

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING: FREEDOM AND CHOICE IN CHILDREN'S LIVES

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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

- 1) According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children have basic human rights and freedoms, including freedom of expression, thought, movement, and association.
- 2) However, children's freedom and choices are restricted by adults within social institutions, which may limit their agency and well-being.
- 3) While some studies have examined the nature and extent of children's freedom within specific age groups (freedom generally increases with age), no study to date has examined children's conception of freedom, and the links between freedom and children's subjective well-being.

BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore:

- 1) children's perceptions of freedom and well-being and
- 2) contexts and people that support or hinder children's freedom and well-being.

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDINGS OF WELL-BEING – GLOBAL AND LOCAL CONTEXTS

<http://www.cuwb.org/>



Interview protocol designed by Fattore, Fegter, and Hunner-Kreisel (2014)

METHODS

Sample

- 22 children in Wave 1 US Substudy (spring 2015)
- 8-13 years old (average age 10.36 years)
- 14% 2nd grade, 18% 3rd grade, 32% 4th grade, 32% 5th grade, and 4% 6th grade
- 7 males 15 females
- from 3 states in the Midwestern U.S.
- from variety of racial and SES backgrounds, primarily White
- More purposive sampling for diversity in Wave 2
(24 children, data just collected spring 2017)

METHODS

Procedure

- **Sampling using convenience and snowball sampling through social networks, local schools and community centers**
- **IRB approval, parental informed consent, child assent**
- **Semi-structured interview & mapping exercise**
- **Children drew & explained what was important to them and what made them feel “well or good”, and in the second part of the interview, described how they felt in particular contexts and domains of their life (home and family, school, economic context, and Q’s about safety, choice, and feeling listened to).**

METHODS

Data Analysis

- The larger study was used a basic interpretive qualitative design for maximum flexibility in analysis procedures
- Transcripts were analyzed using a phenomenological approach following a 3-step process (Creswell, 2013):
 1. Identifying & coding significance statements

Each transcript was coded by at least two researchers to assess reliability, and discrepancies were identified and discussed until consensus was reached.
 2. Inductively clustering of codes into themes
 3. Articulating themes & patterns across themes

FINDINGS

- Analyses revealed six themes regarding desire for freedom:
- Choice
- Space and Place
- Movement and Activity
- Time Use
- Expression
- Privacy

CHOICE

Children desire and appreciate having choices in their lives regarding spending money, media, activities that they participate in, and the clothes they wear.

I: Tell me about a time you felt like your opinion mattered? C: Umm, getting to pick who is on the line and who is not in the games. For hockey.

SPACE AND PLACE

Children expressed a desire to have space or places where they had physical and psychological freedom. This included their own room, a playroom in their house or areas in which they could engage in activities where they felt free.

**I: Ok imagine you had a magic ward and could change whatever you wanted on your map. What would you change?
C: Hmm, more places to play soccer and basketball. Like more places to play games and stuff.**

MOVEMENT AND ACTIVITY

Children expressed desire and appreciation for activities that allowed for freedom of movement including outdoor activities (hunting, fishing, walking, riding bikes, swimming), sports (baseball, basketball, soccer, volleyball, hockey), and less-structured school activities (recess, lunch, P.E.)

**I: Are there certain things that you do that make you feel good?
C: Yes. Playing outside, and riding my bike, and going out for walks.**

TIME USE

Children expressed desire and an appreciation for opportunities where they're allowed to decide how to use their time, which includes, holidays, summers, weekends, and times when they are casually hanging out with their friends.

I: Alright, when do you feel free to do the things that you want to do? C: When I have free time. I: Okay. And can you tell us about a time when you had that free time? C: In summer. I don't have any chores or homework.

EXPRESSION

Children desire and appreciate activities that allow them freedom of expression including creative activities (art, dance, music) and expression in communication, for example, feeling listened to and having opportunities to say what they think.

C: I love public speaking. I: Why is that? C: Because it I just get to share my opinions and it gives me a chance to present and stuff; projects and stuff like that. That's why I like 4-H.

PRIVACY

Children expressed desire and appreciation for freedom to obtain physical and psychological privacy including space to be alone and opportunities to keep their thoughts and ideas private.

I: Okay, what else needs to be in your life to make you feel good?
C: A phone, because my mom doesn't let me do anything on her phone. And I just really want my own so I can like text my friends in private and like whenever I'm really sad, they... I don't want my parents to know about it...

DISCUSSION

Particular people supported or undermined children's freedom (e.g. teachers, parents, siblings, coaches, bullies, and friends). This is consistent with Levy (2015), who reports that children's freedom and choices are restricted by adults within social institutions, which limits children's sense of agency.

DISCUSSION

Particular contexts supported children's freedom (e.g. outdoor, athletic, and recess areas) or limited it (home and school settings). Findings are in line with Bronfenbrenner's (1989) theory which suggests that various microsystems impact children's outcomes. In this study, children expressed a desire for freedom across contexts.

DISCUSSION

Children felt more freedom and choice during particular times (e.g. summer, weekends) than others. Children expressed the desire for more open and free time in their lives.

DISCUSSION

This study builds on a limited literature base examining children's well-being and freedom (e.g. Jack, 2010; Karsten & van Vliet, 2006). It provides important insights into factors supporting children's freedom and well-being.

NEXT STEPS

- Examine new transcripts for similar or different themes.
- Cross-cultural collaboration and analyses
- Triangulation with quantitative data from children (Children's World's survey), parents (parental well-being measures), and demographic data (parent report) to examine potential patterns for subgroups (e.g. lower SES)

