Chapter 12
Conceptualising Children's Subjective Well-Being: A Case Study of Bhambapur, Punjab, India

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12.1 Introduction

An understanding of subjective child well-being is increasingly deemed to be an important area for social research. By drawing upon a qualitative study, carried out in a small village in Punjab, north India, this chapter gives recognition to the voice of children, from the Global South, to formulate a conceptualisation of their perceived well-being. In discussing the findings from this participatory research involving narratives of a total of 50 children, aged 11–14, three key questions are explored: How do children experience and construct a sense of well-being? How can we understand child well-being through children's lived experiences? How might children's narratives of well-being be useful in effecting policy, practice and provision? Four main themes are discussed, namely conceptions of good childhood/child well-being, social and personal relationships, adversity and hardship, and vulnerability and agency. In its consideration of child perspectives on child well-being, and the policy implications of key findings, this chapter makes an important contribution to help advance the rights of children at the margin of society.

Although the well-being of children is considered to be of the utmost importance in contemporary times, we still lack good evidence into what children themselves regard as key facets of this, from their own life experiences. The notion of child well-being is closely related to child rights (UNICEF 1989). Arguably, the emergence of civil rights and feminist movements in the twentieth century led to a consideration of the rights of children in modern times. Although child liberation theorists for example John Holt (1974) *'Escape from childhood'*; Richard Farson (1974) *Birth-rights;* and Howard Cohen (1980) *Equal Rights for Children,* were prominent in communicating their ideas; it was not until 1989 that we witnessed the introduction

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of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1989). This convention was built on the principles of welfare and social justice for children, and stresses the so-called three Ps—Provision, Protection and Participation. India adopted the convention in 1992. Crucially, the adoption of the convention in itself is insufficient in promoting the rights of children. The introduction and implementation of domestic legislation that can help ensure the well-being of children is a necessity. How the subjects of these rights understand their own lived reality in the context of child rights and child well-being remains an important area of concern. One of the key criticisms of the UNCRC 1989 is that it has given birth to a global children's rights industry that is 'tecnocratic' and positivistic; and obsessed with implementation and measurement rather than a reflection on the legitimacy and relevance of children's rights as the new norm in dealing with children (Fernando 2001; Pupavac 2001). Also, it is argued that there is a decontextualisation. In other words, insufficient account is taken of living conditions, the social, economic and historical contexts in which children grow up (Reynaert et al. 2009; Velez 2016).

Since the 1980s, there has been considerable change in the way children are studied within the discipline of sociology, and other social sciences. The notion of child agency and child competence are being given greater recognition in contemporary times (Mason and Danby 2011). So, in the discipline of Sociology for example, where the family as a unit was largely studied within a framework of socialisation; we are now witnessing a greater focus on women and children as social actors and bearers of rights.

Today, children are conceived as occupants of the conceptual space of childhood, which is in itself widely regarded as a social construction (James and James 2001). Thus, whilst childhood is considered to be common to all children, it is also recognised as fragmented by the diversity and intersectionality of children's everyday lives (Purkayastha 2010; Liebel 2017). The temporal and contextual nature of lived reality is regarded as crucial in understanding individual views and experiences.

Increasingly, there is an upsurge of research within sociology that incorporates child perspectives in a range of areas including risk and safety, gender identity, and men's violence against women (James and Prout 1990; Harden et al. 2000; Van der Burgt 2015; Lombard 2013, 2016). Moreover, a myriad of empirical and theoretical studies, amongst others, in health, education, social work, anthropology, and geography have helped enhance our understanding of children's lives. The notion of childhood as a structural category, and an axis of difference alongside that of childhood as a social construction, has helped identify key questions around child agency, universality of childhood, and the locality and diversity of childhood (James et al. 1998; Holloway and Valentine 2000). Such areas of focus frame and inform theoretical and empirical understandings, and serve to influence policy, practice and provision in relation to children's lives.

Significantly, the study of subjective well-being is a recent development in social research (Fattore et al. 2009). Indeed, and in the framework of one of the UNCRC 1989 'P's, and Article 12 (Right to be heard), scholars have consistently argued for the participation and inclusion of children in the process of research and policy-

making to help understand their perspectives to effect child-friendly approaches (Ben-Arieh et al. 2001; Lansdown 2001). In an effort to help focus on children's subjectivities, a key criticism that has been drawn is that developmental paradigms in psychological research have tended to privilege an indicators framework from an adult-centric perspective to the detriment of a consideration of children's views and experiences and 'knowledges' (see James et al. 1998; Qvortrup 2005; Mason and Urquhart 2001). In a climate of epistemic violence where there is a dearth of research into children's perspectives, particularly from the Global South, it is imperative that this shortcoming is addressed (Invernizzi et al. 2017).

This chapter now proceeds to document the aims and methods employed in our study, and the ways in which children's perspectives were held to be of central importance in this empirical study from the Global South. I specify the research questions to be addressed in this chapter together with the mixed-methods framework adopted in this study. An understanding of the research site is also provided to help the reader contextualise the study findings. Children's understandings of child well-being are presented and discussed within the extant literature. Policy implications are also drawn to suggest areas of concern.

12.2 Study Aims and Methods

This chapter explores children's own views and experiences and understandings of child well-being. **The key research question** addressed in this paper is:

- How do children experience and construct a sense of well-being?

Sub-questions include:

- How can we understand child well-being through children's lived experiences?
- How might children's narratives of well-being be useful in effecting policy, practice and provision?

The study draws on empirical data collected in Bhambapur, a fictional name of a village in Punjab, in north India. A mixed-methods approach involving a mapping exercise (that included an exploration of children's views on important places, people and things/objects/hobbies), a 7-day diary (about home, leisure and school activities), focus group discussions, and 1-1 interviews was used to elicit children's accounts of their everyday life (Fattore et al. 2016a). A total of 50 (23 boys and 27 girls) children participated in the written exercises, and in small group discussions. The 7-day diary was completed by 48 children, and in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 21 children (10 boys and 11 girls). Children between the ages of 11–14 were selected to participate in this study for reasons of comparison with studies being undertaken in 24 other countries on the theme of subjective child well-being. Informed consent forms were sent to the parents of children to help recruit volunteer participants for the study. An informed consent form was also administered to the children whose parents had granted

permission to help ensure they were taking part in the study of their own volition. Care was taken to ensure the children were aware of their rights regarding participation in the study. The school demonstrated exceptional hospitality in making a large room available to the researcher for the duration of the fieldwork. The mapping exercise, focus group discussions and 1-1 interviews were all conducted in this room. The researcher was also provided with tea/coffee and meals by the school. This provided a safe space for interaction with the pupils, the teachers, and ancillary staff including the chief cook and the cleaners. The study included an ethnographic element of participant observations, and interactions with teachers, cooks, and cleaning staff. Permission to undertake the study was obtained from the author's university ethics committee, and the stuy adhered to the British Sociological Association ethics code of practice (BSA 2017).

Stage one: This stage involved the completion of the written mapping exercise, and focus group discussions as participatory methods designed to elicit children's subjective experiences. Whilst the mapping exercise worked as a useful engagement tool to build initial rapport, and obtain children's responses to a systematic set of questions about key aspects of social relations and social spaces in children's own context, the focus group method proved to be useful in helping children to identify key themes relevant to their context, and to think through the importance of these to their well-being. In particular, this method allowed for a good discussion of the commonalities and differences in their experiences (Darbyshire et al. 2005).

Stage two: This involved in-depth interviews with a selection of children, and the written exercise of a 7-day diary. In-depth interviews were particularly effective in generating a deep understanding of children's subjective experiences, and the meanings they attach to their social and relational context (Fattore et al. 2016b). The 7-day diary provided further context to children's everyday lives and the importance they attach to key aspects of their lives (Punch 2002; Thomson 2009).

12.3 Brief Description of Bhambapur

Bhambapur is a historic old village in the northern state of Punjab in India. The village witnessed an almost complete de-population following the partition of British India into India and Pakistan. Many of its Muslim inhabitants left for the then newly created Pakistan, whilst Sikh and Hindu refugees from Pakistan settled here after their displacement in 1947. The village is home to about 600 households and it has a population of about 3000 inhabitants. Bhambapur has undergone changes in its boundary as new houses, shops, and other amenities including a gymnasium, hospital, and places of worship have been built on what was formerly arable farmland. Philanthropic Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), from the British Indian diaspora, continue to make an important economic contribution to the development of their former village (Chanda and Ghosh 2012). Many of the families belong to the Jat Sikh caste, and the Hindu baniya group, respectively embedded in agriculturalist and commerce activities. Today, a sizeable number of the affluent families have

migrated to the nearby city, and new families have moved into the village. Bhambapur has a culturally mixed population and boasts two Gurdwaras, two temples and two churches. The village has had a twinned primary and secondary school for some decades which currently educates to pre-university level. Notably, the village has a lower than average literacy rate at 71%. It is also home to a sizeable scheduled caste grouping that comprises about a quarter of the population. Crucially, the vast majority of the children (86%) who attend the village school belong to what are described as lower castes in the Indian census—scheduled caste/backward caste. Affluent high-caste families, on the whole, send their children to private schools in the nearby city. I utilise the commonly employed word Dalit in this paper, to refer to these children and their families, (a politically activist and self-empowering term used by these communities themselves). It is important to note that Dalits have endured historical discrimination and oppression (including social segregation) and continue to do so at the hands of non-Dalits throughout India (Jodhka 2017).

Children from three surrounding villages attended this government school with its pupil population of almost 500 pupils, aged 11–18. The school employs 17 full-time teachers (both male and female). Under the current educational policy regarding child welfare and schooling, children up to class 8 (generally age 14) are entitled to a free school meal, free uniform, and the requisite school books.

12.3.1 Researcher Positionality

Crucially, it is important to understand my positionality as the researcher in this study, and consider the situated reality of the children and the power dynamics in the process of research. Through my introduction as an 'outsider', as a 'foreigner', to the school and the school children, it is likely that my status was regarded, by the child participants, as one of authority and on par with the teachers. The possibility that the children were selective in what they shared, and what they withheld has to be recognised. Given my own ethnic background as an Indian-born Punjabi, and my extensive experience of undertaking social research over the last 30 years, I was mindful of my position as a researcher, and as an 'insider'/'outsider'. To gain acceptance from the children and build a rapport and a situation of trust, my ability to speak the same language/dialect as them (*Punjabi*), and my own primary school experience in a *'similar village'* setting were key bonding factors. Giving children a platform to express their views to help an adult, 'insider'/'outsider', 'foreigner' understand Indian childhood in a contemporary village setting is a powerful activity. Children reported not only their excitement and their enjoyment in being involved in this study, but they also conveyed it as an experience which had enhanced their own learning and knowledge:

> I had a fabulous day today. A professor from London visited my school. And I had the opportunity to interact with her. I felt good, and I really learned a lot from the discussions with her. She talked with us with such warmth and love. I think she was also very happy (Kuldeep, 13-year-old girl).

12.4 Sample

A total of 50 children aged 11–14 contributed to the data collection.

- There were slightly more girls (27) than boys (23) in the study group. The vast majority of the children were Sikhs (32), followed by Hindus (15), and a few Christians (3).
- The vast majority of the children reported that their parents had little or no formal education (up to class 6 or 7).
- Poverty was a strong feature of the group (low paid/casual jobs held mostly by fathers).
- Punjabi was the dominant language spoken by the children.
- Children's home geographies included the village in which the school was located, and three neighbouring villages.
- The most common family form was an extended family. In a few cases, the father had died due to alcoholism, or a work accident, and the children lived alone with their mother, or with their mother and grandmother.

12.5 Data Analysis

The study used and adapted different components of the CUWB project fieldwork schedule (Fattore et al. 2016a). The *'About You'* Questionnaire provided the demographic context for the study. The '*Mapping Exercise'* and the *Focus Group Discussion (FGD), and the 1-1 interviews* were subjected to a thematic analysis. This included three stages. Firstly, I applied the preliminary coding frame to each mapping exercise, and FGD. Secondly, a case study approach was employed for each 'About You' and mapping exercise data for each participant. And finally, I developed an integrated analysis which drew together themes from across the range of participants. All interviews (1-1), and focus groups were transcribed in full. This helped the analysis of this qualitative narrative accounts to generate codes and categories using the thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006).

12.6 Findings

In this study, and following the written mapping exercise about 'important people, places, and things', I began by asking the children, in focus group discussions, to tell me about their understandings of a good childhood and what is most important to them in relation to life and well-being. Below, I discuss children's understandings of a good childhood/child well-being (see Fig 12.1), social and personal relationships, adversity and hardship, and vulnerability and agency.

Fig. 12.1 Children's understanding of a good childhood, and child well-being

12.6.1 Good childhood/child well-being

Using the study children's own words, the wordle below shows, at a glance, their own understanding of a good childhood, and child wellbeing, and what is considered to be important to them in their lives. This information was obtained through focus group discussions.

The wordle depicts the following themes:

1. Physiological needs (food/diet, clothing),
2. Emotional/social needs (love, affection, company/friends),
3. Importance of family and relationships (parents, company/friends, relatives)
4. Social values (respect, cleanliness, clean air),
5. Education (study, qualifications, teachers)
6. Masti (fun)/leisure/play

One can seek to make sense of these narratives through the prism of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow 1943; Tanner 2005). Crucially, for the children in our sample, where poverty was a strong feature, we can see that basic physiological needs such as food and water are given a pronounced significance. For some of the children in our sample, such economic adversity was an everyday experience. I discuss this below. Using the Maslownian framework, we can see the importance

of opportunities, needs, and subjective-well-being. In another paper elsewhere, we discuss how the sense of love, affection and belonging is given precedence over other needs such as self-esteem and self-actualisation which may be considered 'individualistic' (Barn and Chandra forthcoming). This is particularly the case when children discuss their 'future self', and the extent to which filial piety of the collectivist culture, and fulfilling parental dreams is paramount (Barn 2018). How the collective and the individual are intertwined is an important area of understanding.

12.6.2 Social and Personal Relationships

Our interviews with the children reveal a sense of the importance of key facets—belonging, love, affection, attachment, nostalgia, and temporality. These facets were invariably experienced through social and personal relationships. The most prominent family members were those close to the child. In many cases, the parents (especially the mother) were deemed to be the most important people in the child's life. In other cases, siblings, grandparents, aunts/uncles were held in high regard and as core to the child's sense of their well-being. Children expressed feelings of happiness in the company of their family. They also talked about the importance of positive social and personal relationships in helping them to feel safe and secure. Loving and being loved were also identified as an important facet of belonging and well-being. Equally, having time for fun and frolics was considered crucial in growing up. The social and personal relationships that were generally linked to this pastime, invariably called 'masti' (Punjabi / Hindi word for fun) were siblings, friends, and grandparents. The narratives below help capture the meaning of personal and social relationships in the lives of children, particularly around sociality, affect, and materiality. We can sense the importance of affect through the act of story-telling as 12 year old Preet expresses her appreciation of her paternal grandfather. It is evident that through being and the act of doing, social and personal relationships are expressed, by the study children, to promote belonging, love, and affection. The significance of materiality, in the form of pocket money, sweets and chocolates, and basic household provision, also serves as an important indicator of sociality, love and care.

> My dadaji (paternal grandfather) is very important for me for story-telling, for pocket money, and for sweets and chocolates (Preet, 12-year-old girl).

> My mum and dad are very important for me. They love me very much, and they understand my happiness and grief (Diljeet, 13-year-old boy).

> My mother is very important for me. My life would be in darkness without her (Sukhbir, 12-year-old boy).

> I love my mother because she looks after me; my father because he gives us money to run the household; my dadaji (paternal grandfather) for roaming around and playing; and my siblings and friends for masti (fun/unstructured peer leisure) (Jovan, 13-year-old boy).

The influence of parents and teachers as moral guardians was also a common theme. In a climate where children heard daily stories of problematic drug use, the role of parents and teachers as key individuals who helped steer them away from harm was regarded as crucial.

> In my life, teachers are very important to me because they teach us; they are like my parents because they help to put us on the right path (Randeep, 13-year-old girl).

> Parents and teachers are both important because they protect us from drugs (Jaspreet, 14-year-old boy).

In summary, children defined a 'Good life' as one where they lived with their family, were in receipt of good guidance and a sense of the 'right path' (morality), had adequate food, shelter, and clothing, and where there was respect for elders, and plenty of time for play/leisure.

12.6.3 Adversity and Hardship

In their narratives of child well-being, these children who were invariably from Dalit and poor backgrounds raised concerns about adversity and hardship. In doing this, they were emphasising a good life that could be possible if these difficulties were not present. Many children stressed the importance of basic physiological needs of food, clothing and shelter. Indeed, lack of food and poverty in the home setting were real concerns for these children. Our findings contest the supposed universality of the western model of childhood and children's experiences; and suggest that an intersectional understanding that seeks to integrate social identity with systemic discrimination and oppression, is crucial (Etherington and Baker 2018). Children from a Dalit background experienced the disadvantage of their lower caste through parental under-employment/low income, ill-health, poor housing and sometimes lack of food (Jodhka 2017). The account below from 12-year-old Preet whose family belong to the Dalit grouping explains her extended family set-up, and her main concerns:

> I live in an extended family house—with my parents, brothers/sisters, my aunt/uncle, and my parental grandparents. There are six of us who share one room (mother, father, brothers and sisters). It's very difficult. Sometimes there is little food in the house. Yesterday, we couldn't make any tea (Indian tea) because there was no sugar in the house. Our room is made of wood and yesterday there was an earthquake, and we were really worried. Sometimes, there are no onions, garlic in the house. We sometimes borrow from my aunt to cook vegetables (Preet, 12-year-old girl).

In the interview accounts of their family life, many children stressed the spatial aspects of their home and surroundings. It was not uncommon for children to be sharing a bedroom with the entire family, as shown in the quote above—that is with parents and siblings. At times, this also included a grandparent. Interestingly, it was not the sharing of this space that was highlighted as a major concern but other key issues of low income, lack of food, and the poor quality of the housing, and its

associated risks for the safety of the family. Children talked about their family's lack of money to build a better house. Living in cramped, poor quality housing also generated conflict between extended family members as the account below suggests:

> I am sad when there is a problem in our house. Sometimes, there is no money. We can't afford to build a better house. My grandmother and my aunt fight with my mother (Anisha, 13-year-old girl).

Another important dimension of adversity and hardship that had a direct bearing on children's well-being was ill-health in the family. Access to good healthcare, as well as the relationship between ill-health and employment was also identified by children as a serious concern:

> My 10-year-old brother has a stunted growth problem that is thyroid related. I heard my mum talking to my grandmother that my father has an excess growth on his foot. I didn't know why he walked with a limp until I overheard this conversation. We can't afford an operation. Also, my father would have to be off work for about 4–6 months; and he is the only breadwinner and he can't afford to be off work as we will not have any income during this period of time (Manpreet, 13-year-old girl).

Ill-health of one or both parents was a common theme among lower-economic background children. Such concerns were almost invariably related to parents' growing inability to work and earn a living. Such harsh circumstances were also reportedly linked to drink/drug misuse, and domestic violence.

The home is generally considered to be a place of safety, security and comfort. Crucially, as we learn more about family violence, there is also an increasing interest in developing an understanding about child perspectives about the home as a place of violence (Mullender et al. 2002; Etherington and Baker 2018).

> There is strife in my home. My father takes drugs, sometimes there is no food in the house, but he makes sure to get his drugs; and he beats my mother, sometimes in the middle of the night. I usually call on my Dadi (paternal grandmother) to come and stop it, but he sometimes hits me and prevents me from calling my Dadi. He threatens to take me out of school if I intervene" (Anisha, 13-year-old girl).

The much-known problem of drug misuse in the state of Punjab was a recurring theme among the children in our study (Sharma et al. 2017). Children's everyday experiences and narratives about this helped to understand how they themselves were impacted by this. An extract below from one of the focus groups with 13–14-year olds illustrates this:

> Girl1: Some children's parents who are drug users don't give any money to the family. And some of these children might eat food from the dust bin, and become ill.
>
> Boy1: Adults should not drive a car if they have consumed alcohol.
>
> Girl1: In our village, a woman's son drank and did drugs (injections) and he died today. He was 25 years old.
>
> Boy2: One boy from our village (class 3) uses Bhola Manakka (a drug derivative, tablet), and smokes cigarettes.
>
> Author/Interviewer: Where do you think he learnt to do this?

> Boy2: His father is a user. I think his father sends him to collect the tablets for him from the shop; and I think what probably happened is that one day he decided to try it for himself. So—he is now addicted.

Children also talked about how their brother or cousin had almost been entrapped in such drug misuse; stories of drug addicts turning to theft were again not uncommon. Children's narratives of adversity and hardship reveal the impact of structural inequalities on personal and social relationships. Invariably, the accounts conveyed by children were located in poverty, poor housing, and low-paid casual jobs. The tensions and difficulties caused by such adversity were felt at a personal and social level by the children. There was little in the way of formal support for children, and families. The negative consequences for children's well-being were palpable. Our study confirms previous research which showed that children in India were able to 'provide detailed and wide-ranging indicators of wellbeing and ill-being, which were embedded in local environments' (Crivello et al. 2009, p. 62). Next, we focus on children's sense of agency and autonomy in the face of adversity.

12.6.4 Vulnerability and Agency

A strong theme that emerged to help understand children's sense of child well-being was located in their vulnerability, social identity, agency and ideas and aspirations for social inclusion through future job aspirations. There were numerous and varied examples to evidence this including in children's accounts of their caring responsibilities, their efforts to boost their household income through paid work, and through their future aspirations to support their family, community and country.

It was not uncommon for children, but particularly Dalit children, to report an array of caring responsibilities from a young age. Children reported a range of skills within the household domain from cooking, cleaning, looking after younger siblings, and also as peace-makers. The latter point is mentioned above in Anisha's narrative of familial conflict and her efforts to secure the engagement of her grandmother to help diffuse these situations. Notably, children (both boys and girls) described their household skills with pride, and considered such responsibilities as agentic and crucial to their well-being; they perceived these as fundamental skills for life. Generally speaking, many children reported assuming household duties as the norm; whilst others shared that they helped out when their mother was ill:

> My mother was unwell, and the house was really untidy—so I helped to clean it (12-year-old boy)

> Once my mother became ill, so I had to do my school work and do all the housework until she was better. My mother was really happy (11-year-old girl).

> When my mother and father have not returned from work, I do the household work (12-year-old girl).

> I generally help my mother, but when my mother is unwell, I do all the cooking and cleaning (12-year-old girl).

> I can make tea, sevian (sweet vermicelli with milk), but I can't make roti (Indian bread) yet (12-year-old boy).

As mentioned above, undertaking household duties was not perceived by the children as a burden but as a process of the acquisition of key skills. Similarly, paid work was also described as affording agency and skill that enabled children to help their families. In a question that focused on 'What do your parents do'?, one young woman explained that her parents were day labourers. She then went on to say that with the impending 4-day holiday weekend, she was also going to be joining them:

> This holiday weekend, I'm also going to join my mother and father to work in the potato field. I'll get 200 Rupees (£2.20) per day, and I'll give the money I earn to my family (Anisha, 13-year-old girl).

In the future, Anisha's ambition was to be a police officer. Arguably, the familial conflict, and the controlling behavior of her father, described in her narratives above could be understood as the impetus for her vulnerability but also agency and resilience. She explained that due to her social identity as a girl, she did not feel she could be rude to her father or exert control over him as she feared what the community would say about their family. She explained that through her ambition of being a police woman, she hoped to help people in difficult circumstances.

Interestingly, many children's career ambitions demonstrated a sense of their perceived future self, and their desire for a particular social identity and quest to help others. Social problems in their community were a source of inspiration for some to be tomorrow's teachers, and police officers. There was a gendered dimension to some job aspirations, for example, it was not uncommon for some boys to talk about joining the army whilst some girls wanted to join the teaching profession.

12.7 Discussion and Conclusion

The above findings have focused on four themes considered to be important to children—namely their understanding of good childhood / child well-being, social and personal relationships, adversity and hardship, and vulnerability and agency. Through the narratives of their lived reality, it is possible to understand children's conceptions of what is deemed to be of value to them, and how they live their lives. More importantly, we can also have a glimpse of children's projected vision of their future through their sense of vulnerability and agency.

Almost three-quarters of the child population, in India, is located within rural settings—the focus of this chapter. As mentioned above, at 39% of the total national population, India boasts the second largest child population in the world (Childline in India 2018). Poverty, malnutrition and its impact on children's physical and psychological development remain important concerns (Bajpai 2018). In 2012, A Law Commission report ranked India in 112th position in the child development index (Law Commission of India 2012).

The intersectionality of caste, class, gender, and age is also of key significance in understanding the well-being of children. In this chapter, I have highlighted

adversity and hardship experienced by our rural sample where social divisions intersect with systemic power structures to reproduce social and economic inequalities. The poor background of some of the Dalit children in our sample demonstrates everyday hardships about the challenges of housing, employment, nourishment, income, health, and family functionality. Needless to say, children growing up in such circumstances are likely to experience physical and psychological development challenges mentioned above. Bajpai (2018) notes that in the period between 2008 and 2013, 43% of India's children were underweight, and 48% had stunted growth. In addition to the more obvious physical effects in the development of children, there are of course negative emotional and psychological harms as a consequence of the violence of poverty and hardship. Although the children in our study presented themselves as ambitious with key future aspirations, it is questionable how many will be able to face the challenges of adversity as time goes on. Indeed, how many will be able to enter their preferred occupations such as teaching, and the police service remains to be seen. The former requires graduate level qualifications; whilst the latter has strict fitness tests including height requirements. Only a longitudinal study can reveal how in 10–15 years' time, these children may adapt to their situation over time, and their likely social and economic outcomes.

What is interesting about the accounts of these children is their conception of their vulnerability, but also a glimpse of their agency and determination through their belief in a better life. As evident in other studies, the importance of social and personal relationships is of the utmost importance to children (Fattore et al. 2016b). For the children in this study, this was also the case. A sense of relationality within their family, friends and community networks provided children with belonging, and social connections. Such links served to help promote their sense of well-being, and served to affirm their place in their family and community setting. For many of these children, growing up in adverse circumstances, their sense of resilience in their everyday lives was remarkable. Thus, although the adverse circumstances serve to amplify the vulnerability of these children, in many cases, their reportedly strong personal and social relationships, arguably, cushion them to be resilient, agentic and autonomous.

The openness with which these children shared a sense of their lives demonstrates that eliciting child perspectives in school settings can be a useful exercise to help shape policy, practice and provision to promote child well-being. Such insights can be potentially useful in the design and delivery of intervention programmes in school settings (Chhabra et al. 2017).

Indeed, in terms of policy formulation and implementation, it is important for children's perspectives to be given full consideration in decisions that impact them in educational and domestic spaces. There are crucial lessons here for the active participation of children to help effect positive change.

Study findings shed important light on children's understandings of relationality and attachment; social identity; risk, safety and security. The findings should be of interest to policy makers, child welfare practitioners, educationalists, and research scholars; and may well inform key policy and practice in a range of areas including home/school liaison, education curriculum, and school policies on discipline and punishment.

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