification in higher education, adds to itself that they are therefore only fit for churls). In both versions, the fox deceives itself but for Elster there is a significant difference between its misformation of preferences (the grapes are not worth having anyway) in the English version and its misperception of the situation (they are green and therefore must be sour) in the French (1983, p. 123). However, Zimmerman (2003) argues that there are not two but three non-trivial versions of the fox (and I want to add one more here) that illustrate the irrationality and reversibility of the preference changes. That is, whereas Elster seems to suggest that the French fox does not adapt its preferences as he understands the process, the preference deformation it exhibits does articulate with the more general sense used in the capability literature.

The first two of Zimmerman’s foxes change their factual beliefs about the properties of the grapes (i.e. they misperceive the external situation). What distinguishes them is that the first one changes its beliefs about the particular bunch of grapes whereas the second changes its beliefs about grapes in
general. The third fox, however, changes its taste for sweet fruit to a taste for sour.

The first fox, then, retains its general preference for vermillion grapes as well as its general belief that green grapes are sour. As they are out of reach, and to justify the false belief that they are sour, it misperceives them as green. That is, there is a motivated perceptual error; and the misperception leads to the fox forming an aversion to this particular bunch of grapes because it believes them to be sour. The second fox arrives at the same conclusion from a different set of premises. This fox retains its preference for sweet fruit and correctly perceives that these particular grapes are vermillion. However, because they are out of reach, and to justify the false belief that they are sour, it forms the motivated false general belief that all vermillion grapes are sour. It therefore forms an aversion to these particular grapes as an instance of vermillion grapes in general because it believes them all to be sour.

These two variations are marked by a change of belief about the properties of the grapes. In the third variation, the fox correctly perceives that they are vermillion and also retains the general belief that vermillion grapes are sweet. This fox, however, changes its tastes rather than its beliefs: unable to reach them, it changes its general preference for sweet edibles into a general preference for sour ones. I believe there should, however, be another fox here: one that makes a more refined distinction by changing its general preference for sweet grapes to a general preference for sour grapes whilst retaining the more general preference for sweet edibles. The significance of the distinction between the general preferences of these two foxes (i.e. between a changed general preference for sour edibles and for sour grapes) can, perhaps, be more clearly seen if we leave the foxes behind and translate the fable into a higher education setting.

In this translation (which may be helped by the acknowledgement that the fable is a fabulist metaphor): the sweet edibles represent post-compulsory education; the sweet grapes represent higher education (i.e. a particular form of post-compulsory education typically imbued with greater value); the bunch of vermillion grapes represents a particular higher education degree (which, in keeping with the fable, we can call Vulpine Psychology); and the green grapes represent a non-degree level award (let us call it Viniculture) and so they also therefore represent not going to university. Somewhat less confusingly, the fox represents the prospective student who: has an original general preference for higher education (which implies a general preference for post-compulsory education) as she believes that it is a better means to the end she desires than not going to university; and is contemplating a degree in Vulpine Psychology, which she believes to be out of her reach because she comes from a social background historically under-represented in higher education.

This student equivalent of Zimmerman’s first fox: forms a false belief about Vulpine Psychology (e.g. by misperceiving that the coursework will be too hard for her); but maintains the general belief that higher education
is worthwhile; and maintains her general preference for higher education; so reducing the dissonance by concluding that studying Vulpine Psychology is not worth her while and that she therefore does not want to do it. Thus, although she irrationally rejects and forms an aversion to the particular degree, she maintains a general preference for higher education; and so, whilst her freedom to pursue a degree in Vulpine Psychology is restricted by adaptation, she has the freedom to consider other degree courses as well as the other forms of post-compulsory education represented here by the non-degree course in Viniculture.

The second student, however, concludes that Vulpine Psychology is not worthwhile because she: correctly perceives that it is a form of higher education; but forms the general belief that higher education is not worthwhile (perhaps believing it is too hard for her); whilst maintaining her original preference for post-compulsory education; and so reaches the dissonance reducing conclusion that Vulpine Psychology is not worthwhile because it is a form of higher education. Here, she forms the aversion to higher education rather than to the particular degree. Unlike the first student, she not only rejects Vulpine Psychology but all higher education; and so, although she remains free to choose other forms of post-compulsory education, she closes down more options than the first student.

In changing its tastes, Zimmerman’s final fox (below) exhibits an excessively crude means of reducing the dissonance ‘between what [she] can and what [she] might like to do’ (Elster, 1983, p. 117) and so it is necessary to consider my more refined fox-like student here. She also changes her tastes. She believes the degree in Vulpine Psychology is out of her reach but she does not form the misperception that it is too hard for her. Instead, she changes her taste—but in a more selective manner than in Zimmerman’s example. She correctly identifies Vulpine Psychology as a form of higher education; she correctly identifies higher education as a form of post-compulsory education; and she retains the general belief that post-compulsory education (and therefore higher education) is worthwhile; but because she believes Vulpine Psychology is out of her reach she changes her general preference for post-compulsory education to a general preference for a form of post-compulsory education that excludes higher education. That is, she rules out Vulpine Psychology and the higher education it signifies but at least maintains the possibility of engaging with the course in Viniculture or some other form of post-compulsory education.

The second and third students reject higher education from different premises, and those premises have significant implications for subsequent alternatives. The second student rejects higher education because she believes it is too hard for her but this leaves room for her to work to bring it within reach, especially if the misperception that it is too hard is corrected. There is nothing to suggest an aversion to that work—just the misperception that it is too hard. However, the third student changes her preferences for something that is judged to be within reach, implying that she would not make the effort even if the misperception was corrected. Instead of
downgrading inaccessible options, she upgrades accessible options, valorizing her limited choice and excluding the possibility of what Elster terms character planning (below).

The fourth student also changes her taste but in a more extreme manner, and changes her general preference for post-compulsory education to a general preference for no post-compulsory education at all. This prospective student may recognize the value of both specific courses (Vulpine Psychology and Viniculture) and higher education in particular, and post-compulsory education in general. However, she rules out all of them for herself because she prefers not doing any of them.

Following through these variations indicates how and why adaptations can be more refined; and this is especially important here when seeking to distinguish between adaptations to one form of post-compulsory education, such as higher education, and adaptations to all forms of education. These significant variations in preference changes signal increasing constraints on the freedom of the foxes to realize their original preference for sweet grapes and of the students to realize their original preference for higher education. Before leaving the foxes, however, it should be acknowledged that, for all this fabulist discussion of their preferences for vermillion or green grapes, they are red–green colour blind and therefore incapable of distinguishing between the two. That is, they do not have the (physical) commodities needed to make an informed choice.

**Character Planning and Unrealistic Aspirations**

However, the acquisition of the commodities needed to enhance the freedom that is intrinsically important in ‘making us free to choose something we may or may not actually choose’ (Sen, 1999, p. 292) can be aspired to, and Elster addresses this through the concept of character planning. This, however, may lead to the sort of unrealistic aspirations against which Nussbaum cautions.

Elster’s argument presumes that the grapes really are sweet and, when transferred to the global trend to widen participation, the equivalent presumption is that higher education is worth pursuing because it is the better option. This presumption, however, rests upon the orthodoxy of the field of post-compulsory education and the logic that certain forms of education (specifically here higher education) have greater value (as measured out, for example, in Bourdieu’s cultural capital) than others. However, there are three circumstances under which the metaphoric grapes may be considered both green and relevant to the educational argument.

The first, which articulates with the metaphor of growth, is that the green grapes have yet to ripen. Here, the student needs nurturing for the development of the aptitude and attitude that will allow her to successfully engage with higher education; and this can be related to Elster’s concept of character planning. Like adaptive preference formation, character planning also ‘begins with a state of tension between what you can do and what you might like to do’ (Elster, 1983, p. 117). However, whereas the sour grapes phenomenon is
initiated by the individual’s frustration at her external circumstances and leads to her inaccessible options being unintentionally downgraded, character planning leads to the upgrading of accessible options. If adaptive preference formation locks the individual into her resignation, the intentional transformation generated by deliberate character planning can liberate her from oppressive aspects of her own identity and give her greater freedom to navigate her circumstances. As it is a conscious process requiring reflection and self-knowledge, it can be seen, in Sen’s phrase, as putting reason before identity (Sen, 2006).

However, this still presumes the greater value of the vermillion grapes and the orthodoxy of the educational field. The second circumstance, then, is that the metaphoric green grapes are as good as the vermillion grapes (a circumstance that any wine connoisseur will appreciate) and it is only social sanction that attributes the different values (Watts and Bridges, 2006; Watts, 2009).

The final circumstance, and the one I want to focus on here, is that they are green and sour but mistaken for vermillion and sweet grapes. In the educational context, such a misperception may be generated by a habituated worldview whereby the middle-class student may prefer the non-degree course in Viniculture but her adaptation to her position in the social field leads her to choose Vulpine Psychology. However, although her preferred option is ruled out, her middle-class status is likely to equip her to pursue the adapted preference. The greater concern is for those students who may be encouraged to pursue unrealistic aspirations; and, given the prevailing orthodoxy of the field, this requires some context. The normative discourse of politicians (eagerly parroted by the market-hungry universities) continues to promote higher education as the index of high aspirations by emphasizing its benefits to all and sundry. The argument is premised, at least in part, on the belief that the benefits that were once available to the few can be seized by the many even though there is little, if any, evidence to support this (Wolf, 2002). Not all students have the aptitude and the attitude for successful higher education studies (Bridges, 2006). If unreasonably encouraged to pursue higher education, they may fall into the gap that distinguishes ‘formal freedom and real ability, the latter but not the former implying that a desire to perform the action in question will in fact be realized’ (Elster, 1983, p. 126). Yet those who are least equipped to make use of higher education may be encouraged to the point of deception to pursue it (Atkins, 2010). Constrained by the normative discourse of the widening participation agenda, they may strive for something that is out of reach—the equivalent, perhaps, of Nussbaum’s thwarted desire to become an opera singer (2000, p. 138). However, persisting in that unrealistic desire may be detrimental to them, in that they may be frustrated by their failure to grasp that which has been held out to them and by the relative downgrading of that which may be of greater benefit to them—specifically here, other forms of post-compulsory education and/or employment (Watts and Bridges, 2006; Watts, 2009, 2011).
Human diversity is at the heart of the capability approach. If capability is concerned with the substantive freedoms the individual has to choose to lead a life she values and has reason to value, it is necessary to question the extent to which the freedoms of Sen’s ‘usual underdogs’ may be restricted by hierarchical power structures that presume socially constructed values (Bonvin and Farvaque, 2005; Watts, 2009, 2011), and this necessarily includes the normative discourse of widening participation. Within this context of higher education, there is certainly injustice in the demands that the individual shape her identity merely to meet the desires of policy-makers (Archer et al., 2003; Watts, 2006; Watts and Bridges, 2006). Care must therefore be taken to distinguish between multiple realizability and preference adaptation. Nussbaum’s injunction to be wary of unrealistic aspirations adds a further level of complexity. In the example running through this paper, the prospective student may be coerced into believing that higher education is not only desirable in general but desirable for her even though she may not have the necessary resources to properly capitalize upon it. Under such circumstances, she may adapt her preferences so that, for example, she comes to prefer the degree in Vulpine Psychology (falsely believing it to be a better means of achieving her ends) to the non-degree course in Viniculture.

Sour Grapes Reversed

Elster uses La Fontaine’s French fox (which misperceives the out-of-reach vermillion grapes as green) to illustrate preference deformation through the post hoc rationalization of adaptive perceptions. But what if the grapes really are green? That is, what if the student originally preferred the non-degree course represented by Viniculture but, caught up in the normative discourse of the widening participation agenda, was made to prefer the higher education represented here by Vulpine Psychology? As suggested above, the logic of the field may generate such a circumstance with the middle-class student adapting her initial preference for a non-degree course. However, the presumption of Elster’s use of the sour grapes fable is that the vermillion grapes are better because they are sweet and edible. This is not unreasonable but it becomes problematic when translated into the educational context where the presumption articulates with the logic of the field that attributes greater value to higher education than to other forms of post-compulsory education because it has greater cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, 1996; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Elster’s argument (and my extrapolation of it) is based on the premise that the grapes are vermillion but are misperceived as green by the fox in order to rationalize the preference deformation. If, however, they really are green but misperceived as vermillion, the inaccessible may be upgraded instead of downgraded.

In this scenario, to justify the false belief that the grapes are within reach, the first pair of foxes misperceive them as red. Again, there are motivated perceptual errors that lead them to form an affinity for these bunches of green grapes (the first fox for the bunch in particular, the second for the bunch as
an instance of all green grapes) which they now believe to be sweet. The second set of foxes change their tastes from a preference for sour edibles to sweet edibles (the first fox for the grapes in particular, the second for all sweet edibles). Translating this into the illustrative educational context, the fox-like students come to believe that more and more forms of post-compulsory education are within their reach. This may well seem a good thing (and one that articulates with Elster’s character planning) but a closer scrutiny of these processes reveals a number of problems, not the least of which is the irrational belief that higher education is within reach and thus becomes the sort of unrealistic aspiration Nussbaum warns against (2000, pp. 136–138).

The first student, then: forms a false belief about Vulpine Psychology (e.g. by misperceiving that the coursework will be easy); but maintains the general belief that higher education is out of reach (because, say, it is too hard); and maintains her general preference for non-higher education; and so reduces the dissonance by concluding that studying Vulpine Psychology is worth her while and that she therefore does want to do it. Thus, although she irrationally forms an affinity to the particular degree, she maintains a general rejection of higher education and so her upward adaptation—and the relative downgrading of non-degree forms of post-compulsory education—is limited to the one degree course only.

The second student, however, concludes that Vulpine Psychology is worthwhile because she: correctly perceives that it is a form of higher education; and forms the general belief that higher education is worthwhile (because, for example, she thinks that it is easy); and so adapts her original preference from post-compulsory education excluding higher education to a preference for higher education; and so reaches the dissonance-reducing conclusion that Vulpine Psychology is worthwhile because it is a form of higher education. Here, she forms the affinity to higher education rather than to the particular degree. Unlike the first student, she not only irrationally prefers Vulpine Psychology but all higher education. So, although she does not rule out non-degree forms of post-compulsory education, their relative downgrading is more comprehensive.

In contrast to these two students, the third student changes her tastes in a selective manner. She believes the degree in Vulpine Psychology is within her reach by changing her taste from that of preferring post-compulsory education excluding higher education to higher education in the form of the one degree course. She correctly identifies Vulpine Psychology as a form of higher education; she correctly identifies higher education as a form of post-compulsory education; and she retains the general belief that post-compulsory education (and therefore higher education) is worthwhile; but, because she believes Vulpine Psychology is within her reach, she changes her general preference for post-compulsory education that excludes higher education to a general preference for a form of post-compulsory education focused on the one degree course. That is, she rules in Vulpine Psychology. Like the second student, she comprehensively downgrades non-degree
forms of post-compulsory education without fully rejecting them but she does so from a different premise that exaggerates the downgrading.

The fourth student also changes her taste but in a more extreme manner. She changes her general preference for post-compulsory education that excludes higher education to a general preference for higher education that excludes other forms of post-compulsory education. In so doing, she not only downgrades non-degree forms of post-compulsory education but rejects them altogether.

As with the earlier variations on the sour grapes phenomenon, these variations on what could be termed the sweet grapes phenomenon indicate the different ways in which the cognitive dissonance between what the individual wants and is able to do is reduced to cover over the gap between ‘formal freedom and real ability’ (Elster, 1983, p. 126). Importantly, they also highlight the sometimes subtle distinctions between adaptations to different forms of post-compulsory education. However, whereas the sour grapes variations signal the progressive constraints upon the freedoms of the students to realize their original preferences for higher education, these sweet grapes variations reference the ‘social discipline’ (Sen, 1992, p. 149) of the normative discourse on widening participation and its contribution to the development of unrealistic aspirations. This analysis would not be problematic if these were instances of Elster’s character planning (nor, perhaps, would it be problematic if it did not challenge the orthodox logic of the social field). If, on the one hand, these students reflected on their circumstances and determined to work towards their higher education, then their well-being would be increased. If, on the other, they reflected on their circumstances and concluded that higher education really was out of reach, then at least they would not be acting under a false belief: they may have fewer substantive freedoms to choose higher education (because they recognize that it is out of reach) but their agency, framed by their decisive preferences (Pettit, 2001), would not be compromised. These putative unrealistic aspirations, however, are reversible and the students may, for example, come to learn that their aspirations are unrealistic as they approach closer to the field of higher education.

Conclusion

There is considerable articulation between the interpretations of adaptive preferences put forward by Elster, Sen and Nussbaum, but Elster does not recognize rationalization as an adaptive preference (although he does recognize it as a different type of preference deformation). However, as suggested here, this rationalization (which he illustrates with La Fontaine’s French fox) offers a framework that highlights the need to distinguish between levels of adaptation. More specifically, it can be used to account for adaptive preferences whilst also respecting the multiple realizability of the capability approach. That is illustrated here in the context of the widening participation agenda by addressing adaptations to post-compulsory education in general, and to higher
education in particular. This is especially important given the respect for human diversity at the heart of the capability approach as it allows a conceptual release of the tensions between aspirations and adaptation that may otherwise force capability assessments into the orthodoxy of the field of education, thus derogating the realization of capabilities that do not articulate with the logic of the field (in short, those realizations of educational capabilities that generate less cultural capital).

The sour grapes phenomenon involves a downgrading of the inaccessible in order to reduce the dissonance between what the individual desires and what she can have, but its reversal (which can be thought of as the sweet grapes phenomenon) can reduce the dissonance between realistic and unrealistic aspirations. It is, however, important to recognize the distinction between the character planning that enables the individual to strive for and attain that which is initially out of reach (here, for example, studying in preparation for higher education) and aspiring to that which is unrealistic (by assuming, for example, that the benefits of higher education can be obtained without that necessary preparation). This heterodox engagement with the adaptive preference problem challenges the normative discourse that tends to promulgate higher education as universally beneficial but it is consonant with the capability approach that recognizes the importance of freely-made choices. Adaptive preferences deny choice and mask that denial. Similarly, unrealistic aspirations, if encouraged, can deny choice. The example here is that normative discourses may encourage the pursuit of higher education: when it is not an appropriate means of securing benefit; and at the expense of more appropriate forms of education. This is not to defend the underinvestment in cultural capital legitimated by habituation to impoverished circumstances (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 126), but to focus on the importance of recognizing and acknowledging human diversity and the multiple realizability of the capability approach.

Upgrading the inaccessible may seem counterintuitive but that is an index to the power of the normative discourse. The capability approach is concerned with well-being as choice, and a reduction in choice therefore becomes a reduction in well-being. Capability assessments must concentrate on ‘the real freedoms actually enjoyed, taking note of all the barriers—including those from “social discipline”’ (Sen, 1992, p. 149; original emphasis). It is argued here that those barriers must incorporate the individual’s potential to get caught up in the normative discourse of the widening participation agenda. Whether because of aptitude or attitude, she may not be able to engage with higher education in a meaningful way (Bridges, 2006; Watts and Bridges, 2006; Watts, 2009, 2011) and to encourage her to do so is to encourage her to persist in what Nussbaum describes as ‘unrealistic aspirations’ (2000, p. 138). The relative downgrading of that which is accessible in favour of upgrading that which is inaccessible reduces the individual’s choice and therefore her well-being. If the upgrading of that which is inaccessible reduces the dissonance between what she wants and is able to achieve, it
must, from a capability perspective, be seen as an adaptive preference—no matter how counterintuitive that interpretation.

Capability analyses are complicated by the framework’s insistence on the multiple realizability of capabilities. Sociological frameworks such as Bourdieusian analyses of the production and reproduction of capital-based inequalities—as well as Boudon’s positional theory, Foucault’s disciplining of knowledge, and Giddens’ structuration—provide a relatively easy means of identifying adaptations because of their hierarchical structures that establish easily countable rankings (here, following Bourdieu, that higher education is preferable to other forms of post-compulsory education because it incorporates more cultural capital). However, although the capability approach is and should be guided by such frameworks, its concern with diversity means that it cannot rush to such easy interpretations. Two points need to be borne in mind when incorporating adaptive preferences into capability-based assessments of human well-being. The first is that rejecting particular forms of education is significantly different from rejecting education altogether. The second is that the concern with respect for human diversity means that, following Nussbaum, preferences may be deformed by unrealistic aspirations and that focusing on such aspirations can reduce choice and therefore well-being as it is understood in the capability approach. As argued here, an unrealistic aspiration to pursue higher education, framed by the normative discourse of the widening participation agenda, may generate adaptations. A framework such as the capability approach that recognizes and emphasizes the validity of human diversity must be sensitive to the multiple realizability of capabilities. It must inevitably follow, then, that it must also be sensitive to the multiple realizability of adaptive preferences.

References


Complexities of Adaptive Preferences in Post-compulsory Education


