

ASHER BEN-ARIEH

WHERE ARE THE CHILDREN? CHILDREN'S ROLE IN MEASURING AND MONITORING THEIR WELL-BEING

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ABSTRACT. This paper starting point is the dynamic changes and shifts in the field of measuring and monitoring children's well being. In the paper we focus on one specific change – the “new” role of children in measuring and monitoring their own well being – a role of active participants rather than of subjects for research. We then turn to present based on a sequence of arguments and findings what role children should carry in measuring and monitoring their well being. Followed by a presentation of five possible roles for children involvement in such studies and in regard to the specific roles existing knowledge from various studies and suggested directions for future research are presented. The danger of children's involvement in such studies are then discussed followed by a presentation of what do children think on this all issue. Finally we conclude that the potential involved in children's involvement is much greater than the hazards.

KEY WORDS: social indicators, children's well-being, subjective well being.

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have brought new and growing attention to the field of measuring and monitoring children's well-being (Ben-Arieh and Goerge, 2001; Land, Lamb and Mustillo, 2001). This recent widespread interest in children's well-being indicators has been partly due to a movement toward accountability-based public policy that requires increasing amounts of data to provide more accurate measures of the conditions children face and the outcomes various programs achieve. At the same time, the rapid changes in family life also have prompted an increased demand from child development professionals, social scientists and the public for a better picture of children's well-being (Hauser et al., 1997; Lee, 1997; Andrews and Ben-Arieh, 1999).

One example for the recent growth of the children's well-being indicators field can be seen in the publication of various 'state of the child' reports.¹ These reports have increased the level of interests in statistical descriptions of the well-being of children, resulting in the publication of even more such reports around the world (Bradshaw and Barnes, 1999; Ben-Arieh et al., 2001).

In part, as a result of this increased activity the field is going through major changes and is trying to redefine the concept of children's well-being and its measurements (Bradshaw and Barnes, 1999; Ben-Arieh, 2000). An analysis of the field of child well-being indicators based on various state of the child reports (Ben-Arieh and Goerge, 2001; Ben-Arieh et al., 2001) led in the past to the following conclusion.

The field is undergoing four major shifts (i.e., from survival to well-being, from negative to positive, from well becoming to well-being, and from traditional to new domains). These shifts are occurring virtually everywhere – although at different paces in different places (Ben-Arieh, 2002).

In this paper we argue that yet another change is occurring. We refer to the "new" role of children in measuring and monitoring their own well-being – a role of active participants rather than of subjects for research.

SHOULD CHILDREN HAVE A ROLE IN STUDYING THEIR WELL-BEING?

Indeed the field of child well-being indicators is changing. We argue that the basis for children active involvement in the study of their well-being is four-folded. First it is a natural consequence of the concept of children's rights. Second it is based on accepting childhood as a phase of itself and children as active actors in society rather than subjects for societal concern. Third it is a direct consequence of the four shifts we described above. Fourth it is the consequences of accepting the need for "subjective" view of childhood along with the traditional seek for the "objective" measure.

Children Rights as Human Rights

Children became the focus of the international development of human rights standards when, in 1989, following important declarations

on the rights of children and many years of careful drafting and negotiation, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted by the United Nations. Unlike other Covenants, the CRC incorporates a full range of rights for children. Furthermore, it integrates these rights and makes it clear that civil and political rights are indeed interdependent with economic, social, and cultural rights.

The almost-universal ratification of the CRC, the breadth of the rights included, the constitutional nature of its language, the global approach to the issues, and the implementation provisions mean that the treaty offers a valuable framework for evaluating the indicators that we select and the monitoring process itself.

Children's rights are now a central issue in the social and human rights discourse. During the last few hundred years, children have progressed through property and potential person status, with protection and nurturance rights, to partial person status, with some self-determination rights (Hart, 1991). Indeed Public opinion, policies, and laws are converging in support of assuring self-determination rights for children to validate their person status.

A review of the social indicators field reveals that while the legal and public systems might very well be accepting children as persons – the scientific community is still reluctant. Reliability and “response rates” are the magic words used to justify the somewhat different and inferior status of children in studies of their well-being. Indeed many of the major studies looking on children well-being or quality of life have to easily given up on the subjective perception of children or used a proxy measure (Land et al., 2001).

We argue that if a society accepts children as equal human beings then the study of their quality of life should accept that other human beings cannot simply by virtue of age decide what children's well-being consists of, how it should be measured and analyzed. Even if children are granted only partial legal and civil rights and the partial ability to participate in decision making about their lives, then they should participate at least in the same proportion in the study of their well-being, especially since it bears so much influence on them.

Childhood as a Phase of Itself

Although it is possible and reasonable to measure children's well-being by focusing on the outcomes of childhood, such indicators fail

to consider the life phase of childhood, a phase that has its own sociological characteristics. Much of the literature on children, in fact, focuses on them exclusively as “future adults” or the members of the “next generation.” Looking to the future is a legitimate and necessary activity, but including children’s present well-being is just as legitimate (Qvortrup, 1994).

Thus, there is need to focus on the activities and experiences of children while they are children, and on the construction of a clear picture of childhood and how childhood is experienced. This perspective is relatively new and not easily adopted, since we have all been socialized into certain ideas about children, ideas that are reinforced everywhere in society, and that emphasize children as potential, rather than actual members of society (Wintersberger, 2002).

When viewing childhood as a phase in itself, we accept the idea that, although societal forces affect all members of the society, they are likely to affect children and adults quite differently. The elderly and the very young will disproportionately use the health care system, for example. Moreover, if we try to interpret the impact of societal change, the effects of industrialization or urbanization on the experience of being a child is very different from the experience of being an adult. A further example is the continuing debate about working parents, which tends to focus on how these changes will play out in future adults rather than on how these changes have altered the social structure of childhood.

Studying children’s standpoints and priorities and in fact accepting children as active members of society and not only as subjects for research leads unavoidably to the inclusion of children in any effort to study their well-being.

The Consequences of the Changing Field

Former studies have shown that the above-mentioned four shifts are inter-related and are both the reason and the outcome of each other (Ben-Arieh, 2000). 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 and so on). Looking at children’s well-being beyond survival, at positive aspects of life and at children’s

current well-being and not their future well becoming as adults 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, 1999).

Hence any adequate efforts to study children well-being needs to focus on the following set of questions: (1) What are children doing? (2) What do children need? (3) What do children have? (4) What do children think and feel? (5) To whom or what are children connected and related? and (6) What do children contribute? Answering this set of questions will enable a more complete picture of children as human beings in their present life, the positive aspects of their life and 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 exists or the one we collect in the existing efforts and through using traditional methods does not help us very much with the answers to this set of questions. One very good example would be the remarkable work by Land and his colleagues who studied children's well-being in the USA during the last quarter of the 20th century (Land, et al., 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 the above mentioned questions.

In order to better answer such questions we need to focus on children's daily lives. Children daily life is something that children know the most about. Studies have found that parents do not really know how children spend their time (Funk et al., 1999) or what they are worried about (Gottlieb and Bronstein, 1996) . Hence to answer such questions in the best possible way we need the children to be involved in the studies, at least as our primary source of information.

The Need for "Subjective" View

"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" (Prout, 1997 p. 96). Yet, much research on children's lives has until recently been focused on efforts at objective description, treating children as passive objects that are acted upon by the adult world. For example,

socialization studies often appeared to assume that socialization is a process of cultural modeling. Current sociological studies focus on children as active members of society, who themselves influence the adults in their lives and their own peers. Youth culture often is co-opted into mainstream adult culture, often through the media.

Thus, in order to gain an accurate measure and provide meaningful monitoring of children's well-being, we need to develop means of gathering children's subjective perceptions of their world and insights into their experiences. This is especially important since studies have shown, especially during adolescence, that parents for example do not really represent their adolescents subjective feeling (Shek, 1998; Sweeting, 2001).

Johansson (1979), points out that the ideal citizen (as outlined by Mill) is well informed, understands what type of decision is most likely to lead to the preferred outcome, and is able to weigh his/her interests against others'. However, a normal citizen has difficulties in knowing *what the situation is like*. Johansson's idea is that in a democratic society, the *citizens themselves* should provide information necessary to improve our understanding of "how it is"; especially, when it comes to the question of how well different groups in society fare and what changes there are in their situation over time.

This approach on the importance of self-reported information on living conditions should be connected with the discussion of children's right to participate in the democratic process (Jonsson et al., 2001). What politicians and citizens need to know in order to make informed decisions about things that matter to children, is how well children fare in these respects. Knowledge of (a) what issues are important for children, and (b) what their actual conditions are in these matters, are necessary both for adults' decisions in political issues of relevance for children, and for forming children's own (political) views of such issues.

Studies have shown that the perspectives of children are important not because they differ from that of the adults. But also for (a) respecting children as persons; (b) informing policymakers; (c) providing a foundation for child advocacy; (d) enhancing legal and political socialization of children (Melton and Limber, 1992).

Indicators of children's well-being can be based on aggregate statistics, but children's own account of their living conditions should

be fundamental. There are areas in which indirect information may be superior – such as the household economy as reported by parents, or grades from school records – but in most instances, and particularly for crucial indicators such as mental well-being and social relations, children's own reports are necessary (Ohannessian et al., 1995; Shek, 1998; Lohan and Murphy, 2001).

SOME COMMENTS ON AGE, RELIABILITY AND RESPONSE RATES

While in the sections above the basis for children's involvements in studies of their own well-being was presented there are still those who criticize such an approach. Some researchers argue that children differ from adults in cognitive ability, training in research and ability to delay gratification which in turn leads to lower response rates and less reliability of studies who directly involve children. A brief response to such arguments, beyond the concepts presented up to now is presented below.

Age. Indeed children are different from adults. In many ways just as young adults are different from older ones or as adults are different from the elderly. The age difference in itself is not sufficient to conclude a different approach to research. This is especially so since when talking about children we refer to the age group of 0–18 (as defined in the CRC). Now would a 15 years old adolescent be similar to a 21 young adult or to a 2 years toddler? So even if we accept the age as a determining factor in children's involvement in studying their well-being there is still the issue of the "right age". Furthermore there is the question of an aggregate line (based on chronological age) and a personal line (based on developmental and psychological status).

Reliability and response rates. Both of those are methodological challenges a researcher must face whenever conducting a study. Indeed different research populations pose different challenges, those can be cultural, legal, and physical or age related. The question is can the challenge be met? Can we do research that involve children in a way that will generate reliable findings based on a good response rate? The answer is yes and not on a speculative basis. Ample research exist showing clearly that studies directly involving children have yielded just as good response rates and reliability (and sometime even better) as studied

using adults to report on children's well-being. Many of those studies are cited and referred to in the coming sections.

THE POSSIBLE ROLES OF CHILDREN

Indeed, recent years have brought a growing body of research developing new ways of undertaking research with children. "Traditional" research methods which do not directly involve children have been criticized for carrying out research *on* rather than *with* children. Drawing upon the increasingly important children's rights movement, researchers have been developing inclusive and participatory children centered methodologies, which place the voices of children, as social actors, at the centre of the research process (Barker and Weller, 2003). In the coming section an attempt to analyze the different possible roles of children is presented.

The issue of children's role in studying their well-being has both a normative and a methodological aspect. The normative is special to children, since they do not have the ordinary civil right as adult citizens. The methodological aspect is not peculiar to children; it is about the voice of the subject. Furthermore, the subjective perspective (of children) does not necessarily represent the "truth" more than any other perspective, but it is crucial for the analysis of the data. This is especially so in regard to children, since their world to some degree can be culturally apart even if spatially close to the adult world.

We have argued above that children should play a role in any effort to study their well-being. However the question stands as to what possible roles could and should children play? Should children serve as objectives to be studied or merely as respondents? Or should children take the role of informers or even partners in the development of the study and its methods.

We found it beneficial to categorize the possible roles of children in studying their own well-being into five different roles.

Children Should be a Part of the Studies Design

To develop accurate indicators that yield persuasive results, one must make sure the indicators are relevant. The best way to assure relevancy

is to base the development of the indicators on the experience of children. This conclusion is based among others on the analysis of poverty indicators which established the relevance of the experiences of the poor for developing effective child poverty indicators (Habib, 1997; Tardieu et al., 1998).

Furthermore, in order to be relevant to all children, the studies design process must be rooted in the experience of all children including children of minority and disadvantaged groups (Andrews and Ben-Arieh, 1999)

Children know what is important to them and subsequently they know what is important to know about their lives. Studies have shown not only that children know what is important to them – they have clear views on how those issues can and should be measured (Backe-Hensen, 2003). Hence, it is clear that children think they can be partners in the studies design and even more they have a say about what should be measured.

Children Should be the Sources of Information

“To evaluate quality of life of any population we need to go and ask them. It is not appropriated to discuss on children’s quality of life without asking children about their own perspectives on their living conditions” (Casas, 2003, p. 2). It seems obvious that the best source of information for studying children’s well-being would be the children themselves. Nevertheless this is not the case in all instances. For example, in virtually all studies of older children’s (adolescents) time use, the source of information are the adolescents themselves (Alsaker and Flammer, 1999), while in studies looking at younger children this is not always true (Medrich et al., 1982). In fact, a review of the literature reveals an expected correlation between the age group studied and the use of the children themselves as the source of information.

Throughout the literature concern about the accuracy of children’s self-report is evident (Bianchi and Robinson, 1997; Plewis et al., 1990). Thus, resulting in many cases in using the parents, the guardians or even other adults such as teachers as the source of information on children’s lives (Medrich et al., 1982, p. xiv). In contrast to this notion, we found little concern, if any at all, as to the problematic nature of a study using one human being (an adult) to report on the daily activities of another

human being (the child), especially when the study aims at going beyond the mere descriptive level. It is obvious that many studies did not even consider this aspect of who is the source of information. Even when comparing between different studies the issue was not considered (Larson and Verma, 1999).

We find this lack of consideration to be crucial. Apart from the problems of using adults to report on children's lives beyond the non-descriptive aspects, a second issue must be considered. There is a valid concern about how much adults, including the parents, really know about children's daily lives or daily activities, especially in industrialized societies where both parents spend much of their time out of home (Larson and Verma, 1999). Yet, no consideration was given to the issue of how knowledgeable and accurate parents are in regard to their children's lives.

We suggest that the basic assumption in regard to the source of information issue should be that whenever possible, the best source of information on children's daily activities and lives would be the children themselves. Thus, when using any other source of information we are actually compromising on one aspect of our methodology (using the best source of information) in order to avoid harming the study by using an unreliable source of information (when the children are too young).

In that regard, as much as if we accept the age of the children as a determining factor in selecting the source of information we still need to deal with the question of the "right age". While there seems to be an agreement that pre-school children are too young for serving as the source of information for such studies, when focusing on elementary school children the literature is mixed. For example, a common assumption is that we need the parents or other adults as our source of information when looking at time use of children in the ages of 6–12 (Stafford, 1996; Marshall et al., 1997).

Nevertheless, it seems a number of studies are showing the opposite. Bianchi and Robinson have found children of the ages 9–11 to be reliable enough for serving as the direct source of information and have suggested that children at the age of 6–8 will be consulted by the adult that reports on their time use (Bianchi and Robinson, 1997). Posner and Vandell have interviewed children at the ages of 8–10 as their source of information (Posner and Vandell, 1999) and

Ibrahim has included boys at the ages of 10–11 as interviewees in his study (Ibrahim, 1988). Yet another study has used 2200 children aged 7–12 as their source of information for looking at the children's leisure activities (Harrell et al., 1997), and another one has used 11 years old school children to self-report on their out of school activities (Anderson et al., 1988).

Finally, we have found that studies which have looked at the children's perceptions and understanding of complex concepts, such as children and human rights are also leaning support to the notion that children as young as 7 or 8 could be used as reliable sources of information (Melton and Limber, 1992).

Children Can be the Data Collectors

When we refer to the possible role of children as data collectors we do not mean exclusively to focus on children's possible role as interviewers – although such a role is possible. Children's active role in data collection can be expressed through participatory research at large and through their direct involvement in data collection. A review of the literature shows that “There seems to have been an increase in studies that involves children directly in the research” (Hill, 1997, p. 173).

However this increase is mainly in research using children as sources of information and less as data collectors. Hence it is not surprising to find in the literature remarks as: “Seldom have children themselves been involved in the setting up or conduct of the research” (Hill, 1997, p. 173). Yet some studies have gone beyond what is described above and actually trained children and assisted them in carrying out studies (Alderson, 1995).

We find it interesting that such approaches are not more commonly used. This is especially so since when one looks on the literature on methodological problems in collecting data from children he often finds there what was called “The power dynamics of age” or the “power relations” (Mauthner, 1997). Basically this means the unequal power relationships between adult researchers and children. These inequalities of status and age have become an area of growing concern for researchers and indeed the literature suggests various ways to deal with this methodological problem (Hill, 1997; Thomas and O'kane, 1998; Punch, 2002).

Researchers agree that in order to overcome the “intergenerational inequalities” (Mayall, 1994) there is need for reflexivity, responsiveness and open ended research goals and methods (Mauthner, 1997). Similarly other researchers have recommended that using other people (then the researchers themselves) who are familiar to the children will benefit the research and its methodological strength (Minkes et al., 1994; Hill, 1997).

All of the above mentioned experience and suggestions leads us to, what we see as a natural question. Will the use of other children as the data collection want be easier and more appropriate to deal with this “power dynamics of age” or intergenerational inequalities? It is our argument that trained child and youth interviewers can help dealing with this methodological problem better and more appropriate then most of the above mentioned techniques.

Children Should be Part of the Data Analysis

Designing a study, identifying the sources of information and collecting the data are all worthless without the analysis of the data phase and its interpretation. When looking at the children’s possible role in this phase it is clear, again, that research who do so is rare (Hill, 1997; Punch, 2002).

We have argued above to the importance of the subjective perspective as it brings yet another angle, and it is necessary for the gathering of correct information. In any study, all perspectives require interpretation. Information is part of a context, and is directed towards a cultural and social framework Understanding the context require the help of children in interoperating it. One example could be from studies who asked young people which kinds of music they preferred or their favorite artist – an indicator of lifestyle and attitudes. Without the young people participation in the interpretation the researchers would have no chance to construct the cultural classifications that loaded the musical choices with cultural meaning. Instead they did this together with a group of teenagers that constructed cultural schemes in which they placed the variety of musical choices (Frones, 1975).

Morrow and Richards suggest that: “Using methods which are non-invasive, non-confrontational and participatory, and which encourage children to interpret their own data, might be one step

forward in diminishing the ethical problems of imbalanced power relationships between researcher and researched at the point of data collection and interpretation”(1996, p. 100).

Indeed we have found some studies who have done so, Thomas and O’kane (1998) presents several ways in which they tried to create opportunities for children to participate in the interpretation and analysis of their research data. One possible method is to select research instruments that enable children to choose subjects for discussion and decide what they want to say about them. By giving children a choice over what instruments to use we enable the research to follow the children understanding of questions and concepts as well as those of the researchers.

A second method would be to come back and meet each child at least once more after the interview. By doing so we enable the children to review and refine what they are telling us. A third method will be to use group processes and thus creating a space where children can collectively interpret the research findings. Finally, at the conclusion of the research a smaller group of children could be recruited to select and edit their colleagues’ comments in order to better present the message children wanted to convey in the study (Thomas and O’kane, 1998).

This involvement of children in the interpretation and analysis of the data was found to be very useful. “Throughout this process our own understanding of what were the important questions and the critical evidence concerning children’s participation in decisions developed reflexively with the children’s successive contribution to the research process. In the end it is hard to disentangle what was our contribution and what was theirs; but there is no doubt that the course followed by the research and the final conclusions were very different as a result of the children’s own interpretation of the data” (Thomas and O’kane, 1998, p. 345).

Or as another researcher noted “the reliability of research... taking children as a target group is dependent upon the degree of freedom they enjoy to take part actively in a research project” (Kefalyew, 1996, p. 204).

Children Should be Partners in Utilizing the Data

More research is needed that involves children at the dissemination phase of research. This is so that children’s perspectives and concerns

can be integrated in the research applications (Hill, 1997). In fact when looking at children's prospective role in utilizing the data gathered in studies of their well-being one looks at the core question of children participation and civic engagement.

Being an active and involved child safeguards the child's well-being (Ben-Arieh et al., 2001). Child participation is one of the major principles underlying the CRC; it is a basic component of children's rights and citizenship. Child participation does not only mean involving children in the research process but also making them partners in using the data and findings. Child participation is a guiding principle, and as such it should be part of every aspect of children's lives and should be extended to all settings and to all types of rights.

Child participation is crucial in the public and political arena. Since children cannot vote, they are considered as politically weak and politicians tend to ignore their views. True child participation in this sphere can leverage the political power of children and enforce the politicians to hear them. This is especially important for democratic societies that want to include the opinions of all of their citizens in decision-making processes (Riepl and Wintersberger, 1999).

However, children's political rights are the least acceptable of all children's rights. The idea of child participation in the political decision-making process is a relatively new one, which has already "earned" much resistance. Above all this idea advocates the empowerment of children, which can and probably will be looked upon as a redistribution of power in society (LeBlanc, 1995).

In order to realize the true citizenship of children we must encourage child participation. To do so we need to be creative and devise a variety of participation methods and tools appropriate for different children of different ages.

THE "DANGER" IN CHILDREN INVOLVEMENT

Indeed in any social research that children play an active role, it may be necessary to face ethical questions that are avoided when children are not involved. While most methodological and ethical issues that rise from the various children's roles are also present in research with adults, there are important differences (Thomas and O'kane, 1998).

Ethical assessment includes considering whether the research questions are worth asking and the research methods are an effective way of answering them (Alderson, 1995).

Indeed as mentioned above many ethical issues present in social research with children are common to work with subjects of any age. First there is the need to obtain informed consent and it can always be problematic. Second there is the issue of the researcher responsibility and his duty to protect the well-being of the research subjects. Third, confidentiality is always an issue and finally the possibility of abuse of subjects by a researcher or exploitation by the research process is present in every research relationship.

Hence, in many cases research with children is not very different from research with adults. However, there are important differences especially since when children are involved the same issues tend to present themselves more sharply. This is so, among other things, due to differences in children's understanding and experience as compared to adults. As well as to their different means and ways of communication. But above all, as we described earlier, this is so due to different power relationships.

Some examples are: The issue of consent is complicated by the fact that, for a research involving children we need both the children and the adults to give their consent. Also in many cases the adults expect that the private lives or thoughts of their children will be shared with them – thus presenting challenges to the issue of the confidentiality of the research subjects. Further more, since children are less able to protect themselves and due to the fact that social institutions have special rules to protect children the Protection from abuse is becoming more of an issue (Butler and Williamson, 1994). However, the biggest ethical challenge for children taking an active role in studies is the disparities in power and status between themselves and the adults (Morrow and Richards, 1996).

In order to enable children involvement in research we need to readdress the power imbalance between children and adult. We argue that effective methodology and ethics go hand in hand, in the context of children active roles in research. Our argument is that the reliability and validity, and the ethical acceptability, of research with children can be augmented by using an approach which gives children an active role in the study, one which will give them control over the

research process and methods and make sure they are in tune with the children's ways of seeing and relating to their lives.

We acknowledge that where ethical issues are different for research with children, the position one takes will depend in part on one's perspective on children and childhood. However, the need to use methods that enable children to take an active role in research leads to the development of a range of participatory techniques designed to allow children to participate in studies on their own lives and in ways which are relevant to their own lives as they see them.

Based on the work of James (1995) who identified four distinct perspectives which she called the 'developing child', the 'tribal child', the 'adult child' and the 'social child'. We want to go forward and suggest some basic principals who would assist anyone who wants to overcome the problems mentioned above.

First, a consent in such studies should be contingent on the child *active* agreement while in regard to the adult involved we can settle for a *passive* agreement. Second, it should be clear that the children are free to withdraw from the research at any point they wish to. They could conclude an interview whenever they wish, they do not have to answer any question, and they do not have to agree to tape recording.

Thirdly, children should have as much choice as possible over how they participate in the research, consistent with remaining true to the study objectives. This implies that children are offered some choice over the research instruments and that they are allowed to some extent to direct the course of their 'interviews', within the overall themes of the research.

In relation to confidentiality and to protection from abuse we need to allow children the autonomy to decide what they want to say and who they want to say it to. It is important to give children an assurance that what they tell us will not be passed to other people, and for children to know that they could trust the researchers. Any disclosure of information during the research would be an indication that the child is ready to pass on the information to someone else they trusted. This position is unique since as "there appears to be an emerging consensus amongst researchers that complete confidentiality can never be guaranteed to child research subjects" (Mahon et al., 1996).

We hope that we have been able to illustrate some of the ways in which, by addressing the ethical issues presented by children

taking an active role in studies, the methodology can be improved. Far from being compromised by attention to these challenging ethical issues, both validity and reliability can be improved by allowing children an active part in determining their participation in the research and how the subject matter is approached. If "reliability is the degree to which the finding is independent of accidental circumstances of the research, and validity is the degree to which the finding is interpreted in a correct way" (Kirk and Miller, 1986, p. 20), then allowing children to participate freely and to share in the interpretation of data can enhance both. As Kefalyew argues "the reliability of research ... taking children as a target group is dependent upon the degree of freedom they enjoy to take part actively in a research process" (1996, p. 204).

WHAT DO THE CHILDREN THINK?

Involving children in studies of their own well-being is indeed a worthy effort both on the conceptual and methodological levels. However, all the arguments we presented up to now were heavily contingent on an adult perspective on the issue. It is time now to have a look on what do children themselves think on such a possible role and how much do they cherish it.

Not many studies have asked children what they think should be their role in measuring and monitoring their own well-being. The few who did came forward with some very clear findings.

In a study of the British government unit for children a number of focus groups with children at various ages (9–16) were used in order to obtain the children's view. The children participating in these study were able to think sensibly if not in great detail about ways in which change could be assessed over time. Their suggestions fall into six broad groups. The two raised most often were: those, which suggested asking the children; and those, which measured impact and especially the impact on children (Sinclair et al., 2003).

In yet another study in Norway more than 300 children who participated in a survey as respondents were then asked about their thought on the possible roles they should take in the effort to study children well-being. This study came forward with the conclusion that children do want to take active roles but they want to

do it in their way (Backe-Hansen, 2003). Attempts to summarize those studies and others and answer the question of what do the children think leads to the following conclusions.

Children Want to Be Asked

Maybe the most significant finding is that children have a say and they want it to be heard. They want to be asked what they think on their own well-being – but they want to be asked on their terms and on the issues they care about. It is clear that the children want to be asked and that they think it would be stupid to ask anyone else those questions they think to be important.

Children Want to Be Asked in an Interesting Way

Children clearly say that what we (adults) think to be interesting or important is not necessarily what they think. They are willing and happy to take an active role but they are not interested in fulfilling our wishes but rather they want us to listen to them and to look at what is important to them and in ways that they find of interest.

Children Want to Be Involved in Research that Matter

Again the evidence shows that children are willing to become active in studies that they think will matter – studies that will have an impact and that are aiming at measuring substantial issues.

Children Believe They Can Contribute to the Research

In a number of cases children were not only willing to participate in a research or to take an active role but they were expressing a clear point of view that they should contribute to the research goals, methodology, data collection and the data interpretation. Even more although there is no casual linkage proven – it seems clear that children's willingness to take an active role in a given study will be contingent on their perception of the impact they might have on the study (the more possible impact the more will to become active).

To sum up – using Backe-Hansen phrase, children looks on their participation in studies of their well-being as “Cool, boring, difficult or stupid?” (2003). The cooler they find it the more active they will be and vice versa.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have tried to answer based on a sequence of arguments and findings the questions what should be the role of children in measuring and monitoring their well-being. We started our journey with the sound analysis that the field of measuring and monitoring children well-being is changing. Not only that it is changing but we have built on the direction it is heading to make a case for a more active role of children in the study of their well-being.

We have then moved on to present five possible roles for children involvement in such studies. In regard to each possible role we have tried to present existing knowledge from various studies and suggest directions for future research. By doing so we have laid the basis for children involvement in the studies of their well-being and showed that in a number of such studies this is already the practice even though we still have a long way to go.

Furthermore, it is clear from our presentation that children are more involved in regard to some of the possible roles than in regard to the others. Hence it seems the best way to involve children in research is to include them in the work from its early stages and through all the process. This is so due to both our adult perception of children and the children perception of the adult world. This was especially apparent when we moved to discuss what do the children really think about taking an active role in such studies.

Our conclusion adheres with Mauthner's contention that "when space is made for them, children's voices express themselves clearly" (Mauthner, 1997, p. 21). In the studies we looked at children demonstrated impressive abilities to articulate their views and experiences. Moreover, we saw clearly how "participation does not simply imply the mechanical application of a technique or method, but is instead part of a process of dialogue, action, analysis and change" (Pretty et al., 1995, p. 54).

Research is not value free. Prout and James have pointed out how the "double hermeneutic" of the social sciences applies particularly to the study of childhood (Prout and James, 1990, p. 9). In our case the focus on children's involvement research, based on a commitment to enabling them to participate meaningfully, puts us firmly within a "political and participation" research paradigm (Trinder, 1996).

Rather than reinforce views of children's incompetence by portraying them as subjects, we have to develop methods which allow us to explore children's capacities, needs and interests from their own points of view. As John (1996) puts it, this means developing research methodologies on the basis of partnership, which in turn involves a new role in the power structure for the researcher – a move from the plunderer of information to facilitator which enables the child to be an active part of voicing their concerns (p. 21).

As Alderson puts it: "The question for social researchers is how to respect children's rationality and therefore their informed uncoerced consent. The right to consent has an impact on all other rights. Consent is about selecting options, negotiating them, and accepting or rejecting them. Beyond making a decision, consent is about making an informed choice and becoming emotionally committed to it" (1995, p. 69).

By creating space for children to make these choices and to play an active role in the research process, shaping the agenda, speaking out about matters that concern them, and themselves reflecting upon our methodology, we may learn a great deal from them.

NOTES

The term "state of the child report" is used here to describe any report dealing with the status of children at large and sub-groups within the children population, regardless of the exact name of the report.

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*The Paul Baerwald School of Social Work and Social Welfare
at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem
E-mail: benarieh@cc.huji.ac.il*