

Capability Approach to Skill: Bridging the Disciplinary Differentials over Conceptualizing Skill

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Abstract

The 21st-century social science calls for trans-disciplinary perspectives. In an attempt to address this call, this paper offers a trans-disciplinary take on the concept of skill. The author delves into understanding the concept skill and explores its conceptualization across disciplines economics, sociology, and psychology. In so doing, literature review over this concept suggested that there currently exists disciplinary differentials over the concerned idea. Further, the author offers the capability approach as an alternative to understand and define skill. While skill gets explained from the economic, sociological, and psychological fields, the persistent disciplinary differentials make the conception of skill fuzzy. The author argues that the capability approach potentially bridges the disciplinary segmentation over the concept skill.

Keywords: *capability, skill, capability approach, disciplinary differentials*

Introduction

The 21st-century world of work is highly technocratic. In this setting, acquiring skills and their required associated skill levels is complex. The world of work is transforming, and this change has implications for the industry, academicians, practitioners, and policymakers. This changing world of work calls for generating new skill sets, skill actuation methods and techniques, a better place of skills learning, and skill measures. Keeping this new development of the world of work and the need of new skills generation aside, this paper primarily

focuses on the concept of skill per se. In so doing, it explores answers to the questions on how skills have been understood? How is it being understood? And how can it be understood as per the need of the trans-disciplinary nature of 21st-century social science.

The concept of skill is explained and understood through the lens of several different disciplines. These disciplines are namely economics, sociology, and psychology. The meanings of skill vary across these disciplinary domains. Hence,

a view from an economist, a sociologist, and a psychologist over the concept of skill differs. The same concept means different things to each of them within each of their domain. Green (2011) explains this as disciplinary segmentation. He states that such segmentation persists because interdisciplinary dialogue and discussion among stakeholders over skill is rare, and hence, there is a need to chalk out similarities and differences across disciplines and resolve them. Another argument that supports the need to resolve these differences over conceptualization of skills across different disciplines is the nature of definitions, and meanings of skills which are contesting, conflicting, and confusing. Each defines skill narrowly within their disciplines to the extent that there exists no consensus among social scientists, academia, and policymakers. This persistent disciplinary differentials over the concept of skill potentially pave the path for revisiting the existing conceptualization of skill across them and calls for work upon the conceptual differences for better clarity by revising definition that bears trans-disciplinary characteristics such that social scientist could agree relatively more than the existing domain-specific conceptualization of skill.

Disciplinary Differentials over Skill: Economics Lens

The concept of “skill” in economics is explained by both neoclassical and heterodox economics (Green, 2011). For the neoclassical, skill is one of the

composite elements of human capital. Skill is understood to be acquired, valued, and utilized at the individual level, and human capital is valued as an individual’s potential current and future earning discounted to the present earning (Becker, 1964; Mincer, 1974). Further, education and training are undertaken for skill acquisition and are considered to be investments at the individual level. The neoclassical envisions skills from an individualist perspective, where an individual makes rational choices over the type of skills to acquire and value and decides upon how much to invest. Skills in this regards are only productive if it generates earning. This understanding of skill by the neoclassical is clear, consistent, and simple too. However, this conception of skill is silent about the content and composition of skill per se. The neoclassical are blamed to be biased with regards to understanding skills as just potential earning, and the claim that they make on productive skill to generate earning is not always the case. This claims that skill can be understood through economic dimensions and such claim lacks understanding on the composite elements of skill in concern and misses understanding on the potentiality of social aspects that can contribute to understanding skills. Heterodox economists are no different regarding investments in education and training to skill enhancements like the neoclassical, but in contrast, heterodoxy takes into consideration the value of education and training against the price it takes. Heterodoxy also doubts the differences between individual employee’s

skill to that of skills demanded in the labor market or skills required in the concerned jobs. Further, heterodox economics does not limit to just rational decision-maker but also suggests that the context for learning and uncertainty while making a rational decision be taken into consideration by the rational decision-maker (Tversky & Kahneman (1986); Green (2011)). Heterodoxy finally differs from neoclassical by giving more space for other theories and conditions while examining and evaluating skills Lave & Wenger (1991). To sum-up, the conceptualization of the notion of skill within the realm of economics is fuzzy. This fuzziness is an attribute of different assumptions and viewpoints taken by neoclassical economics against heterodox economics. These intra-disciplinary differentials will continue to persist, while the following sections continue to view skills from other disciplinary lenses.

Sociological Lens

The discipline of sociology departs from the economics conception over skills because it looks at the process of production rather than just product, its production, and efficiency. The sociological definition of 'skill' assumes that it is a bundle of activities that constitutes tasks. According to Attewell (1990), 'skill' is exercised by carrying out concerning activity or task, and higher skill is about performing a more complex activity. The sociological definition of 'skill' is biased on understanding skill as a job skill, and here the concerned activities associated with a

particular 'skill' are job-related. 'Job skill' according to the sociological viewpoint is primarily determined by social class (Green, 2011), where individuals can acquire the ability to perform tasks. In cases where individuals need to perform more complex tasks, in such a case more learning is required, and the ability to perform complex tasks gives a greater reward.

In this context, the sociological conceptualization of skill is limited to understanding 'skill' in terms of the measurability of complex activity embedded within it. Few questions that arise here are Does understanding or measuring complex activity explain all that we need to know about skill? If so, how do we measure this substance of skill? 'Skill' can be broadly considered soft skills or cognitive skills that are difficult to measure and need proxies. On one hand, sociology looks at the skill as a measure, while, on the other, it considers skill as socially constructed. This differential within the sociological understanding of skill is a noted contribution towards understanding skill. The social construction theory suggests that 'skill' can be of higher value or lesser value. In this regard, 'skill' of high value returns higher wages, and skills with less value return low wages. Further, 'skill' can be accounted for gender discrimination too. It gives a new flavor to understand skill in subjective terms.

Though understanding of the concept of skill offered by sociology shed light on the production process, activities, tasks, and

complexities as compared to the economic definition of productive 'skill' and return of skills, the objective and subjective divide over the understanding of 'skill' through the sociological approach still does not resolve the fuzziness in the conception of skill. The concept of skill in the domain of sociology is still contesting, conflicting, and confusing.

Psychological Lens

Yet another disciple that offers an extended understanding of skill is psychology. It departs from economics and sociology on the grounds that it takes into consideration the process of learning towards understanding skill. This lens looks at complexity of activities involved in the concerned skill and how the skill can be learned. According to Green (2011) the psychological understanding over skill is that it's the ability of an individual to successfully perform range of activities, and measure the performance. He assumes that to perform a range of activities associated with a skill, an individual need to have required certain standards needed to perform the set of tasks. This standard is called "competence". The idea of competence has significantly contributed towards understanding and measurement of skills (Green & Keese, 2011, Green, 2011). Many countries have designed competence framework as a reference to evaluate qualifications. However, conceptual differences over skill across countries have resulted into dissonance in skill standards (Clarke & Winch, 2006).

Capability Approach: An Alternative Lens

The capability approach to skill connects to human development through its focus on the ability of human beings to live the life they reason to value (Sen, 1997) by exercising the skill they possess or by learning new skills. This is established through reasoning processes for valuing the kind of skill they prefer. The possessed skill or the newly acquired skill potentially can further help enhance people's choices, which in turn, give them alternative life-choices by their preferred lifestyle. The main assumption of this approach is that people in their societies differ across several dimensions such as personal characteristics, socioeconomic background, and economic circumstances. These dimensions define who people are and what they can do and be. This implies that each individual can do or be things she/he has reason to value. In this context, the approach calls for government and partners in the education sector to focus on policies for skill generation that directly connect to the state of being of diverse people, and, which skill they want to do and be skillful for which they have reason to value.

The capability approach to education for human development is concerned with available opportunities for individual advances. This approach differs from human capital and a rights-based approach in a way that it calls for the expansion of the human capabilities of each member of the society. This approach puts more emphasis on

human life as compared to other approaches to education. Likewise, while it primarily concentrates around human life, it puts less stress on income, consumption, expenditure, and even productivity, which are necessary but not sufficient (Sen, 2009). The approach stands at the core founding principles of human well-being and human freedom. Such lens to skill potentially focuses more on the opportunities that people can have to live the kind of life they value and have reason to value. Unlike other approaches to skill, which looks at instrumental roles of skill being just economic, the capability approach includes the non-economic and constitutive role of skill too. Moreover, scholars namely Sen and Nussbaum argue for the capability approach and suggest that it potentially bridges the gaps left out by other approaches to education and can imply skills too. They claim that this approach to education is bottom-up, which, aims to address issues of equality, distributive justice, well-being, and freedom of each member of society. The approach is also free of being culturally and traditionally rooted like the case of criticisms of human capital and the human rights-based approach.

The economics and sociological approach to skill disconnect from human development as it has less connection to the ‘human-ness’ that capability offers (Sen, 2006). This implies that there should not be a problem if an individual is well skilled, as well as be well educated, and have a healthy life. Similarly, another approach seems to be distinct from the capability approach on

the ground of skills being identified as just analytical concept in terms of its importance as measures and measurement, but skills should also be a normative concept, such that, skill is the means and ends to better living. The capability lens assumes that skill enhancement improves the ‘being’ and ‘doing’ of a person who engages in taking training and that the trained person can implement the learned skills to improve his/her well-being. In this regard, this approach helps understand how TVET can directly be linked with human development. In this regard, TVET is also a tool for human development, albeit it is primarily, still concerned with productivity, employment, and better incomes.

Capabilities and Skills: Intrinsic and Instrumental Values of Skill

Sen (1999) defines development as the process of expanding the substantive freedom that people enjoy. To operationalize the given concept, Sen uses another concept of human capability. Human capability relates to the ability of human beings to lead lives they have reason to value and to enhance the substantive choices they have. Sen suggests that it is the expansion of the capabilities of people to control their own lives that connects with development and not income growth. The major assumption in this regard is that human capability expansion improves the quality of people’s lives. Sen argues that at the center of development processes is freedom. He supports this argument for two reasons. First, human development as

freedom is an objective of development because it has intrinsic importance of human freedoms, and secondly, human development as freedom has instrumental effectiveness of freedoms of different kinds, which can directly contribute to economic progress.

Hence, the value of freedom such as good education, training, skills should not only be compared with the income-generating capacity of the same. Sen's notion of freedom comprises fundamental things like basic education, enjoying the freedom of employment choice, receiving or possessing skills of choice, and each opportunity to live long and healthy lives, being well-housed and even clothed. All these are developmental virtues in themselves. Besides their intrinsic value, or, Heckman (2016) '*internal capabilities, skills embodies in agents*', better education, skills, health, opportunity, employment are instrumental ('*external capabilities, promote the expression of skills*') in promoting economic growth and these further help expand other human freedoms.

If people expand their social, economic, and human capital, this coincides with increasing potential levels of one's human development. Having skills, being skilled, and engaged in some vocation, having or being educated, and engaging in or receiving pieces of training adds to one's well-being. Acquiring new skills can potentially motivate youngsters around the world to discover new horizons. It is this intrinsic nature of skill possession that counts as an integral part

of human development. The instrumental part of possessing skill is using it, having its knowledge, and transferring it through training. These offer more opportunities in terms of better work, occupation, and gainful employment and income. It is assumed that acquiring such capabilities often strongly motivates people to gain more out of learning skills and get involved in it.

This perspective in its rights is an agent-oriented approach. Here, stress is laid on the capacity and responsibility of individuals to shape their destiny. In this context, three general mechanisms can be identified that offer understanding of linkages among capability, freedom, and skill. First, the development of a certain minimum level is needed for the establishment and flourishing of the skills that people can acquire. Here, people involved need to possess certain freedoms and have access to skill training to gain knowledge, skills of their choice. This adds to the intrinsic value of the very freedom of being skilled and trained for gainful employment and productive working (Sen, 1999). The second acquiring skill has the potential to affect the well-being of the individual, her/his family, communities, and nation. Skill translates to gainful employment and productive work capacity which can further contribute to the improvement of living standards. This can be attributed to access to better housing, sanitation, food, clothing, and health, where, gains from employment and income can be put to use. Third, besides the intrinsic and direct well-being, enhancing

the potential of skill acquisition, the freedom enhancing potentials of skill may also have an instrumental value in increasing people's capabilities to improve their livelihoods and in contributing to general economic growth and social change.

Conclusions

This paper argues that there exists a dissonance over disciplinary understanding of the concept skill. While this disciplinary segmentation cannot be completely ignored nor erased, the possibility towards understanding skill from trans-disciplinary perspective still exists. The author attempts to offer capability approach to skill in the light of understanding skill in a trans-disciplinary way. The approach conceptualizes skills as both analytical and normative by nature. Any skills have intrinsic value and an instrumental value, which are two dimensions need to understand skill from capability perspective. Intrinsic value of skill refers to interpersonal skills, and, instrumental value of skills refers to the outputs skill generates while performing associated set of tasks or exercising skills. The intrinsic value of skills connects well with social and psychosocial dimension of skill namely complexity and competence, while, instrumental value connects well with productivity and efficiency of economic dimensions. In this regards skill viewed from capability approach potentially brings varied conceptualization over skill to a central and more agreeable point, and hence, provides a trans-disciplinary

platform for skill evaluation. This paper does not attempt to erase the already existing disciplinary differentials over conception of skills. It revisits the already existing disciplinary segmentation over definition and understanding of skills, and, attempts to offers a new approach to the conception of skills that potentially fits the need of 21st century trans-disciplinary social science.

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