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Silvia Exenberger  
Barbara Juen

Well-Being,  
Resilience and  
Quality of Life  
from Children's  
Perspectives  
A Contextualized  
Approach



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# Well-Being, Resilience and Quality of Life from Children's Perspectives

A Contextualized Approach

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# Foreword

What constitutes a good life in childhood after a natural disaster? How do children view their well-being and how do they negotiate caregivers with restrictions and hope? Silvia Exenberger's and Barbara Juen's book on "Well-Being, Resilience and Quality of Life from Children's Perspectives: A Contextualized Approach" offers an innovative view on child well-being in the light of resources as well as in the light of the vulnerability in childhood. Its topic on children and caregivers in the post-Tsunami regions and their concepts of what constitutes a good life for children is an important issue in the general field of child well-being.

At the beginning, the Authors explore the broad view on child well-being and the quality of life research. As a result, the contributions to the first part of the book represent the entire spectrum of topics in the international discussion: the first concern is the conceptual issues, the second is the measurement of differences within one heterogeneous nation by looking at, for example, childhood in rural regions and comparing it to a childhood in metropolitan areas, the third is international comparisons, the fourth is the influence of data-based research on policymaking, the fifth is the fundamental question regarding which domains exert the greatest influence on child well-being in order to draw conclusions on where policy should intervene, and finally the sixth is the need to ask the children themselves.

I would like to take a closer look at the question how the well-being of children relates to that of families, how the concept of vulnerability could be seen, and what role do the children themselves play in this process.

Relations within the family and parental care are often applied as indicators of child well-being and they seem to play an important role. However, I would like to focus attention on something else: on the relation of child well-being to family well-being. Or, to put it differently: How does child policy relate to family policy? Even a superficial international comparison reveals how child and family well-being overlap: they overlap in access to gainful employment, in the quality of care facilities, in the normative ideas on a "good childhood and family," and in the work-life balance. But now this study shows more than that: It took a closer look at the long-term effects of trauma in children aged 7–15 and it realized a culture-sensitive and generational-sensitive approach. The researchers experienced the

interdependence of the Indian culture where the study was located and that gave the first impression on children's and caregivers' roots of thinking about well-being: "However, with regard to the research it became very clear in order to understand well-being in the given sub-culture children and caregivers need to be consulted." (p. 3).

I would like to figure out another topic: the topic of resilience and vulnerability. In this book, the Authors focus on resilience and differentiated between two waves of research on resilience. With respect to a socio-ecological definition Exenberger and Juen follow Michael Ungar's definition of resilience and define resilience as the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to resources that sustain their well-being and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources. This perspective offers a child-sensitive approach as resilience cannot be gained explicitly through internal resources, but also external ones are needed.

In this field of research on resilience and vulnerability we can find a diagnosis of the parental need for security as well: children are considered to be at risk, and they are particularly insecure in public spaces. This is reflected in the fact that protection is one of the fundamental orientations of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child alongside development, education, and participation. Not only parents and other adults in their concrete interaction with children but also institutions in their formal shaping of childhood develop and establish more or less successful strategies to make the childhood life phase as secure and safe from harm as possible. However, what exactly is perceived as a threat or a risk depends decisively on the contexts in which children are growing up: often mentioned is the educational level and status of their parents, the public discourses over risks, or the norms of the state and civil society. In addition, it is precisely social contexts that are linked closely to normative attributions.

But this book decisively makes clear how a disaster like the Tsunami in 2004, confronts us with completely other questions on resilience, well-being, and vulnerability. It makes clear that these concepts only can be understood considering the social and ecological context of the concerned children and caregivers.

Finally, we have to discuss with respect to this excellent study whether research can and should fulfill the function of helping to represent the interests of children on the basis of data, particularly when based on quantitative and qualitative surveys of children as the experts on themselves. The orientation toward children's rights of access to all areas of society plays a strong role in the development of the child well-being approach. One element is asking the children themselves, and even younger children.

We need more case-studies in this sense of context-sensitivity and a strong interest in children's concepts on well-being in such circumstances like in the post-Tsunami regions.

Sabine Andresen

# Preface

## The Imperative Necessity to Give People a Voice

The project ‘Three years post-Tsunami: Long-term effects of trauma in children aged 7–15—A culture-sensitive approach’ received funding from the European Community’s Seventh Framework Programme, Marie Curie Actions, International Outgoing Fellowships. The first Author was awarded with that funding, holding a post-doctoral position. The second Author, together with an Indian cooperation partner—Prof. Kasi Sekar from the Department of Psychiatric Social Work, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS)—a deemed university based in Bangalore—was supervising the entire research process throughout the project duration. The cultural adequacy of the research process was guaranteed through this cooperation as all steps during the research were discussed in face-to-face meetings. Moreover, in December 2008, the first Author received a training at NIMHANS on ‘Psychosocial Care for Disaster Management’ by the Indian cooperation partner. The second cooperation partner in India was SOS Children’s Villages India. Their support was crucial and indispensable as they helped with the recruitment of child and adult participants and established some other necessary cooperation.

The duration of the whole project was from October 2008 to October 2011. Data collection and partly data processing took place in Tamil Nadu and UT Puducherry, South India, where the first Author lived with her family from October 2008 to September 2010. The present research was originally planned as one—not too large—segment of the entire project, but quickly became more and more important once the first Author tried to settle down in India. Already in the first days, the main features of collectivism (interdependence, norms as determinants for social behavior, etc.—see Triandis 1995) could be experienced first-hand. For example, it was not possible to open a bank account without any reference letter of just any person who was already a customer. Consequently, there was no alternative but to talk to Indians and to ask for their help. Once the first step toward inter-dependence and social networking was accomplished, we were part of the huge ‘Indian family’ and at the same time still considered as outsiders and strangers. But, this is another feature of Indian culture—unification of inconsistencies without causing any dissonance (Sinha et al. 2001). However, with regard

to the research, it became very clear in order to understand well-being in the given subculture children and caregivers need to be consulted.

The book starts with a focus on the origin of the social indicator movement and gives a review of the literature on the concepts of quality of life, (subjective) well-being, and resilience. Delineations of the three concepts and their interplay, especially their intersection, are assumed to capture a full understanding of child well-being. In the subsequent chapter, the force of culture on child development will be highlighted. Based on the literature, it will be shown how two prototypical environments (rural subsistence-based and urban Western environment) favor either the independent or interdependent self-model, which in turn have implications on what competencies are valued in a specific culture and what determines subjective well-being. Consequently, our understanding of child well-being will be fully viewed against the background of culture. The [Chap. 2](#) deals with shifts and changes within in the child well-being indicator movement and highlights important trends of child well-being measurements. The literature review of this book closes with a comparison of domains and indicators of current evidence-based national composite child well-being indices and child well-being indices from children's points of view.

In the subsequent chapters, the own research on the development of child well-being indicators 4 years after the Indian Ocean Tsunami disaster will be presented. The first part of the study gives Tsunami-affected children and their caregivers a voice to formulate in their words what constitutes child well-being for them in the given circumstances. The child well-being concepts of caregivers and those of children will be processed in detail and contrasted. In a new chapter, the second part of the study—the introduction of a child well-being index out of the developed indicators—is described. This index became part of a questionnaire battery that aimed to capture children's and mothers' own (mental) health status and resources. In this questioning, which was part of the larger project, a third group of children and their mothers were involved. All mothers gave answers in regard to their children's well-being. The strengths and shortcomings of this child well-being index are briefly discussed.

The book closes with four main conclusions that are reflected in a theoretical model toward contextualized child well-being indicators derived from the present research results.

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