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Stuck in Poverty? Stability and Change of Capabilities and Functionings

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ABSTRACT

Dynamic poverty research based on quantitative panel studies of income and deprivation showed that for many people, poverty is not a permanent state but rather occurs in phases across the life course. The capability approach (CA) does not reduce poverty to low income but conceptualises it as the lack of genuine opportunities to live a life according to one's own values. While there is a broad debate about measuring capabilities, a dynamic view is largely missing in the CA, both in theoretical debates and empirical research. With data from a qualitative panel study on 40 income-poor households in Switzerland, this paper analyses how capabilities and functionings change over time. We propose a model of the personal and social factors underlying the dynamics of capabilities with a focus on the role of aspirations and on feedback loops between fertile or corrosive functionings and capability sets. Empirically, two thirds of the study households experienced stability or stagnation of capabilities and functionings, whereas significant capability enhancement, as well as the decline of capabilities during the two-year study period, was rarer but could be discerned retrospectively by means of the biographical interview accounts.

KEYWORDS

Capability approach;
dynamic poverty research;
fertile functionings; corrosive
functionings; aspirations;
feedback loops

Introduction

Much of poverty measurement consists of cross-sectional data on poverty rates and risks in given populations at given points in time. This static view was overturned by dynamic approaches that were developed in the 1960s in the US and adopted in Europe from the late 1980s (Dewilde 2003). Research based on large-scale longitudinal household panels (Bane and Ellwood 1986; Jarvis and

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Jenkins 1997; Layte and Whelan 2002) or the Bremen Longitudinal Study on Social Assistance (Leisering and Leibfried 1999) changed the picture of poverty profoundly. It demonstrated that over time, many more people are affected by poverty than cross-sectional data suggest, while many of them experience limited phases of economic hardship rather than permanent poverty. Dynamic research identified different patterns of poverty spells and trajectories with varying degrees of fluctuation versus stability and upwards or downwards mobility (Gazareth et al. 2018; Smith and Middleton 2007). Yet, some scholars emphasise that income mobility does not lift people far above the poverty line, that having experienced poverty once increases the risk of becoming poor again, and the longer a poverty phase lasts, the less likely one escapes poverty permanently (Smith and Middleton 2007).

Methodologically, dynamic poverty research is mostly based on long-term quantitative panel studies of large representative samples. Due to data availability, poverty is mainly measured in terms of *income*, sometimes supplemented by *deprivation indicators* regarding health, employment, housing conditions, possession of durable consumer goods, and the like. Moving in and out of poverty is thus conceptualised as crossing a predefined income or deprivation threshold, or as a change in the probability of being deprived. Qualitative longitudinal research that captures not only income trajectories but also biographical meanings or how people cope with economic hardship over time is rare (e.g. Buhr 1995; Millar and Ridge 2020).

For the *capability approach* (CA), low income is not the only dimension of poverty. Rather, poverty is conceptualised as the lack of capabilities, i.e. the real freedom of achieving beings and doings (functionings) one values. Material resources may be prerequisites for many functionings but achieving functionings depends on configurations of resources and a variety of personal and social conversion factors that enable genuine choices (Robeyns 2017). The complexity of such configurations underlying genuine choices suggests the potentially dynamic nature of capabilities and functionings. Yet, as Leßmann (2024) notes, the issue of dynamics is undertheorised in the CA literature. A dynamic view is also missing in the empirical CA-research on poverty. Quantitative studies that aim at measuring capabilities are static snapshots (e.g. Burchardt and Vizard 2011), and there is very little qualitative dynamic CA-research (but see Conradie 2013). However, there are at least three reasons why it is important to include change into capability analysis. As Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) argue, being exposed to greater risks than others is a pervasive feature of disadvantage; hence, the lives of the poor are more prone to instability. Second, some capabilities and functionings can be “corrosive” or “fertile” (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007): they can induce negative or positive developments in the future. Finally, the capacities to make meaningful choices are themselves dynamic: they grow through constant use and erode if people do not have the opportunity to exercise them (Leßmann 2011).

This paper analyses the dynamics of poverty from the perspective of the capability approach with data from a *qualitative panel study of 40 income-poor households* in Switzerland. With this approach, it attempts to fill in a double gap, namely the lack of qualitative research on poverty dynamics in general (Smith and Middleton 2007) and dynamic research from a CA perspective. The study conceptualised people's coping with material poverty as active welfare production out of a mix of resources from the market, state, civil society, family, and social networks with the aim of realising a life they value (Nadai, Böhme, and Gonon 2025; Nadai, Gonon, and Böhme 2025). In addition to longitudinal data from the two-year study period, the research yields rich retrospective data on people's trajectories and strategies in different life spheres (education, employment, family, health, welfare benefits receipt), shaping their material situation, capabilities and functionings. In the following, we examine how capabilities and functionings of poor households change over time. What are the conditions and mechanisms that induce or inhibit such changes? What does the CA perspective reveal, compared to a purely income-based approach to the dynamics of poverty?

In the next section, we elaborate our theoretical framework and present a dynamic model of poverty as capability deprivation. Section 3 gives an overview of the methods, design and data of the study underlying this paper. In Section 4, we present our empirical findings about three patterns of change in capabilities, which we term stability, capability enhancement and decline of capabilities. The findings will be discussed in Section 5.

A Dynamic Perspective on Capabilities and Functionings

The capability approach (CA) defines poverty as “capability deprivation” (Sen 2009, 254) and regards material resources as an insufficient indicator of poverty since people have different personal and social conversion factors, enabling them to convert resources into valued states of being and doing. Prioritising capabilities over functionings, the CA insists on the freedom to choose between different ways of life. Poverty means, on the one hand, having limited options available and, on the other hand, being restricted in one's ability to choose (Leßmann 2011, 443). However, several authors have claimed that the view of a person choosing from a given set of options at one point in time is oversimplified, as it does not account for how a situation of choice arises and evolves (Leßmann 2011, 453), nor how current choices impact future capabilities, and how a person's ability to choose develops over time (Barthelheimer, Büttner, and Schmidt 2011, 153).

While the lack of a dynamic perspective is recognised as a major shortcoming (Leßmann 2024; Zimmermann 2024), several proposals have been put forward that integrate temporality into the CA. In a recent contribution, Agbeyegbe (2026) has specified recursive mechanisms on the societal level

operating between achieved functionings and institutions that feed back into capability sets. On the individual level, discussions about the distinction between capabilities and functionings point to the inherently dynamic relationship between the two. Wolff and De-Shalit (2013, 162) argue that it is not always clear when something is a capability and when it is a functioning, and they suggest that many functionings are, in fact, capabilities for other functionings. Wolff and De-Shalit (2007; 2013) introduce the notion of “fertile functioning”, which is a functioning that contains further capabilities. Barthelheimer, Büttner, and Schmidt (2011) make a similar argument with regard to “cumulative functionings” that develop in a self-referential process. Equally important in the context of poverty is the term “corrosive disadvantage”, by which Wolff and De-Shalit denote a functioning that is likely to impact negatively on the capability set, such as homelessness or debt.

Secondly, Wolff and De-Shalit (2007) point out that an achieved functioning level can be involuntarily insecure and thereby introduce the idea of temporal (in)stability. People living in poverty are usually exposed to greater risks regarding their functionings than more privileged groups. People thus differ with respect to their freedom to *sustain* a functioning. Moreover, Wolff and De-Shalit argue that both realising a capability and sustaining a functioning require multiple actions and that actions always imply costs and risks. Especially for people living in poverty, costs and risks may be considerable and have the effect of making other functionings insecure. For example, an unskilled worker with back problems may find a job in the cleaning industry. But sustaining the functioning of this job will aggravate the back pain and jeopardise the functioning of health.

Furthermore, the discussions about preference formation and, recently, the “capability to aspire” introduce temporality into the CA by analysing how preferences or aspirations underpinning choices are shaped and interact with capabilities and functionings over time (Baillergeau 2024). While preferences refer to present options, aspirations are essentially future-oriented (Hart 2016). Postulating a “feedback loop” (Zimmermann 2024), it is assumed that capability sets and achieved functionings *in the past* shape preferences and aspirations (Conradie 2013), leading people to choose in specific ways from their capability sets *in the present*, which impacts their (*future*) levels of functioning. Capability assessments must therefore take note of previous capability sets, in which agency goals were formed (Burchardt 2009).

We propose a dynamic model of poverty as capability deprivation based on Robeyns (2017, 83) visualisation of the relationship between core concepts of the CA – resources, conversion factors, capability set, choice, achieved functionings, structural constraints, and biographical experiences. The bold arrows indicate the recursive mechanisms that we have added to Robeyns’ model. Moreover, we added different types of resources since not only the quantity but also the quality of resources matters (Figure 1).

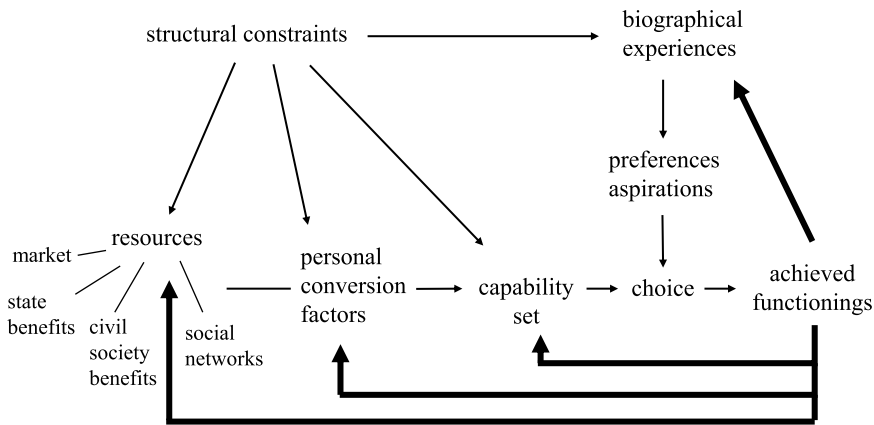


Figure 1. Dynamics of capabilities.

Different types of resources, such as market income, state or civil society benefits and help from the social network, *differ regarding their stability*, which is our first dynamic element. For instance, a labour market income in the low-wage sector is presumably less stable than an old-age pension. Second, building on the idea of fertile and corrosive functionings, we assume that there are several *recursive mechanisms between achieved functionings and the capability set*, either *directly* or *mediated by changes in conversion factors and resources* resulting from newly achieved functionings. The functioning of speaking the local language, for instance, opens several opportunities for immigrants, e.g. improved job opportunities, which may improve their material situation. Moreover, it may be a relevant conversion factor (e.g. if the command of the local language is a requirement for naturalisation). The third dynamic element in our model pertains to the formation of preferences and aspirations, which are shaped by biographical experiences and are the basis for selecting among capabilities. We assume that there is a “*feedback loop*” (Zimmermann 2024) between (past) capability sets and functionings and (future) capability sets, *mediated by biographical experiences and aspirations*.

As an underspecified, radically multidimensional framework (Robeyns 2017), the CA poses serious challenges for empirical research. First, it must be decided whether the focus is on capabilities, functionings, or both and how these can be observed (Hick and Burchardt 2016). Second, the relevant capabilities or functionings for the study must be chosen and operationalised. Quantitative studies typically use lists of capabilities that are either inspired by Nussbaum’s basic capabilities (Peruzzi 2014) or created in deliberative processes based on participatory methods (Burchardt and Vizard 2011).

In this paper, we start our analysis with functionings since they are observable. In a second step, we assess whether these functionings result from genuine choices given specific structural constraints and conversion factors and hence

point to capabilities. Furthermore, we take up Wolff and De-Shalit's (2013, 164) suggestion that the important aspect of capabilities is "less about the freedom whether or not to achieve a functioning, but rather about being able to take control over the way in which the functioning is achieved". We infer lacking capabilities from statements about desired states of being and doing that could not be realised (yet) and about feelings of being in control. In addition, we focus on the stability of achieved functionings over time. We select those capabilities and functionings that are deemed important by our study participants and supplement them with the analysis of established material and social deprivation indicators (FSO 2025). These represent "basic functionings" in the sense that they are considered "necessary for survival and to avoid or escape poverty" (Robeyns 2017, 94). Moreover, we focus on functionings needed to "have an acceptable family and social life" and "goods that provide 'status functionings', the lack of which marks one out as poor" (Wolff 2020, 33).

Methods and Data

This article is based on a qualitative longitudinal study conducted in Switzerland between 2022 and 2025, which examined the welfare production and capabilities of income-poor households. The sample comprises 40 households that were interviewed three times over a period of two years. Following the principles of Grounded Theory Methodology, we adopted an iterative-cyclical approach in which sampling, data collection, and data analysis are interwoven throughout the various phases of fieldwork. Data analysis made use of Grounded Theory coding techniques (see Appendix).

For sampling purposes, we used eligibility limits for two main minimum income schemes of the Swiss social security system as poverty lines: the social assistance eligibility limit for working-age households; for retired or disabled persons, the limits for supplemental benefits to old-age and disability pensions. Supplemental benefits (SB) are a non-contributory special benefit scheme; they are calculated with considerably higher basic costs of living, plus higher limits for rents than for social assistance. SB recipients are thus above the strict social assistance poverty line; they are situated around the 60% at-risk-of-poverty threshold. Within these income groups, we sampled four configurations regarding potential access to various welfare resources: working poor, single parents, old-age pensioners, and migrants. These four categories are subject to different structural constraints (e.g. limited access to public benefits qua residence status or limited access to paid work because of care obligations) and risks. At the time of the first interview, the sample comprised 15 working poor households, 13 single parents, 13 old-age or disability pensioners, and 18 immigrants.¹ Participants were recruited through various channels, mainly via civil society organisations addressing poor and non-poor people. Participants received written and oral information about the

project aims and procedures, and signed an informed consent and data protection form.

Data collection involved three waves of semi-structured interviews conducted over two years, complemented by financial diaries (Morduch and Schneider 2017). The first interviews focused on the strategies of accessing welfare resources and the biographic accounts of how the current situation of financial hardship came about (see Appendix). After the initial interview, participants were asked to complete a financial diary for one month, allowing us to obtain a detailed overview of their income and expenditures. The second interview took place after the diaries had been collected. It comprised follow-up questions about the diaries and more information on finances (also from those who had not filled in a diary), deprivations, and conversion factors. 37 households participated in the second interview wave. The last interview took place approximately two years after the first. We sought to capture changes in the material situation and in various spheres of life, including household composition, health, work and further training. Moreover, we were interested in changing practices, evaluations and aspirations. 33 households participated in this third interview wave.²

Data analysis pertained to two temporal levels and two aspects of poverty. Regarding *time*, we examined long-term dynamics over the whole narrated life course, on the one hand. On the other hand, the two-year study period, which includes the financial diaries at the beginning, allowed for more fine-grained analyses of the households' current welfare mixes and deprivations. Regarding *aspects of poverty*, we combined the analysis of the material situation with the analysis of how capabilities change over time. Discernible positive or negative changes in capabilities and functionings form the core of the three temporal patterns we found. Within the patterns we looked for configurations of material means, structural constraints and conversion factors that produce stagnation or change. The analytical emphasis is on the functionings the interviewees themselves regarded as especially important.

Changes in Capabilities

For most of the study households, income poverty was not a recent experience and only a handful escaped poverty during the two-year study period. Moreover, most households never attained a materially comfortable position for a significant period of their lives. They were either persistently poor or oscillated around the poverty line for many years, which created feelings of precariousness and points to the lack of "secure functionings" (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007). If the study households tend to be stuck in material poverty, how does this affect their capabilities? In the following, we describe three patterns, based on the interviews with the 37 households that participated in at least two interview waves.

Stability or Stagnation

In more than two-thirds of the sample, only minor or no fluctuations in capability sets and achieved functionings can be observed over the two-year period. Yet, a lack of dynamics was not necessarily experienced negatively. For some interviewees who, due to age or disability, had no prospects of significant income gains, lack of change rather felt like *achieving stability* at last after long stretches of insecurity in their lives. Eight old-age pensioners and three disability pensioners in our sample enjoy a low but stable material situation, including some social and status functionings (Wolff 2020), since their pensions and supplemental benefits are higher than social assistance or wages from precarious jobs. For them, stability itself is a highly valued functioning. “Now I have the finances I never had before”, says a pensioner who for many years was homeless, had a highly fluctuating income and lived far below the poverty line. “I know what I have and what I can spend and I can save a little for emergencies”. In contrast, a lack of dynamics is experienced as *stagnation* by interviewees of working age who do not have a regular income from a pension. Although incomes from low wage jobs are often less stable compared to pensions, the *lack of opportunities for fertile functionings* seems more relevant for explaining stagnation. Several personal factors and structural constraints may impede fertile functionings.

Multiple *structural constraints* arise from the Swiss *migration regime*. During the asylum procedure, which can take several years, asylum seekers are usually not allowed to work. Moreover, they are not entitled to state-funded integration measures such as language classes (Stingl 2021). Remaining in this state for a prolonged period negatively affects their future capabilities in the labour market, as they cannot gain work experience and have fewer opportunities to learn the local language. Migration regulations constrain peoples’ capabilities also outside employment, as in the case of Amira Hamad (age 59) and her husband Ahmed (age 62). The couple migrated to Switzerland in their early 50s during the civil war in Syria and was not granted asylum, only the temporary residence permit F. At their age, without formal qualifications and lacking German proficiency, they do not find employment. Not being economically self-reliant, they do not receive permanent residence status and have been living on asylum benefits for more than 10 years by the time of the third interview. Since these are significantly lower than regular social assistance, they live with multiple deprivations. In Amira’s interview account, two unachievable functions stand out: health and mobility. Her husband, who is not satisfied with his dentures paid for by the social services, has been without teeth and has eaten only liquid food for several years. Their temporary residence status does not allow them to travel abroad. Therefore, Ahmed cannot get dental implants more affordably abroad with the financial help of relatives. Moreover, they are unable to see close relatives in neighbouring countries. For Amira and

Ahmed, a permanent permit would – among many other capabilities – improve their freedom to travel. The latter, in turn, would enhance their capability for affiliation and enable Ahmed to get intact teeth – both a health and a status functioning. Amira sums up their feeling of being stuck: “*Husband can’t work, I can’t work, still F permit, still welfare – what can we do?*”

In disability insurance, decisions not to fund work integration measures or the rejection of certain disabilities as legitimate grounds for a pension can restrict people’s access to fertile functionings (Rotzetter 2024). Moreover, *structural conditions in low-wage work* restrict capabilities, such as lacking opportunities for further training and career advancement. Structural constraints often interact with personal conversion factors like care responsibilities and health conditions, as can be demonstrated in Zoë Debrunner’s case.

Zoë (age 44) trained as a baker and worked full-time in low-paid jobs until she temporarily quit paid work at the age of 32, following the birth of her son. Three years later, she separated from the father, took custody and got a part-time job as a receptionist. As she was not married, she was only entitled to alimonies for her son, with the maintenance law at the time not taking her unpaid care work into account. The missing capability of attaining a sufficient income through work that suits her specific constraints looms large in her narratives:

I didn’t want to work too much, because I want to be here for my kid. (...) My job was very exhausting because of the noise, I had a headache all the time. Unfortunately I was paid by the hour but I was still glad. In the end it was 70 to 80% but I never had time for myself.

One year before we met, Zoë underwent surgery on her ear and has suffered from unilateral partial hearing loss since then. Two years later, she returns to work in a retail job. The low pay forces her to take more hours than she feels is good for her health, given that she has hearing and balance disorders. She worries about having to increase her working hours even more after the stop of child maintenance in a few years’ time, when her son finishes his education or moves out. Reducing her working hours would obviously improve Zoë’s health and well-being. In her current job, this could be possible with a partial disability pension that would compensate for the income loss due to part-time work. Indeed, Zoë is declared only 50% fit for work by disability insurance. Yet, as she already worked part-time prior to her surgery, the so-called disability-induced income loss is not high enough to justify a pension according to the logic of disability insurance (Petrik and Pärli 2024). Her former unpaid care work thus narrows her disability insurance entitlements.

Changing to a better paying sector could also allow Zoë to reduce her working hours. Her opportunity to do so might be enhanced by further education and training. Yet, Zoë never mentions that this is something she is aspiring to. Although *aspirations* alone are usually not sufficient to enhance capabilities, they can be necessary for initiating change. However, experiencing

that one's access to fertile functionings is blocked over a prolonged period can cause people to lower their expectations. For instance, living with a restricting residence status or the complete lack thereof, several migrants in our sample lower their aspirations for themselves but place their hopes on their children. An interviewee who is only 40 years old states: *"I have to focus on my son. Cause my life, I think, it's over"*. Similarly, several interviewees who feel stuck in insecure low-wage jobs adopt a resigned attitude towards employment and do not believe that they will ever be able to improve their capabilities through occupational advancement.

Capability Enhancement

Seven households profit from a clearly discernible capability enhancement during the study period. Although a higher income does enhance capabilities for achieving social functionings and status goods, it is not always the decisive factor of capability enhancement. Maryam Yeshe's case represents a configuration, where an increase in material resources is a necessary but not sufficient condition for *realising higher aspirations*. Maryam (age 25) trained and worked as a nurse in Ethiopia but her professional training and experiences are not recognised in the Swiss labour market – a structural constraint on her capability for work. Her husband Hawi is the sole earner of the household and works as an unskilled carpenter at a minimum wage. Attaining a good job – skilled and well-paid – is an important functioning for Maryam. Her goal is to take a course as a nursing aide. However, the household cannot afford the course fee. Over the study period things change for the better. Hawi gets a pay rise, and when their son is one year old, Maryam starts to work as a part-time childcare worker in a mothers' centre. Being involved in the centre proves to be a springboard for Maryam's professional aspirations. The centre sees it as its mission to empower mothers by helping them out of their social isolation and providing part-time jobs where they can bring their children to work. The centre's director encourages Maryam to envisage a three-year VET training as a care specialist and recommends enrolling in a one-year preliminary general education programme: *"My boss, she always gives motivation, for example 'Maryam, you should do this, what do you want to do tomorrow, this year, next year?' Then I'm thinking, what should I do"*. Compared to her initial plan of taking the nursing aide course Maryam now aims higher. This shift in aspiration is due to better information about realistic educational options in the Swiss system of vocational education. Furthermore, realising the aspiration is structurally facilitated by the possibility to work in the centre, since the job is recognised as relevant work experience thereby shortening the planned professional training by a year.

Should Maryam succeed in her studies, the diploma would create further educational capabilities and a good chance of finding a stable job with a

decent wage. In the short run, due to the substantial costs of course fees, German lessons and childcare, there is not much money left for other expenses. Despite the increase in total income, the household thus still experiences deprivations. Nevertheless, Maryam and Hawi now both send money to their parents, thus gaining the “capability of doing good for others” (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007, 47), which they value highly. In sum, Maryam’s capability enhancement rests on a configuration of increased financial means in combination with information and encouragement influencing her aspirations. Social and professional support received in the mothers’ centre, plus the availability of sufficient money, make her biographically anchored professional aspirations realisable, thus constituting a genuine capability that is not as remote as being merely theoretical (Wolff and De-Shalit 2013, 162).

In contrast, for Emanuel Abel (age 35), capability enhancement does not rest on an improved employment situation but on *developments within the welfare system*. Due to a mental disorder, Emanuel is incapacitated for work and has been on social assistance for four years at the time of the first interview. During three years, he is homeless and relies heavily on food and clothing charity. In the second year of the study, his application for a disability pension is finally approved, and he also receives supplemental benefits, which improves his financial situation. Because he is classified as partially fit for work, he receives a partial pension and is still expected to work. Otherwise, the supplemental benefits to his pension would be curtailed. He is assigned to a sheltered workshop for people with disabilities, where he works part-time in the kitchen for a symbolic wage.

On the one hand, social assistance helps Emanuel overcome material deprivations like homelessness and food insecurity; on the other hand, one might argue that being labelled as “disabled” and sent to work in a sheltered workshop by disability insurance reproduces his social marginalisation. Yet, the situation corresponds to Emanuel’s *aspirations* expressed in the first interview: “*Yeah, somehow a partial pension so I can get by and find a sheltered job, that’s my goal*”. These modest goals represent most likely adapted preferences (Robeyns 2017, 137–142) formed in many years of “*living on the edge*” as he himself phrased it in the first interview. In the third interview, after five months’ experience with exactly this situation, Emanuel cautiously raises his aspirations:

Through the disability insurance I decided I want to work again. Maybe if I work one or two years in the kitchen, I get enough work experience so I can maybe get back in the labour market and make more money.

Paradoxically, Emanuel develops aspirations when he is implicitly declared “unfit” for the labour market and sent to a sheltered workshop for the disabled. Prior unsuccessful work programmes still aimed at integration into the regular labour market. By partly conditioning his benefits on working but

simultaneously taking away pressure by cancelling the goal of labour market participation for the moment being, he is given time to regain self-confidence and get used to work routines again. Overall, the changes in Emanuel's situation are thus enabled by *institutional factors in the welfare system*.

Decline in Capabilities

Many households in the sample exhibit a remarkably low level of capabilities and functionings. During the two years of the study a further decline can be observed in two cases. The example of Franziska Christen illustrates that a diminishment of capabilities does not necessarily coincide with a deterioration in material resources. Franziska is 54 years old at the time of the first interview and a single mother. Two of her three children, aged 16 and 14, both having impairments, still live at home. The household subsists on Franziska's part-time, low-wage job in retailing, and on social assistance. Her labour market participation remains limited due to her caregiving responsibilities associated with her children's impairments and due to her own chronic health problems. Following the separation from the father of her two younger children she had to turn to social assistance to supplement her meagre wage.

During the study, Franziska's health deteriorates further following a botched knee surgery. As a consequence, she can hardly walk or stand and needs a sedentary job. Her worsening health condition constitutes a *corrosive functioning* that directly affects her *capability to sustain employment*. Since returning to work after the sick pay expired, her supervisor has become less accommodating of her health situation, and she now fears losing her job altogether: "*By now, it's like [name of the employer] is trying to bully me out. They don't really want me anymore*". Yet, losing the job would not significantly affect her material situation, since according to the social assistance rules any additional income from a job is deducted from benefits save for a small sum serving as work incentive. Rather, this situation directly affects another functioning that is important to Franziska, namely *social recognition* in her role as a worker. She now perceives herself as superfluous, despite having worked continuously at the company for 30 years: "*If you can no longer perform, you are expected to leave*".

In the face of job insecurity, Franziska feels increasingly locked in welfare: "*There's no chance to get out of the vicious circle. The welfare office keeps you trapped if they're taking away everything [that you earn]*". The further decline of capabilities regarding work and escaping welfare is accompanied by a sober assessment of the future. Franziska's biographical experience of long-term material hardship since an early stage in her life is certainly not conducive to developing expectations regarding her personal or professional life, let alone *aspirations*. By the time of the third interview, in the context of her health and workplace troubles, any work-related aspirations had all but vanished. Franziska admits that she no longer expects to get ahead: "*Maybe I have to talk to*

disability insurance, but retraining with 56, I don't know. (...) I have no idea what happens next". At the same time, access to a disability pension appears unlikely, given the tightening of institutional eligibility criteria over the past decades (Rosenstein 2021).

Franziska represents one of two cases in which a decline in capabilities can be observed *within the study period*, resulting from a deterioration of health. It can be assumed that most participants have experienced a loss of capabilities at some earlier point in their lives. The data suggest that across the life course, profound shifts in key conversion factors or life circumstances operate at both the individual and structural level, such as physical or mental health problems, loss of employability, income decline, or separations. These constraints can accumulate and become entrenched over time. A decline in capabilities cannot be attributed to a singular event, but unfolds as a *gradual and demoralising downward trajectory*. Opportunities to exercise meaningful choices thus erode progressively. As the example of Franziska demonstrates, this downward spiral is particularly pronounced for long-term recipients of social assistance finding themselves caught in a vicious cycle without realistic prospects of change. They are unable to formulate and pursue far-reaching goals; their lives are increasingly characterised by negative anticipation (Isola, Virrankari, and Hiilamo 2021). For these individuals, prolonged receipt of social assistance is associated with a deepening sense of resignation, as this 58-year-old interviewee says: *"I had kids, we bought a house, I made it, I was proud of myself. Now I'm a nobody"*.

Discussion and Conclusions

Dynamic research discovered the impermanent and fluctuating character of poverty, which appeared to be determined by life course events rather than social structure (Dewilde 2003). Its findings were soon disputed by scholars who claimed that dynamic research underestimated stability and the power of structural factors (Gazareth et al. 2018, Groh-Samberg 2014). Both sides had in common that they measured poverty in terms of income and material deprivation. This paper analysed poverty from a capability perspective and explored how constellations of material means, structural constraints, personal conversion factors and aspirations lead to stability or change of capabilities and functionings. The focus was on capabilities to achieve material functionings as well as capabilities to attain non-material goals (social recognition, education, affiliation, or self-determination).

This article describes three temporal patterns – stability/stagnation, enhancement and decline of capabilities. Overall, our longitudinal study supports the solidification of poverty thesis: Most of the sample households live in unequivocal material poverty or precarity for many years, and they remain on the same level of *capabilities and functionings* during the study period.

Whether a lack of change is experienced negatively as stagnation or positively as stability depends on how the life course as a whole is perceived, as well as on the societal expectations that are typical of a particular stage of life (Yaqub 2008). A lack of change can be experienced as the *end point of a positive development*, which is valuable for those affected, although they remain below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold. This is the case for most pensioners in our sample, who, thanks to supplemental benefits, dispose of more resources than in earlier phases of their lives and who are no longer expected to earn a living in the labour market. In contrast, nearly half of the sample households experience a lack of dynamics in the *negative sense of stagnation*.

The article identified two kinds of recursive mechanisms between capabilities and achieved functionings: First, some functionings are “fertile” in the sense that they *imply further capabilities* (e.g. when reaching retirement age implies the capability of giving up paid work on legitimate grounds), by influencing conversion factors (becoming eligible for supplemental benefits by virtue of a change in social status, e.g. retirement or disability status), or by improving resources (by being granted supplemental benefits). Second, biographical experiences *influence preferences and aspirations* and thus people’s choices. Similar recursive mechanisms are also discussed in the literature, particularly regarding the temporal embeddedness of aspirations (Baillergeau 2024; Hart 2016; Zimmermann 2024). However, empirical studies usually focus on one mechanism or on selected capabilities, such as the capability to aspire (Stephanus and Vero 2024), the capability for voice (Bonvin, Dif-Pradalier, and Moachon 2013), the capability for training (Lambert, Vero, and Zimmermann 2012) or combined functionings of education, employment and starting a family (Barthelheimer, Büttner, and Schmidt 2011). In contrast, our study sheds light on the interplay of different mechanisms, without being limited to a predefined selection of capabilities and functionings. Our first theoretical contribution therefore lies in highlighting the *multifactorial and contingent character of change*, which is not always linear and cumulative. While the CA literature on aspirations primarily focuses on education and employment (Leßmann 2024), our study confirms the important role of employment for accessing resources and recognition. Yet, it reveals that other capabilities may be subjectively just as important for people living in poverty, e.g. mobility and affiliation, and that capability enhancement may be triggered by changed conversion factors that are independent of personal development achieved through education, such as social security or residence permit, that improve one’s rights or benefit entitlements.

Although our findings highlight the non-linear character of change, we identified *positive and negative self-reinforcing dynamics*. Our second theoretical contribution pertains to the discussion of “corrosive” disadvantage associated with income-poverty (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007). Our analysis demonstrated how having to choose from a capability set containing only

poor options can have constraining effects well beyond one given moment in time. For example, someone might accept a job with harmful working conditions to avoid social assistance. This would result in their health deteriorating, reducing their earning capacity in later life. The accumulation of such long-term effects enduringly impedes the development of capabilities. Concerning positive self-reinforcing dynamics, our findings confirm the argument by Wolff and De-Shalit (2013, 164) that the fertility of functionings depends on whether they are achieved in a self-determined manner. The sample households who became independent of social assistance and thus escaped the tight controls through the welfare authorities showed more self-confidence and motivation to pursue their ideas of a good life. Meanwhile, long-term social assistance recipients tended to lose the feeling of being in control of their lives. Finally, our data suggested that the perception of one's own trajectory influences process freedom. The prolonged experience of being stuck inhibits aspirations, e.g. when someone does not consider further education and training, believing that it is not achievable or that it will not improve their situation. Our findings thus highlight resignation as a counterpart to aspirations. However, although resignation is a side effect reinforcing the entrenchment of downward trajectories, it is not the decisive factor. Our study primarily points to the importance of structural constraints and conversion factors in explaining (lacking) changes in capabilities.

Regarding methodology, it can be concluded that our *qualitative approach* provided information on a variety of capabilities and functionings that matter for people living in poverty, as well as about resources, structural constraints, and personal conversion factors without using a predefined list (Smith and Middleton 2007, 43). The case analyses enabled us to reconstruct the complex interplay between these factors over time (Verd and López 2011). Moreover, the qualitative interviews generated detailed accounts of people's aspirations. However, as many capabilities and functionings develop over longer time spans, the two-year study period is rather short. Although retrospective analysis is insightful, it cannot pinpoint the events and experiences that induce people to adapt their preferences over time. Another limitation concerns multi-person households, where we did not ask detailed questions about the capabilities of each individual. At last, due to sampling via various welfare organisations, people who do not receive any support are underrepresented in our sample.

Finally, two *policy implications* can be outlined. First, capability enhancement crucially depends on beneficial structural conversion factors. Removing the barriers to training, education and obstacles to labour market access caused by migration and social security regulations would make it easier for people living in poverty to enter a positive, self-reinforcing dynamic. Second, certain capabilities and functionings are important for starting and maintaining such a dynamic: the opportunity for self-determination and a basic sense of self-worth, as they are at the basis of aspirations. Contrary to public social

assistance policies that prevent clients from doing things their own way, promoting the “capability for voice” (Bonvin and Laruffa 2024) should be the focus of welfare organisations and social workers.

Notes

1. Because the categories intersect, these numbers add to more than the total of forty households.
2. Of the seven households who did not participate in the second or third interview wave, three had been sampled as working poor, two as pensioners, and two as single parents. With one exception they just did not react to our attempts to contact them. Judging from the prior interviews with them we assume that the main reasons were shame for being addressed as poor, distrust, and (mental) stress. Overall, the retention rate of more than 80% of the initial sample is very high for this sensitive topic.

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