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Informed Child Policy on the Basis of Standardised Children's Surveys

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The cover of the publication on an German-wide representative children's survey of 9- to 14-year-olds from 2009 shows two matchstick men in a demonstration: a girl holding a megaphone announces the "Moods, trends, and opinions of children in Germany" (1), and a boy holding a banner to underline the children's position with an exclamation mark. The study is entitled "Let us tell you something! (Wir sagen Euch mal was!)" with "us" representing the children and "you" the adults.

This study is typical for a series of new and broadly based children's surveys. They constitute one track of the sociological childhood research, which has established itself since the beginning of the 1980s. This research direction puts children in the centre of its analyses as "persons in their own right" and as present instead of future "full members of society" and "competent players in the here and now". In this context, the "children's perspective" is discussed as a methodological counterpart to the concept of the theory of objects, in which children are regarded as social players; for this research, a more and more popular method in Germany are representative polls of children's opinions or "children's surveys".

Children's surveys and official statistics provide empirical data and, together with political reporting systems, constitute the social reporting about children. Political reports about children and childhood have been prepared in Germany since 1998 in the shape of explicit *child* and youth reports of the Federal Government, they are mandatory by law (cf. § 84 of the Social Code, Vol. VIII) and have to be presented in each legislative term. The objective of social reporting is to develop a social monitoring of the status and the changes in the living conditions of children and to provide a permanent institutional reporting basis (2). Its function is, inter alia, to serve as the (empirical) basis for policies aiming at an active management of society.

Some childhood researchers consider children's surveys in particular as an unfiltered mouthpiece of the children, who are "given a voice" by these surveys, as it is expressed in the graphical depiction of the above-mentioned study. These researchers say that such surveys give the perspective of "children as experts for their own cause" a centre-stage position, that children provide information about themselves, communicate their views and opinions to the adults and provide them with "first-hand" information about their specific "childlike" living conditions. Consequently, their findings would be an important basis and source of information for adult decision-makers in teaching and in administration, for parents and the interested public. Last but not least, the research findings would provide the basis for "informed" (child) policies. (3)

Authentic insights into children's lives?

Due to their specific methodological approach as broadly-based and standardised opinion polls, the development of children's surveys has a surprising twist from a scientific perspective and from the perspective of child policy and legislation. The related and previously outlined self-assessment of the researchers and their frequent implicit

assumptions and determinations have to be publicly discussed and challenged to a greater extent than in the past. The principal problem to be highlighted in this context is the fact that children's surveys are defined as “authentic” descriptions of children's opinions and children's lives. However, they should rather be interpreted as an expression of the ideas of a “good childhood” and “successful growth” today and as a view of the future of society, which is put forward from an adult perspective.

Children's surveys are indications of the fact that a methodological change is gaining ground in childhood research, and that this methodology has been an element of the widely used methodological portfolio of empirical social research for a long time: standardised surveys are extended to a “new” group, i.e. children. In this approach, the surveys are - gradually - extended to cover younger and younger age groups: since the emergence of children's surveys, the addressee group especially are children of primary-school age.

In future studies, even younger children are to be surveyed in standardised surveys; the first pilot studies with children of preschool age are already available. This means that not only on the level of official statistics - where children are gradually turned into their own unit of observation and assessment entity (4) – there is a change taking place which can also be found on the level of standardised surveys. Child-related survey research, which is now being established, therefore makes a contribution in science and research towards assessing the position of children by turning them into a suitable population for surveys.

Furthermore, this research track also has a vanguard position as regards the political and social and therefore the legal status of children. In the past, children were considered as a rather marginalised group, which was of secondary importance because of the strong (political) focus on the family and which was hardly recognised as an independent and duly appreciated group. The generation of data and statements about children now - and especially because of the inclusion of “real” children - contributes towards creating an interest in children in politics, the public and the media, just as international comparative analyses on the life situations of children have done, which are prominently represented by the UNICEF Report Cards (cf. www.unicef.org).

With the spread of big (comparative) studies, childhood research realises one of its proclaimed goals: it contributes to the emancipation of the social position of children and attracts direct attention to children and (the social organisation of) childhood. Children are turned into a demographic group meriting surveys.

In the interaction of social reporting and social policies for children, children's surveys aim at an empirical basis for policies for children. Their political objective is to improve the living conditions of children and to redefine the intergenerational relations, which have proven to be a stable relationship of inequalities at the expense of children and especially regarding the distribution of power and the inequality of spatial and financial resources.

From a legal perspective, a continuous empirical monitoring permits an observation of the progress made in the realisation of children's rights, which are mostly referenced on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 (3). Childhood research therefore implements with greater speed than the legal system or teaching institutions, what the children's rights movement has demanded for years (5); similarly, a children's survey therefore considers itself as an original “participation project” (1).

A basic element of children's surveys is their emancipatory mission, which is related to child policies and children's rights. This mission is linked to the rhetoric of an “unbiased portrayal of the youngest”, which can be shown in children's surveys (6). The guiding principles and forms of self-expression constituting their basis must not cloud the fact, however, that children's surveys - in their conceptual consideration as well as their empirical research design, in their selection of topics, their interpretation and ultimately in their (political)

conclusions - include a mix of perceptions about children and today's childhood which are held by the adult researchers' and commissioning parties' such as ministries, foundations, child protection societies as well as international relief organisations.

As a result, the findings tell us almost more about adult perceptions about children growing up well and about childhood today than about the "real" lives of children and their inherent changes. At the same time, these constructs allow children and a childhood to appear, which are the subject of research into our society's future (5). By way of an example, this may be illustrated as follows:

Children, pupils, friends or citizens?

In the first German children's survey of 1980, the life of children was primarily depicted via their family, school, play and well-being. In 1993, in the second representative children's survey, children were interviewed about similar subject areas. Questions were added regarding their peers, church and religion as well as aspects of the children's personality and development. This range of subjects has been steadily extended almost ever since: in the DJI Children's Panel, which started in 2002, the media, their housing environment and forms of participation also played a role. The first World Vision children's study of 2007 also addresses the children's political interests, as does the current LBS Children's Barometer, which also includes questions on the children's tolerance, their body, their body awareness and diseases. It therefore deepens a relatively new thematic focus, which has also led to independent surveys on children's health (cf. Kinder- und Jugendgesundheitssurvey [Children and Youth Health Survey] (KIGGS): www.kiggs.de).

This concise overview of their content illustrates that the surveys themselves may be regarded as indicators and simultaneously as co-generators of childhood today: children are granted more and more options for action; at the same time they are required to make decisions - not only in dealing with the questionnaires. The subject areas are less a reflection of the real (changes in the) living conditions of children in a little less than the past 30 years, they are rather a reflection of the dominant perceptions of a good childhood and therefore about the social position of children, and they show the changes in the empirical approaches to childhood (7).

While the direct sphere of children's experiences was primarily surveyed in the 1980s and while children were granted competences and options in these spheres, the subsequent surveys and especially the surveys made after the turn of the millennium showed and still show children not only as knowledgeable in the context of their family and primary school (and possibly their peers) and consequently as children (in their parental home), as pupils and friends. The survey concepts instead and increasingly show them as knowledgeable about social concerns and therefore turn their involvement and (political) participation into a subject of the survey: in these studies - and beyond -, children are gradually depicted as competent citizens - and together with the fact that children have to choose between various options, and this is symbolically expressed by the choice they have to make between the alternative answers in the questionnaire.

Interest in the children's present existence or the self-preservation of society

The definition of the thematic emphases in the surveys clearly shows society's concern for its future. The UNICEF Report Cards are an illustration of this fact: they regard the areas of family, school, peers, well-being, health and safety as well as risky lifestyles as relevant for an adequate description of the "children's situation" (8). They are less concerned with the analysis and empirical description of the "children's here and now" or with children as "competent players". These thematic areas are instead used to generate two forms of knowledge. On the one hand, they generate caring knowledge and therefore knowledge,

which the adults need for an optimum support of the children's development and their protection.

The living conditions of children are defined as good or bad, promoting or inhibiting and thus dangerous opportunities for development. The analysis is motivated by an early and continues identification of opportunities for „growing up successfully“ as well as the risk factors and threats for a good childhood. On the other hand, they generate knowledge which is of special significance for the future of society. Their interest in data, trends and insights into the life situation and the well-being of children is motivated by an interest in the “society’s fitness for the future“. Children are not interesting as social players or experts for their own causes; the self-preservation of society is turned into a cause for the children: they only “constitute 10% of the population, but they are 100% of our future” (6).

Interviews, measurements and comparisons

Interviews, measurements and comparisons show weaknesses and strengths, supply governments and civil society with information which may be used to improve the life situation, the well-being of children and to realise children's rights (3). This widely used self-definition of (international) comparative studies and children's surveys does not only ignore the previously outlined adult assumptions in selecting and designing the subject areas of the survey. They only state implicitly *what* is asked, measured and compared and what are the intentions behind the children making “unbiased statements“ - as the guiding principle of the sentence “Let us tell you something!” suggests. This fact must be disclosed and discussed more extensively than in the past. It must also be clarified, which children will be interviewed and which criteria are used to compare their answers. So: who is hidden behind the “us” in the title “Let us tell you something!“?

Without going into more detail here, we should nonetheless mention the fact that particularly preschool children from underprivileged social strata and groups of children with a migrant background are clearly less frequently represented in the studies than children from the indigenous population. The systematic distortions can also be retraced to other aspects of the study design (2). They are only insufficiently reflected in both the studies and scientific discussions and in their political reception. Therefore, the following questions are also interesting: Who was not surveyed? What was not included as a subject? And the question who defines the markers and threshold values used to identify the “strengths and weaknesses” so that a distinction can be made between a “good” and a “bad” childhood.

Sociological children's surveys - political conclusions

The previously outlined self-definition of numerous studies also ignores the adults’ decision-making mechanisms with respect to the findings, which are considered as relevant, and with respect to the political conclusions they (are supposed to) lead to - and which can only be justified outside of the realm of science. These problems can be illustrated with the help of two examples.

From the wide range of findings in a current children's survey, *one* result in particular is classified as “relevant for child policy”: this study, the LBS Children’s Barometer (LBS-Kinderbarometer) proves that the children’s everyday life is increasingly marked by the new media. This scientific finding is associated by political decision-makers with the following items (9): firstly with the risk of being exposed to problematic and hazardous media contents and secondly with the fact that - the above-mentioned concern for the children is obvious here - children are not yet able to adequately assess the potential risks. Consequently, it is primarily a matter of actions strengthening parental responsibility and media competence (ibid.). These actions are presented as a (child) policy conclusion, which is directly derived from the findings. This example is a good illustration of the underlying image, which adults have of children as humans in need of protection, and of the idea of a political framework for

the optimum development of children and the defence against threats - the “real” finding, i.e. that the new media have become an integral part of the children's everyday life, is of secondary importance.

In a second example, another recent study, we see something similar: in this study, the researchers themselves announce that “the appropriate consequences for education and social policies” can be directly derived from the findings they obtained from the children (6): a future-oriented child policy includes the fight against poverty, support for families, the establishment of partnerships in the children's upbringing and education as well as comprehensive education, leisure and health policies. This delineates the cornerstones of a “modern child policy”. With this objective in mind, an orientation to scientific findings is necessary to counter “ideological discussions” (ibid.). This statement, which is quoted here as an example, does not consider the - tacit - perceptions of children and childhood or the aspects of society's fitness for the future, which are considered as relevant and enter into the political conclusions derived from the study's findings.

A child policy - which can seemingly be derived without inconsistencies from the findings of a children's survey - introduces clear, albeit implicit, weightings, which are adult-centred and oriented towards special interests: child policy is primarily defined as education, family and health policy. It may only be suggested here that this also means that this child policy does not include integration or intergenerational policies, for example. Particularly the conception of child policy as an intergenerational policy, which is oriented to the challenges and tasks of a synchronised intergenerational justice, might put issues of a just intergenerational distribution of resources into the focus of political attention (10).

Child and childhood research must be reflexive

The above-mentioned points illustrate the future need to more extensively address, reflect and explain adult-centred perceptions, implicit assumptions and constructs in child research and social reporting. And an analysis of the forms of presenting and disseminating the outcomes as well as the selective reception of findings from childhood research is also necessary, especially as there is a highly contested political terrain marked by the present powerful discourses on poverty, health, education, integration, demographic change and competitiveness.

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