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The Ways of Perceiving Children and Childhood. From Asociality Towards Socialization

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ABSTRACT

Performing the analyses of selected ways of perceiving children and childhood is deemed to be important and prosocial within the framework of social sciences. In the process of the changing understanding of the terms “child” and “childhood” as well as promoting the treatment of children as full-fledged members of the community, the process of informing, convincing, and shaping social behaviours is of considerable importance. The results of the analyses of the outcome of research involving children (childhood studies) contribute to inducing changes, e.g. when it comes to the treatment of children or modifying/changing the process of their education and upbringing; notably, establishing who a child is as well as highlighting the distinct features of childhood, and how these features influence the shaping of public opinion. It may contribute to a gradual overcoming of the stereotypes in the perception of children and childhood. Children are equal members of society, and their views on the present are worth knowing.

KEYWORDS: child, childhood, a child's perspective, constructivism, childhood studies

Children and childhood in scientific literature. Who is a child?

The interest in children and childhood has always been present, with differing levels of intensity, throughout the human culture. However, the scientific reflection concerned with these issues remained outside of the main current of the social politics in action, both on the level of respective countries as well as globally. It was also placed outside of the currents of core scientific theory and practice. In science as well as in politics, the matter of children and childhood was a separate, very specialized path. The conse-

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quence of such an approach is the notable lack of inclusion of the person of a child and childhood in a wider social or scientific context. The analyses carried out by e.g. sociologists, ethnographers, historians studying child-rearing, or educational counsellors made it possible to illustrate the general tendencies in perceiving the role and status of a child in societies and indicate, among others, the existence/nonexistence of the childhood stage itself on different levels in the development of human societies. Gertrud Lenzer (2002) notes that researchers from different disciplines have not developed a coherent discourse on the child, and that disconnected visions have not had the chance to become a holistic conception of how to view childhood. Children studies, as a new, interdisciplinary current of postmodern research focused on children, can be called a “short-range theory”. It is because it builds its own methodological construct and typology on the basis of case studies (Szymborska, 2016; Domańska, 2020). This current has also made it possible to capture the paradigm shift of childhood studies. What distinguishes children studies from other research approaches is “focusing not on the future of children, but on their present” (Radkowska-Wilkowicz & Maciejewska-Mroczek, 2024). The global research discourse indicates five main interpretations of the term “childhood studies” (Szymborska, 2020, p. 16–17):

1. This name is associated with a multiform current of children research from the years 1894–1939, appearing under the name of paedology (“child-study”). It concerns itself with the issue of child’s identity development, the differences, with particular focus on their language and culture. It is mostly a critical analysis of children and childhood written by adults (Hall, 1904).
2. In the 21st century, children studies is a term used in reference to the interdisciplinary, paedocentric methodological and interpretative approach. Its foundation lies in the contemporary research toolkit methods, enabling multifaceted, complex childhood studies, inspired by the modern humanities, referencing the results and experiments of other sciences focused on children and their issues, such as psychology, sociology, pedagogy, economy, law, medicine, or literary studies.

Within the framework of this concept, the key focus is placed on studies concerning the analysis of children’s ideation and representation as well as the reconstruction of their individual point of view (Alison James, Adrian L. James, Vibiana Bowman, Laura B. Spencer, Gaile S. Cannella). In this context, children studies address, among others, the issue of child’s identity development within cultural and scientific texts, the differences and mutual cultural influences between the world of adults and the world of children—with particular emphasis on their language and culture (Vibiana Bowman, Laura B. Spencer).

3. *Children studies* also stands for a name of a school (in the sense of social and scientific practice), whose aim is to describe, analyse, and promote children's culture. The school's research program sets itself a goal of improving children's lives, their ontological, legislative, and economic circumstances (Mary Jane Kehily, Gertrud Lenzer, Dominic Wyse).
4. This term also denotes the holistic way of thinking about children, based on the ontological and epistemological differentiation between the so called "infantility" and "adulthood", which turns the age category into a socio-cultural research category, repealing dualities and hierarchies founded upon the adult-centric experience (Jens Qvortrup, Jean Mills, Richard Mills). This perspective is based on the premise that children must be perceived fully as human beings.
5. The most recent meaning, not yet well-established within the scientific discourse, refers to the inclusive research, wherein the child becomes an equal research partner and co-authors the discourse about themselves. It is the most promising branch of children studies (Vibiana Bowman, Laura B. Spencer).

In the contemporary currents of research concerned with children, two approaches can be distinguished: a classic socialization perspective and a constructivist perspective (James & Proud, 1997).

According to the classic socialization theories, a child's maturity is a purely biological fact. By going through subsequent stages of their development, regarding e.g. age, physical, cognitive, or socio-moral development, they reach socially determined and acceptable maturity (the maturity directions are set by the adults). The children's period of "immaturity" lets adults with a cognitive perspective observe the biologically determined factors that supposedly are linked to them reaching maturity. The implication of such an approach, which links the biological perspective with a social one, is treating children as immature, incompetent, asocial, and acultural (Zdanowicz-Kucharczyk, 2015). Children and childhood are described as "meagre". The children's profile, in turn, contains their description as ones devoid of the ability to act independently, requiring help from adults. It is acceptable to compare them to "empty vessels" that require filling with knowledge and skills by adults (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2013). Children should adopt a passive, submissive attitude in the process of acquiring knowledge, and perform the tasks assigned to them by older, more experienced individuals. At last, they reach the expected level of social maturity (formally, with the moment of reaching majority) and join the community of "mature" people. In turn, adults are the ones who are competent, characterized by rationality, socialized, and functioning as autonomous entities.

All activities that children engage in (play, linguistic, cognitive, and social) are interpreted as markers of advancing development, as indicators of future behaviours

(*a dress rehearsal of adult life*). Observing the *irrationality* of children's games creates the possibilities of setting the metrics of reaching adulthood (Zdanowicz-Kucharczyk, 2015). According to the classic theories, socialization is a process that shapes children. If they submit to social rules, then, according to the public opinion, socialization is successful, and it results in *conformist individuals*. It can also fail when a child does not submit to the process of socialization, and is then defined as an individual that is *socially maladjusted* (ibidem).

On the other hand, in the research methodology focused on children and childhood that belongs to the current of constructivist thought, a child is not cast in a role of one that is being "prepared" for adulthood. They are not in permanent anticipation (suspension) (Lat. in spe) (Petelewicz, 2016). The main social aim is to introduce "child players" to global science as well as to initiate an innovative, non-systemic, and experimental research model (a meaning variant of the term *childhood studies*—"a child becomes an equal research partner and co-authors the discourse about themselves"). Alan Prout and Alison James defined the attributes of the new and developing childhood studies paradigm (Prout & James, 1997; Jarosz, 2017):

- a) understanding childhood not as a natural or universal attribute, but as a social construct, a specific structural and cultural component,
- b) viewing the analyses concerned with childhood through the prism of social variables (e.g. sex or ethnicity), which implies understanding childhood in a variety of its forms,
- c) considering childhood with a research perspective set by children's own character, from their point of view,
- d) perceiving children as active entities that construct and define their social life as well as the lives of other people and societies they are established in,
- e) utilizing ethnography as methodology that is particularly useful in studying childhood, which enables children to express themselves in a more direct manner as well as actively participate in the generation of sociological data,
- f) transformative aspect of the research, meaning that the studies must be accompanied by engagement and active participation in the reconstruction of childhood as well as in actions aimed at improving the situation of children.

While analysing the issues connected to the ethics of conduct towards children in various spheres, J. Lisek-Michalska (2012) analysed ethical codes, among others. She noticed the fact that children were granted "[...] a privilege of having their own autonomy in the moral sphere, so, in general—the right to such conduct that is decided by the free will based on the rational moral principles recognized by them as well as subjectivity" (Lisek-Michalska, 2012, p. 34). This means that children are capable of

making decisions concerning the choice and manner of serving social functions (children—“social players”), of acting as partners in interactions, or of deciding to take up or abandon activities that accomplish developmental tasks (e.g. in daily life, free play, games, work-like activities).

The contemporary concept of childhood, therefore, takes into account the history of accrual of experiences in that time, which are new for the child, as well as of equipping themselves with abilities ensuring the possibility of coexistence, and, notably, cooperation with other members of the human society (adults and other children of various ages), with no detriment to their own wellbeing. From the constructivist perspective, what is important is the *child's starting capital*, so knowledge and abilities they have at their disposal “at the start”, entering a relevant development stage.

Constructivist contexts of supporting development

According to A. Brzezińska (2015), what children learn, along with their habits, has *formative influence* on what their learning looks like in the future, what their motivation and engagement look like, which emotions accompany them while they achieve their aims, and which when they face obstacles, or when their planned endeavours end in failure. The constructivist perspective places children's learning in a social context by freeing them from biological determinism. The quality of interactions between a child (infant, child, teenager, young adult) and the adults who are important for them plays a key role in this process. If an adult (e.g. parent, teacher) successfully interprets the child's needs, they create an environment in which the ever more independent child can acquire various experiences. In scientific literature, such an adult is called a “well (high) mediating” between the child and the surroundings. In relation to the adult who is not able to identify the child's needs and who does not perceive a connection between their own behaviour and the child's reactions, a term “poorly (low) mediating” (ibidem, 2015) is employed.

According to A. Brzezińska (2015), *understanding the resources at the disposal of a child* who is entering the subsequent stages of development and education is a prerequisite for the adult's success while carrying out educational tasks. Those are formulated for the relevant stages of education. In keeping with the socio-cultural theory of Lew Wygotski, the resources are contained in two spheres of development—in the *Zone of Actual Development* (ZAD) and the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD). The *Zone of Actual Development* contains resources that a child can utilize on their own or with minor support of their surroundings. The aim is to fulfil their own needs and the needs of the immediate surroundings. The *Zone of Proximal Development* consists of the resources that are in the process of forming. To utilize them, a child requires the

support of their surroundings. There are strategies that can be employed to provide a child with such support (Brzezińska, 2015; Płóciennik & Leżańska, 2021):

- individual support with regard to regulating emotionality (e.g. calming, soothing, animating),
- cognitive support (e.g. help with finding information, providing information, asking a question, demonstration of performing and subsequent performing of a task by a child with the use of different materials, joint commencement of an action and gradual withdrawal of help by the adult),
- material help (e.g. making an object or tool accessible),
- social help (e.g. including a child in other children's team activity, mobilization of peer *tutoring*, specialized support).

In the process of designing the activities compatible with the idea of “education supporting development” of a child who is treated as an equal community member of a family, crèche, kindergarten, or school, it is also necessary to recognize the *resources of the physical environment* that the child functions in, together with their family, crèche and kindergarten group or school form, along with the institution (crèche/kindergarten/school). As the third type of resources, as important as the ones previously listed, the *resources of social environment* of a child should be mentioned. They are defined as access—in a local environment—to the organizations and institutions comprising a network that provides support to the family and institutions tasked with care and education of children (e.g. social and legal assistance, healthcare, cultural institutions) (Brzezińska, 2015; Jakubowska, 2021). As highlighted by M. Radkowska-Walkowicz (2024), a child, like an adult, is always somewhere, somewhere, and sometime.

What is deemed to be the most important, however, is the recognition of who, in the child's immediate surroundings, fulfils or can fulfil the role of a person who is important to them. According to R. Feuerstein's concept of a mediated learning experience (MLE), a mediator in the relations “child—social environment—physical environment” is sought after (Twardowski, 2004; Brzezińska, 2015). The quality of interactions between a child and an important person (mediator) is an essential feature of their development (Brzezińska, 2015).

Summary

Directing attention to the adults fulfilling the roles of mediators between children and, in a broad sense, the world, requires an analysis, albeit short, of the transformations taking place in the postmodernity. They not only change various spheres of human life,

but also impact the condition of the childhood. According to A. Aviram (2010), tracking transformations in the social and cultural perception of children and childhood may contribute to understanding changes faced by education. B. Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz (2011) stresses that the condition of childhood is particularly influenced by four transformations: 1) technical revolution; 2) economic revolution; 3) relativist revolution and the fall of great ideologies, which influence the shift in the concept of authority; and 4) disintegration and erosion of the fundamental social roles and structures (such as family or sex), which change the perception of age. The profile of each of them demonstrates their influence on the process of establishing a new status for childhood, in relation to knowledge and the possibility of its acquisition. In contrast to the past situations, in many cases it places *mediators* in a relation with the child. The analyses by B. Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz (ibidem) show that, firstly, we are dealing with blurring of the fundamental belief in the existence of contents that are not intended for eyes and ears of children (using media does not require any specific competencies—they are egalitarian, in contrast to acquiring the reading ability—up to a certain age, it is an elitist capability). Children often have higher proficiency in using new technologies than adults. Secondly, we are facing a lot of pressure to acquire education as well as the simultaneous competition in the adult world, which many children become part of from their earliest years. Thirdly, a slow withdrawal can be observed by adults from the beliefs attributed to the classic social theories of “a child must be protected”, in favour of a new paradigm of “a child must be given access and enabled”. The saying “the only right one” is already getting replaced by “it depends on the point of view”. Fourthly, there emerges a concept of subjective age—we do not ask “how old are you?”, but “how old do you actually feel?”.

The abovementioned examples of social processes illustrate the blurring of the lines between childhood and adulthood, but also between children and their mediators.

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