

What's new in the New Social Studies of Childhood?

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to review the main theoretical positions of the approach called 'New Social Studies of Childhood' (NSSC) and to critically re-assess them in the face of challenges presented by the twenty-first century. The NSSC developed in the last two decades of the twentieth century as an interdisciplinary approach towards the study of childhood, uniting under its roof sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, educationalists, pediatricians, historians, and geographers. Historical reasons for the appearance of the NSSC are outlined in the first section of the article.

The title of the article has a double reading. On the one hand, the paper considers what new ideas the NSSC has brought into research on childhood, and how it has changed the way researchers see children now. Thus, the paper discusses the principal theoretical assumptions of the approach: the social construction of childhood, diversity of childhoods, a view of children as social actors and participants, and a major role played by localities and environments in shaping children's experiences.

On the other hand, the article also explores what new dimensions are currently taken by the NSSC, and looks at attempts, within childhood studies, to re-evaluate the above, by now well-known positions, and move the field forward to advance interdisciplinary understanding of children's and young people's lives.

I conclude by outlining major changes in our views on childhood, brought in by the NSSC, and discussing the potential for new directions of research, as has been mapped by recent scholarship in childhood studies.

History of the approach

Starting mostly from the 1980s, researchers expressed concern that the study of children is either absent or marginal in sociological and anthropological theory and research (see e.g. Alanen, 1988, Leonard, 1990). They argued that, on the contrary, childhood issues should be central to the discipline of sociology (Adler & Adler, 1986).

This turn towards the child, to studying children 'as they are', and not as adults-in-waiting, can be explained by the important historical development described by Viviana Zelizer in her book *Pricing the Priceless Child* (1994). Zelizer investigates how, from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s, children in America gradually ceased to contribute to the family economy (by helping at the family farm or workshop, or doing major work about the house) due to laws banning child labour, while at the same time the emotional status of children grew, as did the investments that parents put in children's education,

health, and well-being. Thus, an image of the modern child appears who is at once economically 'useless' and emotionally 'priceless'.

Perhaps the first person to trace the appearance and change of the phenomenon of childhood in history and to challenge the notion that childhood is a natural stage in the development of a human being was the French historian Philippe Ariès (1960). According to his book, translated into English as *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), the notion of childhood simply did not exist in the medieval society, and childhood, as a concept and an accepted part of family life, came into being only as late as the seventeenth century. That is when children began to be treated as children, i.e., as different from adults: for example, as innocent beings, who need to be shielded from certain spheres of human existence, such as sex or death. Another example used by Ariès is the appearance of styles of clothes that are specifically designed for young boys and girls instead of the miniature copies of the adult clothing styles that had been prevalent until then.

Closer to the period in which the NSSC appeared and developed, it is worth mentioning that by the last decades of the twentieth century, the number of children per family in affluent societies dropped dramatically, while the quality of life improved. Thus, the centrality of children for the family and the society became even more evident than it might have been before.

In the late 1980s, with the growing attention of society towards childhood, scholars were trying to understand why children were still seen, like women had been before, as peripheral to the sociological study or were only considered as future replacements for adults ('becomings' and not beings). They traced the reasons for this attitude back to the originally mostly 'macro' focus of sociology as a discipline and its prevalent attention to the study of global systems (Ambert, 1986).

A number of feminist researchers have explored why the study of childhood in social sciences narrowed itself to a limited number of topics and approaches. Ennew (1986) points to the conventional perception of family as a natural or biological unit ('nuclear family' or 'typical family'). While new family arrangements were emerging, they received almost no attention in traditional sociological research.

In sociology, the socialization theory was criticized as conventional (see, for example, Alanen 1988), because it considers children as passive and presupposes that the child is only in the process of becoming social — undergoing socialization (Dreitzel, 1973). Although the socialization theory explains how children, born without knowledge of the society's language or organization, become inducted into the surrounding social worlds, it does that from 'the adult ideological viewpoint' (Speier, 1976, Thorne, 1987). This viewpoint was also labelled 'an elitist perspective' (Alanen, 1988: 58), i.e., from a position of power to those undergoing socialization — in our case, children. The concept of socialization was said to regard children as 'not-yet-social beings' and to be inattentive to children's active social participation and their agency in social life.

In child psychology, the concept of development widely used by this discipline was criticized for its lack of attention to the social and historical context of childhood, as well as for setting up adulthood as the standard of rationality. Consequently, the assumption that childhood can be treated as a universal, biologically given, phenomenon was questioned. Critical psychology, emerged in 1970s, was already much more sensitive to the social context of behavior.

On the whole, by the mid-1980s both the importance of study of childhood in the social sciences and the importance of society and culture in childhood studies were becoming widely recognized. Social constructionism theory, which developed in the last



decades of the twentieth century, reinforced the idea that childhood should be understood as a historical, social, and cultural phenomenon.

Social construction of childhood

As mentioned, the NSSC has been largely based on the concept that childhood is socially constructed (e.g. Alanen, 1988, Prout & James, 1990, and many others). As the authors of the book *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood* put it,

The immaturity of children is a biological fact but the ways in which that immaturity is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture. (Prout & James, 1990: 7)

Scholars suggest that childhood is continuously reconstructed within a field of multiple societal constraints and confronting social forces. Moreover, according to Jenks (1982), the child is constituted within social theory — it is assembled to support certain interpretations of a man or a woman, action, order, language and rationality.

Indeed, in line with the ‘linguistic turn’ in social theory, childhood is considered to be constructed through various discourses and narrative practices. Thus, childhood is defined as ‘constructed through its telling... there can only be stories and storytellers of childhood’ (Stainton-Rogers & Stainton-Rogers, 1992: 12).

Some researchers tried to find a compromise between the position that childhood is socially constructed and the socialization theory, bringing the latter up-to-date with contemporary views on childhood. For instance, Alanen calls for the understanding of socialization as a *process*, and not just from the point of view of its outcomes. She suggests that ‘socialization might be re-conceptualized as *construction* instead of internalization’ (Alanen, 1988: 61).

Diverse and global childhood(s)

If childhood is not as universal and natural, as it seemed before the work of Ariès and the NSSC, then there are multiple different childhoods, both synchronically and diachronically.

Synchronically, the social, cultural and economic conditions within which children live and grow up are diverse and increasingly diversified. Numerous research efforts were put into studying childhood from a comparative perspective (see, for example: Chisholm, Buechner, Krueger and Brown, 1990; du Bois-Raymond, Sunker and Krueger, 2001; Olwig & Gulløv, 2003), comparing childhood experiences in different countries and cultures.

Within these efforts, attempts have been made to explore a variety of childhoods co-existing even within one country. For example, drawing on the case of Germany before the re-unification, authors write that ‘Ethnic minorities live on the margins of West German society, with few links into the indigenous culture’, so that ‘West German children rarely have much contact with minority group children unless they live in specific areas (for example, Kreuzberg in West Berlin)...’ (Chisholm & al., 1990: 2).

According to Alan Prout (2005), such diversity of childhoods is made more visible with socio-technical developments in communication. He also suggests that globalization has led not only to greater understanding of the diversity of childhoods but also to the emergence of a common concept of childhood — in particular, due to introducing universal human rights, including children’s rights.



In her book *Growing up Global* (2004), Cindi Katz examines the processes of development and global change through the perspective of children's lives. At the core of the book is a longitudinal ethnographic study of children growing up in a Sudanese village. It follows a small number of children from ten years of age to early adulthood, looking closely at their work and play. Shifting her focus to working-class families in New York City in 1980s and 1990s, Katz draws an unexpected parallel with the Sudanese experience with respect to the effects of the changing environment on children and communities. Such effects are, in particular, deskilling, community destabilization, and a reordered relationship between production and reproduction.

As for the diachronic aspect, a big amount of work has been carried out to study attitudes to children and their upbringing in the past. Karin Calvert, for example, explores the practice of swaddling over the ages. Babies were swaddled not only for their own protection, but also to give them good posture, so that to make them more 'like humans'. Parents would resort to various devices and techniques in order to prevent their children from crawling on all fours like an animal. The author describes methods used to help children stand and walk upright from a very early age (Calvert, 2008).

A lot of attention has recently been devoted to the study of everyday practices, relationships, material aspects of children's lives in the past within a given society, as well as how children's experiences were shaped by the ideology and politics of that society. See, for example, Catriona Kelly's social and cultural history account of a century of childhood in Russia and Soviet Union, from 1890 to 1991 (Kelly, 2007).

Children as agents, social actors, and participants

The NSSC considers children not as passive objects of socialization but as social actors in their own right. Following this, some researchers propose considering children



as 'a structural «class» in relation to other classes and capable of collective action and therefore capable of engaging in social struggles' (Alanen, 1988: 65).

Looking at family as an institution, Delphy (1984) and Delphy & Leonard (1986, 1990) have developed a theoretical formulation that stresses the structural hierarchy of family relations and the 'class' relations between genders and between generations. Leonard comes to the following conclusion:

Childhood, youth and old age are not seen as defined in opposition to, by exclusion from 'adulthood'. Power relations between different age groups are therefore largely invisible because the relationships are seen as individual, complementary, and/or naturally based. Since this is very similar to the situation vis-a-vis the treatment of women and gender relations in sociology prior to 1970, it was suggested that feminist writing, which has developed the concept of patriarchy as a system of power relations, would form a useful resource for the sociology of childhood. (Leonard, 1990: 70)

Speaking about how children are perceived by adults and what is expected of children by the society, Smith (2000) defines three aspects of childhood (he also calls them 'phases of experience' and 'role categories'): children as consumers, children as interpreters, and children as actors. He explains that these 'phases of experience' 'equate to distinct aspects of children's lives, reflecting the stages of receiving stimuli from the external world' (Smith 2000, p. 5).

As 'consumers', children are perceived as passive recipients of information or products, and this perception is used in the context of education or of advertising campaigns. As 'interpreters', however, children are expected to analyze the information they receive and to be able to make their own choices. Finally, as 'actors', children are supposed to take initiative and responsibility, or even a leadership role in youth organizations.

Smith considers such 'phases' in two ways: they can be seen either as 'temporal stages in the process of receiving stimuli, processing them and then taking action' or as 'developmental stages' (p. 6) — children moving from a more dependent and passive state to a more proactive position. Smith is concerned that these role expectations can cause multiple contradictions, especially for children with limited resources, including those living in non-affluent societies.

The view on children as social actors has led to the understanding that children should be granted the status of participants in the processes that construct worlds that surround them. Matthews argues that '...children, as full members of society, have the human right to participate in its activities, according to their levels of ability, understanding and maturity' (2001: 9). A number of other authors regard, too, children's and young people's participation as a necessary condition for the future of a democratic society. Thus, according to Hart (1992), democratic responsibility does not suddenly arise in adulthood, but is a condition that must be nurtured and experienced at different stages along a transition, and so should be a feature of all democratic education.

To show different degrees of children's involvement, Hart devised a ladder of participation. The ladder has eight steps towards full participation starting from non-participation (manipulation, decoration, tokenism) and going through 'assigned but informed', 'consulted and informed', 'adult-initiated, shared decisions with children', 'child-initiated and directed', and finally, 'child-initiated, shared decisions with adults' (Hart, 1992).

This critical stance has led to the development of research on children's participation, in particular regarding the decision-making process of environmental planning (Matthews, 2001; Drummond, 2007; Spenser & Blades, 2005) and the architectural

design of new school buildings (den Besten et al., forthcoming). It has also led to the development and use of participatory methodology in research with children destined to incorporate children's own perspectives (see, for example, Punch, 2002; for the recent critical discussion of such methods sees Gallagher, 2008).

Spatiality and Children's Geographies

Over the past decade, there has been what I would call the 'geographical turn' in the study of childhood. Human geographers extensively explored children's understanding of place and space, their relations to their (especially physical) environment. Matthews (1992) provides a comprehensive survey of the literature that laid foundation to this direction of research named 'Children's Geographies'. A large body of studies have





focused on the 'mileus' in which children are located, such as family, school, and neighbourhood (Aitken, 1998, 2001; James et al., 1998), and on children's emotional and social experience of places around them (see, for example: Christensen & O'Brien, 2003; Nikitina-den Besten, 2008; Olwig & Gulløv, 2003; Spenser & Blades, 2005; Tsoukala, 2001, 2007; and many others). The international journal 'Children's Geographies' was founded in 2003 (editor — Prof. Hugh Matthews, University of Northampton, UK).

Hopkins and Pain explain this 'geographical turn' by the influence of the NSSC ideas:

This shift from seeing age and lifecourse stages as socially constructed categories rather than independent variables means that space and place gain significance. People have different access to and experiences of places on the grounds of their age, and spaces associated with certain age groups influence who uses them and how. (Hopkins & Pain, 2007: 287–288).

Children's geographies as a subdiscipline of human geography has gradually broadened and now comprises a lot of advanced interdisciplinary work — a lot of which was inspired by the New Social Studies of Childhood. In turn, the field of children's geographies make use of post-modern reflections and ideas in social sciences — in particular, focusing on mundane everyday practices, materiality, and bodies (Horton & Kraftl, 2006).

Exploring children's relationship with their environments, many researchers have noted that children and young people are almost invisible on the physical and social landscape of contemporary Western towns and cities. This is partially due to the enlarged home space and diversified indoor activities such as computer games and internet roaming (Valentine and Holloway, 1999). However, the phenomenon of children's absence in public outdoor spaces is also attributed to sociospatial marginalization of children as a generational group, which can be compared to exclusion of other social groups, such as, for example, ethnic minorities or people with disabilities (Matthews and Limb, 1999).

Already 30 years ago, a revolutionary book of Colin Ward (1977) showed how children are ghettoized into safe, protected, adult-controlled compounds and how they are trying to resist it. Those children who are still present on the urban landscape, are regarded as either 'angels' or 'devils' (Valentine, 1996): either as victims, the view which serves to justify the increasing adult surveillance, or on the contrary, as a nuisance or even a danger for social order.

According to Prout (2005), the idea that children do not belong to the public space, has its roots in the exclusion of children from full-time paid employment and their inclusion in compulsory schooling in the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries in Europe and the US (Cunningham and Viazzo, 1996; Hendrick, 1997; Heywood, 2001; Lavalette, 1994, cited in Prout, 2005). Due to that, writes Prout, efforts were made to take children away from the street and confine them to places such as the home, the school, or youth organizations like the Scouts. A recent study of the policies affecting children and young people in the UK revealed that there are policies which both directly and indirectly influence the experiences of public open spaces that children and young people can have (Wooley 2006).

What's on in Childhood Studies today? Contemporary debates around the NSSC

There are currently attempts to bring debates in and around childhood studies on a new level, in particular, by challenging some of the above core theoretical assumptions of the NSSC. According to Robert Vanderbeck, such assumptions are often taken for granted and 'infrequently interrogated in much depth' (2008: 394).

To illustrate this, Vanderbeck considers one example of such an assumption, which has become 'a theoretical commonplace' (*ibid.*) and 'is recited repeatedly in the children's geographies literature and the NSSC' (2008: 396) — that of children's competent social agency. According to Vanderbeck, although there is now a common understanding of the child as a competent social agent (or actor) and of the need for 'the child's voice to be heard', the practical and political implications of this position are rarely discussed. For example, the author states that there is no discussion of (the need for) any age differentiation within the notions of childhood and youth. Yet such differentiation can be crucial, for instance, in criminal proceedings involving young people. Vanderbeck writes about some other aspects of age differentiation, eliminating which in practice would have very serious consequences. Examples of these are voting ages and drinking ages, as well as ages of sexual consent and of access to particular kinds of media (e.g. sexually explicit material and violent video games) (Vanderbeck, 2008: 398).

Along this line of thought, Peter Hopkins and Rachel Pain propose creating 'relational geographies of age' (2007: 287). They are critical of focusing on 'narrow identity groups', such as children or older people, in isolation (2007: 288). Instead, they call for more and broader research into the relations and interactions between generational groups. They write:

*Viewing intergenerationality as an aspect of social identity suggests that individuals' and groups' sense of themselves and others is partly on the basis of generational difference or sameness. (...) A stance that intergenerationality is important in understanding the construction and experience of identity entails more than, for example, acknowledging that what it is to be a child is affected by people of other age groups. It also suggests that identities of children and others are produced **through** interactions with other age/generational groups and are in a constant state of flux (Hopkins & Pain, 2007: 288–289).*

In a similar way, Victoria Semenova proposes a definition of the notion of generation as based on how people see themselves as belonging to this or that generation and associate themselves with other people from this particular generation (Semenova, 2009).

Another concept, which Hopkins and Pain (2007: 290) find useful, is that of intersectionality — for exploring 'the ways in which various markers of social difference — gender, class, race, (dis)ability, sexuality, age, and so on — intersect and interact'. The authors also call for more studies — in particular, through oral history — of dynamic life courses and on transitions between different life stages/experiences: for example, from school to work, from childhood to youth, or from childhood to parenting (*ibid.*). Clearly, a lot of research on children in social sciences has already been based on the life course and oral history approaches, including, for example, a study of Soviet girls' experiences as slave laborers for the Nazi regime during World War II (Nikitina et al., 2008).

Even earlier than Hopkins and Pain, Alan Prout also started to promote the life course approach as a useful framework for advancing childhood studies. According



to him, this approach allows for the multiplicity and complexity of childhoods and does not reduce childhood to a relationship between just two terms — adult and child. Prout writes that life courses are influenced by ‘a wide range of human and non-human factors in constructing multiple versions of childhood and adulthood as they shift through time’, and sets the task to explore ‘how different versions of child and adult emerge from the complex interplay, networking and orchestration of different natural, discursive, collective and hybrid materials’ (Prout, 2005: 79–80).

Another dominant theoretical position of the NSSC questioned today is social and discursive construction of childhood. While recognizing the importance of this ‘founding idea’, Prout (2005) attempts to move on from it. According to Prout, the claim that childhood is a social construction reproduces the opposition between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, social and biological, rather than challenging it.

As Prout (2005: 44) states,

I want to argue that only by understanding the way in which childhood is constructed by the heterogeneous elements of nature and culture, which in any case cannot be easily separated, will it be possible to take this field forward.

Prout emphasizes the fact that we cannot separate out the social from the genetic and that any social theory of childhood has to consider the place of ‘the body’ and genetics. In underlining this inseparability, he refers to Latour’s expression of ‘the heterogeneous networks of the social’, which are ‘simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse and collective, like society’ (Latour, 1993: 6).

Moreover, referring to the concept of ‘being versus becoming’, Prout (2005) argues that the child cannot be essentialized into some unchanging stable entity. I can add that an adult, on the other hand, should not be considered as an unchanging entity, either, but instead as someone changing throughout the life course, influenced by the environment, own biographical events, the gradually changing personal, professional and other practices, and changing body.

As one of the best examples in the history of social sciences of overcoming dualistic approaches, Prout refers to Lev Vygotsky who developed his Socio-Cultural Theory back in the 1920s in the Soviet Union. The theory strived to overcome the dualism of a study of human consciousness as a separate and independent entity, on the one hand, and a study of psychological processes as an epiphenomenon of biology and physiology, on the other. One of the main concepts of this theory, which helps to do that, is the one of mediated action. This means, that children, participating in common activities with other human beings, internalize language, beliefs, norms, facts, artifacts and modes of acting. According to Vygotsky, society provides the symbolic tools, which shape the development of thinking. So cognition cannot be separated from the conditions and practices of life with which the child grows up. Thinking develops in the interaction, i.e. the material activity that takes place between the individual and the collectively constituted and historically situated culture created through joint activity. Vygotsky’s ideas became accessible to Western psychologists and began influencing them only starting from the 1960s (see Vygotsky 1962, 1978).

Prout (2005) further outlines strategies for moving beyond such dualisms in contemporary childhood studies, as adult versus child, structure versus agency, individual versus society and being versus becoming. He draws on innovative ideas from actor-network theory (ANT) and complexity theory to suggest that social life cannot be reduced to the purely social or technological and that natural and social systems are

evolutionary. ANT, for example, uses the metaphor of 'network' to suggest that childhood could be seen as a collection of different, sometimes competing and sometimes conflicting, heterogeneous orderings. ANT avoids the opposition of agency and culture by insisting that actors can be of many different kinds: human as in the case of children and adults but also non-human ones such as organisms, artifacts and technologies. All of these are treated as hybrids of culture and nature produced through networks of connection and disconnection.

...new forms of childhood arise when new sets of network connections, for example between children and technologies such as TV and the internet, are made. Such new networks may overlap and coexist with older ones but they may also conflict. (Prout, 2005: 71–72)

Speaking about complexity theory (see, for example, Byrne 1998, Eve et al., 1997; Prigogine, 1980, 1997; Prigogine & Stengers, 1984, cited in Prout, 2005), Prout argues that childhood studies can draw much from the notion that natural and social systems are not linear. It is argued that the variables of social life are in constant interplay and that small variables at a point in time can change the history of a system. Central to this discussion is the belief that systems with similar starting points can end up radically different. According to Prout, the application of concepts taken from the complexity theory can be quite fruitful to childhood studies:

Complexity theory offers an account of a system that avoids many of the dualistic problems that are encountered in current social studies of childhood. Seen through its lens, the idea of childhood as a social structure takes on a different meaning. Their systemic properties are emergent and intimately linked to the agency of the entities that populate them. Such structures of childhood may, within certain limits, be relatively stable over time but they are never static. They are always in motion and, under certain conditions, can shift from one phase state to another — or even become extremely unpredictable. In other words, complex systems have a history; they have, and cannot help but have, both being and becoming. (Prout, 2005: 75)

Nicola Ansell (2008) contemplates both the concept of the child as a social actor and that of the social construction of childhood. She considers them being partly the cause for the largely local focus of interest in children's geographies — concentration of numerous studies around 'the neighbourhood, playground, shopping mall or journey to school' (2008: 1). In so doing, such studies often failed 'to theorise connections to broader social process' (Cahill and Hart, 2006: ii, cited in Ansell, 2008: 4).

To move forward from this, Ansell (2008:16) proposes to adopt 'a materialist approach, drawing on notions of flat ontology and embodied subjectivity'. She outlines several implications for research using this approach. According to Ansell, research is needed that takes into consideration children's experiences involving multi-sensory perception (not just verbal or visual); research that explores 'children's use of technologies to engage with more distant people and places, through travel and communication' (2008:15); and, besides research with children, also research with those who are involved in constructing the policies and discourses that affect children.

To a large extent, these debates around childhood are shaped by the changing nature of childhood as a phenomenon, which is interconnected with the changes in the society. Thus, in the last decades of the twentieth century, many authors wrote about the



'disappearance of childhood' (Elkind, 1981; Postman, 1983; Steinberg and Kincheloe, 1997; Winn, 1984, cited in Prout, 2005). Some of the researchers attribute this to the changing family life — to processes such as detraditionalisation (Giddens, 1990; Beck 1996; see also Mac an Ghail & Haywood, 2007): the new, more democratic, 'reflexive' relations in the family, where men, women and children are nowadays much more equal not only before the law, but also in practice (Giddens, 1991: 135–6).

What supports the idea that intra-family relationships are undergoing substantial democratisation is the argument that relations between children and parents are increasingly characterized by negotiation, replacing traditional ideas of parental authority. Negotiation is considered as being 'a contested and conflict driven arena where parents and teenagers adopt different strategies when reconstructing their reflexive relationships' (Williams and Williams, 2005: 315).

Giddens also introduces the concept of 'pure relationship', which is different from the 'more traditional kinds of social ties', is based on trust and is 'implicitly democratic' (1999: 61). Moreover, according to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995), due to the instability in contemporary adult relationships, resulting in separation and divorce, the emphasis shifts away from them towards strengthening the relationships with their children. However, there are authors who argue that Giddens' idea of pure relationship is not adequate, because there can never be a purely democratic relationship between the parent and the child/teenager. The struggle for control would always hinder their mutual disclosure (Jamieson, 1998; Solomon et al., 2002).

As for speculations around the 'disappearance of childhood', there are also authors who blame for it the increasing pressure for children to succeed at school; others point at technological innovations such as TV and the internet. Some writers, however, see technological change undermining adult-child distinction as positive, reversing generational hierarchies and liberating children from out-dated social forms. Both Buckingham (2000) and Prout (2005) think that whether positive or negative, the 'death of childhood' discourses derive from an essentialist view of childhood/youth and a cultural conservatism that perceives change as decay or even extinction.

Similarly, Goralik looks at the 'kidult' (assembled from the words 'kid' and 'adult') and at the moral panic surrounding this 'merging of childhood and adulthood', as at a media phenomenon, built on the (out-dated) preconceptions of what it means to be an adult. Instead of speaking about the disappearance of adulthood, the author proposes to speak about 'new adults': emotional and playful, whose material and other resources allow them to consume non-conventional entertainment, and be spontaneous and flexible in all main aspects of life (Goralik, 2008).

Yet, Prout argues that the boundary between adulthood and childhood is indeed weakening and that this relates to processes of cultural, economic, social and technological change. The author thus urges us to keep the question of what childhood is open. In line with that, Smith (2000) argues that in the constantly changing world 'the process of understanding and reconstructing youth is continuing but continually novel historical phenomenon' (p.4).

Conclusion

The article has explored how towards the last decade of the twentieth century, children and childhood, from being on the margins of research in social sciences, appeared in its limelight. I have examined, in particular, the emergence of the interdisciplinary approach called the 'New Social Studies of Childhood', its principal theoretical as-

sumptions, as well as some of the wealth of research that appeared in the wake of the NSSC.

Among main theoretical positions of the NSSC are the view of childhood as socially constructed and the view of children as capable social actors (agents). These trends have, in turn, led to the appearance of the body of research into diverse childhoods, depending on the culture, class, gender, (dis)ability, and historical circumstances, with a primary focus on child-centered, child-friendly and child-empowering, participatory research methods. The core NSSC assumptions, critical and even revolutionary for their time, also nurtured what I call the 'geographical turn' in childhood studies, with a plethora of research (in particular, by human geographers in the UK and North America) on various localities where children's lives unfold and the ways in which children experience and negotiate these spaces and places.

Recent academic work, which is discussed in the last section of this article, revealed the necessity to move the field of childhood studies forward by challenging and reconsidering the major theoretical assumptions of the NSSC that have by now become commonplace. Some researchers strive to overcome the simplistic dichotomies in childhood studies by looking at new developments in philosophy and social theory, such as, for example, the actor-network theory or the complexity theory; while others call for research into the ethical and political implications of certain theoretical positions for children's lives.

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