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Notions of Well-Being, the State of Child Well-Being Research and the MYWeB Project

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Abstract

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There has been a growing interest among academics, policy makers and practitioners in the subjective well-being of children and young people (CYP). The recognition of CYP's rights to having a good childhood and good future life chances, coupled with the injunction from the New Sociology of Childhood to consult with CYP as active agents have resulted in an increasing number of studies on children and young people's well-being at national and international levels. However, the design, content, and modes of data collection used in these surveys are influenced by the question of the extent to which the researchers view children and young people as similar or different to adults and which participatory models they are undertaking for the young people in the study. However, the design, content, and modes of data collection used in these surveys are influenced by a number of factors including conceptual underpinning of well-being, its measurement and participatory model(s) used by the researchers for children in those surveys. This chapter reviews these aspects before describing the structure of this book with summaries of each subsequent chapter.

Keywords

Children
Young people
Well-being
Surveys

1.1. Introduction

Children's well-being is fundamental to that of society as a whole. Promoting children's well-being is not only vital in order for children to have a good childhood, but also as a firm basis for their future well-being as adults (Rees et al. 2012). How children fare through critical points of development affects their quality of life, their productivity, welfare dependency and the transmission of their later life outcomes to their own children (Richardson 2012). In recent years, child well-being has become a priority for the European political agenda. As part of the European cooperation on social protection and social inclusion,

the European Union (EU) has expressed its strong political commitment to promoting well-being among children which is reflected (among others) in the establishment of an EU Task-Force on child poverty and child well-being in 2007 (TARKI 2010). The Europe 2020 Strategy gives a new impetus to efforts addressing child poverty and social exclusion in the EU. A number of Member States have set specific targets or sub-targets relating to child poverty/social exclusion as their contribution to the headline European target to reduce the number of people at risk of poverty and social exclusion by at least 20 million by 2020 (Council of the European Union 2012). Therefore, Euro 2020 has given priority to fighting poverty and social exclusion and improving the well-being of children and young people.

This policy drive in improving children's well-being, the recognition of children's and young people's (CYP) rights to having a good childhood and good future life chances, coupled with the injunction from the New Sociology of Childhood to consult with CYP as active agents have resulted in an increasing number of studies on children's and young people's well-being at national and international levels. See Goswami et al. (2016) for the full review. These surveys provide invaluable policy data for improving children's lives. However, the design, content, and modes of data collection used in these surveys are influenced by a number of factors including conceptual underpinning of well-being, its measurement and participatory model(s) used by the researchers for children in those surveys. This chapter is divided into four sections to review those aspects. The first section focuses on the conceptual and definitional aspects of well-being. The second section reviews how well-being is measured in surveys highlighting its objective and subjective dimensions. The third section critically reviews key studies on child well-being to reveal the paradigm shift towards child-centric research. Finally, the chapter closes by describing the structure of this book with summaries of each subsequent chapter.

1.2. Well-Being: Definition

Despite substantial academic and policy interest in well-being over the decades, there is no universally accepted definition of the concept. In academic literature, it is used as an over-arching concept to refer to the quality of life of people in society (Rees et al. 2010b).

In defining the concept of well-being, a distinction is also made between the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches (Ryan and Deci 2001). Scholars influenced by the hedonic approach view well-being in terms of subjective happiness and the experience of pleasure versus displeasure broadly construed to include all judgements about the good/bad elements of life. Although there are many ways to evaluate the pleasure/pain continuum in human experience, most research within the new hedonic psychology has used assessment of subjective well-being (SWB) (Diener and Lucas 1999). SWB consists of three components: life satisfaction, the presence of positive mood, and the absence of negative mood, together often summarized as happiness. It is to note that a high level of subjective well-being is not assumed to develop from the absence of negative mood, but from a positive balance of negative and positive mood (Fredrickson and Losada 2005; Huppert and So 2013).

On the other hand, the eudaimonic approach maintains that not all desires—not all outcomes that a person might value –would yield well-being when achieved (Ryan and Deci 2001). It focuses on meaning and self-realisation and defines well-being in terms of the degree to which a person is fully functioning. Ryff and Singer (1998, 2000) have explored the question of well-being in the context of developing a lifespan theory of human flourishing. Ryff and Keyes (1995) spoke of psychological well-being (PWB) as distinct from SWB and presented a multidimensional approach to the measurement of PWB that taps six distinct aspects of human actualization: autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life purpose, mastery, and positive relatedness.

Self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan and Deci 2000) is another perspective that has both embraced the concept of eudaimonia, or self-realisation, as a central definitional aspect of well-being and attempted to specify both what it means to actualize the self and how that can be accomplished. Specifically, SDT posits three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—and theorises that

fulfilment of these needs is essential for psychological growth (e.g., intrinsic motivation), integrity (e.g., internalisation and assimilation of cultural practices), and well-being (e.g., life satisfaction and psychological health) (Ryan and Deci 2001).

Although there is much debate among the followers of these two approaches, evidence from a number of investigators (e.g., Biswas-Diener et al. 2009; Compton et al. 1996; King and Napa 1998; McGregor and Little 1998; Proctor et al. 2014) has indicated that well-being is probably best conceived as a multidimensional phenomenon that includes both hedonic (SWB) and eudaimonic (PWB) elements.

1.3. Measures of Well-Being: Objective vs. Subjective

In the literature, well-being is measured using both objective and subjective measures. Objective measures of social reality are those which are not filtered by perceptions and are independent from personal evaluations. On the other hand, subjective measures are supposed to explicitly express subjective states, such as perceptions, assessments and preferences for example (Noll 2013).

The use of objective measures such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), household income, household wealth and the income distribution, the proportion of children in education, educational attainment, life expectancy and crime rates are well established in research with children and young people's well-being. Although objective measures provide useful information on well-being at the macro-level, there are many criticisms and caveats to be taken into account when confronting such measures (McGillivray 2007). For example, Hicks (2011) terms the approach to using objective well-being measures as 'paternalistic'. This approach, he argues, assumes that certain things are good or bad for well-being and these are included in any indicator set and although there may be a model underpinning the choice, there is the danger that what is measured becomes what matters rather than what matters being measured. Some researchers (e.g., Pollard and Lee 2003) argue that the growth of 'developmental perspective' in analysing childhood well-being has influenced the research on child well-being by objective indicator-based measures.

In order to explain the usefulness of subjective measures in well-being research, Kroll and Delhey (2013) used the famous Thomas theorem (Thomas and Thomas 1928: 572) grounded in Symbolic Interactionism: 'If men (people) define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.' Thus, the subjective measures draw on human perception the individual themselves decide what is crucial in assessing their lives. In spite of some methodological issues such as the measurement problem, bias problem, and divergence problem (see Veenhoven 2002), they provide important additional information over and above objective measures on the quality of people's lives (Hicks 2011). There is growing consensus in support for considering subjective well-being as a necessary complement to objective indicators (Guillén-Royo and Velazco 2006; Veenhoven 2002; Stiglitz et al. 2009) and they together can create a rounded picture of the condition of the well-being.

1.4. Review of Key Studies on Child Well-Being

Research on CYP's well-being has made significant progress over the last decade. Therefore, the relevance of a new longitudinal study to children and young people's well-being needs to be evaluated in the context of scientific advancement in this area of research. Rees et al. (2010a) developed a typology to describe child and youth well-being studies. We adopt this typology to review three different approaches used in existing well-being studies:

1.4.1. Social Indicators

Influenced by the wider social indicators movement, this approach initially focused on measurement and trends in child well-being primarily using 'survival indicators' (Ben-Arieh 2008) such as rates of mortality, disease, and social problems affecting children (e.g., illiteracy, school failure). Major work

informed by this approach includes the Child and Youth Well-being Index (Land et al. 2001) in the United States (US), the National Set of Child Well-being Indicators (Hanafin and Brooks 2005) in the Republic of Ireland, the Children and Young People's Well-being Monitor (Welsh Assembly Government 2008) for Wales, the Local Index of Child Well-being (Bradshaw 2009) published by the Department for Communities and Local Government in England, Kids Count, a national and state-by-state effort to track the well-being of children in the US run by The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2012), OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) research on the comparison of child well-being across its 30 member countries (Chapple and Richardson 2009) and UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) publications (2007; 2010).

These indicator-based measures are useful to understand children and young people's well-being at the macro level. However, as Moore et al. (2014) argued, these macro indices predominantly focus on describing children's well-being at the expense of analysing the contexts that may contribute to or undermine their well-being. Using data from the 2007 US National Survey of Children's Health, Moore et al. (2014) developed micro-level indices (positive and negative) of child well-being by focusing on the three contextual domains of family, neighbourhood, and socio-demographic factors. Their indices significantly contributed to child well-being research as they clearly revealed how the independent variables (environment or context of children) play crucial roles in determining children's development and well-being. While such indicators are important to begin to redress issues of inequalities and social exclusion that negatively affect children's health and well-being, they tend to ignore the potential, attributes and strengths of children. More specifically, this approach can be argued to treat children as 'passive agents not capable of evaluating their own lives'.

1.4.2. Self-Report Surveys

The second approach emphasises measuring child well-being through self-report surveys. A number of instruments have been developed over the last decade to measure young people's own assessment of their lives. One of the most widely used is Huebner's Multi-Dimensional Student Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner 1994) which measures well-being in five domains—family, friends, school, living environment, and self. Similarly, Cummins and Lau (2005) in their work with children and young people in Australia have developed a Personal Well-being Index covering the domains of standard of living, personal health, achievement in life, personal relationships, personal safety, feeling part of the community, and future security.

The international Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey covers a number of key areas of young people's health and well-being. In the UK, several waves of the 'Tellus' survey (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills; Department for Children, Schools and Families) have surveyed young people about their well-being and views under the five themes of the Every Child Matters framework - Be Healthy, Stay Safe, Enjoy and Achieve, Make a Positive Contribution and Achieve Economic Well-being. The survey questionnaire included some questions about happiness and about relationships with family and friends. In addition, some large social surveys have begun to incorporate self-report instruments for young people. Understanding Society, previously known as The British Household Panel Survey, has a youth questionnaire for young people aged 11 to 15 about their happiness, feeling troubled and self-esteem (Rees et al. 2010b).

Outside of UK, the Danish Longitudinal Survey of Children, the Youth component of the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP), French Longitudinal Survey of Children, Swiss Survey of Children and Youth, the European Social Survey and the European Quality of Life Survey and some cross-sectional surveys (e.g., Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, Progress for International Student Assessment, Trends in International mathematics Science Study, the European School Project on Alcohol and other Drugs) included some questions on well-being and its various domains for young people in various age groups. For a full review of these surveys, see Richardson (2012), Gabos and Kopasz (2013) and Gabos and Toth (2011).

The main advantage of this approach is that it focuses on self-reported well-being. More specifically, the international surveys among children and young people provide precious comparable data on child well-being covering countries in the EU and beyond. For example, the OECD conducted a comparative analysis on child well-being that provides useful insights on the state of child well-being among 30 OECD countries by focusing on six well-being domains: material well-being; housing and environment; education; health; risk behaviours; and quality of school life (Chapple and Richardson 2009). Moreover, household panel surveys (e.g., Understanding Society) provide new opportunities to explore the effect of changes in young people's lives on their overall well-being. However, the concepts and domains of well-being used in this work were developed primarily from concepts which originated from the study of adult well-being. Fattore et al. (2007) argue that these concepts are not directly transferable to the measurement of the well-being of children and young people. Moreover, as Bradshaw (2009) argues, most of these studies include only a limited number of well-being domains and therefore do not provide the full picture on the state of well-being for children and young people. These limitations influence the development of the third approach: child and young people centric studies.

1.4.3. Children and Young People Centric Well-Being Studies

The third approach focuses on developing concepts and frameworks which incorporate children's perspectives. This strand is still at a relatively early stage, but there are a small number of examples of attempts to develop well-being frameworks from children's perspectives. Consultation exercises with children and young people in the Republic of Ireland (Gabhainn and Sixsmith 2005; Hanafin et al. 2007) and Australia (Fattore et al. 2007) have identified important differences in children and young people's ideas about well-being.

In this regard, the first large-scale project took place in the UK in 2005, undertaken by The Children's Society when it included open-ended questions asking young people about their views on well-being and the factors which promoted and hindered it in its national survey of 11,000 young people aged 14 to 16. The thematic and content-based analyses of these responses identified ten key areas (The Children's Society 2006). These were, roughly in order of their frequency of occurrence in the responses (1) family, (2) friends, (3) leisure, (4) school, education and learning, (5) behaviour, (6) the local environment, (7) community, (8) money, (9) attitudes, and (10) health. Following this child-centric approach, Rees et al. (2010b) developed an index of children's subjective well-being in England. This ten-domain index includes young people's satisfaction on family or carer, friends, health, appearance, time use, future, home, money and possessions, school, and amount of choice. A number of similar initiatives are also observed in the mainland European countries. For example, the Danish Youth Survey 2002 (Helweg-Larsen et al. 2004) examined young people's experiences and views on six themes including family, school, leisure and social networks, health and health behaviour, sexual experiences with peers and adults and violence in immediate surroundings. The DJI (Deutsches Jugendinstitut) Youth Survey in Germany explores adolescents' trust in social institutions, their political attitudes, interest in politics, value orientation as well as their willingness regarding political activity (DJI 2000).

This third approach has been taken further by an international group of researchers linked to Children's Worlds, the International Survey of Children's Well-Being (ISCWeB). The study aims to collect solid and representative data on children's lives and daily activities, their time use an in particular their own perceptions and evaluations of their well-being. Each of the 14 participating countries around the world collected data from a sample of 3000 children aged 8 to 12 in the first wave of the survey in 2012. The second wave of the survey covering almost 45,000 children from 15 countries across four continents has been completed and the third wave covering more than 30 countries is currently underway (Children's Worlds 2017). The results of this project are only now being disseminated. For some initial findings of this project, see Rees and Dinisman (2015), Montserrat et al. (2014), Sarriera et al. (2014).

Having the unique position of 'research *with* and *by* children', this third approach reflects a major paradigm shift in child well-being research (Mason and Danby 2011). Thus, the importance of including

children as active agents whose perspectives are heard in matters concerning them especially in child well-being policies is gaining momentum within child indicator research. However, child well-being researchers (e.g., Richardson 2012; Bradshaw 2009; Casas 2011) are increasingly concerned about the shortage of internationally comparable subjective data on children's and adolescents' perceptions, evaluations and aspirations which they consider useful for decision-making and evaluating social change.

In this regard, the data from the ISCWeB by the Children's World (2017) would supply invaluable comparative data on subjective well-being among a number of EU member states and countries beyond Europe. Several waves of data from these countries would also help researchers to examine change over time at the cohort or aggregate level. However, as Howieson et al. (2008) argued, such data appear to have lacking on detecting change at the individual level. Therefore, they do not enable an understanding of an individual's transition through different activities and statuses that might be linked to their subjective well-being. Since childhood is not static but dynamic, a holistic view taking into account both changes at different stages of children and young people's development and transitions is required. This explains why there is a growing belief that in order to better understand how these changes and other socio-economic factors related to these changes affect children's and young people's well-being a longitudinal survey using a '*children and young people centric approach*' is necessary (Goswami et al. 2016).

1.5. Structure of the Book

This book is a product of the MYWeB project, a feasibility study funded as part of the EU's Framework 7 research programme which addressed the call: 'Towards a European longitudinal childhood and youth survey'. The project sought to provide a balanced approach to assessing the feasibility of a European Longitudinal Study for Children and Young People (ELSCYP) through prioritising both scientific and policy imperatives. This meant that the project contained a range of elements which explored the scientific requirements of undertaking such a survey, the perceived uses and priorities of longitudinal data for child well-being policy development, including a cost benefit analysis, and a robust methodology to guide an options selection process in choosing the most appropriate research design to deliver both scientific and policy requirements.

The MYWeB project comprised of a series of 'work packages' in EU project language, which involved a variety of empirical elements and research methodologies with which to adequately undertake a fully rounded feasibility study. Each of the components of the MYWeB project are represented in this book and together represent a systematic analysis of the need for a Europe wide longitudinal evidence base with which to understand child well-being and develop suitable policy interventions which will, in a cost effective manner, serve to improve well-being. The first three chapters, including the present chapter, explore the rationale for undertaking the feasibility study for a longitudinal survey of child well-being across Europe, the social and political context within which the current state of affairs exists and the methodology of the MYWeB project.

MYWeB began with an analysis of the broad social and political context across Europe within which child well-being exists. This mapping of the current state of affairs in both policy provision and statistical evidence is detailed in Chap. 2 by Backeberg & Busse. This chapter shows that both policy and evidence coverage is highly uneven and concludes that while there is often broad agreement as to the policy imperatives in relation to the well-being of children and young people that the financial underpinnings of the infrastructure to deliver these policies varies wildly. It is, then, hardly a surprise that the availability of robust evidence to inform policy development is markedly different across Europe.

Many professionals across Europe are actively engaging in the child well-being agenda and it is appropriate for a feasibility study to use this expertise to inform and guide priorities for the future. MYWeB used a so called 'Delphi' survey, a survey of experts, in order to benefit from the knowledge and experience of 334 experts drawn from policy, practice and academia across Europe. In Chap. 3 Ozan et al. detail the elaborate methodology that was used to both inform and be informed by this panel of experts

using a three phase questionnaire during the course of the project which allowed us to go into significant depth when asking them about detailed, and often technical questions ranging from concepts of well-being, relative priorities to appropriate scientific instruments with which to collect data. The material from the Delphi survey was of value throughout the project to both inform and contextualize our understandings of how the policy, practice and scientific communities view the imperatives to improve child well-being.

Chapters 4 and 5 detail the current situation in relation to child well-being in Europe. Using both primary and secondary research, these chapters highlight the social and political context of the availability of child well-being evidence and of social policies. It also broaches the thorny issue of cultural and linguistic differences in the ways in which well-being is understood by young people in different parts of Europe. These chapters represent the necessary underpinnings from which such things as comparative research designs and instruments can be developed.

The comparative European requirements of a cross-national survey of child well-being requires that there is a deep engagement in understandings of well-being rooted in first-hand accounts from children and young people themselves. In order to develop common measurement tools there is first the need to establish where there are continuities and discontinuities with understandings of what contributes to well-being. In Chap. 4 Mihalik et al. report on qualitative research undertaken in Slovakia, Greece, Portugal and Estonia where children and young people expressed their own views on what well-being is within a series of semi-structured interviews and focus groups. This analysis of well-being from a grounded conceptual perspective shows some aspects which are relatively unproblematic in terms of definitions and measurement, most notably when well-being is understood as 'happiness'. However, important cross-cultural differences are apparent which suggest that there are distinct national-cultural variations in understandings of well-being which make the development of standard measurement tools challenging.

In Chap. 5 Busse & Backeberg undertake a review of both survey related and administrative data sets across Europe which can be used to inform debates about child well-being. This chapter provides an important analysis of the uneven coverage that currently exists and identification of gaps. Some countries are very well served with a long tradition of survey data collection, in particular longitudinal studies, while others have few or even no national longitudinal data sources that can contribute to understandings of child well-being. They conclude that while the availability of longitudinal data is increasing that there, nonetheless, is a good argument to develop a Europe wide survey which would immediately work towards plugging gaps in evidence and contribute to a better basis from which to identify well-being differentials and policy interventions to address these.

Chapters 6 , 7 and 8 focus on scientific and technical questions to do with survey design and instrument development. A key concern of MYWeB was the extent to which a longitudinal survey of child well-being was *technically* feasible. To this end it was important to review methodological challenges and assess the extent to which a complex survey design could actually be deployed across Europe. More directly, we needed to address questions of the extent to which it would be possible to collect structured data from children as young as 7 and 8 on their well-being using a common instrument developed in English and translated into other languages. Related to this is the scientific and ethical questions of involving children and young people in the design of research instruments as well as being research subjects.

In Chap. 6 Franc et al. reports on perhaps the most thorough set of cognitive tests undertaken in an international environment to date with regard to how seven and eight year olds understand structured questions which aim to measure their well-being. Almost 200 children from Croatia, Hungary, Hungary, Latvia and the UK were included in a systematic set of tests of question and answer structures. There was particular focus was on ensuring that children were able to understand what a question was asking about and that the response that they gave was a valid representation of their understanding and their feelings. This kind of work is an essential pre-cursor to questionnaire development as it shows the limits of understanding and therefore informs the answers to questions to do with the age group to be surveyed as

well as the form and content of the instrument with which to collect the data.

Longitudinal surveys are by their very nature complex, given their ongoing data collection requirements. Building in an international comparative angle as well as the inclusion of children renders this a far greater challenge. Chapter 7 by Ozan et al. details the precise challenges that must be adequately met in order to be satisfied that an ELSCYP is scientifically and technically feasible. Covering issues including sampling, fieldwork and attrition rates this chapter shows that while the challenges are immense, that there is sufficient capacity and expertise across Europe to suggest that an ELSCYP would be feasible.

Central to MYWeB was the belief that children should be involved in aspects of the design as far as is possible. This child centric approach was felt to be merited on the basis that many studies of child well-being have hitherto involved articulating what (adult) researchers feel is important without actually incorporating the views of children themselves. In Chap. 8 Nico et al. show that there are distinct advantages to including children and young people in research design, ones which will have a direct benefit to the quality of the data and such things as response and retention rates. Moreover, there can be argued to be an ethical imperative for their inclusion.

This book ends with two chapters which look to the future placing MYWeB in the context of national policy cycles and cost effectiveness as well as addressing issues relating to an accelerated cohort research design as was ultimately identified by the project as being the most suitable.

Chapter 9 by O'Leary & Fox discusses the policy cycle and raises questions to do with the political priorities which often shape policy debates and which can render evidence based policy making an aspiration as opposed to a reality. It also contains a cost benefit analysis which clearly shows that when compared to the extent of government spending on social policies which include child well-being that, while of significant expense, a 25 year long European Cohort survey is a tiny proportion of such expenditure and would represent a distinct advantage in being able to develop better and more cost effective social policies to enhance child well-being.

The final chapter by Pollock et al. draws together the findings from the different parts of MYWeB. It details the way in which the accelerated cohort design was selected as the most suitable research design for an ELSCYP and goes on to describe the necessary next steps in making it happen in terms of both the scientific aspects of the research design as well as the need to convince national governments and research funding bodies that this ought to be a high priority to ensure that we have an adequate evidence base in years to come to be able to understand child well-being and develop suitable policy responses. At the time of writing (November 2017) the European Commission has agreed to extend to the work of MYWeB by funding a project with will specify the design for the accelerated cohort and work to gain political support to ensure that it will have a solid funding base from which to develop.

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