

BREAKTHROUGH IN THE SOCIAL RESEARCH ON CHILDHOOD: SEARCH FOR THE METHODOLOGY OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY

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Abstract

Recently in the sciences of social-humanitarian character (education science, sociology, cultural anthropology, psychology, political science, etc.) the methodological breakthrough has taken place. Therefore, the concept of childhood was started being conceptualized in the contexts of the sociocultural discourses of these sciences. Referring to the diversity of the existing opinions about childhood (ecological, cultural, sociological, etc.), the field of talking about its meanings is encountered in various sciences. It is similar to inter-directional negotiations taking place between natural sciences and social-humanitarian sciences. There is a search for all kinds of knowledge permitting to harmonize the approaches existing in sciences and develop the criticism of traditional approaches. It is interdisciplinary negotiations in research that become the practice of the birth of new knowledge about childhood and its sociocultural expression.

Keywords: *childhood research, criticism, transformation of methodology, discourses.*

Methodological transformations and the conceptualization of the discourse about childhood

Interdisciplinary childhood studies mean the possibility to construct knowledge about this phenomenon in the new epistemological paradigm of open sociality (Blinov, Rockmorre, & Kasavin, 2013; Kasavin, 2013, 2016). It permits to understand the relation of the knowledge about childhood with social reality and the relation of childhood reality with the knowledge about it in various sciences. Thus childhood is started to be investigated socially involving it in the cultural diversity of the contexts of the dynamics of society when culture (in a general sense) becomes the resource of cognitive knowledge about it (Alanen, 2000, 2009; Christensen & Prout, 2002). Consequently, the diversity of knowledge existing in the perception of childhood is revealed in the context of its cultural forms and types, which sometimes interact and sometimes come into conflict with each other becoming the basis for new knowledge of social-humanitarian character about it. Particular childhood research based on the paradigm of *social knowledge* (Berger & Luckmann, 1999) permits to join scientific knowledge and the

results of the research on childhood into one epistemological thread. Case study is taken from the history of culture (Aries, 1962) and sociology (Christensen & Prout, 2002) as well as the practice of field research (Corsaro, 2015), the methodological rhetoric of which serves as an approach for inter-directional scientific discourse about childhood (Lehrer & Wagner, 1981; Goldman, 1999).

Social-philosophical reflection puts the problem of childhood into a cultural context that poses questions/problems and serves as a unique way of understanding various types of knowledge. Thus the inter-directional epistemological approach permits to critically reflect on the knowledge about childhood creating a specialized discourse consisting of knowledge of various sciences. Such a discourse permits to overcome all the boundaries of the knowledge about childhood that existed before or are existing now (Kasavin, 2013, 2016; Lehrer & Wagner, 1981; Goldman, 1999). This epistemology is enriched by the research focused on the child in childhood and the cultural world of childhood (Juodaitytė & Malinauskienė, 2016; Babić, 2014). Consequently, the culture of society (the present), on the one hand, permits to view the culture of children as a subculture that becomes a context for the research on childhood and the child's issues from the positions of the child. At the same time a social cultural discourse of the knowledge about children is developed. It enables to construct open *social knowledge* (Berger & Luckmann, 1999) about the child and childhood reflecting on such its phenomenon as *childhood culture* (Juodaitytė & Malinauskienė, 2016; Osorina, 2009 etc.). This research takes place in the dichotomy of adult-child cultures, in which the adult culture finds itself in the situation of critical reflection and permits to view the child and the world of the child's culture as a context of inter-directional epistemological knowledge. The research focused on the child and childhood becomes this context, which even more enriches knowing processes.

The object of the research – methodology of childhood research.

The aim is to reveal the sociocultural context of childhood research and the most important directions of this research highlighting the specifics of the construction/deconstruction of the knowledge about childhood and children that are important for the development of the methodology of interdisciplinary childhood research.

The methodology of the research. The research is based on the paradigm of post-structuralist social constructivism when constructivism is viewed as a method of understanding and explaining the world. Knowledge about childhood in the research serves as a product of perception that is constantly reduced by the researcher obtaining new knowledge. Therefore, the methodology of childhood research is perceived as an epistemic ontic field of the interdisciplinary paradigm when the boundaries of separate sciences are overstepped and new knowledge about childhood is created. It is understood as a social construct occurring in the interaction of the subject with social reality. Therefore, the knowledge about childhood expresses not only the actual world of childhood but also a certain way of the compatibility and organization of knowledge with the subjective experience. Here the main role is given to the discourse that permits to give up subjective truths rejecting the attachment to certain cultures. Interpreting the world of childhood the plurality is involved because childhood is not stable, it is in a dynamic context of transformation that is determined by unstable subjective factors.

Childhood and children in modern childhood research

The most important issue in modern childhood research is children as present individuals or becoming future individuals. Therefore, one of the characteristics of social childhood research is a critical approach towards the expression of the elements of normativity. The

beginning of this research is related to the problem of the traditional conceptualization of childhood. It was based on the dichotomy of the adult-child sociocultural interaction, traditional normative conceptualization, and the negation of the sociocultural origin of childhood.

The discourse of the psychical development of the child for a long time was based on the biological, physiological immaturity of the child, understanding childhood as one of the stages of human development, when normativity according to the child's age was defined as a boundary describing a necessary level and stage of development. The concept of maturity/immaturity in this case contradicts to the discourse about the sociocultural origin of childhood because children are conceptualized not as "being" but as "becoming" individuals only in the future. With these statements of the normativity of the child's development the knowledge about childhood and children is constructed in social policy and in the practice of everyday life (Kabašinskaitė, 2006). In order to define children's welfare, its political contexts, in Kabašinskaitė's (2006) opinion, were also based on the concepts of normativity. In sociology the desire is also observed to conceptualize childhood as a period of age but not as a social construct.

In childhood research it is attempted to find out contradictory relations between children's autonomy and the social structuration of childhood. In real life it is still possible to find cases when adults "create" childhood practising being with them based on authoritarianism and power. However, even under such conditions there are children who have innate or attributed autonomy as the ability to act autonomously (Šiaučiulienė, 2011; Rūdytė, 2011; Šaparnytė, 2007). The researchers prove that children are active participants of social environment – they also act and change the environment where their childhood takes place. At the same time they influence both adults and children with whom they maintain relationships. Mutual interrelation of adults and children is achieved through the "construction and deconstruction" of reality (Mayall, 2002) and/or explanatory reproduction. The latter can be understood through "cultural changes" that namely are "the result of the child's innovative and creative participation in society" (Corsaro, 2015).

These actions depend on twofold conditions stimulating or restricting children's participation in the existing "social structure and social reproduction" (Corsaro, 2015). Mutual activity of adults and children cannot be implemented through asymmetric interaction that is based on the position of power.

The most acceptable way for the sociocultural expression of adults and children is negotiations, which aim at common mutual understanding. Negotiations are the comparison/combination of different attitudes conditioned by intersubjectivity performed with the consent of both parties. On the other hand, negotiations serve as striving for social-cultural adequacy conditioned by "the declared principles of children's participation and social security of childhood" (Kabašinskaitė, 2006).

Negotiations also serve as a process of the understanding and harmonization of opinions of all the parties, which obliges to view childhood as a sociocultural construction and children as active agents who are personalities already in the present but not only "future adults" (in a biological, psychical, cultural or social sense). Negotiations between adults and children are based on understanding that children are and must be seen as the creators of their own social life, which is around them and which is influenced by the society the child lives in (Prout & James, 2005). This statement is also complemented by another fact that children can perform autonomous actions "in big social structures, to act in which is and was only the prerogative of adults" (Qvortrup, 2005). However, this understanding is hindered by the previously formed

attitude towards the child's possibilities to perform an autonomous/independent action. Adults also have prejudice about the biological or social nature of the child and think that children must behave according to the same norms of society as adults do. Normativity is then perceived as an external indicator of what should and must be done. This is the opposite of acting that depends on the child's possibility to *choose, act, and evaluate* actions. The ability to act autonomously is attributed to children alongside with the ability to evaluate oneself reasonably (Šaparnytė, 2007). These abilities are related to the contemporary policy of childhood that empowers children to act autonomously, however, does not sufficiently explain the preconditions when children are considered as "*being*", living here and now (Kabašinskaitė, 2002).

In the theory of childhood its self-contained value is also most often declarative. The deconstruction of the dualistic concept of "*being*" and "*becoming*" is taking place, because the concept of "*becoming*" was based on the child's age differences, on his/her natural but not sociocultural development. Therefore, in childhood research thus the alternative discourse about children and childhood is being created stating that the self-contained development of the childhood experience is taking place. The understanding that children themselves but not the adults enrich childhood is predominant.

In research not children's differences but the similarities between children and adults are emphasized because they are at the same time *being* and *becoming* throughout life. This means that constant interaction takes place between their *past, present, and future*. Thus, the reconstruction of the concepts of being and becoming performed referring to the knowledge about the child's development is namely based on the child's present or potential possibilities. The child's *growth and development* are understood as continuous processes made up of relative stability and changeability of possibilities and their combinations. It is the latter that determine the expression of the child's constant autonomy, activity and participation.

For the formation of a new attitude towards children and childhood Vygotsky's (1978) theory of sociocultural development is very important, which confirms the presupposition that sociocultural environment plays a deciding role for the child's development. It is what determines the character of the child-adult interaction. The latter can be not only symmetric but also asymmetric not only in the aspect of values but also in the aspect of positions.

Childhood research focused on social policy

Childhood research develops a critical attitude towards those political discussions concerning children's welfare and education, in which the issue of the strategies of social investment is predominant (Schultz, 1998). The value of strategies is perceived through the *future prospect* of society (James, 2010, James & James, 2004). Concerning reducing poverty, the creation of family welfare, and the development of childcare institutions, children are considered as the "objects" of economical, social, cultural, and educational investments. If the main function of the state social welfare system is to maintain economic and social order and if the "order of generations" is one of the most important preconditions for economy and democracy, then the most important task of the state social welfare system is to maintain this order. It means a certain regulation of childhood in various spheres of life: economical, social, cultural, educational, etc. On the one hand, the "order of generations" is maintained on the strength of the marginalization of the status of childhood, on the other hand, children are considered as a secondary, peripheral or even "shadow" group of society (Rūdytė, 2011). Consequently, the regulation of childhood is based on the future (Blinov, Rockmorre, & Kasavin, 2013). Instead of understanding childhood as a phenomenon of the present in global

social and national policy, the attitude towards children as future citizens and future labour force is still predominant (Shultz, 1998).

In the security policy of childhood its transience is often emphasized using such contradicting concepts as *homogenization, differentiation, institutionalization, regulation*. It hinders the intersubjective understanding of children's and adults' roles in the contexts of public and private life (Lehrer & Wagner, 1981; Goldman, 1999). If we admit intersubjectivity that is based on children's and adults' autonomy and activeness in sociocultural life, then childhood can be potentially acknowledged as a social construction and structure, and children as the participants of their own personal life and adults' life (Dencik, 2005). Their interaction comprises different social positions of children and adults (possibilities and abilities) and asymmetric relations among them. These relations are determined by different sociocultural norms and scenarios (Goldman, 1999). It means that children and adults potentially generate the practices, during which, through activities, through different roles and different life practices they together construct the minimum critical level of perception, eg.: the meanings of negotiations. The aim of such perception is the achievement of a consensus, a certain "social contract" (Lehrer & Wagner, 1981). This, in the opinion of childhood researchers (Alanen, 2009, King, 2007; Blinov, Rockmorre, & Kasavin, 2013), is the most important construct in the policy of social security of childhood of any level (global and national) and the projects focused on children's welfare.

Discussion

Childhood research being interdisciplinary in its essence develops the dialogue between the researchers of various sciences conducting research from the position of the child. Being the research of the level of the open knowledge, it develops interdisciplinary knowledge in the contexts: the child being in the present, the child being in the constant change. However, the development of this paradigm is hindered by the alienation of social sciences that is still predominant, the application of the determinability of the research object and setting boundaries, insufficient attention to the possibilities of the development of epistemic methodology. Consequently, childhood research moves to local childhood environments (family, school) and the broad field of the child's life situations (political, cultural, etc.) is insufficiently investigated. However, the researcher approaching the interdisciplinary perception of the world of childhood and the child in it, gaining experience in the field of interdisciplinary methodology provokes the dialogue among the scientists of various fields. Childhood research is especially important demystifying the understanding of the child in the contexts *maturity – immaturity, being – becoming*. Therefore, it liberalizes relations with children in all the fields of life.

There is still a lack of research on the child's community that would actualize a real authentic social and cultural origin of the child's life. Such research is hard to access for an adult as a researcher because in the community there exist its own norms and rules. It is important that such research aims to reveal a social biography of the child as a person. In such research the context is especially important: both children and adults are both being and becoming. In this research the concept of changeability is especially important because in its absence there is a risk to treat children as insufficiently mature in the present. Consequently, the illusion of the incompleteness of the research outcome may manifest itself.

Conclusions and generalizations

One of the characteristics of the research on modern childhood is a critical attitude towards the traditional concept of childhood and the child that was based on the category

of normativity for a long time. It manifests itself in the contexts *maturity – immaturity and norm – not norm* also accompanied by the concepts of children as becoming socially mature only in the future. It presupposed contradicting relations between the child's autonomy and the processes of the social structuration of childhood and permitted to develop knowledge about the priority of the adult's role in the child's life. It was constructed in the context: adults create childhood with their own efforts. This context was presupposed by insufficient attention to the child's efforts.

Modern childhood and children in research are considered as the participants of social environment acting and changing the environment where their childhood takes place. Such research is developed in the contexts – children being in the present. Therefore, in modern childhood research the reconstruction of the dualistic concept of the child as being and becoming is taking place and the alternative discourse about children and childhood is being created. Its essence is a self-contained development of the experience of childhood because children are being, they themselves but not adults enrich childhood. However, both children and adults are both being and becoming throughout life.

On the basis of childhood research the knowledge important for political discussions on the issues of children's social security and welfare is created. It helps to develop a critical attitude towards such discussions that are based on the perception of social investments for children through the prospect of the future of society. Consequently, children become the object of economical, social, cultural, and educational investments, future labour force. This aims to preserve the task of the state social security – to maintain the social order in society. In this context the transience of childhood is admitted, its social meaning is denied. In new childhood research the attitude that children and adults already now generate new social practices through different activities and roles is predominant. Thus the social contract between generations is ensured.

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Summary

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Recently in social sciences the methodological breakthrough has taken place, as a consequence of which childhood research became an object of interdisciplinary negotiations. They give an opportunity to construct knowledge about childhood and the child in the paradigm of open social knowledge. It enables to investigate the relation of childhood with social reality comprising the diversity of the cultural contexts of the dynamics of society. It is when *culture* in childhood research becomes the resource of cognitive knowledge about it.

The new epistemological paradigm is enriched by the research focused on the child in childhood and the cultural world of childhood. This research takes place in the dichotomy of adult-child cultures, when the priorities are given to the culture of children but not of adults. With regard to the culture of children, the adult culture finds itself in the situation of critical reflection. It permits to view the child and the world of his/her culture as an open context of interdisciplinary knowledge.

In modern social childhood research the most important question is: in what context children and childhood are perceived – in traditional, normative or post-traditional, post-structuralist. In the research the criticism of the normative concept, the contexts “child’s maturity/immaturity” and “becoming but not being” and of knowledge based on them manifests itself.

In childhood research the priority is given to the concept: children are active participants and creators of the social and cultural world of childhood. The reconstruction of the concepts of the child’s being and becoming is taking place because it is referred to the present and potential opportunities of the participation in the social cultural world. The processes of the child’s growth and development are understood as the relative stability and changeability of the combinations of his/her possibilities that namely determine the expression of the child’s autonomy, activity and participation.

The critical attitude towards the child as becoming but not being existing in childhood research also comprises the policy of the children’s social welfare, political decisions. There is a search of contexts, in which this welfare is understood – as the investment into the child’s future or present, as the condition for maintaining the order between generations. Such a concept marginalizes the status of childhood and negates a social contract among people of various generations.

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