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The Wellbeing of Children: Its Source and How It is Affected by a Sense of Exclusion and Acculturation

A condition for realisation of the developmental potential of every human being, and, in particular, that of a child, is satisfaction of the need to be happy, safe, liked, loved and accepted.

Development is defined as the process of systematic changes in behaviour that appear over time in human life (Trempała, 2011, p. 49). This process encompasses the many dimensions and spheres of life and its course shows both inter- and intrapersonal diversity. Depending on the period of life, thanks to the process of development, an individual attains relative independence in the satisfaction of his or her needs (cf. Brzezińska, 2000).

Particular periods in life are assigned to various demands and expectations and different developmental tasks (Gurba, 2011), the realisation of which determines the state of satisfaction or wellbeing. A state of wellbeing can also stem from undertaking new forms of activity, new roles and new tasks and their successful accomplishment. In the view of contemporary psychology, the analysis of objective economic conditions, age, and state of health is insufficient to draw conclusions on the wellbeing of a person. **Of much greater importance is the individual's own evaluation, his or her subjective view of himself/herself and his or her situation.** A low level of subjectively sensed wellbeing during the period of childhood can be related to a divergence between a negative self-evaluation of the child regarding his or her functioning in the family and school environment and the self-evaluation of his or her role-playing abilities in the roles of a child, pupil, colleague, friend. Such evaluations are affected by (1) internal (subjective factors) and (2) external (ex-subjective factors).

The sense of a child's wellbeing as an indicator of social adaptation

According to contemporary psychological concepts, a sense of wellbeing is considered to be a criterion of a good life, a manifestation of the sense of life, an indicator of optimism, the outcome of a balance between negative and positive emotions, a consequence of the realisation of one's life plan and the degree of

conformity to life goals (Strelau, 2000; Pervin, 2002; King, Eells & Burton, 2007). Thus, contradictory goals can lead to a low sense of wellbeing. A child from an ethnic minority often deals with this type of limitation of his or her wellbeing. On one hand, many families from ethnic minorities cultivate the culture of their ethnic group which is fundamental for the child, while on the other hand, the child needs the acceptance of schoolmates belonging to the ethnic majority. The forced need to function in two different cultural environments can restrict a child's sense of wellbeing. A possible response can be inappropriate behaviour, e.g., aggression or estrangement from one of the developmental/educational environments, or even from both.

Indices of wellbeing

The main problem related to the evaluation of wellbeing is recognition of the factors that influence this state. There are differences in the identification of such factors; between the hedonistic and eudaemonistic approaches.

According to the hedonistic approach, the sense of wellbeing depends on life conditions and life events (bottom-up model) or on the type of personality (top-down model). The category of life conditions includes the economic and social status of the family (Bradburn, 1969; Andrews & Whithey 1976; Campbell, Converse & Rodgers, 1976). The sum of everyday experiences determines the total sense of wellbeing (cf. Bańka, 2005). However, not many of today's families function under socio-economic conditions of relative long-term stability, a condition which represents a sort of restriction in a child's attaining a stable sense of wellbeing. Moreover, the dynamics of social events, including political changes in some regions of the world (e.g., recently in Ukraine, 2013–2014) can contribute to destabilisation of wellbeing and, in particular, undermine the sense of wellbeing in children. Cessation of dynamic socio-economic transformations, in particular those with negative connotations, does not necessarily lead to stabilisation of the sense of wellbeing. It has been shown that the elimination of external turmoil does not directly lead to a higher level of wellbeing (Diener, Lucas & Oishi, 2004). In view of the above, the hope that improvement in the economic situation of some ethnic minorities (e.g., the Roma) will bring about an increased sense of wellbeing and increased effectiveness of acculturation may be in vain. The same applies to improvement in material status.

According to the top-down model, the sense of wellbeing of an individual depends on his or her relatively stable features and educational interactions, and is relatively independent of the changing external conditions (cf. Czapiński, 2008). According to the bottom-up model, the sum of all partial satisfactions

and emotional experiences determines one's satisfaction with life. Therefore, an improvement in the material status of the family should increase the sense of wellbeing of its members, including the children (Kahneman, 1999). According to the livability theory of Veenhoven (1994; 1999), the conditions for wellbeing are more complex and include both subjective and situational variables, as well as their interactions. It is understood that if a human being fulfils his or her fundamental needs, then, with a further increase in income, his or her wellbeing does not necessarily increase. It should be understood that fundamental needs should be considered not only in the context of absolute poverty, but also in the context of relative poverty, and as so, relative to the difference between one's current economic status and the standards determined by specific criteria. The criteria can originate from the culture of the ethnic group to which one belongs, the expectations of parents, aspirations, etc. For instance, if the parents' aspirations as to the child's education are low and limited to reading simple texts written in the language of the majority and simple arithmetic in the range of up to 100, then the objectively measured small progress of the child does not necessarily diminish his or her sense of wellbeing. However, if the child assumes (e.g., by modelling) the higher standards of the ethnic majority encountered at school, then he or she can suffer an inner conflict between the aspirations and standards of the family and the aspirations and standards of schoolmates, and his or her sense of wellbeing can suffer.

According to the eudaemonistic approach, the sense of wellbeing is a result of the realisation of an individual's potential and only activity directed to valuable aims brings significance to human life. It should be mentioned, however, that the aims and their value is determined by the culture in which the individual grows and develops. From among the theories representing this approach, an interesting one is that proposed by Bach and Rioux (1996) according to which the wellbeing of an individual in social life is determined by the possibility of self-determination dependant on environmental resources, the degree of democratisation of society and the level of social equality (cf. Kowalik, 2000). Therefore, if the individual perceives divergence in the above aspects of social life between his or her own ethnic group and the ethnic majority in favour of his or her own ethnic group, then he or she can achieve a higher sense of wellbeing through alienation from the world of the ethnic majority. Moreover, the pressure to remain in the world of the ethnic majority can lead to aggression directed towards it.

According to the theory proposed by Raeburn and Rootman (1996), there are three dimensions to wellbeing: *being* – including physical being, psychological being and spiritual being; *belonging* – including local, social and ecological belonging; and *becoming* – pertaining to development, leisure and productivity.

Limitations in these dimensions lead to degradation of the sense of wellbeing understood as one's sense of happiness, experience of one's own existence to the fullest, one's own development and acceptance of the environment (cf. Kowalik, 2000). A child who spends the first years of life in the closest family (either in the ethnic majority or minority) assimilates their standards of happiness, norms of behaviour, and life goals, where he or she also experiences positive emotions, a sense of safety and social acceptance. Contact with completely different standards in the school environment can lead to a desire to escape and return to the family that often welcomes and supports the escapee and thus rewards the child's alienation from the external norms and alien ways of life. The child chooses belonging to the well-known safe world of the family and his or her own ethnic group. As follows, the normative approach to the construction of wellbeing brings an interesting explanation of the failure of acculturation of certain groups from ethnic minorities.

The above-mentioned two theories representing the eudaemonistic approach emphasise the significance of the desired states of social reality and the possibility of experiencing subjectivity and the determination of one's own fate for the development of a sense of wellbeing. **The above can be the basic conditions of or restrictions to the process of the adaptation of ethnic minority families to the culture of the ethnic majority.**

In terms of the concepts of Diener and Lucas (2005), emotions are crucial for wellbeing, and the level of wellbeing is determined by the ratio of positive and negative emotions. Emotions have hedonistic values; they can be pleasant or unpleasant. Emotions are evoked by an evaluation of situations and events experienced in life, though they can have different meanings for different people depending on personality and context. According to this concept, the coherence and repeatability of patterns of emotional responses are very important, and are most probably shaped in the process of development. At this stage of the study, the substantial significance of early-childhood experience cannot be rejected. Frequent experience of positive situations and events can encourage anticipation of such or similar ones in the future. As a consequence, positive emotions dominate over negative ones, and this, to a certain degree, contributes to achieving a higher level of wellbeing in life.

Causes of wellbeing and their correlates

The sense of wellbeing is the main criterion of mental health (Sheldon & Lubomirsky, 2007) and is a consequence of the evaluation of real events and own mental states by the subject with reference to subjective expectations and life

plans. The concept of one's own personality does not always correspond to the possibilities of the individual at a given time and is not always coherent within the present context of the individual, which can lead to a discrepancy between subjective evaluation and objective living conditions that can subsequently deteriorate one's subjective sense of wellbeing (Liberska, 2008).

The level of one's sense of wellbeing can change under the impact of current events, but to some degree it depends on the agreement between the character of the individual, his or her needs and potential, and the demands made by the external environment and those that the individual considers as his or her own. The sense of wellbeing only to a small degree depends on such factors as race, sex, living conditions and material status (Myers & Diener, 1995). Of much greater significance is the impact of the social skills considered very important for interpersonal relations, understood to be the main determinant of wellbeing. Other important factors affecting the sense of wellbeing are: high self-esteem (cf. Rosmus, 2005), a sense of internal control (cf. Kořta, 2001), a low level of neuroticism, extraversion, a high level of awareness (Zaborowski, 1994), orientation to activity (Czapiński 2008), interpersonal competence (Plopa, 2006), and construction of one's own intraindividual evaluation standards and evaluation standards worked out in comparisons between oneself and others.

The criteria of satisfaction with one's own life are based on the knowledge of reality and the expectations of one's life, but always in the context of relations with others. It is particularly well-pronounced in the early stages of human development, when the individual struggles to gain orientation in the world of valid norms and accepted aims and to find ways of their achievement. At later stages of development individual factors become more significant.

An important determinant of subjective wellbeing, not only in adults but also in children, is a sense of the meaning of life related to having goals and their realisation (Obuchowski, 2001; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). A successful activity can initiate the organisation of further activity, thus increasing the probability of successful activity in subsequent years of life (cf. Sheldon, Lubomirsky, 2007). Another important, although underestimated, factor affecting the sense of wellbeing is having free time which can be organised according to the autonomous decisions of the individual. The possibility of autonomous engagement in activities is also important for the wellbeing of children and adolescents. On the basis of longitudinal studies, it has been established that leisure activities enjoyed in the period of early adolescence are related to the level of satisfaction from life in adulthood (Argyle, 1999). Age also has been found to be an important factor for the sense of wellbeing; the highest levels of wellbeing are reported to be experienced between 18 and 21 years of age and at about 80 years of age.

The sense of wellbeing of a child in relation to his or her functioning at school and among peers

Rejection, sometimes even rejection by the whole class, represents an extreme disturbance of relations among pupils. In the period of childhood, when the need for affiliation is strengthened and peer norms determine a child's behaviour and become more important than parental norms (Kołodziejczyk, 2011), suffering from rejection can in extremely sensitive cases lead to suicide attempts (a form of autoaggression) (Obuchowska, 1996).

What are the reasons for peer rejection? The reasons for peer rejection can be multifarious – including physical differences, mental differences and socio-cultural differences. Such differences can be both positively and negatively assessed from the social standards point of view. A reason for rejection can be outstanding intelligence as well as weak intellectual powers, outstanding beauty as well as deficiency in this area (disability, obesity, poor eyesight, irregular facial features, etc.) (Heatherton, 2008). Other reasons for rejection include: coming from a pathological family (e.g., an alcoholic parent), an incomplete or large family, a different outlook on life (e.g., faith, membership in one church or another or being a non-believer), or belonging to a certain ethnic group. Social rejection and its more drastic form of social exclusion stem from the stereotypes and simplified processes of social categorisation (cf. Miluska, 2008). Children adopt the simplified ways of the categorisation of phenomena from their parents. Thus, social exclusion among children is caused by the adults who, not always consciously, pass their own stereotypical ways of thinking to their children. Further on in the developmental perspective, the process of stigmatisation can occur. It is realised through several stages.

- Perception of a difference from the standards (aims, norms) of the group;
- Reference to a stereotypical view of the negative aspects of the difference (he/she has a certain feature, so he/she is evil or he/she does not have a certain feature, so he/she is evil);
- Pressure exerted on the individual to make him/her change in behaviour, looks, etc. in order to conform to the standards of a given group;
- If the individual does not conform to the standards of the group, the pressure increases and takes on more harmful forms, such as isolation of the individual and limitation of his/her contacts with group members (e.g., “You cannot go with us on the trip.” “You cannot go with us for physical training activities/ PE lessons.” etc.);

- Exclusion of the individual from the group, the individual is devoid of the right to belong to the group (“You are not our mate.” “You cannot go to our school.”); the individual is stigmatised and eliminated from the group;
- Dehumanisation of the individual, the individual is devoid of human rights (e.g., “All children know their parents. You do not know your father, so you are not really a child.”) (Heatherton, 2008).

Tolerance versus acceptance and adaptation

Construction of rejection

1/ emotional

2/ intellectual/cognitive

3/ behavioural

full rejection



Although today tolerance of others appears to be higher than it was in the past, it is often mistaken for understanding and compassion and rarely accepted and respected in real terms. Sometimes tolerance exists only at the level of declaration and not in practice, so it is manifested only in verbal form and not in one's attitude towards the other person.

In general, one single factor is not sufficient to emotionally reject an individual. Of greater importance is the atmosphere in the classroom, at the school and in the family. Interestingly, children rejected at home are also rejected by peers at school. This can be explained. Children rejected by their parents develop certain socially depreciating types of behaviour, such as insecurity (lacking in self-confidence), avoidance of social contacts and aggressiveness that can become the reasons for peer rejection. Long-term peer rejection not only enhances the reasons for rejection, but also discourages learning and working on one's self and hinders the construction of one's own identity and the development of a concept of one's future and finding a place in society.

Peer rejection can be related to the phenomenon of the “tormenting of children by children,” or “bullying,” which often takes ritual form (sometimes resembling rituals drawn from the adult world), for example, the cruelty-filled initiation of a new pupil in the class, with the example for this taken from popular films showing life in other cultures (for example, the new pupil has his or her head shoved into the toilet; he or she is forced to hand over money to the tormentors or perform humiliating services for them, such as cleaning their shoes, etc.) (Obuchowska, 1996; Kołodziejczyk, 2011; Deptuła, 2013).

Peer rejection can also lead to the development of a sense of helplessness. According to developmental psychology, feelings of helplessness originate mainly in the family. However, such feelings can also come from school and peer groups. Rejection, leading to depreciation of self-esteem and accompanied by the loss of belief in having an impact on events, can lead to a sense of helplessness. As a consequence, the sense of wellbeing is diminished. From the life perspective, this state leads to inhibition of one's activities. A person who has suffered rejection is likely to fear engaging in any activity that could change his or her fate and remains on the margins of social life. Thus, such a person loses a chance of improving his or her wellbeing. As a result of the above process, the child/person keeps to his or her circle of the social minority, as in this way it is possible to increase one's sense of wellbeing, because this circle accepts the standards and behaviour of the child/person that were not accepted by the external world. Thus, the process of adaptation to the school environment is blocked and the process of acculturation is inhibited. At an intermediate stage the rejected child can develop aggression towards his or her tormentors (peers), as well as towards his or her own ethnic group, making this group responsible for peer rejection at school (it should be noted that sometimes the child suffers rejection not only by peers, but also by teachers). This problem is presented in more details in a separate paper. This attitude closes the loop of social alienation and stabilises the low sense of wellbeing.

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Intercultural psychology is a science that was established in the end of the 60s of the last century based on the needs of the current world, a world characterized by globalization and the accompanying migration of populations with the resulting mutual blending of cultures, ethnicities, nations and national minorities. All of this has a large impact on the behavior and life experience of individuals, as well as on large groups of people and their adopted behavioral patterns.

Intercultural psychology – explores the specific influence of various cultures on the behavior and life experience of humans – the influence of globalization. It helps us understand the global nature of the world and to treat it with respect and a value that the values of each and every individual determine how it will develop further; it helps us understand the principle of interdependence. Global thoughts on the global nature of the world can be found in the work of Viki and Juby (1997).

What is important is communication between cultures, the comparison of psychological differences between cultures, the effort to discover distinctive psychological features of each ethnic living in individual cultures, and at the same time the effort to discover the general laws governing all cultures.

Currently much research focuses on the coexistence of ethnicities within one country and on the attitude of the majority towards immigrants. Further research subjects include the effectiveness of working in groups of diverse ethnic composition (e.g. school classes, work multi-cultural, culturally diverse approaches to family upbringing and various methods of communication). In the field of education, attention is focused on the differences in attitudes towards school and education (Tytcha, 2004; Jančová, 2010).

A typical method of intercultural psychology is the comparative method – comparing the similarities and differences of psychological phenomena amongst the members of various cultures, ethnic, racial and religious communities. Individuals perceive and experience the world in connection with where they live, in which cultural, political and economic environment their people live, and in connection with their mutual interactions with other people. People develop relationships with shared values, they adopt communication standards and the native system, but they also respect and adopt stereotypes, practices, options and norms. These depend on the culture they identify with, what nationality they are, which nation they proclaim to be their own.