Entanglements between Agency and Vulnerability in the Phenomenon of Birth. Reflections on Children's Expressions about 'Being Born'

Catrin Heite, Veronika Magyar-Haas

Abstract

Analogously to the works in the field of new social studies of childhood, this contribution deals with the concept of childhood as a social construction, in which children are considered as social actors in their own living environment, engaged in interpretive reproduction of the social. In this perspective the concept of agency is strongly stressed, and the vulnerability of children is not sufficiently taken into account. But in combining vulnerability and agency lies the possibility to consider the perspective of the subjects in the context of their social, political and cultural embeddedness. In this paper we show that what children say, what is important to them in general and for their well-being, is shaped by the care experiences within the family and by their social contexts. The argumentation for the intertwining of vulnerability and agency is exemplified by the expressions of an interviewed girl about her birth and by reference to philosophical concepts about birth and natality.

Keywords: vulnerability, agency, birth, natality

Verschränkungen zwischen Agency und Verwundbarkeit im Phänomen der Geburt. Reflexionen über Expressionen von Kindern über das 'Geborenwerden'

Zusammenfassung

Analog zu den Arbeiten im Bereich der neuen sozialwissenschaftlichen Kindheitsforschung betrachten wir das Konzept der Kindheit als soziale Konstruktion, bei welchem Kinder als soziale Akteure ihrer eigenen Lebenswelt angesehen werden, aktiv eingebunden in die interpretative Reproduktion des Sozialen. In dieser Perspektive wird das Konzept der „agency" stark hervorgehoben, während die Verletzlichkeit von Kindern kaum ausreichend berücksichtigt wird. Doch gerade in der Kombination von Verletzlichkeit und „agency" liegt die Möglichkeit, die Deutungen der Subjekte im Kontext ihrer sozialen, politischen und kulturellen Einbettung zu betrachten. In diesem Aufsatz zeigen wir, dass das, was Kinder erzählen, was ihnen allgemein und für ihr Wohlbefinden wichtig ist, durch die Betreuungserfahrungen innerhalb der Familie und durch ihre sozialen Zusammenhänge mitgeprägt wird. Die Argumentation für die Verschränkung zwischen Verwundbarkeit und „agency" entfalten wir exemplarisch anhand Erzählungen eines interviewten Mädchens über ihre Geburt sowie in Bezugnahme auf philosophische Konzepte über Geburt und Natalität.

Schlagwörter: Vulnerabilität, Agency, Geburt, Natalität

1   Introduction

The initial point of this special issue is the assumption that there is a strong narrative in the international context, which says that research on child well-being has significantly moved its focus within the last 30 years and has undertaken so called "fundamental shifts". In the context of the new social studies of childhood, childhood is seen as a social construction in which children themselves participate. Children are considered as social actors in their own living environment, engaged in interpretive reproduction of the social. Thereby, the central position of the concept of agency is strongly stressed. However, agency can become impertinent if the focus lies only on strength, thus excluding inabilities, material and emotional dependencies, and inadequacy. Due to this, we are working with a theoretical perspective that also stresses the *vulnerability* of children. This approach makes it possible to consider the perspective of the subjects in the context of their social, political and cultural embeddedness. In this paper we will show how strongly that what children say, what is important to them, and what is marked as important for their well-being is determined by the care experiences within the family and the social contexts. We will work out the strong link between vulnerability and agency using the example of birth narratives.

As part of the multinational qualitative study "Children's Understandings of Well-Being" (cuwb.org) our research uses its methodological manual to ensure international comparability. The narrative interviews are oriented on the research protocol of the network (see *Fattore* et al. 2019) and include open and non-suggestive questions about dimensions that are important for well-being, such as people, activities, places, animals and so on. Hence with the child-oriented, semi-structured interview a method is chosen that evokes narrative passages which alternate with enquiring passages. The interview guideline serves as an orientation for the interviewers, but does not restrict the spontaneous formulation of open questions.

In preparation for the interview, the children are asked to bring something with them or to present what is important to them. The object brought by the children serves as an introduction to the interview. After talking about this object, they are invited to draw a picture of what they value. We then talk with them about where, when, and with whom they feel well and what they would wish for if they could perform miracles. The starting point of our paper is an interview with a nine-year-old girl who has given herself the pseudonym *Sebiha*. At our request to bring something – in her eyes – important with her, she brought a black and white photograph. This photo is – together with the picture drawn by her – at the centre of our reflections. The aim of this contribution is therefore not to make empirically grounded statements on the perspective of children based on the analysis of several interviews (see thereto *Heite* et al. 2020). Rather, the photo of *Sebiha* and what she tells and draws about birth and care arrangements serves as a kind of prism through which we can unfold and illustrate our analyses and conceptual reflections on the relationship between agency and vulnerability. First, we interpret interview sequences together with the photo and the picture on the basis of the in-vivo-code "It is my birth…". Secondly, we connect our analysis with theoretical perspectives with respect to the concepts of vulnerability, agency, and of birth and natality.

2   *"It is my birth…"* – The recognizability, temporality and social embeddedness of the self in photographs and drawings

Sebiha presents a photo to the interviewer. She does not wish to have this photo photographed, but agrees that it may be described in our analysis. The photo shows a woman holding a baby in her arms and looking at it smiling, with her head bowed. The baby is in the centre of the picture and is presented by the woman in the direction of the viewer. On the other side of the baby there is a man standing near the woman and child, facing both of them.

The interviewer and *Sebiha* talk about this photo (0:27-2:47): "It is my birth//mhm// and my mum and dad", *Sebiha* says. The photo means a lot to her; it is important to her, because: "I can see for example, what I looked like//mhm//and otherwise I do not know that I guess,//yes// without photo or anything and yes" (00:01:23). The photo is a substitute for memories she does not have about the time of her birth. In the sequence, three aspects seem to be central to us. First, the question about the 'ego' or the personal identity, which means the capability to identify someone in the photo as the self, so to recognize oneself; secondly, the question of temporality, meaning the connection between past and present; and thirdly the question of sociality, meaning the embeddedness in intergenerational, close social relationships, in caring and supporting environments.

2.1   The recognizability of the self as "newborn being"

Sebiha does not refer to the baby in the photo as herself as a person, but as her "birth", as an event that happened to her; she is not an acting and decisive subject. She is the "newborn being" in the arms of her parents. It is her "genesis", her entrance into the world, that eludes her and which also raises questions such as where she comes from, and who she might have been as a newborn, as someone who has just been born and brought forth by parents. In addition to this "passive" dimension, in the example of the photo and her narration about it, something "self-reflexive" becomes apparent: She tries to make herself cognitively available through the photo itself as well as by way of talking about the photo. The difficulty in finding words for the description might refer to the difficulty of bringing her today's being into relation with the photo of the baby, to recognize herself *in* the baby. After all, her current corporal and physical, emotional and social condition is a very different one. Her nine-year-old body and mind are constantly changing and seem to be a counterpoint to the baby in the photo, which is located in time and not bound to temporal change. At the same time, she is aware that she is the baby in the photo – even if she does not rely on memories but narratives and information from relevant others and the photo documents her birth and origin.

2.2   Dependencies in past and present within the generational order

Concerning the question of temporality, the photo of *Sebiha* with her most important caregivers is a link to the past. It witnesses her being, it is a memory, a projection and at the same time also a kind of "proof" about the genesis of being. It allows for the reassurance of herself, to know about her "previous" being which is derived from memories.

Through photographs and narration, subjects are capable of construing themselves within time and can retrace their contemporary being retrospectively. In the narrations themselves, a particular form of dependency on the parents is also shown. They are capable of remembering, and thus have sovereignty over the interpretation of the objectified memory. Also for them it must be important and of special value to have kept the photo, to show it and to provide access to the child to this – and thus also to their own memories about "becoming parents" and becoming a family.

The photo might be seen as a materialisation of dependencies in the generational order, too. This illustrates a form of dependency which refers to the necessity of care and support as well as to the normative orientation of acting and being. This is picked up by *Sebiha* when she describes her mother and her father: She describes herself as being very pleased "having them", because her mother, she says, "is always nice to me (...) and cares for me." She further reports that her father also cares for her, he teaches her – as well as her mother does – new things and he also tells her when she has done something wrong and should change it, but they also praise her when she has done something right. These descriptions of *Sebiha* have a high level of reflection and are – at the same time – formulated in an abstract and generalised manner. This may be the reason why concrete actions are not narrated. The girl does not talk about her sensations, her feelings. Nor does she mention what her parents mean to her. In her narration the caregivers are arranged towards her, however, she presents herself as passive. The parents are generally important to her, because they take care of her, bring her up and educate her – and they are regarded as a compass and an institution of recognition because they guide her through "right" and "wrong". Within this 'function' of her parents, which is also connected to praise and criticism, this sequence thematises protection, comfort and support as well as the practice of parents giving her advice on how she should not be or what she should not do. The aspect of care is strongly represented in the photo: The mother holds the baby in her arms, whereas the father is bent towards her. This photo symbolizes confidence, caretaking and thus an environment for feeling protected. What this shows is that people "are vulnerable, deeply social beings who are not only physically and economically dependent on others but psychologically dependent on them and in need of their recognition" (*Sayer* 2005, p. 950). In this sense, vulnerability and recognition are linked to each other. People are vulnerable because they existentially depend on recognition by others, who care about them. Recognition firstly takes place in the private sphere, in social and supportive relationships with others.

2.3 About family members and plush animals: Emotionality in caring relationships

After completing this interview sequence about the photo, *Sebiha* is asked to draw what else is important to her. She draws a coloured picture in which a woman, a man and a child are seen. When the interviewer asks if she has drawn all that is important to her, the girl additionally draws a grey stuffed animal on the picture (14:50-17:12). The tall people are presented as parents, the child represents *Sebiha's* brother. Father and mother are standing close to each other and are holding their hands; her brother is standing at a small distance beside them. This distance, however, seems to offer the potential to stretch out his hand and to partake in the couple constellation. All of the three people seem to be

happy, and the brother does not show any sign of loneliness. Standing at near distance to the parents can in fact rather symbolize detachment, independence, the capacity to act, and security. The clothes of the child have the same colours as those of its father, just the opposite way. The colour green appears with all three people.

   Sebiha says, almost weeping, that she got the stuffed animal in the picture at her birth. She had spent a very long time with it, had had it a "mega long time", but she lost it on a holiday. With the presentation of the little sheep, with which *Sebiha* has shared her own biography, one is again referred to her birth. The little sheep here appears ideal-typically as a psychoanalytical transitional object that supports the development of autonomy of the child. Moreover, analogies can be formed between the parental care for her as well as her care for the little sheep. The strong emotional tie with the stuffed animal and the consternation evoked by its loss are shown by the child's sad narrative tone. Thus loss, deprivation and missing become elements not only by the narrated content but also by the prosody.

2.4   Interim conclusion: On the entanglements of vulnerability and agency in „being present in the absence"

In both family designs in the photo and the drawn picture, *Sebiha* herself is present by her absence: In the photo she is present, she is visible, but she cannot remember herself in the situation or herself as a baby. Thus she is absent because of the missing memory. On the drawing she is not visible, she is not present as a family member. At the same time she is the one who actively designs the picture, she is present in the drawing of the picture, in its activity and as the person who made this drawing in the first place. In this way she is 'there', but not in a form that is visible. What has already become clear up to this point: The childlike self is positioned in a social arrangement, in which it is vulnerable and – at the same time – capable of acting. Thus we will discuss in the next part the question of how these forms of presentation of the self and family are connected with vulnerability and agency.

3   Approaches of vulnerability and agency – in connection with philosophical concepts of birth

Agency and vulnerability are central perspectives of the new social studies of childhood. In theoretical and empirical approaches, the concept of agency is strongly stressed "as a contribution to the social emancipation of children" (*Eßer* et al. 2016, p. 3). At the same time the contemporary works on the concept of agency criticise the anthropologisation and ontologisation of children's status as actors (see *Wihstutz* 2016, p. 62; *Magyar-Haas* 2017, p. 50). It is both problematic and inappropriate for theory and analyses to disregard or underestimate children's agency as autonomous persons, as well as to take children genuinely as capable and independent subjects, equipped per se with the ability to act. Due to this, in the following we work from a theoretical perspective that stresses the agency *as well as* the vulnerability of children. This raises the question of how children are capable of acting under the condition of vulnerability and how vulnerable they are as social actors.

3.1 Vulnerability and agency – ontological or/and relational concepts

An entanglement between vulnerability and especially autonomy has also been developed, among others, in feminist approaches; for example by *Catriona Mackenzie*, *Wendy Rogers* and *Susan Dodds* (2014). They emphasize that the dependence on others, the social conditionality of the self and the inscribed possibilities of being hurt belong to being human, but also emphasize the relationality of vulnerability. Thus, one can start from a fundamental dependence on others based on corporeality, which can be grasped as ontological vulnerability inherent in the body and is peculiar to all bodily beings. Also, *Judith Butler* refers to this in "Frames of War" when she calls for a new ontology of the body. If being a body means "to be exposed to social crafting and form" (*Butler* 2010, p. 3), and thus also that this bodily exposure depends on social norms and social and political organizations, then – according to *Butler's* demand – a new reflection on precariousness and vulnerability is needed, as well as an ethics based on vulnerability which she regards as the ontological condition of human existence. Humans are vulnerable because they are exposed to actions and "responses" from others and this is illustrated also by *Sebiha's* narration about her positioning in the familial care-arrangement.

In addition to this ontological form of vulnerability, *Mackenzie, Rogers* and *Dodds* as well as *Butler* consider another form of vulnerability. A *specific* dependence on help and support by others can be assumed, which must also be reflected in connection with various categories of inequality. That is why *Butler* stresses the particular vulnerability of groups that are exposed to political violence, poverty, diseases – but she pays no attention to how vulnerable children are made, for example because of their involvement in the generational order.

This specific form of vulnerability, which is situational and context-specific, is more rooted in external factors and situations. Furthermore, *Mackenzie, Rogers* and *Dodds* (2014, p. 8) distinguish between "dispositional" and "occurrent vulnerability" as two modes of vulnerability. This allows to differentiate between vulnerabilities that have not yet become sources of violations and those that have already led to concrete violations. Societies counter dispositional vulnerabilities with preventive measures and provide concrete, case-specific, socio-educational, medical support and assistance for "occurrent" vulnerabilities (*Magyar-Haas* 2020). The authors differentiate themselves from such autonomy-theoretical positions that reckon with sovereign subjects without completely abandoning the relevance of autonomy. Rather, *Mackenzie* (2014) proposes to also think of autonomy as relational (see also *Rössler* 2018).

Approaches to these theoretical perspectives for childhood studies are shown in cases where children are seen as a specifically vulnerable group, in the sense of a certain social status. In this way vulnerability – as "constitutional violability" – is becoming an attribute of human existence as well as of childhood. In quite a few current contributions to childhood studies, vulnerability is discussed as a basic dimension, and at the same time as a consequence of corporal and psychological neediness, as it is visible in the birth situation of the photo presented by *Sebiha*. This particular childhood-specific and age-related vulnerability is mostly explained by generational difference, that is with the biographical constitutive asymmetry between generations. Research by *Sabine Andresen* (2015), *Vera King* (2015) and *Meike Sophia Baader* (2015) is indeed based upon the basal finding that newborns and growing children are particularly dependent on adults and that it is this

neediness and defencelessness that make them particularly vulnerable – but they go even further: They advocate for asking about the conditions enabling the growing up, so that forms of power, violence and authority can also be integrated into the analysis (see further *Magyar-Haas* 2020; *Heite* et al. 2020).

3.2 Vulnerability and agency within the generational order

In this sense, the case of *Sebiha* placed in the centre here makes it possible to connect children's agency with their vulnerability, without overemphasizing one side. Our considerations regarding the agency and vulnerability of children are based on the concept that children find themselves positioned in a generational order, leaving them dependent on their families and other adults such as teachers, social workers, etc. (*Heite* et al. 2020). This dependency within the generational order is materialized in the photo which *Sebiha* shows at the beginning of the interview. The theoretical term "generational order" (*Bühler-Niederberger* 2011) refers to the differentiation between children, who are seen as not yet (completely) autonomous social actors, and adults, who are viewed as autonomous social actors and who – especially as parents – have a commitment to care for and empower their children. Hence clear hierarchies and power relations, as well as caring responsibilities are connected with the concept of generational order. By reflecting on her being cared for as well as on the loss of the sheep, *Sebiha's* narration illustrates that agency can be seen as a "result of the relations between different actors". As *Tanja Betz* and *Florian Eßer* (2016, p. 309) formulate, agency "arises in networks in which are interwoven, besides children, adults and material objects". The power of the older generation over growing up, the possibilities of action and development options, can be seen particularly in *Sebiha's* statement that her parents tell her what she does right and what she does wrong. In this way, *Sebiha's* parents give her a powerful orientation about which modes of her behaviour they find worthy of recognition and which they find not. By doing so they have a specific influence on *Sebiha's* subjectification, on her development as a subject. The parental power can influence vulnerability in a positive way but can also cause new forms of vulnerability, for example, when something that *Sebiha* has done is devalued. The connection between agency and vulnerability can be analysed on the one hand by reference to the phenomenon of birth and on the other hand, we will show, to what extent agency and vulnerability are linked together in the person of the narrator themselves.

3.3 Theoretical concepts of birth and natality

Newborns are considered generally as symbol of vulnerability, exposure and dependency on others and on other – material – things because they are not able to take care of themselves. At the same time they symbolise new beginnings and hope, as well as the potentiality of change the presence through this new. Several philosophers have dealt with the phenomenon of birth. In the formulation by *Martin Heidegger* (1979, p. 374; see also *Shchyttsova* 2016, p. 58): "The factual beingness [Dasein] exists by birth". Here, being born is interpreted as being thrown, as being thrown into the factual determinations, which cannot be chosen. As *Shchyttsova* (2016, p. 58) points out, in this view "the moment of passivity or powerlessness in the existence of beingness is maintained". The be-

ing of beingness is thought of as a "dramatic relationship, indeed as a conflict between the powerlessness rooted in birth and the self-activity founded in death" (p. 59). In *Hannah Arendt*'s work, this perspective is contrasted with a "natal turning point". "While *Heidegger* explores the existential-ontological conditions of renewal, *Arendt* concentrates on concrete actions as initiatives in the respective togetherness in the world" (*Shchyttsova* 2016, p. 73).

Arendt has analysed the potentiality of intrusion of the new into the world more intensely. She argues that the notion of "natality" underlines the human capacity for new beginnings, that is always something unique and new. For *Arendt* it is a central part of the human condition, that by being born every person possesses this notion of "natality". Thus, each birth is an event of new beginnings and far-reaching novelty as "each newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something new, that is, of acting" (*Arendt* 1998, p. 9). That is to say, the potential consists in transforming the unavailable beginning of being born into one's own life story and one's own actions, and for this the child requires the experience of empathy and recognition from the parents or primary caregivers.

*Hannah Arendt'*s philosophy is regarded as a paradigm shift in philosophy from *mortality* to *natality*. She argues that every person's life is determined by birth and the knowledge of unavoidable death. Thinking and acting are of central importance in this context. Being born is regarded as a basic condition of being human and thinking and acting as an answer to being born. This means that the answer to "being born" in *Arendt's* understanding, is to set something new in motion. In "Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft" she emphasises that possibilities can arise from a new beginning: "All freedom lies in this ability to start. There is no inevitable argument for violence about the beginning, because it cannot be derived from any logical chain..." (*Arendt* 2006a, p. 970; own translation).

For *Arendt*, the new beginning, which is made possible by natality and which can be empirically connected with *Sebiha's* narrative about her birth, is the epitome of freedom. The birth of every human being is the primary prerequisite of conscious action and agency, as well as of vulnerability. This is set in motion by reflection, which is drawn from previous experiences. Thus people can be regarded as the initiator of life by confirming their own birth – and this is exactly what *Sebiha* does in the presented sequence about the photo of her being born: she confirms her own birth and by this her own ability to act. Her own vulnerability is shown again in the dependence on others. Thus every person represents a beginning, an "initium", and birth can be understood as the existential a priori. Birth is the beginning of any existence that is dependent on others, like parents and grandparents. Everybody needs support – a family, friends – that gives him/her recognition, care and protection. Three aspects of *Arendt's* philosophy are important here: Knowledge, life as existence in time and space, and beginning and end of existence.

In contrast to knowledge about inevitable death, there is – firstly – no knowledge about birth, and *Sebiha* makes this clear by presenting the photo as a substitute for her own memory. Before natality there is no state of consciousness that could foresee a planning of existence. The born someone was a nobody before their existence and they were in nothingness. Life is – secondly – temporary and therefore finite. The non-existence before birth, on the other hand, is timeless. The question of birth therefore remains open. Hence, it is completely unclear whether someone is born or not. The beginning is – thirdly – not determined, but the end is. Everyone is aware of the inevitability of death, but not of the fact of birth. The beginning and the end of existence are therefore in a symbiotic re-

lationship. Birth is the existential a priori, for all questions of existence depend on it. *Hannah Arendt* speaks in this context of the miracle of the new beginning, which is made possible by every birth:

> "The new beginning, which comes into the world with every birth, can only be brought to bear in the world because the newcomer has the ability to make a new beginning himself, i.e. to act. In the sense of initiative – to set an initium – there is an element of action in all human activities, which means nothing other than that these activities are practiced by beings who came into the world by birth and are under the condition of natality" (*Arendt* 2006b, p. 18, own translation).

Arendt's distinction between existential and political birth is also relevant. She refers to political birth as a "second birth". It thus describes the process of individual entry into public space through political action. Looking at *Sebiha's* statement that her parents tell her what she is doing right and what she is doing wrong, that they want to give her direction in her actions and thoughts, one can say that *Sebiha* is currently in the second birth process, that she is currently experiencing her political birth, by stating and questioning that her parents gives her orientation. In summary, it can be said that *Arendt's* idea of the miracle of birth, of the beginning, is the basic condition of action and thus opens up the possibility of changing the course of the world. From a philosophical point of view, every human being stands at a point in the world where no other has ever stood before him, quasi as a newcomer (*Arendt* 2006b). For Arendt, birth is the a priori for one's freedom since one can become the initiator of his or herself on the basis of his/her birth. *Arendt's* positive way of thinking implies active, conscious action, which can change the course of history.

By introducing the new into the world, a person also faces the other's novelty and uniqueness. As *Fry* (2014) points out, action in *Arendt's* sense is grounded in natality, and is secondly related to plurality as a human condition. Plurality means that "all human beings are unique and different from one another, but also political equals" (*Fry* 2014, p. 30). The concept of plurality does not focus on physical differences, which *Arendt* calls "otherness", which is shared with all organic life-forms as well as inorganic objects. Hence, the concept of otherness is not exclusively human. Beyond that, the concept means the way that plurality specifies who and how a person is and becomes in a social, political and moral sense. The plurality that is expressed in political action is the fact that "nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live" *(Arendt* 1958, p. 8). Plurality is inherent to the human condition and *Arendt's* politics are attentive to the important differences between humans.

The ontological questions in connection with birth, which are analysed by *Heidegger* and *Arendt*, take an ethical turn with the philosopher *Michail Bachtin*. As *Shchyttsova* (2016, p. 90, all own translation) points out, in *Bachtin's* case it is not ontology but ethics that are the *prima philosophia*; this results from the fact that *Bachtin* interprets "the factual a priori of being born as an ethical (or preethical) a priori" that "determines the constitution of my individual self". Thus with him the self is not, as with *Arendt*, which becomes the initiator of the new. Rather *Bachtin* emphasizes the "inevitable affectedness by the other", "which allows me to view my entire existence from the point of view of having to respond to this affectedness" (*Shchyttsova*, 2016, p. 90). Similar to *Emmanuel Levinas*, *Bachtin* is also concerned with the "indispensable recognition of the ethical priority of the other, to whom I am 'always already' responsible" (*Shchyttsova* 2016, p. 87). The other's being born ignites an ethical obligation to support and foster his being born; it is the other's appeal that grounds the "de facto 'having to answer'" (*Shchyttsova*, 2016, p. 99f.).

Against this background it can be said, too, that a person realises that their own actions are configured in a world situated by other, already existing persons. Those significant others – like parents and brothers – give meaning to one's own actions and enable the person's originality with respect to their own. In this sense, agency and vulnerability are entangled in birth, since children as newcomers are born into an already interpreted and structured world. Furthermore, newcomers carry the potentiality of agency and the possibility of changeability of this world in themselves. At the same time, newcomers are dependent on this world and on the acting people in this world, wherein their vulnerability lies.

3.4 Narrations about "being born" in connection with considerations of recognition

Besides the phenomenon of birth or the newcomer, respectively, the entanglement of the concepts of agency and vulnerability can be traced in the figure of the narrator itself. *Sebiha* is the acting subject that presents herself and her family relations. At the same time she presents herself – for herself and the interviewer – as a baby, as vulnerable, newborn and 'past' being. She exhibits herself in her – although protected and well-cared for – vulnerability. Her agency lies also in the fact that she tries to recognise herself in the baby in the photo. By means of this photo and the narration about it, some sort of self-consciousness is recognizable. Yet the presented self withdraws itself from the memories of the narrating self and is accordingly unavailable. Besides the demonstration of herself and seeking self-recognition, her agency can be seen in the fact that she designs herself in the narrative – as a protected and cared-for child. The presented parental care and support demonstrate 'safe' and 'protective' answers to the vulnerability of the child.

If one follows *Axel Honneth*'s (1992) considerations of recognition theory from this perspective, self-esteem depends on the positive reactions of other persons to the person itself. And it is precisely this experiencing that materializes for *Sebiha* in the photo of her birth. On the other hand, the experience of disregard can collapse the identity and self-esteem of the whole person. *Sebiha's* statement, that her parents tell her what she is doing wrong can be understood as the educational communication of a moral compass, but also as a form of disregard. This is depending on what the right-wrong evaluation of the parents refers to exactly and how this evaluation is communicated in practice. This addresses the first of the three forms of disrespect described by *Honneth* (1992, pp. 190f.): a form of disrespect that pertains to a person's integrity. This is about the deprivation of free disposal over one's own life and body. As a second form, *Honneth* names the exclusion of rights, which deprives the respective groups of the status of equal interaction partners. In terms of childhood theory, this can be related back to the generational order if children do not have the same rights as adults and children and adults do not interact with each other as equals. Third, *Honneth* mentions the disregard and degradation of individual and collective lifestyles, which deprives those concerned of the opportunity to attach social value to their way of life and their own abilities. Consequently, the aim is to protect people from these forms of disregard and to guarantee recognition relationships. Accordingly, *Honneth* (1992, pp. 193-196) designs forms of recognition that are complementary to the three forms of disregard: Love as a form of recognition in affective bonds such as friendships, family in the broadest sense and all its possible forms of definition as well as all possible

forms of (sexual) love relationships that cover people's needs for emotional and physical closeness. This sphere of recognition assumes, among other things, the form of the family as expressed in the photo of *Sebiha* as well as in her narration. The second form of disregard corresponds to the form of recognition as a fully-fledged legal person. The third form of disregard corresponds to the collective consent to alternative ways of life, so that the subject can regard itself as valuable in its particularity, and this form of recognition is described by Honneth as a relationship of recognition of solidarity, inherent in a principle of "egalitarian difference" (*Honneth* 1992, p. 195).

4   Conclusion

Sebiha's expressions show an entanglement of agency and vulnerability. She mentions that her parents tell her what is right and what is wrong, but there is no further explanation as to which forms of behaviour are discussed by the parents as desirable and which are not. In *Sebiha's* narrative normative expectations are mentioned, but only in a quite general manner. Thus, her agency is dependent on the expectations and normative directional instructions of her parents. This current dependence on these norms set as relevant by others, as well as the conditions of recognition by her parents, make her currently vulnerable.

In our contribution, our aim was to show the entanglement of two concepts, that of vulnerability and agency, which are repeatedly seen as contradictory, by means of a child's interpretations of what is important to them. Against the background of our research it cannot only be shown that autonomy as well as dealing with vulnerability in care relationships are essential for the well-being of children. With reference to concepts and narratives of birth, the paper illustrated how strongly ambivalent concepts such as protection and insecurity, safety and risk, vulnerability and agency are intertwined.

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