

The Capabilities Approach and Child Protection in the UK

**Anna Gupta
Brigid Featherstone, Sue White**

Royal Holloway, University of London

The Capabilities Approach originally developed by Amartya Sen and then further explored by Martha Nussbaum provides a theoretical framework concerning wellbeing, human development and social justice. The Capabilities Approach has been used widely in development work in the Global South, and is attracting increasing attention in social policy and research in Europe. It has been suggested that the Capabilities Approach can provide an alternative conceptual framework for social work that challenges the dominance of neoliberal ideology in ways consistent with the promotion of human rights and social justice; however this has not been explored to any significant extent. Sen has described poverty as a capability deprivator, and there is a high degree of consensus in the child welfare literature that poverty and social deprivation makes parenting a greater challenge and can impair the health and development of children. The Coalition Government's cuts in welfare benefits and family support services, alongside more punitive responses towards families experiencing poverty by the child protection and family court systems, have led to questioning of the current settlement between the state and family life in the UK.

In this paper we address the conference theme of Social diversity: Promoting human rights and the role of research. We draw upon a review of the literature and case examples from the authors' research and practice to critique child protection policy and practice using the Capabilities Approach. A particular focus is on neglect and poverty within the current context of 'austerity' Britain. Possibilities for using the Capabilities Approach to promote more humane social work practice that works with families to develop strengths, minimise adversities and promote the welfare of children are also presented.

Key words: Capabilities Approach, Child Protection, Poverty, Parenting