From Object to Praxis: A Narrative of Shifts in Child Well-Being Research

Tobia Fattore

Abstract
This paper presents a broad outline of intellectual developments in child well-being research. Four intellectual currents are identified, the ‘objective’, ‘subjective’, ‘standpoint’ and ‘praxeological’ approaches. The narrative developed emphasises the role that critical contests over epistemological, ontological and methodological issues serve for developments in research. Drawing upon the various approaches identified, the paper concludes by discussing well-being in terms of social integration and system integration, advancing a concept of well-being that is neither relativist nor culturally monopolizing.

Keywords: child well-being research, objective well-being, subjective well-being, standpoint theory, praxeology, methodology


Zusammenfassung

Schlagwörter: Wohlergehen von Kindern, objektives Wohlergehen, subjekitives Wohlergehen, Standpunkttheorie, Praxeologie, Methodologie

1 Introduction

Research on children’s well-being is characterised by multiple interpretations and approaches. While the term ‘child well-being’ is a frequently used concept in popular, aca-
demic and policy discourse, it is inconsistently defined, and there is little agreement among researchers on how it should be measured or whether it should be measured at all. In their introduction to this special issue, Fegter and Hunner-Kreisel (2020) describe one attempt to characterise the diverse approaches that exist in the field, that of Asher Ben-Arieh, who describes fundamental shifts that have occurred in well-being research— from survival to well-being; from negative to positive well-being; from well-being to well-becoming; from traditional to new domains; and from a focus on adult to child perspectives (Ben-Arieh 2010).

The focus of this paper is an alternative set of developments in the child well-being field, based on the emergence of distinct analytical approaches in child well-being research that parallel broader developments in the social sciences. These analytical approaches can be termed the ‘objective’, ‘subjective’, ‘standpoint’ and ‘praxeological’ approaches. In particular, the paper will focus on the emergence of praxeological approaches, which have challenged more established traditions in the field—questioning the positivism of ‘objective’ approaches and the risks of reification in ‘subjective’ and ‘standpoint’ approaches. The existence of different approaches suggests that the field has come to accommodate a diversity of ways that children’s well-being can be researched. However, there have been few attempts to assess how these approaches represent developments in knowledge production, and whether various approaches represent different epistemological and ontological positions. By assessing the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of approaches to researching child well-being, the effects of these underpinnings can better be understood. For example, what constitutes valid knowledge in each approach, what are the assumed parameters of the problem to be researched, what counts as appropriate to research, how are children conceptualised within different approaches and what role do children have to play in research on their well-being. These factors implicitly construct different concepts of the ‘child’ and of ‘well-being’, which then become the focus of policy responses to children and can have significant effects on children and their families.

The main purpose of this paper, therefore, is to provide an overview of some of these intellectual developments in child well-being research. Unlike other narratives of transitions in well-being research, which have focused on how the emergence of children’s rights, monitoring functions of the state and the changed status of children has shifted the emphasis in well-being research (Ben-Arieh et al. 2014), the narrative provided here suggests that in tandem with these developments, we can also observe how well-being research has progressed through a contest of ideas. The paper commences by mapping out these intellectual shifts. Without suggesting that there is a linear sense of progression, the emphasis is on how various approaches have developed on the basis of asserting distinctions from preceding traditions. Three shifts are discussed, from objective to subjective, from subjective to standpoint, and from standpoint to praxeological approaches.

The paper concludes by describing a provisional framework that draws upon the objective, subjective, standpoint and praxeological approaches. This framework understands well-being in terms of system and social integration. Social integration highlights the importance of norms and values and thus draws upon insights gained from praxeological approaches. System integration emphasises the role that the distribution and possession of material social resources has for well-being, thus building on insights provided by standpoint, subjective and objective approaches.