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CHILDREN'S CONCEPTUALISATION(S) OF THEIR WELL-BEING

ABSTRACT. This paper describes the process and some findings of a collaborative project between the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People and researchers at the Social Justice and Social Change Research Centre, at the University of Western Sydney. The project was designed to inform the Commission in implementing its legislative mandate to develop a set of well-being indicators to monitor children's well-being over time. Placing children centrally as research participants was fundamental to the methodological approach of the project in which children's understandings of what contributes to their well-being were explored through qualitative methods. We discuss the epistemological and methodological approaches used in the project, in the context of other, earlier research towards the development of children's well-being indicators. Some of the early findings from the collaborative project are outlined and an example given of the way in which knowledge produced by a research approach which places children centrally, differs from and is similar to knowledge produced by more traditional child social indicator research. The paper ends with a discussion of some of the implications and challenges posed by reflecting on the research process and early findings from the research.

KEY WORDS: children's perspectives, indicators, well-being

1. INTRODUCTION

There has been considerable research during the last decade on developing indicators on children's well-being. However, there remains a lack of knowledge on what positive well-being for children actually looks like. In 1999 Kristin Moore, in discussing the state of play of indicators of child and family well-being, pointed out that given "the vast majority of measures that are available to assess problems ...We have a clearer sense of what we do not want for children than what we do want" (Moore, 1999, p. 13). Moore's assessment was that we do not know what positive well-being looks like, let alone how to measure it. This assessment was supported by Ben-Arieh et al. 2001, who additionally pointed out, that if we are going to adequately measure children's well-being, then children need to be involved in all stages of research efforts to measure and monitor their well-being (Ben-Arieh et al., 2001).

The research project reported on, in this paper, was about increasing our understanding of what positive well-being for children might look like, by involving children as participants in the research. In establishing the project we argued that attempting to involve children in defining their understanding(s) of well-being requires a different epistemological approach from that employed previously in well-being research – an approach which places children centrally and attempts to understand their perspectives, or more properly their standpoint(s)[1], on well-being.

Attempting to understand children's well-being from where they stand, starts from engaging with children as social actors and is driven by their experiences and opinions.

This paper describes a collaborative project between the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People and researchers at the Social Justice and Social Change Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney. The project was designed to respond to the Commission's legislative requirement to monitor the well-being of children and young people through the development of a set of indicators of well-being, which can be used to systematically monitor their well-being over time. The principle governing the work of the Commission – to give the views of children serious consideration – was the significant factor influencing the fundamental aim of the project to place children centrally in exploring their views of what constitutes their well-being and, from the meanings they attach to the concept, to identify key domains that can be operationalised for monitoring and measuring important aspects of well-being at a population level.

The paper has five sections. It begins with a thematic review of children's well-being indicators, including a commentary on the underpinnings in this work. We then discuss the need for an approach with a different set of epistemological and methodological underpinnings and describe the methods employed in our research. Because the research is driven by a child-centred epistemology and methodology, different knowledge about child well-being is produced. This is practically illustrated in the fourth section, which provides an example of the process for deriving indicators from our research and compares this particular domain and indicators with a parallel domain in existing work. This epistemological approach inevitably challenges many of the assumptions of existing work within the traditional positivist framework. The implications of the differences between our outcomes and those of other work are discussed in the final section of the paper. Also discussed are the benefits of indicators developed from children's perspectives and understandings and the possibilities of using complementary approaches in indicator development.

2. DOMINANT APPROACHES TO INDICATOR RESEARCH ON CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

Social indicator research of children's well-being has been increasing since the mid seventies, as governments have sought to account for their policies on children's issues. Indicator research applied to children's well-being grew out of a broader movement, commenced in the sixties and focused on researching appropriate indicators of well-being to apply to the adult population. Social indicator researchers have argued that well-measured and consistently collected social indicators provide a way to monitor the conditions or quality of life of groups in society, including children and families. An increasing emphasis over the last couple of decades on 'counting children in', in policy research, has resulted in what Hood identifies as 'an increasing focus on monitoring, measuring and reporting on children's well-being' (2005, p.30). She refers to the international report (Ben-Arieh and Goerge, 2001) which identified over 130 reports aiming to document and monitor the well-being of children.

Within Australia, the most significant attempt to document children's well-being has been at the Federal level and has been carried out by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, within a framework comprised of health, development and well-being measures. The 2005 report of the AIHW, *A Picture of Australia's Children*, produced national indicators for Australian children up to the age of 14 years (AIHW, May 2005).

Within current literature on children's well-being indicators, four dominant but not mutually exclusive applications of social indicator research to children can be identified. These are the quality of life approach (e.g. Cummins, 1995; Gilman et al., 2000), the domain approach (e.g. Land et al., 2001; Thornton, 2001), developmental health and well-being approaches (e.g. Keating and Hertzman, 1999) and 'State of the child' reports (e.g. Bellamy, 2004).

A fifth approach to measuring child well-being has emerged over the last 5 years. This approach, referred to by Hood (2005) as the child-focused approach, has been spearheaded by the Multi-National Project for Monitoring and Measuring Children's Well-Being (Multi-National Project for Monitoring and Measuring Children's Well-Being, 2005). The group collaborating on this project has moved the thinking on children's well-being from a focus on survival and basic needs to 'beyond survival (e.g. development, protection, provision and participation), from negative to positive, from traditional domains to new domains, and from focusing on preparation for adulthood (well-becoming) to the present lives (well-being) of children'. Ben-Arieh et al. (2001) argue that it is important to focus on

children as a 'distinct population group who need and deserve a unique policy or set of policies to promote their well-being' (op. cit., p. 6). They point to the value of knowledge as the evidence base or 'firm foundation' for making 'better decisions and more appropriate services and plans' for promoting children's well-being (ibid, p. 2).

Fundamental to the four dominant approaches are themes based on particular assumptions about children's well-being. It is important to identify these themes for, while work based on them has provided the impetus to monitor the state of children's survival and development and continues to keep children's development on the policy radar, continued emphasis on these particular themes without explicating their underlying assumptions risks failing to measure well-being in a way meaningful to children. The three themes are identified and critiques pertinent to conceptualising children's well-being articulated, as follows:

2.1. *Children as 'Becomings' – Attaining Developmental Milestones*

One theme in well-being research has to do with assumptions about the importance to children's well-being of their achieving certain developmental milestones. Indicators based on these assumptions measure the attainment of traditional age-based milestones occurring throughout childhood. These indicators also take the form of measures of outcomes assumed to represent positive adulthood, such as productive employment, and attainment of certain educational levels; and also indicators that measure the absence of risk factors that inhibit successful attainment of positive adulthood, such as juvenile crime, substance and alcohol abuse.

Developmentally based indicators accord with assumptions which differentiate childhood from adulthood in terms of what is referred to as the traditional paradigm for understanding childhood – constructing children as 'becomings', growing along a linear path, towards a normative and superior status, that of adulthood (e.g. James and Prout, 1990). The focus of this paradigm on socialisation of children towards a positive adulthood, places emphasis on identifying deficits and problem behaviours in children. Efforts to establish indicators within this developmental theme measure the child against standards of positive adult outcomes (e.g. Moore et al., 2001).

The validity of traditional age-based developmental markers and their relevance for positive adulthood has been called into question. Woodhead and Faulkner (2000) challenge the appropriateness of evaluating children against standards based on assumptions about a normative childhood. They

cite Donaldson's critique of Piaget, that the tests were decontextualised and designed in a way that children could not exhibit their competencies. Further, it can be argued that these markers, in their focus on cognitive and emotional sources of and consequences for well-being, underplay the importance of social, economic and political factors which shape experiences of well-being. Abstracting children from the social and economic contexts in which they live their lives, ignores the complexities of individual children's lives and thereby risks inappropriately simplistic policy responses, such as blaming parents for children's lack of coping skills or poor self esteem.

2.2. *Children Manifesting Problem Behaviours and Other Deficits*

The second theme, related to the first, is about constructing indicators that measure well-being in terms of children and young people lacking developmental health problems or not exhibiting problem outcomes (e.g. Keating and Hertzman, 1999; Stanley et al., 2005).

While measuring the conditions for successful future outcomes is arguably important, it can also be argued that a failure to take into account children's perspectives on their well-being in their 'present(s)', as they are experiencing their lives as children, marginalises the importance of children's lives as experienced in the present, not just in the future. If well-being is defined as the successful attainment of developmental milestones, it is less important to take into account the way childhood is experienced by children in the 'here and now'. Standard measures on educational achievement, for instance, tell us little about children's own perceptions about the quality of their education or the processes by which they learn. Children are seen as objects of determinants, both internal and external, rather than as engaged social actors with varying levels of control over their social environments. The assumption is that children's social engagement is irrelevant, or that they lack agency.

Moreover the focus on problem behaviours, or bad outcomes, provides a skewed concept of well-being. As Ben-Arieh et al. (2001) state, the absence of problem behaviours or negative outcomes does not necessarily indicate positive well-being. Negative indicators measure the existence of harmful aspects in children's lives, or their absence. Positive indicators measure the existence of desired and positive aspects of children's lives. The few studies that explicitly measure the quality of life of children and young people appear to draw heavily upon negative indicators to measure quality of life (e.g. Gilman et al., 2000).

2.3. *Children and Young People Performing According to the Goals of*
      Child Institutions

The third theme measures well-being as the success or failure of children and
young people in child institutions. These measures are related to formal
service system activities such as literacy and numeracy, juvenile offending
rates and child protection reports (AIHW op. cit.).

Such measures are often used as a proxy indicator for other measures of
safety, welfare and well-being. They do not necessarily measure the condi-
tion of children but measure the response of the service system to the
condition of children, or measure the capacity of agencies to provide ser-
vices, or put another way, agency busyness.

Researchers have developed a larger number of and more precise measures
of children's activities of a kind that occur within the service system – things
traditionally delivered by governments and of interest to child professionals –
than of measures that relate to the actual social life of children outside of
formal institutions, things which are increasingly being understood as rele-
vant to children and young people's sense of well-being (e.g. Mayall, 1994).
The former, child institutional based indicators, can be seen as reflecting a
certain institutional convenience and privileging of professional knowledge.
Broadly they are about maintaining the policy regime of the state (powerful
adults), rather than the status of children. If indicators are derived from what
the service system dictates as significant markers, it is unsurprising that in
contemporary market oriented welfare states (e.g. USA and Australia) many
of these indicators measure negative well-being, because they mirror targeted
policies and services rather than universal welfare provisions. The nature of
the indicators has more to do with the characteristics of the state than with
the state of its children.

2.4. *Positivist Underpinnings of the Existing Approaches and their*
      Significance for Developing an Approach which Includes
      Children's Knowledge of Well-Being

The dominant approaches to well-being which have identified children's
well-being as an important social element have been fundamental in effec-
tively placing children's issues on the policy agenda and in providing
information that can be used by children's advocates. Reports on children's
well-being, based on indicator research, have raised awareness about, for
example, the impact of social change on children. They have value in
highlighting both areas for priority policy attention and identified inequal-
ities between children from different socio-economic backgrounds.

The deficits of the dominant approaches as described above, reside in the limitations of relying predominantly on a positivist model of knowledge, a model which assumes the existence of facts about well-being which, when identified and organised into domains, will allow manipulation of causes and effects and guide investment in the future of our society.

The positivist model of knowledge, as a way of understanding well-being and its measures, is problematic when not complemented by alternative knowledge models, as it enables researchers and policy makers to ignore the fact that, as Manderson (2005) argues, well-being is socially contingent, a construct embedded in society and culture and prone to change and redefinition over time. Our understandings of well-being, and the indicators we use to measure it, are subject to contextual factors such as geographic location and gender (ibid.). Following this line, we would also argue that there are likely to be differences in the meanings which adults and children attribute to well-being, based on time and generation.

Recognition of children as a distinct group (e.g. Ben Arieh et al., op. cit.) has given impetus to a different understanding of children's well-being. However, the absence of children's perspectives in the current work on children's well-being means there has been limited attention in the well-being literature to the way in which, as a consequence of their generational location, children's social and cultural realities are likely to be different from those of the expert adults conducting the research and the implications of these differences for measures of children's well-being. This suggests some further questions. To what extent are existing well-being indicators a reflection of what we adults construct as the appropriate boundaries of childhood, rather than what children actually do and want? Furthermore, can we speak of children's well-being as uniform across childhood if divisions exist along cultural, gender and class lines? The dominant approaches divert our attention from such questions, from asking how children's well-being is delimited and expressed by the way childhood or childhoods are structured within a given society. Jens Qvortrup has stated that children who share geographical, temporal, socio-economic or other criteria have common characteristics that tell us not only about the structural conditions of childhood but also the broader society of which such childhood forms a part (Qvortrup, 1994).

At face value, the opportunities for these differences to be captured would appear to be acknowledged through the development of subjective well-being scales for children, by providing spaces to enable children to respond to particular subjective well-being domains. Subjective well-being research, in Rojas' terms, highlights the significance of individual perceptions, in

relation to measures of happiness and quality of life. In so doing the emphasis is on the concept of well-being, as declared by the person who is the focus of the research. Such research is increasing in the psychological literature (e.g. *Quality of Life Research Journal*). The relevance of this approach is reinforced by Ben-Arieh et al., when they highlight the importance in 'acquiring accurate information about children's subjective perceptions of safety or of their leisure time activities...by asking children themselves' (op. cit., p. 8). Cummins and Lau have developed subjective well-being scales for children by substituting items from the existing adult scales with other items able to be understood 'by the less cognitively competent groups' (Cummins and Lau, 2004, p. 4).

The potential of subjective well-being measures to take into account children's own experiences and the complexities of their lives has not yet been realised. The inability of current measures of subjective well-being to perform in this way is limited by the fact that they are not substantively based on individual children's personal values, views and assessments of their life circumstances. Rather, measures are based on standardised measures of satisfaction identified as important to (adult) researchers, to which individual children are asked to respond.

Ultimately we do not really know whether the domains and measures identified by adult researchers are meaningful to children. Measuring children's competencies in adultcentric ways, against those of the normative group of adults, incorporates assumptions about children as becoming adults. Where this means adjusting adult scales for use by children, researchers are continuing to construct children's competencies as lesser than, rather than, say, different from, adults. Such approaches are unable to take account of the pertinence of the adult-determined items to children and to where their lives are situated socially and culturally.

3. PLACING CHILDREN CENTRALLY: EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the research we are describing in this paper the emphasis by the Commission for Children and Young People (CCYP) on taking children's views into consideration has meant that qualitative methods were fundamental to our research. We placed qualitative methods within an epistemological and methodological orientation that emphasised the importance of understanding the concept of well-being from the perspectives of children and young people, the targets of CCYP policy. In doing this we were agreeing with Finch that this is 'precisely the kind of work which is likely to make an

impact upon policy, because it offers theoretical insights grounded in evidence' (Finch, 1986, p. 174). Working from within an epistemological framework which recognises that knowledge is being constructed in the interaction between the researcher and the researched, is consistent with the view that well-being is a social construct. This framework, typically labelled constructionism, contrasts with the objectivist or positivist framework of much social indicator research.

The qualitative methodology employed in our research, lies within the phenomenological/ethnographic tradition. Qualitative research methods, as defined by Denzin and Lincoln (1998), attempt 'to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (p. 3). In this context, we sought rich, in-depth data from which constructions of well-being could be developed through an interpretive process. In conducting qualitative research, our focus has been on 'meanings' rather than 'causes', with the logical procedures used to develop generalisations being inductive rather than deductive (Finch op. cit., p. 70). Finch has argued the value of qualitative research is that, in providing data based on direct experience, qualitative research provides particularly reliable knowledge about the social world (ibid, p. 165).

In our research we acknowledged that children's voices had previously been silenced on the question of what constitutes their well-being, by a reliance on etic views (Headland et al., 1990), in this case those of adult experts, in the framing of research. The importance of facilitating listening to children on matters which concern them is emphasised by the approach articulated by 'new sociology of childhood' researchers. These researchers identify the conceptual autonomy of children – that they have lives which matter and about which they are knowledgeable. Our research accepted as its premise that children are actors and knowers, able to speak for themselves. It sought to utilise children's knowledge as part of the authoritative framework for understanding what well-being is about for children in New South Wales.

This approach highlights the importance of children's 'presents'. We considered it important that in conducting our research, the focus should be on the children's lives as they experience them now, in contrast to research which is about children's development towards their future as adults. This made sense on two counts. Firstly, well-being research with adults is not focussed on their futures as older adults, but instead on their 'presents'. Why should this not also be the case for children? Secondly focusing on well-being in the present is sensitive to children's quality of life now and is respectful of them as reflective and feeling human beings who can interpret their lives to others in the present. Our approach enabled children to discuss

their well-being in the present, as well as to discuss the way aspirations for the future impacted on a sense of current well-being and their ideas of future well-being.

The explicit aims of our project were to facilitate input from children, about what for them constitutes well-being and about the factors they identify as contributing to this well-being. Using children's views about their own well-being, we have worked to derive knowledge and insights which will enable us to develop domains for policy purposes. The outcome we envisage is that children can be asked to respond to domains which are more relevant to them, than those previously constructed by adults. We consider that in implementing this process, a major challenge will be to provide sufficient flexibility in the monitoring process to facilitate meaningful data for children in different places and times.

4. METHODS

A key aspect of our methodology in researching from children's perspectives has been to attempt to involve children as co-constructors of knowledge at the data gathering and analysis stages of the project. Acknowledging that children are usually subordinated to adults in social relations, including those relations occurring around knowledge development, we employed methods that attempt to bridge the power imbalance between researchers and participants. We have derived these methods from participatory action research methodology (PAR) used particularly by researchers in majority world countries. These approaches seek to modify power relations between researchers and participants so as to increase the likelihood that the voices and interests of participants will not be overwhelmed by those of the researchers and to enhance our capacity as researchers to really hear what children are saying to us (O'Kane, 2000; Hood et al., 1996).

The research was conducted over three stages. The first stage involved either individual or group interviews (depending on participants' preferences) on what constitutes well-being and how these definitions relate to the everyday experiences of the participants. These interviews were semi-structured. This stage allowed rapport to be built between the researcher and individual participants and also their parents/carers. The second stage again involved either individual or group interviews, where the researcher and participants explored dominant themes identified in the first interview, allowing an in-depth dialogue to take place concerning the significance of the themes identified by the participants. Both these stages employed a range of task-oriented methods (e.g. drawing, collage and photography) where

appropriate. This second stage, not envisaged in the initial design, was added as we identified the importance of obtaining clarification from children as to the validity of the interpretations which we were beginning to develop, on the basis of the first interviews. The third stage involved participants completing a task-oriented project, exploring a particular theme or themes important to the individual. These projects included the use of photography, collage, drawing or journal keeping, and provided participants with alternative forms of knowledge creation, directed and controlled by them. Discussions between individual children and researchers about the meanings of their creations, after the completion of the projects, helped to continue to give prominence to children's own interpretations of well-being.

A total of 126 children from both rural and urban locations in New South Wales participated in the first stage of the research, 95 children contributed to stage 2 and 56 to the final stage. The children, when initially recruited to the project, were aged between eight and fifteen. The focus on this age group was a pragmatic one. In the New South Wales context this has been an age group on which there has been limited research and policy focus. Significant research attention is being placed on the first three years (as the basis for early intervention) and older teen period as the age of adolescent problem behaviour, seen as of concern because it may lead to 'problem' adult behaviour. Our experience in designing and conducting this research strongly supports arguments made by other child researchers (e.g. Alderson, 2000) that this process can be extended to children of all ages, including the very youngest, providing that researchers have the skills and take the necessary steps to engage them.

Schools from selected areas were approached to participate in the study. Students from these schools were invited to participate. A purposive sampling strategy was employed guided by a number of selection criteria. These included recruiting participants from the three major urban centers of New South Wales (Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong) and rural and regional New South Wales. Participants were selected from local areas across the spectrum of socio-economic status, using an index comprising disposable income including family income, housing status and car ownership. This allowed the participation of children from across New South Wales, which facilitated diversity within the sample and allowed observation of commonalities within a heterogeneous sample.

While these criteria provided guidance for the selection of areas and schools to approach in recruiting participants, the final composition of the sample was determined through the voluntary participation of the children and their parents and carers.

TABLE I

Age and gender characteristics – Well-being Study Sample

Age (years)	Male	Female	Total
Eight	2	0	2
Nine	6	16	22
Ten	13	20	33
Eleven	8	9	17
Twelve	3	6	9
Thirteen	3	10	13
Fourteen	5	18	23
Fifteen	1	6	7
Total	41	85	126

The age and gender breakdown of the participants is presented in Table I. We have used the software package NVivo to help with the organisation of data and the development of themes, in a team process.

Recognising that there are diverse forms of competence being employed when adults and children communicate (Fattore and Turnbull, 2005) was a first step in establishing the research process as a dialogue between children and adults. This dialogue contributed to the data, which enabled us, as adult researchers, to construct domains and indicators of well-being, based on children's perspectives, and then as advocates for children, represent them in the policy arena.

In the strategies we devised to facilitate children entering into dialogue with the researchers, we attempted to minimise linguistic and conceptual barriers to communication. Strategies included: providing choices of forms of participation, for instance individual interviews, peer-based, or group discussions; the use of graphics as part of and separately from verbal interactions and opportunities to follow up on a theme through project type work, such as photography and collages, as a basis for discussion with researchers. Additionally, in response to the input of children, we modified the research process after the first stage, from what we had initially envisaged, to enable dialogue to continue around themes important to the participants.

Of particular importance in facilitating children's standpoint(s) in relation to the concept, was our decision to ask children at the beginning of the research process what they understood well-being to be. While this very unstructured approach initially caused some confusion for some children, in general, it facilitated children arriving at definitions of well-being relevant to them. The ongoing dialogue built into the research design, enabled participants to construct the elements important to their sense of well-being.

As researchers concerned to facilitate children's standpoints in a way that applied rigor to our process of research and our analysis of data, we employed the research practice of reflexivity. We used this practice developed by the researchers in previous contexts (Mason et al., 2003; Watson, 2003) to bring into critical focus and constantly question, the power and privilege that naturalise hierarchical arrangements between adults and children. Reflexivity in the research context has been defined as opening 'the way to a more radical consciousness of self' and 'a mode of self-analysis and political awareness' (Davis et al., 2000, p. 202 citing Callaway, 1992). As adults researching children's lives, we have found it crucial to regularly practice reflexivity in order to confront our adultcentricism. Being reflexive was important both during the period when interactions were taking place between researchers and children and during the process of analysing the transcripts. For example, researchers discussed ways of demonstrating respect towards the children they were interviewing and the difference this made to children's ability to articulate their opinions. In analysis, it was important to continue to challenge the interpretations being made from the data and ground them in what children had conveyed in their discussions. We discussed in a number of meetings how this could appropriately be achieved. We also agreed as we worked on the analysis, that mere inclusion of children's words as quotes, does not necessarily reflect the meanings they are conveying to us. We were aware that placing words on paper can actually distort voice. This was demonstrated to us in the process of moving between first, second and third interviews. As we interrogated in these later interviews what we had understood individual children to be saying in their first interviews, we seemed to get nearer the meanings they were attempting to convey to us in words and graphics.

5. SOME EARLY FINDINGS

The previous discussion has identified the reasons for deriving indicators from children's understanding of well-being. The early findings from our research enable us to elaborate in concrete terms on what such qualitative research can add in terms of meaning to more positivist indicator research findings. In particular, children focus on what contributes to positive experiences of well-being. Their conceptualisation of positive well-being is, however, not a straightforward one. For example, while children associate with well-being what are typically regarded as positive feeling states such as happiness, excitement and peacefulness or calm, some children include being able to integrate anger and sadness into their lives, as part of well-being.

At this stage in the data analysis some themes have emerged. These include:

Defining Well-being: Well-being is defined through feelings in particular happiness, but integrating sadness is also relevant. Well-being is about feeling secure particularly in social relations, when relations are for example harmonious. Well-being is also defined as being a moral actor in relation to oneself (when making decision's in one's best interests) and when one behaves well towards others. Adults are behaving morally when they make decisions in children's best interests.

Autonomy and Agency: Well-being as the capacity to act freely and to make choices and exert influence in everyday situations. This was not necessarily being independent from others. Children articulated the social relations upon which autonomy was premised, including stable, secure relationships with adults. Agency also included the capacity to act in ways consistent with being oneself. Again the capacity to act morally – make moral decisions with some degree of autonomy, was crucial to a sense of well-being.

Keeping safe and feeling secure: Children told us fear and insecurity affects their well-being and that feeling and being safe is an important part of well-being. This included fears about personal safety, particularly feeling alone and fear of being a victim of crime. Children also expressed more global fears about war and terrorism, particularly feeling helpless to do anything about world events. Children described a range of factors that provide a sense of security and safety. These included being with other people, having parents that protect you and treat you well, having a personal, safe place to be and religion. Children identified factors that make them feel afraid and place restrictions on their ability to participate in social life, including design of the built environment and parental concerns about children's safety.

Self: Positive sense of self was used to define well-being by participants. Well-being was bound with experiences of being valued, experience of self as an okay person and aspiring to be okay in the future. Feeling good about oneself could be linked with concrete achievements but also a more general sense that things were going okay. Sense of self-image appears to be grounded in reflections from others. However this appears not to be a simple two-way process. Children appear to negotiate their difference and assert their sameness with significant others. Children also described the importance of 'internal work' for their well-being. This could be described as taking time out to be on one's own, to relax, reflect, 'chill-out' and having ones own space.

Material resources: Children were aware that money provides increased and inequitable access to cultural activities and cultural capital. While children understood that money provided opportunities and more money provided greater capacity to purchase goods and services, the overwhelming link between money and well-being is through having enough money to provide a decent standard of living for households and families, not individuals. Many participants discussed their own experiences of relative poverty. Children described concerns they had about their families 'making ends meet', were worried about the impacts on other members of their family and also described instances of shame associated with poverty. Some participants discussed how certain items that they owned were important to their well-being because they were invested with a certain emotional significance. These items may have little economic or 'materialistic' value but were part of that child's identity.

Physical Environment and Home: Adequate physical shelter and home environments that are stable reference points are important to children's well-being. Some children described how physical environments made them feel happy because they were sites for leisure activities. These didn't necessarily have to be 'special locations', but could just be locations for routine leisure activities. For example being able to access parklands autonomously, and feel safe to play in parks, is important to some children's well-being. Children commented on the quality of the environment and the importance of maintaining the quality of the environment. In particular, environments that were noisy, unhygienic and traffic-dense were not conducive to well-being. A sense of having a home was crucial to well-being. Home has several characteristics – it is a place defined through family; it is a place you receive basic care; it is a place where you can relax and be yourself; it is a place where you have your possessions and hopefully a place where you can have fun; ideally it is a place where you have space to do internal work and feel secure.

From our analysis of the data we have constructed a number of domains on the basis of the themes, which took shape within the data children contributed. As qualitative analysis necessarily involves both deconstruction and reconstruction – a process of seeing new gestalts – it was inevitable that the domains at which we arrived, reflecting children's realities, would differ to some extent from existing domains. For example, the domain labelled 'self', is different from domains previously identified in social indicator research. However, this and other domains overlap with aspects of more traditional domains. It is possible from both overlaps and divergences between the domains to recognise how phenomenologically derived domains

can both complement and supplement domains constructed in positivist research.

5.1. *A more Detailed Example: Activities and Being Active*

The domain we have labelled as 'activities and being active', is the domain from our research which most closely parallels a domain constructed in more positivist well-being indicator research. It is therefore a useful example with which to explore the ways in which our research findings can both complement and supplement other research findings on domains of children's well-being. In this section, we elaborate on this domain (as we have constructed it at this stage), in relation to the way it parallels a domain already established by Ben-Arieh et al.'s research as significant for children – 'children's activities'.

In the domain 'activities and being active' the term activities refers to what children discussed in the data as their 'doings', or things in which they took part. This refers to both actions (verb) and activities (noun). Activities were evident in our data as separate entities in so far as they were associated with sensory experiences, for example physical exhilaration in sports or visual responses to creativity. Apart from these sensory experiences, activities had no separate concrete meaning in themselves, rather they are contexts in which children experience and negotiate competencies and relationships and may also have 'fun'.

Children describe how activities in which they achieve are important to them because they contribute to experiences of competence. This experience of competence can be significant in and of itself and/or because it results in children being given recognition and being appreciated for achieving and/or winning. Competence, when significant in itself is, the children tell us, about a positive sense of self, knowing in yourself that you are good at something – competent. When competence is about approbation by others, the others are most typically family and peers, but can also be teachers. Activities which bring about experiences of competency can be associated with concrete results, for example an award, but this is not necessarily the case.

Fundamental to what activities associated with well-being are about is having power and not feeling powerless. Children feel good when they have some control over their activities. Enjoyment of relationships and autonomy within these can be 'fun'. Children who do not feel competent at a particular activity may feel excluded or humiliated by other children or by adults. Moreover, competence, or perceived lack of competence, can be used by children to exclude others, or to relate to others. Adults who are not sensitive

to difference in competence among children can contribute to children's feelings of powerless and humiliation. This can occur particularly in educational environments. Feelings associated with lack of competence, for example in the school situation, can lead to resistance and rebellion by children.

Children also discussed competency through activities in a future orientated way. In particular, seeing yourself as having increased mastery and capacity to do things contributes to a sense of enhanced enjoyment. The idea of 'growing up' through activities is related to enjoying doing things because you become increasingly competent at them. Children also stated they were having fun when they felt they were actually learning something – the activity had a purpose. What this suggests is that there may not be a clear distinction between unstructured activities as fun and structured activities leading to competence. In fact both structured and unstructured activities may lead to learning and also be fun. Well-being for children comprises both competency in the present and expectations of obtaining greater mastery in particular areas. In children's lives present and future co-exist, sometimes in tension. This presents challenges for the development of indicators.

The relationship context is crucial in whether activities lead to a sense of well-being. For example, some children discussed the importance of supportive adults for helping them learn new things and 'develop'. Supportive adults are described as managing appropriate exposure to risk, creating a balance between the child feeling secure in learning something new/taking the risk and being able to exert agency within secure parameters. The security provided through strong relationships was seen by children as providing them with the confidence to exert agency.

Being good at something/an activity also appears to be an important aspect of children's identities and of their self-esteem. The experience is enhanced for some children when they pick up the knack of doing something for the first time. For some children a positive sense of self relates to trying something new and enjoying it. Feeling proud/good about one self in relation to activities can occur even where the achievement falls short of socially accepted norms for achieving in an activity. For example, one child talked about feeling good about horse riding in spite of falling off the horse.

A further important aspect of activities when associated with well-being are the opportunities the activities provide for the experience of freedom from constraints, expressed either as having 'fun' and/or being able to exercise autonomy. In particular, children enjoy activities where there is lack of pressure to achieve according to adult and/or peer expectations and norms. This was described as a sense of freedom from responsibility or routine that allowed children in some degree to do what they want with

people they enjoyed spending time with. This is both about the capacity to choose the activities that they want to do and also about expressing their agency by doing activities in their own way, which relates to an assertion of self-identity.

Table II summarizes the concepts or dimensions for the domain of 'activities and being active', and indicators derived from these dimensions.

The concept dimensions relate to the immediate relationship context in which the activity is undertaken, the opportunity to obtain or exhibit competence, the capacity for children to exert autonomy through the activity (and therefore negotiate the adulthood–childhood dynamic), account for the sensory experience and relate to the effect of social, cultural and economic characteristics of children to undertake activities. The indicator concepts mirror these dimensions. Indicators operationalised from these concepts will reflect the degree to which activities provide opportunities to develop or express competence, feel valued or supported, allow connections with others, allow the assertion of autonomy and are fun.

This domain as it has been constructed is compared to what we understand as the corollary domain identified by Ben Arieh et al. (op. cit.) in Table III. Through comparing this domain, we illustrate how the

TABLE II

Concept dimensions and indicator concepts: Activities and being active

Domain: Activities and being active	
Concepts Dimensions	Indicator concepts
Contexts for experiencing and negotiating competencies and relationships	Participation in activities that provide opportunities to experience competency and/or being valued and supported (separate from or within a context of social relations) *to connect with important people.*
Opportunities to negotiate structural aspects of social relations, through the exercise of autonomy (can be fun)	Participation in activities that provide opportunities to experience competency and/or being valued (separate from or within a context of social relations) *that provide opportunities to exert autonomy.*
Positive sensory experiences	Participation in activities that result in positive sensory experiences.
Social, cultural and economic characteristics	Indicators should be applied appropriately to context.

TABLE III

A comparison of indicators for children's activity

	CCYP-UWS	Ben Arieh et al. (2001)
Definition	Doings, being part of	Types (e.g. personal care, consumption, spiritual)
Dimensions		Duration
		Frequency
		Place
		• Location
		• Institutional setting
	Contexts for experiencing and negotiating competencies and relationships (can be fun)	People who are present/participate
	Opportunities to negotiate structural aspects of social relations, through the exercise of autonomy (can be fun)	Extent of structure
		Obligation v voluntary participation
		Control over content and structure
	Positive sensory experiences	Subjective evaluation
Indicator Concepts		Distribution of children's time across types of activities
	Participation in activities that provide opportunities to experience competency and/or being valued and supported (separate from or within a context of social relations) *to connect with important people.*	Percentage of time spent in productive activities
	Participation in activities that provide opportunities to experience competency and/or being valued (separate from or within a context of social relations) *that provide opportunities to exert autonomy.*	Percentage of time spent in obligatory v voluntary activities
		Distribution of children's activities with different participants (family, alone, other children, with other adults or other children and adults)
		Percent of time spent in places not designated specifically for children
	Participation in activities that result in positive sensory experiences.	Distribution of children's time by satisfaction levels
Patterns of activities over time	Social, cultural and economic characteristics	Economic, social, cultural, gender and age differences

approaches can complement each other to contribute to robust indicators of children's well-being, meaningful to children and young people.

From this table it can be seen that our findings both complement and supplement the work on the domain of *Children's Activities*, as described by Ben-Arieh et al. (2001). In their work these researchers classify activities according to types (personal care, productive activities, leisure/recreation, transportation time, consumption, sleep and spiritual). Their classification of activities provides a structure of the characteristics of the actual activities that children undertake. Our findings instead identify that the types of activities are not what is significant to children; rather it is the context in which the activities are performed which is significant. Ben-Arieh et al. (2001) identify dimensions such as frequency, place, people who are present and children's control over content and structure of their activities. Our findings broaden the dimensions, both by complementing the Ben-Arieh et al. dimensions and by adding to them. Our dimensions complement the Ben-Arieh et al. dimensions in that they indicate that children's well-being from participating in activities is associated with the meanings they attribute to them, in terms of how they link in with their sense of self, their relations with others and their actual enjoyment of life including positive sensory experiences. Further, our findings highlight the role that social relations play in children's experiences of well-being from participating in activities. These relations have to do with opportunities for children to negotiate structural aspects of social relations, through the exercise of their autonomy.

The indicators derived from the conceptualisation of dimensions from our research are focused on opportunities for children to have experiences relevant to their well-being – these opportunities being broader than those provided by the scheduling of time and extending to the quality and type of interactions with others.

As yet we are unable to determine the relevance of our data to the third aspect of activities described by Ben-Arieh et al. – patterns of children's engagement over time, in terms of for example, economic, social, cultural, gender and age differences. We do, however, expect that the sample of children who participated in our study will be able to make some comments at a later date.

We are currently continuing our analysis of domains and development of indicators.

6.   DISCUSSION: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHILDREN CONCEPTUALISING WELL-BEING

6.1.   *Significance for Well-being Research*

The project described in this paper has been a beginning in the process of identifying areas for indicator development, developed from children's understandings of well-being, within the state of New South Wales. In taking this approach we have responded to the concerns articulated by Ben-Arieh et al. (op. cit.) stipulating the importance of developing relevant indicators for children's well-being, by grounding indicators in the experiences of children. The significance of our work so far, has been in taking seriously children's understandings of the quality of children's childhoods in and of themselves and in demonstrating that phenomenological research can lead to the development of indicators, informed by what children consider as important for 'the here and now' and for the future.

The development of indicators which relate to the experiences of some children may reflect dimensions and domains valued by children more generally. However, we recognise that indicators grounded in some children's experiences are situated in a particular historical, cultural and social context. They are also situated in the experience of particular groups of children. Questions about the universality of what children value, in terms of their well-being, apply to phenomenological research findings as they do to findings from more positivist research.

Those developing indicators needs to be sensitive to the changes that individual children experience over time. They need to take account of individual competencies, abilities and aspirations over time, unrestricted by reified understandings of what pertains to children at different ages. We may find that certain domains or specific indicators have greater relevance to children in various stages of their lives. While certain indicators may be relevant to certain developmental stages, we should not assume that these stages will be tied with specific ages. For example, the needs for autonomy and security may be experienced in different ways by different children at different times in their lives but nevertheless may be universal throughout lifetimes. The ambiguity resulting from this situation points to an ongoing challenge for those of us developing indicators to develop a framework meaningful to children generally but allowing for flexibility in application.

Our findings do indicate variation in the value attributed to different factors contributing to well-being across the population of participants in our research. With further analysis we hope to be able to identify the extent to which the differential values placed on certain factors are related to socio-economic

attributes such as ethnicity and gender. Such analysis will be important for what it can tell us about the relevance of contextual factors, such as gender and ethnic background, for monitoring well-being and the design of measures that will enable contextual factors to be taken into account.

It will be important to follow through from our research by extending it across a larger population within Australia, to test and, where appropriate, transform the concepts and measures. Similarly, it will be important to find opportunities for collaborative work across countries. In the longer term, it will be necessary to routinely test the indicators derived from our research, to determine their continued relevance over time and/or transform them in relation to the times in which they are now to be applied.

6.2. *Significance for Policy Development*

Children in contributing to this research have been both able and willing to reflect on their well-being and articulate concepts relevant to domains of well-being crucial to them. In some aspects the domains which took shape from the data contributed by children are consistent with those identified by adults. Because this research has given priority to children's perspectives as an alternative source of knowledge, these findings have the potential to validate and complement existing efforts. Existing measures can only be enhanced if we have a set of measures that are also relevant to children. However, the domains and the values associated with them also extend and challenge domains developed by research which is adultcentric. It is likely that our data, as it translates into policy relevant indicators, will have the effect of questioning dominant beliefs and expectations of what constitutes and is important for children's well-being.

Designing policies to promote quality of life for children, as defined from their own standpoint, will be more difficult than service oriented or developmental health measures. Much of this difficulty resides in the fact that research from the perspectives of children, usually a silenced group in our society, in terms of contributing to policy development, may not immediately be seen by more powerful adults in policy positions as congruent with their interests. Incongruence is demonstrated most clearly in the findings that when children contribute to concepts of well-being they talk about positives of well-being in their 'presents'. The contrast of this finding with traditional adultcentric findings which have focused on negative aspects of children's well-being for their futures, sums up the way in which attention to children's standpoint(s) has the potential to challenge, complement and overall enrich existing adult–child social relations.

The significance of this research is in the knowledge it provides for advocacy for policies to promote children's well-being in a way which has a great deal to contribute to contemporary social policy debates. In particular, such advocacy, in questioning adultcentric discourses, challenges adult policymakers and professionals in the children's area, to separate out adults and children's interests around children's well-being. Such processes are essential if we are to develop policies in ways which because they accord with children's understanding of their well-being, actually promote this well-being both in children's presents and futures.

NOTES

[1] Standpoint theory is a sociological acknowledgement that people 'see' or 'view' things differently, depending on where they are situated structurally in society. It locates researcher and researched on the same plane, bringing the power and privilege that naturalize hierarchical arrangements (such as those between adults and children) into critical focus. This theory argues that the reality of those located in the least powerful social positions (e.g. women vis-à-vis men, children vis-à-vis adults), is the most valid knowledge for them.

[2] An example provided by Reidy et al. (1998) examines the complex interactions between individual socioeconomic and demographic characteristics and their impact on the timing of the exit from and transitions across programs among a series of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) recipients.

[3] Alanen uses the term 'generation' to refer to the way the positions of childhood and adulthood, and the social relations between these positions, are structured. 'The notion of a generational system suggests that children are also "knowers" – that is, they gain practical knowledge for what it is to be a "child" in the kind of society in which they are positioned as "children"'. They have an understanding of the social world, based on where they are situated in it, from a children's viewpoint, as distinct from adult viewpoints (Alanen, 2005, p. 41).

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