

Breaking the Silence About Compulsory Social Measures in Switzerland: Consequences for Survivor Families

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Submitted: 19 October 2023 **Accepted:** 18 January 2024 **Published:** 27 February 2024

Issue: This article is part of the issue “Accomplices to Social Exclusion? Analyzing Institutional Processes of Silencing” edited by Ulrike M. Vieten (Queen’s University Belfast) and Emily Mitchell-Bajic (Arden University), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.i413>

Abstract

So-called compulsory social measures (CSM) represent a dark chapter in Swiss history. Hundreds of thousands of children and adolescents from families affected by poverty were placed in foster families and homes, or used as labourers on farms. These decisions could hardly be appealed. Many minors suffered traumatic violence in out-of-home placements. In 1981 the relevant laws were redrafted and the practice of CSM was officially stopped. Nevertheless, CSM were considered taboo for decades in Swiss politics and society. Often survivors even concealed their experiences from their own partners and children. It was not until 2013 that a major political and social reappraisal began. Against this background, we analyse how the state breaking its silence on the issue, through the initiating of public reappraisal, changed the way families deal with their parents’ history regarding CSM. To this end, six biographical interviews with adult descendants of survivors were analysed using grounded theory methodology. The results show that the public reappraisal triggered processes of revealing secrets from parental history in families, which also enabled emotional rapprochement between family members. However, it also opened up new areas of family tension and found expression in new constellations of silence. Overall Switzerland’s state action had ambivalent consequences for survivor families.

Keywords

institutional silence; out-of-home placement; public reappraisal; qualitative analysis; welfare and coercion

1. Introduction

So-called compulsory social measures (CSM) represent a dark chapter in Swiss history. Until 1981 cantonal laws and regulations allowed official placements of children and adolescents outside their families in homes, foster families, and farms (Ammann & Schwendener, 2019; Swiss Federation, 2016). This practice also included

forced adoptions as well as the systematic removal of children from the Yenish population (Galle, 2016). The approximately 30,000 Swiss Yenish see themselves as an ethnic minority. About 10% of them currently live itinerant, or partially itinerant lifestyles (Galle, 2016). Also included in CSM were the admission of adolescents and adults to mostly closed institutions, such as reformatories, psychiatric institutions, or penal institutions (Ammann & Schwendener, 2019, p. 9). A conservative family ideal, pedagogical-moral motives, and repressive disciplinary regimes guided official practice (Bühler et al., 2023; Hauss et al., 2018). What is significant in terms of the rule of law is the fact that it was hardly possible to object to official decisions (Germann & Odier, 2019). In the course of the ratification of the European Convention on Human Rights, these interventions, which were part of the state welfare and guardianship system according to cantonal practices, were recrafted in 1981. CSM were predominantly directed against persons from a low socio-economic background (Ammann & Schwendener, 2019, p. 214; Knecht, 2015). There was also additional stigmatisation, for example, due to illegitimate birth or being a single mother (Ammann & Schwendener, 2019, p. 24).

Estimates suggest that, in the second half of the 20th century alone, well over 100,000 children and adolescents were placed outside their family of origin (Lengwiler et al., 2013). The experiences of survivors were often traumatic and characterised by physical, psychological, and sexual violence, lack of affection, isolation, and helplessness (Ammann & Schwendener, 2019; Lengwiler et al., 2013). They were often denied an adequate education (Lengwiler et al., 2013), and their life trajectories remained marked by precariousness, increasing poverty, severe health issues, and limited opportunities even after release from these measures (Ammann & Schwendener, 2019, p. 216). Relationships also remained characterised by difficulties: survivors found themselves in difficult couple and family constellations, women became victims of domestic violence, and often experienced relationship breakdowns and separations (Ammann & Schwendener, 2019). Children of survivors were also more at risk of being placed out of their homes, so one can speak of a transgenerational perpetuation (Ammann & Schwendener, 2019, p. 180, p. 217). Processes of exclusion, marginalisation, and stigmatisation were reproduced through CSM (Germann & Odier, 2019, p. 373). Due to fear of stigmatisation and shame, survivors often even concealed their experiences from their partners and children (Ammann & Schwendener, 2019). As historian Vallgård (2022, p. 239) points out, histories of family secrecy are often emotionally and politically ambivalent. They involve fear, shame, pain, and repression, but also often include degrees of tolerance. Family secrecy is entangled with wider social norms and with official policies and practices and is therefore connected to the written or unwritten rules that society sets up for individual and collective behavior (Vallgård, 2022, p. 240). Over the past couple of centuries, family as an institution has become idealised as a safe space emotionally, with relationships characterised by warmth, care, and intimacy. In contrast, real-life families are often unhappy and even unsafe for some of their members (Vallgård, 2022, p. 240). Family secrets can therefore create a family narrative that allows families to appear more like the ideal family (Smart, 2011, p. 541) and serves the important social function of straddling the gap between the family ideal and reality (Vallgård, 2022, p. 241). For the offspring of survivors of CSM, family silence can be stressful, for example, due to disquiet about what might have happened to their parents, or due to diffuse feelings of guilt and a distanced parental relationship (Gautschi, 2022).

For a long time, CSM were considered a taboo subject in Switzerland, and it is only since 2013 that politicians made public reappraisals. Ferguson (2003) argues that silence can operate as resistance or domination, but also constitutes selves and communities. Public reappraisal, as a political form of breaking the silence about a taboo that has shaped families for generations, can therefore be seen as potentially highly disruptive.

This article is interested in how, against this background, descendants of survivors have experienced the political-social reappraisal of CSM concerning its significance for the familial way of dealing with their parents' history. To date, no research is available on this topic. To this end, we analysed biographical-narrative interviews with descendants of whom at least one parent was a survivor of CSM before 1981. The descendants shared that they did not learn significant parts of the parents' history until adulthood. In adulthood, they learned about this history through disclosure by the survivors' parent or through file inspection.

In the following section, we first provide a historical overview of the public discussion and reappraisal of CSM. In Section 3 we present the current state of research on how public reappraisals and the removal of taboos affect families. Subsequently, we present the methodological approach in Section 4. The results are presented and discussed in Sections 5 and 6.

2. The Political and Social Reappraisal of CSM in Switzerland

Research on the history of residential education, and the associated violence against and exploitation of children, has been conducted in various states since the 1990s (Sköld & Swain, 2015; Zöller et al., 2021). In Switzerland, critical voices demanding a reappraisal of CSM failed to gain public acceptance for a long time, although survivors had repeatedly criticised the CSM since the 1930s (Germann & Odier, 2019, p. 35). Their social position and massive social stigmatisation limited their ability to form a movement and make their voices heard effectively (Germann & Odier, 2019, p. 263). In 1986, Federal Councillor Alphons Egli apologised to the Yenish population for the fact that the federal government had allowed the removal of 600 children from Yenish families between 1926 and 1973 (Germann & Odier, 2019, p. 19; Meier, 2003). The Yenish people, who live primarily in Central Europe, have, along with other groups, been stigmatised and persecuted as "gypsies" for centuries (Huonker, 1990). Only recently have CSM come back into the public eye thanks to the initiative of interest groups and individuals. This development goes hand in hand with increasing social recognition of victims' rights and a new assessment of trauma experiences (Germann & Odier, 2019, p. 260). Films, reports, and exhibitions were created. Researchers also increasingly began to look into the background of the CSM. Finally, individual parliamentarians showed solidarity and advocated for a national debate and examination of the issue. One explanation for the long-lasting social taboo in Switzerland compared to international standards is that CSM tell a story about Switzerland that fundamentally contradicts the national narrative of the successful model. Switzerland in the 20th century, not only included increased prosperity and the expansion of the welfare state but also depending on social class, discrimination, and lack of rights (Germann & Odier, 2019, p. 286). It was not until 2013, however, that Federal Councillor Simonetta Sommaruga publicly apologised on behalf of the Swiss government to the people who had suffered CSM before 1981 (Federal Office of Justice, 2014, p. 26). Since 2013 various measures have been taken by the federal government to improve the situation of survivors and to promote reappraisal at the societal level (Federal Office of Justice, 2014, p. 26). Initially, the Federal Council set up a committee to plan the comprehensive reappraisal of CSM. Representatives of the survivors, the federal government, the cantons, municipalities, and other institutions involved, such as childrens' homes, churches, and the farmers' association, were to jointly develop proposals for solutions (Seiterle, 2018, p. 11). In 2014, Parliament mandated the Federal Council to establish an independent expert commission for scientific reappraisal, and in 2017 the Federal Act on Compulsory Social Measures and Placements Prior to 1981 came into force (Swiss Federation, 2016). Since then survivors can, for example, apply for solidarity contributions,

which is a form of financial compensation, as recognition of the injustice inflicted. They are also guaranteed simple and free access to their files, which are passed to their relatives after they die. The cantons must also operate contact points for survivors which provide counselling to them and their family members. In addition, the law regulates the scientific reappraisal and public relations work on CSM. From 2013 onwards, the topic of the reappraisal, and measures related to it, have also been present in the Swiss media.

In 2017, the Swiss National Science Foundation launched the National Research Programme Welfare and Coercion—Past, Present, and Future (NRP 76) on behalf of the Federal Council. This study was developed as part of an NRP 76 research project in which we are investigating the question of how parental history is reflected in the biographical narratives of descendants (see: <https://www.nfp76.ch/en/GMCF18geTcoH3vxl/project/projekt-abraham>).

3. Consequences of Social Reappraisal and the Removal of Taboos on Families

There are only a few studies that have investigated how social reappraisals of (formerly) taboo or traumatising collective events are experienced by survivors and their families. The significance of social reappraisal can be exemplified by Rosenthal's (1999) study. Rosenthal (1999, pp. 26–28) investigated how families of Nazi perpetrators and survivors dealt with the Holocaust, and showed that the lack of public discourse in Germany corresponded to fragmented communication within the families. In Israel, on the other hand, a state education program promoted dialogue between the generations. This program required young people to talk to their parents and grandparents about their past before their Bar Mitzvah. In this way, many survivors told their stories for the first time. Other studies are primarily concerned with the consequences of public reappraisal for survivors (Ammann & Schwendener, 2019; Kavemann et al., 2015; Mendeloff, 2009; Sutherland, 2016), but not on their families and descendants. Ammann and Schwendener (2019, pp. 192–194) show that the public reappraisal of CSM in Switzerland can be accompanied by severe psychological and physical stress for survivors. This is because, for example, negative feelings and memories become virulent again, or new knowledge about one's own history through the inspection of files can be experienced as a shock. Survivors also report physical discomfort such as sleep disorders or persistent headaches. At the same time, public recognition of injustice can bring about significant personal rehabilitation (Ammann & Schwendener, 2019, p. 193). This echoes findings by Kavemann et al. (2015) who, in their study of talking about sexual abuse, point to the high importance of societal recognition for survivors, for example through rehabilitation payments, and the traumatising potential of non-recognition. Sutherland's (2016) psychological study addresses the consequences of public processing of out-of-home placements and child abuse for survivors, and shows that it can affect emotional well-being both positively and negatively, depending on whether or not public reappraisal efforts meet the survivors' expectations.

Throughout the political and social reappraisal, some of the descendants interviewed in our study learned about their parents' history for the first time. Further references to scientific literature can therefore be made in the sense of "sensitising concepts" (Kelle, 2011) in the context of the disclosure of family secrets. Studies from psychology, communication, and educational sciences describe that revealing family secrets can both strengthen and strain familial relationships (Kelly & McKillop, 1996; Kennedy et al., 2010; Vangelisti et al., 2001). Strengthening factors are evident, for example, in greater emotional closeness between parents and offspring (Kennedy et al., 2010). Distressing factors include negative responses to disclosure (Kelly & McKillop, 1996), or that it may be experienced as a burden to know about a secret (Slepian & Greenaway,

2018). Offspring further reported that as a result of their parents disclosing the taboo, they repositioned themselves and generally valued life more (Kennedy et al., 2010).

In this article, we focus on speaking and silence about parental history against the background of the political-social reappraisal since 2013. The analysis also takes into account changing personal interpretations of the parents' past against the background of the political-social reappraisal of CSM. The research question is as follows: How do descendants experience the speaking and silence about the parental history against the background of the political-social reappraisal of the CSM and to what extent do they describe changes regarding personal interpretations?

4. Methods

For data collection, we chose the biographical narrative interview, which asks about the whole life story without topic restriction (Rosenthal, 2015; Schütze, 1983). This interview form is orientated strictly towards the content settings and narrative structures of the person telling the story with minimal intervention by the interviewer. After the interviewee had finished their biographical narrative, follow-up questions were asked in a second part on selected biographical aspects along the chronology chosen by the interviewee (Equit & Hohage, 2016; Rosenthal, 2015). This interview form allowed us to arrive at a comprehensive thematic outline, based on which we decided which topics to analyse in more depth. While the strength of this interview form lies in the focus on the interviewees' thematic settings, a disadvantage is that, due to the thematic abundance, certain aspects cannot be discussed in detail. We had to take into account that the interviewees were burdened people, for example, due to intergenerational transmission of violence or poverty (Ammann & Schwendener, 2019; Böker & Zölch, 2017). This placed increased demands on interviewing. In addition to the ethical guidelines of the National Research Programme, we were guided in particular by the ethical principles of biographical research (von Unger, 2018) and the use of "process consenting" (Kavanaugh & Ayres, 1998). Specifically, the interviewees were offered either breaks, the option to stop the interview, or to schedule a second appointment if they responded very emotionally or were exhausted. There were often short breaks, but the interview was never stopped. With some interviewees, we enquired about their well-being a few days after the interview in order to offer follow-up discussions if necessary or to refer them to suitable support services (Rosenthal, 2015, p. 97). However, this was never necessary. The interviews lasted between one and a half and nearly seven hours and were often emotionally intense for the interviewees. Many cried during the interviews. Between October 2019 and December 2021, 26 interviews were conducted. We recruited interviewees through existing networks of survivors and the professional and personal contacts of researchers involved in the project, amongst other sources. The data analysis underlying this article was conducted using the reconstructive process of grounded theory methodology (GTM; Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Included in the analysis were the interview transcripts as well as the memos that were created for each interview. The goal of GTM is the empirically grounded acquisition of new knowledge about life experiences in a concrete empirical field (Dausien, 1994). This is achieved through the development of theoretical categories from the data, and trying to achieve an increasingly high level of abstraction (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Biographical narrative interviews in particular can be stressful for the researchers, be it during the interviews themselves or during data analysis, during which one repeatedly deals with the narratives (Dausien, 2007; Siouti, 2018). Generally, we were able to distance ourselves well. Nevertheless, the dialogue with project members was very important and we always had the opportunity to talk to each other after an interview, which we usually did. In the initial phase of the project,

we as a research team took advantage of the supervision of a psychologist specialised in trauma to discuss ways of dealing with stressful narratives (Siouti, 2018). Supervision was available for the entire duration of the project but was subsequently no longer necessary.

From a total of 26 interviews with adult descendants of survivors of CSM, we selected those in which the descendants addressed the political-social reappraisal since 2013. This was true for six interviews. The interviewees in this group shared that during their childhood, their parents' history was kept silent. This was expressed when the interviewees described that the parental story was "not an issue" or a "taboo," or that they "actually knew nothing" about it. They only learned about significant portions of their parents' history during their adult lives. This occurred in three ways: through disclosure by the survivor parent, through file inspection by descendants, and/or through siblings of descendants who learned about the parental past through file inspection. File inspection by descendants has only been possible since 2017 and is a direct consequence of the political measures of the reappraisal (Swiss Federation, 2016). We did not consider for data analysis those interviews in which the descendants did not address the public reappraisal. This was the case, for example, in families in which silence continued to prevail despite the reappraisal, or where the descendants did not want to learn anything about the parental history out of self-protection (Gautschi, 2022).

Transcripts of the audio recordings are available from five interviews analysed for this article. For the sixth interview, the data takes the form of notes, as the interviewee declined audio recording. We conducted the latter interview with two interviewers: one person conducted the interview, whilst the other took notes. Five interviewees learned significant portions of parental history after 2013, and one person before 2013. The sample is made up of one man and five women, ranging in age from 32 to 54 years old. Among the interviewees are two pairs of siblings who were interviewed separately. An overview of the sample can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample overview.

Pseudonym	Year of birth	Placement experience of parents	Own placement experience	How descendants learned about the parents' history	Time of learning
Reto	1960–1970	Mother: homes, foster family	None	Mother's disclosure	After 2013
Rosy	1960–1970	Mother and father: placement on farm; foster family	Foster family	Inspection of files	After 2013
Helen	1970–1980	Mother: homes, foster family	None	Mother's disclosure	After 2013
Vera	1980–1990	Father: foster family	None	Father's disclosure	Before 2013
Mauve	1980–1990	Father: home, foster family	None	Inspection of files	After 2013
Lea	1980–1990	Father: home, foster family	None	Narratives of a sister who learned portions of parental history through file inspection.	After 2013

5. Findings

In this section, we present how descendants have experienced the political-social reappraisal since 2013. Previous experiences were characterised by the fact that their parents' history was kept secret from them for a long time or is still being kept secret from them, and they have only learned significant parts of it in adulthood.

The access to files and the possibility of applying for the financial solidarity contribution, as well as the media presence of the topic proved to be the deciding factors which, from the point of view of the descendants, influenced the speaking and silence about the parental history.

5.1. *Speaking and Silence About the Parents' History*

Descendants describe that political and social reappraisal measures triggered processes of removal of taboos and created new constellations of speech between family members. For example, Helen perceived her mother's past as taboo, until the mother disclosed her story to her daughter a few years ago (before 2013). This allowed Helen to talk to her mother about the public reappraisal and encourage her to apply for the financial solidarity contribution. The mother did so after a lengthy decision-making process. Only after her application was approved and the mother's suffering was thereby officially acknowledged did she gradually open up to other family members (her husband, Helen's siblings):

She [employee at the federal government] saw at least four points why her application [for solidarity payments] was justified. My family didn't know anything then. And then she really got the money. And that kind of, like, turned it around where she could talk about it. And she, really, now made a dossier for every single child, invited each of us to dinner. Now she finally told my brother about the abuse, she told my sister about the abuse, and she could cry with all of them, they all had to cry. When we talked about what she would tell my father, she thought he didn't want to know. And yes, when she started talking about it, his eyes had just watered, and I thought, it's great that he can cry, it's really nice when he has to cry because of you. (Helen, transcript, part 3, 451–571)

The important role that descendants can play for their survivor parents so that new processes of dealing with their past are triggered in them becomes apparent. Prior discussions between Helen and her mother about the public reappraisal and subsequent experience of recognition of the mother by the state finally made it possible for her to remove the taboo relating to her history for her family. Whether and to what extent the de-tabooing led to the siblings also sharing among themselves how they experienced the disclosure of their mother's past remains ambiguous. However, new constellations of speaking are also revealed in the fact that the mother was able to tell her offspring about the disclosure to the father, her prior thoughts about it, and his response to it. It also becomes clear in the quotation that the descendants experienced the disclosure as upsetting.

Helen goes on to describe that the de-tabooing led to a greater emotional closeness between her and her mother: "It felt like there was a glass pane being removed, the glass pane that always separated me from her, now it's real again, now it's authentic" (Helen, transcript, part 3, 663–665).

In other cases, the political and social reappraisal triggered family tensions and new constellations of silence. These are expressed through the fundamental question of whether the parents can or want to be counted as survivors of CSM at all. While the descendants concluded that their parents must be counted among this group, the survivor parents in some cases vehemently denied this and refused to address the issue. This points to a potential for family conflict. Mauve (1283–1286) describes: “I talked to him about it several times and even brought him the forms, it just bounced off. He was irritated why I was talking to him about it, that it had nothing to do with him, so to speak.”

Other offspring experience dealing with the public discourse as taboo. Vera describes that her father follows the current media discourse on CSM, but does not talk about it, and no one from the family asks about it. This is even though the father revealed large parts of his past to Vera a few years ago when she asked him about it. Also, the father has increasingly started to talk about his past with Vera’s siblings and mother in recent years: “My father just started to tell a little bit of his story, but otherwise somehow the big context, he doesn’t talk about it, and nobody from us asked. He certainly follows it” (Vera, 450–453).

The descendants assume that the parents do not want to see themselves as victims and therefore do not want to deal with the public reappraisal. It is clear here that the public reappraisal triggered processes in the descendants that the survivor parents could not connect to.

Further constellations of silence can be found with Mauve and her sister Lea. Due to the family taboo on the subject, they conceal information from their father about his family history, which they obtained by looking through their deceased grandmother’s files. While the silence about the parental history used to come mainly from the parents, now the descendants participate in it as well. However, the sisters now talk to each other about the parental history: “She [sister] went to read all the files on our grandmother two years ago and then she told me about it. That was a year ago” (Lea, 1329–1332).

Here a new constellation of speaking between siblings becomes visible.

5.2. Personal Clarifications and Reinterpretations

The descendants further describe that the political and social reappraisal of the CSM also triggered personal clarifications. Thus, the official recognition of the personal suffering of the parents provided certain descendants with a significant confirmation of their own perception. Helen describes that she had always felt her mother’s great suffering. For her, it was important to receive official confirmation that she had not been mistaken: “Finally, I had always felt it, I felt that she had actually experienced unbelievable suffering, I knew it, and, somehow, that this is finally confirmed shows I had not been mistaken...that has been so important” (Helen, transcript, part 3, 454–459).

The new opportunity to access files also was meaningful for the descendants. Dealing with files can be significant for descendants whose families keep silent about parental history, for example, Mauve describes struggling with the lack of knowledge and the unsaid about what happened in her family. Access to files is also significant when there is little contact with the family and the files are the only source of information about the parental past. This also applies to descendants from families in which the parental history has been de-tabooed, and the files have been consulted as a supplement.

Another important impact of the access to files is that it enabled the filling of biographical gaps: “And then you read files and you see, he [grandfather] was an asshole, but he’s not a blank space anymore. And that’s what I always had, I had a blank in my parents’ biography and that’s not anymore” (Helen, transcript, part 3; 548–555).

However, certain descendants also experienced the study of files as a burden, as they were confronted with difficult information. Rosy had a large stack of files on the table during the interview. She said that she could only read them from time to time because of the upsetting content.

In some cases, the new knowledge of the descendants, whether acquired through the files or the familial removal of taboos in the course of the public reappraisal, also led to new personal interpretations. These can manifest themselves in re-evaluations of experienced parental actions. Rosy was placed with a foster family after birth and had hardly any contact with her biological parents during her life. Based on the file entries, she reinterprets her parents as persons by whom she was wanted and who unsuccessfully sought custody. She emphasises this repeatedly in the interview: “He [the father] apparently, according to the documents, as I heard later, tried several times to get me into his family” (Rosy, 109–110). In this way, she constructs a sense of belonging with her family of origin, which she had previously been denied.

Other descendants construct biographical connections and parallels between their own biography and the biographies of survivor parents or grandparents against the background of the new knowledge, which they interpret as intergenerational transmission.

Reto, who has only recently learned about significant events from his mother’s past, emphasises several times during the interview, visibly moved, that some of his long-term partners had experienced similar things as his mother (sexual abuse, out-of-home placement), and implicitly, i.e., without naming it, establishes a connection between his mother’s biography and his choice of partners. Furthermore, it becomes clear that Reto’s repeatedly expressed aversion to bureaucracy takes on a new meaning against the background of his mother’s history: he establishes a biographical connection between his aversion and his mother’s negative experiences with authorities in the context of CSM. The biographical connections established can be read as implicit, subjective interpretations of intergenerational transmission.

Other descendants *explicitly* name the parallels between their biography and that of their ancestors as intergenerational transmissions: “And I am extremely, almost shocked, how certain parallels somehow show up, things that repeat themselves” (Mauve, 1367–1369). She explains further:

She [grandmother] was actually under guardianship from childhood until her mid-40s, and for me this realisation that she was a sex worker in the same city as I was working, and for many years I put all my life energy into sex workers in this city without knowing that, and knew very soon I was going to start a job with the successor agency to the guardianship agency. I was really thinking, like, oh God no. So just, that got extremely ingrained in me. (Mauve, 1350–1557)

The biographical parallels relate to the fact that the grandmother, whom she hardly knew personally, was a sex worker and Mauve worked for several years as a social worker in the same city counseling sex workers. Furthermore, the grandmother was under guardianship until middle adulthood, which means that she was also

affected by CSM, while Mauve, when she learned the grandmother's story, started a job as a social worker at a Child and Adult Protection Authority. Today's Child and Adult Protection Authorities are the professionalised successor to the former Guardianship Authorities, which were largely responsible for the CSM.

Both the reinterpretations of parental behaviors and the interpretations of intergenerational transmission serve the descendants to establish a new form of intergenerational belonging to their parents and grandparents. This is significant because these offspring have experienced familial relationships as distant or nonexistent.

6. Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

In this article, we analyse how descendants of survivors deal with public reappraisal. Specifically, we examined how speaking and silence as well as personal interpretations regarding parental history changed. The focus of the analysis was on the subjective interpretations of the descendants in the context of the public reappraisal of the CSM in Switzerland.

Public reappraisal shifts social norms of silence and speaking about CSM, with different consequences for survivor families. The results show that discussions initiated by descendants about the possibility of applying for the financial solidarity contribution can lead to significant experiences of recognition by the state for the parents. This can subsequently enable the parents to disclose their history to additional family members. Here, public reappraisal contributes to breaking the intergenerational transmission of silence and stigmatisation (Böker & Zölch, 2017; Rosenthal, 2000). This complements findings by Kavemann et al. (2015) and Rosenthal (1999), who noted the importance of social recognition for interpersonal de-tabooing.

The new knowledge about the parental past also was upsetting for the descendants. This is similar, for example, to findings in which offspring experienced the disclosure of their parents' previously concealed HIV infection as a "shock" (Kennedy et al., 2010). From the examples analyse, however, it is also clear that the political-societal reappraisal can lead to new areas of tension in families accompanied by new constellations of silence. While in some families the silence gradually dissolved over the course of the reappraisal, and both personal experiences and the political and social reappraisal were openly discussed, in others it shifted or intensified. In these cases, the personal experience is discussed, but the public discourse is not, although the descendants know that the survivor parents are following it; or neither level can be discussed openly and descendants conceal newly acquired information from files from the parents.

Although the law stipulates that relatives can only view the files of the person concerned after their death (Swiss Federation, 2016), Mauve and Lea learnt sensitive information about their father, who is still alive, from her deceased grandmother's files. By remaining silent towards their father about this information, they are showing sensitivity by protecting him from feelings of shame and lack of control over others learning about his story. However, this example highlights a relevant inconsistency in the law, which in turn, can place survivors in positions where they may feel powerless to stop their personal story being shared more widely in the family and even beyond. Given the traumatic experiences with state institutions, this is a very unfavorable situation, which could lead to repeated violation of the survivor's integrity and stigmatisation. It is a new finding that the public reappraisal of previously taboo topics in survivor families can also produce new forms of silence. The descendants suspect that the parents do not want to see themselves as victims, and therefore refuse to

engage in the public discourse. Additionally, against the background of Ammann and Schwendener's (2019, pp. 192–193) findings, it could be interpreted that the parents do not engage in speaking out of self-protection against burdensome feelings and memories. Silence is one mechanism for families to persevere (Ferguson, 2003, p. 50). Due to public de-tabooing, survivor parents might feel under pressure to suddenly talk about experiences they had hidden out of shame and fear of stigmatisation for decades. The results show that families cannot easily adapt to this shifting of norms. Depending on where the parents are in their own process, some families find words and their parents' past is de-tabooed and de-stigmatised, others are overwhelmed.

Finally, the political and social reappraisal also led to personal clarifications and reinterpretations of parental history for the descendants. This is a central finding of the study. Thus, the results show the high importance of the official recognition of the personal suffering of the survivor parent, which can be an important confirmation for the descendants of their own perception of their parents as victims. While the high importance of official recognition for survivors is well known (Ammann & Schwendener, 2019), there has been a lack of recognition that it can also become significant for descendants. Furthermore, file access allowed descendants to fill biographical gaps. In some cases, descendants retrospectively reevaluated parental behavior in the light of their new knowledge. Finally, certain descendants recognised connections and parallels between their own biographies and those of survivor parents or grandparents, some of which they experienced as very upsetting. The reasons for these upsetting emotions cannot be identified conclusively based on the data. However, based on existing indications, it could be concluded that, for the descendants, certain biographical parallels to parents or grandparents are hard to explain rationally, for example, because they did not know the persons concerned personally. They interpreted the biographical connections and parallels as forms of intergenerational transmission in the sense of (unconscious) orientations and behavioral patterns. Intergenerational transmission is understood here as the subjective interpretations of the descendants. This conception differs from other qualitative and quantitative approaches that study intergenerational transmission by identifying common features, for example, the similarity of value priorities, among members of different familial generations (Hadjar et al., 2014; Schönplflug, 2001; Zinnecker, 2009). The finding that new knowledge about parents can lead to new interpretations regarding one's own life among offspring is similar to findings by Kennedy et al. (2010), according to which offspring gained a new perspective on life.

It becomes clear that burdens created by family taboos (such as a lack of knowledge about family history or distanced or non-existent family relationships; see Gautschi, 2022) are partially dissolved as a result of political and social reappraisal. This can even lead to new experiences of belonging, to openly dealing with parental history, to emotional rapprochement between family members, to confirmation of one's own perceptions, to biographical gaps being filled, to the construction of parallels and connections between one's own and the parental biography or that of the grandparents, to new, positive evaluations of parental behavior based on the new knowledge. Against the background of distanced and fragile family relationships, this is a remarkable change that could be read as a new form of bonding. At the same time, it becomes clear that the political-social reappraisal can also lead to new strains, i.e., to family tensions and new constellations of silence, to emotional shocks caused by new knowledge. The fact that learning about previously taboo information can lead to closer relationships but also be linked to strain for those who have learned new things echoes findings by Slepian and Greenaway (2018) and Kennedy et al. (2010). It should be noted that, in contrast to the research being presented, the aforementioned studies do not include the influence of social reappraisal discourse in their analysis. In addition, the present study elaborates more concretely on both the positive consequences and

the burdens from the perspective of descendants. Vallgård (2022, p. 242) contextualises that insight into a family member's secret shifts power dynamics in family relationships. It can be used as bargaining power, but also sustain feelings of solidarity, guilt, or even hostility. Based on the data, it can be added that insight into a family secret can not only sustain feelings but also change them and shape family relationships accordingly.

It should be noted that only descendants who experienced strain from their parents' history contacted us. However, it can be assumed that there are also descendants who hardly experienced any strain from their parents' history, for example, because their parents grew up in loving foster families. This represents a limitation of the methodology and is probably largely due to the subject matter of the overarching research project. By focussing on the experiences of descendants of former victims, we implicitly ascribed them the status of (indirect) "victims." We cannot assess the extent to which this contributed to the interviewees beginning to recognise themselves as (indirect) "victims" of a historical injustice. They did not comment on this. However, it would represent a further level of how the political and social reappraisal affects descendants.

This article shows for the first time the far-reaching consequences of the political-social reappraisal of CSM in survivor families by shifting social norms of silence and speaking, and how parental history is renegotiated and reinterpreted in families against this background. In summary and centrally, it can be stated that Switzerland's state action of public reappraisal regarding CSM affects survivor families in an ambivalent way. This highlights the importance of public reappraisals requiring great care and sensitivity. Possibilities for further research could be to systematically investigate how the public reappraisal was experienced by different family members in a single family, in order to understand the consequences of shifting social norms about silence and speaking and the associated possible de-stigmatisation processes in more depth. In the context of the patchy scientific findings on how political-social reappraisal efforts are experienced by survivor families, the present study should be read as an explorative case study that can provide initial empirical evidence on this barely researched phenomenon. These are to be examined further.

Funding

The study was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (project 407640_185622) as part of the National Research Program NRP 76.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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