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SPECIAL ISSUE: Living apart together: growing up in transnational families

research article

Vulnerable agents: what we can learn from a child-centred perspective on transnational families

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Research on children in transnational families benefits from a conceptual input as provided by the studies presented in this special issue. The input aims to overcome the usual juxtaposition of agency and vulnerability dominating the research field, a juxtaposition resulting from disciplinary preconceptions and not from empirical insights. In contrast, the results of the studies in this special issue clearly show that both agency and vulnerability exist, and in such a way that vulnerability may even be the result of the children's actions. Therefore, a pragmatic theory of vulnerability is developed, based on the relational action concept of Emirbayer and Mische (1998). This theory understands vulnerability both as an accompanying phenomenon and as a consequence of agency, and links various forms of agency with the associated risks of vulnerability. Such an approach may be useful in research on children in various family constellations.

Keywords pragmatic theory of vulnerability • agency • transnational families • children and migration • vulnerability

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Introduction

Research on transnational families reveals a multifaceted picture of children. This began with a study by Faulstich Orellana et al (2001), which was probably the first to systematically focus on children in transnational families. Faulstich Orellana et al (2001) compared various forms of migration involving children, from satellite children to children migrating with their parents to left-behind children. The diversity of migration processes, including return migration, is also reflected in the different studies in this special issue. All these forms of migration are seen by parents as being in the best interests of their children (Faulstich Orellana et al, 2001). The competences required and demonstrated by children in these migration processes are many and varied, as are children's complaints about the various burdens that migration processes impose on them. For this reason, I use the term 'vulnerable agents' when focusing

on children in migration processes and must add that, while I consider this term to apply to all of them, they can be 'vulnerable agents' in very different ways.

The problem with research on children is that, depending on the paradigm that researchers adhere to, children are thematised either as agents or as vulnerable beings whose needs must be met. This is a preconception that stems from whether researchers feel more committed to 'childhood studies', with their rather normative concept of children's agency, or more likely to take a child-developmental approach. While my distinction between these two research approaches with regard to children's agency or vulnerability does not take into account the complexity of every single study, the distinction can, however, most often be made quite well. Researchers' decision to use one or the other approach largely answers the question of what situation means for children – that is, what the results of such research might *show* that it means for children. This is the subject of my contribution: I will first discuss the two approaches – one of a needy and vulnerable child and the other of an agentic child – as well as their significance for childhood research and, in particular, for research on transnational migration. I will then take a closer look at the studies that are presented in this special issue and the decisions their authors made in this regard, and will discuss their results against this background. Finally, I will propose a theoretical approach to agency that includes children's vulnerability. Drawing on the theoretical contribution of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), I will distinguish between *different forms* of agency. In doing so, agency is conceived of in situational and relational terms, as an element of interactions and not as an individual characteristic of a child. I will then show how these different forms of agency can render children vulnerable or, conversely, protect them from vulnerability. My theoretical approach therefore attempts to link vulnerability and agency in such a way that we can distance ourselves from the common but empirically unfounded default setting that the more agency children enact in a given situation, the less vulnerable they are to any adverse or constricting aspects of the situation. Instead, my approach aims to encourage the systematic linking of forms of agency with forms of vulnerability, and prompt the search for possible and also unlikely connections. This heuristic grid thus takes into account children's competences and also their needs, as well as the conditions and limits of action that apply to children. All these considerations are illustrated in particular by the studies that are presented in this special issue.

However, before embarking on this systematic work, I would like to show the extent to which the choice of approach – either an agency approach or an approach centred on children's development and needs – determines one's view of events. To do this, in the following section I will draw on two prominent writers on the history of childhood and show their one-sided view of children in the very common migration processes of earlier times.

Excursus: two prominent views on children's migration in pre-industrial Europe

In pre-industrial Europe, processes of migration were a normal part of growing up and education. 'By 14, a great majority would be living ... either as servants in households, apprentices living in their masters' home or students boarding away from their families' (Gillis, 1974: 2). They might also be considerably younger than 14 years old when leaving their families, Gillis mentions (1974: 5). In terms of their physical development, they were still children; at that time 'physical changes that we

associate with early teen-age were 3 or 4 years later' (1974: 7). The children of the English nobility in the late Middle Ages were very young when they were sent to monasteries or as ladies-in-waiting, pages or servants to other noble families, often no older than seven years (deMause, 1974: 33). Such migration had an institutionalised character, in that it was a common element of children's education to live and learn in other families and do so quite far away from their families of origin, in what was an apprenticeship lasting up to ten years (Laslett, 2021). The children, boys as well as girls, but less often girls, usually moved to distant places and, with the limited travel opportunities of the time, rarely or never saw their parents again.

The travelling that journeymen embarked on after completing their apprenticeships involved young adults, and as far as we know these were mostly young men. This also indicates that migration was a valued form of knowledge transfer in pre-industrial Europe. The institution of apprenticeship crumbled with the French Revolution due to the break-up of the old system of rule, which also affected masters and guilds. Other factors were the emergence of schools and poor children's labour in factories (Gillis, 1974). Nevertheless, the migration of children was still not uncommon. Children from poor regions moved to richer regions, such as the children from the mountain region of Savoy who moved to the cities of Germany and France during hard times, where they begged and even found some fame by performing tricks with their trained marmots – Ludwig van Beethoven wrote a piece of music for them (Op. 52, No. 7). They also practised a wide variety of professions (Maistre, 1993). Boys and girls from the mountain valleys of Switzerland and Austria travelled to wealthier Swabia to work for farmers (Bühler, 1984; Uhlig, 1998), and boys from other poor areas of Italian Switzerland and France worked as chimney sweep boys in northern Italian and French cities (Bühler, 1984; Prica, 2017). These are just some of the children's migrations that took place regularly. They continued until the middle of the 20th century.

But what did these migrations mean for children? The historian Philippe Ariès paints a romantic picture of medieval and early modern childhood in which children enjoyed a great deal of freedom and participated – indiscriminately, he claims – in a way that childhood studies would call 'agency'. In his main work, *Centuries of Childhood*, he also draws on the memoirs of a man, Thomas Platter, who was born into a poor family in the Valais in 1499. He left his family for the first time at the age of six to work as a goatherd, moving 'into the mountain solitudes' (Ariès, 1962: 189). At the age of about ten, he then joined an older cousin who travelled all over Europe, 'living the endless roving life of the medieval student'. For five years, Thomas accompanied his cousin through the then renowned schools of Germany, Switzerland and Alsace. He was the greenhorn, begging and singing in the streets to collect money to support himself and his old hand. After five years, Thomas returned to his mother, only to leave again and travel for another five years. He was then travelling without his older protector but also exploiter, and was experienced enough to survive on his own. There was nothing unusual about children travelling in this way together with an older student; there was even a specific term for these children who accompanied and served medieval students: 'Schütze' (Ariès, 1962: 247). This, too, was a form of education: the 'Schütze' saw the world and learnt Latin and Greek in the famous schools of the time. In middle adulthood, Thomas Platter became the rector of an important humanist school in Basel and started to write his biography. He wrote about his childhood memories with recognisable enthusiasm, describing the adventures and freedom of his boyhood. However, he also wrote about the terrible beatings he occasionally took and the vermin he was infested with.

Whereas the development of modern practices and institutions of child-rearing represents a loss for Ariès, a loss of children's freedom and participation in society, for psychohistorian Lloyd deMause (1974) it is progress, development towards an empathic, appropriate relationship with children. He writes his history of childhood only a few years after Ariès and it is a history that focuses on children's vulnerability. For deMause, all deviations from today's protected childhood and empathic treatment of children are forms of cruelty and disregard. For him, this also includes earlier habits of leaving children unattended or historical customs of sending them to other households – even the customs of the nobility, having them brought up in other noble households (deMause, 1974: 33). For deMause, these are all forms of abandonment that traumatise children and make them non-empathic parents themselves when they grow up. We also recognise in his work how much such an approach, which places the vulnerability of children in the foreground, is based on a normative pattern of a good childhood, a Western middle-class childhood of today (Bühler-Niederberger, 2024). Incidentally, deMause applies this claim not only to historical childhoods under conditions of poverty but also to childhoods in other cultures, which he uses as examples of the abusive treatment of children. In both cases – for Ariès and deMause – the answer to the question of the significance of migration for children is already provided by the way the question is posed. It is almost superfluous to say that we also know little about the experiences of the children themselves in all the forms of poverty migration that continued into the 20th century because there are almost no testimonies from the children themselves.

'Children left behind' and 'stayer children': two approaches to children in transnational families

Two terms take centre stage in contemporary research on migration processes, each representing one of the two approaches: the *left-behind child* and the *stayer child*. The somewhat older expression *children left behind* addresses the needs of the child and sees these as being jeopardised and also violated by the parents' migration decisions. The expression is found in many studies of children of migrant workers who leave their children at home. The effects of being 'left behind' on mental health, particularly with regard to anxiety and depression, and on child wellbeing have often been examined. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses show significant negative effects (Fellmeth et al, 2018; Dominquez and Hall, 2022; see also Baltatescu et al, 2023, for six European countries). Occasionally, and when leaving children behind is a mass phenomenon, no significant differences are found or there may even be some positive effects on children's wellbeing (Cebotari et al, 2016; 2018). International child protection organisations also refer to the term 'children left behind' (UNICEF, n.d.; IOM and Save the Children, 2017). They use it when advising parents and caregivers on how to ensure the health, wellbeing and educational progress of children who remain in their home country. However, with their regularly compiled reports that draw attention to the situation of children in different countries, they also address the politicians who should be held accountable. They complain that the policies affecting whether and how children are left behind – including migration management and labour migration policies – often ignore the impact on children. Their complaints are also directed at host countries that use immigration restrictions to prevent family reunification and should instead protect the right to family unity by providing regular migration

channels that allow families to travel together and by developing temporary work programmes that allow migrants to return to their families on a regular basis. (For such policies, see the contribution of Manuela Westphal and co-authors (Westphal et al, 2025), in regard to asylum seekers, in this special issue).

Meanwhile, the notion of children left behind and the message of the negative effects of parental migration can also be instrumentalised in public discourses that blame migrant parents and deny political responsibility. Parents are then measured against standards for a good childhood that they cannot meet under the given economic and infrastructural conditions, while the conditions themselves and the responsibility for them are not addressed. Gu (2023; 2022a) criticises such research, and especially the discourses based on it, with regard to the children of parents who move from rural to urban areas in search of work in China. Liu et al (2023) criticise this research for focusing too much on the negative consequences and ignoring the positive adjustments made by the children. Research on children left behind has also contributed to a similar blaming of parents in Eastern European countries, as discussed in the contributions by Fränze Seidel (2025) and Katarzyna Jendrzey (2025) in this special issue.

It is worth recalling a criticism that Woodhead had already formulated when the new approach of 'childhood studies' was only just emerging and which he then cited as an argument in favour of a paradigm shift from child-developmental approaches focusing on children's needs towards the new approach of childhood studies. He pointed out the instrumental value of the argument based on children's needs, which still dominated childhood research at the time when he wrote: 'Framing prescriptions in terms of children's needs may serve important functions for those who make them' (Woodhead, 1990: 72). Such statements, he continued, might give the impression of unquestionable objectivity, pretending to be an impartial knowledge of human nature but, in fact, they would be nothing other than culturally constructed and normative. Ultimately, on the basis of such statements, only one way of doing justice to that nature would be tolerated. This is Woodhead's critique, and it is precisely what I have criticised when discussing the approach of deMause. Woodhead (1990: 3) added that his critique was aimed at recognising 'the plurality of paths to maturity'; it was not a plea to avoid judgements about the adequacy of children's care, education and welfare, and he added 'on the contrary'.

The *stayer-child* approach focuses on what children *do*, how they interpret situations and decisions in the context of migration, what they contribute to resolving and shaping them, how they control their own behaviour and their own emotions, how they maintain contact with distant parents or other family members, and what their own contribution is to the decision to reunite with their parents or not. Hence, the stayer-child approach makes an important contribution to the knowledge about children in migration processes, both their perspectives on such situations and their acting in relation to those situations. I will refer to relevant studies as examples in the next section when discussing the studies as they are collected in this special issue, as all the authors actually choose this actor approach as their theoretical starting point.

The problem with this approach, however, is its individualistic or microsociological bias – that is, the overestimation of effects and opportunities of agency. The expression 'stayer child' suggests that the children are involved in decision making about migrating or not migrating, staying or not staying. Since the research conducted by Faulstich Orellana et al (2001), it is known that children have the least influence in precisely this initial decision to migrate (be it the parents alone, the whole family or the child

alone); it is almost solely a decision made by their parents. Children may become more important later on in the everyday organisation of the chosen arrangement. This is not only due to parents deciding over their heads – that is, according to the generational order of the family, which at best is negotiable – but also to immigration laws, working conditions, housing conditions, residence conditions and so on. These conditions are designed to meet the needs of the host countries and, above all, the economies of these countries, not the needs of the children.

Given the strength of economic interests, the valorisation of children's competences could ultimately be used to bind children more closely to these interests, even if this is not the intention of the researchers using such an approach. Agentic children – more precisely: children conceived as agentic -, who are seen as resilient, do not prevent parents from being available as flexible and cheap potential labour. And it is already becoming apparent that many of these children will themselves be available as such cheap labour in the future, following the example of their parents. The agentic child, celebrated as an empowerment, may turn out to be a concession to the global labour markets. When these markets need the cheap labour of women, especially from distant countries, they can do so on a more secure moral footing: agentic children help themselves, whatever the situation. Cheap labour becomes internationally available, and there is no pressure to provide the workers with the social protection and (undoubtedly petit-bourgeois) lifestyle that workers were previously granted on the basis of trade union negotiations and state regulations. According to Nancy Fraser (2013: 14), feminism has 'entered a dangerous liaison with neoliberalism'; one might now and in the context of transnational families' research apply this accusation to childhood studies.

Again, as with the needs approach, the problem with the agency and resilience approach is its potential political instrumentalisation. This can also be seen in studies that have not looked at transnational migration but at what might be called the worst forms of exploitation in which children can be involved. Well-known examples include Montgomery's (2001) study of child prostitution in Thailand, the study of Huijsman and Baker (2012) of child trafficking and child labour migration in East Asia, and Jacquemin's (2006) study of girls who move from rural to urban Côte d'Ivoire to work in households. These studies emphasise that children remain agentic and, by focusing on children's agency, provide excellent insights into the interpretations and actions of the children involved. However, this can easily lead to the false impression that children are in a position to do something about exploitative conditions such as global labour markets, the sex industry and traditional local forms of labour exploitation. There is a further problem as in their eagerness to prove the agency of children, these studies focus their critical attention on child protection efforts and organisations. Where paternalistic child protection may admittedly hinder children's agency even more, the exploitative structures are too much out of the line of fire; the balance of power is clear, despite all child agency.

Thus, both an approach that argues exclusively in terms of children's needs and their violation as well as one that argues exclusively in terms of their agency risk losing sight of interests and actors that are far more powerful than children, and may even end up confirming these forces. Both aspects must not be lost sight of to adequately understand the situation of children in processes of transnational migration, neither children's agency that is sometimes granted to them and sometimes required of them, nor children's needs that are clearly violated often enough. This leads me to outline

the 'vulnerable actor' approach. I will begin by discussing the studies in this special issue that make such a theory-developing endeavour both possible and necessary.

Competences and burdens: children in the theoretical and empirical approaches of the studies in this special issue

The studies in this special issue that place children at the centre of their empirical work all refer to an agency approach. Ukrainian refugee children in Switzerland are seen as 'active beings' by Anne Ramos and Andrea Riepl (2025). Charlotte Melander and co-authors (2025) speak of children involved in serial migration processes from Poland and Romania as 'actors' whose actions can be understood as 'exchanging' and 'negotiating' with their family members regarding decisions about where the children will live, who will take care of them and how their daily needs will be met. They also write that this agency is a way of handling the burdens of migration. According to Áron Telegdi-Csetri and co-authors (2025), left-behind children in Moldavia and Ukraine show 'strong personal agency' in coping with parental migration, and they even speak of 'resilience' in relation to this agency. Adrienne Atterberry (2025) examines a very different kind of migration: the return of highly skilled Indian professionals from the US to India in the interest of their children's future careers, for which the parents see better opportunities in Indian society. These children are also called 'proactive' in working out the ambitious plans their parents have for them. Fränze Seidel's (2025) contribution is the only one that is more cautious about this emphasis on children's agency. She speaks of 'left-behind children', and the three young adults and former left-behind children she interviewed from Moldavia strictly reject a childhood like the one they experienced for their own (as yet unborn) children.

Even if the choice of the agency approach is implicitly or explicitly linked to the assumption that the children can also deal with the burdens of transnational migration through their agency, or that they even possess a certain resilience against them, several of the contributions contain highly impressive and sensitive findings on the burdens placed on the children. To cite some examples from this special issue, Áron Telegdi-Csetri and co-authors (2025) refer to a child who cries so much when she comes across a dress belonging to her absent mother that her grandmother now makes sure the clothes are put out of sight. In the same study, there is the example of a child who admits how much children, and therefore herself, and their needs are disregarded when she reports that it is difficult to be with her parents as 'they live in a house provided by the factory where they work, children are not allowed there'. She goes on to say, 'Even visiting is not possible, only at my aunt's, but even there … she has a very strict landlord who doesn't allow pets or visitors for an extended period.' The findings of Anne Ramos and Andrea Riepl (2025) also show very impressively how the children, although in a difficult situation themselves, try to take care of others, the father left behind in the war-torn country or the pets there, and nobody cares for them. And on what other experience than their own grief could it be based if the children try not to show their mother that they are sad and have problems during telephone calls in order not to further sadden the mother – a result from the study by Charlotte Melander and co-authors (2025). The last two examples also show how much the children's agency, their competent way of dealing with the problems, is linked to their injuries, their vulnerability, not simply in the way that they cope with burdens, but that they make themselves vulnerable. Taking care of others as a

self-commitment, which they are then unable to fulfil due to their absence and limited possible influence, or suppressing their own feelings out of concern for others, are such vulnerabilising forms of agency. Several findings in these studies clearly show that agency is not in principle an alternative or a protection against vulnerability but may even create vulnerability. However, this insight should now be worked out theoretically in order to make it available for further research.

Towards a pragmatic and empirically grounded theory of children's vulnerability

The concept of agency – that is, of children active in the construction of their own lives – was meant to be a core concept of childhood studies since the very beginning. 'Children are and must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live' – this was postulated early on by Prout and James (1990: 8). This was of course centrally important in order to study the child not only as a bundle of dependent variables (academic achievement, IQ, mental health, normal development) – as so many studies on children's development had done before – but to focus empirical attention on children's perspectives and their contributions to interactions. Prout and James suggested an agency concept that gave neither priority to agency nor structure but conceived agency and structure as complementing each other, referring to Anthony Giddens (1984), hence an agency being limited but also enabled by what is structurally given (Prout and James, 1990: 28). But the agency of children became a magic formula of childhood studies – beyond any structural embeddedness – and children were even perceived as 'independent social actors' (James and James, 2012: 3). This was certainly also meant as an advocatory commitment so that the children's competences were not underestimated any longer. This is what Mayall (2000: 246) also spoke of when she said the concept would mean 'righting children's wrongs', which was a slogan of the child rights movement. The overemphasis on children's agency was not without problems since, as explained earlier, it can lead to exploitative conditions not being taken into account, despite its favourable intention. For more than 20 years, this agency concept and its use have been constantly criticised. Tisdall and Punch spoke derisively of the 'mantras' of childhood studies (2012: 251). A never-ending debate about the right way to conceptualise agency ensued (for example, Oswell, 2012; Esser et al, 2016), without a generally preferred solution emerging to date. Currently, the debate is mainly centred on taking into account materialities, non-human and technical forces that are involved in the constitution of the social world (Spyrou et al, 2019; Bollig, 2018; Esser, 2018). These materialist approaches conceive of agency as an ontological outcome of a web of heterogeneous entities, rendering agency and actors an *effect* rather than a *property* of social entities (Alberth et al, 2020: 4). Meanwhile, vulnerability may just simply remain a property of children in these approaches, something given by their ontological status of 'becomings' (Spyrou et al, 2019; Bollig, 2020) or by structural givenness and biology (Oswell, 2012; 2017). Intentionally or unintentionally, the materialist approaches are thus moving (back) closer to the familiar image of the child as a being to be nurtured and educated by adults and protective settings. Whether this is a more appropriate conception of the child overall and under all circumstances is not for me to decide here. In any case, it remains unsatisfactory because in this way, agency and vulnerability are linked

ambiguously and no particular emphasis is placed on a stringent link. While the idea of vulnerability frequently appears in the materialist approaches it may still appear in the way I criticised: as an opposite of agency.

It is not my interest and not my ambition to definitively solve social theoretical problems associated with the concept of agency. I want to stay closer to the empirical exploration of children's difficult life situations and ask how in such situations agency and vulnerability can be addressed without having to do this as an 'either-or' or 'the more-the less'. To clarify once again: such a contrast is only suggested by the different disciplinary history of the agency approach versus the needs approach and in no way by empirical findings on childhood. Therefore, I choose the approach of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), which is rooted in US-American pragmatism and refers to Dewey and Mead, among others. It emphasises the relationality of all actions and all elements of society, which (only) receive their (changing) meaning, function and effect in social relations. It therefore does not conceptualise any contrast between agency and structure. Agency is not a fixed property of an individual, not something that the individual has, it is a 'process of social engagement' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 962) and thus 'an independent element in respective social relations', the same is valid for structure (1998: 973).

The approach was not developed to grasp the agency of children, but by detaching agency from the idea of an individual characteristic and capacity and shifting it to the level of interaction, in which actions achieve meaning and effect only, it is possible to develop highly plausible interpretations for situations in which children are taking part. In these situations, children's actions can actually take on very far-reaching significance in the corresponding interactions without having to assume that the child has an extraordinary capacity. To give an example: a child is playing peacefully in the corner, in a situation such as a visit from relatives, and by doing so 'demonstrates' the quality of parenting and even of the entire family life to all visitors. The child undoubtedly realises that people are particularly happy with her behaviour and picks up on a few admiring comments without her actions following a plan which the child is mastering. Anyway, with this approach no assumptions in this regard have to be made, the analysis can remain on the level of observation.

Emirbayer and Mische's approach gains its special value for the purposes for which it is to be used here by systematically distinguishing between different types of agency. Emirbayer and Mische differentiate them according to their relationship to the given rules. They distinguish between *iteration*, an agency that essentially fits into the rules, *evaluation*, which determines and selects which rules are to be applied in the given situation and how, and *imagination*, which gives or might give the event a new twist by applying new rules. For each of these forms, I will now hypothesise how the connection to vulnerability can be conceived for children in transnational families, drawing mainly on the studies in this special issue. In my theoretical attempt, vulnerability will be understood very openly as a 'risk of harm to the child's wellbeing' (Nahkur, 2024) and as a concept that is often used in debates on child protection (Heite et al, 2020).

Iteration, that is, fitting into familiar patterns of rules, can be recognised; for example, where children (continue to) fulfil their daily obligations at school or keep to the agreements made with their parents (regarding communication during absences, for example), but also possibly regarding additional obligations that the children have to take on. Iteration is the form of agency that children manifest most frequently. I

have also referred to it elsewhere as 'competent compliance' (Bühler-Niederberger, 2020: 239). It is by no means to be equated with passivity but is just as much a form of agency as all the others. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) refer to the philosophical work of Taylor (1993: 57): 'A rule doesn't (just) apply itself; it has to be applied and this may involve difficult, finely tuned judgements.' All the children in the studies in this special issue show this form of agency, among others. This fit-in with the rules ensures that the children are recognised by their parents, and ensures their success at school; it also ensures their professional future. In this sense, agency in the form of iteration can also protect children's wellbeing. However, such agency also implies vulnerabilisation, in that the children are also challenging themselves to be children who do not cause difficulties. Gu (2022b) speaks of 'emotional labour' in her study on children from rural Chinese families whose parents migrated to urban areas in search of work. It means that the children also hide their feelings of sadness, loneliness or being overwhelmed, which they explain to themselves as something temporary, something they are able to cope with. The study by Faulstich Orellana et al (2001) also pointed to this emotional labour of children from different migrant groups. Examples of this can also be found in the studies in this special issue, such as those by Charlotte Melander and co-authors (2025), and Áron Telegdi-Csetri and co-authors (2025). Children also impose on themselves a strict regime for their daily activities in order to function within expectations; solidarity among peers can also help them to do so. No doubt, the children do not simply conform to the expectations and the required rules as passive victims. This agency can make it easier for them to bear the situation but, conversely, one might say that they are now victimised by themselves instead of being merely passive victims. Quite apart from this, a further problem of fitting in with the rules that have been set for children in transnational families is that different and incompatible sets of rules can apply to the same areas. Particularly where parents, and especially mothers, migrate temporarily, the distribution of tasks and duties and thus the responsibility expected of the children, as well as the responsibility granted to them, can vary greatly. There is then one solution for the times when parents are present and one for the time when they are absent, in which the child is considered to be more or less a child, more or less competent (König et al, 2022). This is a problem that children, and especially teenagers, often complain about, namely that their skills are negated or demanded – depending on how their parents want to or are able to fulfil their parental role (Bühler-Niederberger and Türkyilmaz, 2022). This denial of competences and maturity once acquired then harbours further potential for injury, especially for children who are so eager to fit in.

Evaluation is, according to Emirbayer and Mische, a form of agency that not only fits into the rules but also determines what the requirements really are under the given conditions and how they can best be met. In this regard, the children featured in the studies in this special issue show some creativity and the studies reveal a wealth of solutions developed by the children. One can also speak of the strategies by which they fulfil the expectations placed on them, and also make this task somewhat easier and less painful for themselves. The children structure their own daily and weekly programmes, they 'fill the void' with hobbies, such as teaching themselves to cook. In short, they add 'actions that they can control', as Áron Telegdi-Csetri and co-authors (2025) write. They also develop contact routines, *when* to call their absent parents and *what* and *how* to tell them. They reorganise their social and emotional relationships locally – without withdrawing too much from their absent

parents – by establishing closer ties with grandparents or other relatives. Finally, the development of plans for the future in which one imagines oneself as the person who will, for example, leave for California or Spain – the respective fantasies of two children in Áron Telegdi-Csetri and co-authors (2025) – can also be seen as a creatively developed strategy of how to meet current expectations and stay in a reasonably good mood. Evaluation – this is the impression the studies convey – is the agency form in which the least potential for injury to the children can be recognised. Where the children cannot do much about the situation, but (have to) do a lot to maintain the arrangement imposed on them, it seems easiest for the children to develop strategies to at least cope better with the expectations placed on them in a way that also protects their own interests to some extent.

Imagination is the third and final form of agency, a form in which individuals reconfigure structural elements according to their wishes, hopes and fears. In other words, it involves at least an attempt to assert one's own interests, contrary to what the rules in force previously stipulated. The studies in this special issue also include some examples of children redefining or replacing rules. One of these can be found in the study of Anne Ramos and Andrea Riepl (2025). The child successfully asserts her will: the girl wants to take off the (religious) cross she wears around her neck and can now do so because she has escaped her mother's sphere of influence to some extent; the cross stands 'for her subordination to her parents' and now she is looked after by her elder sister. Other examples in which the children change the rules sound less successful and show how agency can mean vulnerability. Two examples are given by Charlotte Melander and co-authors (2025), and the outcome can be judged as at least ambivalent for the children. The first example is about a boy who does not want to follow his parents to Sweden, but prefers to enjoy his freedom as a teenager with his friends at home. He comments on this himself: 'and I can tell you it was a bit dangerous'. The second example is the girl who reacts to her father's migration with resistance, perhaps to punish the absent father, perhaps also with the idea that he could be persuaded to return, but who ultimately has to bear the consequences herself for the botched exam and for the constant denial of telephone contact with her father.

Conclusions

This theoretical draft is to be understood as a first step towards a pragmatic approach to vulnerability that does not answer the question of children's competences and burdens through the choice of either an agency approach or an approach of children's needs and the resulting vulnerability. Drawing attention to agency necessarily draws attention to vulnerability, as this is not the alternative to agency, but also its potential consequence and should in any case be considered in conjunction with it – this is the claim that has been made plausible here. In terms of content, the application of this approach then shows that, in view of their limited freedom, actions of the *evaluation* type, skilful strategies for applying predetermined rules, are the most favourable for children and are most likely to protect them from vulnerability. On the other hand, fitting into rules as seamlessly as possible (*iteration*) and attempting to enforce one's own rules (*imagination*) must be viewed more critically.

Other distinctions between types of agency might now need to be defined and examined for their conjunction with vulnerability. Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) definition of types of agency has not been designed with the constellations of action

in which children find themselves in mind and their approach does not take them sufficiently into account. This shortcoming is conspicuous when they write about *imagination*. Emirbayer and Mische write that this form is primarily chosen by individuals in favoured positions and mention the 'broker' to characterise this position (1998: 1007), a person who has the privilege of being familiar with different sets of rules in different social worlds. Of course, this is only true for adults. In the case of children, however, agency of the type of imagination can arise from pure despair about the situation they find themselves in and not from a favourable position. Because liberation from the situation is so urgent, they are prepared to take risks; everything that may come seems better to them and at least no worse than what they have. In an earlier project, I investigated how children acted in biographies characterised by maltreatment and abuse and found that the attempts to free themselves can be surprisingly bold and yet may well create even greater vulnerability (Bühler-Niederberger and Albert, 2023; cf. Thulin et al, 2020). For adults, such situations of almost complete dependency may be rare.

Thus, more and different constellations need to be analysed with regard to and in the interest of a denser pragmatic theory of children's vulnerability. However, I should have succeeded in making it clear that agency is not to be understood as a magic formula that protects children from vulnerability, but as an analytical concept linked to vulnerability: different forms of agency are linked to vulnerability in different ways through the conditions in which children find themselves. For children in transnational families, it can be said that they cannot change much about the situation, but (must) do a lot to make it work. As Áron Telegdi-Csetri and co-authors aptly put it (referring to Lam and Yeoh, 2019: 3099), they are 'similarly and simultaneously powerful and powerless'.

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