Is there a place for children as emotional beings in child protection policy and practice?

Gabrielle Drake[a] [1], Michel Edenborough[b], Jan Falloon[b], Tobia Fattore[c], Rhea Felton[b],

Jan Mason[b] and Lise Mogensen[b]

aAustralian Catholic University, Australia

bWestern Sydney University, Australia

cMacquarie University, Australia

The emotional aspects of children's social relations have generally been marginalised in social science discourse. Children, who participated in the Australian segment of the Children's Understandings of Well-being (CUWB) project used various media to 'voice' the importance for their well-being of emotional relatedness with family, friends, animals and places. In this paper we place our construction of children's discussion of emotional relatedness in the context of the 'emotional turn' in research and briefly describe how the methodology for our project facilitated an understanding of the importance of children's emotions for their lives in the present. We then focus on the significance for child protection policy and practice, of what children tell us about feeling safe, as this relates to the importance of agency and relatedness with people and also with places.

Keywords: Children's well-being; emotional relatedness; child protection; agency; place and belonging

Introduction

In recent years an increasing recognition in the humanities and social sciences of the significance of emotions has challenged the historical dominance within Western thought and practice of an emphasis on rationality (see Brooks, 2014; Bondi, 2005). This 'turn to emotions' in which emotions can be conceptualised as a 'combination of thought and embodied feeling', takes account of the significance of

---

1
   Corresponding author. Email address: drake@acu.edu.au

social and cultural contexts in the framing of emotions (Lemmings & Brooks, 2014, p. 3). Emotion, as in the work of Bondi (2005), may be equated not only with individualized subjective experience but also with experiences in situated relational contexts. Indeed, as Hoggett (2000) notes emotions are fundamentally relational.

The relational aspects of children's emotional lives have generally been marginalised in social science discourses on children's emotions, by an emphasis on strategies for regulating their emotions, through a normative process that emphasizes individual self-control, within a construction of childhood as a time of 'becoming', of children needing to be managed, through relationships within the nuclear family and school, towards becoming self-governing adults (see Satka & Mason, 2004). Our understanding of children's subjective experiences are constrained by an emphasis that accords with particular cultural constructions of stages of emotional development and appropriate affective behaviour for children (e.g. Erikson 1950) and methods for strengthening children's competency for self-regulation (e.g. Kopp, 1989) It is argued that this framing, as exemplified in many articles in this and other journals that provide a forum for research within the developmental psychology tradition (for example D'Amico, 2018; Klappa et al., 2017; Mihic, 2016), is fundamental to the practices of professionals, such as teachers and social workers, charged with the implementation of state policies for the socialization of children towards their futures as adults. This framing has particular relevance for child protection and related child welfare policies which historically have reflected a cultural construction based on normative concepts of child development, in which attachment theory, built on the work of John Bowlby's 1950s research, is considered to have "revolutionized our thinking about the infant-mother relationship and about the importance and function of close relationships in general" (Bretherton, 1997, p, 33), and continues to be acknowledged as the "primary organizer of modern attachment theory" (Page, 2015, p. 87).

The positivistic assumptions underlying Bowlby's theories continue to influence contemporary child protection practices for ensuring child safety through, what Webb (2001) describes as, the "evidence-based preoccupation with positivistic methods" (p. 57). Even though there have been recent developments towards evidence-informed approaches which are more holistic (see Steglitz et al., 2015), a positivist model of child development remains influential in child protection practice. We see this, for example in a renewed focus on early childhood development and the almost exclusive emphasis on attachment in these theories (Hertzman & Boyce, 2010; Murphy, 2019). It is argued that such preoccupations contribute to an objectification of children in child protection work. Such preoccupations leave little space for practice that takes account children's emotional relatedness, a relatedness that work by qualitative researchers (for example Bessell & Mason, 2017; Fattore & Mason, 2017; McCauley, in-press) indicates is central to enabling children to feel safe though experiences of belonging and trust. The qualitative methodology which characterised our investigations of children's understandings of well-being, meant that when children discussed safety, it would often be in terms of their emotional experiences.

This paper proceeds by outlining the epistemological and methodological approach taken in our research before briefly outlining salient elements of the New South Wales child protection framework. This

provides the context for presentation of the two main findings of this paper, regarding children's safety and the importance of place, belonging and identity. We discuss how these themes demonstrate the significance of agency, ontological security, complex emotions, places associated with intimate social bonds and cultural identity for children's well-being. We conclude by discussing some of the implications for child protection policy and practice, summa-rising several of these in the concept of the agency-safety nexus.

The epistemological framing of the study's methods

The epistemological framing of our project enabled researchers to engage with the subjective experiences of children as research participants, so that emotions were "critical resources for data collection and analysis" (see Copp, 2012, p. 250), in attempts to understand children's 'inner' worlds in terms of the meanings they themselves give to them. Emphasis on the meanings children give to their experiences, as 'beings' in the present, distinguishes the qualitative approach and its methods from the more objectivist research on children that characterizes the dominant developmentalist research approach, as exemplified by the research on attachment theory. Satka and Mason (2004) have described how Bowlby's pioneering work in the developmentalist approach, in focusing on children as 'becoming' adults and employing methods based on the physical sciences, objectifies children in both the processes of investigation and in writing up the findings of these investigations in text.

In contrast, the qualitative child participatory methodology, on which the research analysed in this paper is based, engages children through methods which prompt, what Kraftl describes as, a "form of knowledge production where literal 'voicing' is accompanied by various other expressive registers (the visual, the haptic, the danced) allowing for 'an expanded notion of voice" within which children in participatory processes "operate relationally through engagement with each other and in solidarity with adults" (Kraftl, 2013, p.15). For example, in our research, when making videos to describe well-being, many children worked with peers and/or siblings, at times engaging in negotiations with parents and caregivers. Additionally, children in some sites, aware of the multi-national context to which the research in Australia would be contributing, engaged with the adult researchers in presenting their experiences in a format that explicitly placed their experiences in the Australian context.

In implementing the project, researchers engaged with children aged between 8 to 16 years of age living in New South Wales, Australia. Children were recruited from five different locations with differing socio-demographic characteristics, including areas with high levels of urban and rural populations, diversity of socioeconomic status and distinct ethnic groups. Fieldwork sites included children in a private playgroup, two local council after-school care centres, and two Catholic schools. In one of the schools we worked closely with a sample of children who have an intellectual disability. The project was conducted with considerable flexibility regarding time, in order to engage with children across the various sites and in order to allow for children's other time commitments. The sessions were open-ended, lasting for as long as the participants were engaged in the process. Typically, sessions lasted 3 hours with the length of interviews lasting between 20-40 minutes.

More than 100 children and young people participated in the research, with some children participating in all stages and others in some. The fieldwork processes varied across all the sites, based on the preferences and abilities of the participants, but was largely consistent with the fieldwork protocols used in the CUWB study (see Fattore, Fegter, & Hunner-Kreisel, 2018). This included in all cases an initial mapping exercise, where children were asked to 'map' important places, important people, important activities and so on, which then formed the basis of an individual interview or focus group. The 'expanded voicing' opportunities available to participants in the research generally extended over two field work stages and included drawing, photography, walking tours, making digital movies, mapping and sand play on specific well-being topics, virtual mapping using a widely used online mapping program. The activities provided a platform which facilitated further individual interviews or group discussions. Children were asked about what makes them feel good; what is important to them; and the everyday contexts in which concepts of well-being are experienced. While researchers did not directly focus on children's emotions, as with other qualitative research with children, using 'expanded voicing' opportunities, facilitated the voicing by children of emotions. Researchers also made reflexive field notes about the process and fieldwork context throughout both stages of data collection.

The findings discussed in the next section are derived from analysis of the various forms of data produced in the research, viz statements, maps, films and from the ethnographic field notes. In focussing on the findings relevant to child safety, we consider them in the context of contemporary NSW child protection policy.

Findings

Child emotions in child protection policy and practice

The concepts of safety, attachment and well-being, as linked with permanency, are central to the NSW 'Keep them Safe' policy document (NSW Government 2019) which states: "Child safety, attachment, wellbeing, and permanency should guide child protection practice" (parag. 1.5). In this document, while none of these concepts are defined, it is safety that is the focus and implicitly defined as being associated with 'risk of significant harm'. 'Safety' in policy documents tends to be an abstract concept, associated with concepts of 'attachment' and 'permanency' conflated with stability (e.g. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016). More recent policy, for instance the New South Wales FACS 'Practice First' (NSW FaCS 2019) framework, continue to use words such as 'relationships' and 'culture' in ways that typify what Featherstone, White and Morris (2014) refer to as a "rational vocabulary of expertise" that has the effect of hiding from view the emotional significance of child protection interventions (p. 8).

It might be expected that engagement of children through application of the 'participation principle' (NSW Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act s. 10, 1998) would be a factor in the translation of the abstractions of child protection policy, through a process of intersubjective child-practitioner relations, into the day to day operational practices of workers. However, a wariness by both children and practitioners in engaging in child participatory processes (Mason & Fattore, 2019) affecting

child protection decision making is typically reflected in the way child protection practice tends to ignore children as relational beings, as persons with emotions in the present for whom relationships are an important part of decision making about their care (see Bessell, 2015; Ferguson, 2017), so that, as Featherstone et al. argue, children can be made 'less safe' through "the lack of a rich engagement with children's identities" (2014, p. 18). We argue that it is in this context that findings from our research on child well-being about the significance of children's emotions, has relevance for decision making which attempts to increase child safety.

Feeling safe

In our research, children talked about safety in terms of social relatedness, and whether they were talking about physical safety or ontological security, it is in association with feelings or emotions. Where children talked about 'physical safety' in our research, they attached importance to agency in their protection of themselves, in terms of feeling in control. For example, while in the following instance the child, June (all names have been changed), would in an instance of feeling threatened rely on others to protect her, school, home, maybe the police station, fire station it is, she indicates, having knowledge herself of where this protection is to be found is important "because if you don't [know] the police and the fire station, if you don't know where they are, then, how would you feel safe if someone's chasing after you?"

The importance of agency in terms of children feeling they have some control over events in their lives, rather than being controlled by others, is made clear by one adolescent who states "I like my phone because I have complete control over it", and by another, Elizabeth, says she likes the way her bedroom can be organised by her, so it is in her control and she can separate out from other family members. This makes it her 'safe place':

> Elizabeth: I guess my safe place is my bedroom, because I'm in there the most and its calming because no one else is allowed in it. And it's got everything that I need, basically it's got my instruments and all my art supplies so, and my charger, so yeah, I guess that's really it, it's just the place I'm most comfortable.

The interconnections between emotions and a child's exercise of agency in decision making is illustrated in the following statement where Yanni questions the appropriateness of his protective actions towards his/her brother, when the brother was challenged to perform potentially unsafe feats…

> Yanni: …when we were doing camping last year in January-ish… this older boy he was two or three years older than me, and Terry respects anyone who is older than him and sometimes people take advantage. So he went up on the thing and a kid said I'll give you a high 5 if you jump off, and I told him, don't do it. Because I was, I wasn't falling for the kid, it was pretty stupid obviously…

In caring for his brother Yanni problematises in terms of moral agency, his actions to assist his brother to avoid risk of harm:

Yanni: And that's where, like I tried to, withhold, I was restricting him and I think he would have not hurt himself if I didn't restrict him but, because he then like slipped over, then… not being as strong as I am now, and he fell on the wrong angle and yeah, he sprained his arm… Liam is crying on the ground with his arm almost dislocated… I kind of felt like I should have done something, but I really couldn't have done anything else.

In this extract we can see a child struggling with a moral dilemma of the individual's responsibility as an agentic being for the brother about whom he cares. At the centre of these children's discussion of the importance of moral frameworks to making significant decisions is the exercise of moral agency defined by an individual's ownership of the decisions they make, through which they can indicate that they are moral individuals. But there is also an acceptance that the enactment of moral agency occurs within a context of inequality between adults and children.

The problematisation of the connection between protection and safety, as it connects with children's exercise of agency and feelings about being in control, and whether they or others are responsible for their safety, is further illustrated in the following extracts. In the first extract, Harry talks about an area where he likes to exercise agency, but in exercising his agency, in his fascination with different sorts of bugs, his actions are controlled by his mother:

Harry: … [A]nd I just did that because, like I looking at different sorts of bugs, like if I see some sort of black spotted, blue spotted bug, because I've seen it before, um, so yeah, I just sit down and have a look and wow … And my mum usually pulls me away from it, no, that's poisonous. Don't do that. Get away from that. Just so protective of me.

Similarly, Emily problematises how her mother curtails her agency to protect her:

Emily: She doesn't even let me walk to school, and walk back from home to school and when my – when my house is just down the road from my school. I just walk down there, down there and I just have to go down, take a turn and there I am at home.

While Sara explains the dilemma children experience between feeling safe and being protected as follows:

Sara: [E]specially being the oldest kid, you're expected to figure things out for yourself whilst being protected so I don't know, it's like, through my childhood I couldn't figure out things like public transport or going out with friends, so I won't know all that stuff when get out into being an adult

The ability of children, as indicated by these examples of discussions about feeling safe from physical harm, to reflect on and problematise protective actions as they connect with feelings of what is appropriate in terms of feeling safe, is largely ignored both in the literature and in policies and practices designed around children's participation in child protection decision-making (see Mason & Fattore, 2019). The significance for children of 'feeling safe' has been highlighted in research with children by Moore et al (2015) where they found that while adults define safety for children more in terms of protection from physical harm, "(c)hildren

and young people talk about safety and institutional responses to their safety concerns" (p. 2), they "defined safety in relation to how they felt" (p. 7).

This finding is reflected in our research where children were referring to 'ontological security' or the emotional safety they experience, as when they discuss safety in terms of family and others as being "there for me", for example when a child says that safety is about "the fact that my family is there and they can always be there for me" or, as Emily says:

> But what makes me even more safe is that I'm home – I'm, um, with either my brother or my parents. I feel more safe with my parents, let me tell you that. Like even my brother, like even though I'm the one who should be protecting him, but even having him there. It still makes me feel better.

Even though Emily's brother may not realistically be expected to protect his older sibling, as he could be more vulnerable in terms of (presumably) age, this notion of 'having him there' challenges the concept of vulnerability in concrete terms of age and frames protection in terms of the intersubjectivity of the siblings. Similarly, Agnes comments:

> We always have mum or dad in the house. And they are always checking up on me, so it just makes me feel a lot better at home, and safe.

The child's actual physical protection in terms of being checked on, is linked with an existential feeling of safety. Children's discussions of ontological security in connection with home and family have parallels with earlier research on Australian children's understandings of well-being (Fattore & Mason, 2016) where a child tells us that what makes her home feel safe is "Because my mum is there, I have a nice, cosy bed". In these examples children are emphasising the significance of feelings of trust, experienced in intersubjective relations with others, for feeling safe. Giddens, building on the work of Erik Erikson, claims that it is emotions experienced in relations with caregivers and the routines of daily life, that are at the crux of experiences of basic trust and ontological security (Giddens, 1991). The role of trust in relations, for feelings of security is evident when Gerald tells us that:

> Things that make me feel safe are, dogs – if you know them very well and they will protect you, like my grandma's dog, Junior. He would protect everyone in our family, absolutely everyone.

Lily similarly tells us how when she took a dog with her to protect her on a walk in the dark, the dog, Lolly "… loved it because she was so fast and every time I ran she ran with me." The extent to which pets can be a substitute, or supplement for people, in terms of the interconnectivity and ontological security has been demonstrated in a range of settings, including in residential aged care, for persons with mental health problems and in juvenile justice settings (e.g. Brooks et al., 2016). It is perhaps no surprise that pets provide a focus for an ethic of care and provide a sense of security more generally.

That these findings on the importance for children feeling safe, of continuity and trust in intersubjective relations, whether with parents, siblings or pets are significant for the protection/care system, where the emphasis is on protection from harm, is reflected in research by Mason and Gibson (2004), with children in care. In this research children emphasized their needs for ongoing connections with known persons, as well as with pets. Significant were connections based on familiarity, and having something 'in common' in terms of making meaning for themselves of who they are, their identities.

Place, belonging and identity

The significance of children's feelings of self, as it relates to the emotional connections they experience between social and material environments for feelings of security informs us of the complexities of children's attachment experiences. Familiarity is key to our findings on the ways in which children's attachment to particular places contributes to their experiences of security, through feelings of belonging and well-being. For example, Joelle discusses remembering the nature surrounds of her home in the state of Queensland, her first place or residence in Australia:

> Queensland is quite important because when we moved to Australia it was the first place we lived and we had a, like one floored house and then we al-so had banana trees and other trees surrounding, so we could pick bananas and eat them.

The emotional significance of specific places is evocatively described in Jake's description of going to the creek with his friends:

> Interviewer: What are you going to tell me? There's so much on here (refer-ring to the map), so many important things.
>
> Jake: Trees.
>
> Interviewer: Yeah tell me about trees.
>
> Jake: I like trees because you can climb them, they give you fresh air. If we didn't have them there would be no paper. Plus, there wouldn't be any air.
>
> Interviewer: So tell me about climbing up them.
>
> Jake: I like climbing trees because there's this thing that me and my friend in my street, because I live, there's a bush behind our house with a path, so you can go catch tadpoles and stuff, then the other way there's a tree with lots of leaves sometimes, and someone built a platform on it and before that, me and my friend called it the climbing tree, because it was really good to climb on. And yeah, and they also put a swing on it, um… Well, so it's, two streets up, we can either ride there on the road, or we can go through the bush while riding or walking, and we can bring food and stuff and have, well me and my, when friends come over we usually go up there and just have like a little picnic.
>
> Interviewer: Oh really, so is this like, do you do this with like an adult or just …

Jake: No just me and my friends. I ask if they want to go through the bush or on the road. But they usually say through the bush.… I really like catching the tadpoles.

In Jake's description we can assess the importance of the natural environment as an abstract concept (trees are important because they give you fresh air and paper), but the creek in particular, is a special place in which Jake can venture with his friends, to engage in a world which is their own and which becomes significant because it is separate from adults ("just me and my friends", "we can either ride there on the road or go through the bush"). In his description Jake moves from the abstract to the concrete in describing this place as important to his well-being. It is a place in which Jake and his friends can undertake activities on their own terms (climb the "climbing tree", "catch tadpoles", "have a little picnic"). As such it suggests the importance to children having autonomous spaces for their own activities.

Children's attachment to place has, in some quantitative, psychological research, been found to be analogous to their attachment to people for experiences of well-being (e.g. McBain 2010; Scannell & Gifford, 2017). Dazkir (2018) argues that place attachment "can be considered as a person's strong emotional attachment to a place or a sense of being inside" and is found to be associated with well-being (p. 253). Yet, as Jack noted in 2010:

While the social work literature rightly pays considerable attention to the importance for children's development and well-being of their attachments to people, there has been virtually no consideration of the role which is also played by their attachments to place. (2010, p. 755)

He states that in social work theory and practice children's relationships "are considered to have developed in a vacuum, rather than in specific places capable of leaving an indelible mark on a person's identity" (Jack, 2010). We argue this 'vacuum' can again be attributed to the dominance of normative, developmental theorists such as Erik Erikson in the framing of social work research and practices on children's identity issues (e.g. Collbridge, Hassett, & Sisley, 2017; Kools, 1997) and that it risks missing the significance of potential traumas associated with relocation for children's sense of identity and safety (See Dazkir, 2018).

A link between feelings of identity and memoried attachment to places is in our re-search conveyed by Belle, when talking about the house her grandparents used to live in, which was her mothers' house:

The old place, it was there for so long and they sold it, it was just a big thought. My Mum grew up in it, like they had it for so long, and when they sold it I was crying, it was, they sold it two, three years ago. And they are living in an apartment now. Like a little one. They don't have to walk up-stairs, but they, like just the house back then, since my Mum used to live there, whenever we pass the house it just makes me feel good, like know that has a bit of memory.

Cleary (1999) has pointed to the importance of acknowledging a subjectivity that "embraces the organizing influences of imaginal as well as real others" in enabling a defining of the self which moves beyond Bowlby's theorizing of attachment and loss, opening up possibilities for constructing self and identity in terms of the significance of relations in one's ancestry (p. 40-41). The imaginal is clearly evident in the

importance Belle places in her grandparents' home. Such ancestral attachment to home is illustrated in a discussion with Idha who tells us "I was born in Nepal, and stayed there until I was one, so and that's where my family [is] so that she 'was sad, [when} I had to leave". Idha has since travelled back to Nepal and spent time with her grandmother. When the researcher asks her "And how long did you stay with your grandma?" we learn that for her the place of home is still at times physically and linguistically, Nepal. She tells us "I was there for I think a month", and when asked "So do you speak Nepalese there?", she responds "Yes".

A discussion with another girl, Miriam, made similarly clear the significance for her identity of feelings of attachment to diverse cultures, through her ancestral heritage, within Australia but also as imported from different countries, through relatives. She tells the researcher how she is consciously shaping her identity through a legacy of having parents who embody Italian, Tongan, Fijian and Aboriginal background. When the researcher asks "is there anything else that you wanted to tell me about yourself, or what's important for you?" Miriam tells her, "Well what's really important is that I'm really proud to be all these different cultures and I'm really deep in my heart I really want to know everything that everybody knows". She tells the researcher how she intends incorporating this knowledge into a performance of her identity "actually I'm doing a dance … and it's my first time performing that … I can use all these actions to tell a story."

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate the significance of children's emotions in their discussions of the complex inter-relationship of different aspects of well-being as experienced by children. Based on our reconstruction of what children told us, we have shown that agency and safety are interrelated, in that feeling safe and secure are important to well-being because these feelings enabled them to act as agents and engage with life in a fear-free manner (as exemplified in Emily and Agnes feeling secure with important people around them). In our data this is evident where children discuss the importance of control for feeling safe and where children discuss the exercise of moral agency, for example where Elizabeth discusses her room as being a safe place. Yet they also describe the importance of being dependent upon others to pro-vide a sense of what we have described as 'ontological security' (for instance Gerald and Lily). This is also evident where children discussed providing ontological security to others, and therefore being depended upon, as an expression of moral agency. We can describe this relationship between safety and agency as the 'agency-safety nexus', which is somewhat different to the manner in which participation and protection is differentiated in, for example, discourses about children's rights, which also informs much child protection practice (Moore et al., 2015).

This agency-safety nexus is recognised and formally codified in the recognition of children's protection and participation rights, as principles within much child protection legislation (for example s.10 of the New South Wales Children and Young Per-sons (Care and Protection Act 1998) and most notably in the UN Convention on the Rights of the child. Yet reconciling these two principles remains a problem at the level of practice, where child protection workers, often as a result of limited re-sources and overly

demanding caseloads, find it difficult to reconcile the participation needs of children with their mandate to ensure children's safety (see Bessell, 2015; Ferguson, 2017; van Bijleveld, Dedding, & Bunders-Aelen, 2015).

Furthermore, the importance of emotional and relational aspects in children's discussions of well-being is also demonstrated in the way children described how both positive and negative experiences and emotions could be experienced as well-being, and often experienced at the same time. For example, in describing the importance of certain places, children's descriptions evoke both familiarity and longing or loss, which enhances the sense of well-being associated with a particular place and memories of that place. Emotions are rarely experienced in discrete ways, and those emotions associated with a sense of well-being are complex, not merely those usually associated with quality of life measures – happiness or satisfaction. This suggests that there is a limit to the usefulness of hedonic measures of well-being, which are often used as outcome measures in service provision. At the level of practice, our findings suggest the importance of supportive styles of casework that are developed through relationships and which demonstrate a commitment to the child, at least to complement outcome-based measures which have the potential to disregard children's everyday experiences in favour of ultimate objectives. In some jurisdictions we see that this relationship based approach is being adopted as practice principles. [2]

We have found in previous research that what appears to be an integration of contrasting elements is part of children's conceptualisation of a notion of resilience, about how they organise their lives so that they are okay and feel strong (Fattore & Mason, 2016). Our analysis of children's discussions of what is important to their well-being, also suggests that a sense of ontological security provides an important foundation for being able to engage in the world with a sense of confidence. The findings suggest that even experiences of adversity and failure can contribute to children's sense of well-being, especially if children have a sense of ontological security and are supported to reflect on and manage such experiences.

Our findings show that the exercise of agency is a social process, subject to change in terms of how agency is expressed, the spheres of life children exercise agency over and the kinds of topics over which children feel they should be able to make decisions. The exercise of agency is dynamic, the sphere of which is something which is a potential source of conflict between children and those adults tasked with their care. The degree to which children wish to exercise autonomy, or have agency and responsibility is sometimes at odds with adult's expectations of children. Where children feel they have too little agency and autonomy, this is sometimes expressed in children's frustration that they are misunderstood, patronised or belittled by important adults in their life, as is evident in the discussions with Harry and Emily. However too much responsibility can mean children feel unsupported and can undermine the ontological security that children in our study value as important to feeling safe, as Sara describes when she points out that "you're expected to figure things out for yourself whilst being protected".

We would further add to Sara's point that the boundaries of the exercise of agency are subtly renegotiated over time, whether through changes in practice or from explicit discussion about rules, especially rules about safe conduct. One impetus for this shift in the exercise of agency is the encounter

between children's self-understanding (about what they feel competent to do, which accumulates with experience) and significant carers understanding of their child. Where these perceptions match, then the agency-safety nexus is experienced as a sense of well-being. Where child and carer perceptions do not match, this can be a source of conflict between children and those responsible for their care around the exercise of agency, especially in relation to what is safe or unsafe to do. We see this, for example, in Emily's frustration about what she is allowed to do compared to what she feels capable of doing.

If this encounter between children's self-understanding and significant adults under-standing of the child is one feasible explanation for shifts in the exercise of agency, then we can infer that a sense of agency and ontological security cannot be sufficiently understood in atomised ways, as dominant frameworks of subjective well-being assume. Well-being is instead intersubjective, formed through, reliant upon, and existing in relationships- to one's self, with significant others and in encounters that constitute routine interactions in life. As R.D Laing (1978) noted, a basic human need is the requirement to feel secure with others. Several sociologists have drawn upon Laing's work to demonstrate that a sense of security is premised on trust relations, which provide some ability for individuals to develop a notion of their own self-identity (for example Giddens, 1991). This makes well-being something precarious, dependent upon these relationships, which are themselves subject to change. If the agency-safety nexus is also dependent upon how significant adults perceive the child's self, then carers' own fears about the world will be a significant influence on children's exercise of agency, but will also be subject to change if these adults' fears also change. Similarly, in children's experience of the routine interactions of life, then children's feelings of agency-safety can be bolstered through affirming experiences (such as small successes, convivial interactions) or undermined by negating encounters (such as experiences of trauma, violence or misrecognition). This means that rather than thinking about children's exercise of agency as something which develops over time according to a linear developmental logic, children's experiences and feelings of agency and safety are perhaps better understood as iterative, involving progress and drawbacks.

This contingent dimension of well-being resonates with the arguments made by Turner and Rojek (2001), who, in developing a sociology of the body, suggest that our physical vulnerability provides a justification for relationships of interdependence, between individuals and the state. This concept is especially pertinent for children who also lack social power, having limited resources to protect themselves against the dangers encountered as part of social life. In this respect, rather than child protection services using measures such as environmental mastery (Ryff, 1989) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1994) as appropriate indicators of well-being, concepts of relational autonomy may be more useful. Mackenzie, citing Miller (2012, p. 79) in developing a theory of 'relational autonomy' argues that "Caring is the process of responding to another's needs by understanding their self-determined ends, adopting those ends as one's own, and advancing them in an effort to cultivate, maintain, or restore their agency" (Mackenzie, 2013, p. 13) and that "care should be non-paternalistic, which respects and supports another's self-determined agency" (Mackenzie, 2013 p. 13). To avoid the liberal connotations of this construction, MacKenzie argues

that relations of dependence are not only those between individuals, but also between individuals and cultural groups, states and state instrumentalities, and discursive orders.

In our discussion of place, belonging and identity we have shown how children demonstrate whether a place is important by investing in that place emotional significance. We would suggest that these places have emotional significance because they connect the child with a larger group identification. This identification could be religious, racial, cultural or some other identification, for example where Idha and Miriam discuss their cultural heritage; or because they are associated with and solidify important social bonds within the intimate sphere, for example when Joelle discusses the importance of Queensland or when Belle discusses the home her grand-parents used to live in.

The interrelationship between specific places, many of which are quite local and act as a canvas for an emotional landscape for the child, and larger group identifications, suggests a connection between different geo-spatial scales for experiences of well-being (Levitt & Schiller, 2004). We can assess, in children's descriptions, the co-presence of micro-spaces - the spaces in which individual bodies take space (Joelle and the banana trees, Jake and the creek, Belle and the family home), to more global forms of space which might be the focus of comparative national and region-al analyses, for example cultural identity. Here, we are following spatial theorists such as Lefebvre and Massey, who insist that spaces are only significant or take on meaning because of the lived practices and the symbolic meaning attached to the space by actors (Massey, 1993), for example Miriam prioritising the importance of her Italian, Tongan, Fijian and Aboriginal heritage. By focusing on the ways in which social experiences are simultaneously constituted through local, regional, national, transnational and global processes, we can discern how understandings and experiences of well-being are an assemblage of influences that interact at multiple spatial levels (Fattore et al., 2018). This means that experiences of well-being are al-ways bound to context, as opposed to having abstract or universal qualities.

By emphasising the importance of places to identity and belonging, and showing how these are central to well-being, we suggest that any understanding of children's well-being necessitates concrete and particular description. Well-being places are populated with characteristics specific to the individual – certain people, relation-ships, physical and historical features important to that person, which provides a richness to experiences of well-being. As Kitayama and colleagues suggest "It is not just that different things make people happy in different cultural contexts - this is obviously the case. More significantly it is the ways of 'being well' and the experience of well-being that are different." (Kitayama et al., 2000, p. 115. See also Fegter & Mock, this issue). The importance of context indicates that for child protection practice, any use of abstract principles, such as the application of developmental criteria or risk measures for assessment and decision-making must at least be complemented by a more qualitative assessment of the specific context experiences of the child.

An emphasis on place also has the further advantage that it draws our attention to the intersectional inequalities that characterize certain places compared to others. We see this concretely in children's descriptions of safe and unsafe places in other re-search on children's well-being, which has significant

correspondence to spatial inequalities in material wealth and resources between local areas (Adams, Savahl, Florence, & Jackson, 2018; Akkan, Müderrisoglu, Uyan-Semerci, & Erdogan, 2018; Bessell & Mason, 2017; Coulton & Spilsbury, 2014; McKendrick, 2014). This effect is still to be explored in our fieldwork, where the geographical areas in which the fieldwork was undertaken are characterized by quite different levels of social ad-vantage and disadvantage. However, we feel this may be an important analytical category for understanding children's well-being.

Conclusion

Our findings, in identifying the relational aspects of children's emotional lives, represent somewhat of a challenge to the developmental framing of well-being, which we have suggested is fundamental to the practices of professionals, such as teachers and social workers, who are responsible for the implementation of child welfare, protection and education policies. We have argued that safety and agency are related in what we have described as an agency-safety nexus. Control is important for children experiencing safety, yet safety is also dependant on being cared for and caring for others, through acts of moral agency. Relationality is central to these interactions, with moral agency requiring relationships of dependence, which are some-times experienced as an ambivalence between exploration and protection. We have suggested that places of well-being are places of belonging and identity, in which places are invested with emotional significance because they are linked with strong social bonds, whether intimate or part of group identity. This has important implications for child protection practice in the Australian context, especially with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, in which place has extreme importance.

Dominant policy and practice frameworks in child protection emphasize risk assessment, risk management and risk prevention. In our findings, children's discussions of safety revolved around ontological security associated with people 'being there' for them and the presence of having trusted adults in one's life. Moreover, rather than seeing protection and participation as necessarily in conflict, we would suggest that agency and safety form a nexus, in that providing ontological security provides a foundation for children to exercise agency. We have pointed out that this means that the exercise of agency is precarious, dependent upon intersubjective relations and encounters in everyday life, and that the boundaries of what is safe and unsafe need to be 'negotiated' over time, with consideration of children's own self-understanding being critical in this process.

Further, if children's experience of well-being is dependent upon the well-being of others and vulnerable to the exigencies of everyday encounters, this suggests that it is neither possible nor desirable to eliminate risks that children may encounter in everyday life. However, we would argue that children's lack of social power places them at special risk, which is compounded for children who belong to social groups who experience misrecognition or social exclusion. This means that we need to develop collective responses to the risks which we encounter psychologically and physically as individuals and consider ways in which the inequality in the distribution of risks can be moderated.

These considerations seem especially pertinent for children. Our discussion of the agency-safety nexus suggests that children's own sense of agency develops through opportunities for supported risk-taking, which provides opportunities to develop competence and relatedly opportunities to further develop self-responsibility. We would therefore do well to take note of children's discussions of how their agency is dependent upon the care they receive from important people in their lives, when considering the nature and scope of the protection we provide children. We would argue from these findings that even where entry to care is favored by children, clean breaks from those people who have been key figures in their lives can disrupt children's potential for well-being. This occurs as a consequence of undermining what Giddens claims is 'the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action' (Giddens, 1990, p. 92).

Child protection practice and policy can be either autonomy supportive or control-ling. The importance of relational practice is evident in the large amount of research that documents the kind of attributes children involved in the child protection sys-tem identify as supporting their participation, things like workers taking the time to get to know the child, having conversations, listening, learning, understanding, responding and being open to the child, providing appropriate choices to children, dis-cussing the range of possible options and the implications of the range of choices available to the child (Bell, 2002; Bessell, 2011; Jobe & Gorin, 2013; Leeson, 2007; Munro, 2001).

Our discussion of place suggests that in any consideration of children's safety and child protection, we need to look not only at the child's family but at how larger contexts, from extended kinship networks to connections with larger groups, con-tributes to supports for children and their families and potentially enhances children's well-being. Such reasoning has been evident in the argumentation of child protection scholars such as Nigel Parton for several decades now. Parton and col-leagues have argued that child protection should be reconceptualised within the broader context of children's relationships with their families and communities. This focus on 'child welfare' attends to broader concepts of child and community well-being, shifting the focus to the conditions required by communities in which children can flourish. Principles of co-production are relevant here, in that a variety of community stakeholders, including workers, parents and children collaborate to identify what is required to support families care for their children, with workers acting as partners (Parton, 2006). Building on well-established principles of community development, it is an approach that recognises that effective service delivery relies as much on the knowledge assets and efforts of service-users, as it does the expertise of professional providers.

Endnote

[1] For example, this is central to the Practice First approach being adopted by the New South Wales Government (NSW FACS 2019). However, at the time of writing this approach is in the process of implementation.

References

Adams, S., Savahl, S., Florence, M., & Jackson, K. (2018). Considering the Natural Environment in the Creation of Child-Friendly Cities: Implications for Children's Subjective Well-Being. *Child Indicators Research,* 1-23. doi: 10.1007/s12187-018-9531-x.

Akkan, B., Müderrisoglu, S., Uyan-Semerci, P., & Erdogan, E. (2018). How Do Children Contextualize Their Well-Being? Methodological Insights from a Neighborhood Based Qualitative Study in Istanbul. *Child Indicators Research*, 1-18. doi:10.1007/s12187-018-9532-9

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2016 (AIHW). P*ermanency planning in child protection. Child welfare*, Series no. 64. Cat. no. CWS 58. Canberra: AIHW.

Bandura, A. (1994). Self-efficacy. In V. S. Ramachaudran (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Human Behaviour, Vol. 4*, (pp. 71-81). New York: Academic Press.

Bell, M. (2002). Promoting children's rights through the use of relationship. *Child & Family Social Work, 7*(1), 1–11.

Bessell, S. (2011). Participation in decision-making in out-of-home care in Australia: what do young people say? *Children and Youth Services Review, 33*(4), 496–501.

Bessell, S. (2015). Inclusive and Respectful Relationships as the Basis for Child Inclusive Policies and Practice: The Experience of Children in Out-of-Home Care in Australia. In T. Gal & B. Duramy (Eds.) *International Perspectives and Empirical Findings on Child Participation* (pp 183-206). New York: Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Bessell, S., & Mason, J. (2017). The role of intergenerational relationships in children's experiences of community. *Children and Society, 31*, 263-275.

Bondi, L. (2005). Making connections and thinking through emotions: between geography and psychotherapy. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, 30*(4), 433-448.

Bretherton, I. (1997). Bowlby's Legacy to Developmental Psychology. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development, 28*(1), 33-43.

Brooks, A. (2014). Theorising Emotions in the Social Sciences from 1800 to the Present. In Lemmings, D. & Brooks, A. (Eds.) *Emotions and Social Change: Historical and Social Perspectives* (pp. 46-62). New York: Routledge.

Brooks, H., Rushton, K., Walker, S., Lovell, K., & Rogers, A. (2016). Ontological Security and connectivity provided by pets: a study in the self-management of the everyday lives of people diagnosed with a long-term mental illness. *BMC Psychiatry, 16*, 409.

Cleary, R. (1999). Bowlby's Theory of Attachment and Loss: a Feminist Reconsideration. *Feminism and Psychology, 9*(1), 32-42.

Collbridge, A., Hassett, A., & Sisley, E. (2017). *"Who am I?" How Female Care Leavers Construct and Make Sense of Their Lives.* SAGE Open.

Copp, M. (2012). Emotions in Qualitative Research. In Given, L. M. *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 249-252). Thousand Oaks. SAGE Publications, Inc.

Coulton, C., & Spilsbury, J. (2014). Community and Place-Based Understanding of Child Well-Being. In A. Ben-Arieh, F. Casas, I. Frønes, & J. E. Korbin (Eds.), *Handbook of child well-being: Theories, methods and policies in global perspective* (pp. 1307–34). Dordrecht: Springer.

D'Amico, A. (2018). The Use of Technology in the promotion of Children's Emotional Intelligence: The Multimedia Program 'Developing Emotional Intelligence'. *International Journal of Emotional Education, 10*(1)*,* 47-67.

Dazkir, S. (2018). Place Meaning, Sense of Belonging and Personalization Among University Students in Turkey. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, 46*(3), 252-266.

Erikson, E. H. (1950). (1963). *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton.

Fattore, T., & Mason, J. (2016). *Children and Well-Being: Towards a child standpoint.* Springer: Dordrecht.

Fattore, T., & Mason, J. (2017). The Significance of the social for child well-being. *Children and Society, 31*, 276-289.

Fattore, T., Fegter, S., & Hunner-Kreisel, C. (2018). Children's understandings of well-being in global and local contexts: theoretical and methodological considerations for a multinational qualitative study. *Child Indicators Research, 12*(2), 385-407. doi: 10.1007/s12187-018-9594-8

Featherstone, B., White, S., & Morris, K. (2014). *Re-Imagining Child Protection: Towards Humane Social Work with Families*. University of Bristol: Polity Press

Fegter, S., & Mock, C. (forthcoming) Emotional Geographies of Children´s Well-being: The Spatial and Cultural Constitution of Be-(long[-ing]). *International Journal of Emotional Education,* April, 2019.

Ferguson, H. (2017). How Children Become Invisible in Child Protection Work: Findings from Research into Day-to-Day Social Work Practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, *47*, 1007-1023.

Giddens, A. (1990). *Consequences of modernity*. Oxford: Polity Press.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hertzman, C., & Boyce, T. (2010). How experience gets under the skin to create gradients in developmental health. *Annual Review of Public Health, 31*, 329–47.

Hoggett, P. (2000). Social Policy and the Emotions. In Lewis, G, Gerwirtz, S. & Clarke, J. (Eds.) *Rethinking Social Policy* (pp. 141 -155). London: Open University Press in association with SAGE.

Jack, G. (2010). Place Matters: The Significance of Place Attachments for Children's Well-Being. *British Journal of Social Work, 40*, 755-771.

Jobe, A., & Gorin, S. (2013). If kids don't feel safe they don't do anything': young people's views on seeking and receiving help from Children's Social Care Services in England. *Child & Family Social Work*, *18*(4), 429-438.

Kitayama, S., Markus, H., & Kurokawa, M. (2000). Culture, Emotion, and Wellbeing: Good Feelings in Japan and the United States. *Cognition & Emotion,14*(1) 93-124.

Klappa, A., Belfield, C., Bowden, B., Levin, H., Shand, R., et al. (2017). A benefit-cost analysis of a long-term intervention on social and emotional learning in compulsory school. *International Journal of Emotional Education, 9*(1), 3-19.

Kools, S. (1997). Adolescent identity development in foster care. *Family* Relations*, 46*(3), 263-271.

Kopp, C. (1989). Regulation of Distress and Negative Emotions: A Developmental View. *Developmental Psychology, 25*(3), 343-354.

Kraftl, P. (2013). Beyond 'voice', beyond 'agency', beyond 'politics'? Hybrid childhoods and some critical reflections on children's emotional geographies. *Emotion, Space and Society, 9*, 13–23.

Laing, R. D. (1978). *Conversations with children.* London: Penguin Books.

Leeson, C. (2007). My life in care: experiences of nonparticipation in decision-making processes. *Child & Family Social Work*, *12*(3), 268–277.

Lemmings, D., & Brooks, A. (2014). (Eds.) *Emotions and Social Change: Historical and Social Perspectives*. New York: Routledge.

Levitt, P., & Schiller, N. G. (2004). Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society. *International Migration Review, 38*(3), 1002-1039.

Mackenzie, C. (2013). What Is Vulnerability, and Why Does It Matter for Moral Theory? In C. Mackenzie, W. Rogers & S. Dodds (Eds.), *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (pp 1-29). Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Mason, J., & Fattore T. (forthcoming). Child Protection and Child Participation: A risky or emancipatory conjunction? In E. Fernandez & P. Delfabbro (Eds.), *Child protection and the Protective Care Continuum: Theoretical, empirical and practice insights*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Mason, J., & Gibson, C. (2004). *The needs of children in care: a report on a research project: developing a model of out-of-home care to meet the needs of individual children, through participatory research which includes children and young people.* Social Justice and Social Change Research Centre, University of Western Sydney & Uniting Care Burnside. NSW.

Massey, D. (1993). Questions of Locality. *Geography, 78*(2), 142-149.

McBain, K. (2010). *Adult Attachment theory and attachment to place: exploring relationships between people and places*. [Phd thesis] James Cook University. Retrieved on 16th January 2019 from: http://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/19819/

McCauley, C. (in press). Exploring eleven year old children's understanding of well-being using wellbeing maps: Commonalities and divergences across areas of varying levels of deprivation and ethnic diversity in an English Qualitative Study. *Children and Youth Services Review, 97*, 22-29.

McKendrick, J. (2014). Geographies of Children's Well-Being: in, of, and for Place. In A. Ben-Arieh, F. Casas, I. Frønes, & J. E. Korbin (Eds.), *Handbook of child well-being: Theories, methods and policies in global perspective* (pp. 279–300). Dordrecht: Springer.

Mihic, J., Novak, M., Basic, J., & Nix, R. (2016). Promoting Social and Emotional Competencies among Young Children in Croatia with Preschool PATHS. *International Journal of Emotional Education*, *8*(2), 45-59.

Miller, S. C. (2012). *The Ethics of Need: Agency, Dignity and Obligation*, Routledge, New York.

Moore, T., McArthur, M., Noble-Carr, D., & Harcourt, D. (2015). T*aking Us Seriously: children and young people talk about safety and institutional responses to their safety concerns*. A Report for the Royal Commission into Institutional Abuse.

Munro, E. (2001). Empowering looked-after children. *Child & Family Social Work, 6*(2), 129–137.

Murphy, E. (2019). The first 2000 days: the importance of public policy at the beginning of a child's life. *Improving Outcomes Together: Their Futures Matter Conference*, February 12, 2019, Sydney.

New South Wales family and Community Services [NSW FaCS] (2019) *NSW Practice First Framework*, Retrieved on 10th March 2019 from:https://www.facs.nsw.gov.au/providers/children-families/child-protection-services/practice-framework.

New South Wales Government (2019). Keep them safe. Retrieved on 10th March 2019 from: *www.keepthemsafe.nsw.gov.au*

NSW Wales Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998, s. 10. Retrieved on 21st December 2018 from: http://www6.austlii.edu.au/cgi bin/viewdoc/au/legis/nsw/consol_act/caypapa1998442/s10.html

Page, J. (2015). The Legacy of John Bowlby's Attachment Theory. In David, T., Goouch, K. & Powell, S., (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Philosophies and Theories of Early Childhood Education and Care* (pp 80-90). London: Routledge.

Parton, N. (2006). *Safeguarding Childhood: Early Intervention and Surveillance in a Late Modern Society.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 57*(6), 1069-81.

Satka, M., & Mason, J. (2004). Deconstructing post-World War II conceptualisations of children and child-adult relations. *International Journal of Critical Psychology*, *11*(4), 87–110.

Scannell, L., & Gifford, R. (2017). Place Attachment Enhances Psychological Need Satisfaction. *Environment and Behaviour*, *49*(4), 359- 389.

Steglitz, J., Warnick, J. L., Hoffman, S. A., Winter, J., & Spring, B. (2015). Evidence Based Practice. In J. D. Wright (Ed.) *International Encyclopaedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences* (pp. 332-338), Elsevier: Amsterdam.

Turner, B. S., & Rojek, C. (2001). *Society & Culture: Principles of Scarcity and Solidarity*. Sage: London.

van Bijleveld, G. G., Dedding, C. W. M., & Bunders-Aelen, J. F. G. (2015). Children's and young people's participation within child welfare and child protection services: a state-of-the-art review. *Child & Family Social Work*, *20*, 129–138.

Webb, S. (2001). Some Considerations on the Validity of Evidence-Based Practice in Social Work. *British journal of Social Work, 31*, 57-59.