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

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 Natälität.

Schlagwörter: Vulnerabilität, Agency, Geburt, Natälität
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.