



# Understanding children's well-being: A political issue

Claude Martin

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## Introduction

Claude Martin

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# Introduction

## Understanding children's well-being: A political issue

The themes of well-being, happiness, quality of life and “the good life” (Eudaimonia) have attracted increasing interest over the last few decades. Experts, international organisations, public decision-makers and the media have all fuelled the debate. For some, the aim is to produce and analyse considerable volumes of data used to compare countries, or to examine variations in well-being indicators according to age group, gender or generation. Others are interested in formulating and adopting strategies and public policies, while some aim to propagate the best methods to promote or guarantee well-being in individuals.

Reflecting on the conditions for happiness is nothing new. The search for happiness, rather like the punishment of Sisyphus, seems to be an endless quest that needs to be constantly started again in an ever-changing world. Paul Souriau made this observation as far back in 1908 in his work on the conditions for happiness, *Les Conditions du bonheur*. Based on still-emerging social sciences, he defended “the usefulness of a new investigation” to “determine, the most objectively and scientifically as possible, the current conditions for happiness” (Souriau, 1908, p. 2). He described his programme as follows:

*“What is happiness? To what extent is it worth searching for? What can we do to make sure that we obtain it? These are the questions that I would say are of practical interest. What may seem surprising is that we feel the need to ask them again. Every philosopher and moralist has had something to say about these issues. The subject seems to have been covered. So why do we keep coming back to it? Because we always need to come back to it. Humankind evolves. The conditions of our existence change, and with them the conditions for happiness. New adaptations are called for. We cannot be happy in the same way as our parents were. And thus the old theories need to be reworked, since they no longer fully correspond to our mentality and our current social state. [...] The morality of ancient times during antiquity was individualist. Human beings were considered in isolation, as independent beings left to their own devices and responsible for obtaining all of their happiness by their own means. Such a narrow approach would no longer be possible today. Social realities appear to us in all of their complexity. We have acquired a notion of human solidarity. Any theory of happiness that did not take social conditions into account would no longer be taken seriously.”* (Souriau, 1908, p. 1 & 2).

Over a century later, we might wonder whether we are taking the opposite course from that evoked by a philosopher imbued with the values of the French Third Republic, the notion of solidarism, and the construction of the social sciences. It seems we are experiencing a return to individualism, and even a new form of individualism, whose foundations are based more on markets than morals.

These questions are now highly controversial with, on the one side, people who have turned the subject into a market for consultancy, and on the other, people like whistle blowers, who are concerned about the adverse impacts of this injunction to be happy and the marketing of it. Numerous authors (Binkley, 2014;

Davies, 2015; Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Cederström, 2018; Cabanas and Illouz, 2018; Illouz, 2019) raise the question of what this race for personal and individual development says about our times. These authors imply that happiness experts and other coaches have contributed to the spread of neoliberal ideology into all spheres of our existence, and probably also to the widespread anxiety and feeling of not being “good enough” among our contemporaries. Since everyone can attain well-being, those who do not acquire it only have themselves to blame, and cannot accuse their social situation, or even the balances of power and domination that they come up against on a daily basis.

Discussions about the conditions for happiness have a particular relevance in contemporary France. For long months, the country has witnessed the expression of a sentiment of injustice, general discontent, a spirit of revolt, fear of being downgraded, loss of confidence, and even resentment; an ill-being that at once breaks and recomposes social bonds, work relations and the political scene. It seems that the more space that the notions of “well-being” and “happiness” take up in the public debate, the more we measure what compromises them and separates us from them, and the more keenly aware we are of our unequal access to these conditions for contentment.

This special issue of the Journal of social and family policies (*Revue des politiques sociales et familiales*) does not claim to cover every aspect of this debate on well-being and its measurement, its conditions, and the consequences of searching for it, but instead focuses on how this notion can inform us in the areas of childhood, children, and the way in which adults contribute to their well-being: parents; education, social, family, childhood and youth professionals; public decision-makers; experts and researchers in this field. Children’s well-being is a hotly debated subject, in particular by international organisations (backed by global surveys), which call for social investment in order to prevent the risks resulting from childhoods subject to poverty, vulnerability, and inadequate learning or primary socialisation situations. This (academic and political) interest in child well-being is also related to the changing definition of the child, perceived as “a being” and not just “a becoming”, or adult in the making, as put forward by childhood studies. Children are now increasingly seen as actors (of their own socialisation) whose “voice” must be listened to and respected, and whose agency, or capacity to act, should not be restricted by adults (but recognised and supported).

Once more, the question arises of what “child well-being” actually means. The choice of words is again significant. Some in fact maintain that it is preferable to talk about children’s health, the quality of their immediate environment, and their fulfilment, rather than their well-being (Bonnetoy *et al.*, 2018).

This issue of *Revue des politiques sociales et familiales* draws from the first two international seminars organised by the “Childhood, Well-being and Parenting” Chair, supported until 2020 by the French family benefits fund (*Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familiales - Cnaf*) and the École des Hautes Études en Santé Publique (High School of Public Health - EHESP). The activity programme of this chair has three aims:

- Establish a state-of-the art of the international literature on these issues, widely covered on an international scale. The aim is to produce summaries for professionals and researchers interested in these questions, and to make them accessible through publications.
- Carry out secondary analyses of international databases on these child well-being issues, both to compare data from a large number of countries and, perhaps especially, to identify issues that require more extensive research. Part of the work involves crossing and comparing the results of these different surveys in order to come up with hypotheses and new researches.
- Mobilise a network of researchers on these international issues during four research seminars that have been programmed and that complete the two previous aspects. Each session was recorded and filmed and

has been the object of extensive discussions, presentations and working papers, along with summaries published online and accessible on the Chair's website<sup>(1)</sup>.

The Chair's first two seminars respectively treated the question of well-being and its determinants, measurement and the comparability issue, and then the question of children's subjective well-being. The articles published in this issue are the result of these events. It was not possible to include all of the researchers involved in the seminars, given the journal's format and selection criteria. However, the selected articles give an informative overview of the significant potential of reflections generated by this research field and the analysis of available data.

The four research articles in the first section of this issue are based on extensive quantitative surveys [Millennium<sup>(2)</sup> in the United Kingdom, Étude longitudinale française depuis l'enfance (Elfe<sup>(3)</sup>) in France, and Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC<sup>(4)</sup>)], each featuring original exploitation of the data by the authors. The second part of the journal is made up of five other articles whose aim is to provide overviews of this research field and the main available databases. Lastly, the third part includes several critical reviews of books and completes this special issue.

In the first section, Wolfgang Aschauer begins with a theoretical and methodological reflection on the difficult question of measuring and comparing data on well-being, in particular subjective well-being. After identifying the challenges of interpreting these quantitative data and their comparability due to cultural variations, the sociologist develops a particularly promising reflection on what corresponds, not to an individualised approach to well-being or quality of life, but to a societal approach. This societal reading contextualises the interpretation of objective and subjective data on well-being and takes into account the extremely cultural component of this evaluation of well-being. These approaches make it possible to avoid the clearly identified pitfalls of processing that ultimately ranks countries according to the level of subjective well-being declared by individual samples (even representative ones) through their answers (ranked on a scale of zero to ten) to questions like: "Are you satisfied with your life?". This article includes a number of suggestions to improve the intercultural comparability of this research.

In her contribution, Ingrid Schoon underlines how unstable finance and family situations can impact child well-being, and more precisely children's cognitive, social and emotional development. Based on an analysis of data from the Millennium cohort, the psychologist shows that the risk factors that compromise the cognitive and socio-emotional adaptation of boys and girls are not independent from each other, but intrinsically linked and cumulative. The more material and financial difficulties and family instability children face, the lower their development scores. And while "caring" parenting practices can have a compensatory effect by reducing the negative impact of diverse forms of socioeconomic "deprivations", they have less effect in cases of major adversity. This presence of a "dose effect" leads the author to

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(1) <https://www.ehesp.fr/recherche/organisation-de-la-recherche/les-chaieres/chaire-enfance-bien-etre-et-parentalite/>.

(2) Financed by the Economic and Social Research Council, the UK government and the University College of London Institute of Education, the Millennium Cohort Study is a longitudinal cohort study of the UK population based on nineteen thousand children born in the country in 2000 and 2001. The objective is to highlight how early family context influences development and life events during childhood, adolescence and right through to adulthood.

(3) Coordinated by the French Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) and the French National Institute of Health and Medical Research (INSERM), in partnership with the Établissement Français du Sang, the Elfe cohort is supported by several government ministries and public institutions. Researchers from all backgrounds follow children's history from birth to adulthood. More than eighteen thousand children born in mainland France in 2011 are included in this cohort.

(4) The HBSC study is an international survey carried out every four years since 1982 under the aegis of the Regional Office for Europe of the World Health Organisation. The aim is to collect data on health, school life and behaviour harmful or favourable to health among pupils aged 11, 13 and 15 using standardised methods. The HBSC survey is self-administered, strictly anonymous, and carried out in the classroom under the responsibility of a trained survey coordinator. France has taken part since 1994: the sample was initially restricted to the Midi-Pyrénées and Lorraine regions but since 2002 has concerned the entire mainland country.

suggest that researchers and public authorities should take a multidimensional approach to risk factors in order to understand their independent and cumulated impacts on children's cognitive and emotional development.

Childhood poverty is generally presented as a risk to the well-being of children and future adults, and in the third article Lidia Panico, Marion Leturcq and Barbara Castillo Rico question the way in which it is measured. Going beyond poverty measurements based solely on income level, they propose a multidimensional approach that takes into account four features of the living conditions of children, i.e. material conditions, parental investment, housing quality, and extremely precarious housing. Based on data from the Elfe survey, the first major French cohort study, the authors present an analysis of the different dimensions of poverty in one-year-olds in France, and their family characteristics, in order to consider different types of vulnerability that would not be detectable based on income alone.

Laura Bernardi and Anna Garriga are also interested in social inequalities between children, but this time focusing on post-separation childcare in Spain, a country that has undergone significant changes in legislations. The recent increase in the number of divorces and parental separations led the authors to take a look at the negative impacts that joint custody may have on children aged 11 to 16, mostly concerning their health and well-being. Based on quantitative data from the 2014 *Health Behaviour in School-aged Children* HBSC survey, the two authors (sociologist and demographer) show that these consequences have a stronger impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds and that the socioeconomic situation of fathers and mothers can have a moderating influence on the negative effects of alternating custody.

The second part of the issue features five contributions. In the French issue, comes first a translation of a chapter written by Peter Hall and Michèle Lamont (2013) in a publication that they edited on a particularly pertinent notion here: "social resilience". Unlike the approach mostly put forward by psychologists, psychiatrists and epigeneticists, these sociologists – who for over fifteen years have run a vast programme supported by the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research – reflect on the role of cultural variables and the societal dimension of well-being.

Next come two articles, by respectively Jonathan Bradshaw and Michal Molcho, two specialists on well-being in children and adolescents. Based on the numerous exchanges and discussions that took place during the Chair's first two seminars, Jonathan Bradshaw starts by tackling criticisms of the notion of "subjective well-being" and its measurement in order to point out the pertinence and conditions of use. Michal Molcho, the Irish correspondent for the HBSC survey, then takes a look at some of the lessons that can be drawn from these quadrennial surveys of teenage health in over forty countries. The author thus provides a clear overview of the data and results.

Two summary articles written by the coordinators of this issue and members of the Chair complete this part: the first looks back over the history of this so-called "*well-being*" category, and similar notions like "quality of life" and "happiness", and at attempts to apprehend their determinants. The second article presents some of the key surveys that make it possible to document this notion of "*well-being*", measure it, and compare it on an international scale. To wrap up this special issue, the coordinators have also written a few critical reviews of English language publications that they consider to be particularly pertinent. The first focuses on five publications that show how the injunction to experience happiness and well-being reflects neo-liberal ideology, holding individuals responsible for their own success (Ahmed, 2010; Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Frawley, 2015 ; Cederström, 2018; Cabanas and Illouz, 2018). Another note presents a book on the political use of neuroscience in the field of parenting from a member at the University of Kent's *Centre for Parenting Culture Studies* (Macvarish, 2016).

In short, this special issue on child well-being provides a general overview of the theme, looking not just at the methodological difficulties of measuring it, but at the political issues and controversies involved when using this category in the public debate. By focusing on the situation of economically vulnerable and post-separation households, this issue of the journal contributes to improve our comprehension of the impacts of inequalities compared to the impacts of family structure and parental behaviour.

To conclude this brief presentation, we would like to make a crucial point and express our thanks. This publication breaks new ground for the journal, which for the first time is publishing not just selected French articles but also articles in English in the fourth part, created for the occasion. Giving free access in both languages to this research is a rare and precious resource.



**Claude Martin**

Sociologist, director of research at the CNRS and affiliate professor at the École des Hautes Études en Santé Publique. "Childhood, well-being and parenting" chair

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