

## Part 6

### Research Education & Research Practice

Jutta Ecarius

#### Wellbeing of Adolescents as a Requirement for Education in Late Modernity

##### Abstract

In late modernity, discourses of optimization and acceleration dominate. The current debate on wellbeing is directly linked to this, as a good wellbeing in late modernism with an open ethical horizon can be seen as a positive point of reference for education. A good wellbeing is a prerequisite for being convinced with self-efficacy that life is to a large extent self-directed. With regard to youth and education, the question arises as to how these processes and their consequences in youth life make themselves felt – above all because contemporary educational and social science interpretations do not paint an optimistic picture, but primarily consider risks and uncertainties as effects of the new structural conditions. The paper presents quantitative empirical findings of a secondary analysis with 5,520 respondents, 10 to 18 years old in the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia (Germany) and shows connections (cluster analysis) of good and bad wellbeing of adolescents, age, gender, lifestyle as well as self-satisfaction, moods, control over life and decisions in an empirical way.

Keywords: wellbeing, self-efficacy, youth, education, late modern societies

##### Introduction

In late modernity signs are acceleration in technology, in social and private life forms (Rosa, 2013), with invocation of optimization gaining in importance. With regard to youth and education, the question arises as to how these processes and their consequences can be felt in youth life – above all because many of today's contemporary social science interpretations do not paint an optimistic picture of the freedoms that have been gained, but primarily consider risks and uncertainties as effects of the new structural conditions (Ehrenberg, 2008, p. 23). The theme of the subject's wellbeing is directly linked to this, since good wellbeing can be regarded as a positive reference point for individuals, which makes education possible. In view of these diagnosed social expectations, the empirical question arises as to how late modern requirements affect lives of adolescents and their wellbeing.

The first section illustrates the wellbeing of adolescents in the context of international and national studies. In the second section, the results of the quantitative secondary analysis (cluster analysis) of 5,520 respondents, 10-18-year-old youths (Germany) with very good and very poor wellbeing will be presented and

subsequently discussed in the context of late modern life and its challenges for education.

## Wellbeing of children and adolescents

Wellbeing is currently a concept which, despite different definitions, seems to become an increasingly strong category for the representation and assessment of the constitution of the population and of individual groups or states of individuals (Sointu, 2005). Considering the wide range of applications, it quickly becomes clear how difficult it is to specify the precise content. In this way, various specialist traditions can be identified that operate with wellbeing, quality of life, happiness and life satisfaction (Statham & Chase, 2010).

The international study entitled *Child poverty in perspective: an overview of child-wellbeing in rich countries* (UNICEF, 2007), which compared the situation of children in 21 industrialized nations, can be seen as an initial impetus for the consideration of children's wellbeing. Taking into account the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the welfare of children was examined. In the third follow-up study (UNICEF, 2013), the concept was varied for the first time and the wellbeing of children was determined using data on five dimensions (material wellbeing, health/safety, education, behaviour and risks, housing and the environment). Subsequently, the subjective wellbeing of the 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds was interrogated. In the overall analysis of objective data, Germany ranked 6<sup>th</sup> out of 29 participating countries in 2013; only rank 22<sup>nd</sup> in life satisfaction (see German Committee for UNICEF e. V., 2013).

The World Vision Children's Studies (World Vision Deutschland, 2007; 2013) also deal with childhood wellbeing and since 2007 have been interviewing more than 2,500 children aged 6-11 nationwide. In the 2010 study, the previously differentiated areas were supplemented by the question of "self-efficacy and the question of good life in accordance with the capability approach" (Hurrelmann et al., 2013, p. 283), since self-efficacy is seen as a key factor for a good life (Ibid., p. 283f.; Andresen et al., 2010).

In summary, the following is clear: 1) Research findings at national and international level focus on children. There is no explicit focus on adolescents. 2) The respective operationalisations and survey methods vary widely. 3) There are also a few empirical approaches to the wellbeing of adolescents. If we now add the contemporary diagnoses already mentioned, the category of a subjective wellbeing of adolescents in particular offers the possibility of being able to answer questions about how they deal with the demands of late modernism.

## Data basis for the analysis of adolescent wellbeing

A secondary analysis of a representative panoramic study of youth life conducted in 2012 was carried out on a total of 5,520 respondents, 10-18 years old in order to investigate youthful wellbeing in late modernity. In July/August 2012, adolescents of the 4<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> grade from 141 schools in North Rhine-Westphalia were surveyed (Maschke et al., 2013). Sampling largely corresponds to school statistics of this northern German state. The data were evaluated for the secondary

analysis according to common statistical methods (SPSS, cluster analysis). The results are primarily significant (Fischer test: significance threshold  $r=0.05$ ).

In order to obtain a precise picture of the youth's wellbeing, the respondents' responses to four general statements on youthful self-awareness were clustered into the groups of very poor wellbeing, very good wellbeing and medium wellbeing. The four statements (I'm quite happy with myself; I mean that I have a number of good qualities; I find myself quite OK; sometimes I think I'm not good at all) the respondents agreed with 'right exactly' and 'right rather' or with 'right rather not' and 'right not' expressed their negative attitude.

Adolescents with very good wellbeing agree with the first three statements and deny the last one. Conversely, it is the case for adolescents with very poor wellbeing. In order to emphasize this strong contrast, the adolescents were assigned to a medium wellbeing with different response patterns.

The general distribution of these contrast groups is extremely positive: Almost two thirds of the adolescents belong to the group with very good wellbeing ( $n=3,462$ ), significantly fewer report a medium wellbeing ( $n=1,912$ ) and only very few belong to the group with very bad wellbeing ( $n=145$ ). Adolescents with very good wellbeing are mainly male adolescents aged between 16 and 18 years who attend high school or vocational college. The group of adolescents with very poor wellbeing is made up of female primary or secondary school pupils aged 13 to 15 years. In the contrasting group with very good wellbeing, however, their proportion is significantly less than half, so that in this group the proportion of boys and young men (55.9%,  $n=5508$ ;  $r=0.000$ ) outweighs (very bad wellbeing: 65.5% girls).

Compared to the overall distribution of respondents by age (10-12 years: 34.4%; 13-15 years: 37.6%; 16-18 years: 28.0%), the figures are shifting, especially in the middle and the oldest age group. In the case of adolescents with very good wellbeing, the proportion of respondents aged 16-18 increases and the proportion of 13- to 15-year-olds decreases. In the contrasting group of those with very poor wellbeing, however, the share of the middle age group increases significantly (8.6 percentage points to 46.2%) and the share of 16- to 18-year-olds decreases (7.3 percentage points to 20.7%).

If one compares the distribution of contrasting groups in school forms, it is noticeable that the proportions of adolescents with very good wellbeing in the higher school branches and those with the oldest adolescents are constantly increasing. While 51.7% of secondary modern schools and 56.7% of secondary modern schools are attended by adolescents with a very good level of wellbeing, 68.5% of those with a high school education attend secondary school and 75.4% of those with a very high level of wellbeing attend secondary school.

In addition, relationships to wellbeing can be seen in the form of a family as well as in the work and school leaving certificate of the parents. Adolescents who live with their biological parents, who have higher educational attainment and higher incomes, tend to feel a little more comfortable. In the group of adolescents with very good wellbeing, 41.9% of parents have a higher school certificate. In the contrast group, this proportion is only about a third. In this respect, it becomes clear that the material situation in the family has an impact on wellbeing. However, it is also possible to provide for the wellbeing of their children in families with less economic capital.

### **The view of adolescents of themselves**

When looking at youthful wellbeing, this is usually done by means of satisfaction scales with regard to general life or different areas of life. However, in order to examine the wellbeing of adolescents more profoundly, the subjective perspective of the adolescents, i.e. their self-image, must also be examined. In the statements 'Actually, I can be proud of some things about me' and 'I would like to stay the way I am now' and 'sometimes I wish I were different' (n=1108-1126; r=0,000) the differences between the two contrast groups clearly show up. Almost all 10 to 18-year-olds with very good wellbeing agree with these statements 'agrees exactly' or 'agrees rather' (pride: 97.3%; so remain: 85.7%). Even more than half (65.1%) of them agree with the statements with 'agrees exactly'. Staying as they are, 51.7% want to be accurate (rather: 34%). This unrestricted approval is not at all or very seldom in the case of adolescents with very poor wellbeing (pride: correct: 3.7%; as I am: 0.00%). At 77.8%, they also wish they were different.

This clear finding can be substantiated by statements aimed at the social embedding of adolescents. This can be exemplified by the answering behaviour to the statements 'Often I think that no one can like me' or 'Sometimes I have the impression that I am somehow superfluous'. While respondents with very good wellbeing rarely use the response categories 'right exactly' or 'right rather', about three quarters of those with very bad wellbeing report this. Not only with more than 50% of 'right on time' they say to be sometimes superfluous, but even with 59.3% of 'right on time' they sometimes seem to be unimportant.

Wellbeing expresses itself through the mood of the adolescents, who are often addressed with the statement 'I frequently change my mood'. Here, the two contrasting groups are opposed to each other: with very good wellbeing, they say that they only have 8.8% change in mood (accurately) while those with very bad wellbeing have 48.1%. Also, 51.9% of them have the impression that they are 'somehow superfluous' (very good wellbeing: 3.9%).

### **The influence of adolescents on decisions and their view of the future**

As has been pointed out, it is characteristic of a late modern youth that adolescents should have the ability to make decisions for their own life and to choose the right one from a variety of options. This also implies dealing with the uncertainties and uncertainties of our time. In view of highly individualized CVs, decisions are no longer made for eternity. Skills of self-organization and self-reflexivity must be developed in adolescence in order to be able to meet the neo-liberal appeals of the entrepreneurial. Positive references to oneself – self-satisfaction and self-confidence, which are reported above all by adolescents with very good wellbeing – seem to be basic prerequisites for this. But do these adolescents also navigate confidently through their lives and make self-confident decisions?

Following on from the adolescents' self-satisfaction, their self-efficacy (expectation) is of interest (control over their own life, n=5407-5415; r=0,000) and how the two contrasting groups differ with regard to the skills required in late modernism. Self-efficacy and self-assurance can be seen particularly in the assessment of the statement 'I can direct my life to a large extent myself'. Both

contrast groups are extremely optimistic and self-determined. Thus, both adolescents with very bad as well as very good wellbeing agree with this statement predominantly with 'agrees exactly' and 'agrees rather' (very bad wellbeing: 70.4%; very good wellbeing: 92.7%). The main difference lies in the absolute agreement with the answer category 'right on the money' (very good wellbeing: 49.9% is right on the money; very bad wellbeing: 23.2% is right on the money).

The statement 'In life everything goes on a regulated course' also refers to the extent to which one's own biography is experienced as controllable, plannable and stringent or whether the attitude prevails that a clearly structured normal life cycle is no longer a matter of course. Although the adolescents with very good wellbeing (21% is correct, 37.3% is correct) are not quite as positive as in the previous statement, the expectations for a regular life in comparison to the contrasting group (very bad wellbeing: exactly 7.7% is correct, more or less 27.3%) are nevertheless higher. The majority of these 10 to 18-year-olds, who do not feel well, are increasingly reckoning with uncertainties or are already more likely to be confronted with critical situations and irregularities in their lifestyles.

The fact that the future perspectives of the two contrasting groups are different is also illustrated by a further assessment of the future of the adolescents surveyed, which is not aimed at the general view, but more strongly at self-determined life planning. Respondents should give their opinion as to whether they 'not yet' or 'pretty much' know what they want to do with themselves and their lives (life planning:  $n=1062$ ;  $r=0.000$ ). 61.1% of those with a very bad wellbeing don't really know 'what to do with me and my life' (very good wellbeing: 27.9%).

It is noticeable that adolescents with very good wellbeing are almost twice as likely to 'pretty much' know what they want to do with themselves and their lives. If adolescents feel comfortable in the here and now and if they are satisfied with themselves, they are more confident and confident about their future lives. In contrast, the majority of 10 to 18-year-olds with very poor wellbeing are less positive about their future lives.

### **Adolescent wellbeing and late modern subject requirements**

Finally, the research findings are to be discussed against the background of current social science diagnoses. The following question is to be answered: To what extent adolescents with very good and very bad wellbeing meet the subject requirements of the late modern age or may not be able to meet them? Following on from the more recent subjectivization theories, global late modernity requires a young subject that learns to organize itself, to educate itself and to assess social skills and educational possibilities. Even though adolescents with very poor wellbeing are a minority, they still provide cause for concern. Their low self-efficacy expectations are particularly evident in the fact that they want to reduce the burden on their decisions, are dissatisfied with themselves and see their future less clearly. In contrast to the very large contrasting group of adolescents with very good wellbeing, these adolescents will find it more difficult to manage their own lives in the present and the future. On the other hand, those with very good wellbeing are prepared for the demands of late modernism in the sense of an entrepreneurial self. Their self-efficacy (expectations) is extremely positive. They are satisfied with themselves and are even proud of themselves. With this self-confidence they want to

make their own decisions for their own lives and take their future into their own hands.

In view of the fact that the majority of adolescents surveyed have a very good wellbeing, the sociological diagnoses, which address a greater (health) suffering in the face of uncertainties and options, can only be accepted by a small minority. This is not intended to contradict the diagnoses, but to raise the question of how exactly this very bad – but also very good – wellbeing comes about. This would have to be addressed in particular against the background of the design of transitions into the working world or partnerships, since in these biographical phases the growing subjects are likely to become more vulnerable.

## References

- Andresen, S., Hurrelmann, K. & Fegter, U. (2010): How are our children? In World Vision Germany e. V. (Ed.) *Children in Germany 2010. 2<sup>nd</sup> World Vision Children's Study* (pp. 35-59). Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer paperback.
- Andresen, S., Fegter, S. & Hurrelmann, K. (2013): Wellbeing, poverty and justice from the children's point of view. In World Vision Germany e. V. (Ed.) *Children in Germany 2013. 3<sup>rd</sup> World Vision Children's Study* (pp. 26-47). Weinheim/Basel: Beltz.
- Bröckling, U. (2007): *The entrepreneurial self*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- German Committee for UNICEF e. V. (2013): *UNICEF report on the situation of children in industrialised countries 2013*. Cologne. <https://www.unicef.de/blob/18782/7417138f1edd5058dce29dde29d01c8b/unicef-bericht-2013-zusammenfassung-data.pdf>. Accessed 30.03.2017.
- Ehrenberg, A. (2008): *The exhausted self*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Hurrelmann, K., Andresen, S. & Schneekloth, U. (2013): The wellbeing of children in Germany. In H. Bertram (Ed.) *Rich, clever, happy children?* (pp. 277-291). Weinheim/Basel: Beltz Juventa.
- Schneekloth, U. & Andresen, S. (2013): What is fair and what is unfair: the different faces of justice. In World Vision Germany e. V. (Ed.) *Children in Germany 2013* (pp. 48-78). Weinheim/Basel: Beltz.
- Sointu, E. (2005): The Rise of an Ideal: Tracing Changing Discourses of Wellbeing. *Sociological Review*, 53(2), 255-274.
- Statham, J. & Chase, E. (2010): Childhood Wellbeing: A brief overview. In *Briefing Paper 1*. Childhood Wellbeing Research Centre. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/183197/Child-Wellbeing-Brief.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/183197/Child-Wellbeing-Brief.pdf). Accessed 13.12.2016.
- UNICEF (2007): *Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child wellbeing in rich countries. Innocenti Report Card 7*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre. <https://www.unicef.org/media/files/ChildPovertyReport.pdf>. Accessed 08.12.2016.
- UNICEF Office of Research (2013): *Child wellbeing in rich countries: A comparative overview. Innocenti Report Card 11*. Florence: UNICEF Office of Research. [https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc11\\_eng.pdf](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc11_eng.pdf). Accessed 08.12.2016.
- World Vision Germany e. V. (Ed.) (2007): *Children in Germany 2007*. Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer paperback.
- World Vision Germany e. V. (Ed.) (2013): *Children in Germany 2013*. Weinheim/Basel: Beltz.

Prof. Dr. Jutta Ecarius, University of Cologne, Germany, [jecarius@uni-koeln.de](mailto:jecarius@uni-koeln.de)