

”Welfare state, values, local context and child and youth wellbeing”

Dnr 421-2010-2304

Helena Stensöta

1. Research questions

The background of the project is that a considerable body of research has argued for the superior capacity of the general welfare state type to provide well being for its citizens across socio economic cleavages and gender, but that impact does not seem to include *subjective* well-being among the group of *children and youth*. This puzzle suggests that processes in other societal arenas, such as the civil society, might be of importance.

The basic model in the project captures *inclusion* in groups with other people as a necessary condition for wellbeing. Inclusion may be formed through different arenas such as the family, the school, civil society and the welfare state. To use inclusion as point of departure is drawn from ethics of care theory (Young, 2000), but similar ideas are found within other theoretical strands as well. Through the ethics of care theory, the collaborate importance of the welfare state and civil society to provide inclusion can be argued for theoretically. Hence, in relation to civil society theory, civil society is regarded as consisting of processes rather than of formal organizations (Cohen & Arato 1995; Putnam, 1993) – processes that is seen as interacting or co-work with the state to produce human wellbeing in general, rather than standing in opposition to the state. The group of young is focused, as they seem to be more affected by non-wellbeing as of today.

The project predominantly captures civil society as an *independent* variable influencing wellbeing of citizens (youth). It can be argued that it is important also to model research on civil society through this design, as it highlights the significance of civil society to external phenomena, such as wellbeing of citizens, and thereby also relative to other factors. The project also includes a more inductive part, where the actual processes of inclusion for the particular group of the young is focused.

2. Status of the project

The project extends to one year of full-time research for the project leader plus part-time assistant, which is shorter than several other projects. I have in addition chosen to postpone my financing until the end of the program, which is why the results of today are preliminary and that some interesting questions about civil society that the project promises to deliver awaits to be done. Due to changed employment conditions, the project is further now housed by the Political Science Department at Gothenburg University, which houses yet another project in the program (Naurin and Boräng) and which is situated close to the sociological department where another project member since recently is situated (Kerstin Jacobsson). The department of sociology in Gothenburg also houses an interesting seminar on social movements, which forms part of the environment of this project.

I have also continued collaboration with Daniel Engster, professor in political science at University of Texas in San Antonio, who works on ethics of care theory and policy. The

theoretical ideas on how the processes of civil society is important for the inclusion of groups, especially the young, have been developed in collaboration between us. I have also started working with Erica Nordlander, with whom I have written the second almost finished article.

3. Preliminary results, type of results to be expected

The project covers different analytical levels and use different types of materials and techniques, which I show below.

To sum up, beforehand, the type of results that this project may deliver are manifold:

- The theoretical idea is to grant a place for the importance of civil society for the wellbeing of youth (and adult also). It provides a framework to discuss not only the (new) character of civil society, but also its purpose for phenomena such as wellbeing.
- In line with this I think that it is important for the study of civil society not to be satisfied with coming up with new conceptualizations and definitions, but also to define them in such a way that more deductive studies can be performed. Maybe the study of civil society is becoming mature enough to allow for this.
- Important for the development of civil society research along this line, is to consider the special case of Sweden in these type of studies. The contribution that studies placed in Sweden might have for the international research in this area, can be elaborated through paying attention to what makes Sweden special; the general welfare state institutional characteristics, the cooptative strategy of the state towards new social movements, the high degree of post-material values and individualization; last decades changes in the (local) welfare state etc. Future research might want to clearer identify the goal of drawing conclusions based on such specificities.
- Three empirical results will stem from the project:
 - Knowledge on the importance of post-material values for the (subjective) wellbeing (of youth),
 - Knowledge on the importance of resources/activities of local welfare state and local civil society for wellbeing of youth in Sweden
 - a pilot study in the form of inductive description of the processes of inclusions for youth in local Gothenburg suburban area

3.1 Country comparative level: quantitative analytical strategies

3.1.1 Welfare state types and child and youth wellbeing

The first article that was published early on in the project, examines the importance of different welfare state types on child and youth wellbeing (Engster and Stensöta 2011). It introduced the idea of a generational cleavage distinguishing the young from the adult population in relation to welfare state research. Using available country-level data we examined *the capacity of different welfare state types to provide wellbeing for children and youth along varying dimensions*; material, objective health and educational dimensions over time (1995-2005). Our results confirmed the superiority of the encompassing welfare state in providing material well-being and health for children and youth but found that the liberal welfare state had advantages when it came to educational achievements (however not regarding educational attainment). In relation to previous research in the area, we showed that the positive impact of the encompassing welfare state for wellbeing was powerful also for older children (up to 18). In relation to the project, we could identify the

limitations of welfare state arrangements to provide wellbeing for youth in relation to school-achievements.

3.1.2 Postmaterial values and wellbeing

A second research-paper focus more on the interaction between welfare state and features connected to civil society through the same type of analysis (Stensöta 2010). The paper has been presented at two international conferences (American political science conference APSA and Council of European studies (CES)) and I am currently updating the data in order to shortly submit the manuscript to peer review journal.

I first examine two issues related to the comparative welfare state debate: a) *Is there a generational gap between youth and the general population in terms of wellbeing?* and b) *Is there a gap between the capacity of different welfare state types to provide well-being along material dimensions and subjective dimensions of well-being for the group of the young?* Analysis shows that there are differences between wellbeing of children/youth and the general population when countries are compared along rank order (spearman's rho), but that no systematic variation between welfare state types can be established. Further, there is a clear pattern where the Nordic welfare states are superior in terms of traditional material wellbeing (poverty measured in relative terms), but that this pattern gets blurred when more post-material dimensions are examined (rank order through spearman's rho).

The central issue in the paper relates to the process of individualization and its importance for wellbeing. Inglehart (1997) has documented an increased individualization in society and pointed at Sweden being at the frontline in this development. Individualization has been regarded as negative for civil society and thereby also affecting the production of social trust (Putnam, 2000). It could be hypothesized that the high levels of individualism in Sweden hampers inclusion and is part of the reason for why Sweden youth does not score so high on subjective wellbeing measures. I ask: *Does the variation in material/post-material values explain the variation in subjective wellbeing among youth?* This analysis is currently conducted and no preliminary results may yet be delivered. It will however, shed light on the extent to which individualization/post material values play a role for levels of subjective well-being in Sweden and other countries.

3.2 Sweden-level: quantitative analytical strategies

3.2.1 Framtidskommissionen and popular publication

I have participated in the "Framtidskommissionen" (Regeringskansliet) through a talk at one of their gatherings on *"Barns och ungdomar välbefinnande – en fråga om samhällets kvalitet"* (Regeringskansliet, Stockholm 12-03-20). A reworked print-out of my popular-scientific presentation has been published in Ord & Bild (Stensöta 2011).

3.2.2 The power of ambitions and achievements in school

School may be seen as part of civil society and the wellbeing of youth is heavily affected by what happens in school, especially for a bit older kids and youth. Recent trends also disclose how local initiatives and voluntary organizations have come to play a greater role in school as public money decrease, which is yet another reason to focus on the school environment.

The particular hypotheses examined start from two popular images on non- well-being among youth; the highly ambitious middle class girl whose well-being suffers from perfectionism and the working class guy who do not see school at all as a possible route

for improving his self-esteem, Erica Nordlander and myself have examined *how well-being is related to personal ambitions and achievements in the form of grades*. We operationalize ambitions as socio-economic belonging and expect that ambitions rise with economic conditions. Thus, we examine how the connection between grade level and wellbeing depend on socio-economic belonging and gender. The analysis has shown that both boys and girls feel better with higher grades. For girls, the effect depends on socio economic belonging so that especially low white-collar girls need a much higher grade to reach the same level of subjective well-being as other groups (Nordlander and Stensöta 2013). In relation to the general idea of the project, this article examines wellbeing in different groups of youth, related to the local school environment.

3.2.3 Wellbeing and local society

Another article will explore more in detail the hypothesis of retrenched welfare state and civil society factors for youth wellbeing. In relation to the general idea of the project, the article examines wellbeing as produced in the intersection of local welfare state (school) and civil society, which can be regarded as the wider context in which the school environment is set.

A total sample of wellbeing among 6th graders and 9th graders from Socialstyrelsen 2009 will be used in a two level analysis to explore whether youth belonging to risk populations (immigrants, poor people, girls - to a certain extent) are better off in particular contextual circumstances. As contextual circumstances I examine local welfare state resources and particular those directed to youth; school, "leisure management" (fritidsförvaltningen), but also local civil society in form of association-density for youth and the degree of cooperation between local initiatives and school/welfare state. The deductive design of the project limits the possible operationalizations of civil society somewhat as I need to use available data.

3.3 Sub-city level in Sweden: qualitative case- study strategy including questionnaire

The most explorative study planned in the project is a case study of youth wellbeing in four Gothenburg suburbs. The plan is to identify two flourishing suburbs and two more disadvantaged ones with varying degrees of civil society activity in each set. Methodologically, the idea will use group interviews combined with questionnaire to explore mechanisms that pupils feel works inclusive. These mechanisms could be attached to the local welfare state, school, local civil society, criminal gangs or the like. A pilot study is planned during fall 2013.

4. Publications so far (including working-papers)

Engster, Daniel and Helena Olofsdotter Stensöta. 2011. "Do Family Policy Regimes Matter for Children's Well-Being?" *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* doi: 10.1093/sp/jxr006.

Nordlander, Erica and Helena Olofsdotter Stensöta. 2013. "Youth well-being. the interplay of school performance, gender and class."

Stensöta, Helena. 2011. "De unga i den svenska välfärdsstaten - ett jämförande perspektiv." *Ord & Bild*.

Stensöta, Helena Olofsdotter. 2010. "Is the young generation lagging behind? Child and youth well-being and policy programs in comparative perspective " in *APSA American Political Science Association. Yearly Conference*. Washington DC, USA.