



## **Children's Construction of their own Happiness and Wellbeing as Agents of Socialization**

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### ***Introduction***

Much has been written about children's subjective well-being and happiness, however, most of this research has focused on children as reactors rather than social agents unto themselves. We know that factors like culture, socioeconomic class, and parenting styles are important factors in children's happiness, but these factors are outside of the control of children (Cherry et al. 2020, p. 2169; Sung & Ki, 2021, p. 397). In the new sociological theories, children are considered to be their own social agents and thus have a direct affect on their own emotional state and environment (Albanese, 2020, pp. 26-27; Crivello et al., 2009, para. 1). From the constructionist perspective, children are seen as "participating actively in the construction of their own social situation" (Albanese, 2020, pp. 33). Researchers must actively search for what constitutes happiness in growing children and "what enables them to fit constructively, and to their own satisfaction, into the societies in which they live" (Bourdillion, 2014, para. 26). Children are active participants in developing satisfying lives within their families and communities (Bourdillion, 2014, para. 23). Accordingly, the question becomes how do children as actors in their own lives construct happiness for themselves? I will explore the social domains and activities where children create happiness for themselves as autonomous social actors.

### ***Literature Review***

One of the biggest challenges to studying children as their own social actors is the dynamic nature of children's abilities. A method that works well for a four-year-old may not work well for a ten-year-old due to literacy, cognitive abilities, and inclinations. These factors make using standardized quantitative measures difficult. Researchers cite children's lack of maturity and literacy as reasons that quantitative research is too difficult (Fane et al., 2020, Introduction). Creating child focused, participatory research by necessity must take a qualitative research approach (Crivello et al., 2009, paras. 2 & 4). Some methods used in child focused research include observation, child conversations, child photography, child-led tours and mapping of the care setting, role play and collective interpretation (Fane et al., 2020, para. 9; Crivello et al., 2009, para. 11). These approaches center the child's view and the child's narrative.

There must needs be a consistent understanding of what subjective wellbeing or happiness is for children. For the sake of simplicity and to include a variety of research I will operationally define happiness as a general positive affect (happiness, joy, satisfaction) (Koch, 2018, p. 74; Reitsema et al., 2022, p. 374; Tomlinson et al., 2017, p. 1256). The research shows that positive affect is a distinct emotion, and not as commonly thought, the opposite of negative affect (anger, sadness) (Reitsema et al., 2022, p. 386). Thus, positive affect needs to be studied independently but in concert with negative affect in order to get a full picture of children's emotional states and dynamics (Reitsema et al., 2022, p. 386).

The researchers try hard to take the adult perspective out of the equation while trying to understand what happiness is to this group of children by distinguishing between children's perspectives (a child's understandings of their own experiences) and a child perspective (adult understandings of a child's experience) (Kotch, 2018, p. 75). When children participate in the research and are able to share their unique perspective several themes emerge. Children create their own positive affect and wellbeing through domains like agency, pro-social beliefs, play, and their own culture (Koch, 2018, p. 74; Fane et al., 2020, Children's accounts of Agency; Tomlinson et al., 2017, p. 1256). I will explore these elements and how children, as social actors, create wellbeing.

### ***Agency***

Fane (2020) suggests that "agency cannot be understood as simply an assessment of children's capacity to choose to do things" (Children's accounts of Agency). That control is created by children in two ways, through problem solving and through negotiating with the adults in their lives (Fane et al., 2020, Children's accounts of Agency). First, children are able to create satisfaction and happiness through sorting through several strategies and choosing one to solve their own problems (Fane et al., 2020, Children's accounts of Agency). Fane et al. (2020) gives an example where a focus group discusses getting lost in a store. The children in the focus group come up with several alternatives and express satisfaction with their own choices (Children's accounts of Agency). The children are able to interact with their environment and other social actors to solve problems.

The second domain of agency where children create their own sense of happiness is when they are able to negotiate with their caregivers to accomplish their own desires (Fane et al., 2020, Children's accounts of Agency). Children routinely enter the negotiation process with other social actors like parents, teachers, and peers and indicate positive affect when they are able to obtain their desires (Fane et al., 2020, Children's accounts of Agency). An example of this is the process of negotiation that happens around topics like meals, dress, and entertainment (Fane et al., 2020, Children's accounts of Agency). Children can construct their own feelings of happiness when they can successfully negotiate things such as what and when to eat, what they can wear, and how to play (Fane et al., 2020, Children's accounts of Agency; Koch, 2018, p. 74).

### ***Pro-social Beliefs***

One of the ways children can construct their own happiness is through positive beliefs

about themselves and their world. The way children think and speak about experiences not only provides meaning to them, but in a real way, symbolically constructs their perceptions of their experiences (Albanese, 2020, pp. 23-24). Tomlinson and colleagues (2017, p. 1256) suggest that the way that children think about themselves and their world is a key factor in their feelings of happiness (Cherry et al., 2020, p. 2171). Tendencies of thoughts are called schemas and when these tendencies have positive themes like “worthiness, trust, optimism, success, and self-efficacy” they are strong contributors to happiness (Tomlinson et al., 2017, p. 1256). Schemas are both individually and socially constructed through their own impressions of themselves, their perceptions of how others think of them and their life experiences (Albanese, 2020, pp. 23-24). When children have positive schemas, they are more capable of entering social locations in positive manners and construct positive interactions (Cherry et al. 2020, p. 2171, Tomlinson et al., 2017, p.1270). Positive beliefs are correlated with prosocial behaviours and lead to more consistent positive affect and wellbeing (Tomlinson et al., 2017, p. 1270).

### *Play*

Common Sociological and Psychological conceptualizations of play center around the educational and developmental benefits and focus on adult perceptions but for children play is described as “spontaneous, pleasurable, rewarding, and voluntary” (Fane et al., 2020, Children’s accounts of play). Fane et al. (2020) separates play into 3 different categories, namely, child-initiated play, adult-initiated play, and assessment driven play (Children’s accounts of play). When child perspective focused research techniques were implemented, children mostly spoke about their own initiated play (Fane et al., 2020, Children’s accounts of play). Children show the most positive affect in child-initiated play confirming the hypothesis that children are their own constructors of positive affect through the domain of play (Fane et al., 2020, Children’s accounts of play).

Koch (2018) discusses a particular aspect of child initiated play that involves risk taking (p. 76). She suggests that from children’s perspective, happiness is “where children experiment with their own bodily competencies, bend the rules or challenge prevalent norms” (p. 76). Elements of risky play construct a child’s own happiness through colluding with peers to circumvent the rules imposed by adults (Koch, 2018, p. 74). These findings are demonstrated through pictures the children took of off-limit items like a slide cordoned off in the classroom (Koch, 2018, p. 77). The challenge for adult stakeholders is how to balance the physical and emotional dangers while allowing children the opportunities for risky play? The elements of risky play allow children to both construct happiness through play but also through agency (Koch, 2018, p. 74).

### *Culture*

There exists a distinct “underlife” for children, a culture of their own that is somewhat independent of the adult world (Koch, 2018, p. 78). Children cooperate in the “construction of group identity, status, well-being, and happiness” (Koch, 2018, p. 78). Children create a subculture where opposition against the adult boundaries is used as a “general social practice in the construc-

tion of group identity and formation of the identity of self” (Koch, 2018, p. 78). Children construct their own culture with their own rules, traditions and hierarchy (Koch, 2018, p. 78). They work together to challenge the adult institutional norms and rules with “creative and innovative strategies that contain unauthorised means and ends” (Koch, 2018, p. 77). These special strategies that are uniquely theirs (Koch, 2018, p. 78). Essentially, they are “playing against the adults, but at the same time playing along” (Koch, 2018, p. 78). In order to promote wellbeing and happiness this subculture must exist within the context of the adult institution (Koch, 2018, p. 79). Children must create a balance where they coexist in both the adult-led community and the child-led community simultaneously (Koch, 2018, p. 79).

## ***Discussion***

The various examples of research discussed above demonstrate how children are distinct social actors that contribute to their own happiness and well-being. The New Sociologies of Childhood theory acknowledges that children are agents of socialization and must be studied as distinct entities (Albanese, 2020, pp. 32). Children have their own competencies and carry out unique social activities that are both independent from and interdependent with adults (Albanese, 2020, p. 32).

An important aspect of these different domains of children’s constructions is that they are all interconnected. For example, play requires elements of agency, positive schemas, and child-centric culture. Children use each one of these domains to interact with their social world and construct their own well-being and happiness.

One important limitation of this research is that all the research in happiness and well-being that I was able to find was future oriented. Stated another way, researchers study happiness with adult outcomes in mind. The purpose in studying childhood well-being seems to be the future successes of youth and adults in grades, job prospects, mental illness, physical illness, and family longevity (Fane et al., 2020, Introduction). If one acknowledges the distinctive stage of childhood as a state separate from an undeveloped or “becoming” adult then a future topic of research should examine how happiness created by children is an important aspect in children’s lives right now (Albanese, 2020, p. 32).

Another area of future study is in the elements of negative affect (sadness, anger) (Reitsema et al., 2022, p. 374). As discussed, children are active social agents in constructing their own happiness and well-being. It stands to reason that children are also active agents in constructing their own negative affect. This aspect of research feels less comfortable as children are widely considered to be innocent and examining negative affect and negative outcomes may imply blame, however, it is a valuable question that deserves study.

## ***Conclusion***

As researchers attempt to understand how children’s happiness is caused and constructed in the social context it is important to approach the question from children’s perspectives (Kotch, 2018, p.75). Childhood is a distinct stage that is not simply undeveloped adulthood (Albanese,

2020, p. 32). Researchers can use creative, qualitative, child-centric research methods to truly get an understanding of children's perspectives on their own social experiences and their place in their social world. Children use their agency to problem solve challenges using their own strategies and negotiate with peers and adults in their spheres to construct happiness. They use positive schemas to symbolically construct their sense of self and their world. Through socially constructed beliefs of worthiness and trust, children contribute to their interactions in the larger social world. Children also construct well-being and happiness through their participation in voluntary and risky play. Being able to test themselves and subvert adult rules is a source of happiness for children. Finally, children construct their own well-being through the development of their own subculture or underlife created with peers. Knowing how children act as agents of socialization is important only if policy makers and institutions take these findings into account in the wider family, community, institutional and cultural levels. The hope is that children will be considered legitimate and valued stakeholders in these social spheres in the future.

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