From Child Welfare to Children Well-Being: The Child Indicators Perspective

Asher Ben-Arieh

Al Khan was among the first to study children's welfare in a comparative way and to monitor the status of children over time. As early as the 1940th Kahn was involved in one of the pioneering efforts to study the "state of children" in New York through his collaboration with the Citizen Committee for Children (Ben-Arieh, 2006). Similarly, some 40 years ago, Al and Sheila Kamerman were the first to examine child welfare across developed countries (Kamerman & Kahn, 1978).

But it is not only his path breaking efforts that single out Kahn as one of the leading scholars in our field. In my eyes, it was also his ability to foresee where the field was heading, to identify the changes underway, and to lead the way forward that singles him out for special recognition. Indeed, the field of child welfare has dramatically changed in the last decades. As my colleagues who contributed to this volume so brilliantly show, we have indeed moved from saving poor and suffering children to promoting children's well-being.

As history so often conspires, about the same time as Kahn and Kamerman began their venture into comparative child welfare studies, the social indicators movement sprung to life in a vibrant and clear voice. Its first signs of life began in the 1960s amid a climate of rapid social change. At the time, there was a sense among social scientists and public officials that well measured and consistently collected social indicators could offer a way to monitor the condition of groups in society in the present and over time, including the conditions of children and families (Aborn, 1985; Land, 2000).

Today, after more than 50 years, not only have we witnessed a shift from child welfare to child well-being, but, as I will attempt to show in this chapter, we have seen child indicators undergo a dramatic change. Truly, most of these changes have occurred only in the last 25 years, but they are no less dramatic because of it, and they are in line with changes in the broader field of child welfare. These changes have not occurred in isolation. They are the consequence of the work and efforts of many around the globe. I have been lucky to be in the center of the child indicators

A. Ben-Arieh (✉)
Paul Baerwald School of Social Work and Social Welfare, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel
e-mail: benarieh@cc.huji.ac.il

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movement during the last 20 years. I am even luckier to have had Al along with me, curious and enthusiastic as ever and always looking into the future trying to understand and foresee not only where we are, but where we should be going.

1 Child Social Indicators

The rapidly growing use of and interest in childhood social indicators is in many ways a reaction to the rapid changes in family life and the growing demand from child development professionals, social scientists and the public for a better picture of children's well-being. It is also the consequence of both the demands for more accurate measures of the conditions children face and the quest for outcome measures designed to address those conditions (Ben-Arieh & Wintersberger, 1997; Casas, 2000; Forssén & Ritakallio, 2006; Lee, 1997).

Beyond these general explanations, I would argue that the emergence of the child indicators movement be attributed to "new" normative and conceptual theories as well as methodological advancements. Since the early 1970s, three major normative or theoretical developments have contributed to the emergence and rapid development of the child indicators movement: (1) the ecological theories of child development; (2) the normative concept of children's rights; and (3) the new sociology of childhood as a stage in and of itself.

Similarly, three methodological issues supported the development of the child indicators movement: (1) the emerging importance of subjective perspectives; (2) the call for using the child as the unit of observation; and (3) the expanded use of administrative data and the growing variety of data sources.

Finally, and particularly in recent years, the call for more policy-oriented research contributed to the child indicators movement. These theoretical, methodological, and policy impetuses are discussed in more depth below.

2 "New" Normative and Theoretical Approaches

Theories and normative approaches to children welfare abound. Many have contributed to this effort and many more continue to work in this field. Yet, I single out three such approaches that not only influenced the child welfare field at large but had a particular impact on the child indicators movement.

2.1 The Ecology of Child Development

Today, children's capabilities are understood in the context of their development and well-being. These are dynamic processes, influenced by a multitude of factors. Children interact with their environment and thus play an active role in creating their well-being by balancing the different factors, developing and making use

of resources, and responding to stress. Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) conceptualizes child development on the basis of four concentric circles of environmental influence, with time as an underlying factor, recognizing both individual changes over time and historic time.

The child, with all his or her personal characteristics, interacts first and foremost with the family, but also a range of other people and systems: friends, neighbors, health care, child care, school, and so forth. These direct interactions compose the child's *micro-system*, and this is the level with the strongest direct influence on children. Connections between the different structures within the micro-system, for example between parents and school, occur in the *meso-system*. One level up, the *exo-system* represents the societal context in which families live, including parents' social networks, the conditions in the local community, access to and quality of services, parents' workplace, and the media. The exo-system affects the child mainly indirectly by influencing the different structures within the micro-system. The *macro-system*, finally, points to the wider societal context of cultural norms and values, policies, economic conditions, and global developments. The different systems are dynamic and interdependent, influencing one another and changing over time (Lippman, 2004; Olk, 2004; Stevens, Dickson, Poland, & Prasad, 2005).

In interacting with the different systems and subsystems, children and their families encounter both barriers and facilitators. These barriers and facilitators can, in many respects, be considered indicators of child well-being. Together with the various outcomes at the different levels, this ecological perspective had immense impact on the child indicators movement and its development (Bradshaw, Hoscher, & Richardson, 2007).

2.2 Children's Rights as Human Rights

The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) offers a normative framework for understanding children's well-being. Its four general principles fit closely with conceptualizations of child well-being. The first of these is nondiscrimination. Article 2 of the CRC argues for recognizing the life situations and well-being of excluded groups of children, such as those with disabilities, children in institutions, or refugee children, and to disaggregate available data by age, gender, ethnicity, geography, and economic background. The second principle, the best interest of the child (article 3), itself implies a child focus and strengthens children's role as citizens in their own right. From this principle comes the imperative to use the child as a unit of analysis.

The complexity of children's lives is reflected in the third principle, that of survival and development (article 6). The CRC promotes a holistic view of child development and well-being, giving equal weight to children's civic, political, social, economic, and cultural rights, and stressing that these rights are interrelated, universal, and indivisible. Concepts of child well-being accordingly must be

multidimensional and ecological. The fourth principle calls for respecting the view of the child (article 12), acknowledging children's rights to be heard and to have their view taken into account in matters that affect them (Santos Pais, 1999).

These views of children's rights contributed to the child indicators movement in several important ways. First, they have placed children on the agenda, thus calling for more data on their life and well-being. Second, they call for indicators to monitor the implementation of the CRC and the fulfillment of children's rights. Third, by the breadth of topics and issues covered, these views demand indicators in sub domains and areas of interest that were not measured or monitored before.

2.3 The "New" Sociology of Childhood

One of the most important concepts that had shaped the child indicators movement is that of childhood as a stage in and of itself. The discourse on child well-being is thus also one of well-being and well-becoming (Frones, 2007). The more traditional perspective was one that looked on child well-being in terms of children's future, focusing on their education and future employability. The "new" perspective on child well-being focuses on children's current (during childhood) life situation.

Although one can argue that it is reasonable to develop indicators of child well-being that focus on children as "future adults" or members of the next generation, such approaches often fail to consider the life stage of childhood, a stage that has its own sociological characteristics (Alanen, 2001; Olk, 2006; Qvortrup, 1999). The CRC, for example, makes clear that children's immediate well-being is important in its own right. Children's present life and development and future life chances thus must be reconciled in conceptualizations of well-being by looking both into the conditions under which children are doing well and child outcomes across a range of domains (Ben-Arieh et al., 2001).

3 The New Methodological Perspectives and the Child Indicators Movement

Just as the new theories and normative methods created the context in which the child indicators movement flourished, three methodological perspectives contributed to its rapid evolution during the last 30 years. These methodological changes are naturally linked to the theories and concepts presented above, but they also have individual merits and warrant a separate discussion.

3.1 The Emergence of the Subjective Perspective

Prout (1997) argued that "large-scale social phenomena and small-scale inter subjective action implicate each other such that the complexity of the social world

cannot be expressed through a simple asymmetry of objective social structure and subjective actors". Yet, much research on children's lives has until recently focused on objective descriptions, treating children as passive objects who are acted on by the adult world. As the child indicators movement accepted and built on the theoretical foundations outlined above, it became clear that a new role for children had emerged, one that coupled the search for objective measures with a subjective view of childhood (Casas, González, Figuer, & Coenders, 2004; Mareš, 2006).

This has proved particularly important given that studies have shown, especially during adolescence, that parents do not always accurately convey their child's feelings (Shek, 1998; Sweeting, 2001). Further, studies have shown that including the perspectives of children is important not only because they differ from those of the adults, but because doing so respects children as persons, better informs policymakers, provides a foundation for child advocacy and enhances legal and political socialization of children (Melton & Limber, 1992).

The child indicators movement, which traditionally was based on aggregate statistics, bloomed as new indicators sought to capture children's own account of their lives and living conditions. The field quickly realized that although there are areas in which indirect information may be superior—such as on the household economy as reported by parents, or grades from school records—in most instances, and particularly for crucial indicators such as mental well-being and social relations, children's own reports are necessary (Lohan & Murphy, 2001; Ohannessian, Lerner, Lerner, & Voneye, 1995; Shek, 1998).

3.2 Children as the Unit of Observation

If children have basic rights and their childhood is worthy of study by itself, then making the child the unit of observation becomes apparent (Jensen & Saporiti, 1992). The child indicators movement thus began incorporating child-centered indicators, ones that begin from the child and move outward, separating, at least for measurement purposes, the child from his or her family. Sen (1997) has argued for measures that reflect the life a person is actually living rather than the resources or means a person may have available. Sen's approach takes into account personal choices, constraints, circumstances, and abilities to achieve a preferred living standard. Applying Sen's approach to the assessment of a child's living conditions highlights the need to focus on the child, rather than the household or community, as the unit of analysis (Ben-Arieh et al., 2001).

An informative example can be drawn from Sauli's (1997) work on families in Finland. If researchers use the family as the unit of analysis, one-half of the families with children are one-child families. However, using the child as the unit of analysis reveals that only one-fourth of them live without siblings. If the field is to gain an accurate picture of children and their experience, it must develop indicators that focus on the child as the unit of observation. This also means disaggregating information in traditional databases to more reliably assess their well-being.

3.3 The Emergence of Administrative Data and the Variability of Data Sources

The richness of children's lives and their domains of well-being mean that any single source of information will be incomplete. Therefore, the field sought three different sources of information: administrative data, census and surveys, and social research (longitudinal and ad hoc). Although researchers had used the latter two systematically and regularly in the past, administrative data emerged in the "era of information" during the second half of the twentieth century and contributed to the evolution of the child indicators movement.

Administrative data, even though collected primarily for purposes other than research, are a powerful resource for research (Goerge, 1997). The data, maintained by organizations that serve children and families daily, are an important source of information on the conditions of children. Until recently, administrative data were confined to paper files. However, as information systems were computerized and became more accessible, administrative data emerged as a rich source of information for developing indicators of children's well-being. For example, administrative data, by definition, cover the population of individuals or families with a particular status or receiving a particular service. In addition to service receipt, the files often contain information on their address or neighborhood, thus contributing to the development of indicators at the regional or local level and the consequent "small region monitoring" (Banister, 1994).

Further, administrative data may be the best option for quickly developing more timely or new community and local indicators of children's well-being. Given the expense of new or continuing social surveys, and given that much administrative data already exist, this source is ideal for the short-term development of indicators that can be used to inform the public and policymakers.

4 The Policy Context

Finally, the growing demand that indicators be devised and used in ways that (hopefully) enhance their impact beyond academic pursuits has contributed to the emergence of the field. In that regard, some indicators and measurements have clearly led to new policies and programs for children and some have not (Ben-Arieh & Goerge, 2006). It is also evident that the same indicator, when used in certain contexts, has led to desired outcomes while in others, it did not. The effort to develop better policy-oriented indicators led to a thorough examination of existing indicators and to better data collection, including across new domains of life (Titeler & Ben-Arieh, 2006).

5 The Development of the Child Indicators Movement

The child indicators movement went through six major changes during the past 25 years: (1) Early indicators tended to focus on child survival, whereas recent indicators look beyond survival to child well-being; (2) Early indicators primarily

focused on negative outcomes in life, while recent indicators look at positive outcomes in a child's life; (3) Early indicators emphasized children's "well-becoming", that is, their subsequent achievement or well-being; recent indicators focus on children's current well-being; (4) Early indicators were derived from "traditional" domains of child well-being, primarily those of professions, while recent indicators are emerging from new domains that cut across professions; (5) Early indicators focused on the adult's perspective, whereas new indicators consider the child's perspective as well; (6) Recent years have seen efforts to develop various composite indices of children's well-being (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Lippman, 2007). This evolution of child well-being indicators has occurred virtually everywhere, although at varying paces (Ben-Arieh, 2002, 2006). I detail these changes below.

5.1 From Survival to Well-Being

Much attention has been paid to children's physical survival and basic needs, focusing often on threats to children's survival, and the use of such indicators has spurred programs to save children's lives (Ben-Arieh, 2000; Bradshaw et al., 2007). Infant and child mortality, school enrollment and dropout, immunizations, and childhood disease are all examples of indicators of basic needs. However, a fundamental shift occurred when the focus moved from survival to well-being. Researchers argued in the late 1990s for indicators that moved beyond basic needs of development and beyond the phenomenon of deviance to those that promote child development (Aber, 1997; Pittman & Irby, 1997). Indeed, the field moved from efforts to determine minimums, as in saving a life, to those that focus on quality of life. This move was supported by efforts to understand what constitutes "quality of life" and its implications for children (Casas, 2000; Hubner, 1997, 2004).

5.2 From Negative to Positive

Measures of risk factors or negative behaviors are not the same as measures that gauge protective factors or positive behaviors (Aber & Jones, 1997). The absence of problems or failures does not necessarily indicate proper growth and success (Ben-Arieh, 2005; Moore, Lippman, & Brown, 2004). Thus, the challenge became developing indicators that hold societies accountable for more than the safe warehousing of children and youth (Pittman & Irby, 1997). As Resnick (1995, p. 3) states: "children's well-being indicators are on the move from concentrating only on trends of dying, distress, disability, and discomfort to tackling the issue of indicators of sparkle, satisfaction, and well-being."

However, children's positive outcomes are not static. They result from interplay of resources and risk factors of the child, his or her family, friends, school, and in the wider society. These factors are constantly changing, and children, with their evolving capacities, actively create their well-being by mediating these different factors.

5.3 From Well-Becoming to Well-Being

In contrast to the immediacy of well-*being*, well-*becoming* describes a future focus (i.e., preparing children to be productive and happy adults). Qvortrup (1999) laid the foundation for considering children's well-being, rather than only well-becoming, claiming that the conventional preoccupation with the next generation is a preoccupation of adults. Although not a necessarily harmful view, anyone interested in children and childhood should also be interested in the present as well as future childhood. In other words, children are instrumentalized by the forward-looking perspectives in the sense that their "good life" is postponed until adulthood. As such, perspectives of well-becoming focus on opportunities rather than provisions (De Lone, 1979).

Accepting the arguments of Qvortrup and others to concentrate on the well-being of children does not deny the relevance of a child's development toward adulthood. However, focusing on preparing children to become citizens suggests that they are not citizens during childhood, a concept that is hard to reconcile with a belief in children's rights. It is not uncommon to find in the literature reference to the importance of rearing children who will be creative, ethical, and moral adult members of community. It is harder to find reference to children's well-being in their childhood, even indicators of poverty or health, which on the surface are indicators of current well-being, are discussed in a context that is forward-looking: the outcomes of child poverty are diminished future prospects. Indeed, both perspectives are legitimate and necessary, both for social science and public policy. However, the emergence of the child-centered perspective, and its focus on children's well-being, introduced new ideas and energy to the child indicators movement.

5.4 From Traditional to New Domains

Studies have shown that the above three shifts are interrelated and are both the reason and the outcome of each other (Ben-Arieh, 2006). Until recently when measuring the state of children, researchers concerned themselves with traditional domains, those which were defined either by profession or by a social service (i.e., education, health, foster care). Looking at children's well-being rather than only well-becoming naturally brings into focus new domains of child-well being, such as children's life skills, children's civic involvement and participation, and children's culture (Ben-Arieh, 2000).

5.5 From an Adult to a Child Perspective

When we take into account the four changes outlines above, efforts to study children's well-being must ask at least some of the following questions: What are children doing? What do children need? What do children have? What do children

think and feel? To whom or what are children connected and related? What do children contribute? Answering such questions will create a better picture of children as human beings in their present life, the positive aspects of their life, and it will do so in a way that values them as legitimate members of their community and the broader society (Ben-Arieh et al., 2001).

It is, however, evident that most of the data that already exist or data we collect using traditional methods do not help us very much in seeking answers to this set of questions. A good example would be the remarkable work by Land and colleagues, who studied children's well-being in the United States during the last quarter of the twentieth century (Land, Lamb, & Mustillo, 2001). Their reliance on existing databases led them to use traditional indicators of children's well-being, and thus their work has limited potential in answering such questions as outlined above.

To better answer such questions, we must focus on children's daily lives, which is something that children know the most about. Studies have found, for example, that parents do not really know how children spend their time (Funk et al., 1989) or what they are worried about (Gottlieb & Bronstein, 1996). Hence, to answer such questions, we must involve children in such studies, at least as our primary source of information.

5.6 Toward a Composite Index of Child Well-Being

Although expanding data on children provides policymakers and the media important information (Brown & Moore, 2003), this increasing supply of information has also led to calls for a single summary number to capture the circumstances of children. Such a composite would, it is argued, facilitate easier assessment of progress or decline. Moreover, it might be easier to hold policymakers accountable if a single number were used. In addition, it would be simpler to compare trends across demographic groups and different localities and regions (UNICEF, 2007). As noted above, the latter half of the twentieth century witnessed enormous growth in the data available to track and compare trends in children's development over time. As a result, researchers have attempted to develop summary indices (Ben-Arieh, in press; Moore, Vandivere, Lippman, McPhee, & Bloch, 2007).

6 The Current Status of the Child Indicators Movement

It is time now to turn to where the field stands today. I would argue that the current field of child indicators can be generally characterized by ten features:

(1) Indicators, their measurement, and use are driven by the universal acceptance of the CRC;
(2) Indicators have broadened beyond children's immediate survival to their well-being (without necessarily neglecting the survival indicators). Yet, in this regard, developing countries (appropriately) tend to focus more on survival

indicators, while more developed countries tend to focus on other aspects of children's lives;
(3) Efforts are combining a focus on negative and positive aspects of children's lives;
(4) The well-becoming perspective—a focus on the future success of the generation—while still dominant, is no longer the only perspective. Well-being—children's current status—is now considered legitimate as well;
(5) New domains of child well-being have emerged. Thus, a focus on children's life or civic skills, for example, is more common, fewer efforts are profession- or service-oriented, and many more are child-centered;
(6) The child as the unit of observation is now common. Efforts to measure and monitor children's well-being today start from the child and move outward;
(7) Efforts to include subjective perceptions, including the child's, are growing. Recent efforts acknowledge the usefulness of both quantitative and qualitative studies, as well as mixed methods;
(8) Local and regional reports are multiplying, and this trend seems here to stay. Although especially notable in North America and other Western countries, this geographic focus will eventually (and probably already) penetrate to non-Western regions and countries;
(9) Numerous efforts to develop composite indices are underway at all geographic levels, (local, national, and international);
(10) There is an evident shift toward an emphasis on policy-oriented efforts. A major criterion for selecting indicators is their usefulness to community workers and policymakers. Policymakers are often included in the process of developing the indicators and discussing the usefulness of various choices.

The child indicators field has evolved. The various reviews of the field support this claim. The volume of activity is clearly rising, and new indicators, composite indices, and State of the Child reports are emerging.

7 Future Perspectives

The field is clearly growing. The doubling in the number of "State of the Child" reports alone since the 1980s is an indicator of this growth (Ben-Arieh, 2006). Although the growth of these reports may be nearing its peak in the West, it is safe to say that its growth will likely continue in non-Western and non-English-speaking countries, where the emergence of State of the Child reports is still relatively new. Studies have also found that most of these reports are a one-time affair. Although there are several long-standing and well-known periodicals (such as *The State of the World's Children*, *Kids Count*), they are still the minority. It is possible that, eventually, the growing number of reports will lead to established periodicals, rather than a series of one-time reports (Ben-Arieh, 2006). Similarly, perhaps more local and regional reports will emerge in these countries, as they have in the West (O'Hare & Bramstedt, 2003).

Although the field has indeed changed dramatically during the last 30 years, we are still in the midst of the process. None of the above shifts has reached its final destination. However, all have definitely left the station. Therefore, the first reasonable conclusion is that the field will continue to move in these directions. Some have claimed that the continuation of the trends described here will eventually lead to the creation of a new role for children in measuring and monitoring their own well-being. In a field that looks beyond survival and to the full range of child well-being, including children and their own perspectives would be a natural evolution. Indeed incorporating children's subjective perceptions is both a prerequisite and a consequence of the changing field of measuring and monitoring child well-being. This in turn will lead to making children active actors in the effort to measure and monitor their own well-being rather than being an object to study (Ben-Arieh, 2005).

Finally, the field is maturing and getting more organized. What started in the last decades of the twentieth century with several international and national projects (see for example http://multinational-indicators.chapinhall.org; Hauser, Brown, & Prosser, 1997; Ben-Arieh et al., 2001) had developed by 2006 into the International Society for Child Indicators (ISCI) (www.childindicators.org) and the launch of the *Child Indicators Research* journal. These accomplishments and advances will no doubt continue apace.

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