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"I THINK, SHE DOES NOT KNOW THIS ANY MORE": CHILD AGENCY NEGOTIATED THROUGH THE DYNAMICS OF FAMILY INTERACTIONS IN GERMANY DURING COVID-19

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Abstract: We examined child agency in terms of prevailing theories of childhood (seeing children as "been", "being", or "becoming") in the context of interviews about COVID-19 experiences. In our study we focused on conversations between the interlocutor (a child or a parent) and additional family members and used a discourse approach for analyzing and interpreting the interactions. In total, 9 families of diverse sociocultural backgrounds (13 parents and 16 children aged 6–15 years) were interviewed about their individual COVID-19 experience in Germany. Irrespective of age, children were able to describe events and experiences during COVID-19 times and were thus aware of the "been". These ranged from enjoying playtime with parents to playgrounds being cordoned off and classmates being ill. Interview interactions underscored a dynamic of children's agency that alternated between active involvement in their own and the parent's interview and reactively referring questions to a parent or letting the parent take control of the interview situation. Neither parents' views of children nor children's own behavior could be consistently assigned to the category of "being" or "becoming". Rather, our study highlighted children's agency along a being–becoming continuum through an interactive transformational process in terms of interdependent agency between children and parents in a particular context. This process of negotiated agency should be explored further in future studies with children and parents.

Keywords: children, adults, agency, being, becoming, interaction

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The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected families, particularly through its home-schooling requirement and lockdowns (Luttik et al., 2020; Weeland et al., 2021). Precautionary measures meant that families spent more time with each other at home; emphasis shifted to the nuclear family as it became temporarily difficult to meet with friends, schoolmates, colleagues, and relatives in the wider family. Interactions between family members thus took on a new significance. Children and parents reported spending more quality time together (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2023; Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2024; Canzi et al., 2021; Evans et al., 2020) but also commented on tensions arising within the family (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2024; Cassinat et al., 2021; Evans et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2021).

Children as Having Been, Being, and Becoming

Relationships in families have been studied from various perspectives — often from that of parents, whose interpretation of their children's experiences largely depends on their image of their children, and takes in to account the children's need for protection or mitigation of harm (Barenbaum et al., 2004) and notions of independence and competence (Kjørholt, 2004). This view of children as social actors (James & Prout, 2003) gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s in childhood studies and was further boosted through a rights-based approach laid out in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Hart, 2023; Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014). The structural–functionalist views of Durkheim and Parsons had focused on children being moulded to function and fit into the family and society through a socialization process (Moran-Ellis, 2013), a view closely linked to seeing children as "becomings", highlighting their deficiencies in comparison to the adults they will eventually become. The emerging alternative view that sees children as "beings" — agents in their own right — with a focus on their abilities and strengths, challenged previously held views (Nicholson et al., 2015). The terms "beings" and "becomings" were coined by Qvortrup (1985). Yet some scholars bridged this divide by considering "beings" (with its focus on the present) and "becomings" (with its focus on the future) as complementary aspects of childhood (Uprichard, 2008). A third perspective in studying childhood and conducting research with children is that of the lived experiences of the "been" — a focus on the past (Cross, 2011; Hanson, 2017). We will return to this debate after presenting our own research findings.

Evolving Through Interaction: The Dialectical Nature of Relationships

Agency needs to be understood within a given context, with specific relations and interactions (Esser et al., 2016). Abebe (2019) understood childhood as a relational process: he described children as being defined in relation to their families and communities, and influenced by family structures such as the parental roles as well as the family's economic and cultural circumstances. Within this process, children's agency appears as a performative act, which is continuously renegotiated in practices and interactions between adults and children. Spyrou's study on children's voices in research (2016) supports this view of children's agency and highlights the continuous production of agency as well as the constant renegotiation of power relations.

It is thus not only children who evolve; adults — in particular, their roles and needs as parents — are also shaped by their relationships with their children (Abebe, 2019; Palkovitz et al., 2003). Kuczynski, in collaboration with colleagues, developed a social relational theory which "places equal emphasis on the perspectives and actions of children as well as those of parents" (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015, p. 11), stressing the dialectical and bidirectional process of these relationships, despite the asymmetry in power. The relationship between parents and children is formed through numerous interactions over time (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1987).

Discourse Analysis

Interactions are based on verbal and nonverbal communication. How language is used is crucial for interpreting an interaction. Discourse analysis in all its variations sees language and discourse as "constructing social life" (Gill, 2000, p. 172) as shown through the "intersubjective organization of talk" (Edwards, 1993, p. 211). A discourse approach thus critically reflects on text and context (Lupton, 1992), and the analysis takes into account language considerations in conversations (Alldred & Burman, 2005) or in written texts such as newspaper articles (Lupton, 1992). Analyzing how statements are made and how people take turns in a conversation falls into the subcategory of conversational analysis (Wooffitt, 2005) and mostly has the interviewer act as an observer (Wei, 2002). Since each conversation or interview happens between people in a particular context, the intersubjective process, the perception of the situation, and awareness of who is present are likely to have a bearing on the interviewee (Alldred & Burman, 2005). In the present article we draw on this understanding of a discursive approach to conversations with children in the context of power relations and empowerment (Alldred & Burman, 2005) in negotiating agency, and with a focus on conversations between family members within the interview situation.

Method

This article is based on qualitative research in the form of in-depth interviews with families from diverse cultural backgrounds in Germany. The aim of the study was to explore the experiences parents and children had had of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing precautionary measures. The study was approved by the Ethics Commission of the Medical Faculty, University of Heidelberg (S-250/2022).

Positionality Statement

The first and second authors conducted the interviews. We are both female and have an academic background in social anthropology. The first author is a middle-aged German with a PhD in public/global health; she has worked within and outside of Europe and is married to a non-German. Previous work as a global advisor exposed her to different cultural settings so that interviewing people of diverse ages and backgrounds felt comfortable.

The second author is also German and grew up in a family with a non-migratory background. Being in her twenties, she was younger than the parents she interviewed but closer in age to the

adolescent children. She holds a master's degree, and has spent time outside Europe for data collection, familiarizing herself with different cultural settings.

In order to help the children feel more comfortable with an interviewer they did not know, we gave children and their parent(s) the option for the parents to be present in the interview situation; we asked the children to imagine the interviewer as an aunt who lived far away, could not visit them during COVID-19, and was curious about the past three years of their life. We also gave children and adolescents the option to draw their COVID-19 experience (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2023), and demonstrated to all interviewees (parents and children) how to pause the recorder if they did not want their answer or reaction recorded.

Sampling and Data Collection

Families were eligible for this study if they had at least one child aged 6 to 17, and had lived in Germany throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to hear from groups hitherto underrepresented in research (Etti et al., 2021) that had been exposed to and affected by COVID-19 (Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2021), we primarily focused on migrant families from diverse socioeconomic and sociocultural backgrounds.

Contact with participants was established through research colleagues and their personal networks: colleagues or acquaintances of colleagues informed potential interview candidates about the study and asked if they could share contact details with us. The first two authors then contacted a family member, usually the mother, who, if willing to participate, facilitated recruitment of other family members. All potential interviewees were informed about the study and those who were willing to participate provided voluntary written consent. In the case of children and adolescents, personal voluntary written assent was countersigned by a parent. Age-appropriate language was used in the information sheet and consent forms for children and adolescents.

Between May and September 2022, the first two authors, both with a background in qualitative methods, interviewed participants face-to-face, usually at the family home, and otherwise in a location of the family's choosing. Parents were asked how their own lives and their family life had changed from 2019 (before COVID-19) and through the COVID-19 years, and how their children had coped with the changes. Children were asked about their daily routines before and during the COVID-19 pandemic and were probed on their school and leisure time experiences, friendships, and family relationships. While participants were interviewed one-on-one and not as a group, children and parents had the choice of a parent being present when a child was being interviewed (Spratling et al., 2012). In some families, the children were also present during the interview with the mother or father. While this led in one instance to the child producing a narrative similar to the parent's, the child's presence as such did not seem to alter the interview with the parent nor unsettle the child. This arrangement provided the opportunity to witness dialogues and interactions between family members and to use participant observation as an additional qualitative research method (Busetto et al., 2020). Based on interviewees' preferences, interviews were conducted in German or English; Arabic translation was provided for the parents of a West Asian family. The audio-

recorded interviews, ranging from 16 to 69 minutes, were transcribed verbatim, and quality-checked against the audio recording by the first author. English translations of interview excerpts in German were translated in part by the authors directly; other parts were translated by the DeepL online translation service, then refined for clarity by the authors. For this article, we did not use interviews where Arabic was the main language.

Analysis

In order to learn from each interview, the first two authors shared their interview experience, the content of the interview, and any observations from the interview with the wider research team (McMahon & Winch, 2018). For analyzing the transcripts, we employed discourse analysis, a method that studies language in the context in which it occurs (Edwards, 1993). This approach is situated in the constructivist field of qualitative research. We orientated ourselves using Alldred and Burman's (2005) recommended 12 analytic stages (p. 187), from freely associating on the furnished transcript, identifying subjects and objects and their relationships and positionality, to discussing values, relations, and authority. In weekly team meetings, we read aloud with assigned roles all transcripts containing interactions between the interviewee and other family members present during the interview. After freely associating about the conversations, we analyzed the language employed, with particular attention to the use of subjects, objects, and their interrelationships; the positionality of the speakers (telling the parent off or being told off); ways of directly addressing other family members in the conversation (e.g., "Mom", "Say something", "Hey"); patterns of interaction; and expressions of being and becoming. We visualized the analysis in a matrix, which we discussed and further refined as a team.

Following the analysis steps recommended by Alldred and Burman (2005) brought out nuances and interaction dynamics in the conversations. Discussing these as a team ensured that our interpretation was enriched by the perspectives of all team members.

In this present article, we focus on interview interactions between the interlocutor and other family members present. Children's experiences of proximity and distance during COVID-19 expressed through interviews and drawings have already been published (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2023).

Results

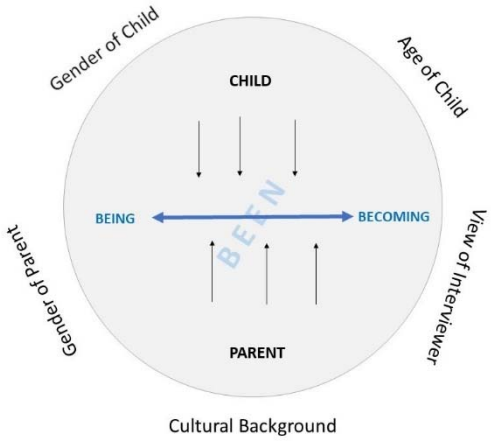
Overall, 29 in-depth interviews were conducted with members of nine families — two with no migration background, and seven with at least one migrating parent from Western Europe (n = 4), Eastern Europe (n = 1), West Asia (n = 2), East Asia (n = 1), and West Africa (n = 1). For this article, we base our analysis on excerpts from six interviews, and use I for interviewer, R for respondent/interlocutor, M for mother, F for father, D for daughter, S for son, and B for brother. Other transcription conventions used were based on Jefferson (2004).

Parents' views of their children emerged in the interview setting. While the main interaction in the interview was intended to take place between interviewer and respondent, in about half of the interviews with children or parents, other family members were present and got involved in the conversation to differing degrees. Differences could be observed in the engagement of the parent and whether parental involvement happened unsolicited or was requested by the child.

The Push and Pull of Being and Becoming

Parents' prevailing image of the child ranged from seeing the child as not capable of remembering the past (the "been"), or not fully understanding the width and breadth of the question (i.e., viewing the child as "becoming"), to having confidence in the child's ability to answer questions (i.e., viewing the child in terms of agency and "being"). As we will show through interview excerpts, prevailing views were not static. The degree of parental involvement in the interview may have been influenced by static factors such as the gender and age of the child, the gender of the parent, the cultural background, and the way the interviewer was perceived; nevertheless, the interactions between children and parents dynamically shifted and negotiated positions along the continuum between "becoming" and "being" (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Negotiating Agency Through Child–Parent Interaction*



The "been" — the experience during COVID-19 — was the subject matter. Pushing and pulling between parents and children led to changing positions on the being–becoming continuum.

First interview[1]

The view that a young child is a "becoming" — not yet capable, or too young, to elaborate on their COVID-19 experience — emerged from an interview with a 6-year-old, whose mother wanted to be present at the interview and often answered for her daughter or commented on her

[1] It should be noted that the numbering here refers to the ordering of the interviews presented in this article, not the chronological sequence in which the interviews were conducted.

daughter's replies. This was a Western European family and the interview was conducted in German.

I: …do you want to tell me ↑anything else about COVID-19, something I have not asked you about? (2.0)
R: Well, I think that we were not at the playground.
M: Yes, we weren't allowed to do that at the beginning, correct.
I: Mm.
M: That, they barred [for a while], yes.
R: [We were not at the playground]
I: Ah, the playground was ↑barred or why were you not allowed to go there?
R: Prr. Because of COVID-19. [voices of little siblings in background]
M: Mhm, that was an idea of the first lockdown, I think. Then they did not do it any more, but then there were tapes everywhere.
I: Aha.
M: So that one could not go there any more, correct.
I: Mm. [voices of little siblings]
M: I think, [whispering] *she does not know this any more*.
R: Barrier tape around it.
M: Barrier tape! Exactly. Correct.

In the interview, the child volunteered information about COVID-19 constraints that were important to her. The mother immediately confirmed the child's response, showed solidarity in using "we", and contrasted "we" and "they" — the people, who cordoned off the playground. Providing the interviewer with more background information may have indicated a feeling that the daughter was not capable of properly explaining the situation. While she opined that her daughter was too young to recollect COVID-19 times, she realized and acknowledged that the daughter did remember details she had not regarded her capable of (Barrier tape! Exactly. Correct). The interview continued with a discussion of using a tablet computer for a remote speech therapy session.

I: Did you do anything ↑else with your ↑tablet?
M: Mm.
R: <W(h)at>
M: With Mrs. (X). Logopedics, can you remember that?
((little sister in background: "mum, what is this?")) (Name of child) was, I just remember, at the time, in logo↑pedics ((little sister: "mum!")) and that
R: Speaking course.
M: Correct, and that could not be done one to one any more ((little sister: "mum, mum")) and that [she then]
R: [Speaking] practice. ((little sister talks in background: "mum, mum, what is that?"))
M: did online.

R: I practised speaking.
M: But that was quite positive, because that was diversion. ((little sister: "mum, water"))
R: To speak more clearly.
I: And how, how was that? Did you see the, the (.) woman on the laptop, ehm, tablet? ((little sister: "look!" – little sister and mother talk in the background))
R: Mm.
I: And what did she ↑do or what did you ↑do?
R: For example, we practised to make a snout. I need a pencil. (2.0)
I: Do you want to have mine?
R: No, I need (.) this one. ((little sister: "Oh, who is waking me up?"))
I: hhh, Mm. ((little sister in background: "look, there she does…" – mother whispers to little sister))
R: To balance the pencil like that.

The mother recalled speech therapy as an activity that had to be conducted online because of COVID-19. She seemed to take over the interview in providing additional information. The daughter translated the term "logopedics" as "speaking course"; she confirmed what the mother had mentioned and demonstrated speech therapy exercises. She seemed neither embarrassed nor offended by the mother's suggestion and played out a therapy session. The mother rather than the daughter evaluated the activity as positive. Throughout the interview, the younger siblings also sought the attention of the mother and their elder sister. Neither mother nor sister responded to them in this part of the interview, yet the attention of all participants in the interview situation was divided. The young age of the interviewed child and the parents' wish to provide a comprehensive account of what had happened during COVID-19 and to air their critique of political decisions that affected families disadvantageously, such as cordoning off playgrounds, may have also played a role.

Second Interview

Children would at times involve their parents in the interview, if they were not sure about the answer. However, they were not always happy about their parents' suggestions as showcased by this 9-year old boy from a Western European family. The interview was conducted in German.

I: Or any other hobby?
R: Do you know something? ((speaks softly to father))
F: Do I know something? Playing Minecraft?
R: Oh no: not computer games! ((speaks in a loud and annoyed voice))
F: I know, you don't want to say it, °but you like doing that.
R: Leave it now (.) hhh oh no, that is not a hobby.
F: You like it though. Lego.
R: Yes.
I: Mm (4.0)

F: Soccer not any more, hey?
R: I play game, ehm things (.) The Harry Potter game I (.) like playing.
F: Boardgames.
R: Yes.
I: And who do you play boardgames with?
R: With my friends. (Name of sister) ↑does not like to play it↑. At times I play it with my Dad and (.) ehm, yes.

Referring the question to the father showed a relationship of trust and also a need to take refuge in the role of the child at this point, underscoring the "becoming" element of being a child. The father repeated the question (perhaps to gain time?) and came up with what he thought the son enjoyed, yet the son did not want to be portrayed as playing computer games and rejected the suggested answer. The father first stuck to his statement and position of power, "I know, you don't want to say it, but you like doing that." Then he provided another alternative (Lego), which the son accepted. Perhaps realizing that he had overstepped his role, the father trod more softly after a pause in the conversation and asked the son for confirmation. The son then took charge of the interview situation again, highlighted board games, and mentioned the father as a playmate. The son thus invited the father to contribute to the interview, yet took charge of the final answer, taking agency in the interview situation. The gender of the parent and the child's age and gender, along with his rejection of the father's answer, may have contributed to the toned-down intervention of the father.

Third Interview

A different strategy was used by the East Asian mother of a 7-year-old. She did not interfere with the interview to the extent of providing or suggesting answers for her daughter, but appealed to the daughter's memory, as she was convinced that the daughter still knew what happened during COVID-19. The interview was conducted in German.

I: And (.) Can you describe your first school↑day? What did you (.) do? Do you remember?
R: I d(h)on't kn(h)ow.
I: You don't know it any more
M: You do know it.
R: Ehm:: a little bit.

While the mother's interference in her young daughter's interview may have also aimed at providing the interviewer with more information, by demonstrating her belief that the child could recall the particular day, the mother seemed to imbue confidence in her daughter.

Fourth Interview

In a West African family, different types of interactions emerged, this time between older siblings, during the children's and the mother's interview. They conveyed images of children's autonomy and the mother's authority. In her interview, the mother portrayed herself as looking after her family and ensuring that her children had all the requirements for taking part in online schooling. She highlighted the technical equipment she provided for her children (an iPhone 12). To what extent this was a school requirement did not become clear. The daughter confirmed the receipt of the phone but contradicted the mother in stating her feelings about online schooling. However, the mother continued the interview as if the interjection had not happened; she was focusing on the interviewer, not her daughter.

I: And how did they do with like ehm: phone or laptop or
R: Yes, they have their phone, they were using iPhone. iPhone 12, iPhone 12.
I: Mm (.)
R: She's using iPhone 12, he's using iPhone 12.
D: Mom, (asking something – not comprehensible).
R: I started to bring her a ↑phone.
D: Yes.
R: So, they are okay with their ↑phone. So, everything they do, they do it online (1.0).
I: And how did you think it went with the teaching? How is the [experience]?
R: [Yes!] It's okay because when they have online course they go inside, we would be in the parlor.
D: It wasn't okay because I don't like it.
R: So, they would be in the room.
I: Mm.
…
I: Masks, tests, all the regulations for Corona like (.) how did you feel about them?
R: I don't understand.
I: Ehm (.) about
S: What was it like about Corona? Like (.) was it like bad?
R: Bad?
S: No, I say -
I: The -
S: °hhh It's like (speaking in local language) -
R: LEAVE THE GAME, TALK TO ME!
S: But it's an online game! If I lose, I lose!
R: Did you hear? This online game!
I: huh-huh, ehm.

In the latter part of this interview, the mother did not comprehend the interviewer's question. The son entered the interview unsolicited to help clarify the issue for the mother, who just repeated

the word “bad”, which had been meant as one option by the son while the mother took it as a value judgement. The son had to revert to their mother tongue to explain the question, thus showing himself to be in a position of power over the mother through his better command of English. The mother then got annoyed at him, told him off through commands (LEAVE THE GAME, TALK TO ME!) and finally vented her frustration to the interviewer (Did you hear? This online game!).

Fifth Interview

In an interview with the daughter of the West African family, the mother interfered to support or protect her daughter. She tried to create space for her daughter by sending the son out of the room, but unsuccessfully; she also supported her daughter’s story.

R: So, like (1.0) I was actually in like, I was still learning German that time when Corona began.
B: W(h)ow!
R: Yeah but after then, then I went to class. They tell me that I could go to class because it’s okay. My Deutsch is a little bit better.
I: Mm.
R: So, yeah, I could go to class.
B: huh-huh-huh
M: ((addressing the oldest brother)) Get out! Get out! Get out!
R: huh-huh-huh
M: huh. Naughty boy!
R: huh-huh-huh
I: huh-huh
R: Yeah.
M: She is not lying, she is saying the truth.
B: I know but-
M: Before her Deutsch is not so good but now it’s okay, yes! (baby crying)
R: Yeah then-
B: <I wasn’t judging you.> ((baby crying))
R: So, I was like still new in the class. ((Baby crying)) So, yeah, I got closer to the other
B: classmates
R: classmates and yes. ((baby crying))
B: Medication.
R: Yeah: because some of my classmates they had Corona like, almost like every day.
I: ↑Hm!
R: Different people get Corona, they (.) send them home to for, for [(1.0)] two weeks quarantine? Yeah.
B: [(speaks in the background)]
I: Hm.
R: And then after they like made the, what is the test called? To prove that they don’t rea- they don’t have Corona.

B: Oh, you mean that thing.
R: Yeah.
B: It has a name.
R: Yeah. What's the name?
B: I don't know?
I: And how did this affect you? Did you also have to quarantine then?
R: No: I didn't get Corona. I don't, we didn't get Corona actually.
M: My children don't have Corona! None of them.
R: <I can't believe>, why we didn't get. I don't know how: but yeah.
I: huh-huh
B: Special effect.

While the brother tried to ridicule the sister by interjecting an ironic "wow" or laughing, the mother's attempt to send the brother out was not followed through, indicating that her position of power had its limits. The brother half apologized to the sister (I wasn't judging you) and finished her sentence for her. Interview interactions between the siblings showed that they rely on each other for information. The mother came back into the situation when the interview focused again on COVID-19. She emphasized that nobody in the family had contracted it, portraying it almost as a sign of good parenting or showing the interviewer that everything was in order, thus re-establishing her position of authority. Throughout the interview, the mother seemed concerned with depicting herself as in charge of family matters and as having complied with COVID-19 regulations. Her interactions with the children showed more lenience towards the son, who annoyed her at times but was listened to, whereas the daughter would at times be ignored. Both children tried to help their mother understand interview questions but also offered their opinions, which the mother, as shown above, ignored if it did not fit her narrative.

Sixth Interview

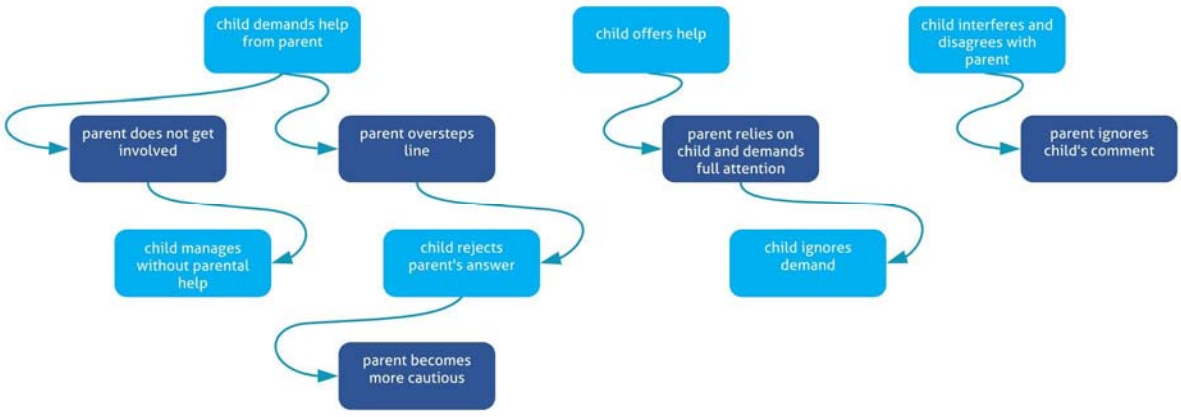
At the far end of the being–becoming spectrum we find a West Asian family, in which the mother did not interfere in the interview with her 8-year-old son at all. The son's close relationship with the mother emerged not only from highlighting playtime with her when he was asked more generally about his activities during COVID-19 but also in demonstrating how they played together by jumping onto each other, describing it as "funny", and in using "we" to mean the mother and himself rather than him and friends. The interview was conducted in German.

I: And what else did you do? You had to spend more time at home during COVID-19, what did you do at home?
R: Ehm (.) mostly, mostly I asked my mum, whether we can play.
I: Yes.
R: But we could only play sometimes, but (.) ↑you should say that now ((speaks in a high-pitched voice with mother, then whispers something to her))
M: huh-huh-huh

R: So, so, sometimes, sometimes my mum(h) startl(h)es (me(h)) ((laughs while he speaks)) and then she jumps on me, huh-huh-huh, and, and then, she says, like "↓say(h), say, say, I am the bes(h)t" ↑That is always so ↑funny, huuh, huuh, huh-huh-huh. That is funny. Okay, that was it, really.
I: Mum gives you a fright sometimes?
R: Sometimes, huh-huh-huh. ↑sisisi, look, she comes sometimes like that, only me. Look. Sometimes, she comes to me. ((demonstrates how mother and son play together)). ↑(Name of child) huh-huh-huh. Oh, oh and then she, like "↑THERE ↓No mercy! Say that I am the best! (.) capiche?"
M: Capiche.
I: huh-huh-huh.
M: huh-huh-huh.
R: ↓Say it.
M: Capiche.
R: End. ↑Ahhh, help ((high-pitched voice))

The son portrayed the mother as playing with him at the same level, demanding that he describe her as "the best". She was depicted as shouting: "No mercy" and as fully engaging with child-level activities. The mother, however, did not follow his request to explain their games. She did not take over to tell his story, nor did she correct the story that her son told about their games, thus granting him autonomy and freedom in the interview situation. She did repeat the word "capiche", following his command and leaving him in charge.

Figure 3. *Children-Initiated Interactions With Parents*



Parent–Child Interactions

We thus see different parental views on children — from perceiving a child as not fully capable of answering the posed question, via having confidence in the child, to not interfering with the interview at all. Yet, independent of the dominant view, the interaction between interviewees could

also change their relationship as shown in Figures 2 and 3. Figure 2 starts with parental instructions. Depending on the child's perception of the situation, these could lead to different responses: complying, challenging the parent, or ignoring the demand altogether. Encouraging a child, on the other hand, seemed to boost the child's confidence in their capabilities.

Some children took the initiative in the interview to either refer questions to the parent and thus buttress parental authority or to help the parent with an interview question that the parent had not fully understood. In some instances, children contradicted a parent if they were not happy with the parent's answer (see Figure 3). Parents' reactions varied from letting the child manage on their own to embarrassing the child with the parental answer and then trying to backpedal and make amends.

The parent ignoring statements by the child or the child ignoring the parent's instructions, the child pushing back and the parent realizing that he had gone too far or the parent misjudging the child's memory revealed a push and pull mechanism in the relationship and a willingness to reconsider one's views. The excerpts also show that parents and children could take on a more active, or more passive, role during interactions (see Figures 2 and 3).

Discussion

In this article we have highlighted social interactions between children and parents to negotiate agency in an interview situation about COVID-19 experiences.

COVID-19 and Family Relationships

The nuclear family played a major role throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly during periods when parents and children were restricted from physically interacting with extrafamilial friends, relatives, and acquaintances due to lockdowns, and school and playground closures. The psychological effects of these restrictions on children have been noted (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2023; Farrell et al., 2023; Idoiaga et al., 2020; Spinelli et al., 2020), yet children and parents also enjoyed closer proximity to and interacting with each other (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2023; Idoiaga et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2023). The centrality of the nuclear family for a child in terms of the child's environment and primary relations was highlighted by Foucault (1981) decades before the COVID-19 pandemic:

> It [the family] organizes itself as the child's immediate environment, tending increasingly to become its basic framework for survival and growth. This leads to an effect of tightening, or at least intensification, of the elements and relations constituting the restricted family (the group of parents and children). (p. 173)

Family Interactions Shift Between Concepts

Theoretical approaches on children's agency as part of the "being" perspective have underlined children's capabilities to act as a dynamic process rather than an inherent quality of children

(Abebe, 2019; Alderson & Yoshida, 2016). Our interview excerpts underscored that children are not just passive recipients of parental care; together with the parents, they shape childhood and show agency (Oswell, 2013).

As we explored the "been" (Cross, 2011; Hanson, 2017) in terms of the time before and during COVID-19, children shared incisive negative experiences such as playgrounds being taped off or classmates being sick with COVID-19 as well as positive experiences such as enjoying made-up games with their mothers. Irrespective of age, they were able to elaborate on these episodes of their past without a parent's help. Other details relating to speech therapy and games they liked playing were prompted or half-prompted by parents and partly taken on board. Some children also acted out how they played with the mother or practiced speech therapy exercises thus sharing more details of a particular situation. Yet, children at times also called for parental guidance and some parents provided support in reconstructing and contextualizing the child's past, and therefore also underscored the concept of "becoming".

In our study, parental views spanned a wide range. At one end were parents who appeared to generally believe in the agency of the child — in the "being"; this expressed itself through not interfering in the child's interview or not even being present, having confidence that the child was capable of answering interview questions. At the other extreme were parents who saw the child as "becoming", and who thus tended to take over the interview and provide information that they thought the child might not know or remember. Other interviewees covered the middle ground. The parent's dominant view of the child in a specific interview situation seemed to be related to some extent to the age and gender of the child, the gender of the parent, how parents wanted to portray their experiences to the interviewer, and perhaps cultural factors. Since we had families with diverse backgrounds, the cultural component was more difficult to pinpoint. Views were not static, however. In the course of the interview, parents often revised their preconceived ideas of their children, realizing that the "becoming" child was a "being" in his or her own right. Children could change from confidently answering questions (being) to enlisting the parent to answer for them (becoming), and from being spoken about (becoming) to getting involved in the interview with a parent (being), thus showing an ability to shift in either direction. The subject matter of the interview — the "been" (the child talking about past experiences) — was thus closely linked to the concepts of "being" (the child handling the interview situation or engaging with the parent as an equal) and "becoming" (needing help from the parent to answer questions). Our study highlighted the flexibility of participants in that both children and adults could change from one position to the other in the course of their interactions. This dialectic and bidirectional approach (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015) through analysis of interactions is based on the Hegelian concept of thesis – antithesis – synthesis. The dialogue excerpts show that "parents and children interpret or construct meanings from each other's behaviors and resist, negotiate, and accommodate each other's perspectives" (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015, p. 11) thus forming a new synthesis out of contradictions (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015).

The Transformational Process of Interdependent Agency

Family interactions do not occur in a vacuum but are part of long-standing intrafamilial relationships characterized by an interdependent asymmetry (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). In our study, it was not always the child who had less power. Some parents kept in the background and did not get involved at all; we also saw exchanges in which the child held sway over the parent, and other cases, in which children pushed back or disagreed with the parent. By doing so, the child established a position that the parent had to react to. Abebe (2019) describes agency as "situated in practices and actions that transform both the immediate and future lives of children. This conceptualization also indicates that agency is negotiated continuously between children and families" (p. 8). It seems beyond doubt that children, irrespective of age, are "social agents and co-constructors of their social worlds" (Brady et al., 2015, p. 173). In their interactions with parents, both children and parents are transformed, much as Paulo Freire (2000) elucidated in the realm of education:

> The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow. (p. 80)

While this state may not yet have been reached in family interactions between the children and parents in our study, the push and pull from children and parents in terms of negotiating agency led to a more fluid use of the "being" and "becoming" concepts, including the freedom of children to call on parental support as part of their agency.

We used discourse analysis in this study to examine the verbal interactions of children and parents (Edwards, 1993; Gill, 2000) that emerged through the presence of additional family members in the interview situation — either because parents or children wanted to be present or because other family members were using the same space. Rather than being treated as an interview side-conversation, these exchanges became a way to examine negotiation for agency (Alldred & Burman, 2005). The expression of a particular view of the parent toward the child and the manifestation of the agency of the child by answering or not answering the question or referring it to the parent was not consistent throughout the interview experience (see Figures 2 and 3); this underscores the process-like nature of establishing and granting agency (Alldred & Burman, 2005) or, for that matter, taking it away.

Limitations

We should bear in mind that interviews are always snapshots, taken at a particular moment in time, and that the presence of the interviewer, and how she was perceived by parents and children, as well as other events happening on that day may have influenced the course of the interview. If the interviewer could have visited the same families a few times, or if families had been filmed without the presence of an interviewer, we would have gained deeper insights into family interactions over a longer period of time. Instead, we were limited to a one-off recorded interview,

and therefore can by no means present an analysis of the entire relationship between parents and children in the participating families.

While we ensured participation of families with a migratory background for the study, the small numbers of diverse cultural backgrounds made statements about culture-related interactions too tentative.

Conclusion

Our study showed that children, irrespective of age, are capable of explaining events that happened some years ago and are thus aware of the "been". Their recollections included positive connotations of COVID-19, such as spending more quality time with parents, as well as negative experiences, such as playgrounds being blocked or classmates being ill.

Interview interactions between children and parents brought to the fore a dynamic of children's agency, which shifted between being actively involved in their own and the parent's interview and taking on a deferential role in referring questions to a parent or letting the parent take over the interview situation. Agency is thus clearly not to be equated with always having to be active: the conscious decision to sit back is also part of a child's or parent's agency. Our study showed that neither parents' views of children nor children's behavior can be consistently ascribed to the realm of "being" or "becoming". Building on Uprichard (2008), we see children's agency as consisting of both "being" and "becoming", and agree with Abebe that "children's lives are better explained by and/and/and than by either/or" (Abebe, 2019, p. 12), thus making the choice dependent on the context, the presence of other people, the subject matter, and the people they interact with. Based on our study, we underline the transformational process for children and parents through "interdependent agency" (Abebe, 2019, p. 12). This concept should be explored further and may guide research in diverse fields that highlight children's agency, such as climate action, education, and political science.

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