On Major Conceptual Shifts within Research on Child Well-Being in Estonia

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Abstract
The aim of this paper is to highlight major shifts in research regarding children and childhood as a narrative of the author. It starts from presenting a retrospective of child poverty research in Estonia, and it is demonstrated how it has developed from the social and political acknowledgement of poverty as a social issue in the early 1990s. Then it revisits main shifts in theory and methodology of childhood research and reaches international comparative approaches to child subjective and relational well-being.¹

Keywords: child poverty research, relative deprivation, exclusion, children’s perspective, subjective and relational well-being, Estonia

1 Introduction
The perspective of children – as active agents, social actors, and units of observation – crystallized as a new field of sociological research in the late 1980s and early 1990s (cf. Qvortrup 1991; James/Prout 1990). The perspective did not problematize traditional views on children but was complementary to it, thus, enriching academic understanding of social practices related to children. Today, the ideas underlying the new paradigm of...
childhood studies have spread worldwide as an interdisciplinary and internationally comparative field of knowledge. Most importantly, besides child welfare issues, the conceptualization of a child’s subjective well-being and the development of child social indicators have attained an acknowledged position in RDI projects and in the academic literature on children. Moreover, the research output received from studies with children and children’s perspectives in their own right is gaining trust in both national and international studies by informing policies.

This current paper highlights major shifts in studying children and childhood, by making an excursion back to the 1990s and then onwards to demonstrate how the new theoretical perspective on children and research methodologies reached and found its acknowledged position in research and policy in Estonia. The “fundamental shifts” in research on child well-being over 30 years (cf. Ben-Arieh 2008) frames the present academic narrative. The narrative starts from children “coming out” as units of observation in research and policy in early 1990s, and follows main shifts in understanding children and childhoods and reaches to the current theoretical and methodological standpoints. The present approach does not pretend to be an overwhelming overview of research about and with children in Estonia but is rather a personal narrative of the author who has stayed close to the academic community of the child indicators movement since the early 2000s.

2 Shift One: Children Are “Coming Out”

During the Soviet era, research on families was an integral part of population studies. Besides studying formation of families and breakdown of family relationships as major research topics, giving recommendations to serve pronatalist family policies was the main policy task. Children themselves were not sources of information and they were almost missing in state statistics. Children were represented in the population structure by age groups and counted in relation to the education system but as the group of the dependants, they were together with people not in labour force and the elderly. Negative lives statistics (suicides among children) was calculated within the age group below 20 years old hiding the numbers about children (Eesti Statistika 1991).

When developing a position paper for a new family policy in late 1980s and early 1990s, researchers at the Research Group of Family Studies of the Tartu State University (currently University of Tartu) were puzzled with defining the family as the launching point, especially because of its variety of structures. As a solution, they put the child in the focus (Perekonnapolitikka Kontsesptsoor 1994) saying that family policy should accept the needs of a child as the first priority; it has to pay attention at the family in its variety and support development of the best life arrangement for the child. This was the first time when a child was the point of departure in family policies and the key to approach the families. Later, the term ‘family’ was exchanged with the term ‘household’ in the official statistics and the position paper lost its expected influence in policymaking.