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Introduction to Special Collection Eight on Children's Well-Being from Different Angles

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Introduction

The papers included in this *Special Collection* originate from – or were inspired by – the 7th conference of the International Society for Child Indicators (ISCI) ‘*Children of the Worlds: The Touch of Change. Research, Policy, and Practices*,’ held on 27-29 August 2019 in Tartu, Estonia. International Society for Child Indicators (ISCI, established in 2005) incorporates senior researchers and professionals internationally who develop and support indicators to measure and monitor the well-being of children and apply the collected data to influence and formulate policies. ISCI holds biannual international conferences since 2007.

The ISCI conferences aim to gather researchers, practitioners, policy makers and child advocates from across the world to share and discuss the latest research on child indicators and their implications for policy and interventions. The current Special Collection presents examples of children's well-being research from different angles, such as measurement of child poverty, a debate over applying the notion of child well-being in children's rights law and research, and empirical evidence of children's rights and well-being from adults' and children's perspectives. The ten articles included in the Collection capture analyses of children's subjective well-being from Bangladesh, Estonia, France, Indonesia, Nigeria, Poland, and Russia. They are authored by different scholars (sociologists, psychologists, educational scientists, childhood and well-being scholars, faculty of law), but also by an advisor to the Chancellor of Justice of Estonia, UNICEF senior adviser, and head of the Analysis and Statistics Department at Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs.

The ISCI conferences carry ideas of children as a separate social group and a part of the society, also known in academic literature as a ‘new’ understanding of children and childhood. The emergence of a ‘new’ understanding of childhood as a social phenomenon, and of children being active social actors in their own right within a generational order, has given rise to a paradigmatic advancement in the field of reshaping studies in children and childhood, since its development in the mid-1980s (Qvortrup 1985; Qvortrup, Sgritta, and Wintersberger 1994; Alanen 1994). The paradigm rapidly gained popularity with the fresh view it contributed to the development of new theories regarding children and childhood (e.g., Corsaro 1997; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; and others).

The new approach differed significantly from the prior one, as it viewed a child not as a future adult but as an active social actor and a subject in the here and now. An international group of researchers studying social indicators of children's well-being (Ben-Arieh et al. 2001) admitted that administrative data collected on children so far and the so-called simple counting of children (e.g., how many drop out of school, how many have a certain disease, etc.) is not enough to explain how children themselves think they are doing and to what extent their rights are secured. It became clear that the assessments of adults about children are not always adequate and correct. The assessments of children and adults cannot be the same because they are representatives of different generations and, as such, they fulfil different roles in the society as well as towards each other (e.g., Casas 2011; Casas et al. 2013; Gilman and Huebner 2000). If a child is considered as a subject, not an object, it should also be believed that the child has age-appropriate social competence and ability to provide subjective evaluations about different aspects of one's life (Ben-Arieh 2005; Casas et al. 2013; Mason and Danby 2011).

This new viewpoint in the child well-being research is important in both policy formulation as well as for official statistics, because it can significantly alter the statistical picture. Moreover, new theoretical considerations about children and childhood pave the way for discussions about children's rights (e.g., Carvalho 2008; Doek 2014; Mayall 2015; and others), and the normative framework of the understanding of a child's well-being (Kosher and Ben-Arieh 2016). Internationally, the interest in data collected from children started with the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child at UN General Assembly in 1989. Subsequently most countries globally ratified the convention, assuming responsibility to give children a life that corresponds to their rights.

In the present Special Collection, *Wouter Vandenhole* brings a debate about the relations between children's rights perspective and child well-being. He contemplates the commonalities between the international children's rights law and the idea of child well-being. Both of these approaches focus on children and are concerned about 'child flourishing'. However, Vandenhole concludes that the concept of well-being remains rare, undefined, and undertheorized in children's rights and proposes to continue with more sustained dialogue between the two fields.

Andra Reinomägi focuses on children's right to participation from generational perspective. She explores children's and adults' attitudes, knowledge and experiences concerning children's involvement in decision-making in matters related to children's lives, as expressions of the right of participation. The findings demonstrate the generational and gender differences between children and adults in their perceptions. The study confirms the association between the awareness of children's rights and support to children's possibilities to participate in decision-making in different aspects of life. Furthermore, the analysis shows the importance of the children's own experiences of involvement: children who have more experiences with having a say in issues related to their everyday matters tend to be supportive of the involvement of children.

Children's rights and child well-being is the foundation also in *Enrique Delamonica's* paper about poverty measurement debates. He agrees with many other researchers that children experience poverty differently from adults. Therefore, it is important to design specific, child-focused policies to eliminate child poverty. In the context of global efforts, Delamonica introduces UNICEF's position to measure child poverty, based on a few simple and clear principles. He stresses that child poverty should be measured at the individual child's level, not just as a disaggregation by age on household level or as an adult-centred measurement. Moreover, he pays attention to children with special requisites and how those may affect poverty. For example, children with disabilities may require assistive devices or indigenous children may require culturally appropriate learning materials.

The measurement of poverty is the main emphasis also in *Hede Sinisaar's* article, demonstrating how important poverty measurement is for policy. She explores whether and to what extent family benefits can help reduce persistent child poverty. Estonia is an interesting case because family allowances increased in the second part of 2013, coinciding with a decrease in annual child poverty rates. Using data from 2013-2018, the article explores the effect of this policy change on both absolute and relative poverty and on persistent absolute and relative poverty among children.

Going back to a short history of the 'new' understanding of children and childhood, an important milestone in advancing child well-being theory and measurement was the *Indicators of Positive*

Development conference in 2003 organised by *Child Trends*. This conference started the *Child Trends' Flourishing Children Project* – a project to develop positive indicators of children's well-being. It emerged from the discussions that social development lies not only in emphasizing the negative but also in noticing positive indications and finding opportunities to develop these further (e.g., Lippman, Moore, and McIntosh 2011; Moore and Lippman 2005; Lippman et al. 2014). Different theories and approaches have helped to move this work along (Ben-Arieh 2008). Positive psychology, with a flourishing childhood as one of its constructs (e.g., Moore and Lippman 2005), contributed to the understanding of the notion of positive subjective well-being of children (e.g., Huebner 2004; Casas 2011; and others), and the acceptance of a child as a socially-competent agent in his or her life, as an individual whose opinions and views can be trusted (Casas et al. 2013; Huebner et al. 2014). Ecological systems theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), has recently been integrated as a lifeworld orientation (e.g., Grunwald and Thiersch 2009; Kraus 2015; Roets, Roose, and Bouverne-De Bie 2013; Tuukanen, Kankaanranta, and Wilska 2012; and others) and is helpful in recognising children as experts in their own lives and as agents of change, as well as by theorising of their lives in different life domains (e.g., Ben-Arieh 2005; Dinisman et al. 2017; Lee and Yoo 2015).

Positive indicators reflecting children's lives such as life satisfaction and happiness appeared in international surveys (in 2002 in HBSC and in 2015 in PISA). The core group of ISCI initiated "Children's Worlds", the International Survey of Children's Well-Being (ISCWeB) in 2009. The questionnaire was piloted in 2010 and the first full survey was carried out in 2013-2014 in 14 countries (Casas and Rees 2015; Rees and Dinisman 2015), and the next wave in 2017-2018 in 35 countries (Rees et al. 2020). The study aims to collect solid and representative data on children's lives and daily activities, their time use, and, in particular, their own perception of their well-being. In the present Special Collection, three papers draw data from this study focusing on 8 to 12 year-old children's assessments from Indonesia, Russia and Bangladesh.

Ihsana Sabriani Borualogo and Ferran Casas analyse the relationship between bullying (by siblings and by peers at school) and subjective well-being in West Java Province, Indonesia. Their findings indicate that bullying is a frequent phenomenon: about a quarter of respondents report bullying by siblings and one-fifth report school bullying, though it varies by the type of bullying and gender. Self-reported evidence of physical, verbal and psychological bullying seems to increase with age. Among the 8-year olds, there were no differences in subjective well-being among those who were bullied and those who were not. By age 10, physical bullying at school decreases subjective well-being and by age 12 also other types of bullying (verbal and psychological) affect subjective well-being. As such, some age groups are more adapted to the bullying in terms of subjective well-being. However, overall, it is clear that bullying is a serious threat to children's subjective well-being and mental health.

Zhanna Bruk, Svetlana Ignatjeva, Natallia Sianko, and Liudmila Volosnikova present children's assessments of subjective well-being and general life satisfaction in the Tyumen region in West Siberia, Russia. The analysis of 10- and 12-year-old children's responses showed that among younger participants, subjective well-being is most strongly associated with school life satisfaction, while for older participants, the strongest correlation is with family life satisfaction.

Haridhan Goswami presents children's views from Bangladesh and demonstrates the dependence of subjective well-being assessments on socio-demographic and economic context of children's lives. The analyses reveal the impact of several socio-demographic and economic factors on children's subjective well-being, however, the rural-urban divide had the highest effect on children's well-being followed by higher material deprivation and lower affordability to buy enough food.

Another article, co-authored by **Kevin Diter, Julia Buzaud, Claude Martin, and Zoé Perron**, focuses on school climate and well-being using PISA data. PISA (OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment) is another great source of international and comparative data on children; however, its main focus is to measure knowledge and skills. Using the French part of the PISA 2015 survey, Diter and colleagues attempt to understand the interplay between family socioeconomic factors and school climate on children's life satisfaction. Their overall finding is that school climate affects children's life satisfaction. This means, sense of belonging to school and good relationships at school increase life satisfaction while school bullying and anxiety about school lower life satisfaction. However, family

socioeconomic background affects these relationships in two ways: 1) those from lower socioeconomic classes are less likely to experience good school climate (and, hence, are more likely to have lower life satisfaction), and 2) the effect of school climate on life satisfaction differs by socioeconomic background (for example, bullying has a stronger negative effect on life satisfaction for working-class children). As such, family socioeconomic background has a two-tiered effect on the relationship between school climate and life satisfaction.

Two articles are examples of smaller, more localized, glimpse into children's wellbeing at different disadvantaged environments. *Esther Ariyo, Dimitri Mortelmans, and Edwin Wouters* focus on the wellbeing of conflict-displaced children in Nigeria and *Jolanta Grotowska-Leder and Iwona Kudlińska-Chróścicka* analyse the transition to adulthood for foster care children in Poland.

Ariyo and colleagues strive to illuminate how intervention program could improve life satisfaction and hope of displaced children. A unique data of displaced children due to Boko Haram insurgency in Northeast Nigeria sheds light to the lives of children in the conflict area where children have been kidnapped from schools, schools have been destroyed, family members and teachers murdered, children and families displaced. It is especially important to understand what affects children's subjective wellbeing in these dramatic conditions. Ariyo and colleagues find that parent-child relationship, living within an extended family system, and livelihood support increase life satisfaction and hope while economic stress decreases life satisfaction. As such, the intervention programs should, in addition to improving the economic conditions, focus on relationships and uniting children with families.

Finally, the article on foster children in Poland is a good example of trying to understand the success of a societal process from youth's own point of view. Grotowska-Leder and Kudlińska-Chróścicka use original qualitative data from 2015-2020 to show how foster children feel about their transition to adulthood and exit from foster care. The interviews reveal that the transition from care to adulthood is both accelerated and compressed compared to transition to adulthood for general public. Care leavers find the transition to be rapid and chaotic, affecting the care leavers' eventual success to become independent members of society.

Scientists, professional practitioners, and policymakers are looking for systematic and practice oriented standards of child well-being. What they particularly need is empirical datasets that are freely available as open resources – the Children's Worlds study is a good example here. They also need evidence from children regarding how they conceptualize subjective well-being and what are the determining factors of well-being. Comparative research helps to understand the positions that the children hold across time and space by assessing their well-being, especially in case of vulnerable children.

It is noteworthy that traditionally children used to be invisible participants in the studies of issues related to them, but they have now become more visible in research, politics and everyday life. The papers in this Special Collection can offer only a microscopic insight into the topics discussed during the 7th ISCI conference held in Tartu in 2019. We hope that the papers serve as an example raising interest in research, theory and implementation of knowledge about children for purposeful improvement of children's lives.

We thank all of the authors who responded to our call for papers and re-worked their presentations into submissions to consider for this Special Collection. We also thank all of the volunteer reviewers who helped us in making the decision to choose the articles and to shape the final published articles ready for publication. Last and not least, we thank Estonian Research Council (PRG700) for supporting the guest-editor's contribution to the Special Collection.

The 8th conference of the International Society for Child Indicators “Children's Rights and Opportunities in an Unequal World: Research, Policy and Intervention” is to be held in Gramado city in Brazil on May 25-27, 2022. The conference will be hosted by the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). More information at: <https://isc2022.org/>.

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