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INVITED COMMENTARY by Alan Hayes

on 'Child well-being in comparative perspective' by Jonathan Bradshaw

Professor Bradshaw is to be congratulated on an excellent, thought-provoking paper.

While well-being has had a long history in social policy, Jonathan Bradshaw challenges us to consider the limitations of objective measures and focus more sharply on the subjective dimensions of well-being, as reflected in the voices of children and young people. He highlights the value of large-scale comparative datasets that illustrate the disjunction between poverty, however measured, and the perceptions that children have of their current circumstances and prospects. As such, he provides a thought-provoking set of speculations about why the child well-being data vary so dramatically across countries.

While admitting the limitations of current data, Professor Bradshaw provides a compelling case for extending, rather than curtailing, the focus on subjective child well-being in these large-scale national datasets. As such, he makes a clear case for why it is so important to listen to the voices of children and young people and to value and respect their insights into their situations and circumstances.

This resonates with the focus of the NSW Commission for Children and Young People, for example, to giving children their voice, hearing their views and respecting their insights.

At the heart of the paper is the positioning of the US and the UK at the bottom of the rank ordering of nations on measures of child well-being. After cogently dismissing some of the likely explanations – measurement error,

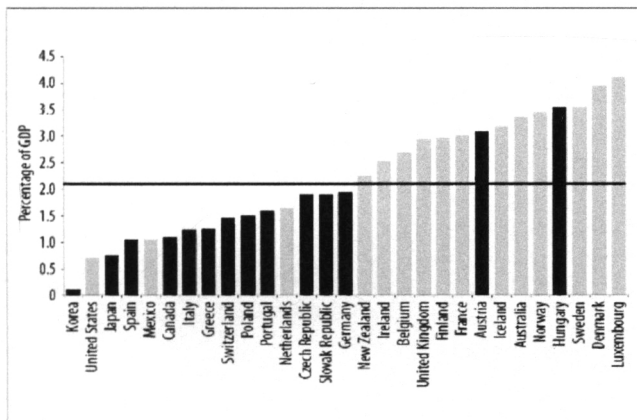
parenting practices, culture, relationship breakdown rates and family form – he considers the influence of other factors such as educational attainment or child income poverty. The latter, for example, explains half the variation in well-being, which is substantial. The relationship of child well-being to teenage fertility rates also differentiates countries, which is likely to be correlated with measures of social status, including family disadvantage. Along with the teenage fertility rate data, measures of perceived health, experience of violence and income poverty correlate with the overall construct of well-being, suggesting that social address does make a difference.

But why the stark differences across countries?

National expenditure on families is related to child well-being statistics. This is particularly interesting and I agree that this might be even stronger if one excludes the USA and UK. The cross-national data (see Figure 1) provide heartening news for Australia as we have had a long-term trend to increase our support for families and continue to make investment in families a policy priority (Gray, Qu & Weston 2008).

Beyond its heuristic value, the paper also stimulates critical reflection on what we need to collect and how. Given the differences that relate to age, gender and within family relationships, the gold standard for measuring subjective well-being should be large scale longitudinal research that tracks the trends for individuals and subgroups, in a form that is comparable across countries.

Figure 1: Family spending in cash, services and tax measures, percentage of GDP, 2003



Notes: Public support accounted here only concerns public support that is exclusively for families (e.g. child payments and allowances, parental leave benefits and child care support). Spending recorded in other social policy areas, such as health and housing support, also assists families, but not exclusively, and is not included here. Columns that are in black indicate a TFR of 1.5 or less in 2004.

Sources: Gray, Qu & Weston (2008, Figure 6). Data from OECD (2007) and Population Reference Bureau (2006).

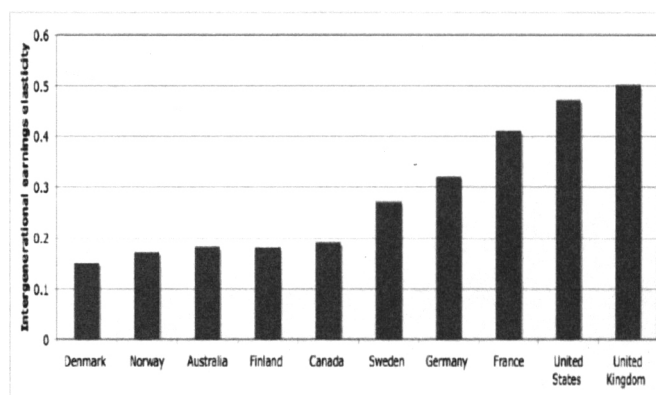
In the absence of this, modelling of the cross-sectional data that allows sub-group differences to be assessed, between and across countries would be useful. Such analyses might provide valuable insights into the cross-national differences that are observed at the macro level.

But how far can one go in explaining the differences if the analyses are only focused on the children of the generation under consideration? One perhaps needs to consider intergenerational factors to provide another lens on why countries such as the USA and the UK have such markedly lower child well-being data. Can the observed differences, in part, be explained by the extent to which societies engender hope? How might this relate to the extent to which children believe that they can move beyond the circumstances of their birth and social position?

One way to look at this is via the lens of intergenerational mobility. As I reflect on the data provided by Professor Bradshaw, it is interesting to compare the child well-being data with the OECD data on intergenerational mobility of earnings – a measure of the extent to which young people can access opportunity and transcend the constraints of class and social address.

Figure 2 maps reasonably to the OECD data on wellbeing, with the possible exception of Sweden. While the match is not perfect, the USA and the UK are clearly in the same position on this intergenerational measure as they ‘enjoy’ on the child wellbeing graphs included in Professor Bradshaw’s paper.

Figure 2: Intergenerational mobility of earnings across OECD countries



Note: The height of each bar represents the intergenerational earnings elasticity. The higher the bar, the higher the persistence of earnings across generations and the lower intergenerational earnings mobility.

Source: d’Addio (2007, Figure 1)

The intergenerational earnings data mirror data on educational and occupational mobility. Perhaps open societies that strongly support families, encourage achievement, and provide accessible high quality education as the engine of opportunity, engender hope, optimism and faith in the future, which are reflected in children’s current subjective sense of well-being.

Whatever the ultimate consensus on the causal connections, Professor Bradshaw’s excellent paper challenges us to hone our measures of well-being and appreciate the way in which they provide a window on the true health and wealth of nations.

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