Gottfried Schweiger, Gunter Graf (Eds.)
The Well-Being of Children
Philosophical and Social Scientific Approaches

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Preface

The last few years have seen an increasing interest in the topic of well-being across different disciplines. Questions of measurement and such regarding the normative value of well-being for theories of justice have been widely discussed. Furthermore, it has been acknowledged that these theoretical considerations interlink with questions of policy design and political practice. Children are special in many aspects: it is a widely shared understanding that children are not able to fully understand their situation, that they are limited in their ability to make reasonable decisions about themselves and their actions, that they do not always act in their best interest, that they need the help and guidance of adults, and that they need special protection from various harms and from making wrong choices. It is further well studied that well-being during childhood has a significant influence on the entirety of a child's future life and adulthood. These factors make the well-being of children a topic of importance but also one that is confronted with many conceptual, normative and methodological difficulties that need to be addressed by different disciplines. As such, the papers in our volume are divided into two sections: the first section consists of papers that deal with conceptual issues and discuss how the well-being of children can and should be grasped in a meaningful sense. The second part of the book deals with practical issues, specific cases and social environments in which the well-being and well-becoming of children is secured or endangered.

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Gunter Graf & Gottfried Schweiger

Introduction: Conceptualizing Children's Well-Being

The chapters in this volume are concerned with the adequate conceptualization and study of children's well-being. Together, they do not present a coherent theory of children's well-being but rather show the many different perspectives from which it can be approached. They are concerned with some of the key issues and problems that need to be addressed but certainly not with all that there are. This volume does not aim for completeness in regard to its main topic and it seems questionable if this could ever be a goal worth aspiring for. Children's well-being is a highly complex, multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary issue, a multi-faceted concept that spans the whole variety of children's lives and the social contexts in which they are embedded. It can be approached from different theoretical perspectives and conceptualized by means of a variety of sources. Three of them which are often found in the literature and which also have their place in this book are needs, rights and capabilities (Axford 2012). They accentuate different aspects of the well-being concept and have all been recognized as important policy objectives in children's services. However, their exact meanings and relationships to each other are still the object of debate, even if it has to be recognized that each of them has to play a role in a comprehensive theory on the well-being of children.

As such, the main goal of this volume is to highlight a few issues connected to and surrounding the well-being of children and the theorizing about it. The contribution of philosophy to this research of children's well-being is relatively new but growing and we do hope that the philosophical chapters in this volume show that they are promising. In this introduction we want to give not only an overview of the chapters but also a short outline of some key issues in the recent discussions on children's well-being and how they are reflected in the course of this volume. These are first, the aforementioned multidimensionality of children's well-being and why it is best approached from an interdisciplinary perspective that aims to incorporate knowledge from different disciplines. A second issue is what is called the ecology of children's well-being and that children's lives are surrounded and shaped by different types of social environments (family, neighbourhood, political and legal system etc.). The third issue is the interrelation of children's well-being and well-becoming. Research should not only be concerned with how children actually live but how this affects their growing up and their later life without viewing children only as adults-to-be. Finally, we want to discuss the relation between children's well-being and ethics, in the sense that well-being and well-becoming are always not only descriptive and explanatory concepts but normative and prescriptive as well.

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Multidimensionality and Interdisciplinarity

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in the well-being of children. Many academic contributions to the field have been made by a variety of disciplines and it is acknowledged that these theoretical considerations interlink with questions of policy design and political practice (Axford 2012). In fact, children's well-being is a concept that can now be found in many documents and is frequently discussed in public debates about children (McAuley and Rose 2010). Today, while there is no clear-cut and unanimous definition of its exact meaning and scope, one insight is well-established, one which also finds support in this book: there are many aspects that are of importance to a child's life, and an adequate understanding of a child's well-being must be able to do justice to this multidimensionality (Ben-Arieh et al. 2014). Health, safety, social inclusion, material security, education and the child's satisfaction with life as a whole are a few examples of such aspects. These aspects are frequently found in concepts of child well-being, and all have to be integrated and acknowledged in their own right. This does not mean that it is of no value to study or analyse just one or more selected domain(s); such studies can indeed be relevant for many important purposes and in fact, practical constraints often limit the range of studies and projects. But a comprehensive picture of the well-being of children must include a variety of dimensions and set them in relation to each other. Such a multidimensional approach, as we suggest it here, is intuitively plausible and fits well with our considered judgements when evaluating the life of a child. This becomes particularly clear when we think about it in terms of compensation. If a child, for instance, has wealthy parents and a stable social network but a lack of mental health, it would be inadequate and objectionable to argue that the high achievement in some domains compensates the problems in another. In fact, the goal of achieving well-being in such a case is tantamount to targeting the mental health issue, irrespective of achievements in the other dimensions. Of course, this might be more easily achieved if the social environment is supportive and if financial issues do not constitute a barrier. But still, such examples show that there are good reasons that the different elements of a child's well-being should be valued individually and that one should be careful with trade-offs between them or with attempts to reduce them to one single measure for the sake of theoretical simplicity or easier policy recommendations. By reducing the complexity, there is a risk of distorting our everyday experiences too much, missing central aspects of social realities.

Furthermore, recognizing the multidimensionality and the different layers of well-being brings to our attention the many connections and interdependencies between the different domains that matter. In this way, a basis for a differentiated empirical analysis can be provided, which can eventually have a direct impact on improving the well-being of children and corresponding policy recommendations. On the one hand, such an approach provides the framework for identifying those disadvantages for well-being which have particularly "corrosive" effects in that they negatively

influence other domains of well-being and development. On the other, it points to those elements of a child's life which are likely to have ample positive impacts on the child's situation and which should therefore be fostered and secured with priority (Wolff and De-Shalit 2007). In this sense, a multidimensional approach to children's well-being can be considered an "analytical tool" necessary for an effective and target-oriented social policy for children.

Amongst all these considerations, the perspective of the child herself must not be forgotten (Alderson 2008). Often enough judgements about the well-being of children are made by adults – parents, researchers, policy makers etc. – without considering the voices of those who are the subject of the discourse: children. Here enters another important aspect of the multidimensional nature of the well-being of children. There are both objective and subjective dimensions that count and that provide valuable insights. Objective dimensions refer to goods or states of a person which are considered valuable without taking the person's point of view into account, while subjective ones rely on the perceptions and evaluations of the person in question (Ben-Arieh 2010). It is still the subject of scholarly debate how objective and subjective dimensions should be balanced against each other, an especially important question in those circumstances in which they conflict. But some of the chapters of this book strengthen the argument that children have to be involved in the conceptualization of their well-being and that their points of view and experiences provide an irreducible element of it. Well-being is always related to subjective well-being even if it should not be reduced to it.

These few remarks already indicate that researching and theorizing about the well-being of children should not be limited to one single discipline. The well-being of children touches on many different facets of a child's life and happens at the intersection between individual agency and its cultural and social embeddedness. Accordingly it must be approached from a variety of angles, combining different sources of knowledge and ways of thinking. Due to different methodologies and research paradigms, such an endeavour is challenging and not likely to lead to a clear cut, coherent and complete theory. However, only constant interdisciplinary debate will further deepen our understanding of the well-being of children and the ways it can be improved, and this book should be read as one contribution to this overall aim.

The Ecology of Children's Well-Being

Many researchers have looked at children and their development from a rather individualistic perspective (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998). They have researched and defined different stages of development, looked at those factors which are beneficial or disadvantageous for the process of growing up, and have differentiated between a variety of areas of development, e.g. physical, cognitive, emotional and psychosocial. Of course it has been recognized for a long time that

there is an interaction between the individual child and his environment and that, for example, close and loving relationships with parents or care-givers are an important element of a child's well-being and development. However, the wider embeddedness of a child in different spheres, systems and norms of a society has been neglected in the study of children until fairly recently. In the meanwhile this has changed and one of the blooming fields of childhood studies relates to the complex relationships between the individual child and the different social spheres she is part of. Pioneered by Uri Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner 1979), such an ecological model is now seen as the point of reference in the literature on the well-being of children and has been developed further by many others (Aldgate 2010). It is now acknowledged that we need to recognize a variety of layers and complex social groupings and norms which all influence the individual child and which have to be taken into account when theorizing her well-being. Among them are not only the immediate environment and the close family which were traditionally in the focus of research on children, but also the extended family, friendships and peers, the neighbourhood, networks, the family's social status and the state with its systems and institutions. Furthermore, the culture within which a child grows up is now critically analysed by scholars and many aspects of a society's way of treating its children, which have generally been taken for granted are now being challenged and scrutinized. For example, social hierarchies based on age are critically reflected and discourses emphasizing innocence, ignorance and vulnerability as "natural" characteristics of children, justifying their weaker social positions, are questioned (Mayall 2002). This shift in the approach towards the study of children, making their ecology a central object of investigation, also becomes apparent if we look at the scientific disciplines interested in children. While traditionally psychology and biology were seen to provide the most important knowledge for understanding a child's life, development and learning, nowadays many other disciplines show that they can contribute to our understanding of the lives of children. History, anthropology, sociology and many more have put children and childhood on their research agenda, asking their specific questions and addressing them with their own methodologies and approaches. With this we do not want to suggest that psychological and biological knowledge has become replaced or outdated or that it may be neglected in the study of the well-being of children. In particular, many insights of development psychology are still valid and are an important source of knowledge. Rather we claim in line with recent developments that there are simply more perspectives on children's lives which are valuable, that children are always social actors with particular places in the different systems of the society they are part of and that it is therefore crucial to analyse childhood as a social phenomenon, too. Such an approach widens our perspectives and points to the importance of looking at children's lives in combination with other variables of social analyses such as class, gender, or ethnicity (James and Prout 1997). Accordingly, it becomes clear that in a society, children live and grow up in highly diverse circumstances

which leads to the consequence that many authors state that it is better to talk about "childhoods" in the plural. This insight gets further support if we approach the issue from an international and cross-cultural point of view which confirms the variety of manners in which childhood is recognized and institutionalized (Weisner 2014).

The role of an ecological perspective in the well-being of children is therefore twofold. On the one hand it contributes on a conceptual level by pointing to the many social and cultural constructions present in theorizing about children and their families and by reminding us that individual development happens in a context constituted by a variety of systems, norms and relationships. On the other, it is of great importance for practical matters. There are many stakeholders in the child's environment that matter and individuals can only flourish if they are provided with adequate conditions. Measures to improve the well-being of children must therefore take the entire ecology of a child into account. It is essential that different systems interact so that effective and lasting results can be achieved.

Well-Being and Well-Becoming

So far we have discussed child well-being as a multi-dimensional and ecological concept. But it is furthermore a dynamic and developmental concept, closely connected to well-becoming. Well-being refers to *the actual state of a child*, while well-becoming is concerned with *the transition from one state of being to another*. Obviously, childhood is a phase of constant change and development – physiological, mental and social – and children will not be children for their lifetime, but become adults (Aldgate et al. 2006). They are growing, developing skills and self-relations; they learn to interact with others and how to behave in different settings. Well-being demands that this process is one in which the *material, physical, and mental and emotional needs* of the child are met, while well-becoming demands that it happens in a way that supports that these needs – which change and develop themselves – are also met in a later stage of life, and possibly over the whole life course. Well-being and well-becoming are connected through various biological, psychological and social channels and it is reasonable to conceptualize the well-being of children in a way that includes their well-becoming right from the beginning (Ben-Arieh et al. 2014). This implies that it is not only essential to define certain developmental stages and benchmarks that should be reached and operationalized to help guide policies and the work with children, but also to develop an understanding of what is a worthy and good adult life; a task that demands integrating knowledge from different disciplinary perspectives, and from children and adults themselves.

Childhood heavily influences adulthood and the whole future life course (Settersten Jr, McClelland, and Miao 2014). Nearly all the competencies and freedoms that are valued in adulthood – such as being a productive member of society and

an engaged citizen, or being educated and autonomous – have to be grounded and developed in childhood. Therefore there are very good reasons to guide the interactions of children with their environment, enabling them to enjoy a variety of freedoms in adulthood. In fact, it would be unjust to deprive children of a wide range of support to acquire the relevant competencies through comprehensive measures in social and family policy, education and health care. There is overwhelming evidence that growing-up in ill-being – for example because of ill-health, maltreatment, neglect or a lower socio-economic position – leads to ill-being in later life and is one major reason for sustaining inequalities (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997). In fact, equality of opportunity in many different areas is decided in childhood. But childhood is not only a preparatory stage that one should be interested in because we want productive adults who enjoy well-being. Childhood is of intrinsic value and valuable to *children qua children*. A focus on the well-becoming of children and their future lives should not be instrumentalised, ignoring the child's current well-being. A good childhood is certainly not to be judged only by looking at the outcomes in later life, but also by the way children live as children, taking among other things their subjective experiences and happiness into account. Especially participatory approaches and the shift to focus on the subjective perspectives of children on their own lives appear promising in this regard (Hill et al. 2004).

Children's Lives and Justice

We have laid out a multi-dimensional, ecological concept of well-being in relation to the well-becoming of children. But why should one – researchers, social workers, policy makers – be interested in the well-being of children in the first place? Are there reasons to prioritize it and to give it special attention compared to other societal challenges? These questions cannot be answered by interrogating the theoretical and empirical work on child well-being alone, but they demand an ethical perspective (Archard and Macleod 2002). Implicitly, we suppose, nearly all research on child well-being and practical work with children is driven by such ethical convictions that parents, teachers, politicians etc. owe children a good life and that it is morally bad if children suffer from ill-being that is avoidable. The concepts of well-being and well-becoming themselves are based on ethical assumptions about what is morally right and good or just. Without such normative reasoning the definition of comprehensive concepts of well-being and well-becoming would be impossible, because they guide our understanding of what a good life for children should look like and what adults and society as a whole should enable children to be, do and become (Biggeri and Mehrotra 2011). This is a matter of justice for children and how the institutions and the distribution of benefits and burdens should be designed (Graf and Schweiger 2015, Macleod 2010). Children are special subjects of