



Child Well-Being in Latin America: contributions to child indicators research

Lívia Maria Bedin¹ · Jorge Castellá Sarriera² · Jaime Alfaro³

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Abstract

This Special Issue was compiled to advance an interdisciplinary understanding of the complexity of conceptualizations, determinants, consequences, and measurement of child well-being of children and adolescents fully devoted to Latin-American. It seeks to enhance by contributing with studies on socioeconomic determinants and access to material goods, as well as regarding the conditions of urban life, the school, the neighbourhood, including personal aspects, while considering contributions in instrumental resources for research. This is an important step forward for the well-being researchers in a region of the world that still needs a lot of new scientific knowledge, and where many new actions should be undertaken to improve children and adolescent's well-being. We hope that as a result of this special issue, the scientific research in this field will increase in Latin America.

Keywords Child well-being · Latin America

Research on well-being in childhood and adolescence in Latin America dates back many years (e.g., Sarriera, 1996). However, it has been in the last 10 years that partnerships between researchers from different countries in this part of the American continent have grown closer. It is worth pointing out an event where scientific researchers from Brazil, Chile, Argentina and Spain met in 2010 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and started a new network named PROTEBA (*Proyecto Translatino de Estudios de Bienestar en la Infancia y Adolescencia*). This network was a facilitator of collaborative research to publish several scientific articles in the following years (as for example: Alfaro et al., 2014; Alfaro, et al., 2015; Casas et al., 2015; Sarriera

✉ Lívia Maria Bedin
liviabedin@gmail.com

¹ Department of Developmental and Personality Psychology, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 50 Independência Avenue, apartment 803, Porto Alegre, RS 90035-070, Brazil

² Doctoral and Master Program in Psychology, and Master Program in Social Policy and Social Work, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Brazil

³ Faculty of Psychology, Universidad del Desarrollo, Santiago, Chile

et al., 2012; Sarriera et al., 2014; Sarriera et al., 2015) and was also a promotor of reflections, debates and even international stage-exchanges related to new research on children's subjective well-being. And above all, it was the beginning of a valuable training process for a prominent group of young researchers who are focusing on the understanding and promotion of well-being and quality of life of children and adolescents in Latin America.

Another driving force behind the advancement of studies on childhood well-being was the participation of researchers from Latin America in the International Society for Child Indicators (ISCI) Conferences held in York (3rd Conference, 2011), Seoul (4th Conference, 2013), Cape Town (5th Conference, 2015), Montreal (6th conference, 2017) and Tartu (7th Conference). In our participation in the 3rd ISCI Conference, in 2011 (York), an invitation was made so that we could be part of the ISCI board, and also be part of the Childrens' Worlds international survey, including survey data from some countries in America Latina. In 2019, at the last ISCI conference held in Tartu, Estonia, the ISCI board agreed that it was time to take the ISCI Conference to be held for the first time in Latin America.

The 8th ISCI Conference would be held in 2021, however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the conference will be held on May 25th to 27th, 2022, in Gramado, Brazil. During the planning of the conference, interest in organizing the special edition of the Child Indicators Research arose, seeking to give visibility to research carried out in Latin America related to children's indicators with a focus on well-being. As the participation of researchers from Latin America in ISCI conferences has been very scarce, the purpose was to expand the network of researchers, practitioners and interested in the topic, to strengthen the group, as several partnerships among Argentina-Brazil-Chile were already underway.

In that regard, efforts are being made to enhance visibility to the reality of research carried out in Latin America, which affect the lives of children. The aim is to strengthen ties and include other countries in Latin America on the the movement of child indicators, expanding the ISCI network and fighting to guarantee children's rights, such as the right to be heard and taken into account. This is in line with the 2015's sustainable development summit of the United Nations (UN), which formally adopted the "2030 Agenda", an action plan comprising a set of 17 goals and 169 universal goals, which are integrated and indivisible, including ensuring a healthy life and promoting well-being for all (goal number 3), at all ages (UN, 2015), with children and adolescents in Latin America as focus on this special issue.

Documents such as the United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (Child Rights Convention, UN General Assembly, 1989), which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989, have been a most influential factor to consolidate this tendency. Children have to count and to be taken into account, as human beings with universal human rights. The child indicators movement that appears at the end of the twenty century in the international arena (Ben-Arieh, 2008) symbolizes that children's self-reported well-being and children's quality of life can be measured both at macro-social and at micro-social level – and that they are key informants to report on these phenomena, as well as experts in their own lives (Casas, 2016).

The vast majority of research on well-being in childhood comes from the realities of the developed world, especially in Europe and the USA. On the other hand, research on this subject is still insufficient in developing countries (Casas et al., 2014; Tiliouine, 2015). Studies in Latin America point to the main issues addressed in developing countries, such as overcoming the limitations of traditional methods of assessing well-being and poverty which are usually centralized in the two traditional methods most used (income-based and unmet basic needs), but which do not represent the reality of the Latin American people (Battiston et al., 2013). Many poverty reduction programs, which are generally popular in Latin America, tend to accentuate strategies to generate higher incomes. However, by focusing on income, programs tend to neglect the impact they can have on satisfying family relationships, availability and use of free time, community satisfaction, and other key aspects. We must not lose sight of the fact that people experience well-being as entire human beings and not as fragmented humans (Rojas, 2015).

In this way, we are very happy that this issue is dedicated to Latin America, its children and adolescents. We highlight the importance of contexts and, sometimes, we do not stop to analyse the influence of socio-cultural determinants on the well-being of children. Martín-Baró (1998), psychologist, Jesuit and assassinated by the Salvadoran dictatorship, already told us that our young students were learning a Developmental Psychology at the University based on experiences and research collected with white, middle-class young people, mostly North Americans. Therefore, it was necessary to build knowledge of the Latin American population, so as not to be colonized again. We are aware that, in addition to the importance of subjective, psychological and psychosocial well-being, socio-community well-being acquires all relevance for Latin America considering the poverty and inequality of its peoples. We believe that those who work to develop a sense of belonging to their communities, strengthen their beliefs and popular knowledge, work on building community health (Sarriera, Saforcada & Alfaro, 2015b) and integrating family and community are the best guarantee of the possibilities for change and for social justice to achieve better levels of well-being and quality of life (Sarriera & Bedin, 2017).

The debate and study of these issues increasingly highlights the importance of considering contextual processes and structures of everyday life (Ben-Arieh, et al., 2014; Sarriera, Saforcada & Alfaro, 2015b; Fattore et al., 2019). In such a way that well-being is investigated from perspectives that include the indissoluble relationship between the individual and the group, conceptualizing well-being as an emerging of life in common, resulting from processes shared and inscribed in life with others, through which the goods (material, social, symbolic-cultural, and also personal-psychological) necessary for well-being are distributed and exchanged, and therefore where the experience of well-being is configured and emerges (White, 2017). Regarding the study of the multiple systemic contexts, they would contribute to understanding and explaining well-being more broadly and robustly, and the dynamics of its determinants (Oyarzún, et al. 2019). Themes in relation to which there is less knowledge regarding their relevance to the well-being of children and adolescents.

The 16 papers included in this special issue address and contribute to these challenges and needs in the study of children and adolescents' well-being in Latin

American. A first set of works focuses on the study of the socio-economic and material context impact on the well-being of Latin American children and adolescents.

Among these works is the study “Measuring Overcrowding in Households with Children: Official vs. Actual Thresholds in the Ecuadorian Case” by **Juan Pablo Díaz-Sánchez and collaborators**, which analyses the relationship between the habitability conditions of homes where there are children and their association with their health, discussing the relevance of improving the methodologies to measure and evaluate housing conditions in Ecuador. In a similar vein, a second work entitled “Childhood Geography: a study about Children’s Satisfaction with Housing in Buenos Aires Province, Argentina” by **Graciela Tonon and colleagues**, delves into the description of the housing conditions of Argentinian children, and their satisfaction based on information collected in the third wave of the ISCWeB study, providing valuable information on basic housing quality, and the alternatives of having their own space. A third work entitled “Mind the gap! Socioeconomic determinants of the stunting urban-rural gap for children in Colombia” by **Ernesto Cardenas et al.**, studied the differences between rural and urban living conditions as determinants of stunting in Colombian children, providing valuable evidence regarding the importance of the economic resources of each household, the education of mothers, and the access and use of health services, as the main determinants of child growth.

A fourth study of this type is the “Worlds 1st and 3rd Wave of 10 and 12-year-olds Sample”, by **Fabiane Schütz and colleagues**, which investigates the differences in subjective well-being of 10 and 12-year-old Brazilian boys and girls using data from the First and Third Waves of data collection from the Children’s Worlds study, which provides evidence on the significant reduction in child subjective well-being indexes between 2012 and 2019, which from the authors’ perspective is related to the effect of the profound changes in the decrease in investment in education, access to health and social care, as well as in the policies of children’s rights in general in Brazil, also highlighting the relevance of the participation of children in the development of public policies aimed at them. A fifth and last work of this set is entitled “Access to material resources and the subjective well-being of children in Brazil and Chile”, by **Ana Loreto Ditzel and collaborators**, which studies the relationship between the perception of access to material resources and life satisfaction in children from Brazil and Chile, which, based on the information collected in the third wave of Children’s Worlds research, reports the positive relation of these perceptions and the levels of satisfaction in the areas related to family, friends and school.

A second set of papers published in this special issue refers to the effects on the well-being of community settings where the daily lives of Latin American children and adolescents take place, considering both aspects such as mobility and displacement in urban areas, as well as the qualities of the relationships they maintain with adults in different spaces. A first work is entitled “Urban mobility and subjective well-being among Brazilian children” by **Cibele Mariano Vaz de Macedo et al.**, which studies the relationship between autonomous urban mobility and subjective well-being in Brazilian children, reporting that autonomy in the mobility and playing in streets/parks or open spaces in the city without an adult increases the possibility of greater well-being, as well as, on the contrary, the use of public transport without an adult and the frequency of going to and from

school without an adult companion are predictors of a lower level of well-being, thereby providing valuable evidence on the relevance of the conditions of life in the city for children's well-being.

A second work, entitled "Rights and Overall Life Satisfaction of 10- and 12-year-old Children in Three Countries" by **Ferran Casas et al.**, explores the contribution that their perceptions of participation and the ways in which adults listen to them and take them into account, comparing in three countries (two of them Latin-American) according to age and sex, finding as a result that the opportunities of children to participate in the decisions that affect the home, the school and neighbourhood contribute significantly to their well-being. A third work in this category is the one entitled "School and neighbourhood relationships that affect well-being based on Chilean children's understandings" by **Carolina Aspillaga et al.**, which, using a qualitative methodological framework, studies the understandings that Chilean children and adolescents have about their relationships with others, both in the neighbourhood and at school, reporting that three central aspects of these experiences are crucial: the feeling of belonging, closeness, support and security both among peers and with adults in the neighbourhood and school context; the ability to motivate and entertain teaching-learning relationships in school settings; and the feelings and experiences of satisfaction with the physical and material conditions of their neighbourhoods and schools.

A third set of studies included refers to the impact on well-being that the school context has, in dimensions related to the bond and interpersonal relationships that occur at school, both between teacher and student, as well as among children and adolescents themselves. A first work included here is the one entitled "Understanding the Relationship between Preschool Teachers' Well-Being, Interaction Quality and Students' Well-Being", by **Marigen Narea et al.**, which reports the incidence of the teacher-student relationship on well-being of students, providing evidence in favour of the relevance of the affective balance of teachers, and their ability to respond to the emotional and behavioural needs and problems in children.

A second work included in this category is the study "Characterization of Well-being and its Relationship with Exposure to Violence in Mexican and Chilean Early and Late Adolescents during the COVID-19 Pandemic" by **Mónica Viviana Bravo Sanzana et al.**, considering the well-being of Mexican and Chilean adolescents in the school context during the COVID pandemic, focused on the relationship between victimization and hedonic and eudaimonic well-being, generating relevant evidence regarding the risk factors that cause confinement situations associated with COVID-19 in the adolescent mental health. A third and last work with this focus is the one entitled "Life Satisfaction, Bullying, and Feeling Safe as a Protective Factor for Chilean and Brazilian Adolescents", by **Jorge Javier Varela and collaborators**, regarding the role of the perception of safety against the effects of bullying on life satisfaction in adolescents in the school context, with a sample of Chilean and Brazilian students participating in the Third Wave of the ISCWeB study. The work generates evidence that supports the promotion of safer environments at schools, within families, and in our communities in Latin America.

A fourth set of selected works refers to psychological and mental health dimensions, and their relationship with well-being in Latin American children. Included

here is a first work entitled “Life satisfaction and character strengths in Ecuadorian adolescents” by **Paula Yépez-Tito and colleagues**, which studies the relationship between satisfaction with life, and character strengths, controlling for family structure, gender, age and socioeconomic level. They report significant association among satisfaction, gender and family structure, but not regarding age or socioeconomic level. They also provide evidence in favour of the protective role of character strengths in the face of difficulties during adolescence.

Secondly, the work “Integration, Social Competence, and Life Satisfaction: The Mediating Effect of Resilience and Self-Esteem in Adolescents”, by **Alejandra Caqueo-Urizar et al.**, with Chilean adolescents aged 12 to 18 years, points the main result that self-esteem and resilience have a direct effect on life satisfaction, while resilience acts as a mediating variable in the relationship between self-esteem and satisfaction with life, also indicating that social competence would have a direct effect on self-esteem and an indirect effect on satisfaction with life. In third place in this category, the work entitled “Adverse childhood experiences and mental health: when well-being matters” by **Loreto Leiva et al.**, with Chilean adolescents, presented as a result significant differences in all dimensions of subjective well-being between those who presented some adversity and those who did not. The cumulative effect of adversities was associated with poor well-being, and mental health was favored when the subjective well-being was higher.

Finally, in a fifth set of works contained in this special issue, we have two scale validation works for research on childhood, where in the first place is the work “Psychometric properties of subjective children’s well-being scales: a multigroup study investigating school type, gender, age and region of children in the south and south-east regions of Brazil” by **Aline Lopes Moreira et al.**, and secondly the work “Psychometric Properties of the Community Sense Scale in the Classroom in a sample of Chilean students” by **Mariavictoria Benavente and collaborators**.

Here we present a small seed, of knowledge and research, with the participation of our children and adolescents, born in six Latin American countries, where we can listen to what they say, sometimes with hope, sometimes with sadness, of contexts where there is overcrowding, lack and difficulties of resources: health, education, income, etc. Living without knowing if a stray bullet or a tragedy passes by their door, without knowing for sure what will happen the day of tomorrow.

This is the challenge of well-being, that one cannot stay in an ivory tower, but go to the field and feel what is present in the eyes and in the soul of every child in the world and perceive that they will undoubtedly be resilient, something that many of us, adults, would not be able to be, to grow as citizens of good.

This special issue is fully devoted to Latin-American empirical research on well-being of children and adolescents. This is an important step forward for the well-being researchers in a region of the world that still needs a lot of new scientific knowledge, and where many new actions should be undertaken to improve children and adolescent’s well-being. It presents a very broad selection of research topics related to children’s well-being. We hope that as a result of this work, the scientific research in this field will increase in Latin America.

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Declarations

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