Children’s quality of life

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Abstract

A brief introduction is given to historical and conceptual perspectives on quality-of-life studies. An analysis is provided of how the concept is used and how it should be used when applied to children. The quality of life perspective treats the perspective of all social agents involved in any social phenomena as important. This includes people’s perceptions, evaluations and aspirations - that is to say their subjective well-being - and is related to people’s satisfaction with life domains and with life as a whole. As a consequence, children’s own opinions must be included in any study of children’s quality of life and children’s well-being is a crucial topic for child researchers. Because of the traditional adult-centric perspective in which research on children has been grounded, examples are given of research evidence showing that children’s perspectives may be different from those expected and from those of adults. This does not mean that children’s perspectives are wrong and adults’ are right, it only means that adults and children may have different perspectives on social reality, because they feel that they belong to different social groups. The relational, social and political implications of such perspectives are briefly discussed.

Key words: children, adolescents, quality of life, subjective well-being, life satisfaction, child perspective.

1.- Quality of life

During the first half of the 20th century, most experts took material living conditions to be good indicators of well-being and progress in a country. However, particularly from the 1960s on, social scientists increasingly stated that how people experience their own lives is also a very important indicator of the state of affairs and that material living conditions may not indicate people's real worries and needs (Campbell et al, 1976).

Throughout history, phenomena showing things moving in the wrong, or "bad" direction have been a major focus of interest for human and social sciences. For example, for centuries medicine was interested only in illness and disease. Just a few decades ago an increasing interest developed in studying how things move in a good “social” direction, or how things may improve even if they are not bad to begin with: for example, through health promotion. This change of perspective, from negatively connoted constructs to positively connoted constructs, is, in my opinion, a silent but very far-reaching revolution.

For decades social scientists have been studying how social problems appear and develop, and it is only very recently that we have become interested in how to promote well-being or quality of life. In 1969, G.A. Miller, in his famous speech as new president of the American Psychological Association, proposed redefining psychology as a means of promoting human well-being. Traditionally psychology has been very much focused on curing mental illness. However, in recent decades many researchers have focused on a new perspective called positive psychology, the psychology of positive human functioning (Seligman, 2002). It is a pleasure to read that Seligman's 5-year-old child had an important influence on his understanding of this perspective (Seligman, 2002, p. 3).

Quality of life studies, in the sense we currently understand quality of life in social psychology, appeared at the end of the 1960s in the form of a proposal to approach social change from an interdisciplinary perspective, different from the traditional "material-oriented" perspective. The concept of quality of life has so many meanings at present that it would not be appropriate to talk about it without explaining a little about my own theoretical assumptions. Its meaning is sometimes considered synonymous with welfare. It may also be considered equivalent to materially well-off, living in comfort or even luxury. For other people it is related to well-being, happiness, a good life and so on.

Some authors have tried to explain why, during the 1960s, new interests in psychosocial changes appeared. For example, Inglehart (1977; 1990) defines a material values crisis in the industrial advanced societies and the emergence of post-material values. According to him, some non-directly-material values that had traditionally been associated with minority groups in society began to move up in the ranking of more and more people in different countries: the importance of preserving natural environments; social justice; self-realisation and so on. These "new" interests in society had as correlates "new" interests in the social sciences, such as, for example, environmental behaviour, equality of opportunities, gender research and quality of life. At the same time we observe that certain research perspectives appear or become consolidated at the methodological level: social indicators research, programme evaluation, participant research and so on.

That period – the end of the 1960s – saw the appearance of serious attempts to develop major research on people's happiness, psychological well-being or satisfaction with life or with specific domains of life and important scientific debates began (Casas, 1991; 1996a). For decades these phenomena had been considered subjective and "therefore" of no scientific value. Different theoretical conceptualisations and scientific models for QOL (quality of life) began to be developed, trying to reconcile material ("objective") and non-material ("subjective") aspects of the human and socio-cultural environment. QOL began to be considered a function of both material and psychosocial environment: QOL = f (Em, Eps). The psychosocial environment was defined by Campbell et al, (1976) as the perceptions, evaluations and aspirations of people.

It was very easy to demonstrate that in many situations, the two components of QOL do not correlate. "Objective" measures by experts and, for example, the "subjective" satisfaction of users of services

may not correlate at all. Debates started as to "who is right" when the figures used to measure each component do not agree. It was some years before people became aware that the scientifically relevant question is not "who is right?", but rather "why do different “observers” disagree?".

Glatzer & Mohr (1987) illustrated this point with a very simple 2x2 table. When experts evaluate material ("objective") conditions as good, and people also perceive them as good, it is without question that we can refer the situation as one of well-being: there is a consensus. If both of them agree that conditions are bad, then no doubt arises that the situation is one of deprivation. In both cases, the only discussion is about the “label”, the concept and the conceptual definition we give to that reality – if positive, we discuss whether to call it welfare, progress, well-being, development, quality of life and so on; while if negative we talk about marginalisation, exclusion, deviation, maladjustment, deprivation, social problems and a long list of other possible definitions.

Table 1.- Coincidences and discrepancies about quality of life, according to data from different social agents. Following Glatzer & Mohr (1987)

		Perceptions and evaluations	
		GOOD	BAD
“Objective” material living conditions	GOOD	*Well-being*	*Dissonance*
	BAD	*Adaptation*	*Deprivation*

However, if experts perceive a situation as good and people (for example, the users of any service) perceive it as bad, then we must search for the reasons for such dissonance. Finally, if experts evaluate a situation as bad but people perceive it as good, the experts will probably say that we are seeing adaptation or conformist phenomena, but people may say something completely different. In both cases the big debate is not only on the concept, but on what in fact is the reality we are talking about. As a consequence, there will be disagreement between social agents about what to do – and this disagreement is itself related to different social dynamics.

Reality is always more complicated than simple 2x2 tables. The relationship between psychosocial (“subjective”) living conditions and material (“objective”) living conditions has proved to be neither simple nor “easy”. In any event, in recent decades researchers have reached a broad consensus which considers psychological well-being to be a key component of quality of life. Authors call this phenomenon “subjective well-being” (Diener, 1984; Huebner, 1991; Huebner et al, 1998), “psychological well-being” (Casas, 1998; Ryff, 1989), “human well-being” (Blanco, 2000), “social well-being” (Keyes, 1998) or “subjective quality of life” (Cummins & Cahill, 2000). Since the 1960s, according to Bradburn (Bradburn, 1969; Bradburn & Caplovitz, 1965), most authors have agreed that subjective well-being has an important affective dimension related to the “happiness” concept. Another important and more cognitive dimension is “satisfaction” with life domains and with life as a

whole. Both dimensions are considered indicators or outcomes of good psychological living conditions. Additionally, there is a body of evidence to suggest that this phenomenon is correlated with others, such as self-esteem, perceived control, perceived social support (Huebner, 2004; Casas et al, 2003), values (Diener & Fujita, 1995; Diener et al, 1998; Csikzentmihalyi, 1997; Coenders et al, 2005), and such evidence also appears in cross-cultural studies.

According to Diener's (1984) review, there is a broad consensus that subjective well-being has three basic characteristics:

- It is grounded in each person's experiences and on his or her perceptions and evaluations of such experiences.
- It includes positive measures and not only the absence of negative aspects.
- It includes some overall evaluation of life, usually called "life satisfaction".

Since Bradburn's (1969) studies, the relationship between positive and negative affects has been a traditional field of discussion. On the other hand, satisfaction with life as a whole is understood by many authors as a global evaluation of life (Veenhoven, 1994). Overall life satisfaction is considered "more than" the satisfaction with a set of life domains. However, these two kinds of satisfaction can be explained through both individual and cultural differences (Diener, 1984). Since Andrews & Withey (1976) proposed the one-item life satisfaction index, this has been widely used as a basic indicator of well-being and it has also been used with children and adolescents. Some authors consider this single item a higher order measure of well-being (Cummins, 1998) and it is frequently combined in questionnaires with other, multiple-items scales.

However, many other authors have underlined the importance of satisfaction with specific life domains for our personal well-being. In the scientific literature we can find long discussions about which life domains are the most relevant for life satisfaction. Cummins (1998) considers life-domains satisfaction to be a second order level, and proposed the Personal Well-Being Index to evaluate life satisfaction, with only eight different life domains which, he hypothesises, are the most relevant cross-culturally.

When the concept of "quality of life" was defined in the 1960s, its political implications were "obvious": any society or social group changing "for the better" will improve the quality of life of its citizens. Any service offering good quality will improve the quality of life of its clients or users. This implied that both improving material living conditions and improving psychosocial living conditions would improve quality of life. The meaning of "improving material living conditions" seemed clear; however, it has never been quite as clear how to go about improving the "psychosocial conditions of living" of a large group of people or of a whole country, particularly now that we have a better understanding of subjective well-being. Today we know that high quality public services and being well-off do contribute to subjective well-being, but their contribution is less than expected, particularly if people are already

above a certain level of quality of life, as is usually the case in the more industrialised countries. There are few external influences which generally show a high level of contribution to our subjective well-being and, when they do, these are mainly related to interpersonal relationships. At the beginning of the 21st century, the main debate seems to be focused on some of the most important dimensions of subjective well-being – happiness and life satisfaction. The crucial point can be formulated with the following questions: Should governments develop policies aimed at increasing citizens' happiness or satisfaction with life? What would such policies be like? (Veenhoven, 2001).

2.- What is quality of life for children?

Developmental psychologists, as well as pedagogues, paediatricians and other professionals, have invested a great deal of energy in understanding what ***is good for child development***. Parents also usually want ***the best*** for their children, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child stands for ***children's best interests***.

What different people define as *good* or *best* for children may be considered as the standards or indicators for quality in children's living conditions. However, we know very well that experts often disagree among themselves about such standards, they may change their minds, parents may disagree with them, and the cross-cultural validity of such standards is often doubtful. In fact, we have become aware that there are important cultural differences (or diversities) about what is good for children (Childwatch International, 1995; Ennew, 1996; Casas, 1997; 2000a).

Let us consider some related questions:

a) As a rule, even scientists conceptualise childhood through the most common **social representations of childhood** in our social-cultural context (Chombart de Lauwe, 1971; 1984; 1989; Casas, 1996c; 1997).
b) Our social representations of childhood cause biases to arise in the ways we perceive and conceptualise what is good or bad for children: that is to say, what children's **social** (as opposite to "private") problems are and what "good life" is in childhood (for our children) (Casas, 1998).
c) In the social sciences, as well as in social life, quality has very often been used as to the opposite of "quantity". To know to what extent we agree that there is quality in some domain of life, we not only need figures about children's living conditions – we also need some consensus about what "good quality" is, that is to say we need some normative standard to compare with "reality". Is there a clear agreement about such standards?
d) The ways we socially define "social problems" and "good quality" for children have a strong influence on how our society implements social intervention programmes (and social policies) to deal with the problems of children (and of families with children) and/or to

promote children's quality of life (Casas, 1998).

If we take an overview of the research labelled *children's quality of life studies*, we find very few publications in which children have been asked anything. The most common research in this field is about the *attribution of needs, or perceptions of quality, which adults (experts or parents) apply to children*. That is a misuse of the concept "quality of life", because it loses sight of the basic definition of the concept: people's **own** perceptions, evaluations, and aspirations. So, in practice, what is referred to as research on children's quality of life is not truly on the quality of *their* lives but on other people's perceptions or opinions about their lives.

Traditionally what is good or best for children has been decided by parents or experts. Early experts "knew" about children's needs from their own position as experts; step by step, it has been realised that experts must also take into account the *perspective of the child*, because that may be different from an adult's view. But even though this change of perspective is very important, it is still taken for granted that children must not be asked, because they do not know what is good for them (they are *not-yet* capable or competent). Who is right and who is wrong has been predetermined. If we compare this situation with the recent history of studying quality of life, we may wonder if this is the right approach. Perhaps, if we ask children, *sometimes they will agree and sometimes they will disagree with different groups of adults, and then we may ask the reasons for such disagreements and learn from them.*

Discrepancies between children's perspectives on their own lives and adults' perspectives on children's lives are an important dimension of social life and of interpersonal and intergenerational relationships. Adolescents and youngsters in general are well known to be much more "risk-taking" than adults; it is very important for them to have new, amusing experiences and get to know their limits. For adults "security" is much more important. For youngsters, security measures imposed by adults may be considered as an adult need to control their lives, or simply as limitations on their freedoms - which "need not" be taken into account, and so on.

We must not forget that the psychosocial context in which such disagreements happen is based on both adults and youngsters considering each other to be members of different social groups or categories. Their behaviour takes place in what social psychologists call **processes of inter-group categorial differentiation** (Tajfel, 1978; Casas, 1995). It is a major challenge to try to understand in depth why we adults are so "interested" in keeping children and teenagers in a completely separate social category, instead of trying to build social consensus with the new generation. This is also one of the basic points needed to understand why we adults are often so hesitant when we speak about the need to increase children's social participation (Casas, 1998).

The quality-of-life perspective invites us to take into account: (a) children's living conditions ; (b) children's perceptions, evaluations and aspirations about their own lives – including their subjective well-being; and (c) the perceptions, evaluations and aspirations of other relevant social agents about children's lives and living conditions, i.e. those of their parents, teachers, paediatricians, educators, social professionals and so on.

Studies on children's well-being have seldom been conducted using children or adolescents as informants, particularly if we compare the situation with that of adults (Huebner, 2004). Many of the preliminary studies with children of 8 years old or older used the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS) (Huebner, 1991), which seems to function well in different cultural contexts (Casas *et al*, 2000). Cummins' (1998) Personal Well-Being Index has also been used successfully with adolescents from 12 to 16 years old, and longer lists of life domains have been explored in Brazil, India, South Africa, Norway and Spain (Casas *et al,* 2004). In fact, over the last decade, psychological well-being in childhood and adolescence has become a growing field of discussion (Ben-Arieh *et al,* 2001), although different authors use varying concepts and approaches. There is considerable interest in asking children about their own life evaluations and sometimes their answers are unexpected and surprising to adults.

Huebner (2004) has reviewed the correlations found by different authors between life satisfaction measures in children and adolescents and other measures of adaptive and positive functioning. Among his conclusions it is worth pointing out the following:

- Although the development of life satisfaction scales appropriate for children and adolescents has only recently been undertaken, there is support for the convergent validity of life satisfaction measures.
- There is developing support for discriminant validity. Life satisfaction appears to be related to, but separable from, a variety of psychological constructs, such as self-esteem, positive affect, and negative affect.

3.- Asking children about their own (quality of) life.

If we have now started to have theories and models available to develop research on quality of life, are they useful in the study of children's quality of life? Clearly the immediate answer is *why not?* There has traditionally been a strong reluctance on the part of social scientists to accept children's self-reported information as **reliable** (this is consistent with the adult's social representation of children as *not-yets* and not yet competent - Verhellen, 1992; Casas, 1995). The consequences have been dramatic in some arenas, such as for example judicial processes (Casas, 1998). This attitude has only recently started to change. We even have a number of publications available recommending how we should communicate better with children (Richman, 1993). As Garbarino *et al* (1989) stated, *it is adults' orientation and competence that raises the difference of children's competence*, even in judicial proceedings.

For a long time, developmental psychologists have been testing instruments to use to question children in order to understand their cognitive capacities and other skills. After developmental psychologists, the people probably most interested in knowing children's points of view have been publicists and professionals involved with the media: children are consumers, they are a television audience, so their preferences must be known. In recent years we have been able to read publications in which children are asked what they really think about something. We have a number of studies asking their opinions on the family (Van Gils, 1995; CRN, 1996), their own rights (Melton, 1980; Cherney & Perry, 1994; Ochaita *et al*, 1994), their neighbourhood or city and so on.

Children's points of view about their neighbourhood or city had traditionally been explored through drawings or compositions, which only allowed analysis of the views of a very limited number of children with the biases of adult interpretation forming an outstanding component. However, other methods can also be used; for example, a few years ago we obtained almost 2,000 "letters to the Magic Kings" (a tradition in Spain and Belgium, equivalent to Santa Claus in other countries, which takes place on 6th January). The letters were designed in such a way that, as well as the traditional sentence "I would like you to bring me ..... as a present", they included a paragraph beginning "And for my neighbourhood I would like .....". As such letters are a deeply-rooted tradition in Spain, and almost all children under 10 write them, we assumed it would be possible to get "spontaneously produced information" about children's ideas, worries and expectations on how to improve their neighbourhood and city. We submitted the letters to content and lexical analysis. The results could be “mapped” by 32 geographical areas. With a multiple correspondence analysis we were able to compare children's opinions within and between areas as well as with the "objective reality" of each area, and to build up a city map according to children's expectations of improvement. We obtained letters from children aged from 3 (those from the youngest were usually written by their parents or siblings) to 12. Young children's worries and expectations were very specific and even cheap for the municipality to deal with; the eldest also included wishes related to improving relationships among people and social values (Casas, 1996b), which involve social goals which are obviously more difficult to achieve through political planning.

Another interesting aspect that has also only very recently been raised is whether or not children are able to give appropriate answers to questionnaires exploring their satisfaction with life as a whole, or with some life domains. Huebner (1991) first tested both, by means of a one-dimensional and a multidimensional questionnaire on satisfaction adapted for children. The multidimensional scale included measures about family, friends, school, living environment and self. The one-dimensional scale was very simple (only 7 questions) and was tested successfully with children from 8 to 14 years old. From his findings, Huebner (1991) concluded that *the notion of children's global life satisfaction can be reliably and validly assessed in children as early as 8 years old.*

Parents' and children's perspectives and evaluations about very different topics are being explored more and more (e.g. Megías, 2002; Barge & Loges, 2003; Luk-Fong, 2005). Values and audiovisual media are two examples of fields which are interesting for such comparisons. Let us look at a few of them:

- Many adults say that their children's favourite activity is watching television. In their opinion, given the opportunity, the child would never move from in front of a television set. When we ask children, the picture is usually very different. A possible conclusion, after analysing the results in Table 2 from a representative Spanish sample, is that children probably watch television mainly when their friends are not available.

Table 2.- Preferred activities according to children 7 to 16 years old.
Spanish representative sample (N = 1757). Source: C.I.S. October 2000.

To be with friends	32,2%
To play sports	25,5%
To play	21,4%
Watching television	6.7%

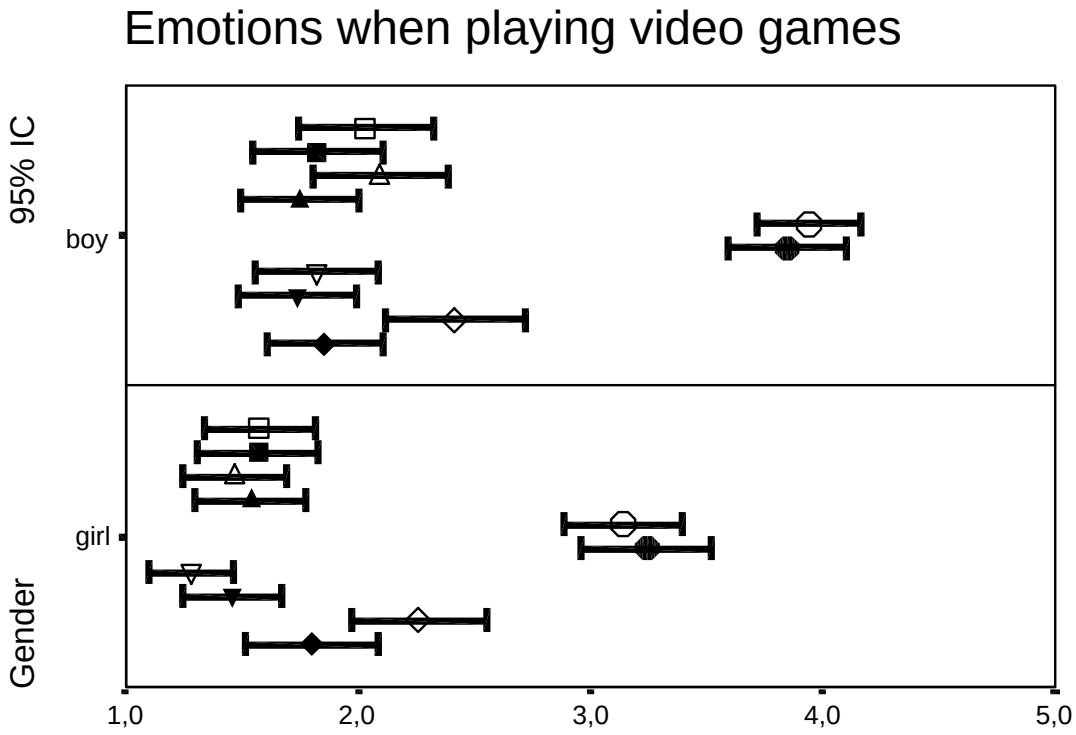
- While many adults feel unable to cope with the new information and communication technologies (NICTs), children feel very comfortable and even enthusiastic about using them. In fact, in Europe, it is clear that "children in the household" is a variable with a high influence on having more NICTs at home (Süess *et al*, 1998) (Table 3).

Table 3.- Media equipment in households in 3 European countries (Suess *et al*, 1998)**.**

	Finland		Spain		Switzerland	
	All households	Households with children	All households	Households with children	All households	Households with children
Television	98	98	99	100	95	95
Video	63	91	69	87	63	66
Computer	23	44	19	29	44	58
Video-console	14	37	17	36	7	38
Internet access	9	16	2	3	9	15

- As a consequence, many adults miss a lot of relevant information about children's activities and interests with new technologies and they wrongly assume that children's perspectives must be the same as their own. For example, in a study on the use of video-games (Casas, 2000b; 2001), several questions were posed to children and then, in a separate questionnaire, parents were asked for their own opinions and their ideas about their child's views on exactly the same topics. Parents and children shared a number of opinions, for example, that *video games are useless as a way of learning things.* However, statistically significant discrepancies appeared between parents and their sons when we asked children whether *playing video-games is a waste of time*, whether they *prefer video-games which involve fighting and war*, and whether they *play video games to forget their problems*- The parents' ideas about their child were related to their own wishes, not to the child's real feelings (Graphics 1 and 2).

Graphic 1.- The child's self-reported emotions and emotions attributed to the child by their parents (part I) (Casas, 2000b).



(a) Reported by the child (empty figures)

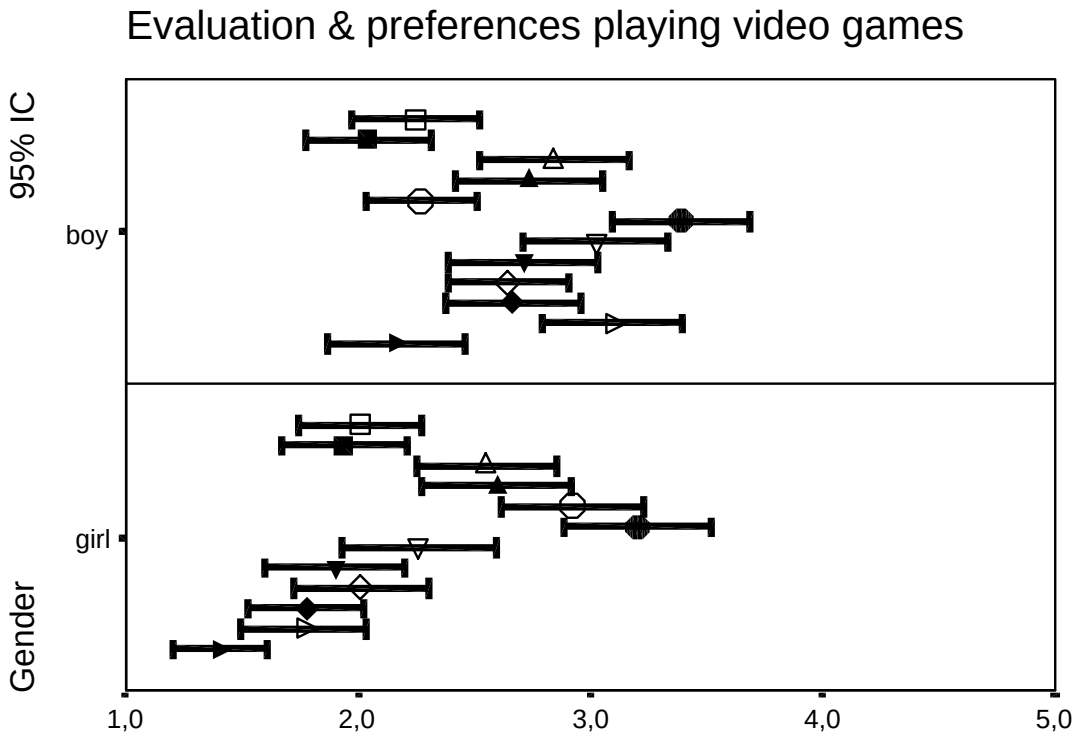
(b) Attributed by the parent (full figures)

1 = Total disagreement **5 = Total agreement.**

Square:	I get anxious to play video games again.
	My child gets anxious to play video games again.
Triangle:	When I have to stop playing, I often get very angry.
	When my child has to stop playing, he/she often gets very angry.
Circle:	I enjoy video games very much.
	My child enjoys video games very much.
Invested triangle:	I feel more aggressive after playing some video games.
	My child feels more aggressive after playing some video games.
Rhomb:**	**I like playing video games to forget my problems.**
	My child likes to play video games to forget his/her problems.

**** Differences are statistically significant for boy**

Graphic 2.- The child's self-reported emotions and emotions attributed to the child by their parents (Part II) (Casas, 2000b).



(a) Reported by the child (empty figures)

(b) Reported by the parent (full figures)

1 = Total disagreement **5 = Total agreement.**

Square:	Video games are useful for learning things.
	In my opinion, video games are useful for learning things.
Triangle:	Playing video games gives you better reflexes.
	In my opinion, playing video games gives one better reflexes.
Circle:**	**I believe playing video games is a waste of time.**
	I believe playing video games is a waste of time for my child.
Invested triangle:	I like video games better than most other games.
	My child likes video games better than most other games.
Rhomb:	I prefer playing video games to watching television.
	My child prefers playing video games to watching television.
Arrow to right:**	**I like video games best when they involve fighting and war.**
	My child prefers video games which involve fighting and war.

**** Differences are statistically significant for boys**

- Another clear example is related to educational CD-ROMs. Parents think their children are very interested in them and very well-informed about them. Answers show that the people really interested in educational CD-ROMs are parents, not children, and as a consequence parents tend to

overestimate their own child's interest (Casas *et al*, 2004) (Table 4).

Table 4.- Children's and parents' interests and interests attributed to children by their parents on a 1 to 5 scale (5 countries sample N=4380) (Childwatch International media project).

MEANS		*TV*	*Com-puters*	*Internet*	*CD-ROMs*	*Console games*	*Com-puter games*	*Mobile*
Children's interest	***Boy***	3.59	3.79	3.65	2.58	3.41	3.67	3.26
	Girl	3.62	3.49	3.53	2.64	2.46	2.65	3.72
	Total	3.61	3.64	3.59	2.61	2.95	3.17	3.49
Parents' interest	***Boy***	2.93↓	3.39↓	2.93↓	2.99↑	1.77↓	1.98↓	2.71↓
	Girl	2.94↓	3.37↓	2.95↓	2.96↑	1.61↓	1.89↓	2.78↓
	Total	2.94↓	3.38↓	2.94↓	2.97↑	1.69↓	1.93↓	2..75↓
Interests attributed by parents to children	***Boy***	3.58↓	3.97↑	3.54↓	3.00↑	3.40↑	3.67→	3.12↓
	Girl	3.59↓	3.75↑	3.43↓	3.07↑	2.45↓	2.76↑	3.47↓
	Total	3.59↓	3.85↑	3.48↓	3.04↑	2.89↓	3.18↑	3.31↓

- When children chat with adults about their activities with NICTs they tend to report that the experience is rarely satisfactory. This is in contrast with the high degree of satisfaction that both boys and girls report when chatting about such experiences with peers or even with older friends. In 5 samples in Catalonia (N = 1.634) children reported being highly dissatisfied with talking with their teacher and their mother and father about their activities with computers, television, consoles, the Internet and even educational CD-ROMs. At the same time they reported being mostly very satisfied with chatting about the same activities with peers, older friends and siblings (Casas *et al*, 2001) (Table 5).

Table 5.- Children's satisfaction with communication about their use of NICTs.

		No satisfaction at all	***Very high satisfaction.***
Computer	***Boy***	1. Teachers (53.5%) 2. Mother (37.3%) 3. Father (29.6%)	1. Peers (55.5%) 2. Older friends (32.4%) 3. Siblings (30.2%)
	Girl	1. Teachers (41.5%)	1. Peers (39%) 2. Siblings (28.3%)
Console	***Boy***	1. Teachers (80.2%) 2. Mother (44.1%) 3. Father (40.8%)	1. Peers (64.5%) 2. Siblings (41.7%) 3. Older friends (36.8%)
	Girl	1. Teachers (79%) 2. Mother (49.2%) 3. Father (46.2%) 4. Older friends (29%)	1. Peers (38.9%) 2. Siblings (38%)
Television	***Boy***	1. Teachers (66.9%)	1. Peers (55.9%) 2. Siblings (30.2%) 3. Older friends (29.6%)
	Girl	1. Teachers (57%)	1. Peers (65.6%) 2. Siblings (38.6%) 3. Older friends (34.8%)

- A high percentage of families show important discrepancies when they answer separately about values associated with different types of NICT use (Casas *et al*, 2001) (Table 6).

Table 6.- Coincidences and discrepancies between children and their parents.

		Coincidences				**Discrepancies**		
		Negative	Neutral	Positive	**Sub-total**	Clear	Extreme	**Sub-total**
Computer	Learning	1.4	4.2	50.3	**55.9**	34.8	9.2	**44**
	Wasting time	2.8	7.2	43.6	**53.6**	36.2	10	**46.2**
	Usefulness	0.9	2.8	73.7	**77.4**	17.4	4.4	**21.8**
Console	Learning	61.9	5.1	0.4	**67.4**	25.8	6.7	**32.5**
	Wasting time	51.8	4.8	1.4	**58**	26	16.1	**42.1**
	Usefulness	45.6	4.7	1.3	**51.6**	23.8	17.3	**41.1**
Television	Learning	8.4	21.8	10.2	**40.4**	47.3	12.3	**59.6**
	Wasting time	19.3	19.8	3.3	**42.4**	46.9	10.6	**57.5**
	Usefulness	6.3	15.6	10.9	**32.8**	45.7	21.4	**67.1**

- Discrepancies also appear when we explore the values which are important when the children reach the age of 21 (Coenders *et al,* 2005) (Table 7).

Table 7.- Values they would like to be appreciated for when the child reaches the age of 21, according to parents' and children's perspectives. N = 1184 adolescents 12-16 years old and N = 468 parents. List of 21 values. Mean scores from 0 to 10. Catalonia. December 2003.

Boy	**Girl**	**Boy's Parent**	**Girl's Parent**
Kindness (8.03)	Kindness (8.62)	*Joie de vivre* (9.25)	*Joie de vivre* (9.03)
Niceness (7.92)	Niceness (8.60)	Good manners (9.03)	Personality (8.91)
Personality (7.87)	Personality (8.60)	Responsibility (8.99)	Responsibility (8.82)
Joie de vivre (7.69)	*Joie de vivre* (8.45)	Solidarity (8.99)	Kindness (8.77)
Family (7.64)	Sensitivity (8.08)	Personality (8.95)	Solidarity (8.76)
Profession (7.55)	Family (8.03)	Kindness (8.90)	Hard work (8.62)
……	……	……	……
Religious faith or spirituality (5.62)	Religious faith or spirituality (5.59)	Religious faith or spirituality (6.87)	Religious faith or spirituality (6.38)
Money (5.61)	Money (4.53)	Power (4.74)	Power (4.83)
Power (5.53)	Power (4.51)	Money (4.70)	Money (4.75)

- As a final example, when we tried to find out the most frequent topics of conversation between a father or mother and their child in a representative sample of families in a municipality, we discovered that if we ask everybody involved, the answer becomes much more complex than expected: Sometimes it depends on who we ask! We found discrepancies not only between generations, but also between the father and mother (Tables 8 and 9).

Table 8.- Most frequent conversation topics between *mother* and child.

	If the child is a boy	***If the child is a girl***
According to the mother	(1) School and learning (2) Cleanliness and tidiness (3) The future	**(1) School and learning** (2) Cleanliness and tidiness (3) Clothes
According to the father	(1) School and learning (2) Cleanliness and tidiness **(3) Meals**	**(1)** Meals (2) Cleanliness and tidiness (3) Clothes
When both parents report together	(1) School and learning (2) Cleanliness and tidiness (3) The future	(1) School and learning (2) Cleanliness and tidiness (3) Clothes
According to the boy	(1) School and learning (2) Cleanliness and tidiness (3) Family and relatives	
According to the girl		**(1) Clothes** (2) School and learning (3) Cleanliness and tidiness

Table 9.- Most frequent conversation topics between *father* and child.

	If the child is a boy	***If the child is a girl***
According to the mother	(1) Responsibility and other moral values (2) The future (3) School and learning	**(1) Responsibility and other moral values** (2) School and learning (3) The future
According to the father	(1) School and learning (2) = Computers and World events	**(1) School and learning** (2) Responsibility and other moral values (3) = Cleanliness and tidiness and World events
When the two parents report together	(1) School and learning (2) Responsibility and other moral values (3) The future	(1) School and learning (2) Responsibility and other moral values (3) Family and relatives
According to the boy	(1) School and learning (2) Television (3) = Family and relatives and Responsibility and other moral values	
According to the girl		**(1) Family and relatives** (2) School and learning (3) The future

Last but not least, traditional research on children very often assumed that socialisation is a one-directional process, mainly related to parents' skills – those with knowledge about life and the world socialise those without that knowledge, i.e. the children. A bidirectional model of socialisation has only recently been adopted by experts (Kuczynski *et al,* 1997). Two main consequences arise from this new model: (a) adults can also learn from children. In fact they often do, although a general tendency is observed to undervalue the importance of such learning (these are "childish" things); (b) adults have often attributed intergenerational relationship problems to the behaviour of the younger generation. Aristotle

already showed concern about young people “losing” and changing traditional values. Ever since , it seems that all generations in western culture have viewed youngsters with a certain lack of confidence. Young people are often said not to “explain things to adults”. However, we now have research evidence in Europe that we adults are also changing our traditional values on how to raise children (Commission of the European Communities, 1990) and that it is often adults who avoid talking to younger people, particularly on topics where we know that they are more competent than we are (Casas, 2001) (Table 10).

Table 10.- Activities with video games reported by parents with their own child, when the child reports liking video games (Casas, 2001).

	Chat	Don’t chat	TOTAL
Play	30.1%	9.6%	39.7%
Don’t play	15.9%	44.3%	60.2%
TOTAL	46%	53.9%	99.9%

4.- Conceptual, research, policy and practice implications of the application of the quality of life perspective and research to children and childhood.

If we genuinely assume that quality of life includes people's perceptions, evaluations and aspirations about their own lives, we must conclude that real research on children’s quality of life is only just beginning. Researchers are only now starting to “listen to children”, to “discover” their opinions and evaluations and to realise that children's points of view may be different from adults', even on important matters, and that it is no longer clear that it is we adults who are “right”. More interestingly, this allows a new question: why do we differ in our perceptions and evaluations of important aspects of our everyday lives?

In order to develop well-designed intervention programs, of course, we need a better understanding of the reality we aim to change. However, the present state of the art of quality-of life research already allows us to point out some crucial aspects. These have not been researched specifically for children, but rather for overall populations. However, they seem to be equally valid for children’s populations:

a) Improving the quality of public services has a positive impact on people’s quality of life.
b) The participation of users of services in their design and functioning has positive effects on their perception and evaluation, as well as other positive consequences. For example, participation of people in the design of urban spaces has as an “appropriating” effect and, as a consequence, these spaces are better respected and people are more likely to ask others to respect them. The same effect has been observed on children when they participate in the design of city playgrounds. At a major population level, political democracy (respect for political rights and civil

rights) has been shown to probably contribute to people's greater happiness (Veenhoven, 2001).

c) Improving material living conditions has a positive impact on people's quality of life. The lower material living conditions are, the greater the impact when they are improved.
d) It is very difficult to improve the subjective well-being of people who are already very happy or very satisfied with life. However, it is comparatively easy to improve the subjective well-being of those who are unhappy or dissatisfied with their living conditions. An important political recommendation arises from such evidence: in order to have a clear global impact on the mean quality of life of any population, it is far more effective to focus action on those living in the worst conditions than on those already living in good conditions.
e) In order to understand the quality of life of any population, we need to know the point of view of all social agents involved. That includes children's points of view when we study their quality of life.
f) Improving satisfactory interpersonal relationships is probably the best way of producing a positive impact on people's subjective well-being.

Let us recall here that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948 states, in Article 25.1, that *Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care, and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.*

More than a decade ago Williams (1993) discussed the importance of quality of life in policy decisions and concluded that quality of life measurement, as a means of measuring the relative value of the benefits of different interventions, had a tremendous future at all levels, from the monitoring of individual performance to the establishment of social priorities. However, *it is likely to be several decades before we can expect to see this kind of data used routinely for policy decisions.*

When we talk about children's subjective well-being, the main problem we have at present is the lack of sufficient knowledge, caused by the absence of a long historical tradition of research in this field. However, although only very recently, various new research perspectives have begun to be developed, asking children about their lives and living conditions. These are promising first steps in a new stage of exploring children's "real" quality of life in the immediate future.

Children's perspectives allow us to learn, even in academic arenas, about "a different interpersonal and social world". The idea of "children's cultures" makes sense when we realise that children and adolescents have their own opinions, experiences, evaluations and aspirations, which *are constructed not only in their interactions with adults, but sometimes independently from us.* In fact, many different

studies have suggested that experiences, values, and perceptions are shared between parents and children much less than was once presumed (Kuczynski *et al*, 1997). This becomes particularly evident when we study audio-visual media use and the interpersonal relationships related to or mediated by these technologies. In order to advance, we still need an great deal of creativity and methodological work. Following some promising first results, it is of course necessary to replicate and improve our data collection designs and instruments.

Children, like adults, are citizens and users of services. Understanding their satisfaction with services and life domains is crucial in order to improve programmes addressing the quality of life for any group of children. Should children be included in the present debates on whether governments should develop policies aimed at increasing citizens' happiness or satisfaction with life and on what such policies would be like?

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