

On Major Conceptual Shifts within Research on Child Well-Being in Estonia

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to highlight major shifts in research regarding children and childhood as a narrative of the author. It starts from presenting a retrospective of child poverty research in Estonia, and it is demonstrated how it has developed from the social and political acknowledgement of poverty as a social issue in the early 1990s. Then it revisits main shifts in theory and methodology of childhood research and reaches international comparative approaches to child subjective and relational well-being.¹

Keywords: child poverty research, relative deprivation, exclusion, children's perspective, subjective and relational well-being, Estonia

Bedeutende konzeptuelle Veränderungen in der Forschung zum Wohlbefinden von Kindern in Estland

Zusammenfassung

Das Ziel dieser Forschungsarbeit ist es, die hauptsächlichen Veränderungen in Bezug auf die Erforschung von Kindern und der Kindheit hervorzuheben. Die Arbeit präsentiert zunächst einen Rückblick auf die Erforschung von Kinderarmut in Estland und zeigt, wie sich die Forschung von sozialer und politischer Anerkennung von Armut als soziale Frage ab den frühen 1990er Jahren entwickelt hat. Dann geht die Arbeit auf die wichtigsten Veränderungen in der Theorie und Methodologie von Kindheitsforschung ein und gelangt schließlich zu internationalen vergleichenden Ansätzen zum subjektiven und relationalen Wohlbefinden von Kindern.

Schlagwörter: Erforschung von Kinderarmut, relative Deprivation, Exklusion, Perspektive von Kindern, subjektives und relationales Wohlbefinden, Estland

1 Introduction

The perspective of children – as active agents, social actors, and units of observation – crystallized as a new field of sociological research in the late 1980s and early 1990s (cf. *Qvortrup* 1991; *James/Prout* 1990). The perspective did not problematize traditional views on children but was complementary to it, thus, enriching academic understanding of social practices related to children. Today, the ideas underlying the new paradigm of

childhood studies have spread worldwide as an interdisciplinary and internationally comparative field of knowledge. Most importantly, besides child welfare issues, the conceptualization of a child's subjective well-being and the development of child social indicators have attained an acknowledged position in RDI projects and in the academic literature on children. Moreover, the research output received from studies with children and children's perspectives in their own right is gaining trust in both national and international studies by informing policies.

This current paper highlights major shifts in studying children and childhood, by making an excursion back to the 1990s and then onwards to demonstrate how the new theoretical perspective on children and research methodologies reached and found its acknowledged position in research and policy in Estonia. The "fundamental shifts" in research on child well-being over 30 years (cf. *Ben-Arieh* 2008) frames the present academic narrative. The narrative starts from children "coming out" as units of observation in research and policy in early 1990s, and follows main shifts in understanding children and childhoods and reaches to the current theoretical and methodological standpoints. The present approach does not pretend to be an overwhelming overview of research about and with children in Estonia but is rather a personal narrative of the author who has stayed close to the academic community of the child indicators movement since the early 2000s.

2 Shift One: Children Are "Coming Out"

During the Soviet era, research on families was an integral part of population studies. Besides studying formation of families and breakdown of family relationships as major research topics, giving recommendations to serve pronatalist family policies was the main policy task. Children themselves were not sources of information and they were almost missing in state statistics. Children were represented in the population structure by age groups and counted in relation to the education system but as the group of the dependants, they were together with people not in labour force and the elderly. Negative live statistics (suicides among children) was calculated within the age group below 20 years old hiding the numbers about children (*Eesti Statistika* 1991).

When developing a position paper for a new family policy in late 1980s and early 1990s, researchers at the Research Group of Family Studies of the Tartu State University (currently University of Tartu) were puzzled with defining the family as the launching point, especially because of its variety of structures. As a solution, they put the child in the focus (*Perekonnapoliitika Kontsesptsioon* 1994) saying that family policy should accept the needs of a child as the first priority; it has to pay attention at the family in its variety and support development of the best life arrangement for the child. This was the first time when a child was the point of departure in family policies and the key to approach the families. Later, the term 'family' was exchanged with the term 'household' in the official statistics and the position paper lost its expected influence in policymaking.

3 Shift Two: From No-Poverty to Poverty of Children

Like elsewhere, the research *with* children grew out of the research *about* children, and in the case of Estonia, it closely related to poverty studies in the early 1990s. In order to measure a social phenomenon, several preconditions should meet: (1) the existence of an observable phenomenon; (2) official recognition of this phenomenon; (3) the availability of a measuring tool; and (4) society's readiness to address the issue. During the Soviet era, poverty as a term applied only to the Western World and nobody officially discussed it in the Soviet framework. Because poverty did not officially exist, poverty research was missing. However, Estonia after re-establishing its independence in 1991 started reconstructions from scratch and problems of economic coping within the households were spreading fast. Thus, the term 'poverty' found a fertile soil for emerging in research and policy agendas.

The first scientific article that introduced the term 'poverty' authored by *Kutsar and Trumm* (1993) appeared in the *Scandinavian Journal of Social Welfare* (currently *International Journal of Social Welfare*). This publication applied a structural approach to households by drawing data from the *Estonian Household Income and Expenditure Survey* (first undertaken by the Estonian Statistical Office, and from 2006 continued by the EU SILC). The researchers attempted to apply harmonised equivalence scale to measure poverty. It opened the way towards official recognition of poverty as a political term as well as the development of its measurement tools.

The main conclusions from the poverty studies were the following. (1) Poverty in Estonia is structural; (2) poor children most often come from households with unfavourable shares of breadwinners and dependants (households with unemployed adults, especially long-term unemployed, single-parent families, large families with three or more children); and (3) a child is the most vulnerable subject exposed to poverty in Estonia (cf. *UNDP* 1999; *Kutsar/Trumm* 1998). These conclusions are no longer new because they go in parallel with many other international studies on poverty and, more specifically, child poverty (cf. *Bradshaw et al.* 2012). But at that time, they were a novelty in research and politics in Estonia. There were arguments that the child him/herself could be a crucial risk factor in determining the health of a household economy. With every additional child, the economic situation of the family is more likely to worsen. Compared to other social groups, children are at a higher risk of living in a household with a small income, which means that due to a shortage of money their needs are more likely to remain unmet. Moreover, a child in a household setting is dependent on the social and economic coping capacities and the available resources of the child's parent(s); children can do very little by themselves to improve their situation. The latter conclusions resonated strongly with the public, which caused policy makers to recognize child poverty as a social problem in Estonia. Children acquired the status of being units of observation and the objects of the study with attaining the position of carrying the 'risks of being the poor' in political rhetoric. Making a parallel with "fundamental shifts" according to *Ben-Arieh* (2008), this was the *survival approach to children's well-being* with a *negative focus*.

To broaden this view, an analysis made by *Tiit* (2004) is worth to highlight hereby. In her article, she set a research question: how much does a child "cost", or – how much do parents spend from the household budget to meet the child's needs in households with different consumption levels. *Tiit's* analysis used data from the *Household Income and Ex-*

penditure Survey (10,460 households, data from 2002). She compared expenditures on a child of households with children in five lower income deciles (*the “poorer half”*) and those in the upper five deciles (*the “wealthier half”*). The study showed that the difference in expenditures on children between these two groups of households is nearly double. The wealthier households spend on the average 1.55 times more on food, 1.86 times more on eating out, 2.13 times more on transportation, 3.12 times more on clothing and footwear and 3.25 times more on leisure activities of the child. It is important to note that expenditures on clothes and footwear in case of a preschool child form up to 80 percent of that of the average adult, and reach 1.5 times by 18 years of age.

Tiit (2004) admits that the household budget method is itself somewhat problematic because of relatively large role of joint consumption in households (e.g., expenditures on the use of a family car, joint meals, shared accommodation, etc.). However, her study broadened the horizons for further research. She demonstrated that the needs of a child vary and tend to change, as the child grows older. During the teenage years, the consumption needs to relate a broader spectre of items (expenditures on wardrobe, educational and leisure activities, etc.) than those of an average adult. The comparison of expenditures on children among different income groups helped both to understand the roots of social and economic inequalities between children and it led researchers to measure children’s own perspectives concerning poverty more closely. It is obvious that children regard what items their friends have as important. Sometimes it appears to be of enormous importance to own specific things, e.g., computer games, toys, the ‘right’ clothes, a computer or a mobile phone. A lack of these things may result in exclusion from the peer group society, like missing a ticket to attend a social event. Through owning ‘right resources’, a child can express his or her acceptance of norms and values of the peer group. One can presume that a child from less wealthy household experiences relative deprivation and is exposed to higher risks of social exclusion with a higher probability than his or her peers living with wealthier parents. This assumption prepared researchers for the next shift in childhood studies in Estonia, as described next.

4 Shift 3: From Welfare to Well-Being and Child Perspectives Approach

The definitions of poverty vary and cognitive research models can be constructed using several related terms – subjectively perceived relative deprivation (economic, social and psychological); social exclusion from different social arena (e.g., peers, family, school, activities, shelter, services, etc.), or by using related but more distant social constructs, such as abuse, violence, school bullying, or children in court hearings.

In parallel with the welfare approach, the child well-being approach developed internationally in 1990s as a new field of knowledge, framed with the new paradigm of sociology of childhood (*Corsaro* 1997) and the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989; ratified in Estonia in 1991). The new approach differed significantly from the prior ones, as it viewed a child not as a future adult but as an active social actor and a subject ‘here and now’. In order to study poverty experienced by children, a group of researchers in Tartu University began to follow the concepts of subjectively perceived relative deprivation and social exclusion. An important milestone in a new childhood re-

search here was a study called *The Dependence of a Child's Health on Living Conditions in Different Regions of Estonia*. It captured besides child's living conditions (with a special focus on health behaviour) also questions about quality of life and a bloc of questions about the realization of children's rights in their lives. The study was self-administered and representative to 14 to 15 years old children (1997; 1568 respondents from the eighth forms of ordinary schools). A research team of the Unit of Family Studies and the Department of Public Health in the University of Tartu carried out the study.

The study was the first representative to the age group source of data to analyse children's opinions about their lives from different angles (including poverty issues). Among many other items, the survey contained questions about children's perceptions and estimations of their household economic performance and tested the child's perceived relative deprivation and social exclusion. Researchers understood the perception of relative deprivation in children as a process of social comparisons with peers. The researchers followed the approach by *Augoustinos and Walker* (1996), according to whom an individual who feels deprived believes that he/she deserves more than he/she has. This recognition may lead to an increasing group cohesion and protest, or conversely – to distress and psychosomatic symptoms. In both cases, the feeling of deprivation has a negative impact on children's participation in peer culture routines – the processes of mutual communication, interpersonal comparisons, and influence. The data analysis applied the welfare deficits' approach developed by *Kutsar* (1997) in the framework of the new paradigm of childhood. She adapted a three-dimensional welfare approach by *Allardt* (1975) in order to understand poverty in people's lives through its related constructs of subjectively perceived relative deprivation and social exclusion and constructed an integrated measure for adult respondents. Further, she applied a similar conceptual model by analysing data collected from children (cf. *Kutsar et al.* 2004).

According to *Kutsar*, the three welfare dimensions developed by *Allardt* (1975) – “Having” (*what I have*), “Loving” (*where I belong*) and “Being” (*what I am*) are the dimensions of relative deprivation in terms of scarce resources – economic, social and psychological respectively. Through deficits in the economic dimension (economic deprivation), a child is exposed to negative social comparisons – namely what the child has and what he/she feels they deserve when compared to others – his or her peers. Deficits of resources in the social dimension (social deprivation) leaves a child devoid of his/her participatory rights of belonging to peer groups and taking joint actions with them. Deficits in the psychological dimension (psychological deprivation) puts the child at risk of negative self-identity. Deficits of welfare resources cumulate into risks of social exclusion from peers.

The analysis confirmed a statistically significant impact of poor economic conditions of the family as estimated by children on their perceived relative deprivation. Those respondents who estimated the economic performance of the family as poor were more likely to experience subjective economic deprivation when compared to the economic situation of their friends. As they perceived it, they had less pocket money, could not afford necessary things, and were not able to attend school events, hobbies and recreational groups compared to those from wealthier families. Being aware of the resource level of the household and taking the views of their parents into consideration, children from poorer families learned to cope with fewer material resources. They learned to be silent and not speak about their needs to their parents (*Kutsar et al.* 2004). The research evidence also showed that the low economic performance of a household puts a child at a

risk of perceived social deprivation and isolation, e.g., by having fewer friends than their classmates; they also felt or believed teachers favoured them less than the other classmates. Children who estimated the economic performance of their family as poor were more likely to experience relative psychological deprivation. They could not accept themselves as they are – they tended to be less satisfied with their own body and capacities; they regarded themselves as being less successful and less happy.

The findings described above became a part of a publication *Children in Estonia* (UNDP 2000), which was a milestone in making children's living conditions and quality of life visible in social reporting. The report followed both, welfare and well-being approach and as firstly acknowledging children's messages it gained wide resonance in public. However, the policymakers were not content with this publication because they were concerned about the "official face" of a newly reconstructed statehood. The report picked up topics, such as children living in diverse household structures, children in education and children's health; it also focused on children's messages about their risk behaviour (risking with health, sex, alcohol, etc.); and a child as a subject of help and support. This report did not resonate with the customary political rhetoric of hiding social problems.

Two additional small-scale quantitative surveys among children tested the conceptual framework of perceived relative deprivation (Kutsar et al. 2004). The study by *Vetemäe* (2004; 330 respondents 12-13 years of age) tested social exclusion from peers and the study by *Viira* (2005; 291 respondents of the same age) explored children's self-exclusion from peer activities as a coping strategy with feelings of deprivation.

Vetemäe (2004) focused on teenage friendships – who could be a friend, which kind of children are excluded from friendships, and how this is related to the perceived economic performance of the child's family. This study confirmed the results of the 1997 study, i.e. that the perceived lack of resources in one welfare dimension is related to the lack of perceived resources in another welfare dimension and cumulates as social exclusion from peers. The children who perceived exclusion from peers also felt excluded from their family members: they felt not heard and accepted by family members; no interest in their activities nor successes expressed at home; they reported more arguments with their parents and they had less wish to spend time with them, especially with their father. The poor economic situation of the household as the launching factor of relative deprivation took secondary place in the child's perceptions, which led to the idea to know more about children as social agents: participation in peer groups and self-value are launching factors in children's everyday actions. How could the child cope with relative deprivation? *Viira* (2005) tried to answer to this question with a small survey among 12- and 13-year-old children.

The experience of negative social comparisons with peers (relative deprivation) creates a situation of cognitive dissonance between personal standards and low available resources to meet one's needs. This psychological situation cannot last long and can end either with attempts to increase one's resources or, conversely – by lowering one's personal standards to make more favourable social comparisons. The latter, characterised by *Zapf* as a satisfaction paradox (*Zapf* 1984) paves the way to resigned adaptation: one's personal standards are adapted to the undesired situation, which helps to cope with it and produces a state of mental ease. The study by *Viira* (2005) confirmed that children from subjectively poorer households set lower standards for their needs. They expressed less interest in leisure activities and exposed less activation in looking for strategies to cope with the unfavourable situation – 30 per cent of children from poor families compared to ten per cent of children from 'average' families and only three per cent of children from well-off fami-

lies were not active owing to a lack of interest. It was, thus, concluded that the perceived lack of financial resources (economic deprivation) not only leads to a decrease of personal standards for social comparisons with peers, which helps to avoid feelings of deprivation, but also to a loss of interest towards opportunities of organised leisure time as a self-excluding coping strategy. Moreover, the resigned adaptation of a child is a defence mechanism that helps a child to deal with parents who say ‘no’ – instead the child says first ‘no’ to his/her emerging needs or wishes.

5 Shift 4: From Traditional to New Domains by Studying Children’s Perspectives

From the 2010s onwards, besides quantitative approach, qualitative and mixed methods found their way to understand children’s subjective well-being in Estonia. The methodological framework of children’s perspectives spread to new topics that carried meaningful messages from children to policymakers and to the wider public. Based on their own experiences, children commented on diverse social practices and political issues that directly or indirectly influenced their everyday lives. Family as the primary environment for a child gained a special attention from the child’s perspective. *Roots* (2010) carried out a small-scale study among 12- and 13-year-old children to clarify what is a family for them. She adapted a questionnaire by *Irene Levin* and *Jan Trost* “*What is Family?*” (cf. *Levin/Trost* 1992) to the Estonian context and added open-ended questions to learn about children’s own perspectives. Her study demonstrated that the legal basis should not be the decisive factor by defining the family for children. Besides legal and biological bonds, children see spatial and psychological factors important, especially in the cases when the couple lives in cohabitation. Children gave a number of comments to their assessments.

Mägi (2016) explored who are the family of 7- to 14-year-old children living in blended families. In this qualitative study, she applied the family mapping method of *Irene Levin* (cf. *Levin* 1990) to explore subjective family boundaries of children who lived in blended families at the time of the study. It appeared from the study that the change in the family structure and re-definition of the family boundaries cause confusion in a child. *Whether the biological father who had left the family is still the child’s family member?* is the most puzzling question to answer for a child: he is still the biological parent while the spatial and psychological boundaries break or blur. *Who is the mother’s partner/new husband/‘social father’?* is also hard to define for a child. In the family mapping exercise children may leave him out of subjective family even when sharing the same household. The study concluded that a child lists the people as belonging to the family with whom he or she feels emotionally safe and with whom the child communicates a lot.

Djakiv (2018) focused on child’s subjective family as a network with several household nuclei. She combined family network method by *Eric Widmer* (cf. *Widmer* 2006) and family mapping by *Irene Levin* (cf. *Levin* 1990), and carried out a qualitative study with 12- and 13-year-old children whose parents lived separately. The study showed that a child’s family can have several nuclei – a separated member can be saved in the family group or some person in one’s household may not be listed as a family member (e.g., a parent’s partner) or it can involve only one household. The subjective family configuration is a network that uncovers mutual relationships, connectedness, tensions, ambiva-

lence and power. It seems that traditional norms and values associated with a family nucleus (mother, father, child/ren) and heteronormativity of the society as a whole hamper the development of the family as a network and amplify the unacceptance of a presumed family member (*Kutsar/Raid* 2019).

In the early 2010s, hot debates divided Estonian society between those supporting and those fighting against legalizing unions of same-sex couples. Policymakers were puzzled with diverse and contradictory arguments over a new cohabitation law. But what are the opinions of the potential adoptees living in residential homes? *Heinma* (2014) seconded hot debates of these days and carried out focus group discussions with children living in residential homes. Children found the main difference between hetero- and same-sex couples: they cannot have common biological children. Otherwise, their everyday may not be much different from those living in a heterosexual union. Children saw themselves being less traditional than the elders are. They assumed that as far as an Estonian society carries traditional norms this is not likely that people would support the same-sex policy. They preferred living in a children's home and not been adopted by a same-sex couple even when the latter offers better living arrangement. It appeared that general societal readiness is the most powerful factor for children whether to give adoption rights to same-sex couples or not.

6 Shift 5: From Negative to Positive Subjective Well-Being

The narrative above showed that the child well-being research has had a major negative focus. An important milestone for drawing attention on positive children's well-being besides the negative one in international childhood research was the conference organised by the organization

Child Trends in 2003 and the following *Flourishing Children Project*. Researchers found that social development lies not only in emphasizing the negative but also in noticing positive indications and finding opportunities to develop these further (cf. *Lippman/Moore/McIntosh* 2009; *Lippman et al.* 2014). A shift from negative to positive well-being of children in Estonia dates back to 2012. This year the research team of family and childhood studies at the University of Tartu joined the International Society for Child Indicators (ISCI), their *International Survey on Children's Well-Being* (Children's Worlds or ISCWeB) and a couple of years later its qualitative network project *Children's Understandings of Well-Being* (CUWB). By that time, the team members believed in children as trustful sources of information and competent subjects to share their explorations; however, they admitted that not always adults could favour children's observations.

Extensive analyses of the ISCWeB datasets (isciweb.org) and following the CUWB research protocol (cf. *Fattore/Fegter/Hunner-Kreisel* 2019) added new findings that inspired to advance childhood research and inform policies. As an important research evidence shows, children are critical concerning school (*Kutsar/Kasearu* 2017), and can give advice that makes school life good and enjoyable (*Kutsar/Soo/Mandel* 2019). The experts by developing the position paper of *Education 2035 Tark ja tegus Eesti* (2019) referred to children's criticism and took their messages into account by drawing the vision of a 'school for well-being' (the term was drawn from *Layard/Hagell* 2015). Researchers understood that subjective well-being is relational and intersubjective, and the life domains intertwine in children's subjective lives and perceptions (cf. *Nahkur/Kutsar* 2019).

7 Shift 6: From Subjective to Relational Well-Being – Where We Stand Now

The OECD position paper *Education 2030* (2018) is an important milestone by making a shift from subjective to relational well-being of children because it clearly relates a child as a social actor with other actors and systems. In this paper, a child's agency takes a central position in education: "Agency implies a sense of responsibility to participate in the world and, in so doing, to influence people, events and circumstances for the better. Agency requires the ability to frame a guiding purpose and identify actions to achieve a goal." (p.5) Although the position paper focuses on education, it looks also beyond – besides teachers and peers it involves parents (the families) and communities as co-agents who create 'mutually supportive relationships that help learners to progress' (p.4). In practice, not all children are able to commit their positive agency, feel safe or be happy. For example, because the co-agency does not work due to low parental skills of parents, life skills of teachers or political debates over ageing society in Estonia – the latter challenges leaving children's population out of the politicians' active sight and thus political agenda. The research evidences refer to cumulating vulnerabilities that children face today while the grounds of their vulnerability as perceived and interpreted in children's perceptions and expressed in their opinions are still undervalued in research and policies. Thus, besides the lens of positive psychology, the childhood researchers are facing a new challenge to explore another edge of the continuum – vulnerability in childhood in relation to different life environments and relationships, and vulnerable subjectivity as a cognitive-emotional process endangering both, subjective well-being of a child and doing positive agency.

8 Conclusion

Studying children as a separate group started in the late 1980s at the international level. The children "came out" as a separate social group in early 1990s in Estonia, as the author of this paper, witnessed it. Since then child well-being research has passed similar "fundamental shifts" as described by *Ben-Arieh* (2008) within three decades. Today, the study of children's well-being in Estonia has expanded into different domains and disciplines, capturing new theories and methodologies. Compared to the past when children were invisible participants in the treatment of aspects related to them, they have now become more visible in studies, politics as well as in everyday life. Paraphrasing *Bergmark* and *Kostenius* (2009), children are becoming acknowledged co-creators of changes in their own environment, meaning that children are not passive objects of scientific observation in research any more but active participants in new knowledge creation and intervention into everyday practices. The continuous study of children's perceptions about their situations are important in creating well-being in the present as well as the future society.

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