

Research Article

Touko Vaahtera*

Strong and Weak Theories of Capacity: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Disability, and Contemporary Capacity Theorizing

<https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2024-0003>

received August 24, 2023; accepted April 3, 2024

Abstract: This article puts forward two ways of understanding capacity: strong and weak theories. The strong theory of capacity self-evidently connects capacity with ideal humanity or pedestalizes it as an analytic concept, while the weak theory of capacity allows space for interpretations about life unfolding without murmurings about capacity. By considering capacity in a way that distinguishes these two theories, the article contributes to contemporary thinking in which capacity has emerged as a key concept. My perspective draws on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's ideas about strong and weak theories and is further influenced by methodological issues raised by disability studies scholars. I first recall Sedgwick's ideas about strong theories, after which I focus on how capacity assumptions operate in Silvan Tomkins' work, which has had an important impact on Sedgwick. I then identify two recent contributions in disability studies in the area of capacity-themed theorizing. I interrogate the ways in which these contributions share the habits of the strong theory and how they escape its problematic tendencies. Toward the end of the article, I outline how the weak theory of capacity could contribute new perspectives to the contemporary discussion.

Keywords: capacity, disability studies, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, methodology, Silvan Tomkins

If one considers recent conversations in humanities and social sciences, it becomes clear (and odd) just how ubiquitous “capacity” seems to have become. This makes me think of how Sedgwick (2003) advanced the idea of strong theories more than 20 years ago, by which she meant the analytical habits of describing very different phenomena through the same analytic assumptions. There is currently a significant faction of scholars who draw on Baruch Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze and understand all kinds of bodies not just through the idea of capacity but as capacity (Coleman, 2011; Grosz, 2007). The Deleuzian body, as implied by the often-used saying “we do not even know of what a body is capable” (Deleuze, 1992, p. 226), is one that is always in the process of differing (Rothfield, 2011). Scholars from a range of academic disciplines linked to affect scholarship have embraced this popular theoretical approach (e.g., Braidotti, 2019; Feely, 2016; Fox & Alldred, 2022; Paasonen, 2021; Puar, 2017; Wolf-Meyer, 2020a). In the framework on which they draw, capacity is not understood as an individual attribute but to be emerging when bodies, ideas, or things interrelate (e.g., Fox & Alldred, 2022). Furthermore, capacity is not always linked to betterment (see Méndez de la Brena, 2022), even though it is more common in new materialist thought to link capacities to beneficial transformations. This makes capacity a highly flexible approach that can be used to analyze distinct phenomena. Furthermore, it is peculiar that capacity as a cultural idea has generated critical responses only minimally. Even disability studies scholars, from whom one might expect this, have done little to interrogate “capacity” (however, see Vaahtera, 2022). Rather, “capacity” has remained a somewhat neutral analytic term. More bizarrely,

* **Corresponding author: Touko Vaahtera**, Department of Social Sciences, University of Eastern Finland, Joensuu, Finland, e-mail: touko.vaahtera@uef.fi

vulnerability – another major concept in current body studies – has been interrogated and its various cultural and societal uses have been examined (Brunila et al., 2016; Koivunen et al., 2018; Pieri, 2022; Vuk, 2021), but capacity seems to be less in need of critical responses.

“Capacity” has also been adopted by some disability studies scholars, even though there is also an orientation in disability studies to unpack the cultural understandings of bodies, especially those emphasizing ability (see, e.g., Campbell, 2009; McRuer, 2006). For example, Feely (2016), a disability studies scholar, claims that capacity generates nonessentialist perspectives, suggesting that it allows attention to be drawn to both what a body can do now and what it might be able to do in the future. For Feely (2016, p. 272), the capacity perspective “is not limited” and is better than other theoretical perspectives on disability. The extent and flexibility to which “capacity,” as an analytic tool, can be used and how it is presented as the best theory have pushed me to ponder that we might need to expose “capacity” to the scrutiny arising from the idea of strong theories. In this sense, the aim of my article is to place this key concept of contemporary thinking in a new light and examine it through Sedgwick’s idea of strong theories.

An important point is that Sedgwick is actually present in affect scholarship, which relies on the idea of capacity. Sedgwick, who was an important contributor to affect scholarship and drew on the psychologist Silvan Tomkins rather than Deleuze and Spinoza in her approaches to affect, is connected to capacity presumptions via Tomkins, as I further explain in this article. However, Tomkins also enabled Sedgwick to interrogate strong theories. It is in this context that Sedgwick (2003, p. 8) maintains that her approach should not be read as a way of “expos[ing] forms of essentialism lurking behind apparently nonessentialist forms of analysis.” While Sedgwick distanced her approach from a critique of essentialism in her work on affects, the bizarre thing that bothers me is that in current discussions, capacity has emerged as a self-evidently good and nonessentialist perspective, which is apparent in Feely’s (2016) work. However, if we consider essentialism as a certainty of how specific analytic approaches function (Chambers, 2002), the certainty regarding capacity as a beneficial approach could also be called essentialism. Might there then be ways to read bodies/minds that leave room for other kinds of interpretations?

This article is, above all, a methodological contribution. Drawing on cultural studies, I understand “categories of thought” (Hall, 1996, p. 36) to be contingent, historically specific articulations that require a reflexive analysis of what they can describe, and it is in this sense I approach “capacity.” My approach is also influenced by the methodological matters raised by disability studies scholars. On the one hand, they emphasize that methodological approaches also relate to broader assumptions about bodies/minds (Johnson & McRuer, 2014), while on the other, they consider the way in which critical interventions into cultural understandings can take place via new methodological approaches (Minich, 2016; Schalk, 2017). With regard to my methodological assumptions more specifically and for the purposes of this article, I focus on the cultural and analytical assumptions around capacity and disability – not what capacity and disability really are. However, I do not rule out ontological approaches, even though I am more focused on cultural articulations. I draw on Sedgwick’s approaches throughout the article, and my perspective on her ideas is uncanonical. Thus, although I am inspired by Sedgwick in this text, I understand that my suggestions might differ from what she would have wanted.

Sedgwick’s works are not usually associated with disability studies. However, her oeuvre does feature themes related to disability. She discussed themes such as chronic illness (1993, 1999), depression (1999, 2003, 2006), and autism spectrum (2011) – topics whose conventional articulations have been interrogated in disability studies. Furthermore, some disability studies scholars have drawn on her approaches (Bone, 2017; Goodley, 2014; Johnson & McRuer, 2014; McRuer, 2006; Sherry, 2004; Vaahtera, 2022). My focus is on her methodological ideas, and while they are my major inspiration in this text, there are dimensions of her thinking that frustrate me as a disability studies scholar. My ambivalent theoretical love toward Sedgwick has motivated me to write this article.

The article proceeds by first recalling Sedgwick’s ideas about strong theories, after which I pay attention to the ableist capacity assumptions in the ideas of Tomkins (who influenced Sedgwick’s theorizing) and how these assumptions connect Tomkins to the habits of strong theories. I then point to two recent contributions in disability studies in the area of capacity-themed theorizing. These works do not share such ableist assumptions as Tomkins’, and they express a commitment to the pursuit of disability studies. I interrogate the way in which these contributions share the habits of the strong theory and manage to escape its problematic tendencies. Toward the end of the article, I outline how the weak theory of capacity could contribute new perspectives to

the contemporary discussion. The weak theory of capacity is influenced by the methodological perspectives of the depressive position considered by Sedgwick. It allows us to understand capacity as only one analytic possibility among many.

1 Sedgwick and Challenges to the Strong Theory

Sedgwick (2003) borrows from Tomkins the definition of a strong affect theory, emphasizing how it “orders more and more remote phenomena to a single formulation” (p. 134). She also pays attention to the point that affect theories are also the activities of researchers. Thus, through the formulation of a strong theory, Sedgwick begins to examine analytic assumptions rather than personal interpretations about social environments, even though Tomkins (1995a, p. 165) used the term “affect theory” to mean a quick examination of one’s social environment by relying on affective experiences.

While some scholars have associated “strong theories” with pessimistic interpretations (e.g., Paasonen, 2021), the avoidance of pessimism is by no means the focal component of an approach for which Sedgwick needs the strong theory concept. Sedgwick (2003, pp. 145–146) was quite explicit that the pitfalls of strong theories do not relate solely to negativity or pessimism; rather, the problem is their coercive nature. A strong theory provides a “totalizing model” (2003, p. 146) for thinking in ways that can be difficult to interrogate. These totalizing models can be specific conceptual frameworks packaged as tools to make a better theory (p. 146). However, Sedgwick (2003) emphasizes that this does not mean that we should never use strong theories; rather, the challenging of strong theories means that we remain open to various analytic interpretations while also resisting theoretical visions for generality.

2 Sedgwick and Tomkins’s Capacity

Sedgwick’s relationship with disability is complex. Her oeuvre has fascinating dimensions that focus on chronic illness and nonnormative minds. However, her focus was not disability, and her thinking was not influenced by approaches within disability studies. Nevertheless, intellectual disability might work as a starting point in alignment with her aim to consider something other than human language. Here, the textile artist Judith Scott – portrayed on the cover of *Touching Feeling* – is Sedgwick’s object of identification, despite Scott being “isolat[ed] from language,” as Sedgwick (2003, p. 24), the famous professor of English, describes her – almost in a pitiful manner. However, considering that *Touching Feeling* is all about methodologies not centralizing human language, Scott’s “isolation from language” (p. 24) might hint that Sedgwick was considering approaches where capacities associated with the ideal human being do not function as a starting point. However, I need to be a typical reparative reader who is understanding and assumes good intentions if I want to probe the ways in which Sedgwick’s ideas would be compatible with the interrogation of capacity.

Indeed, when Sedgwick (2003) introduces the framework of paranoid–reparative reading, she does not straightforwardly position herself against medical knowledge. Tomkins, to whom Sedgwick owes much of her thinking about affects, was, after all, a psychologist. However, what fascinates Sedgwick (2003, p. 117) about Tomkins’s ideas are the “unpathologizing” manners and his lack of homophobia. Furthermore, there is a societal thread in Tomkins’s (1995c) thinking, as he also considered social norms in his writing about affects. Still, Tomkins (1995b) highlights intellectual capacities that should not be overlooked in considerations of possibilities advanced by Sedgwick and Tomkins for disability studies. In what follows, I bring a new perspective to Sedgwick’s scholarship by focusing on Tomkins’s assumptions about capacity.

Though capacity as an analytical concept is often associated with the Spinozian/Deleuzian traditions, Tomkins also relies on the assumption of capacity. How integral “capacity” is to his thinking is a matter that, to my knowledge, is rarely considered. According to Marlovits and Wolf-Meyer (2023, p. 369), there are two theoretical schools around affect scholarship that emphasize “capacity.” They note that the Spinozian/

Deleuzian perspectives view affect as capacity by emphasizing the interactions between various bodies. Tomkins, too, links “affect” with “capacity.” However, he views it as a biology-based response (p. 369).

It should be noted that Tomkins deploys “capacity” in two ways, the first being the way in which he highlights the capacities of human beings when describing the affect system. According to him (1995b, p. 37), greater cognitive capacities are those that distinguish human beings from other animals. He also links greater human capacities with human possibilities for larger variations (Frank & Wilson, 2020). Connecting the potential for variations to human beings is one of the features of human exceptionalism (Vaahtera, 2022), even though this is examined less frequently than the more obvious forms of human exceptionalism that idealize specific qualities linked to development.¹

The second component of Tomkins’s reliance on capacity relates to his understanding of the automation of habits (Frank & Wilson, 2020). Tomkins (1962, p. 114) explains this phenomenon through the term capacity: “This capacity to make automatic or nearly automatic what was once voluntary, conscious and learned frees consciousness, or the transmuting mechanism, for new learning.” For him, this capacity for automation functions both beneficially (as in the case of learning) and unfavorably (as in the case of strong affect theories) in an individual’s life (Frank & Wilson, 2020). Indeed, this relates to Tomkins’s (1995a) ideas about affect theories, as the downside of strong affect theories for Tomkins is that people maintain similar interpretations also in unsimilar situations. Interestingly, the capacity for automation – which is both “good” and “bad” – frames Tomkins’s affect models. Here, Tomkins uses the term “capacity” in a way that combines it with unconscious learning, as this sort of “capacity” does not only enable “favorable” transformations. It also underlies such actions that psychologists, such as Tomkins, might view as repeating old mistakes. Thus, we must recognize the extent to which Tomkins’s ideas about affect theories rely on the theory about capacity for automated responses. Furthermore, as a theorist, Tomkins is not unconnected to strong theories. By understanding human beings as cognitively superior, his views echo paranoid interpretations when they firmly link cognitive superiority exclusively to human beings. Consequently, his ideas also define humanity.

Defining humanity based on specific capacities and the ideals of species typicality is a central feature of ableism (Campbell, 2009). When I consider Tomkins’s way of making distinctions between humans and animals by assigning analytic capacities to humans, I cannot help but recall how Sedgwick (2003) seemed to pity Judith Scott, who lacked the skills that Sedgwick was famous for. I also wonder what Tomkins’s and Sedgwick’s ways of writing about capacities and disability ultimately say about the culture, where strong assumptions about life are made. In the following section, I turn to disability studies theories on capacity.

3 Capacity Theories in Disability Studies

In this section, I focus on recent research by two scholars, who find the societal tendencies around “capacity” problematic, but who nevertheless use “capacity” (in different ways from one another) in their research. I first consider the work of the anthropologist Matthew Wolf-Meyer, followed by that of the political scientist Stacy C. Simpican, neither of whom accept capacity ideals that emphasize individual cognitive skills. Because of their explicit critique of ableist norms, I wish to further consider their perspectives.

In Wolf-Meyer’s (2020a,b) research around capacity, he focuses on people who do not meet the social expectations of communicative capacity. Some of these people use facilitated communication to express themselves to others, which is usually seen as more reliant on infrastructural matters and networks of care than communication that corresponds to social assumptions (2020a). Wolf-Meyer (2020a) draws on Spinoza’s ontology, which leads him to emphasize connective dimensions of living. In that sense, Wolf-Meyer argues that everyone’s capacities rely on the networks of technology, human relations, and historically formed understandings that set norms and standards. Whereas Tomkins (1995b) emphasizes the analytical capacities of human beings, Wolf-Meyer (2020a,c) rejects ideas that rely on species-typical and cognitivist assumptions.

¹ See Marlovits and Wolf-Meyer (2023) for human exceptionalism regarding idealized capacities.

Furthermore, what distinguishes Wolf-Meyer (2020a) from many other scholars who rely on Spinozist and Deleuzian notions is his disability study-oriented understanding, which recognizes the role of social expectations in understandings of capacities.² Despite Wolf-Meyer's sometimes very nuanced remarks challenging ableism relating to normative capacities, he applies the Spinozian/Deleuzian perspectives about capacities. This leads to a position in which the idea of capacity cannot be let go of.

Indeed, Wolf-Meyer's (2020a) idea is structured in the same way as other capacity perspectives inspired by Deleuze. Fox and Alldred (2022, p. 502) define capacities by relying on Deleuze's ideas as "not inherent but emerg[ing] relationally." Wolf-Meyer (2020a) makes a logical step in this framework and argues that we should not fundamentally differentiate facilitated capacities from seemingly individual capacities. Nevertheless, in Wolf-Meyer's (2020a) approach, capacity receives a lot of attention. Even though he critically interrogates the ideals of analytic and communicative capacities, he seems to be attracted to the idea of capacity. Relational capacities engendered by technology and networks of care challenge ableist norms enable unexpected experiences and make the person existent to other people (Wolf-Meyer, 2020a). An example of the latter dimension of relational capacity is Wolf-Meyer's (2020a) interpretation of Peyton Goddard's memoir *I am Intelligent*. Goddard has been diagnosed with autism and has used facilitated communication, on which the memoir is partly based. Wolf-Meyer (2020a, p. 131) reads Goddard's story by emphasizing how facilitation is about strengthening capacities and how this makes her appear as "a full person" in the interpretations of others. Furthermore, Wolf-Meyer (2020a, p. 136) writes that Goddard becomes possible as a subject "by those people and technologies that facilitate her". Here, Wolf-Meyer's emphasis is on the relational dimensions of capacities and not on the individualizing aspects, but it is also on capacities and relations that strengthen them – according to the Spinozian/Deleuzian model. Though it can be politically useful to theorize that all capacities are relational, the Spinozian/Deleuzian model about capacity maintains capacity as an essential analytic framework about life. When considering Wolf-Meyer's research, it seems as if it would be difficult to think without capacity, even when interrogating the ableist understandings around it.

Simplican's (2015) book *The Capacity Contract: Intellectual Disability and the Question of Citizenship* examines how the ideals of democratic citizenship relate to cognitive abilities. The first chapters of the book focus on the ideas of the theorists of political membership and the history of ideas surrounding intellectual disability. The last two chapters of the book are based on Simplican's observations at self-advocacy events. As for the first part of the book, in particular, Simplican's (2015) work on capacity is more unpacking than Wolf-Meyer's. She does not develop new theoretical approaches to capacity. Rather, she interrogates theoretical ideas that have connected the assumption of capacity with political membership. By considering the ideas of John Locke, John Rawls, and Charles W. Mills and their theoretical models about political membership, Simplican (2015) challenges strong theoretical views that claim that political citizenship does not truly exist without proper cognitive capacity.

She notes that a rigid loyalty to capacity can also exist when Locke's racist and misogynist assumptions about political membership are criticized. It seems that Simplican (2015, p. 41) wishes to reject the way of thinking that relies on capacity, as she suggests that it should not be argued that some marginalized populations have only been "falsely" associated with lower capacities.³ She argues that capacity is an unjust demand for political citizenship and humanity.

While she does not accept that there is a particular kind of capacity that permits political membership, in the chapters based on her observations, she uses the cultural idea of capacity to describe political participation. She states that "different people can contribute to politics by drawing on different capacities" (p. 125). For her, "different capacities" denote that although some people participate in politics by having a communal dinner (to which I will return in a moment), others participate through modes that are more in line with

² For many scholars inspired by Spinoza and Deleuze, increased capacities merely signal good relations without consideration of the social dimensions around the ideal of capacity (see, e.g., Fox & Alldred, 2022; Guillaume & Hughes, 2011; Paasonen, 2021; Stephens et al., 2015).

³ "Lower capacities" refer here to loose cultural ideas about intelligence and cognitive skills, including IQ. It should be noted that IQ tests are relatively new historical practices, and before their introduction, there were other ideas about capacities and their hierarchies (Simplican, 2015).

conventional ideas about political membership (pp. 125–132). Accordingly, capacity remains an idea that illustrates political agency.

Even though Simplican seems to challenge the idea of capacity less than she first implies, her way of describing “different capacities” comes close to Sedgwick’s weak theories. This became apparent to me when I read a review article on Simplican’s book (Carey, 2015). It seems that there is something annoying in Simplican’s description of “different capacities” that disturbs readers who want politics to focus on broad societal transformations. The reviewer of Simplican’s work (Carey, 2015) criticizes her for focusing on the everyday level; however, I think that Carey might be overly attached to conventional politics.

In considering what happens in self-advocacy meetings and other events for people with intellectual disabilities, Simplican (2015) focuses on the communal roles of dinner meetings and dance. Simplican (2015) describes an event for self-advocates that ended with a dance in a public restaurant. In Simplican’s description, self-advocates’ dance in the public space is political self-expression that does not require language. In its political form, it is nonorganized and unpredictable; it may or may not challenge the way disability appears in the public space. Second, dance brings joy and laughter to everyone present, and therefore, it has a communal value. There are shades of both strong and weak theory in this interpretation. Simplican highlights specific circumstances and spaces, and thus her approach echoes the weak theories that Sedgwick (2003, p. 145) associates with locality. Simplican (2015) appears to suggest that what happens at the dinner meetings of self-advocates may not engender major changes to the political sphere but may open up something that can be risky and that takes place at the concrete level of spaces where meetings are held. She uses Hannah Arendt’s idea of political action as an unexpected, spontaneous practice being carried out in togetherness (Simplican, 2015, p. 129). However, as there is no guarantee of better or smarter politics when unexpectedness is highlighted, this manner challenges such views that associate politics with reforms, juridical transformations, or rational debate – which might disturb readers who have understood politics in such a way. By letting readers become puzzled when she ends her book on political membership with a description of dancing in the conference of self-advocates, Simplican enables experiences that a weak theory provides. There is no closure or promise of a great approach that achieves fulfillment. However, her description also has features of the strong theory. I wonder, is it necessary to link dance to community building as many things happen in a dance scene? For example, Simplican pays attention to how some of the self-advocates dance alone and some of the staff members (who work in self-advocates’ organizations) try to interfere with the self-advocates’ behavior during the dance. To what extent does the desire to see community meanings in dance erase other nuances? And what would happen if we did not think of dance through its communal dimensions or as “capacity” at all?

Simplican’s approaches share both the habits of strong and weak theories. In contrast, Wolf-Meyer’s approach might be called a new strong theory of capacity, which aims to fulfill readers by assuring them that there can be a more inclusive theory of capacity. Even though Simplican does not build a new strong theory of capacity, she has similar tendencies to Wolf-Meyer in her analysis. She first challenges assumptions related to capacity, but by considering how different people work together, she returns to it by emphasizing “different capacities” (Simplican, 2015, p. 125). The approaches of Simplican and Wolf-Meyer and their emphasis on the collective and connective dimensions of living can be politically and ethically impressive approaches since their ideas work against the presumption that people are or should be independent from others (see, e.g., Hughes, 2001). But might there be ways of thinking about life where questions about capacity – either individual or collective – do not direct our collective imagination?

4 Beside

Sedgwick (2003, p. 125) favored such analytic practices that position different forms of thinking beside each other so that each practice is simply one “possibility among other possibilities.” For Sedgwick (p. 8), the preposition *beside* enables thinking that gives space for various logics. This tendency in her thinking is a broader approach than is usually recognized. Even though Sedgwick (2003, 2011) highlights this idea in her works about affects and Melanie Klein, and while her consideration of these themes has usually been interpreted as a major turning point in her thinking (see, e.g., Huffer, 2012, p. 22), her earlier works also apply the

approach of *beside* as a fruitful way of thinking. In this section, I outline the weak theory of capacity by delving momentarily into more of Sedgwick's thinking.

The most influential contribution of Sedgwick's (2008 [1990]) *Epistemology of the Closet* is the approach to cultural logics situated beside one another. In this work, Sedgwick explores the ways in which universalizing and minoritizing ways of thinking about homosexuality co-exist in culture and can be used in both homophobic and antihomophobic ways. Further, when she shows both the universalizing and minoritizing mechanisms as both good and bad, she pushes her reader into a state where it becomes apparent that binary perspectives to cultural problems are seldom productive; rather, a more helpful perspective is one that does not erase ambivalence. Likierman (2003) connects ambivalence with Melanie Klein's depressive position, which Sedgwick (2011) draws on in her posthumous study, viewing it as a source of creative thinking.

The depressive position engenders both negative and positive interpretations of the world (Likierman, 2003). It is the position framed by the approach of *beside*: There is always another kind of tone alongside all tones. Since the depressive position is also connected to lived depression (Muñoz, 2006; Sedgwick, 2003), which was also experienced by Sedgwick, the way in which the depressed person can wallow in self-blaming appears to be not only a pathological habit but also a way of thinking that enables a specific kind of cultural analysis. In this sense, Sedgwick's way of using the figure of the scapegoat in her works is fascinating. In *Epistemology*, Sedgwick (2008 [1990]) argues against logics that presume the scapegoat.⁴ In her later work (2006) on affect and Melanie Klein, the logic of the scapegoat is again questioned when she maintains that the depressive position provides a perspective in which one finds problems in one's own actions as much as in those of others. The depressive position provides a "we like those others" angle (p. 2), which does not rush to create a scapegoat.

By considering the depressive position as an analytic approach, I ponder what it might offer to current thinking on capacity. First, the depressive position invites one to approach "capacity" through ambivalence. Thus, capacity as an analytic approach could be interrogated by asking what it has enabled and what it has ignored. This does not mean ruling out approaches operating with "capacity" but, instead, remaining ambivalent toward the analytic hopes they have provided. Second, this ambivalent perspective toward capacity could result in what I would call the weak theory of capacity. For me, it is primarily a methodological way of giving space in the analysis to experiences and forms of being that are difficult to describe through the idea of capacity.⁵ What the weak theory of capacity suggests is that capacity might operate as a weak theory about the body rather than a generalizing one. The weak theory of capacity places capacity *beside* other qualitative descriptions of bodies and minds. Sedgwick (2003) associates locality, specificity, openness to surprises, and nonce taxonomies with weak theories. The nonce taxonomies approach enables the pondering, for example, of the kinds of assumptions about bodies/minds that play a role in theories that rely on capacity and whether there might be other kinds of abstractions available in culture – abstractions that differ from those relating to capacity. While the weak theory highlights specificity, I do not suggest that attention be paid to the "different capacities" (Simplican, 2015, p. 125) of different people. The idea of "different capacities" does not open up possibilities for other kinds of registers than those of capacity. Third, the depressive position emphasizes that the analysis does not cease with new theories. Rather, it makes me ask, "what have I done," "what have I ignored in my interrogation of capacity," or "might my disappointment in my analysis open new approaches after all?"

⁴ The important contribution of *Epistemology* (Sedgwick, 2008 [1990]) is that it shows how both women and gay men have been positioned as scapegoats for culturally degraded qualities, such as femininity and sentimentality. It aims to challenge such assumptions around gender and sexuality that assume the scapegoat (Chambers, 2002).

⁵ Stewart (2008) also proposes a weak theory as a way of paying attention to specific moments of bodies without generalizing frameworks.

5 Disability Studies and Alternatives to the Strong Theory of Capacity

Minich (2016) emphasizes that a significant contribution of disability studies is that it approaches ideas related to disability not from a subject-oriented approach but from a methodological perspective. Thus, disability studies aim to change how disability-related ideas (including the cultural idealization of able-bodiedness) are viewed. In this sense, and as I have argued in this article, we might turn to capacity as a methodological problem that needs to be interrogated rather than a self-evident phenomenon related to human beings or life – or a fine theoretical way to approach bodies. Indeed, we should understand capacity as only one possible idea around bodies/minds; that is, we should understand it through a weak theory. The weak theory of capacity understands that the question of “what a body can do now or in the future” and perspectives on infrastructures and networks of care are relevant in limited situations. It does not give them a self-evident priority in theorizing. When capacity is considered one option among many, it might be possible to propose modes of being that might not fit neatly into the framework of capacity. In a nonce taxonomical manner, the weak theory directs its perspective to the archives of disability theory to pay attention to something other than “capacity.”

Wendell (1996), in her classic *The Rejected Body* in the field of feminist disability studies, considers what might be called the negative dimensions of disability and illness. She emphasizes that not all disabilities/illnesses are curable, and thus, many disabled people live their daily lives making practical and psychological arrangements to enable them to *live with* their disabilities. However, the modus of *living with* does not exclude questions about capacity; rather, *living with* invites a focus on a different kind of ontological mode. Disability writers have articulated this mode of being as characterized by a sense that no change is to be expected in the state of the body. When you do not anticipate a more capable body, questions about future capacities and the relations actualizing them become less relevant.

A weak theory of capacity considers approaches that are not limited to questions of capacities. Other modes, such as “making peace,” “accepting,” “living with ambiguity,” or “rejecting overcoming,” which Clare (2017, p. 131) alludes to as she traces understandings that complicate the cultural expectation of cure, provide a different interpretation of what is going on in corporeal living. In line with the weak theory, which does not know in advance how bodies will react in a society that values capacity, “making peace,” “accepting,” “living with ambiguity,” and “rejecting overcoming” are examples of possible reactions to ableist standards at a concrete and tangible level.

The mode of *living with* does not prioritize the question of capacity, although the issues around capacity can relate to *living with*. *Living with* requires questions about what societal, cultural, and psychological dimensions support a life with disability, illness, or pain. The framework of *living with* draws attention to, for example, cultural notions, and metaphors articulating disability as a substantial part of humanity, knowledges of disabled people about their bodies, mechanisms that help in tolerating pain, and accessibility as a societal arrangement. All of these questions have been explored in disability studies.⁶ The Spinozist question of “what a body can do” relates only to some dimensions of the modes of *living with*. Indeed, *living with* may require the increase of psychological or infrastructural capacities that alleviate daily life.

Further, in relation to these needs, the idea of capacity can be used as a societal tool. For these limited and sometimes strategic purposes, the strong theory of capacity might still be needed. However, we should not let the idea of capacity determine our thinking about life. Rather, disability studies should explore cultural ideas by interrogating what might be called strong cultural theories about bodies or minds. Indeed, if we understand that strong theories make homogenizing and totalizing interpretations about life, disability studies ought to position itself against such theories. Furthermore, disability studies could interact with strong theories through knowledges that appreciate heterogeneous experiences. For instance, the work of many disability

⁶ On cultural notions and metaphors articulating disability as a substantial part of humanity, see, e.g., Kafer (2013) and Mitchell and Snyder (2000). On the knowledges of disabled people about their bodies, see, e.g., Clare (2017), Driedger and Owen (2008), and Wendell (1996). On mechanisms that help in tolerating pain, see Wendell (1996). On accessibility as a societal arrangement, see, e.g., Williamson (2020).

studies scholars on the ideologies of able-bodiedness/able-mindedness (Araneda & Infante, 2022; Barounis, 2009; Kafer, 2013; McRuer, 2006) implicitly interrogates ability as a strong theory about life. In the same sense, we could focus on capacity by interrogating the ideas related to it and thereby challenging its cultural power.

The orientation of *living with* rests on a body existing as it is rather than a body that can imagine itself as new and better. My hope is that we might have the sensibility to register forms of being that are difficult to describe through the idea of capacity. Consider, for example, the various little events at the dinner meetings of Simplican's (2015) self-advocates. Does Simplican (2015) actually merge the various experiences taking place while dancing when she links dancing with the capacity for community building? Alternatively, if you, my dear reader, wake up in the night after having slept for 4 hours and then experience various thoughts that pop into your head and see fascinating hypnagogic images⁷ before your alarm clock rings, would you ascribe to this experience the concept of capacity? If you were to view it as a new capacity engendered by debilitation (sleep deprivation), as implied by Puar's (2017) framework,⁸ would you also describe it as capacity at your doctor's appointment after having experienced sleep deprivation for several weeks? Perhaps, at this appointment, you would emphasize the debilitating dimensions intertwining the experience despite enjoying your hypnagogic images. Perhaps both capacity and debility simplify the experience. Capacity and debility may manage to capture something about this experience, but they use a broad brush to describe what is happening.

The concepts and terms we employ in our aim to be understood contain the history of power relations within them. Misapplying the description of Tomkins on strong theories, whose power means that they direct "more and more remote phenomena to a single formulation" (qtd. in Sedgwick, *Touching feeling* 134), I would say that the more the cultural power of these terms has grown, the likelier we are to use them when we talk about our experiences. We are more likely to resort to expressions such as "insomnia," "sleep difficulty," and "sleep deprivation" when we talk about our hypnagogic experiences instead of saying that we were excited during the night, that we were looking at captivating pictures, or that we had so much to think about that we did not get much sleep. Culturally powerful terms often have administrative functions and are used, for example, in diagnostic contexts. However, cultural studies might want to challenge hegemonic ways of interpreting the world and consider what general-seeming expressions cannot capture.

6 The Strong Theory of Capacity: Powerful but not Necessary

This article has attempted to change the current tendency whereby capacity as an analytic term has remained immune to critiques of strong theories. By considering the methodological possibilities of Melanie Klein's depressive position, I have pondered how we might view "capacity" if we want to avoid the totalizing tendencies of strong theories. Even though I have shown in this article some ways in which capacity operates as a strong theory around affect scholarship – while there is a theoretical habit in affect studies to call into question strong theories – the fruitfulness of the thinking derived from the depressive position is the pessimism that it engenders toward our own analytic attempts. If I wish to appreciate the depressive position, I cannot just show how others think in a dissatisfying way; my dissatisfaction also extends to my own ideas. Indeed, while I elaborated on what the weak theory of capacity might offer in the previous section, I keep pondering how it might be necessary to think about capacity in a way that is congruent with the strong theory of capacity while also understanding it as nonnecessary.

⁷ According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology* (Colman, 2014), a hypnagogic image is "a dreamlike image, often vivid and resembling a hallucination, generally accompanied by sleep paralysis, experienced by a person in the transition state from wakefulness to sleep." Schwenger (2008, p. 423) gives a more detailed account of the phenomena: "You are in bed, your eyes are closed, you feel yourself drifting toward sleep. You are drowsily aware of bright clouds drifting past, which condense into floating luminous ribbons, stars, saw-toothed lines, and geometrical forms. Then the faces begin; they crowd in on you, grotesque to the point of caricature."

⁸ In an essay drawing on Puar's (2017) approaches, Johnson and McRuer (2014, p. 135) explore how "capacity depends on debility within a single individual's body."

For example, Wolf-Meyer's (2020a) perspective, which suggests that there is a collective dimension in all capacities, can be politically productive. He seems to solve the problem of capacity with respect to disability by building what might be called an inclusive theory of capacity. It can be used to question the ideals around independence. If we were to think about the theory of collective capacities as a strategy in a specific social situation without becoming locked into its perspective about the world, the totalizing tendencies of this theory could be used in political struggles against ableism. But we should understand this theory only as a momentary tool for strategic use.

My intervention regarding "capacity" is not entirely free from the habits of strong theories either, even though I have paid attention to how other scholars use strong theories. I am perhaps cognitively hyperfocused on examining capacity because I feel so strongly that the emphasis on it does not value human difference. It is possible that my focus on capacity may ignore other hierarchizing ideas. Just like a paranoid reader, I see it everywhere without noticing what else is going on. However, my disappointment, both with my own focus and the larger emphasis on capacity, pushed me to explore the articulations in which life variously unfolds before us. Indeed, against all-consuming frameworks around capacity, I have suggested "strong and weak theories of capacity" to interrogate the methodological power of capacity.

Even though capacity is that which registers enablement, it does not only enable. As a discourse, it can also prevent more heterogeneous conceptualizations of life. I have suggested that we keep capacity only as one possible framework while understanding that a strong theory of capacity may hover around culture, which frames our lives. Considering how cultural studies have interrogated what kinds of vocabularies are used when interpreting what is going on, capacity might be viewed as a powerful but unnecessary articulation. Life does unfold before us without murmurings about capacity, but what kinds of articulations connect life with capacity is a contextualizing question to be further explored in future research. This could be done with an approach that considers "the historical conditions which motivate our conceptualization" (Foucault, 1982, p. 778). Scholars from different fields could analyze the way in which "capacity" has functioned as an analytic term in their fields and the kinds of assumptions about bodies generated by this analytic assumption. A deeper understanding of these dimensions might present capacity as a weak concept that does not block articulations of other kinds of ontologies. These other ontologies may look like bad surprises, but sometimes, such surprises destabilize taken-for-granted ways of thinking in ways that engender new perspectives.

Funding information: The work was supported by the University of Eastern Finland and the Research Council of Finland.

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

References

- Araneda, C., & Infante, M. (2022). Disturbing able-bodiedness in "vulnerable" schools: Dis/orientations inside and through research-assemblages. *Critical Studies in Education*, 63(4), 419–435.
- Barounis, C. (2009). Crippling heterosexuality, queering able-bodiedness: Murderball, Brokeback Mountain and the contested masculine body. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 8(1), 54–75.
- Bone, K. M. (2017). Trapped behind the glass: Crip theory and disability identity. *Disability & Society*, 32(9), 1297–1314.
- Braidotti, R. (2019). Affirmative ethics and generative life. *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*, 13(4), 463–481.
- Brunila, K., Ikävalko, E., Kurki, T., Mertanen, K., & Mikkola, A. (2016). Revisiting the vulnerability ethos in cross-sectoral transition policies and practices for young people in the era of marketisation of education. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 11(1), 69–79.
- Campbell, F. K. (2009). *Contours of ableism: The production of disability and abledness*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Carey, A. C. (2015). Review: The capacity contract: Intellectual disability and the question of citizenship. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 35(4). doi: 10.18061/v35i4.4996.
- Chambers, R. (2002). Strategic constructivism? Sedgwick's ethics of inversion. In M. Barber & D. L. Clark (Eds.), *Regarding Sedgwick. Essays on queer culture and critical theory* (pp. 165–180). Routledge.
- Clare, E. (2017). *Brilliant imperfection: Grappling with cure*. Duke University Press.

- Coleman, R. (2011). "Be(come) yourself only better": Self-transformation and the materialisation of images. In L. Guillaume & J. Hughes (Eds.), *Deleuze and the body* (pp. 144–164). Edinburgh University Press.
- Colman, A. M. (2014). *The Oxford dictionary of psychology*. Oxford University Press. doi: 10.1093/acref/9780199534067.001.0001.
- Deleuze, G. (1992). *Expressionism in philosophy: Spinoza*. Zone Books.
- Driedger, D., & Owen, M. (2008). *Dissonant disabilities: Women with chronic illnesses explore their lives*. Canadian Scholar's Press Inc./Women's Press.
- Feely, M. (2016). Disability studies after the ontological turn: A return to the material world and material bodies without a return to essentialism. *Disability & Society*, 31(7), 863–883.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry*, 8(4), 777–795.
- Fox, N. J., & Alldred, P. (2022). Bodies, non-human matter and the micropolitical production of sociomaterial dis/advantage. *Journal of Sociology*, 58(4), 499–516.
- Frank, A. J., & Wilson, E. A. (2020). *A Silvan Tomkins handbook: Foundations for affect theory*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Goodley, D. (2014). *Dis/ability studies: Theorising disability and ableism*. Routledge.
- Grosz, E. (2007). Naked. In M. Smith & J. Morra (Eds.), *The prosthetic impulse: From a posthuman present to a biocultural future* (pp. 187–202). The MIT Press.
- Guillaume, L., & Hughes, J. (2011). *Deleuze and the body*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Hall, S. (1996). The problem of ideology: Marxism without guarantees. In D. Morley & K.-H. Chen (Eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies* (pp. 25–46). Routledge.
- Huffer, L. (2012). Foucault and Sedgwick: The repressive hypothesis revisited. *Foucault Studies*, 14, 20–40. doi: 10.22439/fs.v0i14.3888.
- Hughes, B. (2001). Disability and the constitution of dependency. In L. Barton (Ed.), *Disability, politics & the struggle for change* (pp. 24–33). David Fulton Publishers.
- Johnson, M. L., & McRuer, R. (2014). Introduction: Cripistemologies and the masturbating girl. *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 8(3), 245–255.
- Kafer, A. (2013). *Feminist, queer, crip*. Indiana University Press.
- Koivunen, A., Kyrölä, K., & Ryberg, I. (2018). *The power of vulnerability: Mobilising affect in feminist, queer and anti-racist media cultures*. Manchester University Press.
- Likierman, M. (2003). *Melanie Klein: Her work in context*. Bloomsbury.
- Marlovits, J., & Wolf-Meyer, M. J. (2023). Is a Psychotic Anthropology Possible? Or How to Have Inclusive Anthropologies of Subjectivity and Personhood. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 58, 365–380. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-052721-041315>
- McRuer, R. (2006). *Crip theory: Cultural signs of queerness and disability*. New York University Press.
- Méndez de la Brena, D. E. (2022). "Caring matter." A queer love story between (her) body and (cigarette) object. In A. Lahti, M. Kolehmainen, & K. Lahad (Eds.), *Affective intimacies* (pp. 27–44). Manchester University Press.
- Minich, J. A. (2016). Enabling whom? Critical disability studies now. *Lateral*, 5(1). <https://csalateral.org/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-now-minich/>.
- Mitchell, D. T., & Snyder, S. L. (2000). *Narrative prosthesis: Disability and the dependencies of discourse*. The University of Michigan Press.
- Muñoz, J. E. (2006). Feeling brown, feeling down: Latina affect, the performativity of race, and the depressive position. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 31(3), 675–88.
- Paasonen, S. (2021). *Dependent, distracted, bored: Affective formations in networked media*. The MIT Press.
- Pieri, M. (2022). When vulnerability got mainstream: Reading the pandemic through disability and illness. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 29(1_suppl), 1055–1155.
- Puar, J. K. (2017). *The right to maim: Debility, capacity, disability*. Duke University Press.
- Rothfield, P. (2011). Dance and the passing moment: Deleuze's Nietzsche. In L. Guillaume & J. Hughes (Eds.), *Deleuze and the body* (pp. 203–223). Edinburgh University Press.
- Schalk, S. (2017). Critical disability studies as methodology. *Lateral*, 6(1). <https://csalateral.org/issue/6-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-methodology-schalk/>.
- Schwenger, P. (2008). Writing hypnagogia. *Critical Inquiry*, 34(3), 423–439.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1993). *Tendencies*. Duke University Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1999). *A dialogue on love*. Beacon Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (2003). *Touching feeling. Affect, pedagogy, performativity*. Duke University Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (2006). Teaching/depression. *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, 4(2). <https://sfoonline.barnard.edu/teaching-depression/>.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (2008 [1990]). *Epistemology of the closet*. University of California Press.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (2011). *The weather in Proust*. In J. Goldberg (Ed.). Duke University Press.
- Sherry, M. (2004). Overlaps and contradictions between queer theory and disability studies. *Disability & Society*, 19(7), 769–783.
- Simplican, S. C. (2015). *The Capacity contract: Intellectual disability and the question of citizenship*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Stephens, L., Ruddick, S., & McKeever, P. (2015). Disability and Deleuze: An exploration of becoming and embodiment in children's everyday environments. *Body & Society*, 21(2), 194–220.
- Stewart, K. (2008). Weak theory in an unfinished world. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 45(1), 71–82.
- Tomkins, S. S. (1962). *Affect imagery consciousness: The positive affects* (Vol. 1). Springer.
- Tomkins, S. S. (1995a). Shame-humiliation and contempt-disgust. In E. K. Sedgwick & A. Frank (Eds.), *Shame and its sisters. A Silvan Tomkins reader* (pp. 133–178). Duke University Press.

- Tomkins, S. S. (1995b). What are affects? In E. K. Sedgwick & A. Frank (Eds.), *Shame and its sisters. A Silvan Tomkins reader* (pp. 33–74). Duke University Press.
- Tomkins, S. S. (1995c). The socialization of affect and the resultant ideo-affective postures which evoke resonance to the ideological polarity. In V. Demos (Ed.), *Exploring affect: The selected writings of Silvan S. Tomkins* (pp. 168–195). Cambridge University Press.
- Vaahtera, T. (2022). *Biopolitics of Swimming and the Re-articulation of Able-bodiedness: Bodies of Latent Potential*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Vuk, M. (2021). Vulnerability and flourishing: Are they exclusive? The common experience in the context of life circumstance. *Sociológia a Spoločnosť*, 6(1), 40–56.
- Wendell, S. (1996). *The rejected body: Feminist philosophical reflections on disability*. Routledge.
- Williamson, B. (2020). *Accessible America: A history of disability and design*. New York University Press.
- Wolf-Meyer, M. (2020a). *Unraveling: Remaking personhood in a neurodiverse age*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Wolf-Meyer, M. (2020b). Facilitated personhood. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 26(1), 167–186.
- Wolf-Meyer, M. (2020c). Neurological disorders, affective bioethics, and the nervous system: Reconsidering the Schiavo case from a materialist perspective. *Medical Humanities*, 46(3), 66–175.