

# 10 Childhood, wellbeing, and transnational migrant families

## Conceptual and methodological issues

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### Introduction

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the concepts of ‘wellbeing’ and ‘transnational families’ have become part of research consciousness as well as everyday discourse so that there is now a range of studies on both. The proliferation of work on wellbeing has resulted from recognition that wellbeing, happiness, and outcomes for children, families, and society are interlinked. It follows from this that there are likely to be particular issues of wellbeing for ‘transnational families’. Indeed, as intimate life, relationships, and families have been increasingly opened up to scrutiny, it has been recognized that migration status differentiates the experiences and everyday practices of families. Yet, while both ‘wellbeing’ and ‘transnational families’ have gained traction, there are relatively few studies that explicitly address the wellbeing of transnational families (Mazzucato and Schans, 2011; Mazzucato, et al., 2015), particularly from the perspectives of their various members. This may be because wellbeing is frequently employed in individualizing ways that do not address the impact of sociostructural issues on family wellbeing (Dreby, 2015). It is clear, however, that differences among families and children, including inequalities, are central to children’s wellbeing in their families. If this criticism is to be taken seriously, a holistic understanding of family wellbeing requires engagement with the ways in which different family members are simultaneously positioned in multiple social categories of, for example, nation, generation, and gender, as well as social class and racialization.

This chapter makes a contribution to thinking simultaneously about wellbeing and transnational families, two categories that are rendered elusive because they are both extensive and encompassing. Wellbeing, in particular, is subject to contentious debate about its conceptualization and methodologies (White, 2016) and in the relatively rare studies where wellbeing and transnational families are brought together, methodological debate is often also at play (Mazzucato and Schans, 2011) because the explanations generated and understandings produced depend on the data and analyses generated. This chapter, therefore, considers the conceptual and methodological issues raised

in studying the wellbeing of transnational families. In order to do so, it draws on the concept of intersectionality, which is concerned with the ways in which people are multiply positioned. The chapter suggests that intersectionality should thus be central to considerations of wellbeing by presenting examples of how the intersections of gender, social class, racialization, and sexuality impact childhood and hence (transnational) family wellbeing, focusing particularly on children in such families. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first discusses contemporary conceptualizations of wellbeing. It includes examination of both family relations and the ways in which families are sociostructurally positioned. The second section employs the concept of intersectionality to engage with the issue of wellbeing for transnational families, particularly in relation to children and young people from minority ethnic groups. The final section discusses methodological issues that need to be considered in order to take thinking about the wellbeing of transnational families forward. It presents two examples to illuminate these issues and to propose some fruitful methodological approaches. The chapter argues for a multidisciplinary perspective in the study of the wellbeing of transnational families, taking into account the viewpoints and experiences of the particular family members involved.

### **Theorizing wellbeing**

A particular impetus for concern with family wellbeing was the publication in 2007 of the UNICEF quantitative comparison of children's happiness and wellbeing in 21 affluent countries. In the UNICEF domains (material; health and safety; education; peer and family relationships; behaviours and risks; and subjective wellbeing) the UK scored very low. This result was shocking and puzzling for many policy makers and researchers in Britain. Internationally, it fuelled many analyses and studies of childhood and family wellbeing, including UNICEF's publication of a qualitative research comparison of Spain, Sweden, and the UK that also showed that children's lives were qualitatively worse in the UK than in Spain and Sweden (Ipsos MORI and Nairn, 2011).

In the years since the publication of the 2007 UNICEF report, wellbeing has become commonplace and there are now thousands of studies on wellbeing, most of which are quantitative attempts either to refine the domains that should be included in wellbeing scales and/or linking particular domains with outcomes. The debate generated since the UNICEF (2007) report served to popularize the term 'wellbeing' and it is now a trope for the conditions considered necessary to ensure that children maximize their potential, can live happy, successful lives, and contribute to society. This appears straightforward, but definitions of wellbeing have been much debated as the term has become commonplace. In 2008, Ereaut and Whiting explained that, despite its ubiquity, there is no straightforward agreement about what constitutes 'wellbeing'.

‘Wellbeing’ is a ubiquitous term, occurring frequently and widely in public discourse. It is ... not yet present in the unprompted discourse of parents and children and indeed is not well understood by these groups. ... Within academic science, it is often taken for granted as something that ‘is’, and which simply needs investigating. ... some studies, for example, draw on the positive psychology movement and might characterize wellbeing as “positive and sustainable characteristics which enable individuals and organizations to thrive and flourish”. ... Within the science discourse, however, there are also more critical approaches ... [that do] not accept wellbeing as a ‘thing’ that needs research to uncover its essential nature, but as a social and cultural *construction* (Ereaut and Whiting, 2008).

Since the term ‘wellbeing’ is in everyday usage and appears incontrovertibly positive, it might be expected that its popularity in academic work and policy is also accepted as necessarily good. Wellbeing indices, for example, have been adopted by the Royal Kingdom of Bhutan instead of economic indicators, and the then UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, introduced a Happiness Index in 2012, although economic indicators such as Gross Domestic Product are still recorded in the UK (Bentley, 2012). However, as White (2010) suggests, wellbeing is always a political process grounded in place and time. A major criticism of the ways in which wellbeing is frequently studied (with its links to happiness studies and the ways in which it is picked up in policy) is that it individualizes and depoliticizes children’s (and adults’) lives and oversimplifies international comparisons (Morrow and Mayall, 2010; Manderson, 2005). As a result, it both focuses on economic indicators and neglects the crucial role of economic inequalities, although there is ample evidence that economic inequality in societies is associated with poor wellbeing (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). It is one reason that Gross Domestic Product is not a satisfactory proxy for wellbeing. Schwanen and Atkinson (2014, p.100) point out that, while wellbeing can help academics and policymakers understand how life can be made better for individuals and communities, it can also “become a cover for the promotion of potentially oppressive norms and practices”.

Despite the lack of consensus about what constitutes wellbeing, there is general agreement that ‘wellbeing’ has to be viewed as multidimensional, consisting of physical, economic, social, emotional, and psychological dimensions. An influential review of wellbeing by the UK New Economics Foundation at the beginning of the 21st century concluded that it is linked to a range of desirable health, social, and educational outcomes, including optimal development in childhood and over the life course (Marks and Shah, 2004). Wellbeing is also a dynamic state, rather than a static achievement, so that it varies in different contexts and changes over time. It is enhanced when people can “... develop their potential, work productively and creatively, build strong and positive relationships with others, and contribute to their

community” (Jenkins, et al., 2008, p.10). Findings such as these are encapsulated in the five ‘postcards’ devised by the New Economics Foundation (2008), each with a slogan condensing the factors identified as central to wellbeing for anybody, namely: connect, be active, take notice, keep learning and give (i.e., make a contribution). Schwanen and Atkinson (2014) argue that consistently conceptualizing wellbeing in terms of multiplicity reduces the limitations of the term and their negative implications for the most vulnerable in society. From a review of the literature, Statham and Chase succinctly summarize the research findings on children’s wellbeing as follows:

There is some emerging consensus that childhood wellbeing is multi-dimensional, should include dimensions of physical, emotional and social wellbeing; should focus on the immediate lives of children but also consider their future lives; and should incorporate some subjective as well as objective measures (Statham and Chase, 2010, p.2).

In pointing out that childhood wellbeing should focus on children in the here and now, Statham and Chase’s summary fits with what has been called the ‘new’ sociology of childhood over the last 30 years. One crucial insight from the sociology of childhood was that, in order to understand childhood and children’s lives, researchers should focus on children’s current lives, rather than viewing them only as adults in the making (James and James, 2012). It is, therefore, important not only to focus on children’s deficits, what they cannot (yet) do and what is wrong in their lives, but also on what they can, and actually do, do (Pollard and Lee, 2003). Statham and Chase’s (2010) summary also fits with developmental psychology notions that children’s current lives are important to their future prospects. In recognition of this, ‘wellbecoming’ has increasingly been recognized as conceptually important, with education and learning, not surprisingly, being viewed as important routes to wellbeing. Underpinning all the dimensions Statham and Chase identify is an economic dimension in that economic inequality is associated with poor wellbeing for society as a whole as well as for individuals (Ballas, Dorling and Shaw, 2007; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). The immediate and future lives of children are necessarily dependent on the socioeconomic circumstances in which they live.

In the above extract, Statham and Chase (2010) also point out the importance of subjective wellbeing. The name comes from the subdiscipline of positive psychology and is an umbrella term to encompass the overall evaluations people make of their experiences and lives. These are affective, cognitive, embodied, and socioeconomic (Diener, 2013) and include self-acceptance, environmental mastery, purpose in life, personal growth, positive relations with others, and autonomy (Haworth and Hart, 2007). It is widely agreed that objective measures of wellbeing are not in themselves sufficient for understanding outcomes or the development of policy. This is because findings developed from scalar measures of domains of wellbeing do not engage

with the ways in which people themselves feel about their experiences and their personal approach to psychological wellbeing impacts on their quality of life and life satisfaction and outcomes (Ryff, et al., 2006). Both subjective and 'objective' wellbeing are important for outcomes in that people sometimes like to do things that damage their wellbeing or wellbecoming. If, for example, people have no positive evaluations of their experiences and lives, they are unlikely to thrive. In addition, children, as well as adults, have subjective understandings of what contributes to their wellbeing. In a qualitative Australian study, Fattore, Mason and Watson (2009) found that 8–15-year-olds understood wellbeing in relation to their significant relationships and their emotional lives. They believed that it included a positive sense of self, having some agency and control in everyday life and security and safety. From quantitative analyses, Bradshaw (2016) also found that children viewed a sense of freedom and relationships with their families as most important to their subjective wellbeing.

The centrality of relationships to wellbeing partly accounts for why issues of wellbeing are linked to notions of resilience, which is also currently a common trope for good outcomes. While it is frequently treated as an individual characteristic, recent theorizing grounded in research suggests that it is the case neither that resilience inheres in individuals nor that environments are risky or protective in themselves. Rather it is an interplay between both factors. Some contexts and experiences enable resilience for some people, but not others (Rutter, 2006). Adversity affects people in different ways with the result that what is apparently a similar environment and the same events can lead to different outcomes and reactions. It is of course difficult to establish that environments are similar since an important development in family psychology is the recognition that even siblings with the same parents live in 'non-shared environments' because, for example, they are born in different years that may constitute different family or societal periods; they may look different; meet different people; and show different characteristics with the result that people react to them in different ways (Asbury, et al., 2003; Mulleaux, et al., 2009). It is for such reasons that some people have relatively good outcomes despite bad experiences, while others have relatively poor outcomes from apparently less disadvantageous circumstances. The picture is even more nuanced in that people may be resilient to some difficult experiences but not others, and they may be resilient in some outcomes (e.g. education), but not others (e.g. relationships or jobs). The same experience can, therefore, produce different findings in different domains (Rutter, 2006). Resilience is, therefore, about the ways in which people can cope with adversity and risk experiences or overcome them. In other words, it is about relative resistance to risk experiences. Relationships are important to resilience (and to wellbeing) in that who it is that provides help and support at particular times can make important differences in how people deal with circumstances (Hauser, Allen and Golden, 2009). Thus, a lifespan perspective is important in that whether or not people overcome stress or adversity may partly depend

on whether they have had previous exposure to risks in controlled circumstances, rather than having been protected from all risks and adversity. Rutter (2006) points out that exposure to some risk and adversity in circumstances where children are protected from the worst impacts can 'steel' them to deal with problems (Rutter, 2006). Equally, overcoming adversity depends on experiences after adverse events have occurred and whether experiences following adversity help ameliorate negative effects or reinforce them. The factors that facilitate resilience may thus include personal agency, coping strategies, socioeconomic contexts and the nature of environment and relational contexts. This multidimensional perspective explains why some things work in some situations and not in others and why a single strategy is unlikely to work in every circumstance. In practice, those working on wellbeing sometimes shift focus between different domains and so different ways of understanding it (Hone, et al., 2014). As White (2016) suggests, this plurality is a strength, with the concomitant weakness that it is frequently not clear how wellbeing is being conceptualized.

The above discussion of the conceptualization of wellbeing raises important issues for a consideration of transnational families and wellbeing. First, it is important to take a multidimensional perspective that brings together physical, material (including socioeconomic), emotional, and social dimensions, and to recognize the interlinking of subjective and 'objective' perspectives. A multidimensional approach requires a dynamic rather than a static view of wellbeing. Relationality is an important part of this perspective, so that families have to be viewed as central to the wellbeing of all their members, including children, over the lifespan. It is, however, important to study families in ways that do not individualize, decontextualize, and depoliticize people's lives while over-simplifying international comparisons (Morrow and Mayall, 2010; White, 2017). A focus on 'wellbecoming' means that children and young people's learning as well as the quality of their lives and experiences are central to wellbeing (Statham and Chase, 2010). Yet difference and inequality are frequently left silent in work on wellbeing, particularly in relation to children. Using the concept of intersectionality, the next section will examine the issue of difference and inequality in relation to wellbeing in the case of transnational families.

### **Transnational families, intersectionality, and wellbeing**

Before engaging with the wellbeing of transnational families through the lens of intersectionality, this section begins by outlining prevalent academic understanding of the characteristics of transnational families. By definition, transnational families are spread across nation-states so that family and household are not co-resident unities (Goulbourne, et al., 2010). In order to be categorized as transnational families, however, family members need to share a sense of collectivity (Bryceson and Vuorela, 2002). They are often characterized by complex care arrangements that shape this sense of collective

belonging across international boundaries. The research available indicates that transnational families face a range of issues relevant to their positioning as children, mothers, and fathers. Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (1997), who coined the term 'transnational motherhood', suggested that women's geographical separation from their children can produce a sense of liminality, ambiguity, and indeterminacy of identity: a sense of simultaneously 'being here and there'. This is partly because it is often very difficult for mothers to develop new lifestyles in a new country while ensuring that their children are well cared for in other countries (Lutz, 2008). Fathers have been largely neglected in research on transnational families, although some research is now being done (Sørensen and Vammen, 2014; Souralová and Fialová, 2017), but relatively little is known about their experiences of being part of transnational families. However, the burgeoning work done on transnational families in general points out that it is generally mothers who take the responsibility for making arrangements for their children abroad as well as working to earn money to support them and enable family reunion (Budginaite and Juozeliuniene, 2018). This is borne out in a study of Filipino/a 'children of migration', where Parreñas (2005) found that the mothers' hard work provided material comforts that their children very much appreciated, even though they were often particularly sad about their mothers' absence.

It is possible for transnational families to maintain shared imaginaries and narratives of belonging through contact and visits in either direction (Yeoh, Huang and Lam, 2005) and through 'virtual intimacies' (Wilding, 2006). They are thus sometimes able to maintain the simultaneity of family members' lives across transnational space through shared activities, routines, and institutions (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004). This geographically separated simultaneity takes effort, resources, and organization to maintain and so is emotionally, cognitively, and financially costly (Orellana, et al., 2001). Transnational families thus have to negotiate transnational circuits of emotion, material goods, and financial support. Wolf (2002) coined the term 'emotional transnationalism' to capture the emotional ties that are evoked, despite migration and geographical separation. The work of emotional (and often economic) maintenance across national borders often falls to women (Skrbiš, 2008). Children's emotions are less explored and there is a dearth of research on transnational relations other than parent-child.

The above-mentioned complex and layered dimensions of transnational family lives underline the importance of the theoretical concept of intersectionality in arriving at a nuanced understanding of the wellbeing of transnational family members and particularly that of children.

Intersectionality has come to be recognized as fruitful for analysing and explaining the complexity and plurality of contemporary life. The term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to account, theoretically, for what she perceived as the systematic invisibility of black women in US legal processes. Crenshaw provided examples of how black women's experiences of discrimination are distorted when analysts focus only on a single category of

social inequality (e.g. ‘femaleness’ or ‘blackness’). She argued that black women’s positioning and the discrimination to which they are subjected is “greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (Crenshaw, 1989, p.140). In other words, simple additive models cannot account for the complexity that arises from the fact that social categories never operate in isolation. The simultaneity of categories such as gender and racialization (Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Collins and Bilge, 2016) means that while not all the possible categories of difference and inequality are relevant in every context, it is important to analyse the multiple social categories that are relevant to understanding any particular issue, such as the wellbeing of transnational families. Cho, Crenshaw and McCall suggest that social categories have to be viewed “... not as distinct but always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of being created by dynamics of power ...” (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013, p.795). Since social categories are not fixed, but permeate and mutually constitute each other, it follows that any individual category is also dynamic and changing, rather than fixed. The dynamism and mutual constitution of categories means that any one social category is only meaningful in relation to other social categories. In other words, categories have to be seen as decentralized in that there is no central fixed meaning to a category. For example, what it means to be a ‘transnational family’ is only meaningful in relation to families that are constructed as not transnational and meanings within the category will vary with the categories that intersect with international family status such as age, generation, gender, social class, and nation. Thus, in order to approach an understanding of children’s wellbeing in transnational families it is helpful to consider what is currently known about how children’s wellbeing is differentiated by the social categories to which they belong.

It has long been established that there are intersectional inequalities in how children from different ethnicized groups perform in schools in different countries (Gillborn, 2008). Gross, Gottburgsen and Phoenix (2016, p.51) suggest that: “Education remains one of the most important determinants of social inequalities across generations and the life course and educational systems are the main places for generating these disparities.”

Empirical education research identifies particular social groups that are especially at risk of being losers in various educational systems. Being male, being of migrant status, and belonging to lower social classes are factors that have repeatedly been found to be disadvantageous for the attainment of educational qualifications. However, by themselves, none of the axes of inequality are sufficient to fully explain educational disparities. Instead, they operate simultaneously and are mutually constitutive (Gillborn and Mirza, 2000). The concept of intersectionality helpfully emphasizes this simultaneity. From an intersectional point of view, social inequality is not only determined multi-dimensionally along different axes of inequality – such as gender, migration, socioeconomic background, age, handicaps, etc. – but also emerges particularly in the intersection of these axes as they mutually reinforce each other within social contexts such as the family, school, or the labour market.



It is not only educational attainment that differs by racialized / ethnicized / gendered / classed / sexuality intersections (Gillborn, 2008), but also the ways in which pupils are constructed by teachers and other pupils is intersectionally differentiated so that the ‘ideal pupil’ in Minority World contexts has long been constructed as white, male, middle class, and heterosexual (Walkerdine, 1988; Archer, 2011). Classrooms provide possibilities and constraints for ‘who students can be’ (Yudell, 2006). For example, from an ethnographic study of one US school, Ferguson (2000) found that the cultural images and racial myths in the school produced a racialized / gendered hierarchy where the school institutional practices were couched in universal language, but maintained a racial order. White boys who ‘act out’ were viewed as ‘naughty’, while black boys who did so were adultified as criminals in the making.

Various studies have also found complex intersections of social class, racialization, and gender in children’s friendships. For example, in a study conducted by Neal and Vincent (2013); Iqbal, Neal and Vincent (2017), the friendships of 8–9-year-old children in ‘super-diverse’ London boroughs were shown to involve complex “entrenchments around similarity” (Iqbal, Neal and Vincent, 2017, p.128) and interactions across difference where racialization was sometimes made salient in informal segregation. Children and young people are very well aware of how they are positioned in terms of status. This has been repeatedly shown in relation to consumption and socioeconomic status (e.g. Croghan, et al., 2006) and in terms of racialization (Howarth, 2002; Hughey and Jackson, 2017). This has implications for how children treat each other within and across intersectional categories. For example, in a study of 16–18-year-old Somali Muslim girls in a London sixth form college, some of whom were migrants, Aisha Phoenix (2011) found that they attempted to avoid social exclusion through creative claims to ‘new ethnicities’ by attempting to be ‘cool’, or popular by copying the disaffected behaviour of students perceived to possess ‘vernacular prestige’ (Labov, 1972). Some perceived truanting from school and being disruptive in class as an important way to ‘fit in’, gain higher status, and ‘be the centre of attention’. They considered that truanting also served a further function, to avoid being bullied, while competing for popularity with the popular girls (who were white). From their own reports, the girls were different at home than they were at school. At school their wellbeing was fractured by intersections of racialization, gender, ethnicity, and Muslim identity and they sought to avoid the exclusion they were subjected to by virtue of being Muslim by downplaying their religious identity. As they got older, the Somali Muslim girls reported that they were better able to deal with the embarrassment caused by their intersectional positioning, as in the following example.

Rahma: All my friends were like “Rahma, I pray that a Somali girl that doesn’t speak English [laughs] comes and you have to teach her” [laughs] and I was thinking what! Before I used to get vexed about it and stuff like that, but now ... if I see someone who doesn’t know Somali I won’t, I

won't hesitate to help them, but when I was in secondary school or something I was really shallow and I was like you know just so childish and I wouldn't.

Facilitator: You wouldn't have wanted to help someone who didn't speak English?

Rahma: Maybe I'd be like embarrassed, 'cos like you know when you're in school and all of that bitchiness and stuff (Focus Group 2). (Phoenix, 2011, p.323)

Similar patterns are found in other countries. For example, Gilliam and Gulløv (2017) found that Danish Muslim boys (although less so girls) were considered to be properly Muslim boys only if they made trouble and did not behave properly at school. It is not just students who position each other in intersectional racialized / religious / gendered positions; teachers also do so. Teachers have been found to stereotype ethnic minority parents and families in negative ways in Denmark (Gitz-Johansen, 2003; Gilliam, 2016) and in the UK, where, for example, black middle-class parents report that they have to carefully negotiate the low expectations teachers hold about their child's capabilities and they have to make concerted efforts to avoid this (Rollock, et al., 2014). So, while middle-class status does help them deal with discrimination, the pervasive dynamics of racial stereotypes means that being middle class does not guarantee black families protection against racism.

The implications of these patterns of findings for an understanding of wellbeing (particularly in the case of transnational families) is that, alongside analysing national differences, it is also important to consider how racialization, ethnicity, gender, and social class intersect in school and family lives to produce patterns of wellbeing and wellbecoming. The complex patterns of attainment and everyday practices at school are differentiated by the social categories in which children and other family members are positioned. Since young people consider that they are positioned differently at home and school, it is clearly important for considerations of wellbeing to include the ways in which different family members are socially positioned in diverse contexts, their own perspectives, and the differences between them.

### **Methodological issues in building conceptualizations of wellbeing for children in transnational families**

The question of how the wellbeing of members of transnational families can usefully be studied is both important and relatively open. Mazzucato and Schans (2011) suggest that it is important to combine quantitative and qualitative methods in order to get a more holistic picture. There are, however, more fundamental issues to be considered about the methods best suited to studying wellbeing. Some of these issues arise from the diversity of ways in which wellbeing is conceptualized into domains. This has led various researchers to suggest that there is a need for standardization of measures and

a great deal of energy has been expended in attempts to improve measurements of wellbeing (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2012). The concern with refining measurement, however, is founded on the assumption that scales and other quantitative measures are sufficient to underpin reliable understandings of wellbeing. Yet, Ed Diener, who is a pioneering theorist of subjective wellbeing says that there is currently insufficient research evidence to make policy application straightforward and that the plethora of measures available often make “simplifying assumptions that could potentially create biases and errors in a national index of well-being” (Diener, Lucas and Schimmack, 2009, p.11). White and Jha (2014) also point out that while wellbeing measures are designed to give a holistic humanistic focus to public policy, these measures are highly quantitative and decontextualized. It is not that White and Jha are opposed to quantitative work in this area since, for example, White, Gaines and Jha (2012) welcome the attention that some reports bring to the global issue of subjective wellbeing and, in 2014, they themselves devised a scale of inner wellbeing. The issue is rather that their extensive research in India and various countries on the African continent, together with their collaborations with researchers working in International Development on other continents, leads them to recognize that such scales do not exhaust people’s subjective understandings of their lives and wellbeing.

In the introduction to an edited collection that discusses new and helpful ways of thinking about wellbeing, White (2016) suggests that what the contributors bring together is a shift away from conceptualizing wellbeing (what wellbeing is) to exploring how accounts of wellbeing are produced. In other words, methods produce ways of seeing. This is a crucial point. White (2016) points out that the contributors’ analyses resist the reification of wellbeing as a ‘real thing’ that people may or may not ‘have’. This perspective fits with that on resilience discussed above. It is not an absolute characteristic that people do or do not have. Equally, it is not possible to bring about one’s own wellbeing through force of will, as implied by approaches that individualize wellbeing. Instead, the volume, White explains, shows that it is important to examine what is claimed in research, how research is undertaken, and where and with whom the research takes place. Place and cultural and socioeconomic context are all important to understanding wellbeing. It is therefore too simplistic to be methodologically dogmatic by prescribing either quantitative or qualitative approaches or even mixed methods as a panacea for current methodological shortcomings in the wellbeing literature since the methods used have to be appropriate for answering the particular research question addressed. White’s (2016) edited collection is particularly helpful in showing how bringing together multidisciplinary and methodologically diverse research on different places (but with consistent epistemological, ontological, and axiological perspectives) can illuminate plural ‘cultures of wellbeing’.

This section takes for granted the need for disciplinary and methodological pluralism in research on wellbeing so that no one study has to bear the burden of addressing all the issues necessary to a consideration of wellbeing,

but all have to contextualize their own findings in order to contribute to producing holistic understandings.

The section examines, specifically, two examples to illustrate how engagement with the experiences of children in transnational families can aid understandings of the wellbeing of transnational families, showing the importance of focusing on subjective perspectives without asking about wellbeing per se, and analysing the impact of intersectional positioning, including of place. It argues that a holistic understanding of wellbeing requires a focus on negotiations of relationality and racism as transnational families forge their family practices in particular contexts.

The selected examples also show how different sources of material on wellbeing can provide fruitful analyses.

### ***Everyday wellbeing and transnational families***

The first example makes the case for analysing wellbeing in cultural analyses of events reported in the media. It shows how transnational families negotiate family practices in new ways in the context of the policy of the post-9/11 anti-terrorist agenda in the USA. It is a newspaper report of an incident where, on September 14, 2015, a 14-year-old Muslim schoolboy Ahmed Mohamed, reputed for his interest in engineering, was arrested after taking a clock he had made by himself to his school, MacArthur High School in Irving, Texas. Far from being praised for his ingenuity, Ahmed's English teacher told the principal and he was questioned by five police officers, pictured handcuffed and taken to the police station without his parents, on the grounds that he had brought in a hoax bomb. He was suspended from school. When the event was made public, Ahmed was invited to places such as Facebook headquarters, Twitter, and the White House. The family received a great deal of support from members of the public, including money from crowd funding, but were also subjected to upsetting vitriolic and threatening communications. The family pursued unsuccessful lawsuits against the City of Irving and the Irving School district as well as Fox television studios. Although his parents are Sudanese, they moved the whole family to Qatar, where Ahmed received a scholarship to continue his education.

The above example clearly does not constitute a research interview or self-completion scales. Nonetheless, it allows a cultural reading that exemplifies issues important to the wellbeing of transnational families. In terms of wellbeing, this everyday example shows how contingent wellbeing is on the local context. The increase in Islamophobia in many 'Western' countries with Muslim minorities that has been reported since 9/11 has the potential to disrupt what appears to have been the achievement of a settled life in the USA and, to underline that, at least for some, the family were ascribed an outsider and unwelcome status on the basis of racialization and religion. Their wellbeing was disrupted and the children's future prospects threatened. As White

(2016) suggests, this example can only be understood if the local context is made central to analyses. A further analytic point is that wellbeing can encompass contradictory elements in that this frightening and upsetting episode also produced invitations and opportunities to meet powerful people that would not have been forthcoming but for Ahmed's infamy. His future prospects, and so his 'wellbecoming', were therefore both potentially damaged and enhanced by this episode. As is evident in the transnational family literature, the impetus to search for a better life, particularly for children, is not one that is acted on once and for all. Ahmed's parents moved the family again, leaving behind extended family members in the USA, as well as in Sudan and indeed, they spent the summer after Ahmed's first year in a Qatari school in the USA in order to see family members. That search for a better life was clearly not just economic. Intersectionally, this episode arises from intersections of Ahmed's racialized positioning in religion and no doubt gender as well as his family's migration status and that intersectionality is visible from the various media reports.

The second example comes from a study of childhood language brokering, where children interpret and translate for their parents and others and so take on responsibilities in situations in which adults would normally be in control. From her longitudinal research on childhood language brokers, Orellana (2009) suggests that the indirect work of children as language brokers helps support and sustain their parents as workers and so make significant contribution to institutions (schools, healthcare, etc.) and to society. The following example comes from a narrative interview study of 40 adults looking back on their childhoods as language brokers.<sup>1</sup> Husniyah, in her twenties, is part of a nuclear family that has migrated from Syria, initially leaving her father as well as their extended family behind. Her father joined them after some time.

Husniyah: When we were newly arrived and none of us spoke Swedish, translators usually addressed my mother when translating, even if the topic was about school and us kids. I didn't need to take responsibility and my mom handled the information. After a while I had to tell my mom what had happened in school and what the teachers told us to prepare for the next day. This was my first encounter with translating for my parents and I found it quite amusing. I was also rather proud of myself for knowing things that my parents didn't. At the same time, I didn't want people to know that my parents didn't understand Swedish or that their language skill was poor. To me, it was kind of a family secret that I usually enjoyed but did not want to reveal to others ...

So, whenever I got a letter that I didn't understand I was reminded about my lack of skill in the Swedish language. In the beginning I thought that it all depended on my language skill, but after a while I understood that at my age (about 11–12 years) I wasn't supposed to

know anything about taxes, company rules, and so on. And sometimes even if I understood all the words, I [did not] discern the meaning because I lacked a context in which to situate them, and I had to ask my parents to give me more information so I might be able to get the whole picture. I remember feeling that my family and I were marginalized because we lived in a society where we didn't know all the rules or all the words and we didn't know what people wanted to say to us when they sent us letters. I felt bad for being able to read better than my parents but still not being good enough ...

In outlining her career as a language broker, Husniyah explains how it starts and continues to its end, when she refuses to continue language brokering because her father, frustrated at not being able to communicate and unhappy in Sweden, is frequently critical of her language brokering work. She is both initially captured by the practice of language brokering and then lost from it. The method of narrative interviewing is a helpful way to get at Husniyah's subjective understanding of her experiences. Her account shows that she identified the contradictory nature of language brokering and wellbeing. Her narrative suggests that she is initially amused and proud to know what her parents did not, but, simultaneously, wanted to keep her language brokering a family secret. While she does not say so, her desire to keep this secret suggests that she had learned about the power relations stratified in language, recognizing that parents who speak Arabic and not Swedish are devalued in Swedish society. As with the example from Ahmed above, this method is also able to show the situatedness of wellbeing. It also shows the temporality and dynamism of language brokering in that the whole career of language brokering is visible. The analysis of Husniyah's narrative also shows that she considers herself to be exercising agency in various ways, not only in doing language brokering, but also in keeping language brokering private, presumably to avoid stigma, and in eventually refusing to do any more language brokering. In keeping with the work of Andresen et al. (2017) on child wellbeing and poverty, this method is also able to show the ways in which Husniyah, and other child language brokers, take responsibility for their parents. Generation, age, and language visibly intersect with migration status in this narrative. However, ethnicity and racialization are not brought into being in this account and, since both would seem relevant here, they would have to be analysed in other ways. Overall, the narrative method that generated the extract above is able to indicate the situated, plural, and dynamic nature of wellbeing for children in transnational families, as well as the way in which Husniyah herself constructs her life and experience. It is less clear from this method, however, what the issues would be for her 'wellbecoming', although Orellana (2009) concludes that language brokering enables children to develop many skills that their peers do not. It would seem, however, that Husniyah draws on her relationships to craft resilience in context.

## Conclusion

The above consideration of the conceptual and methodological issues raised in studying the wellbeing of transnational families has drawn on the concept of intersectionality to argue that childhood wellbeing is always intersectional and thus psychosocial and permeated by inequalities. The methods used above are not usually used by those studying wellbeing. However, examples presented above show that children develop complex understandings of positioning and potential 'wellbecoming'. These would not necessarily be the understandings of wellbeing that adults or many wellbeing researchers would favour. However, the examples fit with White's (2016) notion that wellbeing is understood differently in different cultures, is situated in place, and that it is important to use methods that allow researchers to listen to participants' subjective perspectives rather than simply using reductionist measures of subjective wellbeing (White, 2010; White, Gaines and Jha, 2012). The notion of 'relational wellbeing' (White, 2016) becomes evident in the analysis of what children and young people say about their lives (or adults say about their childhood experiences).

The examples above make two further contributions to studying and understanding wellbeing as it relates to children in transnational families. First it shows that it is possible to illuminate concerns that have an impact on wellbeing from participants' talk about other issues. Wright (2012) has also shown that deploying wellbeing theory in an interview study can help to broaden analyses of how people's understandings and expectations of wellbeing change as they move across borders and that interviews can allow holistic understandings of wellbeing by showing the dynamic interplay between domains of wellbeing. Second, it has shown that it is possible to understand wellbeing from analyses of cultural products such as newspaper reports as long as the accounts of particular events and so on are analysed as situated in place, culture, and intersectional positioning and it is recognized that the subjective element is missing or partial in such reports. For children, it is also possible to gain some insights into issues of wellbecoming, as in the example of Rahma and Ahmed above. As White (2016) advocates, it is important to recognize the shortcomings of any methods such as those outlined above, which do not remove the necessity of using other methods including quantitative methods, to address other issues. However, taking an intersectional perspective on the study of wellbeing helps illuminate the importance of recognizing that children's wellbeing is necessarily constrained by their positioning in relation, for example, to racism, racialization, religion, gender, and nation. In other words, wellbeing is necessarily political, particularly as operationalized in policy measures.

## Note

- 1 The study was an ESRC Professorial Fellowship (ESRC number: RES-051-27-0181-A) awarded to Ann Phoenix as part of a larger study of adult retrospective narratives of their 'non-normative' childhood experiences. It consisted of three projects: (i) serial migrants who came from the Caribbean to rejoin their parents in

the UK, (ii) members of visibly ethnically different households, (iii) childhood language brokers who interpreted and/or translated for their parents in childhood. The extract above comes from the third project. Forty adult language brokers (27 women and 13 men) were interviewed individually in five countries and three group discussions were held, two in the UK and one in the USA.

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