Agency operating within structures: a qualitative exploration of agency amongst children living in Palestine

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June 12, 2020

Abstract

Over the last two decades the concept of agency has played a pivotal role in childhood studies, bringing a radical shift into the old views of children and childhood development. However, little agreement has been reached on what exactly agency means, how it should be measured, especially amongst children affected by military violence and oppression. Based on drawings and walk-along interviews with 70 children from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the present study provides an analysis of children's agency across the multiple settings in which they live. Our findings highlight the dynamic interconnections between the children's agentic practices (*the employment of social capital*; *challenging movement restrictions*; *receiving an education; personal strategies; reclaiming play-areas; meaning-making process and political agency*) and the multiple ecologies implied in promoting - or suppressing - their opportunity to act and cope with their surroundings. Our research challenges the dominant picture of children exposed to political violence as helpless victim, portraying them as active agents who mobilize resources both within themselves and throughout their social, physical, and political world. The study suggests implications for practices when designing intervention for children in contexts of chronic political violence.

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Introduction

Due to the key role played by the concept of 'agency' over the last two decades in childhood studies, the twentieth century has been recently defined as the *age of children's agency* (Oswell, 2013). Indeed, the idea of children and young people as *social agents* has become a type of mantra within the social sciences (Ahearn, 2001, p.109; Bordonaro, 2012, p.414). Since Prout and James' (1990, p.8) statement that 'children are not just passive subjects of social structures and processes but active in the construction and determination of their own social lives,' both political agendas and scholarly research have come together in recognizing children's competencies (Abebe, 2019; Edmonds, 2019; Tisdall & Punch, 2012). These new perspectives have brought a radical shift into the old views of children and childhood development (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998), transforming childhood into a more 'socio-cultural' category, characterized by its own social, cultural and spatial characteristics and differences (Abebe, 2019; Hammersley, 2017).

The concept of agency has become very popular within several disciplines, from psychology and sociology to human geography and anthropology (Ahearn, 2001; Bandura, 2001, 2018; Mezirow, 1981). However, this term has gained resonance in the absence of any explicit definition of its core meaning (Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä, & Paloniemi, 2013). A bundle of concepts has been used interchangeably with the term of agency, such as 'free will' (Ahearn, 2001), 'self-efficacy' (Bandura, 2018; Gecas, 1989), 'personal autonomy' (Seeman & Seeman, 1983), 'planful competence' (Clausen 1995), and 'internal locus of control' (Rotter, 1966). As a result, agency is often still described within the literature a 'slippery term' (Hitlin &

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Elder, 2007, p.170) and a considerable 'source of increasing strain and confusion in social thought' (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p.962).

Without dwelling on the important academic discussions on this topic, the issue on how to intend the relation between agency and structure must be taken into consideration to present our work and the definition of agency that we have adopted (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014; Furlong, Woodman, & Wyn, 2011). Debates over the place of individuals within social structures have led to the development of different research traditions, born in the attempt to answer to the question of *what matters more, structure or agency?* (Settersten & Gannon, 2005). On the one hand, academics have emphasized the role of the individuals as the primary architects of their own lives, describing agency as a force that emerges in resistance to social forces (Coffey and Farrrugia, 2014; Settersten & Gannon, 2005). On the other hand, considering structure as 'a powerful set of stable top-down forces that impinge upon individuals and cannot be (easily) altered' (Settersten & Gannon, 2005, p.37), a second current emphasized the key role of the social structure within the individual's life, developments, and opportunities (Durham, 2008; Hammersley, 2017). Criticizing the idea of agency as a mere exercise of free will against the constraints of structure, this second approach have highlighted the powerful social and historical forces that direct and enable an individual's agency (Giddens, 1984; Mizen & Ofusu-Kusi, 2013).

Moving toward a more holistic attempt to capture the fundamentally intertwined nature of structure and agency, contemporary literature no longer divorces agency from structural forces (Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Sewell, 1992). There is now a common understanding that social class, ethnicity, economic conditions, and living environment, are all factors that influence people's agency (Eteläpelto et al., 2013). Only by considering agency *within structures* we are able to delve into the interactions between social settings and children's capacities and resources (Settersten & Gannon, 2005). Terms such as 'tactical agency' (Honwana, 2005), 'bounded agency' (Evans, 2002, 2007), 'opportunities for agency' (Moen, 2013) or 'thin agency' (Klocker, 2007) are all attempts to capture this interdependent relation between agency and structural forces (such as social structures, contexts and relationships), which can act as 'thinners' or 'thickeners' (Klocker, 2007, p.85) of an individual's agency.

This understanding of children's agency as being in constant tension with structural forces has been of significant importance within the research focused on children living in challenging and violent contexts (Mizen & Ofosu-Kusi, 2013). Scholars have started to uncover how young people 'manage' their life within contexts characterized by oppression and political violence, documenting their capabilities to mobilize resources within the diverse spheres of family, community, economy, workforce and education, and political and civic engagement (Abebe, 2019; Beazley, 2007; Bell & Payne, 2009; Oswell, 2013; Veronese, Sousa, Cavazzoni, Shoman, 2020). Multiple forms of agency have been documented observing the ways in which children navigate within their environment in the face of threats to maintain their own safety, well-being, and development (Bordonaro, 2012; Robson et al., 2007; Veronese, Cavazzoni, Antenucci, 2018; Williamson & Robinson, 2006). Researchers have begun to recognize the agency of children living on the streets, who are possessors of conscious livelihood strategies and not merely passive victims of circumstances (Kovats-Bernat, 2006; Offit, 2008). Similarly, children living in contexts characterized by armed conflict and political violence have displayed a variety of strategies in order to restore their life and well-being (Chatty, 2010; Veronese et al., 2017).

However, scholars are still jointly calling for the need to develop empirical research that moves beyond the mere recognition of children's agency and is instead directed at exploring the kind of agency that children have, how the context shapes it, and how their agency relates to others (Abebe, 2019, p.6; Durham, 2008, p.151). Academics are highlighting the necessity of considering agency within a socio-cultural and socio-ecological perspective in order to animate local concept of agency (Edmonds, 2019; Sutterluty & Tisdall, 2019).

Therefore, in the present study, wherein agency is conceptualized as 'the ways in which individual counteract their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circumstances,' (Elder, Johnson, Crosnoem 2003, p.5), we explore the agency of a group

of children living in Occupied Palestinian Territories. In order to fill the gaps mentioned above, we addressed both children's 'agentic practices' (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014) as well as the resources and constraints that exist in the settings around them. Recognizing agency as situated in practices and actions taking place in a specific social and temporal context, we focus on how children are able to navigate their environment and activate whatever resources exist in it, while also managing to preserve their well-being despite the persistent challenges. This work delves into the multiple ways in which children exert their agency and how this agency relates to their families, communities, and surrounding contexts.

The study

In light of the need for more empirical and socio-culturally grounded studies on children's agency, we set out to explore how children exert it within the different social structures in which their lives are embedded, which can give a rise to, shape, or constrain their agency (Samman & Santor, 2009). Our study was informed by socio-ecological theories, in order to take into account micro-, as well as miso- and macro-, factors within children's living environment (Johnson & West, 2018).

Hence, in the present work we investigate both the many intersecting factors - such as family, community, society, and environment - that might shape children's 'opportunities for agency,' as well as the everyday strategies that participant's display in order to maintain a positive functioning and well-being despite their highly challenging contexts. Thus, this paper aims at contributing to the ongoing discussion about the role of agency for children's well-being (Edmonds, 2019; Stecknermeier, 2019). The research was conducted in conformity with APA ethical guidelines concerning child protection (APA, 2013) and approved by the Milano-Bicocca Institutional Review Board (N.368).

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 75 children from 7 to 13 years old (M=10.27; SD=1.38; 68% female and 32% male), all of whom were attending primary school and all of whom belonged to the Muslim religion. Data was collected between April and December 2018. Participants were chosen through purposive convenience sampling: directors and counselors of education centers were responsible for choosing the participants. Inclusion criteria were related to both age and not having been previously diagnosed with any physical or psychological diseases. Basic demographics were collected, including gender, age, place of residence, education, and religious affiliation.

All participants and families provided verbal consent and assent and all of the participants had the purpose of the research carefully explained to them. They were free not to answer to any researcher's questions, to refuse to participate in any activity, or to withdraw at any moment. In line with the principle of *no survey without service* , the activities were structured with the help of local expert counsellors and aimed at providing children with a non-judgmental and safe space through which to express their emotions, ideas, and perspective in an active way (Allden et al., 2009).

The research context

The prolonged Israeli occupation exposes the whole Palestinian population to daily situations of danger, violence, and human rights abuse, with has significant effects on each member of the community (McNeely et al., 2014). Palestinian children are exposed to violent circumstances, night raids, arrest, house demolitions, personal assaults and injuries, as well as air bombardments (Arafat & Boothby, 2003). Despite the pervasiveness of the occupation, the living conditions for children and families might be very different dependent upon their location in cities or refugee camps, with differing implications on their well-being. Children's experiences might vastly differ between Gaza and the West Bank, while rural villages face their own distinct challenges, such as the encroaching separation wall, the seizure of land, and settler violence. Therefore, considering agency as a socio-culturally grounded concept that can vary from place to place, the study was conducted in five different sites within the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, in order to explore the unique

place-related experiences within the different contexts. Table 1 summarizes the different settings where the sampling was carried-out.

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Instruments and procedures

In order to observe how children act within their environment to protect themselves and preserve their overall well-being, our participatory approach encompassed a place-based method focused on children's agency. All children were asked to draw a map representing all significant places within their neighbourhood, perceived both as safe and unsafe, on an A3 sized white paper and then describe it. Safe places where marked in green, while unpleasant spaces were drawn in red (Loebach and Gilliland, 2010). Upon completion of the drawing task (all children participated), 40% of them (7 from Nablus, 6 from Fasayel, 10 from Dheisheh camp, 3 from Gaza city, and 4 from Jabalia Camp) were invited to continue the *conversation into the places* themselves: following a 'walk-around' technique (Anderson, 2004; Carpiano, 2009), the children guided the research team around these places, narrating and describing their experiences in them (Akesson, 2014; Evans and Jones, 2011; Hammad, 2011). During the walk, interviews were conducted using an open-ended format. The remaining children (60%) did not participate due to previous commitments with their family, work, or school errand, or because they simply did not want to take part in the following activities.

This method provides additional access to children's knowledge and it facilitates the observation of their everyday practices and of the interplay between structural conditions and individual agency for shaping action (Carpiano, 2009, p.268).

All children's narratives were audiotaped, transcribed, and translated into English by a local bilingual researcher and analyzed by two independent researchers following a data-driven and grounded analysis strategy (Lambert, 2019). Thematic contest analysis (TCA) was applied to both written and drawn materials using Atlas.Ti software. The main themes were selected via a consensus by discussion procedure.

Results

The method adopted allowed us to observe and identify children's agency across multiple dimensions and settings (e.g. families, schools, neighborhoods, peers) and its dynamic interconnection with the structural forces in which children's lives are embedded, which can facilitate or inhibit this exercise of agency. The TCA led to the identification of eight factors that play a key role in providing - or reducing - children's opportunities to exert their own agency (see Table 2) as well as a variety of ways in which children's capacities and actions interact with these factors in order to cope with their surroundings and preserve their functioning and well-being (Figure 3).

Factors shaping children's opportunity for agency

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Safety and security

The importance of feeling safe within one's surroundings emerged as a crucial aspect in a large proportion of the interviews. All of the participants reported experiencing either physical threats or a general feeling of vulnerability due to attacks both from the Israeli army as well as intra-community violence. Moreover, the environment was widely perceived as unhealthy (e.g. unhygienic conditions) or unpredictable, enhancing feelings of fear, sadness, and distress.

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Feeling unsafe, either outdoors or within their homes, was described by the children as a source of negative emotions, with consequent sleep problem and distress. These factors were acting as a significant deterrent of children's agency, negatively impacting children's well-being and inhibiting the normal activities of their everyday life, such as going to school and studying.

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"In my house we are very close to the gate that the army use to enter in the camp. [. . .] When I'm so worried I can not sleep. [. . .] After in the school I'm too tired to concentrate." (Dheisheh Camp, 8, female).

Social relationships

Most of the places that the children have selected where defined by their social dimension. Maps and narratives were studded with houses of relatives and friends, marked as safe landmarks within their neighborhoods. Spending time with friends and family was evidenced as an important factor in enhancing their well-being and life satisfaction. The value of supportive relationships amongst friends and families was explicitly connected to their ability to better manage periods of distress. Similarly, sharing feelings and thoughts with peers emerged as a common strategy used by children to reduce their feelings of isolation and to find ways of foreseeing the different possible scenarios of their insecure environment.

"We share why we are scared. Like when they came to take my uncle, my friend Jane helped me to feel better. She explained me what happened to her brother before and she made me less scared. (Fasayel, 12, female).

In addition, children described the importance of perceiving an environment characterized by strong sentimental bonds between residents, where people *take strong care of each other*. When this connectedness with family and community was missing, children expressed a feeling of vulnerability, thereby limiting their opportunity of movement and their capacity for action.

Freedom of movement

All of the participants mentioned the need to autonomously explore their environment and to feel free from movement constraints as a precondition to enjoying their lives despite their adverse settings. The importance of the freedom - or alternatively the prohibition - to physically explore their surroundings emerged as an important factor from both the children's maps and walking tours. Some drawings included different streets and paths, showing the ability of children to move around and their awareness of the appropriate roads to reach their favorite places. In contrast, other maps offered a more schematic collection of places the children liked, without any precise or accurate geographical connection between them.

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The imposed restrictions effectively limited children's opportunity to explore their environment and denied them access to many resources, which reduces children's ability to engage and develop their own independent survival strategies.

Places for children

Recreational sites, associations, parks, and natural areas were depicted in all of the maps and were described as crucial aspects in the children's lives since they provided them with the opportunity for play. Participants stressed the importance of having access to places where they can - as one 9-year-old girl stated - 'enjoy their childhood before growing up' and where they feel free to play safely and undisturbed. In villages and refugee camps, the access to play-areas was described as being much more complex. For example, in both the Dheisheh and Jabalia refugee camps, children expressed with negative emotions the fact that "there is no park in the camp".

Children described being satisfied as long as their cities, villages, or camps were able to support their needs, providing them with spaces where they could enjoy leisure activity freely and safely: 'we are children and we love to play' (Gaza, 12, female).

Education

The maps and the interviews illustrated the extent to which school plays a pivotal role in the children's lives. Their narratives indicated the many ways in which school provides them with opportunities for improving their capabilities and competences, thereby enabling a better future.

"The school is a safe place for me, where I can feel comfortable playing and chatting with my friends. When there is war, we cannot go to the school and this is so sad. [...] I learn many things that will improve my life allowing me to find a good job, help my family and be happy". (Gaza, 11, male)

In accordance with the literature on the topic (Winthrop & Kirk, 2008), school supports and shapes children's lives in many different ways: it allows for a *return of normalcy;* it offers some routine amidst the otherwise unpredictable environment; it acts as a *mechanism of socialization* that provides an opportunity to meet friends and peers; it provides a *nurturing environment* since school is safe and proactive place within the chaos of the occupation. Finally, school plays a pivotal role in *enhancing coping and hope* since it is a place of learning that is foundational to improving the child's future prospects.

National identity

Despite their long history of dispossession children always referred to themselves as proudly Palestinian. They reported feelings of happiness and comfort in seeing the Palestinian flag, demonstrating a strong attachment to their country and a powerful sense of belonging to a shared national identity.

"I drew the Palestinian flag because the place I love more is my country. I belong here. [...] I feel strong and good within my people and my country". (Nablus, 10, male)

This sense of belonging enhanced children's feelings of validation and pride, which helps to sustain their need for self-definition while also lessening feelings of isolation (in accord with Khalidi, 1997; Hammad, 2011).

However, this feeling of belonging, when related to the perception of being on the 'defeated' side of the conflict, was also generating feelings of powerlessness, loss of hope, and passivity, which suppresses the child's well-being and will for action. For instance, an 8-year-old boy, standing few miles away from the siege in Gaza, expressed his sense of frustration about the demonstration taking place every Friday:

"When I'm here and I see the barrier, I feel I have lost because we have lost lands and our country is already stolen. Like this I feel that we are defeated and that there is nothing that we can do".

Spirituality and religion

Narrating their maps, children often included mosques or other religious sites, defining them as sources of love, quietness, and identity: "When I'm there, I feel peace. Mosque is a quite place, where silence prevails. [...] I go there to feel relaxed, safe and loved by my God". (Fasayel, 11, female).

Religious practices appear to be essential in giving them strength, protection, and also to restoring a sense of hope and control over their lives. Furthermore, children described the mosques as places where they can be in contact with the community and where they learn about important morals, values, and social behaviors.

"Al-Quran teaches you beautiful values. To be clean, polite, to wash your hand, to help people. It helps you to be a nice person. When you are angry or sad about something and you think to do something not nice, you remember what Quran told you, and you choose a different way". (Nablus, 11, male)

Living environment shaped by the occupation: symbols, history, and political identity

The everyday space of Palestinian children is studded with symbols and signs related to the occupation or to the struggle against oppression. After observing children's everyday practices within their environment, it is apparent that their understanding of the political situation in which they live is reflected through their ability to interpret those symbols and signs that surround them. For instance, in front of the separation wall, a 13-year-old girl from the Dheisheh camp described how the graffiti on the wall has been critically important for understanding her country's situation and the meaning of the wall itself. Similarly, an 11-year-old boy from Nablus drew our attention to the many photos of martyrs hung up in the street, explaining that those 'pictures are here to teach us and remind us that these people died in order to protect us and our country."

The fact that their everyday surroundings are dotted by historical and political reminders provide children with opportunities to connect with significant memories of their community's past as well as with shared

values that might help in shaping future strategies and actions.

Children's everyday agentic practices

By connecting to those dimensions, it was possible to identify the different strategies that children displayed in order to cope with their challenging contexts and preserve their own well-being.

Personal strategies to promote personal security

The connection between agency and safety emerged through our findings, as perceived security was mentioned as a necessary prerequisite to being able to fully engage with and enjoy their lives. Children were often actively engaged in developing their own strategies to feel secure enough to keep on with their favourite activities and thus act upon the limitations imposed upon them by fear. These included behaviors such as: engagement in leisure activities to express and control their emotions and reduce anxiety; seeking God's protection to regain a sense of control and safety; and the development of strategies to both manage and get some sort of 'benefit' from the constant presence of the occupation.

"I'm scared of them [the settlers], but sometimes I come here because you can find Internet here. We don't have Internet cable in our village, but we can come here and use theirs, watch videos on our phones and have fun". (Fasayel, 12, male)

Despite the pervasive serve of insecurity, which was influencing children's ability to exercise agency, children were deploying different strategies to regain control of their environment and their lives.

The employment of social capital

Participants described having the opportunity to benefit from the support of friends, family, and community members as a crucial factor in developing an enhanced ability to cope with adverse circumstances. Social bonds were mentioned as crucial to mitigating the negative effects of the violence they experienced, reducing feelings of isolation and improving their ability to cope with the overall insecurity around them. Children's agency was strongly reflected by their persistent attempts to 'use' these social resources to actively ask for help and protection in order to continue with their regular activities, despite the dangers encountered.

"Sometimes I have to pass through this neighborhood which I am afraid of. So I ask to my friend to come with me. She knows people in that areas, she can help me. In this way I don't have to wait until Friday to go there with my family" (Nablus, 9, female)

Challenge the movement restrictions

Restrictions on their mobility were denying them access to various resources, reducing their ability of develop their own independent strategies of coping and survival and also preventing them from accessing other relational support. However, in confronting these restrictions children did not react with resignation. Participants all displayed creative strategies in order to challenge these imposed limitations, thereby regaining control over their environment and reducing feelings of helplessness and isolation. These included using social and physical aspects of their environment as secure bases to explore around, which persuaded their families to give them more freedom.

"This street in red, but it is not always dangerous. Only when soldiers come. From here [baker shop] I can stop and check, that place is safe and the man very nice. If they are coming, I can go to the mosque taking this second road. I don't want to stay in the house every time they come." (Fasayel, 11, male).

Reclaiming for play-areas

The lack of play-areas was perceived as negative for children's well-being and happiness. However, most of the children reported and acted upon different strategies that they had developed to improve the quality of their free time and they also suggested alternative solutions. These included persuading relatives to give access to private spaces to allow children to have a place to play or also to actively engage themselves in the creation of independent play-spaces.

"We were playing between people and cars. So an idea sprung in our minds, to make a playground. We asked help and we made the playground. [. . .] It was very hard but the results is so good. Now we have a playground". (Fasayel, 12, male)

Receiving an education and working hard

During armed conflict, policymakers and international organizations always advocate education to support the physical, psychological, and social well-being of children (Winthrop & Kirk, 2008). Indeed, most of the participants stressed their willingness to further their education as a means of improving their future prospects and gain capabilities to deal better with the ongoing situation in Palestine. Going to school was described as a way to strengthen personal abilities, thereby enabling them to someday play their part in improving the situation of their family and also of their country. , Moreover, education was described as a means of resisting the occupation, challenging male-dominated social and cultural norms, and it also helps women claim their rights and assert themselves within the community.

"It is very important for us as women to learn and be educated. With education we can get our rights". (Dheisheh camp, 13, female) "The occupation wants to take our lands, but also our tradition and identity. We have to study to keep them. And learning English so we can describe the situation in our village and ask help to the people around the world" (Fasayel, 12, female).

Meaning-making process and political agency

Being able to make sense of the surrounding violence to which children are exposed has a significant role in the ways in which they might experience and cope with it. For example, a 9-year-old girl from Dheisheh camp depicted herself as overwhelmed by negative emotions concerning the situation in her camp due to the Israeli violence: "I don't understand, we are already refugees, what do they want from us? Where do they want us to go? I don't understand what they want. I just stay in my room, terrified."

In contrast, in the narratives of other participants, children revealed a deep insight into the political situation that surrounds them. Indeed, most of the participants revealed an acute ability to 'read' and assess the meaning of the many symbols of the occupation within the spaces of their everyday life. Moreover, they demonstrated the ability to utilize these symbols as reminders of their collective history of struggle for freedom: "Coming here reminds us that it is our right to ask for our cities back since they have stolen them to the original owners" (Jabalia, 12, female).

Therefore, being able to make sense of the surrounding violence children experienced was significant in reducing negative emotions, such as insecurity and hopelessness, and it enables the mobilization of their resources. Children's agency strongly emerged in their ability to use their spaces (the symbols and signs within them) to raise their political awareness and find their own way of both protecting themselves and acting upon their surroundings to enhance their well-being, which amounts to a refusal to accept the ongoing situation of the occupation.

Discussion

Having or perceiving their own agency - displayed in their capacity to exert some sort of control over their own life and their surrounding environment - was delineated as a crucial component in enhancing children's well-being and in developing strategies to cope with their unpredictable contexts. Moreover, the model that emerges from our findings visually highlights the dialectic relationship between children's agency and the fields of social and environmental structures in which their lives are embedded (see Figure 3).

—- Insert Figure 3 —-

On the one hand, spatial, political, relational, and material factors shapes the lives of the children, providing or reducing their opportunities to access resources and 'thinning' their agency (Klocker, 2007; Moen, 2013). On the other hand, children's agency was strongly reflected in the fact that such violent experiences and adverse living condition – as well as such structural influences – were not enough to stop them from finding creative strategies to both survive and imagine a better future.

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Safety has been identified as one of the most important domains of children's well-being and of their general quality of life. Yet, children's sense of agency emerged as strictly related to the opportunity to experience safety, which enables them to act autonomously (Fattore, Mason, & Watson, 2009; Stecknermeier, 2019). Therefore, if one the one hand, feelings of insecurity and vulnerability were discussed as crucial limitations of children's ability to act, on the other, participants showed themselves to be actively engaged in developing new strategies in order to challenge those limitations.

Moreover, children's narratives evidenced how their lives are embedded in familial and communal networks, which play a pivotal role in providing opportunities to develop competencies in order to better cope with adversity (Seymour, 2012). Indeed, children's ability to act emerged as strongly linked to their web of social relations, evidencing the relational dimension of children's agency (Bell & Payne, 2009). Children stressed the importance of spending time with friends and family to experience emotional support and share negative feelings, which helps to manage the deleterious impacts of their violent circumstances (Barber, 2001; Veronese et al., 2018). Feeling connected to, and thus protected by, their family and community provides the children with a secure base, sustaining their relationships with both people and the place itself and enabling them to autonomously navigate their environment (Akesson, 2014; Veronese et al., 2020).

Subsequently, the importance of being able to freely move around their environment and having access to places specifically dedicated for children vividly emerged in this study. As a precondition to feeling happy and enjoying their lives despite their adverse conditions, children mentioned the need to autonomously explore their environment and to feel free from constrains (Fattore et al., 2009). Restrictions on their mobility denied them access to various resources, reducing their ability to develop strategies and to benefit from relational support. Similarly, the lack of play-areas was limiting children's opportunities to engage in leisure activities. However, in confronting both of these restrictions, children did not react with passivity or resignation. Participants displayed different strategies in order to circumnavigate those obstacles and improve the quality of their free time.

Education, national identity, and spirituality were also mentioned as powerful enhancers of children's agency. Being able to access their schools provided children with the opportunity of a safe place through which to engage in activities of learning, playing, and socializing. Indeed, school restores a sense of routine and normalcy in children's lives, which enhance their abilities to cope with their adverse situation (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2006; Veronese & Cavazzoni, 2019). On the other hand, children's actively described their willingness to further their education as a means to strengthen their abilities, improve the situation of their family and their community, and as a way to learn their rights in order to challenge both the occupation and the male-dominated societal and cultural norms that they regularly face. Besides school, children revealed the importance of both national identity and spirituality as crucial enhancers of feelings of validation, pride, safety, and hope for the future (Hammad, 2011; Peteet, 2005). Children highlighted the importance of Islam in teaching and providing them with positive values, behavioral and moral guidelines, as well as a purpose in life, which supports them when having to face an adverse and dangerous environment (Salas-Wright, Olate, & Vaughn, 2013; Wessells & Strang, 2006). Indeed, children's narratives challenged the Western idea of children who endorse Islamic idioms being potentially radical and violent. Instead, our findings corroborate other studies that have suggested that religiosity carries with it narratives of redemption, forgiveness, and freedom, rather than revenge and violence (Habashi, 2011; 2013; Veronese et al., 2017).

Finally, studies concerning children living in contexts of war and conflict highlight the importance of recognizing children's agency also as emerging out of the cultural and political discourse (Habashi & Worley, 2009). In our findings, the immediate environment – such as street, walls, or fences – emerged as an important medium through which to access information and it was often used by children to improve their historical and political awareness. Being able to signify an otherwise perturbing event helps individuals to contextualize their situation, which reduces the impact of trauma and enables the mobilization of resources to deal with it (Garbarino, 2014; Veronese et al., 2018). By actively *reading* the signs of their complex surroundings, children's narratives also testified to their ability to understand the relationship between the history of previous generations and their own present situation. As outlined by Barber (2008), being able

to locate yourself within a historical and political context while also identifying a collective purpose – *we will return to our lands*(M, 13-years-old, Dheisheh camp) – powerfully helps in withstanding the hardship experienced as a result of the occupation.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated how children take purposeful actions to further their desired goals and meet their own needs, enhancing and preserving their well-being despite the living contexts characterized by ongoing military violence and oppression. The children interviewed displayed a real determination to find their own ways of regaining control over their environment, showing that their adverse living conditions were not *enough* to stop them from creating strategies to survive and imagine a better future for themselves and their communities. Moreover, acknowledging the complementary role of structure and agency, it has shown how the ability of young people to exert agency is strongly shaped and influenced by the fields of social and environmental structures in which their lives are embedded.

We should acknowledge and discuss the limitation of this study. Firstly, the gender imbalance in the group of participants prevents us from providing a more detailed picture of the gendered features of agency. A second limitation is related to the contradictory aspect of children's agency that we were unable to explore within the study. Agency should also be assessed within its 'negative forms,' as children may exercise it against their own best interests as well as against those of others (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012; Spyrou, 2018, Valentine, 2011). Perhaps because our focus was directed at detecting those practices of agency by which children preserve and enhance their well-being, we may have overlooked possible self-destructive practices (Abebe, 2019; Gigengack, 2014). Further studies should pay close attention to examining the potential forms of 'negative' agency exerted by children, with reference to both gender and geographical origins.

Despite these limitations, the present study suggests possible directions to follow in order to design policies and interventions in contexts affected by political violence. A focus on agency allows us to pay attention to the children's many ways of comprehending and responding to the challenging situations in which they live (Habashi, 2011). It means emphasizing the ability of children to participate in the promotion and safeguarding of their own well-being by addressing the personal, local, and cultural notions of 'best interest' and well-being. Moreover, in acknowledging children's agency within structures, our study highlights the role of social, economic, political, and material constraints that effectively limit and shape the extent by which children's agency can be exerted. In accordance with others scholars (Bordonaro, 2011; Hoggett, 2001; Punch, 2007), this is a fundamental step in order not to overemphasize agency, which might 'deflect attention away from those with moral and legal responsibilities to improve children life chances' (Abebe, 2019, p.8) and lead to the erroneous assumption that children 'are not simultaneously victims of larger political and economic machinations that severely impact their lives' (Kovats-Bernat, 2006, p.7).

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