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CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN RESEARCH ON CHILDREN AND CHILDHOOD. OVERVIEW OF PROSPECTS

ABSTRACT. Kiszka Monika, *Contemporary Trends in Research on Children and Childhood. Overview of Prospects* [Współczesne nurty badań nad dzieckiem i dzieciństwem. Przegląd perspektyw] Studia Edukacyjne no. 76, 2025, Poznań 2025, pp. 175-187. Adam Mickiewicz University Press. ISSN 1233-6688. Submitted: 20.04.2025. Accepted: 01.06.2025. DOI: 10.14746/se.2025.76.12

The article contains considerations on contemporary research on children and childhood, presenting various approaches, concepts, and research paradigms. Research on children and childhood is conducted on the basis of many theoretical and methodological paradigms. Childhood and child development research is based on diverse theoretical and methodological frameworks. For the contemporary identity of research, the trends of childhood studies and childism discussed in the article are particularly important. The contemporary identity of research is significantly shaped by trends in childhood studies and childism, which are explored in the article. Childhood is undoubtedly one of the major stages in a person's life, serving as the foundation for every subsequent stage. Therefore, scientific reflection on the development of research trends and paradigms in this topic is extremely important. It is crucial to conduct scholarly analysis on the evolution of research trends and paradigms in this area.

Key words: child, childhood, childhood studies, childism, methodology, research

Introduction

Children and childhood research has been developing its methodological assumptions for many years. This process was associated with numerous transformations of the very construct of childhood, which largely results from society's ideas and attitudes on this subject. Traditional research has adopted the perspective of children and childhood research, considering both children and childhood as objects of research. Nowadays, however, the

need to listen to children and strive to understand children's points of view on social reality is emphasized. The translation of children's experiences and narratives into scientific knowledge should be the result of the research. This is a particularly important task facing childhood researchers today. Contemporary social reality and the numerous changes that come with it mean that children and childhood are often marginalized and harmed. The described situation requires the development of tools that will allow for the fullest understanding of the child and childhood, and then the development of solutions to protect them.

Research on children and childhood is not only a description of the child's living conditions, but is also an attempt to find answers to the question about the actual realization of the rights of the youngest, their freedom, equality and justice. Time and again, research on the topic of childhood reveals the painful truth describing the hardships of childhood. Diagnosing the situation of children is the first necessary step to making changes that will improve the quality of life of the youngest. That is why it is crucially important to conduct debates on the methodological ways of constructing research on children and childhood. An important issue is the fact that research conducted on this topic is becoming interdisciplinary, and even transdisciplinary, which results directly from the complex nature of childhood itself, which is entangled in numerous dependencies. This means that contemporary childhood researchers are increasingly reinterpreting the responsible task before them, which is to obtain the fullest understanding of the contexts of childhood. This process assumes the full involvement of children, as childhood specialists, at every step of the research. The contemporary approach to research on children and childhood is therefore an attempt at a fully subjective approach to the child and its role in the research process, and this has a direct impact on the translation of research results into scientific knowledge, allowing for the broadest possible understanding and description of childhood.

In the presented article the conducted analyses focused on discussing contemporary directions of research on children and childhood. The trends of childhood studies and childism, which constitute a response to the need to understand contemporary childhood, are the key categories in the conducted considerations. The following article presents trends in research on children and childhood that fit into the "new paradigm" of childhood. Contemporary research aims to undertake interdisciplinary studies on the topic, focusing on children's participation in the process of researching their own childhood. Hence, children nowadays are not merely subjects of research but have also become researchers in their own right, investigating their social environment. (Górka-Strzałkowska, 2025, pp. 30-31).

Scientific foundations of children and childhood studies

When analysing the issue of children and childhood research, it is important to point out that it should be divided into traditional and contemporary categories. In traditional research, the child is treated as an object. It is believed that it is influenced by the interactions of individuals, groups, family, school and society. Therefore, the child is influenced by institutions that are external to them. Traditional research is often quantitative in nature (Matyjas, 2022, p.23-24). Childhood research traditionally describes and classifies different types of childhood based on developmental, socialization, and acculturation processes.

Contemporary research on children and childhood, as Barbara Smolińska-Theiss emphasises, is extensive and multi-threaded. The beginning of its development dates back to the 1980s. It draws on numerous research traditions and therefore has a diverse character. Contemporary research assumptions are focused on the goal of constantly deepening knowledge and horizons relating to children and childhood. The research is undertaken not only by representatives of social sciences, but is interdisciplinary in nature, facilitating the constant discovery of previously unknown dimensions of inquiry. Contemporary research trends focus on treating the child as a subject with respect for their dignity. This idea of subjectivity assumes that the child is an active creator of their own development and, through contacts with adults, co-creates the social space (Szczepska-Pustkowska, 2009, pp. 79-89).

The scientific foundations for the development of contemporary trends in research on children and childhood were laid by Alan Prout and Allison James, who in their groundbreaking study identified the key features of research. The authors emphasized that the following issues are important: childhood is a social construct, while at the same time being a specific structural and cultural component; childhood is considered through the prism of social variables, which implies its understanding in many approaches; childhood is understood and considered from the perspective of children, taking into account their point of view; children are seen as active subjects who construct their own social lives; ethnography is an important research method, which allows children to speak directly and be active in the research process. The last, but no less important issue is the assumption of the involvement of researchers in the research and reconstruction of childhood, which should be guided by the idea of working to improve the situation of children and the quality of childhood itself (James, Prout, 1997, pp. 8).

Pedagogical literature also indicates that research on children and childhood is conducted in two basic directions. In the first one, childhood

is marked by the influences of environment and upbringing. A perspective close to the above is also presented by Barbara Smolińska-Theiss, who points out that childhood is defined through the prism of services provided to the child, which stem from the influence of adults on children. These activities are included in the psychological language of actions and behaviors. What is characteristic here is the object-oriented approach to the child (Smolińska-Theiss, 1993, p. 11). The second direction of research, which treats the child as a subject, shows that childhood can be defined as independent and developing. The dominant belief here is that it is necessary to treat the child as a subject, one that is involved in its own development and adopts an active attitude towards social reality. The key categories of research are the child's experiences, activities, and actions. The dominant strategy here is qualitative research, which allows for a more in-depth understanding of children's marking of social space.

In presenting the analysis of selected trends in research on children and childhood, it is important to indicate further characteristics of contemporary research identity. The above description should be supplemented with three perspectives: ontological, epistemological-methodological, and narrative (of research questions). Additionally, children and childhood studies can be defined according to their thematic perspectives. Among the research conducted in the social sciences and humanities, the following trends are indicated: autodiscourse; methodology of childhood research; history of childhood; intergenerational relations; children in society; children in politics; everyday life of children; specific conditions of development (Jarosz, 2017, pp. 72-73).

To sum up, it should be noted that contemporary researchers strive to achieve a holistic approach to children and to develop interdisciplinary research on childhood. The described assumptions show a paradigmatic shift from the traditional discourse of childhood, focused on selective approaches, towards the research orientations of the "new childhood" paradigm. It is crucial to show many different childhoods and the ways in which children experience social reality.

The Childhood Studies Paradigm in Contemporary Children and Childhood Studies

The beginnings of the development of childhood studies date back to the 1980s, when, under the influence of scientific studies, a research field called the new sociology of childhood was established. According to the developing concepts of this trend, childhood is perceived as a social phenomenon that is constructed through many discourses, and children themselves

are active actors in social life. The main goal was to learn about the life worlds of children, which was to be achieved by using qualitative research methods. This methodological solution was intended to facilitate listening to children's voices and presenting the forms of their childhood agency. A key role in shaping the field of childhood studies was played by the work of Alan Prout and Allison James entitled *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*, as well as by many other authors (including Corsaro, James, Moran-Ellis) who, under the influence of the above publication, contributed to strengthening the childhood studies paradigm in the field of research on children and childhood. It is also important to point out that the emergence of the childhood studies trend was also influenced by structural sociology and feminist movements. Theses derived from structural sociology indicated that childhood is a permanent feature inscribed in the social structure. On the other hand, feminist assumptions presented children as one of the minority groups that experience marginalization and oppression from adults (Kowalik-Olubińska, 2020, p. 130).

The fundamental assumption of childhood studies is that childhood is one of the social phenomena that is also subject to social interpretation. However, knowledge on this subject is constantly reconstructed and constructed by society. This means that childhood is dependent on the historical time in which it occurs and the socio-cultural environment within which it arises. Childhood is not fixed, but rather shaped by the time period and socio-cultural context in which it takes place. Therefore, the specificity of available knowledge about the child and childhood is variable and dependent on the impact of social, religious, economic, cultural, and finally global factors. The created images of childhood always serve to regulate this period by adults. The possible social representations of childhood available in societies are a combination of beliefs, meanings, and values that are important carriers of ideas rooted in the cultural context. This means that when it comes to the issue of children and childhood, there are many myths and false images that constitute a relic of the past, but which constantly influence the construction of the vision of children and childhood. Consequently, numerous misconceptions and inaccurate portrayals of children and childhood persist as remnants of the past, and continue to shape our understanding of these concepts.

Research focused on childhood studies includes theoretical assumptions regarding conducting scientific research on the subject of children and childhood, taking full advantage of the children's rights. This means that the research paradigm includes not only research on the child and childhood, but also with the child and by the child. (Patrick Thomas, 2021, p. 187). This perspective corresponds to the assumptions of Janusz Korczak, who during his work emphasized that children are specialists on and creators of their own

childhood because they are the ones experiencing it in the present moment. Therefore, the childhood studies paradigm assumes the subjective treatment of children as experts on childhood issues, and the use of their knowledge and competences at every step of the research process. Contemporary directions of research on children and childhood have a wide range of research contexts, thus including assigning many roles to the child that they can play in the research process. These roles include: the child as an assistant, the child as a partner, and the child as a researcher (i.e. a child who independently constructs the research process with the support of an adult).

When describing the contemporary assumptions of childhood studies, it is important to draw attention to the issues raised by scientists, including doubts about conducting research in this field. It is important to emphasize that in childhood studies there are no clear studies protecting the broadly understood interests of the child, their role and the scope of tasks they perform in the research process. The lack of clear provisions regulating the issues described above also results from the different ways of understanding and defining childhood. Therefore, securing the interests of the child who becomes a full-scale participant and researcher of their own childhood is necessary in several areas, but the following issues are of key importance: the ability to freely express their opinion and develop their own competences, along with providing the child with appropriate case law for protecting their interests. The issues presented above highlight the need for institutional and legal protection of the rights of children participating in research.

Another important matter is the way of organizing and conducting research, which, in accordance with the assumptions of childhood studies, allows for full children's participation at every step of the research, as well as children's participation in the decision-making process. Many authors emphasize the need to develop theoretical and methodological assumptions for the participation or co-participation of children in research, which will also concern determining their readiness and, above all, taking into account the diverse environmental context. The implementation of the childhood studies trend, which is grounded in genuine respect for children's rights and their involvement in research, is supported by the aforementioned issues (Patrick Thomas, 2021, pp. 191-194).

When discussing the assumptions of childhood studies, it is also important to emphasize that the understanding of childhood and the process of researching it occurs not only in the area of disciplinary research such as pedagogy or psychology. It is crucial to highlight that the comprehension of childhood and the research process surrounding it extends beyond the confines of disciplinary research fields like pedagogy or psychology, particularly when examining the foundations of childhood studies. The research undertaken is

mediated by other disciplines that broadly deal with children and childhood and their rights, which makes the research interdisciplinary in nature. The fundamental assumptions of childhood studies allow us to state that these studies break traditional patterns. The underlying principles of childhood studies defy conventional models. They provide diverse views on childhood, encompassing many scientific perspectives, providing a better understanding of this social phenomenon.

Childhood studies revolve around attempts to find answers to questions about the realization of children's rights, the status of children in society and children's experience. The goal of the considerations that center around the aforementioned area is to gain a holistic comprehension of childhood and its intrinsic nature. The knowledge acquired in this way should be used to improve communication between children and adults and to improve the quality of childhood. The issues mentioned above show that children are perceived as full-fledged citizens, members of social life and, above all, actors of their own lives who construct and determine the course of their own biography. Knowledge about childhood should be obtained directly from children, because they are the ones who fully participate in childhood. Moreover, knowledge obtained directly from children reveals their ways of thinking, perspectives of understanding and seeing social reality, relationships present in their lives and their own living conditions.

Childism as a new paradigm of children and childhood research

Contemporary research trends are focused around the childism paradigm, which essentially refers to the injustices and exclusions that occur in relation to children and childhood, resulting in the infantilization of the child. The result of the above described situation is discrimination against children in many fields of their activity. This results in children being discriminated against in many areas of their lives. In the Polish nomenclature, 'dziecinizm' is the equivalent of the English term childism (Burman, 2023). The term "childism" was first introduced in 1975 by child psychiatrists Chesta Pierce and Gil Allen. It described the attitudes and practices of adults that were anti-child in their essence. However, the contemporary understanding of childism was popularized in 2012 by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl. The author suggested that prejudice against children should be considered as unacceptable as racism or homophobia. These prejudices are the main reason why children and their problems continue to be unheard and disrespected. Childism therefore focuses on false assumptions and ways of seeing the child that are contained in

prejudices, leading directly to many harmful, operational and unfair behaviours towards them.

As indicated in the literature, the main goal of conducting research on the subject of children and childhood is to strive to build the most multi-threaded knowledge about childhood while emphasizing children's agency and competences. The research process is focused on a comprehensive understanding of the child, their experience, but also their social environment, age, place of upbringing, gender and origin. When elaborating on the childism trend, it is important to note its connection to the aforementioned childhood studies. Childism expands and deepens the research contexts of childhood studies. Finally, childism is closely related to the philosophy of childhood, but also to the philosophy for children, as well as all the policy assumptions regarding children and their role in politics.

Research from a childism perspective considers children as active participants in democratic and political processes. Researchers who study children are investigating how to incorporate children's perspectives into political processes and create effective methods for listening to them. It is also crucially important how adults and children perceive each other's roles and how these concepts are understood. The issues outlined above constitute an area of analysis included in the efforts to include children in political structures (Burman, 2022, pp. 1024-1026). Of course, the issues mentioned above require reflection and many social debates, which will result in the development of appropriate strategies for the inclusion of children in the structures of society and the decision-making process.

Childism raises questions about social injustice towards children, their discrimination and marginalization in social structures, which affects the youngest regardless of their age. One of the basic assumptions of this trend is the perception of children as a group deprived of selected abilities, and childhood itself as a period of introduction to adulthood. Children are often assigned a lower value than adults. The view described above has been shaped on the basis of a variety of attitudes and beliefs that exist in society and relate to children and childhood. Discrimination against children on the basis of age and attributing numerous stereotypes to childhood covers the period from birth to 18 years of age (Adami, 2023).

The works of John Wall and Elisabeth Young-Bruehl had a significant influence on the formation of the foundations of childism. Key to these considerations are issues arising from the following trends: human and children's rights; theories of discrimination; dafavoritism; power and violence; sociological assumptions about childhood; theories of social injustice; social and political participation of children, as well as trends in feminism (Adami, Dineen, 2021, p. 354). Childism highlights the negative phenomena that chil-

dren face in their daily lives. Research embedded in the described paradigm is intended to lead to positive social changes to improve the quality of children's lives. It is worth mentioning here the two perspectives that constitute the foundation for conducting research in the field of childism. The first one includes analyses focused on the processes of discrimination against children, promoting actions for the realization of children's rights. The second perspective includes expanding knowledge and awareness of the process of marginalization, counteracting violence against children and treating them as objects. The conducted research and analyses indicate the need to treat children as partners who have their own voice and rights (Adami, Dineen, 2021, p. 354).

Thus, the concept of childism focuses on the problems of marginalization of children, referencing assumptions similar to feminist trends, striving to give children the right to voice their opinions. This perspective focuses analysis on negative criticism of the existing social reality, opposing the oppressive social system. On the other hand, childism is included in the framework of positive reinforcement, i.e. the so-called empowerment concept, which entails strengthening children's competences and their own advocacy and defense of their interests. Undoubtedly, regardless of the context in which the research is based, it has a significant impact on building knowledge about discrimination against children resulting from the oppressive shaping of social systems. Only by drawing attention to the described issues, along with their scientific study, will it be possible to take actions aimed at genuinely changing the situation of children (Adami, Dineen, 2021, pp. 355).

Childism is also understood as a research trend focused on a critical description of social reality, which perceives children as a social group subjected to marginalization. The research trends here are similar to critical feminist theory. This trend constitutes a deep reflection on the domination of adults over children and their experience of the often invisible but operational principles of domination. The key to conducting research is to highlight children's personal experiences, in particular their sense of independence, general life experience, and the possibilities of creating policies that include them in the structures of social life. The empowerment concept also plays a significant role as it targets disadvantaged groups, which, according to the trend's assumptions, are children. (Wall, 2024, p. 206).

As John Wall emphasises, in order to fully understand the assumptions of childism, it is necessary to refer to the understanding of the concept of adultism and the resulting process of marginalisation of children. According to the theory of adultism, it is crucial to accept that it is the source of patriarchy and the resulting structures of social domination over children. Similarly to childhood studies, in childism, childhood and adulthood are social con-

structs whose framework is determined by the biological age of individuals. Both concepts are attributed with features that constitute mutual opposition. However, it is adulthood that is attributed with respect and authority, which constitute the basis for domination over childhood. When analyzing the assumptions of childism, it is also necessary to discuss the concept of authority and power. This is a fundamental factor that allows adults to maintain dominance and set limits on children's participation. Adulthood, therefore, is a theory of establishing patriarchal boundaries that constitute the social and political rules for the functioning of society. By strengthening the position of adulthood, the process of marginalizing and weakening childhood is deepened. This concept is therefore not only a discourse of domination, but also of the weakening of the position and power of children, referred to as disempowerment (Wall, 2024, p. 207).

Childism research focuses on considerations concerning the status of the child, their rights, and childhood policies, which constitute the basis for singling out the status of childhood itself. Moreover, researchers are interested in the rights and privileges that a child has due to their age and attributes. It is worth noting here that the name childism itself refers to the in-depth theoretical grounding of the research conducted in a critical reflection on childhood, while at the same time drawing attention to the context of children's activity. The research in the discussed trend constitutes a critical assessment of the theoretical discourses of adulthood and childhood, drawing attention to the need to create more inclusive programs for children's social participation. (Wall, 2019, pp. 5-7).

The childism trend refers to researchers' efforts to critically assess the contexts of child marginalization, which continue to constitute the basis for the analysis of the process of upbringing and socialization. However, each of the performed analyses is also rooted in the perspective of children's interactions with their peers and teachers, as well as with society more broadly. The research trend of childism aligns with feminist principles as it aims to enhance children's social participation and citizenship by making them more accessible. Childism also postulates striving to understand childhood, but also to understand children as a social group and, above all, the influence of child-adult and child-society relations on the construction of images of the child. The aim of the childism research is to promote the strengthening of the potential inherent in children, while striving for social change. (Wall, 2019, pp. 9-10). It should be noted that the scientific assumptions of childism apply to the broadest understanding of childhood, encompassing political, historical, and societal perspectives. Only by understanding all the connections and entanglements of childhood will it be possible to attempt to change social and political views on children and childhood (Burman, 2022, p. 1030).

The above-described characteristics of childhood studies and childism research trends seem to be related. However, each of them has different assumptions that constitute the methodological basis of the conducted research. The fullest possible distinction between the two trends of research on children and childhood will allow for a deeper understanding of them. The first of them, childhood studies, focuses on the sociological understanding of the construct of the child and childhood, situating the child in the position of an active individual as a constructor of their own life and biography. Children are treated as specialists in their own lives and childhood. Childhood studies research focuses on understanding children's everyday lives and their experiences. However, research embedded in the childism trend leads to a better understanding of childhood experience as well as intergenerational relations. Thus, childism provides an understanding of childhood not only from the perspective of children themselves, but also from a broader generational, political, and social context. The historical foundations of the formation of the construct of adulthood and childhood, as well as the process of marginalization of the latter, also play an important role. Childism, which has been developing intensively for over 10 years, is an answer to questions about children's citizenship, their place in society and the possibility of realizing their own rights. Research in this area is situated on the border of transdisciplinarity, leading to an in-depth, often critical analysis of the current social reality, allowing for the creation of practical solutions for including children in broader social and political structures, as well as the decision-making process. However, despite numerous methodological differences between the trends of childism and childhood studies, it is important to point out that both trends are complementary to each other, and the obtained research results constitute mutually complementary contexts. Therefore, when analysing the issue of children and childhood studies, it should be noted that they encompass extensive theoretical and empirical areas of research inquiry. However, what must be noticed is that many issues still require exploration. Real reflection on the issues raised in the article will make it possible for the research on children and childhood to be carried out in such a way as to allow for the voice of children to be heard and understood. Therefore, the debate regarding methodological and theoretical grounding still remains open.

Final reflection

Contemporary research on children and childhood aims towards full interdisciplinarity and even transdisciplinarity. Childhood and children are studied not only by educational sciences, but also by sociological and psy-

chological sciences. The research strives to make the best possible attempts to solve the problems of children's social reality. Regardless of the emerging dilemmas between the paradigmatic research transition or the choice of research methods, undoubtedly the developing research perspectives allow for a better understanding of children by looking at and understanding reality from their perspective. However, especially nowadays, there is still a need to reflect on childhood and to ask questions that allow for a critical assessment of the many still unresolved issues of marginalisation, exclusion or harm done to children. Available research results and reports emphasize the need to protect children and childhood, which should lead to an improvement in the quality of children's lives and a better understanding of the diversity of childhoods.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work.

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