

CUWB Panel 3: RECONSTRUCTING WELL-BEING: NEW THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMES FOR THE QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

***Full Name of the Panel Organiser:**

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Theme

- Innovations in research design and measurement on the focus of the Conference

Subtheme

- Subjective well-being

Summary of the panel

What is well-being? How should it be conceptualized? What are the social and cultural relations and orders that are implied when we speak about well-being? The papers in this session engage with these issues by reconstructing the concept of well-being theoretically, methodologically and analytically. Drawing upon broader traditions of social theory and philosophy, the presentations ask us to reconsider taken for granted categories and understandings of how well-being is experienced and the social function of well-being. The papers consider the linguistic, emotional and discursive constitution of well-being, the generative effects of researching well-being on concepts of well-being, the transactional horizons of children during COVID-19 and how well-being is a negotiated order, the relational and socio-structural constitution of well-being and how well-being as a normative construct can be used to make justice claims for children at a national and global level.

Paper 1

Title: The transactional horizons of children facing COVID-19

Authors: Daniel Stoecklin*, Associate Professor, Centre for Children's Rights Studies, University of Geneva, daniel.stoecklin@unige.ch

Abstract:

This paper reflects on how children express their subjective experience of Covid-19 by looking at the symbolic landscapes they are using in their social transactions. The theory of transactional horizons shows that social actors use five dominant symbolic landscapes in their interactions, namely activities, relations, values, images of self and motivations. This theory stems, notably, from research on children's understanding of well-being (CUWB). It has been applied to discourse analysis on other topics, like Greta Thunberg's speeches on climate change (Stoecklin 2021) and it is here applied to shed new perspectives on children's experiences of Covid-19 in Switzerland. Semi-confinement measures were applied in Switzerland in 2020. An online survey was conducted in April and May 2020 with children and young people, aged 11 to 17, in the French-speaking parts of Switzerland.

Respondents spoke about their experience of semi-confinement in the following areas: family, school, friends, leisure, health. They were also asked to identify the new activities developed since the crisis, as well as those that they could no longer carry out because of semi-confinement. The analysis shows that while the crisis is subjectively experienced through the five transactional horizons, public discourses are mainly shaped in terms of the activities that are no longer available or which have become more difficult. The dominance of this entrepreneurial mode of action over the others (relational, moral, identity and motivational) frames children's positionings. Their vulnerability and well-being is shaped by this entrepreneurial regime of truth (Foucault 1975) prevalent in the neo-liberal order.

The perspective developed in this paper specifies critical questions about power relations, presentation of self, and the twisting movement leading from sensations to discourses. These elements are considered central for the understanding of well-being as a negotiated order. It suggests that agency should be considered along *forms* of social interactions and not just in terms of *levels* of freedom or choice within a general and abstract vision of social structure. Cultural, social and economic forces shape people's preferences and hence their capabilities, defined as the effective possibilities "to lead the life they have reasons to value" (Sen 1999). Yet, the influences of these forces are negotiated to some point, and even by children. Transactional horizons offer a perspective to understand more closely the means different actors are equipped with and allowed to display in these negotiations. Children's experiences in this regard are quite insightful to understand the evolution of their social positionings.

Paper 2

Title: Researching subjective well-being in German-speaking Switzerland: Preliminary findings of the project WoKids

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Abstract:

In childhood research, the subject of children's understanding of well-being is attracting increasing international and interdisciplinary attention. The current debate has been boosted by the international research network and multinational qualitative study "Children's Understandings of Well-being – Global and Local Contexts" (CUWB). Funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), the project WoKids – "Children's well-being in the German-speaking Switzerland" – is located in the CUWB network. It seeks to understand when, under which conditions and how children experience well-being in Switzerland. What do children in Switzerland need, from their own perspective, to feel well? Which conceptions of well-being can be reconstructed from their reported experiences? Against this backdrop, the project pursues two interlinked research goals: (1)

to represent the empirically derived perspectives of children in German-speaking Switzerland on their well-being and (2) to promote the comparison of these perspectives with international findings. Methodologically, the project includes children from eight to 14 years of age who have contrastive experiences of childhood in relation to socio-economic status, migration background, disabilities, religious beliefs, place of living, etc. With this strategy sampling, we aim to do justice to the high diversity of childhoods in Switzerland and to give visibility to the multi-layered phenomenon in which social (inequality) conditions are reflected and in which children grow up. The children will take part in the study by engaging in individual interviews (open questions and drawings) and group discussions. The interviews will be held in urban and rural areas, including large urban centres and more remote areas, such as the Swiss Alps. In our presentation, we will first introduce our project's framework as part of the international research network CUWB. Based on this, we will present the preliminary empirical findings from our field research, highlighting three main aspects: (i) the social relationships that are important for children; (ii) the aspects that count when they evaluate the quality of their social ties; and (iii) why these relationships interfere in their well-being in a positive and/or negative way. The WoKids project started in September 2021 and the field research is planned to be launched in March 2022.

Paper 3

Title: Child Well-being and Social Justice: Reflections and findings from a Multinational Qualitative Study with Children

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Abstract:

The turbulent impacts of contemporary economic, social, political, and health challenges have deepened existing inequalities and created new inequalities. These have impacted disproportionately on already marginalised groups, including children, who are central to issues of social justice, both in terms of their generational positioning and in the way inequalities between nations impact children's well-being.

This presentation examines the relationship between children's well-being and social justice, using Fraser's (1995) normative justice theory as an analytical framework. Drawing upon data from a multistage, multi-national qualitative study on children's well-being, the *Children's Understandings of Well-being* study undertaken in diverse socio-economic and national contexts (including the presenters from Argentina, Australia, Azerbaijan, Germany, India, South Africa and Turkey), we illustrate how children's discussions of well-being include claims for social justice, reflect deep inequalities between childhoods and point to how well-being frameworks potentially perpetuate colonial constructs and narratives.

In concluding we will discuss the significance of scrutinizing the relatively uncontested concept of child well-being for social justice and children's rights; the implications of the relationship between well-being and social justice for understanding 'childhoods'; and how 'generation' is a crucial concept for understanding inequity, inequalities and justice issues within and between nation-states.