

Child Maltreatment, Child Protection and Child Well-being – Research across Borders

Timo Ackermann, Alice Salomon Hochschule Berlin

Friederike Lorenz, Freie University Berlin

Meike Wittfeld, University of Duisburg-Essen

Introduction

This special issue is based on contributions from the conference „Child maltreatment and well-being (CMW) II: challenges across borders, research and practices“ that was held at the Freie Universität Berlin from 21st -22nd March 2019¹. One result of the conference discussions in Berlin 2019 was that it is productive to interrelate research on child maltreatment and well-being more strongly.

The articles gathered in this issue discuss methodological questions about doing research on child well-being as well as results from research on child maltreatment and on child well-being. What is beneficial about combining these perspectives? An interconnection between both fields results, for example, in a broad understanding and concept of child protection, in which child protection is not narrowed down to protection against endangerment, but understood as an effort to improve living environments for children and families (see e.g. Biesel/Urban-Stahl 2018, Cancian 2013).

However, since the research fields were developed separately, we first outline child maltreatment, child well-being and child protection individually in this introduction and then formulate benefits and challenges in the combination of analytical perspectives on children in different social situations (1). Afterwards we shall give a brief overview of how the articles in this special issue address the three fields (2).

1 Relating Research on Child Maltreatment and Child Well-being in the Field of Child Protection

Child maltreatment, child well-being and child protection are interdisciplinary research fields in which different disciplines such as social work, psychology, sociology, law, medicine and public health connect with and complement one another. However, these research fields have different conceptual backgrounds and imply different perspectives on children and their social situations. How are discourses and research on child maltreatment and child well-being interrelated? How is it possible to link these perspectives on children's social situations with

¹ The idea of the row of CMW-conferences was initiated by a group of young researchers who met at the 2nd Haruv Workshop of child maltreatment in 2015 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The aim of the research network is to discuss research across borders and to contextualize child maltreatment and well-being into social, system and legal contexts. The 2nd CMW-conference at Freie University Berlin was organized by an international and local committee: Timo Ackermann, Luck van Erwegen, Gemma Crous, Friederike Lorenz, Stjepka Popovic, Noam Tarshish, Ulrike Urban-Stahl and Meike Wittfeld.

regard to different focuses of child protection, such as child-focused child protection, family-supporting child protection and risk oriented child protection (Biesel & Urban-Stahl 2018, p. 24)?

In the discourse on child protection, child maltreatment refers to acts of violence against children and adolescents, physical abuse and child neglect. Historical and current discourses from the research field of child maltreatment deal with causes and circumstances, prevalence and consequences of many forms of maltreatment and abuse of children (cf. Whitaker and Rogers-Brown, 2019). Child maltreatment is nowadays considered a worldwide public health problem (Whitaker and Rogers-Brown, 2019). Physical and emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect and exploitation has become a matter of political concern (cf. WHO 2020). Prevention of child maltreatment is globally considered an important issue (Shenderovich, et al., 2020; Malvaso et al., 2020). The underlying perspectives on children and concepts of violence have changed over time. This transition is closely linked to the professionalization of social work. The discovery of the child as a subject with its own rights (Ariès 1962, Liebel 2004) that needs to be protected led to a collective understanding of child abuse as a social problem (Pfohl, 1977), which social workers took up from the very beginning of the professionalization of social work until today. A growing professional awareness and treatment of child maltreatment however led to risk-oriented and punitive child protection programs and into passivation and objectification of minor actors (Ackerman & Robin 2016). Safeguarding children should also be considered as a matter of social justice (Johnson et al. 2020) and of fostering a culture of caring (Melton 2009).

The concept of child well-being has a different background. It is historically rooted in research and discussions on the welfare state (Sen 2007) and the question, what a 'good life' means to different people. Child well-being can be understood as a research perspective that asks for subjective, socio-economic, and political criteria for well-being and contextualizes subjective perspectives in different social contexts and communities. Through the concept of child well-being, matters of the 'good life' are interrelated with the question for welfare state structures (cf. Hübenthal, Lorenz & Urban-Stahl, 2021). The core of the well-being concept is the connection of two perspectives: one is the describable living conditions of people in specific structures and social conditions. The other is their own subjective assessment of their living conditions and their well-being therein (cf. Taylor, 2011; Michalos & Weijers, 2017). The field of child well-being was in particular deepened by the child indicator research movement (cf. Ben-Arieh, 2010), a well-known example is the World Vision Study (cf. Andresen & Neumann, 2018). Research on child well-being is particularly relevant for child-focused child protection and family-supporting child protection focus.

One thing the fields have in common is that research on child maltreatment and child well-being both focus on the (health) status of children in their social everyday living context. One could even say: they examine two sides of the same coin. While the concept of maltreatment is focusing on considering impairments in the form of commissions and omissions children are exposed to, concepts of child well-being are thematizing factors that generally ensure the advancements of beneficial living conditions for children in society. The research between both perspectives is rarely linked. However, if these areas of research are taken into account from a professional perspective it raises the question: what do children need to be protected and most of all to be supported in their development.

Child protection can be understood as an institutional and professional response to both (1) the fact of child maltreatment, abuse and neglect and (2) the protection of children's rights and their well-being.

Furthermore, in the international discourse child protection has often been discussed as “child protection or family service orientation” (Gilbert et. al. 2011, p. 4). Starting with the democratization of society from the early 1970s, movements for a less forensic approach to child protection emerged in many western countries: for more participation, more deliberative communication and help-orientation in child protection systems (Gilbert et al. 2011: 6; Wolff et al. 2011). Today, in many countries, there seems to be a political reversion of these deliberative approaches. In this context of a stronger risk-orientation, child welfare and child protection systems seem to increasingly focus on avoiding potential dangers to the child’s well-being, thus shifting away from support towards the identification of deviant parenthood, “risky” behavior and the prevention of maltreatment, abuse and neglect by interventions. Against this background a more relational perspective, a stronger orientation on child well-being might be fruitful (see also Gilbert et al. 2011:5), as it is targeted in broader child-focused and family-supporting child protection (Biesel & Urban-Stahl, 2018, p. 24).

2 Challenges and Benefits in relating Research on Child Maltreatment and Child Well-being

The contributions during the 2nd CMW-conference mentioned before showed that research on child maltreatment and child well-being is discussed rather separately so far. In discussions between researchers from both fields, however, it became apparent that the interconnection of both perspectives – child maltreatment and child well-being – is beneficial for research on child protection. We would like to illustrate this for two research fields.

In the first place, child poverty as an original field of child protection can be linked to questions of child maltreatment. Poverty reporting has a long tradition in research to define poverty and to discuss it in the practice of social policy and social work. But adult-defined poverty levels do not consider how different children subjectively perceive poverty in their respective everyday lives. The child-well-being perspective aims to relate the perspectives of adults and children on poverty and to contextualize these perspectives in respective living environments (cf. Howarth, Mansfield, McCartney & Main in this special issue).

In the second place, is the research field on specific phenomena of child maltreatment, research on violence against children is becoming more and more specific and examines various forms, such as exploitation, violence in residential care, sexual violence by professionals or cyber grooming and sexual violence. Linking research on different phenomena of maltreatment with research on children’s perspectives in the respective research context deepens the understanding of such phenomena. The (potential) maltreatment is put into social context by connecting the children’s perspective. Two examples: (1) For the phenomenon of cyber grooming the desire of many children to connect online with peers via social media has to be taken into account (cf. Weingraber, Platz, Nägele & Stein in this special issue). (2) The increased social attention on sexual violence against children leads to an uncertainty of professionals, which prevents a pedagogically meaningful closeness between children and professionals. A focus on formalized closeness regulation falls short in the prevention of sexual violence. The need of children for closeness must be taken into account, especially in order to prevent assaults on children. (cf. Wittfeld in this special issue). This aspect becomes particularly clear in the discussion about child protection concepts, in which it has been noticed that it is essential to include the child's perspective in the implementation of child protection (cf. Domann & Rusack 2015).

Overall, the editors of this special issue assume that research on child protection would benefit from a stronger link between research on child maltreatment and child well-being.

Content and orientation of the articles in this special issue are, from our point of view, exemplary for the status of this developing dialogue.

3 Sections of the Special Issue

This special issue is structured in four sections. The *first section* contains articles which discuss methodological matters of research on children's perspectives and participation.

Chester Howarth, Maria Mansfield, Camilla McCartney and Gill Main wrote a methodological reflection on the participatory action research project "A Different Take" which was carried out in 2019 in the UK. The project aims to open a room for the voice of children who are often not heard because they are children and poor. The article reflects the methodological approach to address "the participation in research of children with lived experience of poverty - as equals alongside adults". The authors discuss this as an intergenerational approach, "to challenge traditional power imbalances based on both poverty status and age". The Children and young people, as well as adults from low-income families were addressed as experts by experience.

Timo Ackermann and Dirk Schubotz reflect on questions present in participatory and co-production approaches, in particular in research with children and young people. They introduce theoretical backgrounds, development history and principles of participatory research and its diversification and point out its relation to social change perspectives. Afterwards they discuss in-depth the connection of children's right and participatory research perspectives as well as the challenge to research with children and young people rather than on them, especially with regard to ethical issues, power relations between adults and children and the researcher's role in this field. Challenges at different stages of the research process are pointed out and discussed. The authors underline the greater effort of participatory research in comparison to conventional research, the lack of implementing such participatory approaches and finally relate their considerations to current public demands of young people for social and political change.

Lise Mogensen, Jenny MacDonald and Jan Manson point out that the perspective of children and young people with disabilities has only been marginally represented in the discourse on child well-being so far. In their research project, they gave voice to pupils from a special school in Australia by using flexible and creative qualitative methods. Using various communicative methods, they succeeded to talk intensively with the pupils about places, people and situations that are good for them. The methodological reflection that this article provides is beneficial for further research.

The *second section* follows one idea of research on child well-being by analyzing perspectives of professionals and young people in the context of residential care with regard to the tension field of closeness and with regard to residents' perceptions of their situation in care.

Joan Llosada-Gistau, Gemma Crous and Carme Montserrat carried out a mixed method study among children (between 12 and 14 years old) living in residential care in Catalonia. The study asks what factors of daily life influence the subjective well-being of children. A central result is that the degree to which children experience of relational belonging is a key variable for subjective well-being. An institution's flexibility in its response to children is of central importance. If the children's needs are taken into account, especially regarding social

contacts, subjective well-being increases. An extensive restriction of freedom by the institution, albeit with protective intention, has a negative effect.

Gemma Crous, Carme Montserrat, Ana Balaban show that “Young people leaving care with intellectual disabilities or mental health problems” are an especially vulnerable group. They argue that while there has been extensive research on leaving care, a specific focus on care leavers with intellectual disabilities is still scarce. The evaluation study is situated in the context of a housing program for care leavers. The research aims to clarify strengths and weaknesses of said program. It takes into account both the perspectives of young people and professionals. The findings are based on 30 interviews, 16 with professionals and 14 with young adults leaving care. Based on content analysis, the article shows common grounds in their perspectives. The authors report that the majority of the interviewees felt content with the decision to join the housing program, although some of them felt left aside considering the decision to become part of the program. As one result they point out that both professionals and young people argue for more flexible ways for leaving care, also exceeding the 21st birthday.

In her article, *Meike Wittfeld* discusses the connection between media scandalization of sexual violence in educational institutions on the one hand, and the everyday dealings of educational professionals with closeness in educational interaction on the other. It points to the fact that professionals in residential child care institutions face an action dilemma: They are afraid to be accused of committing sexual violence and are thus unable to fully respond to the children's need for closeness. The article shows that protection against sexual violence conflicts both with (1) the protection of the pedagogical staff and (2) the well-being of children and young people, which includes the need for closeness.

The *third section* includes articles about research on specific phenomena of violence and violent constellations.

Friederike Lorenz analyzes how silence on staff violence and the abuse of power is performed within social practices. The case study concerns a team in residential care that exercised systematic violence against children with disabilities in the name of a behavioral concept for years. In the data analysis, the team's documentation is parsed as collective storytelling and interpreted with a heuristic of silence. Three sets of practices are reconstructed: (1) practices of silence in the professionals' speaking and writing, (2) the team's veiling and unveiling of dimensions of group life towards parents and (3) in the reactions of other staff and managers. The study shows how silence on violence can be implemented in organizational routines and how silence practices on violence can continue in organizations after the disclosure.

Sophie Weingraber, Christina Plath, Laura Naegele and Margit Stein discuss cyber grooming and sexual violence against the background of an explorative quantitative research with 300 young adults. Results tackle subjective perceptions of sexual violence by users of different social media platforms and point out mental-stress factors of affected persons and gender-related differences, as there is a higher number of female victims. In the conclusion they argue why cyber grooming should be taken more seriously by social workers and police and underline the relevance of media competence. Finally, the authors discuss the study's limitations and emphasize that the definition of cyber grooming, sexual violence and its 'grey areas' need further clarification and reflection.

Sonal Pandey reports on an exploratory study of interventions for survivors of sex trafficking and brothel based prostitution in India. Using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 30 survivors of sex trafficking, together with collecting data of "key informants" such as superintendents of shelter homes, welfare officers, police and personnel from the NGO's she questions the provision for survivors. She argues that due to communication issues and conflicts of interest the provision for survivors is not only limited but might also jeopardize their health and wellbeing and prevent going back to a normal life after being trafficked. She questions the "rights" perspective of the group under study and concludes with significant recommendations regarding effective rehabilitation and reintegration of sex trafficking survivors.

Gonzalo de Castro Lamela, Clarisa Giamello and Macarena Céspedes Quintanilla explore the "impact of the Great Recession in the well-being of 'latchkey children'". They demonstrate how an economic crisis leads to social distortions, including problematic consequences for families and the welfare of children. The authors focus on latchkey children as a vulnerable group, which is addressed by social work services. The authors demonstrate how these children's welfare is affected by poverty, by cramped living conditions and forced sharing of houses. The article indicates that working poor single parents have to leave their children alone or with people who do not always care enough for the children's well-being. The authors conclude social work and social policy should act more decidedly against new forms of poverty and precarization.

Michael Herschelmann, Nataliya Komarova, Tatiana Suslova, Albina Nesterova, and Pia Fischer describe violence against children as a worldwide problem. They argue that countries all over the world developed child protection systems in reaction to these problems and in order to protect children in their well-being. With a case vignette design the authors explore differences in the German and Russian child protection systems. While in Germany, social workers feel that they are personally held responsible for their case work, in Russia the responsibility is with a multi-professional group of experts. In both countries, various organizations work together to safeguard children. The study shows that Russian child care institutions have their own medical services, while in Germany this is not the case. The authors point out, that Russian professionals such as educators and teachers seem to provide support before reporting to child protections services while German professionals tend to report earlier to child protection services.

Christian Schröder and Ulrike Zöllner discuss challenges of organizing transnational child protection in a greater region (cross-boarder-cooperation of Luxembourg and regions of France and Germany). The authors describe and compare differences of the three child protection systems and analyze them using case studies on children who are clients of the child and youth welfare system in transnational cooperation between the countries concerned. The authors underline challenges from and experiences with the transregional support from different perspectives, such as parents, child and professionals. Against that background they underline the practical reasons for transnational placements of children, such as economic reasons, and point out the lack of rights-based approaches such as child's participation rights and the implementation of ombudsperson in the region.

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Author's Address:

Prof. Dr. Timo Ackermann
Professur für Theorie und Praxis Sozialer Arbeit mit dem Schwerpunkt Kinder- und Jugendhilfe
Alice Salomon Hochschule Berlin
University of Applied Sciences
Alice-Salomon-Platz 5
12627 Berlin
ackermann@ash-berlin.eu
www.ash-berlin.eu

Author's Address:

Dr. Friederike Lorenz
Freie Universität Berlin
Arbeitsbereich Sozialpädagogik
Habelschwerdter Allee 45
14195 Berlin
+49-30-838-63478
friederike.lorenz@fu-berlin.de
www.fu-berlin.de/sozialpaedagogik

Author's Address:

Meike Wittfeld
Universität Duisburg-Essen
Universitätsstraße 2
D-45141 Essen
meike.wittfeld@uni-due.de
https://www.uni-due.de/schule_und_jugendhilfe/meike_wittfeld.php