

DOI: [10.20472/SS.2017.6.1.005](https://doi.org/10.20472/SS.2017.6.1.005)

## CHILDHOOD THROUGH THE LENS OF SOCIAL PEDAGOGY

*JITKA LORENZOVA*

### **Abstract:**

The article aims to analyze the status of childhood in today's society as it relates to the emancipatory goals of social pedagogy. Among the viewpoints to understand the status of childhood is the concept of social representation. Childhood is conceptualized in the study as a transversal topic that transcends many fields and is analyzed from a multidisciplinary perspective. Social representation is characterized in the text as a tool to construct analysis of social realities, while social pedagogy is characterized as an emancipatory practice. The conflict between dominant and alternative social representations of childhood is also explored, elaborating on the ambivalent and diffuse images of childhood in neoliberal society. The conclusions of this analysis show that the unclear status of childhood in society casts doubt of the paradigm of children's rights, that ostensibly being the official approach to childhood on the policy side in democratic societies. This ambivalence then prevents children's rights from being a central approach to the children's world in the field of social pedagogy. The article is a theoretical study based on the analysis of specialist sources and their interpretations; it uses descriptive, analytical and hermeneutic-interpretative methods.

### **Keywords:**

Childhood, child welfare, children's rights, socialization, social pedagogy, social politics, social representation, social reality.

**JEL Classification:** I28, I31

### **Authors:**

JITKA LORENZOVA, MIAS, School of Business and Interdisciplinary Studies; Charles University, Faculty of Arts, Czech Republic, Email: [jitka.lorenzova@post.cz](mailto:jitka.lorenzova@post.cz)

### **Citation:**

JITKA LORENZOVA (2017). CHILDHOOD THROUGH THE LENS OF SOCIAL PEDAGOGY. International Journal of Social Sciences, Vol. VI(1), pp. 53-70., [10.20472/SS.2017.6.1.005](https://doi.org/10.20472/SS.2017.6.1.005)

## Introduction

Throughout the past three decades, the social sciences, including social pedagogy, have investigated various problems relating to childhood as a social phenomenon in western society. Many have warned against uncritical adoration of the children's world, but also against the disappearance of childhood altogether, against the blurring of boundaries between childhood and adulthood, and against mechanisms of the marketplace taking control of childhood itself. On the one hand, children are subject to anxious care and protection from society, while on the other hand there are many strategies aiming to teach children to “overcome” themselves, compete with others and make decisions from an early age. Social pedagogy should engage with this ambivalent status of children and childhood in western society; for instance, by clarifying what paradigm of childhood and what vision of child development it should support in its activities.

Although the social sciences have discussed the need of a new paradigm of childhood that addresses children as generational partners, active agents and culture-makers, along with their invisible social status, since the 1990s (Ambert, 1992; Jenks 1996; Jenks and Prout, 1997; Qvortrup, 1993; Mayal, 2001), the image of childhood in today's competitive, work-oriented society remains unclear and often contradictory. Thus it is necessary to rethink childhood as a social phenomenon in the context of pedagogical and social science in pursuit of concepts that make it possible to articulate childhood with relevance. One of these key concepts concerns social representation, which enables us to analyze the variable image of childhood in our current postmodern society. Then we can begin to answer whether the current representation of childhood in society is beneficial or detrimental to children's rights as a global vision of child welfare, which in itself is meant to increase the quality of life for children and young people and forms the normative framework of activities within the remit of social pedagogy.

## Goals and Methodology

This article aims to interpret the status of childhood in contemporary society in relation to the emancipatory goals of social pedagogy as a science as well as a practical activity with the goal of raising the quality of life and social inclusion. The status of childhood is approached by means of the analytical concept of social representation and the multiple meanings construed by them. These meanings, as they circulate in society, have a number of specific effects on children as members of society and on their standard of living. Although the concept of social representation was originally coined in the field of social psychology (Moscovici), in the current phase of scientific development, characterized by sharing research methods, it represents “a tool enabling [us] to explore societally shared schemes of thought, evaluation and their symbolic functions in sociology and social pedagogy as well” (Ángeles, 2009: 39). As this article is a theoretical

study, it employs the descriptive, analytical and hermeneutic-interpretative methods necessary for the analysis and interpretation of specialist sources.

### **Social Pedagogy and Its History of Interest in Childhood**

Social pedagogy, at least in one of its incarnations, emerged as a branch of applied pedagogy in Germany during the period of the Weimar Republic. According to Mollenhauer's famous interpretation (1959), a chief impetus of social pedagogy was its reaction to the various conflicts and deficits in the nascent modern industrial society – its aim was to answer urgent needs of education where both the family and the school were failing as two main instances of socialization. As such, social pedagogy found itself incorporated as part of social hygiene and population control.

The unification of social and pedagogical themes under a single framework made it possible for social pedagogy to focus in its practical applications on disadvantaged and vulnerable children and youth from the beginning, with a goal of contributing to their wellbeing through education (Hämäläinen 2003a, 2012). Although the concept of lifelong learning has significantly broadened the interests of social pedagogy to include adults and the elderly since the 1970s, its original orientation towards children and youth remains typical of the discipline. Considering that its activities were designed to counterbalance the inappropriate or insufficient influence of the environment on young people, the main functions of social pedagogy tended to be compensatory and corrective.

The predominantly defensive character of social pedagogy with its focus on deficits began to be disrupted in the 1960s, as a tendency emerged to view social pedagogy as an action-oriented science that forms part of society's democratic practices (Mollenhauer, 1959). The concept of social-educational help emphasizing adaptation and normalization was replaced by a more emancipatory one, emphasizing empowerment and the mobilization of resources of individuals, groups and communities, which in turn enables them to actively impact their environment, solve conflicts and manage the demands of everyday life (Thiersch, 1986, 1992). Following on the above trend, today's social pedagogy is particularly interested in supporting the processes of human development in the sense of social participation, inclusion and integration. Consciousness-raising efforts relating to the opportunities people have to take control of their lives and influence the social conditions that determine the quality of their day-to-day life are currently at the forefront (Hämäläinen et. al., 2009). This emancipatory ethos focussing on empowerment in social pedagogy concurs with similar interest in other social sciences, some of which have shifted their focus to children during the past three decades as “the last societal minority.”

## **The Theory of Social Representation: A Summary**

The theory of social representation enables us to research everyday realities, and as such it is instrumental to those who investigate phenomena which are important to society but not given much awareness (Novák, 2009: 24). Childhood is a prime example of such a phenomenon, as it is plagued by a host of so-called truths and presuppositions that pass from one generation to the next without ever being sufficiently questioned. It is this compendium of ideas that significantly influence the way childhood is perceived by society.

Social representation can be defined as a type of socially constructed knowledge that enables us to articulate and maintain social reality (Markus and Plaut, 2001). It involves various supposedly self-evident, often implicit everyday beliefs with practical social aims and functions: they determine how social reality should be interpreted, they allow individuals to share and communicate meaning, they outline the rules implicit in certain social discourses, determine the character of social interaction and organize our behaviour. As such, they constitute forms of social thinking with the purpose of communication as well as understanding and controlling one's social, material and intellectual environment (Jodelet in Markus and Plaut, 2001: 184). Although social representation is not considered an exact discipline, it undeniably influences researches and the perspective they take when dealing with childhood and children. Conversely, any theories of childhood may drive change in the realm of social representation itself, giving rise to a circular relationship between the social representation of childhood and its theoretical reflection: theories may influence social representation and vice versa.

Social representation is subject to change over time; however, it is also characterized by a degree of pervasiveness. Often we find a number of different takes on the social representation of childhood, with meanings that may support, but also compete with or even preclude one another (childhood can be viewed as e.g. fragile, vulnerable, dangerous, rebellious, innocent etc.). As a result, the image of childhood in society is by no means unified, which by extension implies that the status of childhood and children is afflicted with the same ambiguity. This complicates the conditions for the socialization of children and young people, a problem that immediately affects both children and social pedagogy as a scientific discipline and as a practice-oriented field that seeks to aid the process of social integration even in highly complex and socially diversified societies.

## **Attitudes to Childhood in Modern Society**

Three great paradigms of childhood have developed in the modern era, all of them reflecting the concept of childhood as a social phenomenon: the paradigm of normalization, specialization and that of children's rights. The last viewpoint mentioned is less present in social pedagogy than it may seem at the first glance, as it requires

understanding children as social actors who are able and competent to comment on the situation of their lives. The shift in the social representation of childhood are also somewhat evident from the aforementioned paradigms, which illustrate the evolution of such representation since the beginning of the modern era.

The normalizing approach to childhood was primarily associated with the need of state bureaucracy as it began to emerge from the ruins of the feudal world in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As a result of industrialization, traditional child labour lost much of its purpose and numerous cohorts of children were transferred into schools, with childhood becoming subject to control and supervision. Children were thus deprived of freedom in the interest of their protection, morality and education (Ariès, 1962).

The modern era unfolded within the framework of this disposition of normalize; it lived in fear of deviation, idleness and bad behaviour, as these could undermine the painstakingly constructed modern social order. Ensuring that the coming generations would be socialized as best as possible became the chief goal of this period, thus ensuring that the normative social structures of the world of adults would be preserved. This increased interest in childhood also illustrates that childhood had only become a major social problem during the modern era (Ariès, 1962). From then on children would be perceived as uncivilized beings who pose a threat to the existing social order. The modern image of childhood would go on to become a point of reference for many modern theories of socialization.

In the nascent field of sociology, which had adapted terms such as “pathology” and “normality” from 19<sup>th</sup> century psychology (Gómez-Mendoza and Alzate-Piedrahíta, 2014), children were understood as pre-moral and wilful individuals who had to be extracted from the unpredictable influences of the family and, under the auspices of institutional authority, transformed by education into beings fit for social life. The dominant social representation of modern childhood is thus organized around a figurative core the social moratorium: children become a distinct social group in direct opposition to adulthood, “not yet” capable of having competences, responsibilities and rights (Casas, 2006).

Professions such as paediatrics, social work, and developmental psychology were largely consolidated in early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Howell, 2006), giving rise to the paradigm of specialization. Social representation showing childhood as predominantly a time of fragile vulnerability became the dominant concept and, in turn, children came to be viewed as objects of special care (Zelizer, 1985). Although this paradigm shift undoubtedly heralded improvements in the quality of care and child protection, what both the normalizing and specializing paradigm shared was their conviction that children differ from adults to such a large extent that they represent a wholly different category of being. This perceived opposition of childhood to adulthood can be considered the crucial characteristic of modern social representation of childhood.

At the heart of the modern approach to children lies the paradox that higher protection also implies greater invisibility and silencing by adults who, under the rationale of child protection, deprive children of their voice and instead aspire to interpret their needs and speak for them (Qvortrup, 2005). It can safely be said that the modern concept of childhood is formed upon a double tendency (Vergara, Peña et. al., 2015: 58): children are objects of protection, control and study, the embodiment of social development or degradation – but they are also made invisible in terms of their interpretation of reality or their possibilities of influencing their surroundings. This paradox indirectly affects a number of areas including social policy, the child care system and education, where children are transformed into invisible, fragmented subjects within a variety of care-related discourses. In the field of social rights, where children are granted higher visibility, this is again contingent on the assumption that they are incapable of deciding and acting in certain areas of social life (ibid.)

Since the advent of postmodern criticism, tension have been rising between “traditional” (or modern) notions of childhood and child welfare couched in the social moratorium concept, in contrast to alternative visions. These new visions (Fig. 1) emerge in relation to the civil rights paradigm and illustrate a shift in perspective regarding childhood, ongoing since the 1960s and 70s in relation to the international children's rights movement<sup>1</sup> that has also included the field of pedagogy. It can also be generally linked to postmodern criticisms of universalist concepts typical of modernity, attempting to reflect the plurality and diversity of the various forms social reality takes, along with civic pressure to ensure a more democratic society where the rights of previously marginalized and socially invisible groups (e.g. women, ethnic minorities, disabled people, seniors, and children).

Casas (2010) provides some examples of statements typical of the traditional versus new or alternative visions of childhood that capture this dichotomy:

---

<sup>1</sup> The children's rights movement was formally established in 1965. Among its first major figures was psychologist R. Farson, whose book *Human Rights for Children: The Last Minority* was published in 1975.

<b>Change-resistant social representation</b>	<b>Alternative vision</b>
Socialization is a one-way process: those who know educate those who do not. Adults have nothing to learn from children or adolescents.	Socialization is a two-way street, a process founded in mutual relationship (we all learn together).
Children “can't be like” adults in important aspects, they “don't understand life”, they have not achieved “stability”.	Children have the same human rights as adults.
Children's knowledge, skills and abilities are insignificant; they are “childish things.”	It is evident that some children may have better knowledge, skills and abilities than many adults; most children are more adept at accommodating new technologies when presented with them.
Children are not yet as competent, trustworthy and responsible as adults.	There are many untrustworthy, irresponsible and incompetent adults, just as there are many trustworthy, responsible and competent children.
Adults and children do not share the same perception and evaluation of reality, seeing as adults are “smarter” and more likely to be closer to the “truth”.	There are many different perspectives and visions of the same facts; all these perspectives may encompass “real” aspects. Understanding complex social reality requires consideration of the perspectives of all the social actors involved.
Children are social actors with low productivity.	Children are active social actors who productively contribute to society and to its human as well as social capital.
The full extent of human rights is only granted to individuals upon reaching adulthood.	The most valued and expected values may differ between generations or social groups, without this difference implying that one of these views should be superior to the other.

Fig. 1: Changes in the social representation of childhood, adapted from Casas (2010: 20).

## Like Socialization, Like Childhood?

The concept of childhood in western civilization is intrinsically linked with the imperative to keep existentially demanding topics of the adult world such as death, violence, illness, money or sex secret from children (Elias, 2006). This emphasis on an essential difference between childhood and adulthood has culminated in modern theories in the fields of sociology, pedagogy, psychology or law that exclude the world of children from that of adults and reduce childhood to no more than a preparatory phase for real (adult) life. In the 1980s and 90s, sociology and anthropology began to see debates on the necessity of establishing a new theory that would be used in the field of children's studies. Here too this change in attitude was spurred on by new developments in the historiography of childhood, sociological and legal analyses related to the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, social constructivist and narrative approaches to reality, and the rise of ethnographic research methods that sparked interest in getting to know childhood from its own perspective (Prout and James, 1997). Childhood as socially constructed reality and as a structurally determined space of living came into focus in the social sciences, becoming an international trend in research by the turn of the millennium. *Children's studies* is now a wide-ranging interdisciplinary platform for scientific research with a variety of social sciences under its banner, including social work, psychology, pedagogy, economics, history, literary science, linguistics, law and many others.<sup>2</sup> Major sources of inspiration include the theories of Foucault (needs-based hegemony, the discursive formation of the subject, the relationship between power and knowledge), Bourdieu (symbolic violence in the context of cultural reproduction), the second wave of the Frankfurt School which significantly influenced critical social pedagogy in Germany (Mollenhauer, Giesecke, Böhnisch) and feminist critique of patriarchal relations and social hierarchies as major causes of discrimination and the marginalization of certain groups in society. As stated by Thebron later followed by Wintersberger (2006), none of the changes in the research methods and politics of childhood would have been as impactful without feminist criticism and its questioning of the patriarchy (in addition to pointing out the fact that societies that emphasize social justice are more favourable to both women and children; some examples of these "enlightened welfare states" are Nordic countries).

New concepts of childhood are often connected by the emancipatory paradigm of rights, which in this context challenges the adult-centric approach of traditional socialization theories with their view of childhood as a category only derived from the normative structures of the adult world. In new and emerging theories, the development of children's

---

<sup>2</sup> Social studies themselves comprise a wide range of disciplines including also feminist and gender studies, queer studies, postcolonial studies, governmentality studies (research into the practices and strategies of governments), disability studies, cultural studies, and finally youth and children's studies. These are not strictly separated areas of knowledge, but fields that often intersect and exchange many diverse perspectives.

social experiences and identities is conceptualized with respect to sociocultural variability as a process that is not only used to passively accept the culture and norms of adults, effectively calling into question even such established terms as development, socialization and enculturation where they are presumed to have a unidirectional, static, objectivist and evolutionist character (Corsaro, 1997).

Evolutionary metaphors have been particularly criticized for their presentation of socialization as an upward climb through a hierarchy of stages, during which the child learns to overcome “lower” pre-social states in favour of “higher” states of socialization in order to take a prescribed place in society as a grown adult who has internalized the proper examples and values. Critics have also rejected the implicit or explicit binarism of child versus adult, where childhood is conceptualized as the antithesis of adulthood and children as immature, irrational, incompetent, asocial and acultural beings (James and Prout, 1997).

New paradigms of socialization are also critical of the traditional concept of childhood as an irrational phase of human life which is subjugated by the privileged position of rationality and logic (*ratio*) in Western culture and should be policed by the various institutions of socialization in terms of the possibilities of human life afforded to it, as well as its survival, education, and physical and moral hygiene. Pedagogy, paediatrics, psychology or hygiene then represent scientific disciplines that offer up expert knowledge on how to scientifically direct child development and correct any aberrations from developmental norms. If a child falls short of these, it supposedly signals a problem with their rational capabilities.

Contemporary theoretical approaches view children as a social group in its own right from the perspective of the present, not merely by virtue of their future status as adults. The relationship of children and adults is not treated as a one-way process as in Durkheim or Parsons, but as bidirectional in the sense that although we cannot imagine children without adults, it would also be impossible to define an adult figure and their associated social role without first defining a child (Jenks, 1982).

Socialization is then understood as interaction between children and adults as social actors, resulting in exchanging what has been tried by adults with what is being tried by children. This is not a process that merely reproduces the same existing models – it also generates new forms of social relations and changes the nature of institutions as well as the social roles of children and adults at a given point in time. Children themselves become actors in the process of socialization and contribute to the character of their generation (Corsaro, 1997).

Previous models of socialization, be they classic, functionalist or reproductive, are too deterministic to be useful to new childhood theories as they underestimate the active and innovative abilities of children as members of society. Children have traditionally been

assigned a subservient role dependent on adults and accepted by both sides due to the belief that children lack a sufficiently developed sense of autonomy and responsibility. In other words, the concepts of socialization and child development as set out by dominant theories of childhood do not allow for any understanding of children as equal actors – children are only capable of passive “acceptance” as befitting of future “products”, while a child as an actor is viewed as a dysfunction in this context (Ambert, 1992). However, childhood is no more a happy age of innocence than it is a merely transient period whose meaning is only realized at the time of its overcoming, nor are children mere embryos of citizens of the future. They are specific persons and actors in the present. It is therefore necessary to re-evaluate a whole range of metaphors currently employed to situate childhood relative to the adult world (children as travellers into the future, childhood as a transitory phase of life or as a period when reason sleeps, childhood as summarized by the phrase “not yet”). Such representation always serves to marginalize childhood in one way or another, as childhood is viewed as a subjugated phase of life, while socialization is only understood as a mechanical one-way process exerting pressure on children in the name of transmitting dominant values and reproducing the given social order. This one-sidedness in particular has limited the possibilities of the social sciences to articulate different concepts of socialization and the world of children (Corsaro, 1997).

### **The Ambivalence of the Representation of Childhood in Today’s Society**

Every society, community or social group develops a compendium of shared beliefs at a given point in history (these will be referred to here as its “social representation”). Due to the influence of these conviction, some experiences, opinions and behaviours are considered important and desirable with respect to childhood, while others that do not fit into the socially acceptable norms and expectations are deemed less valuable or outright undesirable. These are socially marginalized, excluded and sanctioned (Casas, 2006, 2010).

Given that social representation offers certain typified views of social reality, it affects all actors in the processes of interaction, including researchers who are also members of a given culture and who are likely to take certain approaches to the study of social phenomena. For instance, according to dominant social representation, the position of children in society and the necessity of investment in their welfare are such self-evident facts that it is pointless to discuss them further or at all. This self-evident, “natural” position of children has influenced researchers in their study of childhood across a long time period – until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the scientific world had no concept of cruelty to children; until the 1960s, socialization was only viewed as a unilateral process whereby parents socialize children but learn nothing themselves; scientific interest in children’s eyewitness accounts was limited to when a child’s testimony should not be considered reliable in court; surveys of children’s quality of life were happy to record only

the answers of an expert or a parent without giving the children themselves any opportunity to express their views (Casas, 2006). A certain degree of social invisibility still influenced official statistics by the 1980s, as data on the population of children was limited; according to Qvortrup (1987), the nonexistence of this statistical data was proof positive that the presence of children in society was being systematically ignored.

Based on the findings of Casas, three general perspectives on the social representation of childhood can be identified:

- Childhood as positive representation: idyllic, happy childhood that symbolizes innocence, vulnerability and purity (Rousseau, today often used for marketing purposes). This perspective lends legitimacy to the rhetoric of protecting children from the adult world;
- Childhood as negative representation: the idea that being naughty or rebellious, as inherent attributes of childhood, must be corrected. This vision is usually associated with devaluing childhood in order to justify the exercise of control over it;
- Childhood as ambivalent, transient representation: children are beings who cannot yet articulate themselves,<sup>3</sup> who still lack understanding both socially and legally. This perspective is related to terminology that allows us to distance “before” from “after”, such as “reason”, “judgement”, “responsibility”, “maturity”, “capacity”, “competence”, “age of majority” etc. (Casas, 2006: 29-30).

Social pedagogy strives to prevent potential social disadvantages. In the context of the rights paradigm as an emerging approach to childhood, it is necessary to pay attention in terms of criticism to those type of representation whose unquestioning acceptance can result in the stigmatization or victimization of childhood in society. Alfageme, Cantos and Martínez (2003: 22-23), who acknowledge their position as being more sympathetic to new concepts of socialization and paradigms of childhood, have set out five types of social representation that may be harmful to childhood and children:

- Children as “property” of their parents: a conviction deeply rooted in the general attitude to childhood as a family matter and family responsibility
- Children as “power *in potentia*”: future citizens whose present is negated; their only valuable aspect is who they will become and what they will do in the future. This is a type of representation that denies any rationalization of the public discourse of childhood or recognition of childhood as a social phenomenon

---

<sup>3</sup> The etymological origin of this concept of childhood lies in the Latin *infans*, from *in-fale* or “non-speaking”.

- Children as victims or pursuers, childhood defined by terms such as “wild”, “conflicted”, “persecuted” or even “dangerous”: this approach engenders distrust towards childhood and strengthens social measures against children's participation, allowing participation under close supervision at best. The presence of children in society is only acknowledged through “drama”, otherwise they remain invisible in the private circle of the family (and this is the perspective that brings children on the front pages of newspapers where they are stigmatized);
- Childhood as a private matter: children are silenced as individual and collective actors; they disappear from the political scene or their participation is negated; children are denied necessary experiences and possibilities of expressing themselves in the public, private, social, political, adult and children's spheres. This vision is supported by the predominantly ideological drive to create specific environments exclusive to the “children's world” and to “children's nature”;
- Childhood as a state of insufficiency and in need of help in its journey towards being a social actor: this results in the image of children as manipulable, impressionable, psychologically weak and incomplete; a being characterized by “not yet” as opposed to the “now” associated with adults, who are conceptualized as complete, “finished” beings. The associated idea of incompleteness and incapacity is rationalized as being “natural”, i.e. an inalienable part of the developmental laws and specificities of children. It also ties in with the dominant social representation that grants adults a social right to veto children.

The perspectives outlined above suggest that the dominant social representation of childhood is still couched in the modern concept of socialization, but they also incorporate much older meanings present even in their language: for instance, the patriarchal structure of the family (children as property) or the medieval view of children as being burdened by sin. Even so, the ambivalent and paradoxical ideas currently associated with the representation of childhood in complex societies have been far from exhausted by this summary.

In the neoliberal era, the subject of vanishing childhood is brought up again in relation to the loss of a so-called standard adult figure (as defined by Parsons) in the post-Fordian neoliberal economy. This is a completely different diagnosis of “vanishing childhood” from the one put forward earlier by media theorist Postman. He focussed on the fact that with the advent of television (and even more applicably with today's advanced technologies), the media space makes available images that do not require any specialist knowledge, such as reading and writing was in the past, to be perceived and understood. Almost all of the informational taboos that traditionally separated the world of children from the world of adults have thus been eliminated and the boundaries between childhood and adulthood began to blur (Postman, 1982). The social representation of neoliberal childhood then is the “superchild”, whose presence in the public space indicates that

adults are now so ruled by anxiety in today's workforce, so afraid for the future of their children, that preparation for adulthood supersedes other activities such as play. The overly organized free time of today's children reflects a new model of child development, according to which developmental milestones are no longer to be simply achieved, but overcome. As discussed by Kaščák and Pupala (2012), this new metaphor of the superchild "overcoming" developmental norms mirrors the image of the future ideal worker in the neoliberal economy, one who is always ready for competition, self-development, self-education and for maximizing their potential. It does not necessarily mean that the modern concept of childhood has disappeared, as the value of childhood in this paradigm is still derived from the child's future as an adult.

Advertising makes use of the ambivalent meanings present in the social representation of childhood in many sophisticated ways. Aided by broadcasting and the digital media, it is able to reach into families where it construes childhood as a category of consumerism and the marketplace. In TV commercials (Gómez, Espino and Blanco, 2005) at least twenty typified images of children can be identified (the child may be innocent, happy, naughty, vulnerable, unruly, dangerous, family-associated, mature, etc.), giving an implicit nod to the current variability in the social representation of childhood. These images make it possible to attach a market value to children within this continuum of meanings along three main axes: the child as a subject – object; socialization – non-socialization; optimism (the child as hope and joy) – pessimism (the child as a problem or ruin). Children can be portrayed as actors and mere objects of action, positively and negatively (e.g. as hope for the future that comes with many risks), as being socialized and not, with all these images relying on social representation with meanings often derived from the distant past but still able to define and maintain childhood as social reality today. The use of social representation of childhood in advertising shows its considerable potential in the commercial realm, as it subliminally influences adult consumers while signalling an interest in children as a consumer group with significant impact on the consumer behaviour of their parents (Buckingham, 2000). It also shows that children are treated as future consumers in the neoliberal economy, and as such it is deemed necessary to start shaping their adult consumer habits today (McDougall and Chantrey, 2004).

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

Based on an analysis of social representation and selected sociological theories, it can be said that an ambivalent, diffuse status of childhood is characteristic of contemporary society. This calls into question the idea of childhood articulated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which is declared to be the current authority on the approach official policies in democratic countries should take to childhood, and which should also have been incorporated into the relationship of social pedagogy to the children's world. Wintersberger (2006: 90-91) argues that despite the ratification of the Convention, all of

today's countries remain adult-centric and paternalistic in more ways than one. Firstly, they are largely blind to children in the sense that children are still "forgotten" or ignored by the discourse – when they are considered, it is only in a paternalistic manner with adults determining what should be considered beneficial and in children's best interests. In addition, while adults are treated more as individuals by the regulatory mechanisms of the state, the treatment of children is predominantly familial. Finally, social agendas that prioritize children are clearly relegated to a place of lesser importance in social policy. No European country is able to guarantee children treatment that would be fully compatible with the letter or the ethos of the Convention under these circumstances.

Where modern society used to socialize children in the framework of the paradigm of normalization, contemporary parents are no longer satisfied with their child only meeting developmental norms but encourage and even expect achievement beyond these. The new social representation of the "superchild" casts doubt on the aims of education and familial upbringing, which are at risk of becoming devoid of ideas in a society whose development is increasingly unpredictable. It would seem that children's status is becoming more and more ambivalent: on the one hand they may enjoy greater freedom and autonomy than before, but on the other they are even more subject to control by adults, institutions and the omnipresent market forces.

Although adults realize that parents and children generally benefit from being together, they paradoxically live their lives increasingly apart. Even as parents declare that children are their priority, they make economic and political decisions without any input from said children; they agree that children should be brought up to live freely and democratically, but social norms are given from the position of directing, controlling and disciplining them (Qvortrup, 1995). While autonomy, creativity and the ability to cooperate are considered to be more desirable in children by contemporary parents than they were in the past, when norms and goals associated with discipline, obedience and order were more prominent (Fölling-Albers et al., 2005), it is as if parents themselves were attempting to extend their own childhood or live in a state of "permanent puberty" (Lenzen, 1985). Some of this infantilization of adulthood signals problems in taking responsibility, relate to the paradox of the deification of youth in Western society which is getting older in terms of demographics but refuses to appreciate the values traditionally associated with old age (maturity, wisdom, perspective) as a result of the current dictate of efficiency and productivity.

Critically oriented social sciences have abandoned the language of care, protection, moulding and control used by modern institutions to legitimize their treatment of children, but an ordinary child's experience with the very institutions tasked with supporting their development into autonomy is still largely an experience of control that has an adult-centric character (Wintersberger, 2006). Greater protection of childhood thus paradoxically implies greater invisibility and greater silencing of children by adults, who

not only protect children but also presume to speak for them and their needs (Qvortrup, 2005). Childhood remains an object of marginalization and paternalistic approaches on the part of the dominant adult group, which enjoys a higher social status and greater privileges; childhood can thus be said to have a classic minority status (Qvortrup, 1993). Structural delegitimization of children shows that children's rights and freedoms are neither global nor assured in the everyday institutional practice of democratic societies. Although critical theories are gradually dismantling the paradigm of childhood based on the social moratorium concept, practical applications of children's rights are not yet widespread enough to be adequate to the value of childhood as articulated by the children's rights doctrine.

Where childhood and children are made visible, it is often in the context of tabloid media and their attempts to turn the fates of children and families into entertaining drama. At the same time, the postmodern image of childhood is influenced by a number of additional phenomena: the commodification of childhood (or children as consumers), childhood within the media, digital and virtual childhood, childhood fragmented by discourse, socially marginalized childhood, the childhood of migrants, childhood in war, superchildhood. In sum, childhood sits at the crossroads of many different discourses (of protection, care, control, support, etc.), which illustrates it as a structurally determined space where many often opposing interests and preferences meet; that is to say, childhood as a phenomenon is linked to conflicts of interest.

None of this is to say that a child's perspective should be elevated above all other perspectives – it should, however, be included in the complexity of social and cultural relations (James, 2007). Social pedagogy should play its part in achieving that end, as it is not merely a set of specific methods and techniques (Schugurensky, 2014), but a theoretical concept and a philosophical orientation with its own normative framework that gives action within this field its meaning. If social pedagogy is to support the paradigm of children's rights effectively, it must increase its sensitivity towards those types of social representation of childhood and those theories of socialization and child development that prevent children from participating on social and cultural relations in society or from expressing themselves on issues that directly concern their existence. This is the challenge to social pedagogy, to its critical, questioning and as such also emancipatory purpose.

## References

- AMBERT, A. M. (1992). *The Effect of Children on Parents*. New York: Haworth Press.
- ARIÈS, P. (1962). *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. New York, Vintage Books.

- ÁNGELES SABASTIZABAL, M. (2009). Aprender y enseñar en las sociedades actuales. In Ángeles Sabastizabal, M. (coord.). *Aprender y enseñar en contextos complejos. Multiculturalidad, diversidad y fragmentación*. Buenos Aires: Noveduc.
- BUCKINGHAM, D. (2000). *After the death of childhood*. Cambridge: Polity.
- CASAS, F. (2006) Infancia y representaciones sociales. *Política y sociedad*, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 27-42.
- CASAS, F. (2010). Representaciones sociales que influyen en las políticas sociales de infancia y adolescencia en Europa. *Pedagogía Social. Revista Interuniversitaria*, No. 17, pp. 15-28. [https://doi.org/10.7179/PSRI\\_2010.17.02](https://doi.org/10.7179/PSRI_2010.17.02)
- CORSARO, W. (1997). *The Sociology of Childhood*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- ELIAS, N. (2006). *O procesu civilizace. Sociogenetické a psychogenetické studie. Díl 1: Proměny chování světských horních vrstev na západě*. Praha: Argo.
- FÖLLING-ALBERS, M. (2005): Soziokulturelle Bedingungen der Kindheit. In EINSIEDLER, W. et al. (Eds.), *Handbuch Grundschulpädagogik und -didaktik* (pp. 155–166). Bad Heilbrunn, Germany: Klinkhardt.
- GÓMEZ-MENDOZA, M. A. and ALZATE-PIEDRAHÍTA, M. V. (2014). La infancia contemporánea. *Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Niñez y Juventud*, Vol. 12, No. 1, pp. 77-89. <https://doi.org/10.11600/1692715x.1213040513>
- GÓMEZ ESPINO, J. M., and BLANCO LÓPEZ, J. (2005). Los niños en la publicidad. Una propuesta de categorización de las representaciones sociales sobre la infancia en los anuncios televisivos. *Zer*, Vol. 10, No. 19, pp. 53-76.
- HÄMÄLÄINEN, J. (2012). Social Pedagogical Eyes in the Midst of Diverse Understandings, Conceptualisations and Activities. *The International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 3-16, Available online: <http://www.internationaljournalofsocialpedagogy.com> <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.ijsp.2012.v1.1.002>
- HÄMÄLÄINEN, J., PUURUNEN, P. and MÄÄTTÄ, M. (2009). Sociálně pedagogický rámec pro multiprofesní spolupráci při podpoře lidí v multikulturním kontextu. In LAUNIKARI, M., PUUKARI, S. (ed.). *Multikulturní poradenství. Teoretické základy a osvědčené postupy v Evropě* (pp. 170-183). Praha: Dům zahraničních služeb MŠMT pro Centrum Euroguidance.
- HOWELL, S. (2006) *Kinning of Foreigners: Transnational Adoption in a Global Perspective*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- JAMES, A. (2007). Giving Voice to Children's Voices: Practices and Problems, Pitfalls and Potentials, *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 109, No. 2, pp. 261-272. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2007.109.2.261>
- JAMES, A., and PROUT, A. (1997). *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood. Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, Londres: Routledge.
- JAMES, A., JENKS, CH., and PROUT, A. (1998). *Theorizing Childhood*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

- JENKS, CH. (1982). *The Sociology of Childhood: Essential Readings*, London: Batsford.
- JENKS, CH. (1996). *Childhood*, London, New York: Routledge.
- KAŠČÁK, O. and PUPALA, B. (2012). Deti medzi emancipáciou a sociálnou využiteľnosťou: nová sociológia detstva a „našepkaná emancipácia“. *Sociální studia*, No. 2, pp. 13–29. Brno: Katedra sociologie FSS MU.
- LENZEN, D. (1985). *Mythologie der Kindheit. Die Verewigung des Kindlichen in der Erwachsenenkultur. Versteckte Bilder und vergessene Geschichten*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag.
- MCDUGALL, J., and CHANTREY, D. (2004). The making of tomorrow's consumer. *Young Consumers*, Vol. 5, No. 4, pp. 8-18. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17473610410814283>
- MOLLENHAUER, K. (1959). *Die Ursprünge der Sozialpädagogik in der industriellen Gesellschaft*. Wanheim – Berlin: Beltz.
- PAPENKORT, U. (2006). Co znamená „sociální pedagogika“ v Německu? *Sociální práce/Sociálna práca*, No. 3, pp. 102-109.
- PROUT, A., and JAMES, A. (1997). A new paradigm for the sociology of childhood? Provenance, promise and problems. In JAMES, A. and PROUT, A. (Eds.), *Constructing and reconstructing childhood. Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood* (pp. 7-31). London: Falmer Press.
- POSTMAN, N. (1982). *The disappearance of childhood*. New York: Delacorte Press.
- MARKUS, H., and PLAUT, V. (2001). Social representations: catching a good idea. In: DEAUX, K., and PHILOGÈNE, G. (Eds.) *Representations of the social*. USA: Blackwell Publishers Ltda.
- MAYALL, B. (2001). Understanding childhoods: A London study. In ALANEN, L. and MAYALL, B. (Eds.), *Conceptualising child–adult relations* (pp. 114-128). London: Routledge Falmer.
- NOVÁK, P. (2009). Teorie sociálních reprezentací. *E-psychologie* [online]. Vol. 3, No. 1, [9. 9. 2016]. Dostupný z WWW: <<http://e-psycholog.eu/pdf/novak.pdf>>.
- QVORTRUP, J. (1987). Childhood as social phenomenon. Implications for future policies. *Eurosocial Newsletter*, No. 46, pp. 17-23.
- QVORTRUP, J. (1993). Nine Theses about Childhood as a Social Phenomenon. In: Qvortrup, J. (ed.) *Childhood as a Social Phenomenon. Lessons from an International Project*. Wien: European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research.
- QVORTRUP, J. (1995). Childhood in Europe: a New Field of Social Research. In: CHISHOLM, L., BÜCHNER, P., KRÜGER, H., and BOIS-REYMOND, M. (Eds.). *Growing Up in Europe*. Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- QVORTRUP, J. (2005). *Studies in Modern Childhood: Society, Agency, Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230504929>

- SCHUGURENSKY, D. (2014). A social worker, a community development worker and an adult educator walk into a bar: on strange bedfellows and social pedagogy. *Postcolonial Directions in Education*, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 360-395.
- THIERSCH, H. (1986). *Die Erfahrung der Wirklichkeit. Perspektiven einer alltagsorientierten Sozialpädagogik*. Weinheim/München: Juventa.
- THIERSCH, H. (1992). *Lebensweltorientierte Soziale Arbeit. Aufgaben der Praxis im sozialen Wandel*. Weinheim/München: Juventa.
- WINTERSBERGER, H. (2006). Infancia y ciudadanía: El orden generacional del estado de Bienestar. (Childhood and Citizenship: The Generational Order of the Welfare State). *Política y Sociedad*, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 81-103.
- ZELIZER, V. (1985). *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*. New York: Basic Books.