

# New Social Practices in Childhood Space in the Age of Digitalization: Toward a Question on Research Methodology

Mitrofanova S.Yu.<sup>1,2,\*</sup>, Bocharov V.Yu.<sup>1,3</sup>, Vandysheva L.V.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Samara National Research University, Samara, Russia

<sup>2</sup> Samara state technical University, Samara, Russia

<sup>3</sup> Sociological Institute of the RAS — a branch of the Federal State Budgetary Institution of Science of the Federal Research Sociological Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Saint-Petersburg, Russia

\*Corresponding author. Email: mit\_s@mail.ru

## ABSTRACT

The article systematizes new social practices that have arisen mainly since the beginning of the 21st century in the space of modern childhood in the digital era. The question is raised of a methodology capable of “catching” the changing digital reality of modern childhood. The possibilities of classical sociological theories and the quantitative methodology of sociological research that grew on their basis, as well as the possibilities of an interdisciplinary approach in the analysis of new childhood practices in the digital age, are discussed. The article identifies the following six groups of practices related to 1) the construction of a children's body; 2) the informatization of childhood, the growing up of children in a new media environment, their definition as “digital nomads” on the Internet; 3) strengthening the role of consumption of children, and the glamorization of childhood; 4) gadgetization of childhood space; 5) protection of the rights of the child; 6) the development of children's social movements. The importance of an interdisciplinary approach based on the theory of intersectionality in the study of childhood in the digitalization era is substantiated.

**Keywords:** *digital society, new social practices, modern childhood, modern childhood change, childhood research methodology*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Modern society is characterized as digital, when new technologies penetrate the everyday life of every person, and thereby redesign not only the level of individuals but also the existing social order at the level of totality. Modern reality acquires such epithets as virtual, digitalized, digital, electronic and the ones alike.

The digital format of society also changes the space of childhood, where new social practices arise [1]. We believe that the changes taking place in it over the past two or three decades are the result of the emergence, development, and penetration of new technologies, new means of communication into childhood. Everyday life of children is more than ever under the influence of new technologies, under the influence of globalization. However, these processes are not sufficiently reflected by the scientific community; there is no clear understanding of how to study them. The purpose of this article is to discuss the methodological foundations of the study of new social practices of childhood in the digital age. Setting this goal involves solving the following tasks:

- 1) to indicate an understanding of social change,
- 2) to systematize new social practices in the space of childhood in the era of digitalization,

3) to determine the possibilities of various theoretical and methodological foundations, and in particular, an interdisciplinary approach, in the analysis of new social practices in the space of childhood.

The object of research is childhood in the era of digitalization. The subject of the study is a methodology for the study of new social practices of childhood in the context of digitalization.

## 2. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

Our understanding of new social practices in the space of childhood is based on the interpretation of social changes by P. Štompka, which he presents in the theory of social formation, reflecting the specifics of the sociocultural dynamics of modern society. This theory proceeds from the idea of continuity, the lack of predetermination of social changes in the course of the historical process. This theory attaches great importance to the choice that a person makes. Here, social change is interpreted as the transformation of society from one earlier stage to the next, the later one. The absence of a predetermined result of the change is due to the fact that the potential opportunities that occur at the levels of totality, reality and individuality may or may not be actualized in reality. At

the same time, it is recognized that these potentialities themselves change under the influence of their own updates [2]. Such an understanding of the essence of social changes implies an awareness of the influence of “unknown variables” on the course of life of both an individual person and the whole society, as well as the significance of the choices we make in everyday life and the acceptance of responsibility for these choices. In our opinion, at a certain stage in the development of society, the processes of its digitalization acted as such an “unknown variable”, opening up new opportunities for it, which, according to P. Stompke, may or may not be realized in reality.

Based on these general premises of the interpretation of social changes, the role of digitalization processes in them, we systematize practices in the childhood space that have appeared in recent decades and are somehow connected with the digitalization of modern society.

It is also important to pay attention to the complexity of assessing the changes due to the fact that children are not a homogeneous social group and their practices are determined by the specifics of the territory, the level of parental income, family composition, race and ethnicity. All this testifies to the need to use an interdisciplinary approach based on the theory of intersectionality [3] to study the practices of modern childhood.

### 3. RESEARCH RESULTS

In our opinion, the following groups of practices can be distinguished:

1) Practices associated with the construction of a child’s body. This is both a “biological” and a “social” transformation of the child’s body, to which new technologies of the digital age are often directly related. The biological transformations that became possible only thanks to modern digital technologies include practices aimed at genetic editing of the human genome at the embryo stage, the development of an IVF system, and the practice of childhood medicalization. Modern technology opens up opportunities that were not available until recently. So, the new digital technologies of “freezing” the biological material of people who would never have met in reality make it possible to connect, transport it, and thereby lay certain makings of the future embryo. Discussion of the collection of biological material, the birth of genetically modified children (China), chipping of children (Foresight project 2030). Digital everyday life is not tomorrow, but partly today.

Among the “social” transformations that are gaining popularity today, we include such practices for modifying a child’s body as maintaining a healthy lifestyle, healthy eating, children’s fitness, etc. Digital technologies in all these practices play an important role when, for example, they can be used to calculate the optimal way to maintain the shape of a child’s body, a diet for children, the number of calories that are necessary taking into account the individual situation of a child’s development, etc. The development of children’s model business as a certain way

of representing and exploiting a child’s body can also be attributed to this type of practice. Moreover, digital technology can help to embellish reality, make it more attractive to all participants in this business.

Note that the line between the “biological” and “social” transformations of the child’s body is rather vague, since new technologies are involved in the design of both, and the practices that construct these transformations influence each other. This can be seen in the example of the medicalization of childhood. On the one hand, the effects of medical intervention in the daily lives of children result in the biological transformation of the child’s body. Thus, the need for hormonal medications for children for medical reasons can lead to corresponding changes in the body of the child, for example, in weight. On the other hand, the child needs to live with this changed body, with the need to socially construct a medicalized reality for himself and others.

2) A group of practices related to the informatization of childhood, with the growing up of children in the new media environment, their definition as “digital nomads” on the Internet [4; 5; 6]. It is about the fact that the childhood space is saturated with new information technologies and gadgets. However, it becomes important not only that the child has a personal computer or tablet, a phone with all the new applications, a virtual reality helmet and other gadgets, but the fact that modern society demands modern children with respect to the appropriate level of digital literacy. The processes of childhood informatization change the format of interpersonal communication of children from exclusively direct face-to-face live communication to other formats via the Internet, social networks, children’s video blogging [7], SMS, etc. All this allows us to talk about the transformation of socialization processes in the space of modern childhood [8], on the strengthening of the role of virtual and visual images in these processes [9], on the digital socialization of modern children, on changes in their relationships with parents, peers and the implementation of mobility practices public space under control by the personal gadget (smartphone) [10].

Moreover, the digitization of reality has opened up new possibilities in relation to the problems of child death. For example, the creation of holograms of deceased children, virtual Internet cemeteries for children. A video is gaining popularity on the Internet that engineers and developers “revived” the girl three years after her death in 2016 so that her mother from South Korea could meet her daughter but in virtual reality. All these processes have mixed social consequences, but they become the reality of a digital society.

3) Practices associated with strengthening the role of consumption of children, and the glamorization of childhood [1]. The specificity of the consumption of children in modern society is that it sets a certain “bar” of life for them. The digital environment opens up new possibilities for the consumption of children; thanks to this environment, consumption standards are widespread. They are actively disseminated by modern media, and the identity of a modern child is largely based on what he

owns or has. In this regard, childhood is glamorized, becoming a space for demonstrating status, abundance, and excesses. And the digital environment contributes to such a show, actualizes the demonstration behavior of children.

Note that differentiation in consumption reproduces and strengthens existing inequalities in the field of childhood: economic, cultural, digital, etc. But at the same time, although not all children can be consumers due to the limited, primarily, material resources of their parents, we note that the consumption of modern children is not limited solely to the material aspect of their lives. Consumption includes an understanding of how children relate to the values that the consumer society imposes on them, which is really important for them; what are they talking about; what kind of music they listen to; what are the meanings of the choices of clothing, shoes, food, etc. This leads to recognition for all children growing up in the modern consumer society of the importance of the social role of the consumer, which they realize in their consumer practices.

4) A group of practices related to the gadgetization of childhood space. The emergence of many of them is directly related to the emergence of new technologies. For example, these are gadgets such as a nozzle suction device for very young children, a safety bracelet, a smart mattress, smart clothes with sensors, game plates, a robot child, interactive books, a tablet, a phone with all new applications (step by step, parental control), baby monitor, headphones (for example, with noise isolation for young children), a virtual reality helmet and others. Based on the use of these gadgets, new phenomena of the childhood world arise the "glamorization" of childhood, children's catering, childhood informatization, etc.

5) A group of practices related to the protection of the rights of the child. The rights of children are fully reflected in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified in Russia. The document states that each child from 0 to 18 years old has his own rights that are different from adults, and the state must guarantee the provision and protection of these rights. Along with this document of international law, the Family Code of the Russian Federation is in force, which enshrines the right of the child to be raised in a family, to be protected from abuse by parents and persons substituting them. If situations arise when children's rights are violated, the social services take over the authority to restore them. Thanks to the digitalization processes, their activity acquires a certain transparency. On the other hand, their activities may be subject to correction in cases of lack of an objective approach when making decisions on observing the rights of the child. In such cases, situations are brought up for discussion and family relations are made public. The initiators of the discussion may include children who do not agree with the situation. Digitalization processes in this context give children a certain power and control, developing their subjective position, and creating conditions for observing the rights of the child, providing them with the possibility of growing up in safety.

The work to protect the rights of the child is represented by a phased process in which the following are highlighted: work with information, its assessment and planning of further actions, implementation of social technologies applicable to specific difficult life situations. Digitalization processes here have a significant impact at the stage of working with information. It is here that the problem of observing the principle of confidentiality when ensuring the rights of the child arises. An analysis of situations related to the life situation of orphans or children without parental care indicates that this principle is violated if there is a risk of violence against children. It is important to obtain objective information, which requires specialist professional competence, including in the digital environment.

6) A group of practices related to the development of children's social movements. Today, only in Russia there are about 400 thousand youth and children's public organizations of different territorial levels [11]. And, despite some trends in state centralization and curtailing the activities of independent actors, unification and control over social space, which affects the sphere of activity of children's associations, a wide repertoire of applications for their organized activity is still possible for modern Russian children and adolescents, including in a virtual digital environment (participation in online contests, quizzes, intellectual competitions, virtual team games, joint online discussions, etc.).

#### **4. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

Note that these practices have their own specifics at the level of individual childhood. They manifest themselves differently depending on the specific circumstances of the child's life: gender, age, educational and educational environment, the territory of residence, socio-economic class of parents, ethnicity, religiosity, presence or absence of parents, etc.

These practices do not exhaust modern childhood, however, in our opinion, they most convincingly demonstrate the complexity, multidirectionality, and variability of modern childhood in a digital society.

A fundamental question arises regarding how to explore this new emerging reality, from what perspectives to study new practices and phenomena of the childhood world in the digital age. It makes sense to discuss this issue from the perspective of the theoretical and methodological foundations of childhood analysis. From the point of view of methodology, the question arises as to whether it is possible to be based on classical models of sociality in their analysis. So, blind adherence to the positions presented in these concepts can lead to turning away from accumulated experience, it can even be harmful due to the fact that it does not correspond to the real "digital" conditions of modern society. This can explain the fact that a postmodern turn in childhood research has been made abroad and the greatest interest among scientists studying childhood is caused by the methodology of social construction of reality and the resulting qualitative

approach and methods of ethnography and the participating sociology of childhood [12]. But at the same time, we consider it not productive to completely abandon the logic of classical models of sociality in childhood studies. In the Russian sociology of childhood, the situation is somewhat different; there is interest in both the classical paradigms of social knowledge, for example, the ideas of structural functionalism and the questionnaire method [13], and qualitative research on children and childhood [14, 15].

The most attractive approach to the theoretical analysis of new social practices of children in the digital environment, in our opinion, is an interdisciplinary one, taking into account the close mutual relationship and interdependence of these practices, as well as allowing us to synthesize the achievements of various fields of knowledge in the study of modern childhood in the digital age.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Thus, we conclude that interdisciplinary research on childhood is significant in the digital age, and argue that it is not productive today to abandon the classic models of sociality in childhood research. It is appropriate to recall the well-known statement from the distant Middle Ages by Bernard of Chart that: "... we are like dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants. And therefore we see more and further than they. Not because we have better eyesight, and not because they are taller than them, but because they raised us and increased our growth with their own greatness", and to admit that the classical models of sociality are applicable today, but within a certain framework. In general, the choice of the theoretical and methodological framework of the research depends, of course, on the goals and objectives that the author sets for himself, but at the same time, it is largely determined by new practices that arise in the space of modern childhood, the study of which requires the development of new approaches and methodologies.

## REFERENCES

- [1] *Detstvo XXI veka v sotsiogumanitarnoy perspektive: novyye teorii, yavleniya i ponyatiya: kollektivnaya monografiya /nauch. red. S.N. Mayorova-Shcheglova. M.: ROS, 2017. – 203s. 1 CDROM*
- [2] P. Shtompka, *Sotsiologiya sotsial'nykh izmeneniy, per. s angl., pod red. V. A. Yadova. M.: Aspekt Press, 1996, 416 s. (Programma «Vysshye obrazovaniye»)*
- [3] T.V. Gavrilyuk, V.Yu. Bocharov, *Intersectionality as a Way of Conceptualizing Gender and Class Inequality. The Journal of Social Policy Studies, 16(3), 2018, pp. 537-545. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17323/727-0634-2018-16-3-537-545>*
- [4] A.V. Tolstokorova, *Global'nyy rebenok, Detstvo XXI veka: sotsiogumanitarnyy tezaurus. Tematicheskiy slovar'-spravochnik, Otv. red. S.N. Mayorova-Shcheglova. M.: Izd-vo ROS, 2018. S.225-232.*
- [5] A.YU. Gubanova, *Elektronnyy kontent dlya detey/ Detstvo XXI veka: sotsiogumanitarnyy tezaurus. Tematicheskiy slovar'-spravochnik, M.: Izd-vo ROS, 2018. S.341-348.*
- [6] Ye.A. Kupryashkina, *Detskiye mobil'nosti, Detstvo XXI veka: sotsiogumanitarnyy tezaurus. Tematicheskiy slovar'-spravochnik, M.: Izd-vo ROS, 2018. S.262-266.*
- [7] Ye. Ye. Abrosimova, *Detskiy videobloging, Detstvo XXI veka: sotsiogumanitarnyy tezaurus. Tematicheskiy slovar'-spravochnik, M.: Izd-vo ROS, 2018. S.309-313.*
- [8] Ye.A. Kolosova, S.N. Mayorova-Shcheglova, Mitrofanova S.YU. *Novaya sotsiologiya detstva, Detstvo XXI veka: sotsiogumanitarnyy tezaurus. Tematicheskiy slovar'-spravochnik, M.: Izd-vo ROS, 2018. S.18-23.*
- [9] A. KH. Sabirova, S. YU. Mitrofanova, *Detskoye tekhnicheskoye tvorchestvo, Detstvo XXI veka: sotsiogumanitarnyy tezaurus. Tematicheskiy slovar'-spravochnik, M.: Izd-vo ROS, 2018. S.267-270.*
- [10] O.V. Sergeyeva, E.G. Laktyukhina, *Social Aspects of the Digitalization of Children's Urban Mobility. The Journal of Social Policy Studies, 17(4), 2019, pp. 507-524. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17323/727-0634-2019-17-4-507-524>*
- [11] O.A. Koptseva, *Children's Organizations and Social Creativity of Pupils. Social Research, 2 (2005). pp. 113–120.*
- [12] L. Alanen, *Are we all constructionists now? Childhood. 2015. Vol. 22(2). pp.149-153.*
- [13] A.G. Filipova, *Detstvo v fokuse otechestvennykh sotsiologicheskikh issledovaniy, Vestnik Nizhegorodskogo universiteta im. N.I. Lobachevskogo. Seriya: Sotsial'nyye nauki. 2016. No. 1(41). S.80-87.*
- [14] S.YU. Mitrofanova, Ye.A. Shtifanova, *Rol' informatsionnykh tekhnologiy i gadzhetov v sotsializatsii detey, Ekonomika i sotsiologiya. 2015. No. 1. S.18-24.*
- [15] S.N. Shcheglova, *Myagkiye metodiki izucheniya detey i podrostkov, Shkol'nyye tekhnologii. 2000. No. 3. S.118.*