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EMBRACING CHILDREN'S VOICES

What sets Childhood Studies apart from other scholarly fields studying minors is its shift in focus from the children's future to a close examination of their present.

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In 2013, we established the Childhood Studies Interdisciplinary Research Team at the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Warsaw. Our motivation for forming this team was a recognition of the near-total absence of children as subjects in research in the social sciences – particularly in cultural anthropology. There were writings *about* children, studies on children, and children were the focus of attention. However, in our opinion, children's voices were going almost completely unheard. "People talk *about* us, but they don't talk *with* us," we were told by one teenage boy born through in vitro technology, participating in one of our projects.

The field of childhood studies strives to place children on an equal footing with other members of society, to see the world from their perspective. The focus of our Childhood Studies Interdisciplinary Research Team is therefore on doing research *with* children – underscoring children's participation in these studies – rather than research *on* or *about* them. Children

should be the ones telling researchers about what their world is like, they should have the right to express their opinions and to have them taken seriously by scholars. Assuming a dominant, all-knowing viewpoint that disciplines children and subordinates them to adult rules fails to capture their different perspective. Modern childhood studies also seek to implement in practice the principles set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, particularly Article 12: "States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."

While emphasizing the need to recognize and better represent children's perspectives, we are also aware of the need to "decentralize" childhood and seek more relational approaches. A child is not an isolated island, nor always the same, stable entity, and contemporary models of children and childhood are complex, change over time, and continuously evolve. In our research, the child is part of a broader world that they co-create and experience. We are interested in their relationships with other people, with the natural world, and with material and immaterial cultural products, including new media. Like adults, children always come from somewhere, are somewhere, and are situated in a particular time.

The political dimension of childhood studies is also significant to us. By exploring children's worlds,



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analyzing them, and presenting them to the academic community, we not only deepen our knowledge but also strive to contribute to a better understanding of children’s experiences. This alone is a political choice because, as childhood researchers argue, children constitute society’s largest minority group. What we mean is that children are often marginalized, their direct impact on society overly limited. However, sometimes the political nature of this research is more direct when it concerns children whose situations are the subject of political decisions or ideological disputes.

Our team has conducted and continues to conduct many research projects within the framework of childhood studies. Many of these projects pertain to health and children’s experiences of illnesses and disorders, including rare genetic diseases, obesity, and ADHD. Here, we will briefly discuss two of the projects we have undertaken.

Children born through IVF

The initial project that helped bring our team together and guided the development of our ethical framework (outlined in the *Code of Good Practices in Research with Children*) focused on children conceived through *in vitro* fertilization, commonly known as IVF. This study, groundbreaking in Poland, examined the social and cultural dynamics surrounding children born by means of this technology. We considered how these

children, aware of the unconventional means of their conception, weave this aspect into their personal identity narratives and their perceptions of family dynamics. What does it mean to grow up in Poland as a child born thanks to assisted reproductive technologies? How do children navigate the adult discourse surrounding IVF, including the various viewpoints of parents, politicians, clergy, and medical professionals? And how do media portrayals shape such children’s perspectives on their own origins?

What emerged from our research was that most of the children studied did not see the method of their conception as making much of a difference. Rather, what they did find important was how IVF is discussed, how the choices made by their parents and medical professionals (who often played prominent roles in their narratives) are talked about. Surprisingly, even children as young as 10 or 11 reported that they had been exposed to negative opinions about IVF. However, what they consistently emphasized in our conversations was that they felt they were the very same kind of children as those conceived without medical intervention. Our teenage participant Wiktor, reflecting on criticism towards IVF, remarked, “I think these are just the opinions of people who aren’t fully informed, who see us as being completely different.”

Some younger children had their own intriguing perceptions of IVF, associating it more with places like hospitals or laboratories. One child even speculated that all children might be born through IVF. Many of

them had been aware of their unconventional means of conception for as long as they could remember. Additionally, they understood that their arrival had been preceded by a long period of expectation: “They tried for quite a while to have me,” 11-year-old Patryk shared. As one of our research participants succinctly put it, “It was a big success for both my parents and the doctor.”

The children involved in our study often found humor in some of the things they had heard said about themselves. Some, already as adults, have been engaged in actively opposing negative portrayals of themselves and the IVF method. Sometimes they have spoken out in school, penned letters to newspapers, or given television and radio interviews. Their motivation stems from their conviction that they are no different from other children, and from their desire to challenge untrue and hurtful narratives.

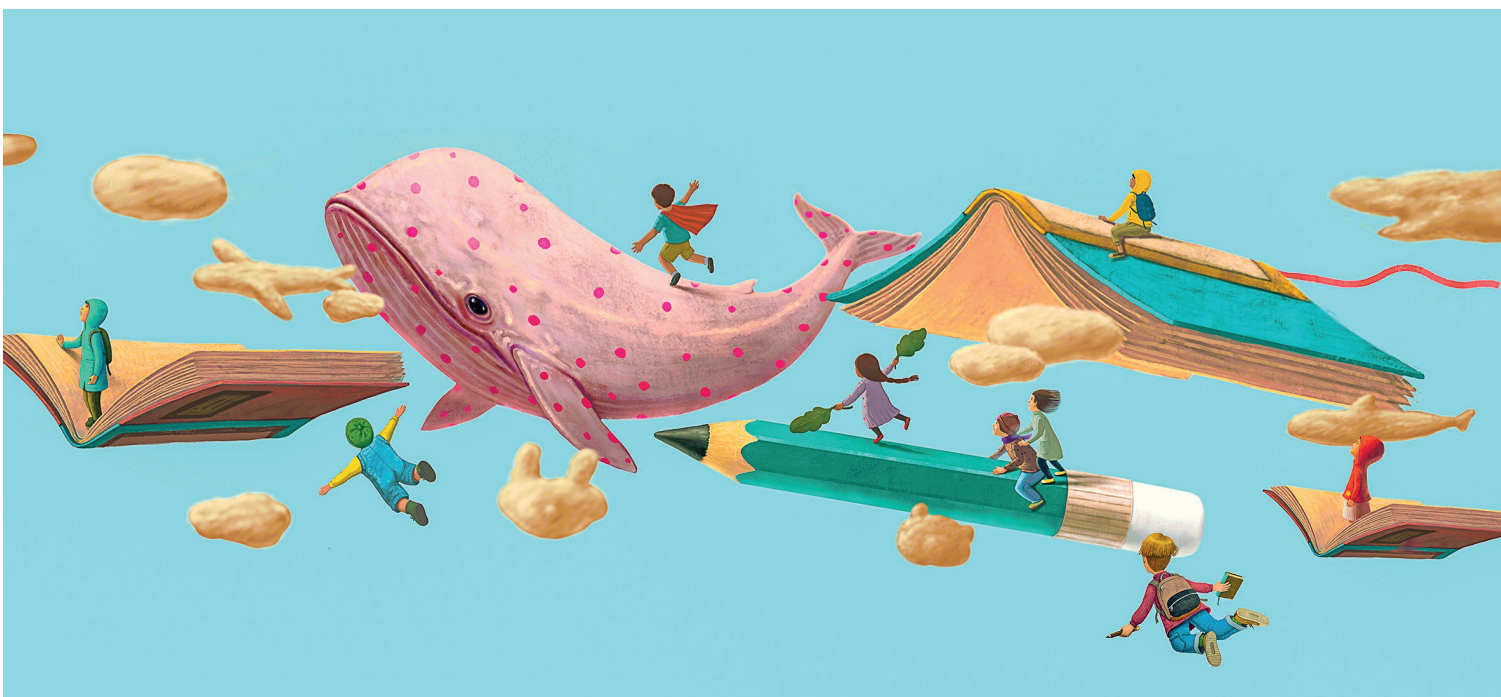
Through ethnographic research (interviews, participatory observation), media analysis, and psychological and legal consultations, we arrived at a crucial question: Do “IVF children” even exist? Is it truly valid to categorize them as such, when they do not fundamentally differ from their peers? We found that the answer was affirmative. Yes, they do indeed exist as a group – with the caveat that their IVF-related identity is not a biological designation, but rather a political one, shaped by societal ideologies. As Kasia, born through IVF, reflected on the discourse surrounding this topic: “This whole situation compels us to form some kind of community [of people born through IVF] to cope with it, even though this will be a completely artificial construct, [...] because

even though we are no different from others, people fail to recognize that.”

Pandemic seen through the youngest eyes

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to numerous research initiatives and projects, as social researchers recognized the importance of comprehending and documenting this extraordinary moment in contemporary history. However, as is often the case, it was primarily adults who were tasked with narrating this story. Children were not asked for their opinions by politicians or legislators, and when their schools were closed, they were not communicated to directly about the situation. Consequently, although they were not expected to be the primary victims of the virus, children were profoundly affected by the pandemic. Suddenly, they were forced to switch to remote learning, were unable to freely leave their homes or meet with friends or grandparents.

In this crisis that affected all citizens, we wanted children’s voices to be heard and taken into account. In mid-March 2020, shortly after the closure of schools throughout Poland, we began collecting children’s artwork and writings related to the pandemic. Through social media and with the help of parents, journalists, and teachers, we managed to gather dozens of diverse works, mainly drawings, collages, photographs, as well as letters, diaries, and song lyrics. Today, this “Children’s Pandemic Archive” can be on the project website, mip.uw.edu.pl. Visitors can



also see the results of the second pandemic project, which was carried out in 2021. The project “Change: Children’s Pandemic Experience” aimed to explore how preschool-aged children experienced the changes associated with the pandemic – how they perceived their role in this situation, understood the pandemic, attributed meaning to it, and perceived the changes it brought about in their lives. The project mainly took place during daily preschool activities in collaboration with children and teachers. Like in all our other projects, children participated voluntarily and always had the option to refrain from engaging in activities or discussions about the coronavirus.

That project served as a prelude to a larger study, still ongoing and funded by the Polish National Science Centre, entitled “The Pandemic and Post-pandemic Children’s Worlds.” Its goal is to analyze the changes that have occurred in Polish society in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of young children. We aim to describe how these changes are reflected in children’s memories, their understanding of the current situation, and their imaginations about the future. The challenge for us lies in obtaining the opinions of young children, preschool-aged and early school-aged, in the most methodologically sound manner: How should such a study be organized, to give children the opportunity for free expression, tailored to their communication abilities? The study is based on activities related to play, movement, creativity, as well as the interpretation of cultural elements close to children.

Our project is still ongoing, but even now, we can observe some interesting aspects of children’s perceptions of the pandemic. What we have found most striking is the discrepancy between how adults (especially those with political power) view the position of children in this pandemic landscape vs. how children perceive themselves. It turns out that children do not see themselves as helpless victims of the virus or as silent, invisible witnesses to events. In children’s drawings, we see them picking up weapons and bravely fighting the coronavirus. In their stories, we hear about them helping grandparents adapt to new communication technologies in everyday life. In many works, children themselves advocate in favor of social distancing measures, even putting masks on Lego figures and stuffed animals. However, this full immersion in the pandemic landscape is not necessarily something welcomed by them. They long not only for their friends (“I don’t want books or dolls if there are no friends,” nine-year-old Joanna writes on a drawing sent to the archive) but also for their grandparents and playgrounds. Preschool children, when asked in 2021 about what the world would look like after the pandemic, talked about open shops and taking trips abroad, about being able to watch cartoons instead of TV news, and about a world where the grass



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is greener and they can freely run barefoot. “Without the coronavirus,” emphasized Kuba, “we will finally be able to breathe (...) and then everyone will be glad.”

A dedicated team

In our projects, we place equal emphasis on academic understanding and in-depth exploration of the given topic, as well as active involvement and attempts to influence the world surrounding children. Leveraging our experience conversing with children born through *in vitro* fertilization, we were able to actively counter attacks on this technology in the media. Research on a rare disease (Turner syndrome) prompted us to create three leaflets aimed at children, teenagers, and parents who had recently received their child’s diagnosis. These leaflets were distributed to doctors for dissemination to patients. The “Children’s Pandemic Archive,” as mentioned earlier, serves as a platform for children’s narratives, empowering and giving voice to their experiences. It is essential for us to view children not only as competent producers and providers of scientific data but also as its recipients. Building on this principle, we conceived the idea of publishing books in the “Children/Borders/Ethnographies” series (published by Oficyna Naukowa) in pairs of volumes: one for adult, academic readers, the other for children. To our knowledge, this is the first such initiative in the world of academia. ■

Childhood Studies Interdisciplinary Research Team, University of Warsaw

The team was founded by Magdalena Radkowska-Walkowicz, Ewa Maciejewska-Mroczek, [Maria Reimann](#) (tragically deceased in 2023), and Anna Krawczak. Later, Anna Witeska-Młynarczyk, Zofia Boni, and Marta Rakoczy joined the core team. We collaborate with researchers from various disciplines, all dedicated to understanding children’s worlds. We encouraged everyone interested in our projects to visit the website: www.childhoods.uw.edu.pl.