On Conceptualizing Child Well-Being: Drawing on Disciplinary Understandings of Childhood

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Abstract

Given the greater attention to student well-being as a concern for school education in Canada and beyond, this article is concerned with the questions of whether, and in what way, the well-being of children should be differently conceptualized than that of adults. This theoretical article responds to these questions and argues that the conceptual distinction needs to be grounded in an understanding of childhood (i.e., the socially constructed understanding of the life of children). First, the article extracts core understandings of *childhood* from four scholarly disciplines that are each concerned with children. Then the article develops an integrative view of childhood by drawing on these four disciplinary

Canadian Journal of Education / Revue canadienne de l'éducation 43:4 (2020)

www.cje-rce.ca

understandings. Finally, the article identifies implications of this integrative view of childhood for any conceptualization of child well-being.

Keywords: child well-being, student well-being, childhood

Résumé

Compte tenu de l'attention accrue accordée au bien-être des élèves par les systèmes d'éducation au Canada et ailleurs, le présent article vise à découvrir si et comment le bien-être des enfants devrait être conceptualisé différemment de celui des adultes. Cette étude théorique répond à ces questions et soutient que la distinction conceptuelle doit être fondée sur une compréhension de l'*enfance* (c'est-à-dire la compréhension socialement construite de la vie des enfants). Elle présente d'abord les principales conceptions de l'enfance extraites de quatre disciplines universitaires qui s'intéressent aux enfants. Elle développe ensuite une vision intégrative de l'enfance en s'appuyant sur ces quatre principes disciplinaires. Enfin, elle détermine les implications de cette vision intégrative de l'enfance pour toute conceptualisation du bien-être de l'enfant.

Mots-clés : bien-être des enfants, bien-être des élèves, enfance

Introduction

The government of Bhutan has been using human well-being (flourishing) as a guiding concern for political decisions at the highest level since 1972 (see http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com). Over the last 20 years, some Western governments have started considering doing so as well (for some examples, see Falkenberg, 2019, pp. 3–4). Recently, the governments of Iceland, Scotland, and New Zealand went further in this regard than any other Western country to date. In 2019, the New Zealand government, for instance, published its "Wellbeing Budget" in 2019: "To set the priorities for this Budget, we used evidence and expert advice to tell us where we could make the greatest difference to the wellbeing of New Zealanders" (Government of New Zealand, 2019, p. 3). For instance, mental health, child well-being, and the support of Māori and Pasifika aspirations were listed as three of the budget's five priority areas (p. 6). More recently, provincial and national governments have been showing a greater interest in child and student well-being as a focus of directing social and educational policy, including some, now former, Canadian provincial governments (for some examples, see Falkenberg, 2019, pp. 3–4). Accompanying these developments at the political level is a burgeoning scholarship on human well-being (e.g., Estes & Sirgy, 2017; Michalos, 2005) and child well-being in particular (see Ben-Arieh et al., 2014).

Our theoretical inquiry is concerned with the latter and, more particularly, with the following conceptualization questions: (1) Whether we should make a conceptual distinction between adult and child well-being, (2) what the basis for this distinction is, and (3) what constitutes this distinction. The significance of these questions lies in the fact that in the research on child well-being these questions are answered quite differently. On the one hand is the work by Biggeri and his collaborators (2006), who modify the Capabilities Approach to human flourishing, developed by Sen and Nussbaum (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1993/2009b) in order to use the Capabilities Approach to conceptualize child well-being (e.g., Ballet et al., 2011; Biggeri et al., 2006). On the other hand is the PERMA framework for human flourishing, developed by Seligman (2011, 2018). When it is used to research and promote child well-being, generally no conceptual distinction is made between the well-being of adults and that of children (see Butler & Kern, 2016; White & Murray, 2015).

Starting with the premise that our understanding of childhood should be the grounds upon which we should consider a conceptual distinction between child and adult well-being, through this article we contribute to the conceptualization questions by (1) developing a perspective on childhood that integrates compatible aspects of different disciplinary understandings of childhood, and (2) developing a set of implications that this integrative perspective on childhood has for conceptualizing child well-being.

In this article we follow the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and define a child as anyone under the age of 18. The CRC is evidence that around the world a categorical distinction between children and adults is of social and political importance. *Childhood* is the socially constructed understanding of the lives of children. Unpacking how such understanding is quite differently constructed within and across academic disciplines is at the core of this article.

The literature we draw upon here is predominantly sourced from the global North within what is often referred to as the Western tradition. However, within the Western tradition there is a wide variance and expansive critiques of mainstream Western views. For example Marx, Foucault, and Bourdieu each problematize Western views, while contributing to the evolution of Western thought. We situate the work presented in this article within a Western tradition of childhood studies but also as a challenge to select Western and normative (in the Western context) views on childhood.

Being a Child: Disciplinary Understandings

The integrative view on childhood that we develop in this article draws on approaches to childhood implicitly or explicitly developed in the following four subdisciplines:

- Traditional developmental psychology
- The New Sociology of Childhood
- The child well-being literature in applied philosophy
- The child rights movement

We have chosen to draw on the first three areas of childhood research because they represent prominent disciplinary understandings of childhood in the three classical Western academic disciplines of psychology, sociology, and philosophy. These disciplines in

particular have traditionally been focusing on core aspects of what it means to be human, so it made sense to draw on areas of research within these major disciplines that focus particularly on understanding childhood. We have added the child rights approach to childhood because of its outstanding influence on the child well-being literature (see Ben-Arieh, 2008; Doek, 2014).

In this section, we introduce what we consider to be main characteristics of approaches within each of the four disciplinary understandings of childhood. For this, we make reference to specific theoretical approaches because of their prominence within the respective discipline, while necessarily having to neglect others for space reasons. In the subsequent section, we then integrate the compatible aspects of these understandings into a more comprehensive understanding of childhood.

Traditional Developmental Psychology

Here we want to draw on what we call a traditional view of childhood in developmental psychology. We do so because we do not claim that all or newer approaches in developmental psychology share the analyzed understanding of childhood, but rather that the understanding of childhood extracted in this section reflects appropriately at least a prominent understanding of childhood within the history of the discipline. We do so in order to establish a rich set of perspectives on understanding childhood across disciplines. The disciplinary understanding discussed next—the New Sociology of Childhood—has been developed in response to what James, Jenks, and Prout (James & Prout, 1997; James et al., 1998; Prout & James, 1997) have called the traditional view of childhood in developmental psychology. For this reason, focusing here on the understanding of childhood in traditional developmental psychology will allow us to establish that rich set of understandings.

The core notion of the traditional understandings of childhood that we want to draw out of the history of developmental psychology is that children develop in stages toward adulthood. Historically, the most influential developmental psychologists who have subscribed to this view are Piaget and Kohlberg, whose influence on the field cannot be overstated and who are still richly referenced in current textbooks on child development (see Levine & Munsch, 2016). We suggest that this traditional view of child development is characterized by the following four notions of childhood.

First, the starting point of the inquiry in the traditional view is that "children are compared with adults, with the latter the standard model that children work their way towards throughout childhood" (Wyness, 2012, p. 82). The cognitive-developmental stage theory of morality by Kohlberg (1981, 1984) takes this starting point: "In contrast to traditional views of morality as relative to different cultures, the cognitive developmental perspective seeks to identify cross-culturally general age trends in moral development *culminating in an end-state of moral adequacy or maturity*" [emphasis added] (Gibbs, 1995, p. 27). From this view, childhood is a transitional process of (mature) becoming adult.

Second, this developmental process of adult-becoming is a *fixed* process in terms of what each stage looks like, what stage follows each other one, and what the child will have developed into at the "end" stage. The probably best known stage-based developmental theories in child psychology include Piaget's theory of cognitive development in childhood (e.g., Bibok et al., 2009) and Kohlberg's stage theory of moral development (e.g., Hoffman, 1977). From these views, the development that characterizes childhood is a process with fixed trajectory.

Third, the traditional stage-based view of child development we are focusing on here takes the starting point of its inquiry from the assumption that there is a stage development of children toward adulthood that is common to all children, regardless of cultural contexts. Wyness (2012), for instance, points to the fact that Piaget chose to publish many of his books using "the child (l'enfant)" in the title as an indicator of universal claims about all children: *The Child's Conception of the World* (Piaget, 1929/1951); *The Moral Judgement of the Child* (Piaget, 1932/1997); and *The Psychology of the Child* (Piaget & Inhelder, 1966/1969). This suggestive language use can also be found in more recent writings, for instance by Hartup and Laursen (1991), who write about the traditional focus of research in social development to be about "changes over time in *the child*'s [emphasis added] understanding of, attitudes toward, and actions with others" (as cited in Collins, 2011, p. 3). From this view, *the development that characterizes childhood is universal* in the sense that all children go through the development in similar fashion.

Fourth, the traditional stage approach to child development puts "the emphasis…on the singular child rather than children and their collective practices" (Wyness, 2012, p. 83), as Piaget's and Kohlberg's theories of cognitive and moral development, respectively, exemplify. From this view, *the development that characterizes childhood is*

an individualized development in the sense that the development is understood through psychological processes within the individual child rather than through social processes of interaction with other children, for instance.

The New Sociology of Childhood

While traditional developmental psychology as characterized above focused on the development of the individual human in their transitional process of adult-becoming, early sociological approaches to studying children and childhood focused on the enculturation aspect of this transitional process: "The scientific construction of the 'irrationality,' 'naturalness' and 'universality' of childhood through psychological discourses was translated directly into sociological accounts of childhood in the form of theories of socialization during the 1950s" (Prout & James, 1997, p. 12). This early sociological understanding of childhood focused on the outcome of the process to the detriment of understanding the process itself (Prout & James, 1997, p. 13), and on the external constraints of the socialization process to the detriment of the interaction of the child's agency and those external forces of the socialization process (Wyness, 2012, p. 95).

In opposition to this traditional socialization view of children, James et al. (1998, chapters 2 and 10) identify "four 'new' discourses of childhood" (p. 207) in the discipline of sociology, which are the basis for what they identified as a new paradigm of viewing childhood in sociology (see also Prout & James, 1997). While the paradigm was new 20-plus years ago, it is also a current paradigm in childhood studies (see Aronsson et al., 2018).

The first discourse offers a new view on the socialization process itself: it is a socially constructed process that is mediated by the meanings that the social actors in the social construction process, including the children themselves, make of the elements of the process.

In the second discourse, "theorists view childhood as a constant and recognizable component of all social structures, across space and time" (James et al., 1998, p. 208). This discourse promotes the notion that childhood is its own social category and, as with other social categories, comes with its own status within the social structure and is, as such, worth studying for its own sake rather than only as a transitional process toward adulthood.

The third discourse develops the notion that children belong to a sociological group that is separate from non-children and has its own social structure and social system. Children as a social group—as with other social groups—are local and particular, and no general claims of what it means to be a child can be made. One crucial consequence of this view of childhood is that what it means to be a child (in a particular context) is inaccessible to adults (James et al., 1998, p. 28).

The fourth discourse expands on the previous discourse. It not only recognizes childhood as a social category in its own right, but also it

> ascrib[es] to children the status of a minority group…therefore…challeng[ing] rather than confirm[ing] an existing set of power relations between adults and children. Indeed, the very title "minority" is a moral rather than demographic classification that conveys notions of relative powerlessness or victimization. (James et al., 1998, pp. 30–31)

As we will see below, it is particularly this discourse within the new paradigm of understanding childhood that feeds into the child rights movement (e.g., Doek, 2014), as it recognizes children as a special group that needs protection from misuse of power.

These four discourses contribute collectively to a different paradigm (in sociology) for understanding childhood. Focusing on the compatible elements of these four discourses, we can identify four core features of the New Sociology of Childhood (see also Prout & James, 1997, p. 8):

- Childhood is a social construction.
- Childhood is a distinguished sociological phenomenon.
- Children are social actors.
- There are a variety of childhoods rather than a single universal phenomenon of childhood, because childhood is a sociological category of social analysis linked to other sociological categories like race, class, gender, and ethnicity.

The notion that childhood is a social construction draws on the first discourse. Rather than understanding childhood as a biologically grounded and naturally determined process of development of children from being not-yet-adults to being adults, in the new paradigm childhood as a social construct "provides an interpretive frame for contextualizing the early years of human life" (James & Prout, 1997, p. 3).

The notion that childhood is a distinct sociological phenomenon is the politicization of the first core feature of the new paradigm: Childhood is not just a social construction of a sociological phenomenon, but as a distinct sociological phenomenon it is worth studying *in its own right*, namely as a particular phase in human life—the early phase—as is the case for any other phases of human life, like work life, marriage, and retirement. This feature of the new paradigm of childhood draws particularly on the second discourse.

The notion that children are social actors draws on the ideas from the first three discourses. At the core of this notion is that

> children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live. Children are not just the passive subjects of social structures and processes. (Prout & James, 1997, p. 8)

The notion that there are a variety of childhoods expands further on the second and third feature of the new paradigm. If childhood is a distinct social phenomenon with its own social structure (second feature) with children as its social actors (third feature), then other social categories, like class, gender, and ethnicity that operate on social structure of social systems more generally, should also affect the social structure of childhood, which is exactly what this fourth discourse that makes up the New Sociology of Childhood suggests. This idea of the need to consider the *intersecting* of different sociological categories in social analysis (here: of childhood) is developed in the newer discourse on intersectionality (see Collins & Bilge, 2016; Hankivsky & Jordan-Zachery, 2019): using an intersectional lens is "a way to understand our lives and the choices [we make in our lives] as a consequence of our social location (i.e., the intersection of race, gender, class, and other markers of identity)" (Manuel, 2019, p. 33).

Applied Philosophy

Working within the broader fields of moral and political philosophy, some philosophers focus on exploring what distinguishes childhood from adulthood and how children's well-being may be distinct from adult well-being. These applied philosophers explore questions about the concept of childhood and what it means to assign to some humans the

status of being a child (see Archard & Macleod, 2002; Gheaus, 2018a, 2018b; Hannan, 2018; Macleod, 2015; Schapiro, 1999; Weinstock, 2018).

Disagreement about the moral and political status of children has persisted in philosophical literature since at least the time of Aristotle. Two prevailing ideas about children and childhood can be found in the Western history of moral and political philosophy (Archard & Macleod, 2002). First, there is the view that children are an extension of their parents. Aristotle, for instance, compares the sovereignty of a man over his chattels to that of a father over his child (Archard & Macleod, 2002). Second, there is the view that children are incomplete or inchoate adults (Hannan, 2018). On this view, despite not yet possessing the powers of adults, children are recognized as progressively acquiring the abilities of adults. This second view closely resembles the view of traditional developmental psychology presented above. Both views have implications for the rights and treatment of children. For instance, following the first view, children are subject to unconstrained parental paternalism as the legal property of their parents until they reach the age of majority. Following the second view, parental paternalism is partially constrained, since it must be used for the good of the child; furthermore, paternalism is gradually lessened as the child becomes more capable of making his/her own decisions (Archard & Macleod, 2002).

Each of these two prevailing perspectives on childhood, however, narrowly valorizes the phase of childhood. More recently, philosophers working in this area have moved away from the above views to consider alternate ways of understanding childhood. Books published in the series *Contesting Early Childhood* by Moss and Dahlberg draw on perspectives and understandings about children's subjectivity and bring to the field of early childhood "new thought, diverse forms of knowledge, and (literal and metaphorical) multilingualism" (Moss & Dahlberg, 2008, p. 8). Brighouse and Swift (2014) characterize four features of childhood as significant when considering children's interests, capabilities, and well-being: a dependency on others for their well-being; a vulnerability to other people's decisions; a lack of a "well-developed stable distinctive conception of what is valuable in their life" (p. 62); and yet-to-be-developed "capacities that enable them to realize their own interests in life" (p. 62). Combined, these features of childhood make children unique from adults and can guide the way we theorize about children's well-being. Finally, Hannan (2018) adds that a child is a person who is in the state of childhood as a consequence of their age. While others might be dependent and

vulnerable, for example because of disease or disability, they will not be classified as children because they do not experience these states *in virtue* of their age. Importantly, this means that a central feature of childhood is being new to the world. Perhaps because they are so new and in the process of becoming socialized, another important feature of childhood, argued by Weinstock (2018), is that "children do not yet have stable maxims" (p. 2) about the world and are, for this reason, dependent and vulnerable. While it may be true that children lack full moral agency because they do not have principles by which they govern their behaviour or a Self of their own (Gheaus, 2018a), there are good reasons to break away from the conventional image of children as being mere unfinished adults. Gheaus (2018b) draws on research that demonstrates that young children are, on average, more likely than adults to investigate the empirical world with the mindset of a scientist (testing hypotheses), to engage in philosophical investigations, and to create artwork. Macleod (2015) critiques the view of children as basic unfinished adults as "a narrow valorization of rational agency and autonomy that is common in a great deal of contemporary liberal political philosophy" (p. 3). In other words, the stage of life before children's rational planning resembles that of adults and offers special opportunities for flourishing that have normative significance in their own right (Gheaus, 2018b; Macleod, 2015, 2018; Tomlin, 2018). Normative in this sense is distinguished from normal and natural (for a detailed explanation of the distinction, see Link, 2014) and "is used as an abstract general category for the entire field of the 'norms' in this particular sense which is always characterized by a legal or an ethical overtone" (Link, 2014, p. 8). The normative is concerned with questions of what is good or valuable (Brighouse & Swift, 2014). Although children are vulnerable and dependent, these attributes may be uniquely coupled with children having other desirable experiences and special access to goods and experiences that are inaccessible or far less accessible to adults.

Much attention in applied philosophy is now given to the idea that childhood is valuable in itself and is not mere preparation for adult life. A new focus in this field of study is the idea that there are goods that are valuable to children whether or not they contribute to children's development into the future (Gheaus, 2015). This has implications for how we conceptualize children's well-being. Indeed there may be fundamental goods for well-being that are unique to children in that they are *only* good for and accessible by children (Tomlin, 2018). For instance, children enjoy a unique propensity to imagine and investigate the world, to confront empirical and philosophical issues, to love

unreservedly, to have openness to future possibilities, and to engage in artistic pursuits (Gheaus, 2015). These are goods especially available to children, not just because of their developmental state of being, but also because their status as being dependent and vulnerable human beings gives them the protected space needed to exert their imagination and curiosity without the restraining expectations put on adults. These intrinsic goods of childhood mean that children are a different kind of human being than adults are, and therefore children's lives go well according to a different measure. Accordingly, an account is needed that frames childhood as a phase of life in which important goods, (e.g., exploring their abilities to imagine and play, engaging in certain types of physical affections, trusting and loving more freely, and engaging in philosophical pursuits) can and should be realized; and the value of which is not directly tied to the development and exercise of adult rational agency. Therefore, the basic view of children as adult-becoming is, "at best, an incomplete account of the normatively relevant features of childhood" (Gheaus, 2018a, p. 2). The notion that childhood goods are a special feature of childhood compels adults and caregivers to provide children with opportunities to procure access to these goods before it is too late.

The Child Rights Movement

The disciplinary child rights movement has much to offer in systematizing the perfect and imperfect obligations that the society has towards children (Sen, 2009a). The child rights view considers children to have rights both as persons and moral agents. Historically, the child rights movement has its roots in the 18th century, but intensified in the early 20th century (Mekonen & Tiruneh, 2014). During this time, concerns focused on the need for special care and protection of children against the harms of war and unsafe labour conditions, and in particular the impact of World War I on the lives of children was of central concern (Doek, 2014). Increased awareness of the need for special protections and assistance for children led to the 1924 Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which recognized rights specific to children, and the responsibility of adults toward children for the first time (UNICEF, 2009). The Declaration focuses on the basic securities and welfare of children: a child must be fed, nursed to health, helped, sheltered, and in other ways cared for (Gran, 2017). The provisions made for children in the 1924 Declaration are consistent with the view that children are like pets or projects.

In 1959, the UN General Assembly adopted the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, and 30 years later, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). According to Van Bueren (1995), these documents "demonstrate the extent to which children were beginning to emerge as no longer passive recipients of handouts, but as subject of international law and recognized as being able to enjoy the benefits of specific rights and freedoms" (p. 12). The CRC (UN General Assembly) now has almost universal acceptance, having been ratified by all but one country, the United States of America (UNICEF, n.d.).

The CRC is a comprehensive child rights instrument with many unique features. First and foremost, it is an international human rights treaty that recognizes the child as a rights holder and a special being who grows and acquires enhanced competencies (Lansdown, 2005). It also fully embodies civil, economic, political, social, and cultural rights, and sees the child in a holistic manner (Doek, 2014). The CRC attempts to achieve an appropriate balance between a child's right to be protected by adults and a child's right to participate in decisions affecting them.

The child rights perspective holds that while children are rights bearers, there are differences between the status of persons in childhood and persons in adulthood and, hence, children do not have exactly the same moral rights and duties as adults have. This begs the question of criteria of distinction between children and adults. Two criteria that children's rights scholars identify as useful to distinguish between adults and children are age and competence. Age-based accounts treat the age of a person as the decisive criterion for determining the threshold between childhood and adulthood. However, age seems to be an arbitrary criterion if we compare competence based solely on age. For instance, should we assume that a 21-year-old person is better at caring for their interests than, say, a 16-year-old person? Competence-based accounts, on the other hand, consider individual attributes such as cognitive capacities, emotional stability, and future-oriented planning; such an approach, however, can also be practically untenable, because the acknowledgement of a person's rights would need to be preceded by an assessment of their competency. In the preamble of the CRC a more practical, but somewhat arbitrary, approach is taken, defining a child as "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d.).

While the rights and duties of children ought to be given equal consideration to adults, children should not have the same package of moral rights and duties (Archard &

Macleod, 2002; Brennan & Noggle, 1997). Adults, for instance have the duty to act and use as a primary consideration that which is in the best interest of the child (UN General Assembly, Art. 3). This feature of the Convention compels adult duty-bearers to evaluate their actions in light of their potential impact on children. Although children are not given the same status as adults, the CRC includes a provision that entitles children with the right to express their views freely and to have their voice heard in decisions that affect them, all "in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (UN General Assembly, Art. 12). In its General Comment no. 12 (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009), the General Committee clarified that hearing is predominantly a juridical term, yet the basic requirements must also be met in less formal settings, such as family discussion or the classroom (Krappmann, 2010). The CRC's relevance for child well-being is clear: Children's ability to influence their own lives should be looked at in its own right as a core aspect of children's well-being (Lundy, 2014).

The basic claim of the modern understanding of childhood in the children's rights literature that we draw on here is twofold. First, children are persons who have rights and adults have obligations toward them based on these rights (Bagattini, 2014), but unlike child liberationists, we do not go so far as to argue that children have the same liberal rights as adults (the right to work, to travel, etc.). Second, children are persons who have a normative status that is distinct from adults (Bagattini, 2014). At the core of this distinct status are children's rights to "special" protection that adults normally do not have, like the right to protection and assistance by the State when a child is temporarily or permanently deprived of the family environment (UN General Assembly, Art. 20). The child rights movement integrates these two positions to conclude: In cases where it is justified for adults to make decisions affecting children (based in a concern for protection), those decisions need to be made with the best interest of the child in mind. Children have an equally significant yet non-equivalent moral and political status when compared to adults. For this reason, children are entitled to special protections and must have their best interests be a primary consideration when decisions affecting them are made. Even where child welfare and protection are considerations, children have the right to agency over their own lives and their opinions must be taken into account.

In this section we have identified core characteristics of understanding childhood within each of the four scholarly sub-disciplines. In the next section, we develop a view of childhood that integrates these different disciplinary understandings into an integrative

view of childhood that provides a comprehensive understanding of how childhood is substantially distinct from adulthood.

Being a Child: Developing an Integrative View on Childhood

Integrating the four disciplinary understandings into an integrative view of childhood will require qualifying some of the characteristics identified in the previous section, as well as curtailing some of the disciplinary views. We develop the integrative view of childhood in two steps. First, we draw together common aspects of the different disciplinary understandings to arrive at four perspectives on childhood that each integrate such common aspects. Second, we draw the four perspectives together into one integrative view of childhood.

Perspective 1: Childhood Is a Process of Adult-Becoming

This perspective, primarily informed by traditional developmental psychology, early socialization theory, and applied philosophy, focuses on the notion that children develop into adults. From this perspective, childhood is seen in two different and complementing ways. First, childhood is seen in a somewhat instrumental way, namely as a developmental phase that affects the quality of life as an adult, with the main concern being the latter. Here, the quality of a child's experience is of concern for instrumental reasons, because of the potential to affect the quality of life of the emerging adult. Second, children are seen as incomplete or inchoate adults. Accordingly, parents and caregivers have an obligation to help children become adults; for example, by helping them develop their own stable maxims and decision-making powers. As a future-oriented agency is further developing in childhood, children themselves experience and understand at least aspects of their childhood as preparing them for adulthood.

While this perspective adopts from early socialization theory the idea that children are socialized into the values and norms of (adult) society, it does *not* adopt the aspect of early socialization theory that is *the primary* characteristic of childhood and that, thus, children are passive subjects of the socialization forces governed by adults. Furthermore, this perspective adopts from applied philosophy the idea that children are new to the

world and are not yet fully adults with some not yet fully developed capacities or stable maxims, but it does not take the view proposed by some applied philosophers (e.g., Schapiro, 1999) that children are just that, "little adults," who need all the paternalism they can get to develop into full adults. We exclude these views on childhood within the respective disciplines in order to keep this perspective on "children as adult-becoming" compatible with the other perspectives described next.

Perspective 2: Childhood Matters in Its Own Right and Is Qualitatively Different from Adulthood

The instrumental view of childhood of Perspective 1 is qualified by Perspective 2, which suggests that childhood should matter to adults for more than just instrumental reasons: Childhood matters in its own right. This point is particularly made in the child rights movement, in applied philosophy, and in the New Sociology of Childhood. From this perspective, we can say that children's quality of life as children matters because children have the right that their interests in having a certain life *as a child* are given consideration. Such consideration seems even more called for if one considers that, if all goes well for a human being, they spend about a quarter of their life as a child. As has been particularly pointed out in applied philosophy, such consideration needs to take into account that children have their own conceptions of the world and, thus, what is valuable in their life and what capacities they need to develop to be able to realize what is valuable in their life. Children may also have access to a special rationality that is unique to childhood and no less important than adult rationality. To make this perspective compatible with Perspective 3, these differences are not considered inferiorities, but rather differences that require different approaches. As the child rights movement points out, those differences can also be found *within* childhood, where the form and level of moral rights and duties are made dependent on competence, rather than on being a child.

Perspective 3: Children Are Social Actors with Agency and Rights

The third perspective focuses on the agentic aspect of what it means to be a child: Children have agency within their social systems. As the New Sociology of Childhood emphasizes, children are social actors as they engage their agency in their interactions

with other social actors (children and adults) of their social systems. As social actors within the social systems they are part of over time, children engage with and shape these very systems. On the other hand, as the child rights movement emphasizes, there is also a normative aspect to child agency: Children have the capacity for agency qua being human and they have the right to use that agency to shape their life experiences.

Integrating this perspective with the previous one suggests a perspective on child agency according to which children have a right to be able to exert their agency to direct their own lives. However, what such integration also suggests is that child agency is qualitatively different from adult agency in that adults still have the duty to monitor the exertion of child agency in light of children's rights to be protected (sometimes from the exertion of their agency) and to be provided for, as suggested in the child rights movement.

Perspective 4: Childhood Is a Social Construction with a Variety of Childhoods

The fourth perspective is a form of meta-perspective and suggests, in line with the New Sociology of Childhood, that in whatever way we understand childhood, this understanding is socially constructed and will vary in accordance with that construction. When we integrate this meta-perspective with Perspectives 1, 2, and 3, we arrive at the following qualification of these three perspectives: we socially construct, at whatever age or developmental stage we consider adulthood to start (Perspective 1); we socially construct the sense that childhood matters to adults as a qualitatively distinct phase of human life (Perspective 2); and we socially construct a sense of children as social actors and the rights children are given by adults (Perspective 3). More generally, with Perspective 4 we can say that all the disciplinary views of childhood we discussed above are socially constructed phenomena, reflective of a particular time within a particular society or cluster of societies.

Furthermore, Perspective 4 not only suggests that childhood is socially constructed, but also that how childhood is (is to be) constructed depends also on other social variables; in other words, there are a variety of childhoods even within the same social construction of childhood, a point particularly made in the New Sociology of Childhood.

An Integrative View of Childhood

In this section, we propose an integrative view of childhood that draws together the four perspectives just presented. Children develop into adults, and a good part of what it means to be a child has to be understood in this light: that and how children are socialized into being and functioning as adults in society; that and how children develop physically and psychologically into some version of physical and psychological functioning adults within society; and what this developmental path generally looks like. Principally, children develop physically and psychologically into adults who are socialized into functioning within an adult society. However, while children develop into adults, children are in a particular phase of the life span of a human being. Childhood is not just a developmental phase, but a phase of being human in its own right in the sense that children live a qualitatively different life than adults, and that humans, while in this phase of childhood, have (are to be given) rights similar, although not identical, to those adults have in their society.

The integrative view of childhood suggests two specifications to the phase-in-its-own-right pillar of childhood. The first specification is that this phase of human living (childhood) is not one cohesive way of life for all children. Rather, the different experiences of children based on their belonging to different categories of social sections of a society, like class, race, gender, and ethnicity, suggest that childhood does not consist of generalizable and shared types of experiences. Thus, childhood has to be understood as a phase of human life that consists of various "versions," depending on a child's specific cross-sectional belonging: there are many childhoods to understand.

The second specification of childhood as a phase in its own right of being human is that children are social actors within their social systems. They are not passive objects of adults' acting, but children enact their own agency that they have qua being human within the systems and circumstantial conditions created by other systems actors. From a normative stance, children have the right to develop and enact a level of agency appropriate for the level of their development.

What envelops these two pillars of the integrative view of childhood is the notion that the categorization and understanding of this categorical distinction is socially constructed. In other words, our understanding of the developmental pillar of childhood and

the phase-in-its-own-right pillar of childhood is dependent on a society's dominant values and on the learned and practiced understandings of what it means to be a child.

The concerns that gave rise to the inquiry in this article are the questions related to the grounds and the substantial ways those who are concerned for child and student well-being need to make a conceptual distinction between adult and child well-being. We started our inquiry with the premise that we need to ground our consideration of any such distinction in our understanding of childhood. It was for this reason that we inquired into the selected disciplinary understandings of childhood and developed the integrative view of childhood presented in this section. We now turn back to the original concern of this inquiry and consider what this integrative view of childhood implies for any conceptualization of child well-being.

Implications for Conceptualizing Child Well-Being

We started this article by pointing to the attention given to human, child, and student well-being. Any such attention will, at some point, require and draw on a *conceptualization* of well-being, whereby "*conceptualization* refers to the theoretical work in defining constructs of their interrelationships" (Berends, 2006, p. 627). The four perspectives on childhood that built the integrative view on childhood developed in the previous section have a number of consequences for any conceptualization of child well-being. We first outline the implications by perspective and then integrate these implications into conditions that any conceptualization of child well-being would need to satisfy if it is to be grounded in the integrative view of childhood.

The first perspective—from which childhood is seen as a process of adult-becoming—implies a conceptualization of child well-being that needs to incorporate the notion that *child well-being has a future-adult-oriented aspect*. In other words, the quality of children's well-being as children matters because it matters to the quality of their lives as adults.

The second perspective—that childhood matters in its own right and is qualitatively different from adulthood—has two implications for a conceptualization of child well-being. First, it implies that such conceptualization needs to incorporate the notion that *child well-being has a present-as-child oriented aspect*. In other words, the quality

of their life during their childhood matters for their well-being. While this notion seems trivial at first sight, it has to be understood in its role to counterbalance the implication of the first perspective, which focuses on the concern for the quality of the lives that children will live as future adults. The second perspective suggests that children's well-being is not just a means for adult well-being, but *also* an end in itself: The quality of a child's life matters in its own right.

The second implication of the second perspective is that a conceptualization of child well-being needs to account for the notion that *children's lives are different from adult lives in qualitatively specific ways*. The perspective that childhood is qualitatively different from adulthood is grounded in the understanding that the way a child experiences and conceptualizes the world is quite different from that of an adult (within the same sociocultural context), which in turn is grounded in the developmental differences between children and adults and in the difference in social status between children and adults. A conceptualization of child well-being compatible with the understanding of childhood in this article would need to reflect in an appropriate way the qualitative differences in the experiences and conceptualization of the world between children and adults.

The third perspective—that children are social actors with agency and human rights—has two implications for a conceptualization of child well-being. First, this perspective implies that for any conceptualization of child well-being that draws on the understanding of childhood characterized in the first part of the article, such conceptualization needs to incorporate the notion that *agency matters to child well-being*. In other words, the degree and quality of agency that a child has in matters affecting their life matters to their well-being. The second implication is identical to the first implication of the second perspective: Child well-being matters as an end in itself.

The fourth perspective—that childhood is a social construction with a variety of constructed childhoods—has two implications for any conceptualization of child well-being. The first implication is that child well-being needs to be conceptualized relative to the social context in which the child lives. The second implication is that a conceptualization of child well-being needs to be sensitive enough to be able to capture that a child's social status (captured by sociological categories) generally affects the understanding of their well-being. In other words, such conceptualization needs to be able to account for the findings that a child's intersectional location affects the child's and others' understanding of the child's well-being. While the first implication suggests a qualification of the

concept of child well-being to the social context, the second implication does not suggest a qualification of the concept to each child's intersectional location, but rather makes the weaker claim that conceptualizing child well-being needs to be able to capture that children's well-being generally varies with their intersectional location.

The following list summarizes the implications that the integrative view of childhood has on conceptualizing child well-being:

A conceptualization of child well-being should:

- Be present-as-child *and* future-as-adult-oriented
- Consider qualitative differences between child and adult well-being that are grounded in qualitative differences between childhood and adulthood
- Incorporate child agency as a core aspect of child well-being
- Consider sociocultural differences in understanding child well-being
- Consider that a child's intersectional social status plays an important role in the child's well-being

Conclusion

How we view childhood (children) in relation to adulthood (adults) is at its core a matter of our values. In this article, we have given privilege to a particular value-based class of understandings of childhood when we drew on four specific disciplinary approaches to understanding childhood. From these quite different approaches, we have developed an integrative view of childhood. Where the proverbial rubber meets the road is that one's view of childhood—like the one developed in this article—has implications for child well-being, because it is our often implicit understanding of childhood in relation to adulthood that directs our engagement with children. Because different views of childhood have different implications for understanding child well-being, how we understand childhood in relation to adulthood matters for the decisions that adults make and that affect the well-being of children.

Our concern for the integrative view of childhood is derived from our concern for child well-being. As exemplified in the introduction to this article, there are approaches to understanding and researching child well-being that make quite different assumptions (value judgements) about childhood in relation to adulthood. What this article contributes

to the scholarship on child well-being is, first, a demonstration that our understanding of childhood matters to our understanding of child well-being, and, second, a proposal for an integrative understanding of childhood that draws together influential approaches to childhood in psychology, sociology, philosophy, and human rights scholarship.

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