Children's Agency

Élodie Razy and Mélanie Vivier

INTRODUCTION

The notion of agency has been widely debated within the human and social sciences and continues to be so. Tracing its genealogy would require an exploration of long and complex developments. For the purposes of this glossary, some milestones and key authors will be referred to.

Depending on the discipline, the language, the author and the period, the notion of agency has given rise to a number of other terms considered as synonymous, simply closely related or distinct. Intention, intentionality, volition tend to be linked to the subject, and thus to thinking, and to the assumption of an eventual implementation. Ability to act is rather linked to the concrete commitment of agents.

But what about the notion of children's agency? What controversies characterise the debates surrounding its use? This chapter examines the meaning of this notion when considering the provision of food to children in a migratory situation. These questions are addressed through the

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literature and a case study conducted in French-speaking Belgium with children living with their families in a reception centre for asylum-seekers and attending a public school in the area. The daily lunchbox, a seemingly banal object, is the common thread of this chapter. Indeed, this is an essential item in school socialisation in Belgium, both as a container and by its very content, which particularly emphasises and challenges social relationships as well as embodies various norms and values.

Contextualising the Notion of Agency

The understanding of the notion of agency within the social sciences stems from several sociological models, including the actor-oriented approach (Long 2001) and the actor-oriented rational choice theory (Boudon 2004). Starting from a "[…] provisional definition of the concept: Agency refers to the socioculturally mediated capacity to act", Ahearn (2001: 112) investigates the contributions of linguistic anthropology after proposing a critical reading of certain uses of the notion of agency. This notion can be conceived as synonymous with "free will" and "resistance" or, on the contrary, its impossibility can be claimed. In contrast to this, Ahearn draws on practice theory with Giddens, Bourdieu and De Certeau. For Giddens, "[…] people's actions are shaped (in both constraining and enabling ways) by the very social structures that those actions then serve to reinforce or reconfigure" (ibid.: 117). This is what Bourdieu describes using the notion of habitus and disposition: "Of the infinite thoughts, meanings, and practices that the habitus can produce at any given historical moment, there is only a minimal probability that any will ever be thought or practiced because individuals are predisposed to think and act in a manner that reproduces the existing system of inequalities" (ibid.: 118). Although de Certeau proposes to focus on the "microprocesses of resistance" at the very heart of everyday life, according to Ahearn, this would not allow for an understanding of social change (ibid.: 119).

As we have just seen, the issue mainly arises in relation to adult humans. The paradigm shift in this area, which began in the 1980s and has been addressed by various philosophers (Balibar and Laugier 2004), opens up other avenues for moving away from the often sterile opposition between agency and structure. Contributions from Descola (2005) on ontologies and the notion of "existing"—including non-humans—on the one hand, and the actor-network theory (ANT), the notion of "actant"—including objects and organisations—, as well as that of "symmetrical anthropology" from Latour (2005), on the other hand, have provided a renewed perspective. When applied to animals, it consists in "[…] conceiving agentivity: no longer as a modality of the action of a species, of an ecosystem, of a human society—by virtue of behaviours framed and driven by natural (or cultural) regularities, by habitus and instincts, it is instead conceptualised as deriving from modes of existence, of presence and of enunciation (expression) that are eminently contextual and interactional" (Manceron 2016: 289, our translation). As with (art or ritual) objects, the focus is placed on the construction of their acting power (Gell 1998), by implicitly invoking a strand of cognitive psychology asserting that "[…] human beings possess an innate capacity to understand the intentionalities of other minds. A capacity that rapidly becomes more and more sophisticated as the child grows" (Bloch 2005, our translation).

Why do these introductory detours shed light on the topic of this chapter? The focus on animals, objects, and non-humans in general combined with some of the suggested orientations, allows us to consider all children engaged in situated relational settings as capable of exercising forms of agency. This includes cases below or beyond language acquisition, with no lower age limit, as well as the absence of proficiency in the official language of their host country for migrant children. While most of the literature on agency has long been concerned exclusively with adults, its gradual extension to children, in the frame of the paradigm shift mentioned above, together with the evolution of the place and status of children within society and in the humanities and social sciences, has changed the situation. How has the notion of children's agency been shaped, and how is it designed for children in migration situations?

Milestones for a Better Understanding of Children's Agency

Authors using the notion of agency draw on a range of references including those mentioned above and a variety of theoretical strands exist (Esser et al. 2016). However, it is necessary to better understand the specificities of children's agency in the specialised literature in order to better grasp its challenges in the context of food.

Bringing Some Definitions into Perspective

Since the anthropologist Hardman's (1973) call for children to be studied "in their own right" to their definition as "actual beings" (James and Prout 1990), agency has asserted itself within the framework of childhood studies—following its development in relation to adults, anchored in the theory of the actor. Childhood studies emerged for several reasons, including the mobilisation of Ariès's foundational historical work on childhood, the recognition of the coexistence of multiple ways of thinking and living childhoods in the West, and the breaking away from analytical models emphasising structure and biology. Context played a crucial role with a renewed focus on childhood and its definition as a moderne, social problem—the solution to which was to be embodied in the International Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. This long-standing commitment to engage politically on behalf of the "vulnerable" children is thus expressed in the improvement of their condition, which is at the intersection of social development (focusing on empowerment, another side of agency), interventions and psychology (Razy 2019). At the heart of this new line of research, the concept is seen as a way of deconstructing the structural power relationships in which children are trapped. At the same time, children's agency has given raise to questions and criticisms, as by Esser et al.'s (2016) history of it recalls, before proposing to "reconceptualise" agency.

There are several coexisting perspectives on children's agency, all of which are based on the recognition of children as social actors. Thus, the literature uses many terms to describe this agency, which helps to clarify the concept or to highlight its contextual nature (see Abebe 2019 for further examples). Honwana (2005), drawing on De Certeau and Giddens, develops the notion of "tactical agency" for child soldiers: "By 'tactical agency', I mean a specific type of agency that is devised to cope with the concrete, immediate conditions of their lives to maximise the circumstances created by their military and violent environment". Prompting a shift beyond the agency/structure dichotomy, the supposed universality of the notion and the linear view of agency acquisition derived from the child development theories, Abebe (2019) suggests recognising that agency "… has multiple and sometimes contradictory dimensions" (ibid.: 6). This leads to considering agency as a continuum and giving primacy to the notion of "interdependent agency", which brings back the relational (especially intergenerational) and contextual (material, political, economic, cultural, etc.) dimensions to childhood studies. This shift enables moving out of the impasse of previous definitions and typologies (ibid.: 8–11).

Children's Agency: A Controversial Issue?

The conditions of possibility and the nature or degree of agency are seldom explicitly addressed in the literature, particularly with regard to the youngest children (etic level). In the same vein, the "local cultures of agency" (Razy 2019) are given little consideration (emic level). Nevertheless, the most important issues lie at the intersection and possible overlap or discrepancy between the emic and etic categories of agency. However, the controversy relates to the Western origin and ideological anchoring of agency (Abebe 2019). Despite the interest of the empirical testing of the notion, for Lancy (2012), it is notably "ethnocentric", "classist", "hegemonic", and even counterproductive. Other authors have also drawn attention to some of the precautions that need to be taken to avoid the perverse effects of its use (James 2007; Spyrou 2011).

Moving between the idea of a child's omnipotence stemming from a romantic background or from the modern conception of the (responsible) individual, and its counterpart represented by determinism—as a result of the "clandestine persuasion of an implicit pedagogy" (Bourdieu 1980: 117, our translation) that leaves no room for agency—, the case of migrant children exemplifies the tensions at play.

Migrant Children: Less or More Agency?

According to the representations of childhood that originate in the modern era and are conveyed by national and international organisations and institutions (Suremain and Bonnet 2014), migrant children are considered from the outset as being in a so-called vulnerable situation and therefore as being less capable of exercising their agency. As they do not fit into the prescriptive framework of a "good childhood", their supposed status as victims would deprive them of this agency, which is refuted by numerous works (Rodet and Razy 2016). Without denying the reality of the dangers to which they are often exposed to, this position inflicts a double violence on them: both as children and as migrants. For these reasons, their status as victims lacking agency cannot be taken for granted. It is necessary to understand as closely as possible the weight of institutions and the place occupied by children in order to determine what we call here their "food agency" in the different contexts of their daily lives and at the heart of the relationships they have with their peers and adults (family and institutions).

CHILDREN'S FOOD AGENCY

What does eating mean for a child living with his/her family in a centre for asylum-seekers and attending school? To what extent and how can he/she express his/her agency in a new world full of norms and restrictions? It is necessary to understand how different research trends and disciplines consider the place and role of the child in food issues before looking at the specific case of children in migration situations to answer these questions. While considering all points of view, we will deliberately focus on the children's perspectives (Mathiot 2015; Brembeck et al. 2013) to better grasp how they deal with other children and adults in new, and sometimes contrasting environments, when it comes to food in their daily lives.

Literature About Food and Children's Agency

Various disciplines and research trends have focused on children's diets. Let us first point out some of these trends. Social science research is primarily devoted to health issues: malnutrition in the Global South (Dettwyler 1994) and obesity in the Global North (Diasio 2010), even though this public health problem seems to be progressively globalised with the food transition. Nutrition thus occupies a central position in research and in the moralising and normative enterprise, particularly with regard to vulnerable families (Dryden et al. 2009, Skuland 2019), including migrant mothers (Brembeck et al. 2013). They are often suspected of not feeding their children well, whereas this is a parenting function regarded as essential. This emphasis on "healthy food" is particularly present in school systems where this responsibility is shifted to parents who must provide a lunchbox (Willemsen et al. 2023), as in the United Kingdom (Dryden et al. 2009), and is carried out by public institutions in school systems providing collective catering to children (Comoretto 2017). However, children's room for manoeuvre within this institutional complex is hardly mentioned (Willemsen et al. 2023), except to some extent in "dinette games" (Hubert 1994; Delalande 2001) and sharing: in Norway, the lunchbox "[...] is a special form of commensality, which may provoke feelings of sympathy and solidarity between the children for instance through practices of sharing food between classmates, but also pose the risks making one's social background visible to everyone, which may result in social exclusion" (Skuland, 2019, p. 141). The other much-studied dimension concerns the links between food and identity (Suremain and Razy 2012), the role of which has been shown from pregnancy or birth in various societies with two non-exclusive tendencies: on the one hand, making the child a member of his or her society through the food consumed itself, but also through specific relational modes, such as sharing, i.e. learning to give and receive through the circulation of food, tasting what is unfamiliar, etc., on the other hand, the construction of childhood as a category and of children as a social group through food (Gojard 2000): children's food practices and children's food.

The shifts in the role and position of children within society, as well as in the social sciences, have gradually led to the identification and consideration of children's food agency in Western societies. This development is evidenced by: "Increasing levels of fragmentation and individualisation, in terms of both the provision of food and where and how children's meals are consumed, are accentuating food choices and involving children in new kinds of identity formation" in a certain tension with the group (James et al. 2009: 4–5). For more than a decade, research has been unfolding around negotiations with parents, power relations between children and adults, and the influence of peers, including the analysis of marketing and media. More generally, scholars show the "increasing emphasis in Western countries on neoliberal discourses, constructing children as consumers and autonomous participants with the right to influence social matters" even in childhood institutions (James et al. 2009: 4–5). The child is thus endowed with the food agency of a consumer-citizen, for him/herself, but above all to influence the choices of his/her parents. Furthermore, the child is also being presented as having full "theoretical" knowledge about healthy food.

While the literature is relevant to the agency of children in migrant situations, the specificities of their cases are less studied. However, some authors mention the driving role of food in the social change that takes place within the family and in creating their sense of belonging. This has been observed, for example, among the children of former Bosnian and Iraqi refugees in Sweden (Brembeck 2009) among the children of migrants from Africa (Razy 2006). In both case studies, the mothers' concern is to cook something that their children will eat and therefore that they say they like. The latter are chosen between the dishes of their country of origin and those of the country in which they live. Indeed, "[…] synchronizing tastes is a concrete way of materializing their unity as a family in new circumstances" (Brembeck 2009: 139). However, the consumption of "junk food" from a "childish and decidedly modern fast-foodscape" or McDonald's, items from a "Swedish foodscape" are part of the integration process and a resistance to ethnic assignments (Brembeck 2009: 142–144). In the school setting, when there is a collective catering service, the canteen is also a place for negotiations (Tichit 2020). Finally, for some, chidren's food agency is expressed in their relationship with the Ramadan fast and the consumption of pork, as Zotian (2012) shows in the south of France.

In order to better grasp children's daily food experience, we propose to start from the notion of "food agency" as any act by which the child composes, plays with or rejects the rules, norms or values embodied by adults and/or the school system and/or peers producing a more or less creative food alternative in a specific context (e.g. the playground or the classroom, the family room or the dining hall of the asylum-seekers' center), a given situation and relations. We will try to specify the nature, the form (verbal, non-verbal) and the degree of agency. Where and how is the children's food agency performed?

Between the Reception Centre, the School and the Family

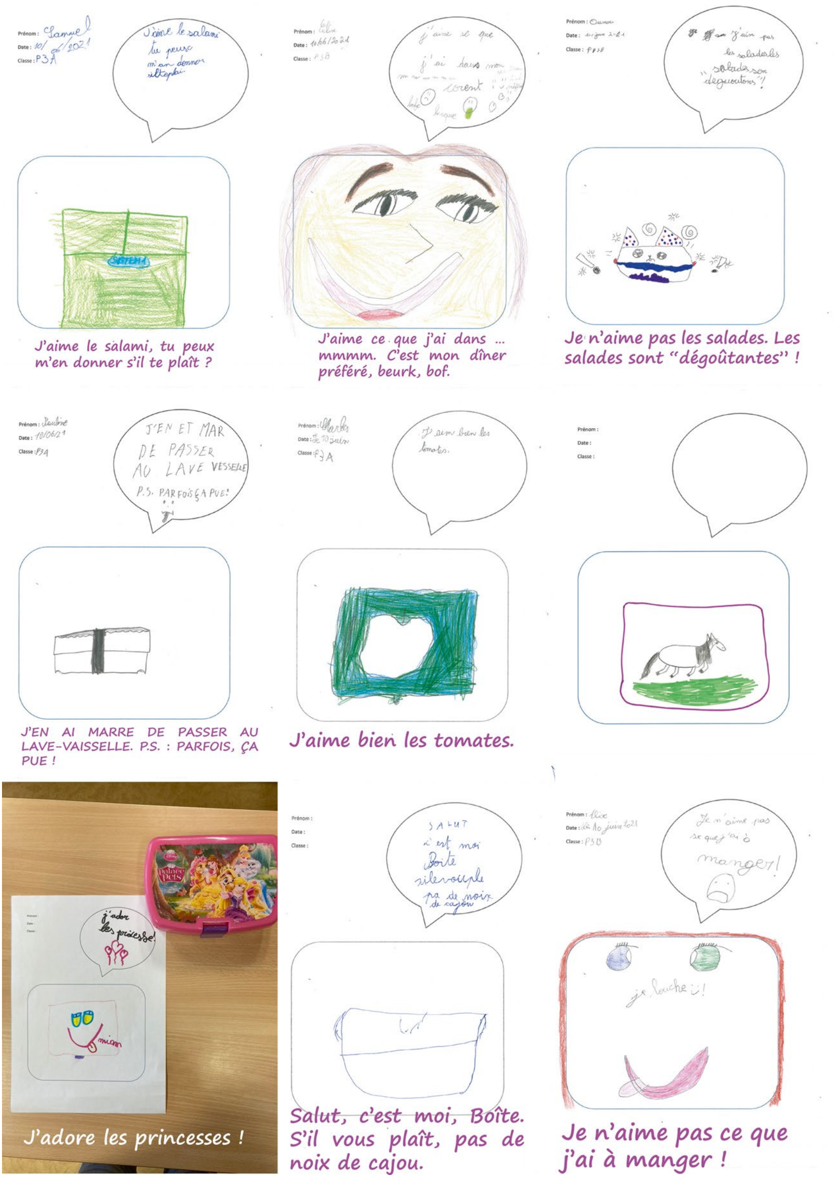
Children from asylum-seeking families circulate between different institutions; unlike other children, a third institution, the reception centre, with its own rules, norms and values, is added to family and school. It is not easy to understand how the different foodscapes and the children's foodscapes that they gradually incorporate intersect and sometimes contradict each other. Following an object that circulates between all these institutions, namely the school lunchbox, makes it possible to tackle the complex processes at work and the way in which children perform their food agency with a threefold constraint.

Let us follow the lunchboxes that move (1) between the three spaces (two institutions: the reception centre and the school) and the children's private and family space (the room where they live with their family), (2) within "smooth spaces", which are "[…] forgotten spaces or hideaways not regulated by adults where children can learn about themselves more on their own terms" (Brembeck 2009: 132–133), but also (3) within spaces-times regulated by adults.

A first level of analysis of the children's point of view on their lunchboxes can arise from workshops. Researchers in the United Kingdom asked children aged 9–11 to draw their "'dream' and 'nigthmare' lunchboxes". This elicitation revealed the central role of gender and age in "identity work" through food and the motivations guiding their choices: "personal preference; the notion of 'healthy eating'; and the demonstration of 'informed choice-making'" (Dryden et al. 2009: 83–89). One of the anthropology workshops we conducted with the children as part of the Food2Gather project aimed to "talk through" their lunchboxes to better understand their current concerns and investigate the different dimensions of food (see "L'alimenpédie enfantique") (Fig. 1).

The provision of food to children housed in the reception centre studied refers to different standards (provision, food, preparation, consumption, frequency, etc.), which intersect with a local food model, an institutional food model—informed by the former, by the ideology of healthy food and by economic constraints—and a food model linked to the country or region of origin, which varies according to the diversity of the populations housed. In all three models, feeding children "well" is an ideal, but in an asylum seeking situation, food can rapidly become a metric of "good parenting". Other parents, as well as teachers or social workers from the school, reception centre or other services have opinions about how asylum-seekers feed their children. However, they most often are unaware of the fact that parents do not have all the economic, social, symbolic or even practical resources to fulfil this essential parenting function. Indeed, dependent on a canteen system and only occasionally able to cook using a small fraction of the food they buy with their small allowance, they cope day by day (Figs. 2, and 3-7).

> I stayed in Mariama and her children's room the entire evening. Before leaving the reception centre around 9pm, Mariama insists on giving me a shopping bag filled with juice and cakes that the children do not eat. At first I refuse out of politness, knowing that I will have difficulty eating it all at home and that these products are provided by the reception centre. She insists: "I've already given some away, but I have plenty left, it's better than throwing it away, Mélanie! The children won't eat them, I swear." She takes a chocolate cake in her hand and tells me: "Before, Fatima (age 6) loved them, but now she doesn't want them anymore. Who am I going to give it to? Nobody here wants them, everyone already has them!" Convinced, I finally accepted the bag. (Field notes, Mélanie Vivier)


SYSTEMA
J'EN ET MAR DE PASSER AU LAVE VESSELLE P.S. PARFOIS ÇA PUE!
j'ador les prinsesse!
miam
SALUT c'est moi Boite silevouple pa de noix de cajou
je louche
Je n'aime pas se que j'ai à manger!

J'aime le salami, tu peux m'en donner s'il te plaît ?

J'aime ce que j'ai dans … mmmm. C'est mon dîner préféré, beurk, bof.

Je n'aime pas les salades. Les salades sont "dégoûtantes" !

J'EN AI MARRE DE PASSER AU LAVE-VAISSELLE. P.S. : PARFOIS, ÇA PUE !

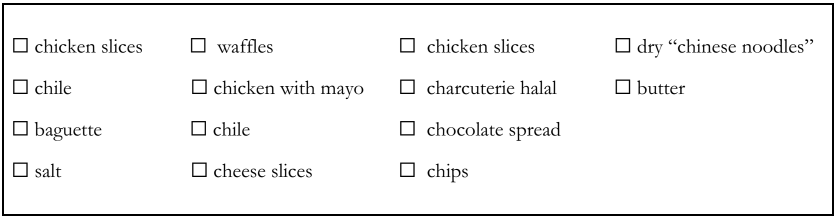
J'aime bien les tomates.

J'adore les princesses !

Salut, c'est moi, Boîte. S'il vous plaît, pas de noix de cajou.

Je n'aime pas ce que j'ai à manger !

Fig. 1 "If my lunchbox could talk…". Pictures published in "L'alimenpédie enfantique"…". (*Photos courtesy of Élodie Razy and Mélanie Vivier*)



☐ chicken slices
☐ chile
☐ baguette
☐ salt
☐ waffles
☐ chicken with mayo
☐ chile
☐ cheese slices
☐ chicken slices
☐ charcuterie halal
☐ chocolate spread
☐ chips
☐ dry "chinese noodles"
☐ butter

Fig. 2 Reception Centre "shopping list" designed from fieldwork information: getting or not getting food (*Figure courtesy of Élodie Razy and Mélanie Vivier*)

> When they arrive at the centre, both parents and children find it difficult to adapt to the lunchbox system. The parents don't know what to put in it, the children don't know what to take and when to eat it at school. Children also don't like the ingredients offered at breakfast that are used to prepare the lunchboxes. The food they prefer at first is the chocolate spread. Parents then usually make sandwiches with chocolate to ensure that the children eat at school. However, the children eventually get tired of what they call the "chocolate of the centre" (which they say is not as good as "Nutella", for example) and often refuse to eat at school. As they adapt to the centre's food system, the contents of the children's lunchboxes change; the chocolate sandwiches are replaced or supplemented by snacks from the families' countries/regions of origin, sometimes made by the families themselves (see Fig. 8-9) with other ingredients from the canteen (such as cheese, which they melt, contrary to what is usually done in the centre) or with food from outside the centre's canteen (food from the supermarket bought by the parentsthemselves or dry food from the centre's cafeteria, such as crisps or "Chinese noodles"). The agency of the mothers, who gain expertise in preparing the lunchbox, is a way of reassuring themselves about their children's consumption when they are at school, outside their supervision (Field notes, Mélanie Vivier).

Maryama, the mother of one of the children, explained how she has regained control, and thus agency, over her children's diet since leaving the centre and living alone in a flat with her children.

As the literature points out, the transmission of norms, rules and values through food assumes a central place in the parent-child relationship; indeed, food is often the primary domain of restored intergenerational continuity and parents' agency in an everyday life shaped by a structural discontinuity caused by migration. At the same time, the

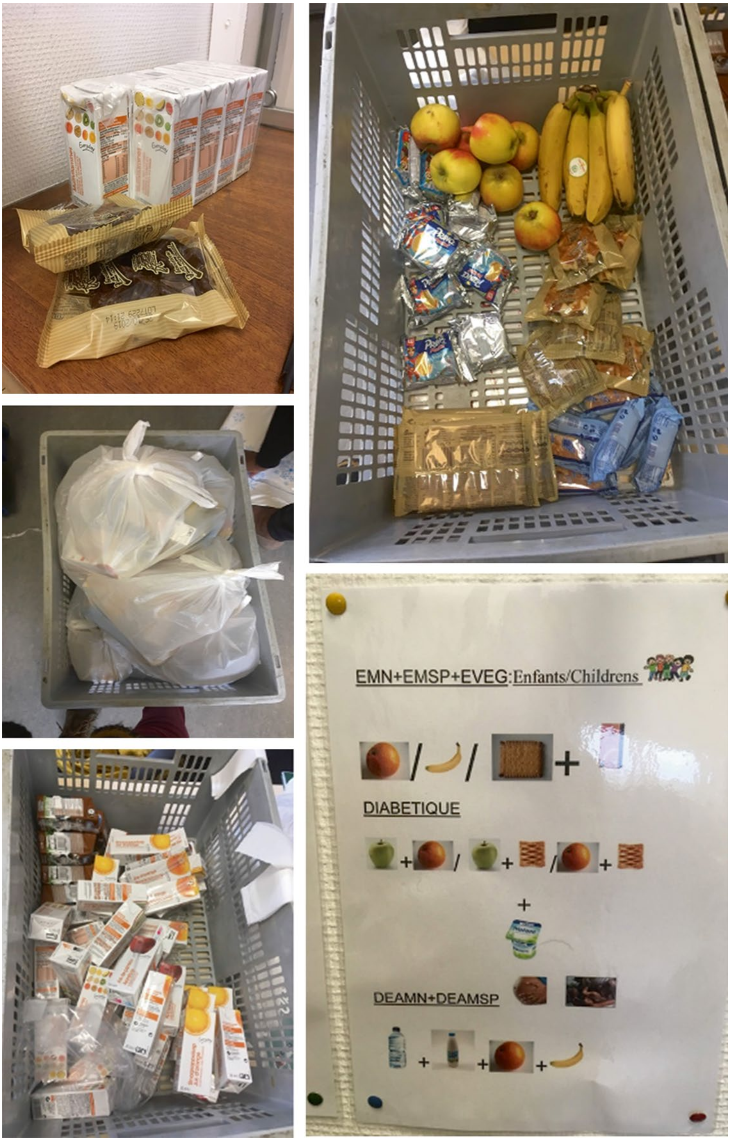

EMN+EMSP+EVEG:Enfants/Childrens
DIABETIQUE
DEAMN+DEAMSP

Fig. 3-7 Examples of snacks provided by the centre (*Photos courtesy of Mélanie Vivier*)

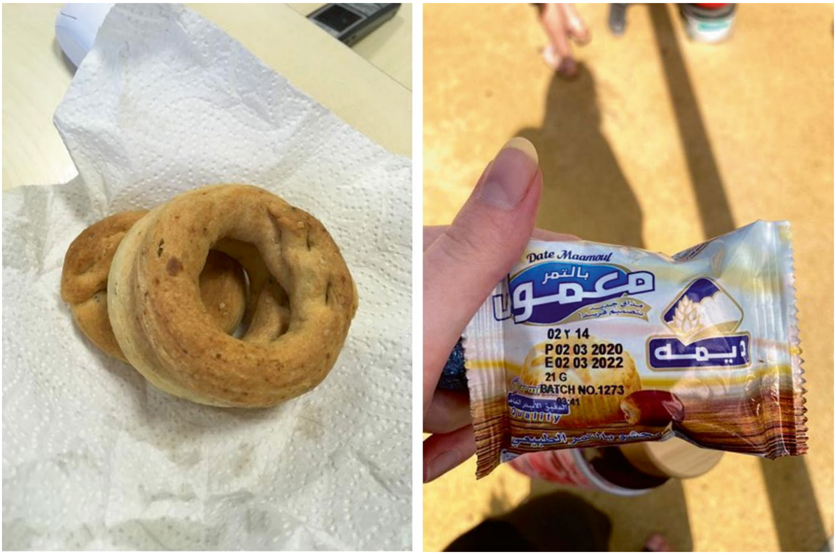


Fig. 8-9 Homemade (left) and imported (right) snack. (*Photos courtesy of Mélanie Vivier*)

children are the medium for food innovations that the mothers adapt according to the conditions of the reception centre: transforming a recipe from the country of origin, "re-cooking" the dishes from the canteen or proposing a "Belgian" dish. Concerning the lunchbox (snack and lunch), there are not so many possibilities: sandwiches (bread, butter, chicken breast/turkey slices, etc. received in the morning) but they are the subject of modest and almost non-verbal negotiations—with no guarantee of success for the children—or for the mothers' strategies.

> Fatou says that her children do not like what they eat at the centre, that she has to force them, to find little strategies. When they come back from school, Moussa (age 6–8) is always hungry, because he doesn't eat at school: "At home, we are used to eating when we are hungry. If children are hungry at home, we give them food. Here, Moussa doesn't eat much, because he doesn't like it, and after school, he has to wait until 6 pm to eat and then nothing, it's very difficult for him" (Excerpt from an interview with Fatou, Moussa's mother, translated by a resident of the centre, Mélanie Vivier).

Children's food agency is thus being expressed in different contexts, according to different modes and degrees, at the crossroads of the value judgements sometimes heard at school about their "poor diet", the weariness of children who receive the same sandwich or the same snack from the reception centre every day, and their mothers who try to encourage their children to eat at school by trying to offer them something they enjoy.

> Mariama: "Karim (age 10), he prefers real food, a whole meal. I prefer to make it in the evening so that he can heat it up at school. Even when I cook rice (that is, the night before), when he comes home from school he asks me if there is any left over and if he can put it in his lunchbox. I've done this two or three times and he's taken it to school" (Field notes, Mélanie Vivier).

The teacher of the DASPA class ("Dispositif d'accueil et de Scolarisation des élèves Primo-Arrivants et Assimilés", a reception and schooling system for newcomers and similar pupils) answered my question "What is your opinion about the children's diet?" in an interview. The answer reflects a certain lack of understanding of the role and responsibility of parents:

> "It's a real disaster! 98% of their diet is made up of sweet food, and the 2% of salty food that is left is a real disaster. […] So that's it, that they have a way of cooking, different tastes, that's one thing, but I'm not the one who makes their sandwiches, so they could… Well, I don't really know how it works at the centre from that point of view" (Interview excerpt, Mélanie Vivier).

While this teacher admits that he does not in fact have any information about how the centre is organised in terms of food provision, Ludivine, another teacher, on the other hand, has more general questions about her role. In the teachers' room, she talks about the diet of a child staying at the reception centre: "It's like Safiya (age 8) who brought a packet of snack cakes, what should I do? […] Yes, but it's like potato crisps, we have to tell her or take it away from her, she shouldn't take it to school" (Fieldwork notes, Mélanie Vivier).

However, children are involved in the misunderstandings based on unshared norms and values that prevent food encounters and reproduce stereotypes on both sides when there is no communication:

> I sit next to a group of girls (age 7–10) in the playground. They are sharing food with each other and with the other children from the centre. "Non-migrant" boys come to play around them. They push them around and shout at the girls "we can't eat crisps at school!" Surprised by the situation, one of the girls looks at me and says: "they are weird." (Field notes, Mélanie Vivier)

It is not uncommon to see children eating dried "Chinese noodles" (another salty food; see Fig. 10) as a snack instead of the waffles of the centre—which they have grown tired of—because their parents do not

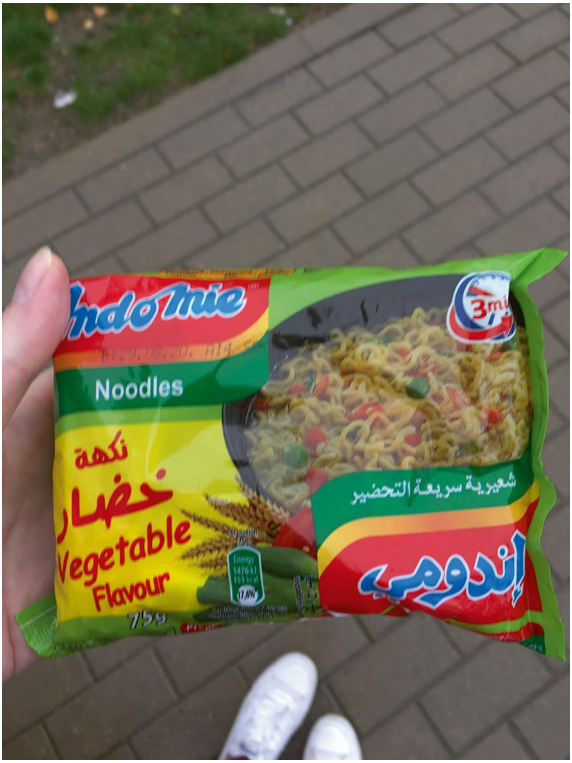

Indomie
Noodles
نكهة
خضار
Vegetable
Flavour
75g
شعيرية سريعة التحضير
إندومي

Fig. 10 Dried "Chinese noodles" for snacking (*Photo courtesy of Mélanie Vivier*)

want them to go hungry all day long. This snack is also strongly discouraged at school.

> Today, Adam (age 7) has brought a packet of "Chinese noodles" as a snack. He proudly shows them to me and rubs his tummy to let me know that he loves them. Surprised, I ask him how he manages to eat them as he doesn't have access to hot water to cook them in the classroom. He asks me to open the packet because he can't do it; once it's open, he pours the small bag of spices in it and eats the hard noodles by breaking them into small pieces. He seems to enjoy it (Field notes, Mélanie Vivier).

Eating or not Eating… My Lunchbox

Faced with a lunchbox whose contents they do not like, the children perform a kind of food agency involving an individual, passive, mostly non-verbal, resistance, which leads them to pretend to eat, or not to eat at all.

> The teacher seldom allows the children to eat before lunch. Most of the pupils rush to their lunchboxes to take out their sandwiches. Many of the children have chocolate spread sandwiches. Some have [*halal*] ham and cheese. The oldest, Mohamed (aged 12–14), doesn't eat. I go to him several times and remind him that he can eat (because he is not used to this schedule). Knowing that the children in the DASPA class are sometimes a little confused about mealtimes in Belgium—especially when they have just arrived—, I remind him that he won't have any chance to eat his sandwich later in the day. He keeps showing me that he doesn't want to eat pointing to his stomach to let me know that he is not hungry. Worried, I report this to the teacher. She seems aware of the situation and carries on with her activities. I do the same and join the children to eat (Field notes, Mélanie Vivier).

Although the children have to eat, the teachers are often understanding because the contents of their lunchboxes are always the same; they sometimes blame the parents more or less explicitly, not knowing the precise institutional constraints on food. As we have seen, the mothers in this centre have little opportunity to carry out their daily feeding function, even though it is crucial for their own identity as mothers and for the perpetuation of this role during migration and transmission processes.

Only during the month of Ramadan does the institution implement specific arrangements.

When children develop deep social relationships, food trade or food donations may take place between children at an inter-individual level. Nevertheless peers may remind them of the school rule, as already pointed out.

> During an excursion, Claudia (2nd grade class, aged 7) comes up to me at lunch and says she doesn't like her chocolate spread sandwich. As I didn't want to force her to eat her sandwich, and as I thought it would be better for her to have something to eat rather than to go hungry for the rest of the day, I suggested that she asks her friend (who had come to me to complain about her lunchbox) to swap her sandwich, first making sure that there were no food restrictions or allergies. We continue eating and another pupil sitting with them at their table comes up to me: "Madame! Claudia, she's not eating her sandwich and she's eating Natacha's!", hoping that I would reprimand the girls' behaviour. I had just understood that trading food is usually forbidden at school. However, not wanting to be a part of punishing the girls, I explain to the pupil that I had made an exception to the rules and allowed the two little girls to swap their sandwiches (Field notes, Mélanie Vivier).

While these prohibited practices are tolerated for snacks eaten in the playground—a "smooth space" (Brembeck 2009: 132–133) per se—they are more difficult for lunch, which takes place in the classroom, under the direct supervision of the teacher.

> Aïcha (age 7), who is in the DASPA class, secretly shows me that she has a large roll of chewing gum for snack time. I ask her why she doesn't eat the sandwiches she has in her lunchbox, since it's lunch time. She answers that she doesn't like chocolate spread sandwiches. The class teacher sees her and asks her to put the gum back in her bag because it is not allowed in school (Field notes, Mélanie Vivier).

> Adam (age 7) takes a packet of biscuits out of his bag before going outside to play. The other children in the reception centre run up to him and ask for some biscuits. However, Adam's older sister arrives to regulate the distribution. She makes sure that the biscuits are divided equally between all the children, so that everyone gets a piece and his brother has some left over. She tells Adam to give more biscuits to his friends and less to the others. When some of the children get too impatient, she admonishes them by

> reminding them that “it’s not polite”. Some children tell me, “Adam is very nice, he always shares his snacks with others”. (Field notes, Mélanie Vivier)

Based on the conceptual overview, the rich analysis embedded in the workshops and fieldwork, and the complexity of the children’s food agency that emerged, it is now clear that children’s food agency can only be understood as a highly intricate topic. As such, it needs to be considered in context and in a relational approach. Furthermore, all scales are to be taken into consideration, from the most micro (e.g. food trading between peers in the playground) to the most macro (food policies in reception centres for asylum-seekers), along with all the participants involved.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of our ethnographic data, this chapter, proposed the notion of children’s food agency to better grasp how children living in a reception centre for asylum-seekers in the French-speaking part of Belgium navigate and cope with various constraints. To do so, we first made a brief genealogy of the notion of agency in the social sciences. We then connected the contributions of recent developments in the field to the reflections and the controversies surrounding the use of the notion of agency in the childhood studies. On the basis of this iterative process between ethnographic data and theoretical reflection, we have shown how the children express their agency on a daily basis between the different institutions and social spaces in which they live which are closely intertwined (the reception centre, the school and the family) and within “smooth spaces” (Brembeck 2009). We have thus demonstrated that their food agency can be better understood through the knowledge and analysis of its rich sociocultural context and relational dimensions.

Children’s food agency is indeed voiced in a more or less explicit confrontation with adults (family and institutions). It also fits into the framework defined by Brembeck (2009: 141) who emphasises the heuristic nature of the apparent paradox it entails: “[…] it is the very ordinariness of food, and the relative invisibility of the childish foodscape to authorities, such as teachers and health experts, that becomes an important factor supporting children’s agency”. Drawing on these reflections, we can therefore, first, state the importance of not remaining trapped within a binary interpretive framework. Second, it is necessary to work on the circularity of/navigation between the continuities and discontinuities of this children's food agency understood as a continuum. As we have seen, the lunchbox is at the heart of school socialisation in Belgium insofar as it embodies local (food model) and global (importance of nutritional health standards) norms and values, while at the same time engaging a variety of relationships. Its circulation between different social spaces (centre, school, family) makes it a valuable tool for transmission and possible ex/inclusion as well as a tool for analysis. The center for asylum-seekers started to diversify the lunchboxes after acknowledging the stigmatising effects of the uniform red lunchbox distributed to all the children living in the centre. However, there is still a lack of reflection on the content and sociocultural dimensions of these boxes which deserve to be studied from a cross-cutting perspective, taking into account the institutions and social spaces experienced by the children. In order to do so, the food agency of children and adults should be considered jointly. A comprehensive understanding of the sociocultural, symbolic and public health implications of the constraints and value judgements concerning children's food would undoubtedly make it possible to better assess the driving role they play in social change and in the development of new foodscapes, beyond their new childish foodscape (Brembeck 2009). These are glocal, mixing at least a double local framework—that of their parents' and that of the host country's—and a double global framework—the economic and health-based institutional food model, and that of the food industry.

Note: All first names have been anonymised; the exact years of the field notes (Fieldwork: 2019–2021) are not mentioned for the same ethical reasons. Finally, as the precise age of the children is not always known, due to the lack of civil registration service in the country of origin and/or official documents in the country of origin, it is sometimes given approximately.

Connected Concepts

Agent/Victim, Control, Culture, Forced Migration, and Vulnerabilisation, Sharing/Not sharing, Taste.

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