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Children participating in measuring what matters – why, when, how?

By Ferran Casas

The social indicators movement emerged in the 1960s defending the idea that subjective data may be useful for political decision-making at macro social level: what people say, express, perceive, evaluate and aspire to, has relevant social consequences. Therefore, systematic data – that is to say, *regular statistics* – on some social and psychosocial phenomena are needed. The word 'statistics' is not – as many people may think – related to 'mathematics' or to 'arithmetic', but to the Latin expression 'ratio status' ('state's reason' = it is in the national interest). One question, then, is: Which statistics matter to proper decision-making in the national or international interest of children?

By the 1960s, social indicators were also accepted and promoted as relevant instruments to assess *social change*, both 'spontaneous' social change, and intended social change, that is to say, the results of planned interventions. In that way a new field of research appeared: *programme evaluation*, which also involved impact evaluation.

It is only 40 years since the beginning of the social indicators movement and now we have started to debate whether what children say, express, perceive, evaluate and aspire to has relevant social consequences. The so-called child indicators movement has been considering which kind of data provided by children (and adolescents) could be used for political decision-making, in order to improve some social dynamics involving children (Ben-Arieh et al. 2001). Children are users of schools, health services, and public spaces in their city or village. Should they be asked about their satisfaction with the services provided to them, in the same way that we started to ask adults half a century ago?

All through the last century, arguments were put forward that adults' opinions, satisfactions or happiness should not be taken into account because such behaviours are 'subjective' and only 'objective' measures were considered 'scientifically' acceptable – therefore the scientist's point of view should be considered superior to people's ('subjective') point of view. That was a very narrow epistemological perspective about how human knowledge is produced, and also about the nature of many social

phenomena. Many social phenomena are determined by the perceptions that human beings have about it, that is to say, psychosocial components are a 'real' part of social reality.

In a similar way, it has rapidly become evident that we, adults, are able to underline a lot of 'problems', including serious methodological problems, when we collect information from children. Do we trust information provided by children? Is data provided by children reliable? Traditional *adult-centric thinking* holds that children 'cannot' be right if they think differently from adults – their perceptions and evaluations 'cannot' be reliable (Casas, 2011).

Why? Methodological and epistemological premises

It is not only paediatricians, psychologists, child sociologists, teachers, pedagogues, parents and many other *adults* who may be considered 'experts' on children. Children and adolescents are *also experts in their own lives*. Some key information about children's lives *can* only be obtained by asking children: children are key informants about their own lives. For example, it is not always obvious to adults' eyes that a child is being physically or emotionally bullied. Therefore, children can make very relevant and important contributions to social knowledge. The point is not whether children are competent or not to provide relevant information to adults – the point is whether adults are competent enough to obtain from children the relevant information they have (Garbarino, Stott et al., 1989).

From a quality of life perspective, a social phenomenon is composed both by material conditions of living, measured with objective indicators, and by psychosocial conditions of living, measured as perceptions, evaluations and aspirations of the diverse stakeholders involved (Glatzer and Mohr, 1987; Casas, 2011). Different social agents may have different perspectives of the same social phenomenon. For example, a mother may report her child is satisfied with the school they attend, but the child may report dissatisfaction. From a scientific point of view it makes no sense to discuss 'who is right' – what makes sense is to try to understand why different social agents perceive the same reality in different ways. If different observers climb up different hills surrounding a valley and take pictures, when we join the pictures together they may look as if they are of different valleys. Who has taken 'the image' of the 'real' valley? That question is nonsense. Even if you go downhill and take closer pictures, they will not be 'more real', because you lose perspective. The valley is 'composed' by all the pictures, and even for aspects that no picture has been able to capture.

When adults and children (or adolescents) disagree on their perception or evaluations of the same social phenomenon, it does not mean at all that adults are right and children are wrong. It may happen that everybody is 'right'. That is particularly important when we collect data about perceptions and evaluations from big samples of children: now and then results are unexpected and/or children or adolescents 'disagree' with adults (Casas, 2011).

When? The opportunity of school-based surveys

Surveys are expensive, and only a few national statistics bureaus so far seem to be interested in investing the necessary budget to obtain regular subjective indicators from big samples of children to be used as systematic regular statistics.

Alternative ways of obtaining children's perceptions and evaluations have already been implemented. The cheapest way seems to be the development of school-based surveys, because in the school context questionnaires can be group administered and in that way big samples can be reached for smaller costs. That means developing clustered samples, by obtaining representative samples of schools, frequently stratified – i.e.: by state-run and private, and/or by rural and urban, or by other geographical characteristics. For example, in the Children's Worlds international survey (www.isciweb.org) that was the option selected.

Subjective data from big samples of children is not only needed to know more about children's lives. It is also needed to improve children's lives (including children's rights as established in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child). Any action taken in any country to improve children's well-being can only be properly evaluated if we have rigorous data previous to the action – in a similar way we need data to evaluate the results of interventions for adults. Besides that, we need representative samples of the general population of children and adolescents to establish the available normative data at country or region level (i.e. a baseline), in order to identify which subgroups are significantly below the national or regional mean scores – even those in a more miserable situation in relation to their subjective well-being. These subgroups should be the focus of political and social interventions.

School-based surveys have, however, several limitations. In some countries active parental consent is required, while in others passive consent is accepted. In the first group of countries real representative samples are impossible in practice. On the other hand, selecting children on the basis of a representative sample of schools offers methodological difficulties (i.e. complex sampling analysis is required), and has additional limitations: children not going to school that day are not surveyed; in some countries the number of children not in school at certain ages may be relevant; schools with children with a disability or with children with some specific problems (health, behavioural and other) are not usually included in schools sampling; and so on.

How? The pluralistic perspective

Information provided by children is sometimes uncomfortable for adults, because it may be unexpected or even contradict adults' beliefs or majority social representations on childhood and adolescence (Casas, 2011). It is only when maintaining adult-centric positions that it is possible to doubt that information provided by thousands of children on their

own lives cannot be relevant to understanding children's worlds and to improving social policies.

Because perceptions, evaluations and aspirations of big samples of children have seldom been collected, analysed and discussed up to now, we need to advance fast in that young field of scientific research and collect all kinds of evidence that may be of help for that purpose. For that reason pluralistic approaches can be the most fruitful, both theoretically and methodologically. In order to better understand children's answers, particularly those which are unexpected, we cannot ground our research only on the quantitative answers to questionnaire items. We also need qualitative information to be able to develop more in-depth analysis – we need multi-method approaches.

However, the main challenge is to accept children as active agents in our research projects. Children can be advisers to their researchers and can help to better design a questionnaire, or even a whole research project (Casas et al., 2013). Children can be extremely helpful in assisting us to better understand children's answers to our items by means of, for example, focus groups. More children participative multi-method designed international projects are needed to advance improvements to children's lives. Accepting children as advisers and as active agents in research investigating children's well-being has also the deep meaning of recognising the rights of children to social participation as established in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and in the documents of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (Davey, 2010).

What really matters is not only measuring what really matters: Firstly we have to answer a key question: *How to improve children's subjective well-being?* We can only start measuring once we have answers to that question. Do we want to improve the subjective well-being of ALL children? Or perhaps, more realistically, do we prefer to start by improving the subjective well-being of the children with the lowest subjective well-being? After developing an action to improve well-being, how can we be sure our action was successful? Evidence-based programme evaluation is needed. However, any such evaluation should start with listening to children and taking into account their own perspective on well-being, including their own aspirations at country level; and, of course, in the final programme evaluation any changes on children's perceptions, evaluations and aspirations should be included.

In recent years some researchers have pointed out that western research has been very focused on some of children's 'traditional social problems', while some subgroups of children have been 'forgotten' from well-being research. For example, we have evidence that children in care – particularly in residential care – have significantly much lower subjective well-being than the mean population in many countries (Llosada-Gistau et al., 2014). That is also the case, for example, of children of migrant parents and of children involved in bullying.

A scientific, political and social challenge

What really matters for children's well-being provides a scientific, political and social challenge. These three dimensions need to be approached and articulated. From the scientific perspective, children's well-being is a very young field of research and we must recognise we still know too little about its characteristics and determinants, particularly in a cross-cultural perspective. Few resources are devoted to research in this field, because up to now it has not been a political or social priority. We need more scientifically based proposals of the most relevant subjective indicators of child well-being in order to prioritise their data collection.

From a political perspective, childhood policies are not a big priority in many of our societies: our politicians have much more 'important' questions to face, and budgets for children are usually planned for their well-becoming, not for their well-being (Ben-Arieh et al., 2001) – children may be important as future citizens, but usually not as citizens in the present. How can we push politicians to invest more in our children for their present well-being? That may depend a good deal on how important children are in the public life of the civil society and for the overall adult population. In societies where children 'belong' only to private life (i.e. to the family), public childhood policies are usually very irrelevant. Only public opinion that is convinced that the whole society must invest a relevant part of their public budgets (i.e. of their taxes) for the well-being of the youngest generation will pressure politicians to implement plans consistent with the idea that 'children matter' for the whole society.

Some pending key topics for the future

Because subjective well-being of children and adolescents is such a recent research topic and because of the lack of information drawn from representative samples in so many countries as yet, we have a number of major theoretical and empirical challenges to be faced by all human and social sciences. One very important challenge is giving an appropriate theoretical explanation to the cumulative evidence that subjective well-being seems to be continuously decreasing throughout adolescence in many countries, particularly between 12 and 16 years of age (Holte et al., 2013). This trend has only become evident when the much more sensitive 11-point scales have been used with adolescents to assess their subjective well-being instead of 5-point scales. We have some evidence that in some countries this decrease may stop at 15 years of age (e.g. Brazil) and that in others it continues decreasing after age 15 (e.g. Romania) (Casas et al., 2015). No consistent information is available on the age at which this decrease starts because very little research has collected data from big samples of children under 12. The Children's Worlds' project is one of the first initiatives collecting data from children 8, 10 and 12 years of age, and the project has obtained representative samples from 15 countries. However, in the Children's Worlds' project 8-year-olds have answered to the subjective well-being psychometric scales using a different scores

range than 10 and 12-year-olds. In the pilots 11-point scales appeared to be too complicated for some children in some countries, and 5-point scales with emoticons were used for the 8-year-olds instead. Therefore, checking the decrease with age of subjective well-being with the dates of this project is not easy, because scales are not the same for the youngest. A very preliminary analysis of the results of this project suggests that SWB decrease may start at 10, but in a few countries that rule does not work (e.g. in Ethiopia and Israel) (Rees and Main, 2015).

In western countries and in South Korea part of this decrease seems to be related to the decrease in satisfaction with one's own body and self-image (particularly among girls), satisfaction with school-related aspects (particularly among boys), and satisfaction with the area children live in. If such results are confirmed by future research, important political challenges appear on the horizon.

To better understand the determinants of children's and adolescents' subjective well-being, and therefore, for better decision-making and action in order to improve the well-being of the younger population, or of subgroups of them, longitudinal studies are needed. At present very little longitudinal research is available on children's subjective well-being in any country of the world. To get that kind of data is a major challenge and should be a scientific priority, which requires adequate funding.

In order to stimulate more international scientific debate focused on children's well-being, availability of databases including data from as many countries as possible is a key topic. At present, most existing cross-national comparisons including subjective indicators of children's well-being or quality of life are using data from only two international databases containing children's self-reported information on different aspects of their own lives: the HBSC (www.hbsc.org) focused on health-related behaviours among students and the PISA (www.oecd.org/pisa) focused on school performance. The Children's Worlds' project has announced it is going to offer free access to its databases, and will be the first one offering information for those under 12 years of age and about children's activities in their daily life as well as satisfaction with a broad set of life domains and aspects on their lives (www.isciweb.org).

If we are able to reach agreement on what matters for children's well-being in our societies, including subjective well-being as children themselves understand it, it will be much easier to give priority to measure what matters. However, we face a vicious circle: If we do not start measuring, debates about which are the best measures will be too narrow, because of our lack of scientific historical tradition on those kinds of measures. We need empirical evidence on children's points of view from as many countries as possible to make possible a broad international debate. And for that purpose we need young people to be involved in our research, to be considered active social agents who have the capacity to advise and improve our research and our actions to improve our societies.

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