

Reconstructing a child standpoint on well-being: Emotions and relations as structural configurations for child agency

TOBIA FATTORE AND JAN MASON

ISCI Conference 2015, University of Cape Town September 4, 2015



Outline

Reconstruct some aspects of children's understandings of well-being, from their understandings of both the meanings they associate with the term and the experiences they associate with a sense of well-being.

Part I: explore *how* emotions and relationships are critical to children's understanding of and experience of well-being.

Part II: explore 'relationships' as mediums, in which children's exercise of agency and the central place that different dimensions of agency have to a sense of well-being.

Methods and Research Design



Stage 1 Interviews:

- what well-being means for the child or young person,
- how well-being is experienced in everyday life, and
- what factors that contribute to a sense of well-being.

Stage 2 Interviews:

- Consolidating Stage 1 – deeper insights.

Stage 3 Projects:

- Project of own design
- Medium to focus discussion and prioritise

INTERVIEWER: What sorts of questions would you ask if you were doing this project?

PARTICIPANT A (Female, 14 years): Um, I definitely like this wand idea. I think if I could make, if I could ask any child what they would like in the world I would definitely ask it. I think it would be interesting to find out what everyone's ideas are. What they want.

PARTICIPANT B (Female, 14 years): It is like a creative way of asking what would you really like. It is like putting a nice edge to it.

126 children, 8-15 years of age

Emotions, the social sciences and children's experiences



Nussbaum – construction of personhood has historically been associated with rationality.

Consequently, the social ordering of childhood, has typically been directed to controlling and regulating children's emotions.

In contrast, adopting a child standpoint emphasises rich and complex understandings of personal experience and relationships, of the 'emotional messiness, uncertainties and fluidity that constitute relational experience' (Gabb 2009, p. 49).

Well-being as more than happiness



For some children, an understanding of well-being as happiness was evident.

I: '... if you wanted to find out from other kids what well-being meant to them, like what would you ask them?'

P: 'Just, what would make you happy?'

['Well-being' pictures as] 'the ones that make people feel happy and not sad'.

However, a different construction is of well-being as a reservoir of contrasting emotions.

P: 'You can feel happy and then sad. Like, that is part of well-being '

Interviewer: Yeah, can you tell me about the happy and sad parts?

Angel: 'Cause my grandma was happy. That is the happy part. And the sad part is that she was leaving ... I was pretty sad that day 'cause my grandma was leaving, but my family was there to cheer me up.

5

Affective relationships and well-being



Emotions can be understood as a form of evaluative judgement of matters affecting or our well-being.

Three components of affective relationships emphasised:

For feeling *cared about*:

'they are always there for you and stuff like that. And they care'.
'Because especially my best friend, um, she is just always, always going to be there for me'.

For *feeling cared for* or instrumental relatedness:

'Washing up (is) done for you, ... does your washing',
'You know, helping me, giving me advice'.

For *caring of others* :

Jackie: I would really like to change everyone to start helping each other. So that when someone falls down and no-one helps them, like, and I feel really sorry ...
So when you helped them, that person who's fallen down and needs help, it makes them feel good because they feel cared for.

Participant (Female, 9 years): And um, there is a boy, his name is Trent and um he has like problems with his eyes and everything and nobody lets him play. And he asked me and Grace one day and we let him, even though we don't know him but he was lonely so we let him play.

6

Agency as a fundamental aspect of well-being



Structure-Agency a foundational dichotomy in understanding and reconstructing social practices.

Ongoing debates: agency as 'freedom from', negative liberty and autonomy, versus agency as action embedded in social contexts constituted in relation to and with others.

Reconstruction of children's discussions of agency emphasise multiple dimensions:

- Agency as competency – being able to exercise ability
- Agency as self-determination - being able to make choices.
- Agency as freedom of action in everyday life - over concrete practices in everyday situations.

Each constituted as part of ongoing social arrangements. Task is to understand how agency is expressed, whether acknowledged, ignored or controlled in everyday interactions with other children and adults.

7

Competence and the exercise of agency



The competence agenda central to the sociology of childhood.

- The way children define competency in the exercise of agency, and the place of context in this process was also important in children's discussions of the relationship between agency and well-being.

Strawberry: [Adults] are in charge of me when I was small. I'm in charge of myself when I am big.

Interviewer: Okay, so how do they start to understand that?

Strawberry: Yeah, it happens gradually. It is just nature. I don't know how it happens.

Interviewer: Until what age do you see that happening?

Strawberry: About five. As soon as like you get to school you will be like dressing yourself. You will be like having showers. Because before you might like put the shirt [on] the wrong way. You might slip in the bathtub or something.

- The practical exercise of competence, is one way in which children differentiate themselves from adults, and through which childhood cultures emerge and are reproduced.
- But it is also one way relationships of interdependence between adults and children are constructed, enforced and become sites for negotiation over time. Displays of competence are a mode of recognition of social status.

8

Autonomy, freedom and choice as well-being



Well-being as freedom to act, or autonomy of the self...

Luke: A number of things really ... Ah, a fair bit of freedom. Being able to do what you like. Planning a good future.

Nikita: You know, it is what you want to do. I mean you've got your future ahead of you. It is all yours and you are holding it in your hands ...

The opportunity to learn from one's mistakes creates an opportunity to exercise one's reflective capabilities.

Martha: It takes time. Like, it just depends on your experiences and your choices and the decisions you make, and even if you made the wrong decision, you can learn by it and what and like learn from your mistakes.

Interviewer: How do you learn from mistakes?

Martha: Like say you made a wrong decision, you go, 'I made the wrong decision because I did that' and then maybe when you make your next decision you don't do the same thing.

Autonomy, freedom and choice as well-being (cont.)



However, 'displays' of freedom reliant upon 'frameworks for choice' (Ballet et al. 2011), or 'opportunity structures' (Lansdown 2005).

Interviewer: When that happened, did you think there was anything you could change to make that better for you?

Martha: No, not really 'cause it is not like um, I'm just a child, I'm not the parent that is actually breaking up or whatever. I can't really, you know, it is not my opinion that is going to affect their problems and that, so really a child can't do anything when their parents are sort of breaking up or divorcing or whatever, like that. The child, you know, has no power for those times.

Agency as practical action in everyday contexts



Some evidence in our research of a 'democracy of emotions' (Giddens, 1999), evident in expressions of agency as practical action.

Beady: Mum is always saying do what you want to do. Do this, do that. Like not forcing me, but like be happy, make sure you are happy, make sure you are doing this if you want to be doing that. So it is good to know that she doesn't want me to do anything because of her, she just wants me to be happy in what I'm doing.

Interviewer: Okay. And do you think maybe it is kind of easier in a sense [accepting parents' regulation of their activities], because you do have a good relationship with your parents that you can do a bit of negotiating?

Longstocking: Yeah, like just say, you want to go somewhere, like a party or something, and it finishes at one o'clock in the morning or something and you go to your mum 'Oh, can I please go' and they go 'No' and they are like 'I'm not letting you go to a party that finishes at one o'clock' and you can say 'I'll come home at an earlier time, I'll come home at ten'.

Pippi: Then they will let you go.

Longstocking: Just that sort of negotiating.

Agency as practical action in everyday contexts (cont.)



However ... vertical asymmetries occur at the point where macro-level policies impact on the micro-politics of the family.

As part of generational orders:

Prudence: Well, adults can ask you to do things and you have to do them cause they are adult But if you ask parents to do things, they don't have to do it. ... Um, one time I was um, I was home alone and I asked my dad if he could not leave, like 'cause he always when he gets up he makes his lunch and goes straight to work, so I asked him [not to leave] the knives and the butter and everything out ... and like he says 'Yes, sure', and I have like a say in everything with him. But he doesn't usually listen to it.

Conclusions



- Not a theory of agency, but a reconstruction from children's discussions of their experiences of well-being and their definitions of well-being.
- Agency is constituted intersubjectively, within the parameters set by and enabled through structures represented in social space.
- Children's 'agency' is thus always constituted through 'constraints' and 'opportunities', which represent both the immediate intersubjective, or relational context of action and also generational and other social orders that constitute 'childhood' and 'adulthood'.
- However these 'constraints' and 'opportunities' may be accepted, negotiated or resisted
 - agency as negotiating agency – reflexive agency
 - agency as negotiating the boundaries of 'childhood' and 'adulthood'
- Some signposts for developing indicators:
 - acknowledge the messiness and complexity of children's emotions as they contribute to their well-being.
 - be inclusive of the significance for children of being actors in relationships, in caring *about* and *for*, as well as responding *morally* to others
 - acknowledge the multidimensionality of agency

