Asking children about their subjective well-being: A cross-cultural perspective

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Asking children… (1)

- In the Children's Worlds international research project we ask children about their Subjective Well-Being (SWB), and also about their daily activities and other topics.
- We ask them by means of self-completion questionnaires administered in the classrooms using closed-ended items.
- Our questionnaires include psychometric scales on SWB.
- **Why very few international surveys asking children existed before our project?**
- **Why is our international project pioneer?**
- **What has our project added to international scientific knowledge on children?**
- **What have we already learned and are still learning from children?**
- **What are our goals when analysing data?**
- **Has the project weak points and aspects to be improved?**

Asking children… (2)

- But first of all: **why we decided to ask about their SWB?**
- SWB was a key concept in the ***social indicators movement*** and again, in the ***child indicators movement***. In both movements researchers agreed that both ***objective and subjective indicators*** are needed to assess complex social phenomena such as well-being and quality of life.
- Before the Children's Worlds project, very few children's SWB indicators existed in the international arena. In fact, the only internationally frequently used one was the **single-item Cantril's Ladder**, provided by the HBSC (Health Behaviour in School-aged Children) international survey. It was available every 4 years, for 11, 13 and 15 year-old children from some countries (5 in 1984; 42 in 2013/14).
- Psychometricians have often pointed out that single-item scales are not **robust measures** – multi-item measures being needed.

Subjective Well-Being (1)

How to measure SWB?

- Many authors simply point out that SWB has **cognitive and affective components**.
- The **tripartite theory** proposes that SWB includes three components: Positive affect (PA), Negative affect (NA) and Life Satisfaction (LS) (Arthaud-Day et al., 2005; Metler & Busseri, 2017).
- While defining SWB as "*an overall evaluation of the quality of a person's life from her or his own perspective*" (Diener, Lucas & Oishi, 2108, pp 1) and stating that people can evaluate their lives in terms of a **global judgment**, in terms of **evaluating the domains of their lives**, or in terms of their **ongoing emotional feelings** about what is happening to them, in the international arena very often researchers prefer to use **life satisfaction measures only**, because they are supposed to be more stable over time (Park, 2004).

Subjective Well-Being (2)

- "*When possible, researchers should include a* ***broad array of measures***" to assess SWB (Diener, Lucas and Oishi, 2018, pp.7).
- "*A complete assessment of subjective well-being requires more than a simple life satisfaction or happiness question; well-being is a multi-faceted phenomenon and requires* ***multi-pronged assessment***" (Diener and Tov, 2012, pp 9).
- "*We eagerly await the day when a* ***full set of findings based on measures of positive affect****, as well as related concepts, is available*" (Lucas, Diener & Suh, 1996).
- To clarify the relationship among the existing measures "*the relevant* ***longitudinal studies*** *need to be done with youth*" (Park, 2004).
- Some authors have pointed out that "*different SWB* ***instruments may not display identical results in different contexts***" (Casas *et al.*, 2012; Holte *et al.*, 2014; Casas & González-Carrasco, 2018).

Subjective Well-Being (3)

- Data on **SWB does not display a normal statistical distribution**: **The optimistic bias**. In most countries and in most human groups people tend to be more happy than unhappy, more satisfied than dissatisfied with their lives (fortunately!!).
- Two different kinds of SWB **cognitive** measurements instruments are used: **context-free** (based on question about general life satisfaction) and **domain-based** (based on satisfaction with different life domains).
- Instruments measuring the **affective** dimension of SWB are designed to check for **stable high positive affect and low negative affect**.
- SWB works under the **homeostatic principle**: Most positive or negative events only have a short temporary effect on our affect and then we go back to our baseline. Only exceptionally stressful life events may have important consequences on the homeostatic individual functioning: then mental-illness (e.g.: depression) may appear.
- A SWB **cultural homeostasis** has also been observed.

Children's Subjective Well-Being measures

The Children's Worlds Wave 3 questionnaires contain 5 sets of questions designed to measure **self-reported well-being**, 4 sets on hedonic well-being and one on eudaimonic well-being:

- **OLS** (Overall Subjective Well-Being) – A **single-item cognitive scale** about satisfaction with life as a whole (Q45).
- **CW-SWBS** (Children's Worlds Subjective Well-Being Scale) – A **multi-item context-free cognitive** well-being scale (6 items) (Q25)
- **CW-DBSWBS** (Children's Worlds Domain Based Subjective Well-Being Scale) – A **multi-item domain-based cognitive** well-being scale (5 items) (Qs 11,25,28,36,41).
- **CW-PNAS** (Children's Worlds Positive and Negative Affects Scale) – A **multi-item affective** well-being scale (3 positive and 3 negative items) (Q47).
- **CW-PSWBS** (Children's Worlds Psychological Subjective Well-Being Scale)- A **multi-item eudaimonic** well-being scale (6 items) (Q48).

Social indicators (I)

- Traditionally, **social indicators systems** and **social indexes** (based on social indicators systems) have been used to compare territories (e.g.: countries, districts, cities, regions,…).
- We know a lot (although not enough) about **children's objective indicators**, because they have been used for decades. In contrast, the use of **children's subjective indicators** has a short history – that is a young field of research and we have much to learn yet.
- The two last decades, in the international arena, a growing interest in collecting data about **children's subjective well-being (SWB)** has been observed.
- The **relationship between SWB objective and subjective indicators** is complex and unclear, even for adult's populations.

Social indicators (II)

- Among the lessons learned when researching adults' quality of life it is worth to underline that **objective and subjective indicators may display important discrepancies**.
- When **indicators provided by different stakeholders disagree** on the results displayed very often scientists focused discussions about "*who is right and who is wrong*".
- At present we know that different stakeholders may have **different perspectives** to assess a social phenomenon. "*Different*" does not mean "*right*" or "*wrong*". Social phenomena are complex. **Perhaps all observers are right**.
- **Discrepancies are a relevant part of social reality**. It is very important to know if different stakeholders have the same view, or they have discrepant evaluations.
- If children report differently than adults expect, that does not mean they are wrong. **We need to understand social phenomena also from children's perspectives, using data provided by children as subjective indicators.**

Why do we need indicators of children's SWB?

- Besides comparing territories, robust indicators of children's SWB can be also used to **identify sub-groups or clusters of children that display significantly lower mean scores** than the overall population of any territory.
- Good indicators are crucial to develop **program evaluation** (i.e.: satisfaction with services provided).
- As soon as we identify the situation of a group or subgroup of children (i.e.: with significantly lower SWB than mean) and a **political and/or social action is adopted** to improve their situation, selected indicators should show the previous **baseline**, and the **situation after the implemented action**. That means indicators may allow us to check for the **efficacy and the efficiency** of actions to fulfil goals for positive social change, and also to **assess the impact** of these actions.

Why have children been so often ignored by large-scale, general population, survey research?

According to Scott (1997), there are at least four distinct causes:

- The inertia of practice.
- Tendency to accredit adults with greater knowledge, experience, and power.
- Collecting data from children viewed as too problematic to be worth the possible pay-off.
- Ignorance or perhaps half-truth: Children are commonly believed to lack the communication, cognitive and social skills that are the prerequisite of good respondents.

Although pre-teen children can and do tell us about themselves, they have also mastered the art of impression management and, like adults, will tend to edit their answers according to **what they guess they are expected to say**. By adolescence they are wary of revealing their secrets to an adult.

This international research project is pioneer

- **Based on survey methodology with children**
  - Children have traditionally been marginal in representative survey research, except for marketing purposes.
- **Explores new fields**
  - 8yo, 11-point scales, different topics, ….
- **Leads new pathways**
  - We trust children as key informants and experts in their lives.
- **Innovative**
  - Collects data in countries with diverse characteristics, using different languages, cross-culturally, ….
- **Contrasts with traditional beliefs in social sciences**
  - In the design of our questionnaires, we have taken a few methodological decisions against the mainstream opinions …
- **Gaining prestige in the international scientific community**
  - There is already an impressive number of scientific publications using our international databases.

We want to achieve high scientific standards

- **Our data has to achieve high quality**
  - We have done our best to be accurate and rigorous in our data collection, and transparently report on our procedures.
- **We have to clearly illustrate how we take carefully into account children as active agents in our research**
  - We have improved our instruments by being sensitive to what children tell us, accepting children as advisers, taking into account children's opinions and points of view to contribute to human and social sciences, ….
- **We must keep very aware and sensitive to the different socio-cultural environments we include information from in our data bases**
  - We have tested for the equivalence and comparability of SWB items answered by children from different socio-cultural contexts.
- **We should lead new international debates**
  - We try to explain how SWB indicators based on data provided by children are useful for knowledge, but also for social policy decision-making.

In order to gain more prestige

- Our **sampling procedures** have to appear very rigorous and transparent.
- Our **translations** of the instruments have to be back-translated, but also **piloted** with children in order to use **child-friendly wording in all countries.**
- The **format** of our questionnaires should be the same in every country. We need to work more on a **common on-line format** of the questionnaires for countries where it is possible children answer at school using a computer.
- We have to demonstrate control on the **data administration context**.
- We have to demonstrate control on the **quality of the data** we incorporate into the international database.
- **All of this in order to avoid biases and errors in our data that may mislead our analysis and interpretation of the results.**

What can we learn from scientific publications about data collection from children

Researchers (and research assistants) need to acquire more methodological knowledge about children as subjects (Markopoulos and Bekker, 2002):

- Make sure the **questions do not resemble test items or school questions. There are no wrong answers. The researchers do not know a correct answer.**
- **Reduce the hierarchical adult-child relationship**.
- **Children can act as advisers** of their researchers (Casas et al., 2012).
- **Children tend to ask for more guidance than adults, especially when they are unsure what a question means** (Scott, 1997).
- Children's responses are subject to the **standard biases** (as adults – well researched among adults, but not among children): **context effects, social desirability, acquiescence bias, and so on.**

Discrepancies between methodologists and children

We have identified **discrepancies** between what **methodologists** state and **what children tell us** in focus groups:

Methodologists	Children
7-10 – Maximum 3 response options 11-15 – 4 to 5 response options 16+ - 5 to 7 response options	Many children as young as 8 state they understand and can answer 11 response options – they simply need more time to answer
Clearly detailed introductions make a questionnaire easier. Complexity of wording, negations, and logical operators makes a questionnaire more difficult.	Having to read more makes a questionnaire more difficult. Do not repeat headings or questions.
Scales with a label at the mid-point are easier to understand.	Scales with a label at the mid-point are more difficult to understand.
Completely labelled scales produce better-quality responses from children. Verbal labels are more easily understood than numeric.	End-labelled scales using numbers are more easy to understand (i.e.: 11-point satisfaction scales).

Adult centred versus child centred questionnaires

Adult centred questionnaires	Child centred questionnaires
Evaluation of a proposed questionnaire by an advisory committee of **experts**	Evaluation of a proposed questionnaire by asking **children**
Use **cognitive testing** methods	Use **discussion groups** with children
The **adult is the expert**	The **child is the expert**
"Don't know" answers are not recommended because, even though they increase the reliability of responses, they discourage respondents to report their opinion.	"Don't know" is an **ethical** and necessary option when children may really not know the answer to the question raised.

The format of the questionnaires (1)

- The **graphic design of a question** is known to make its comprehension easier or more difficult, increase or decrease the possibility of certain types of error, and even make it visually more pleasant or unpleasant, comfortable or uncomfortable for the respondent, bearing in mind that the **emotional reaction** to a question is in no way irrelevant to the response it may provoke.
- These aspects may additionally be influenced by factors over which the researcher has little control, such as the respondent's age, prior experience answering questionnaires and level of interest in the issues being addressed (Casas et al., 2012).
- **Adults' criteria have been traditionally imposed in the design of questionnaires for children** in all countries around the world (Casas et al., 2012). There is no loss of "prestige" in admitting to children that we as researchers do not know "the best format" for **children** of a concrete age and therefore requesting them to act as consultants to university researchers to **improve designs**.

The format of the questionnaires (2)

- **Asking children for help and advice for something adults do not know** (e.g.: recognizing adults ignorance about the topic) usually leads to most of them approaching the task with great **interest and motivation**. They feel **main characters, protagonists**.
- The key to children's clear understanding of the formats often did not lie in the researchers providing explanations and investing time answering questions and interacting with them. Rather, **explanations given by other children** often brought them to a faster understanding than those given by researchers.
- Formats that require **more time to read are more "difficult".**
- **Shading alternate lines** makes questions easier to read correctly.
- **Faces/emoticons** were considered attractive and easy to understand, but only appropriate for "the easy questions", while the "serious" questions require other formats (particularly for 12yo).
- **Repeating questions is considered boring and time consuming**.

Training activities

- **Training sessions** allow better data quality, with less errors. The child learns he or she could correct the researcher (Gee, Gregory & Pipe, 1999).
- Our project suggest to use **training sheets** with the children of the 8-year-olds group before administering the questionnaires.
- It is convenient to also use them with children that may not have previous experience answering questionnaires, as for example children from rural or remote areas, children with low literacy skills and so on.
- We need to learn more about **training activities** that may improve the quality of the data we get from children when they answer a questionnaire. Suggestions and new experiences are welcome.

The attitude children perceive in the researchers

- We know that to be good informants children need to feel **confident and motivated**. Our project is based on trusting what children tell us. We need to collect information to explain our experience with detail to other researchers and to policy-makers who doubt about the usefulness of subjective indicators of children's well-being.
- When participating in our data collection, children should feel that they are the main characters (for example, using sentences such as "We need your knowledge and help"; "Your opinion is really important for us"; "Would you like to advise us?").
- During the questionnaire administration, do we facilitate children to ask the researchers about any doubts that they have?
- ***It is adult's orientation and competence that raises the difference of children's competence*** (Garbarino, Stott et al., 1989).

What has our project added to international scientific knowledge on children? (I)

Children's Worlds data has already contributed to new scientific knowledge by:

- Publishing **more than 50 scientific articles** in international impact journals, besides book chapters and other.
- Confirming that **socio-demographic variables** do not have outstanding effects of children's SWB in most countries.
- Observing that **mean values of the SWB measures** are often **not cross-culturally comparable**, due to different understanding and different answering styles.
- Identifying **gender differences** on satisfaction with self-image, girls scoring significantly lower than boys in most industrialized countries.
- Observing that **bullying** is a complex phenomena with important implications for children's SWB, presenting cultural differences.

What has our project added to international scientific knowledge on children? (II)

- Identifying the **decreasing-with-age SWB trend**, in most countries, (using both cognitive and affective measures), including a decreasing satisfaction with school in industrialised countries.
- **Determinants of SWB** may be different in diverse cultures and traditions.
- **Security** seems to be a key determinant in most countries
- Initial studies found three strong **predictors** of children's SWB: **Bullying, Perception of safety, and Respect for children and inclusion of their voice.**
- The variance in children's SWB is barely explained by **socio-demographic variables**.
- It is better explained by variables that measure **children's relations and perceptions**.
- This is a new and growing area of research.

What have we already learned and are still learning from children?

- **Children and adolescents like to be listened**. Asking their opinions about topics which are relevant to their lives facilitates adults approach to their perspectives, and therefore facilitates relationships between adults and the younger generations.
- **We do not often talk with children or adolescents about their subjective well-being**. When we offer them the opportunity to do so, they display high interest –even enthusiasm – to express their thoughts and opinions, and also on related topics.
- Children's Worlds questionnaires administration has generated the desire **to continue talking on this topic at school, more time and more in-depth**. In Spain, at some schools they decided to continue discussions in the tutorship time.
- Talking about topics such as satisfaction with friends, with things learned, with teachers or with family brings to reflect on oneself. This is an opportunity to suggest **constructive reflections in order to promote the owns well-being**.

We want to achieve real social impact to improve children's lives in as many countries as possible

- Data obtained in the first and the second Wave raised many comments in the **media** world wide (more than 200 media reports in 12 languages for the 2nd Wave).
- Well-being indicators based on subjective data provided by children are useful for knowledge, but also for **social policy decision-making**.
- In some countries **political and/or social impact** has already been observed:
  - In South Korea, the Government supported the survey, the sample size was expanded and data collection became longitudinal.
  - In Israel, the Central Bureau of Statistics has incorporated a series of the questions in a national survey and has established a committee to further develop knowledge on children's lives.
  - In Brazil and Spain, programs to increase school well-being have been supported by the government.

Which are our goals when analysing data? (1)

- Our main goal is NOT comparing countries, although that may be illustrative for international debates.
- Our main goal should NOT be to identify who are the best.
- **Our main goal should be to identify what can be improved in children's lives in each country and consistently propose political and social action.**
- Keeping that goal in mind, it makes sense to check for the **subgroups of children** in each country or region who display the **lowest SWB scores**. They are the potential **target groups** for future programs aiming **positive social change** to improve their situation.
- It is also interesting to **compare areas or regions** in a country to identify **inequalities in the distribution of well-being**.

Which are our goals when analysing data? (2)

- The **meaning of "subgroups"** can be very broad. From previous research in Spain we learned that some of the children displaying **significantly lower subjective well-being than the mean** were these that (the list can be different in different countries):
  a. Report being in residential care.
  b. Report not feeling safe, mainly at home or at school.
  c. Report not getting pocket money.
  d. Report their parents did no finish primary education.
  e. Were not born in Spain.
  f. Report no adult at home has a paid job.
  g. Report not having access to ICTs when they need them: computer, Internet or mobile phone.
  h. Perceive their family as less or much less wealthy than the other families.
  i. Report not being allowed to participate in decisions made at home.
  j. Report last year they have changed parents or adults living at home.

Challenges in our data analysis

- We need to check for the **reliability and validity** of our instruments in each country, and for their cross-cultural **comparability**.
- We have the challenge of identifying the **variables contributing to children's SWB** in each country and to explain why they are sometimes different from one country to another.
- Many additional analyses are needed to better understand **differences between boys and girls** in each country and in the aggregated database.
- We would like to develop analysis **measuring the socio-economic status of children**. However, we are still testing indicators useful to identify such status, and we have been unable to use the same indicators in all countries. New ideas are welcome.
- We still need to learn a lot about children's **daily activities** in different cultures.

How to interpret our results?

- In each country we may have identified some **unexpected results** using subjective data provided by children. We should keep an open mind to potential new interpretations of children's worlds through children's eyes.
- We need to design **activities with children so that they can help us to better understand the results**.
- We have used representative samples in all countries in this project. We should not attribute low **relevance to small percentages** (i.e.: in the bullying items). **In most countries, 2% of children means thousands of children**.
- When developing cross-cultural comparisons let's not forget that is not a competition. **We compare data mostly to learn things that can be useful for research or for policy debate**.
- People in diverse cultures and speaking different languages may have **different answering styles** to the same questions. This may also happen with children. Should we give priority to research exploring this topic in order to give more accurate explanations to our findings?

Some dilemmas…

- Should we search for **similar characteristics and behaviours** children have in all countries and cultures – or should we give priority to analyse in-country and cross-countries **variability**?
- Should we work more on the **cross-cultural comparability** of our instruments (i.e.: psychometric scales) – or should we invest more energies in **capturing the specificities of children in each cultural environment**?
- Methodologists are very concerned about underlining children's lack of communication, cognitive and social skills. It is very easy to "demonstrate" biased answers of children (as well as of adults!) to any questionnaire. However, should we face the challenge of demonstrating that sometimes children also display **more skills than expected**?

Weak points to review and improve (1)

- An international committee has checked for the **representativeness of the sampling in each country**. However, we know our samples could be improved.
- We need more discussions with children (focus groups) to improve our questionnaires. Priority should be given to the use of wordings that children use in their everyday life in each region. **Equivalent meaning for children does not mean precise translation by adults and vice versa.**
- We need **discussions with children** (focus groups) in every country **to improve the format of our questionnaires**. The fact that in each wave more countries incorporate **on-line questionnaires** for data collection raises new challenges for comparability. We should try, at least, to ensure that all countries use the same online format and that online formats are as similar or equivalent as possible to paper ones.

Weak points to review and improve (2)

- In some countries **researchers personally administer the questionnaires in schools** (even the online format) and, in some others, teachers do the administration, because of the lower costs. The potential bias differences are unknown.
- We have to report more in detail about **children excluded from our samples**, not only because of the sampling. Some countries have children only of exactly the same age in their sample and most haven't.
- Although in the first wave we included some **open-ended items** to know children's opinions about our questionnaire, planning and articulation of quantitative and qualitative data provided by children in as many countries as possible is highly desirable.
- We need more **research on standard biases** in children's self-administered information: context effects, social desirability, acquiescence bias, scales understanding, etc.

Future challenges

- We would like to increase the involvement of children with our project in as many countries as possible. We should **involve children in more discussions** on the analysis and interpretation of our results, as well as in its dissemination, and in the improvement of future waves of data collection.
- We need to **improve the comparability of our data**, as well as the comparability of the psychometric instruments used in our questionnaire. By including **new items suggested by children speaking non Indo-European languages** we think we have made an important first step forward.
- Only a few countries have organised data collection in order to allow **longitudinal data analysis** in the future. Longitudinal studies are highly desirable (i.e.: with different cohorts of children) and very scarce in relation to children's SWB cross-culturally.

Remarks

- Our data analysis clearly points out that the different **SWB psychometric scales** here used are **sensitive to the socio-cultural context** they are used in.
- Despite the high correlation usually observed among them, **the election of a concrete scale can be associated to different results**.
- Therefore, **using more than one psychometric scale** for any SWB analysis with children **is advised**.
- The reasons for that **discriminant sensitivity** in different countries should be **more in-depth researched** in the future.

The right to be socially visible through scientific research?

- Collecting data about the opinions, perceptions, evaluations and satisfaction of big samples of children in as many countries as possible, and disseminating them, helps to a **broader knowledge of children's lives**, taking seriously into account their own point of view as social agents (stakeholders).
- Availability of this data sets (Children's Worlds data sets are publicly available) also allows to use such data as rigorous social indicators in different sets of **indicators systems**.
- Our project shows that scientific researchers are **taking children's perspectives really seriously**.
- We have to work for policy-makers contributing to the collection and **dissemination SWB data produced by children.**

Some reflections (I)

- **Availability of social indicators** of children's and adolescents' SWB depends on adults will (both social and political will) of **better knowing the younger generations**, their living situations, where we are and which is the direction of present changes.
- If we have data about were we are, and political decisions are made in order to achieve positive changes, **we will be able to evaluate the real impact of the actions taken.**
- Any change impacting the life of the younger generations require an **evaluation**, taking into account the degree of **satisfaction** of all stakeholders with these changes, including children and adolescents evaluations from their point of view on the topics involved.

Some reflections (II)

- Results suggest that **actions to promote SWB in the child and adolescent years can be designed, both at macro- and at micro-level**. First, we need to focus on ensuring children's and adolescents' **safety**, reducing violence and fostering better **family and social relations**. But next we should focus on more specific topics, such as, for example, **school satisfaction and satisfaction with the area they live in**, domains with many possibilities for improvement in industrialized countries. However, some actions should be **gender-specific**, for example, in relation to **girls' self-image** in industrialized countries.
- **Greater data collection in more countries** is still necessary to better understand this phenomenon, and in order to evaluate interventions for improving SWB in children and adolescents.

Some topics for discussion (I)

- We need systematic data provided by children in order to know and better understand their daily lives and **their understanding of their own rights** in different socio-cultural contexts, from their own points of view. We need data on children's opinions, perceptions, evaluations and aspirations from representative samples of children = **social indicators of children's subjective well-being.**
- Like among adults, **interpersonal relationships** are very important contributors to well-being among children and adolescents. However, **children's cultures** are much more influenced than adults' by the **relationships created using the audio-visual media** (information and communication technologies – **ICTs**). We can only understand about such changes **asking children.**

Some topics for discussion (II)

- **Professionals and researchers** should contribute to understand changes in children's life in different socio-cultural contexts.
- May professional social interventions palliate the **decrease of subjective well-being** (and of the life optimistic bias) **during adolescence**? Satisfaction with school and with their experience as students are facets in children's lives dramatically decreasing in many countries between 12 and 16 years of age – but they are not the only facets. **May such satisfactions be improved**?
- May professionals and researchers contribute to give **more social political priority to data collection about children's subjective well-being**, and to promote new research and new political, social and psychosocial intervention in this field?

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