Subjective well-being and perceptions of safety among Jewish and Arab children in Israel

Asher Ben-Arieh⁎, Edna Shimon

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel

Abstract

As research has shown, safety is also a subjective phenomenon. Contemporary scholarship has also underscored the importance of subjective well-being among children as a vital component of overall well-being. Our paper explores the potential relationship between reported levels of safety in different settings and the subjective well-being of children. We conducted our study on 2238 children ages 10 and 12 with varying sociodemographic characteristics. Our findings support our hypothesis that safety in different settings is positively inter-correlated and that safety perceptions are positively correlated with subjective well-being. Furthermore, the correlations exist among different sociodemographic groups and in different settings.

1. Introduction

Safety is a primary component of quality of life (QOL) (González, Casas, Figuer, Malo, & Viñas, 2012). Furthermore, safety and security form one of the basic levels (the second one) in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, Frager, & Fadiman, 1970, pp. 35–51). Thus, safety and security are important aspects of the lives and well-being of children.

The tradition of studying well-being in social sciences emerged with the social indicators movement in the 1960s. Many scholars consider Bauer (1966) the starting point of the Quality of Life movement. By the end of the 1960s, serious attempts to develop significant research on happiness, psychological well-being, or satisfaction with life initiated important scientific debates (Casas, 1989, 1991, 1996). Researchers have developed different theoretical conceptualizations and scientific models for well-being, trying to reconcile material (objective) and non-material (subjective) aspects of the human and sociocultural environment. One of the more useful definitions for subjective well-being is presented by Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers (1976) who proposed including perceptions, evaluations, and aspirations of people regarding their lives.

For the last 5–6 decades, major changes have characterized the physical and social environments in cities of the West (Prezza & Pacilli, 2007). In some countries in which violence and crime rates have been rising, young people feel unsafe. Those feelings are considered a pervasive social and public health problems (Mijanovich & Weitzman, 2003). Some studies have examined children’s exposure to violence, either directly or as witnesses (Spilsbury, 2005). Other studies have linked socioeconomic status and life in disadvantaged neighborhoods to dangerous lives and exposure to social and physical hazards. Violence has also become a major concern in school environments (Fu, Land, & Lamb, 2013; Raviv, Raviv, Shimon, Fox, & Leavitt, 1999), even for very young children (Shahinfar, Fox, & Leavitt, 2000). Yet, safety perceptions and subjective well-being among children have seldom been studied.

Furthermore, although perceptions of safety and actual safety are a crucial prerequisite for the well-being of children, only a few studies have examined the relationship between safety and well-being among children (Nayak, 2003; Prezza & Pacilli, 2007). Other studies focused on adults (González et al., 2012); however, studies have shown that the meaning and perception of well-being differ between children and adults. Furthermore, studies that have examined perceptions of safety and subjective well-being among children have focused only on one particular setting (e.g., home, school).

Therefore, a thorough examination of the possible relationship between safety and well-being among children is warranted. The goal of our study is to explore perceptions of safety among children (ages 10 and 12), the relationship between perceptions of safety in different settings, and the relationship between perceptions of safety and subjective well-being. We begin with three hypotheses:

(1) Perceptions of safety among children in different settings are positively correlated between themselves;
(2) Perceptions of safety among children are positively correlated with their subjective well-being; and

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⁎ Corresponding author at: Tel.: +972 77 515 0300; fax: +972 77 515 0304.
E-mail addresses: benarieh@cc.huji.ac.il (A. Ben-Arieh), ednas07@gmail.com (E. Shimon).

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(3) Any positive relationship between safety perceptions and subjective well-being among children will hold across different sociodemographic groups.

2. Literature review

2.1. Well-being of children

Definitions of well-being emphasize a desirable state of happiness, health, or prosperity. More specifically, well-being refers to subjective feelings and experiences as well as living conditions. Well-being is usually discussed from a subjective perspective yet many times it is measured with objective indicators. A number of tensions illustrate the challenges of theorizing well-being, including: (1) between subjective and objective well-being; (2) between the present and possible future consequences for children; and (3) between the individual and the macro level (Ben-Arieh, Casas, Frones, & Korbin, 2013).

Well-being is even more complex with regard to children. Well-being influences children's lives in the present and the future, as the present influences shape children's development and future outcomes. Evaluating the well-being of children is also complex because children are developing and depend on caretakers on the micro level and other ecological levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Further, childhood is not a delimited psychological issue but is related to characteristics at the societal level; various societies not only influence social and cognitive development but require different levels of competencies for members according to age and gender. Such norms are not detailed prescriptions. For example, general agreement on the principle that children should not be exposed to risk requires mutual understanding of what risk for children implies so that risk cannot be delimited by a purely objective or adult perspective standard (Ben-Arieh & Frones, 2011).

In recent decades, research on the well-being of children and adolescents has begun to develop and test psychometric instruments to measure well-being. Indeed, a broad consensus that psychological well-being is a key component of QOL has arisen among researchers. Authors call this phenomenon subjective well-being (Diener, 1984; Huebner, 1991; Huebner, Laughlin, Asch, & Gilman, 1998), psychological well-being (Casas, 1998; Ryff, 1989), human well-being (Blanco, Rojas, & Corte, 2000), social well-being (Keyes, 1998) or subjective QOL (Cummins & Cahill, 2000). Another important and more cognitive dimension of well-being is "satisfaction" with life. Both the affective and the cognitive dimensions are considered indicators of good psychological conditions of living. Additionally, evidence in localized and cross-cultural studies has suggested that well-being is correlated with other positive constructs such as self-esteem, perceived control, perceived social support (Casas et al., 2007; Huebner, 2004), and values (Coenders, Casas, Figuer, & González, 2005; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Diener & Fujita, 1995; Diener, Suh, & Oishi, 1998).

Satisfaction with life is understood by many scholars to be a global evaluation of life (Veenhoven, 1994). Indeed, Andrews and Withey (1976) proposed a one-item life satisfaction index, which has since been widely used as a basic indicator of well-being, although in different formats (i.e., Cantril's ladder), and it has also been used with children and adolescents. Some authors consider this single-item index a better measure of well-being (Cummins, 1998) than the aggregated measures, and it is frequently combined in questionnaires with other multi-item scales. Overall life satisfaction (OLS) is considered "more than" satisfaction with a set of life domains. On the other hand, satisfaction with life domains and OLS can be explained using both individual and cultural differences (Diener, 1984).

Others have emphasized the importance for personal well-being of satisfaction with specific life domains. In scientific literature, extensive discussions have addressed the most relevant life domains for an assessment of OLS. Cummins (1998) considered life-domain satisfaction a second-order level and proposed the Personal Well-Being Index to evaluate life satisfaction with only seven primary life domains, which he hypothesized are the most cross-culturally relevant.

However, research on children's QOL from their own perspective is limited. Research has tended to focus on the attribution of needs, or the perceptions of QOL from adult (expert or parental) vantage points. In many instances, this approach betrays the basic definition of QOL: people's own perceptions, evaluations, and aspirations. Therefore, in practice, what has been referred to as QOL of children does not adequately address the quality of young peoples' lives; rather, research has addressed adult perceptions or opinions about the QOL of children.

Furthermore, disagreements between children and adults regarding aspects of children's lives are an important dimension of social life and of interpersonal and intergenerational relationships. For example, children (especially older ones) are generally more often risk-takers than adults are. New and exciting experiences are important for children, while for adults, "security" of children is often more important. As a result, security measures imposed by adults may be interpreted by children as limits on their freedom.

2.2. Safety of children

The safety of children is an objective and a subjective phenomenon concerned with perceptions of safety and exposure to hazards or risk factors. Some scholars have defined the safety of children by examining their exposure to risk and their levels of protection. Others have defined the safety of children according to how children feel (Ben-Arieh, McDonell, & Attar-Schwartz, 2009). The research we report on focuses on children's perceptions of safety.

Others would point at the importance of safety in the Israeli context of a high-stress, high-conflict sociopolitical environment. Our study included measures reported by children from each of the two primary adversary groups, yet we looked on perceptions of safety at home, at school, and in the neighborhood. We have done so since the literature taught us that children safety is overwhelmingly understood by them in their local context and not the sociopolitical one.

A number of studies including children demonstrated the importance of safety in children's lives. Fattore, Mason, and Watson (2009) studied children's views of well-being, finding that safety is one of three themes with independent importance for well-being. Children indicated that feeling safe and secure was important for well-being, allowing them to engage fully with life. Children identified three factors that provide a sense of safety: (1) being protected by parents, (2) having a personal safe place, and (3) having trusted people in their lives. Another study with young people ages 15 to 24 in Spain found that satisfaction with present safety was most highly correlated with optimism, a sense of humor, coherence, a sense of meaning in life, and enjoying life (González et al., 2012).

Although these studies and others showed the importance of safety and notions of well-being from children's perspectives, most of the research concentrated on the fear of victimization in particular. For example, Mijanovich and Weitzman (2003) found that in economically distressed cities and their suburbs in the United States, 8% of the participants (ages 10 to 18) felt unsafe on the day prior to the interview and 15% reported feeling unsafe at school. As noted, safety and well-being should be studied in different settings. In literature on children's safety perceptions, three settings have been dominant: home, school, and neighborhood.

2.3. Safety at home

Home is the environment in which children spend most of their time. Furthermore, most children regard home as the safest place. Fattore et al. (2009) reported that children saw parents as the most responsible for keeping them safe. Accordingly, children expect home to be a place without personal threats and with emotional and physical security. Similarly, the Good Life Report (The Children's Society, 2012)
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