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EDITORIAL

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Accomplices to Social Exclusion? Analyzing Institutional Processes of Silencing

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Abstract

The editorial notes contextualize the theme of "silencing" and processes of un-silencing before briefly outlining the central arguments of the different contributions assembled in this thematic issue.

Keywords

archaeology of silence; by-standers; mobilisation of power; social exclusion

1. Introduction: Institutional Silencing in Context

"Silencing," particularly within the social sciences, constitutes a broad, textured theoretical and empirical topic of inquiry. Landmark contributions to discussions on silencing primarily focus on how it relates to mobilisations of power, with defined conceptual marriages between silencing, power, and resulting social exclusion for demographics and individuals who are subjected to silencing as a wielding of social power (see Bhambra & Shilliam, 2009; Mitchell-Bajic, 2022; Post, 1998). This has led the authors of this thematic issue to unwrap and analyse, out of necessity, the structural hierarchies of power that mobilise silencing as an upholding or yielding mechanism of that power (see also Mitchell-Bajic, 2022).

Whereas "silences" may be identified as "a systematic way to inform issues of voice, representation, and responsibility along with the associated problems of inclusion, exclusion, and participation" (Bhambra & Shilliam, 2009, p. 2)—that is to say, silences can be mobilised as a modality for excluded groups and individuals to protect and/or rebel against progressive social systems and practices (see also Clark, 2020)—silence-*ing* is framed as a mass phenomenon, embedded in institutions and regarded as a signifier of taboo or stigma. Therefore, while the editors are keenly interested in and appreciative of the body of

existing literature on the qualities of silence as a modality that may be *selected*, consciously or unconsciously, by oppressed demographics and individuals as a protective or rebellious mechanism, we affirm that the key focus of this thematic issue is primarily concerned with the imposition of silencing by institutions.

2. Legacies of Silencing as a Powerful Institutional Tool

Despite a long tradition of silences and silencing being discussed in scholarly work, framing silencing as a mobilization of power, especially by institutions that seek to uphold and bolster that power, is a bold claim to make. This leads to questions of *why* institutions mobilize silencing—for a "shelter for power" that has tangible qualities visible to the outside world (Brown, 1998, p. 315). In 2024, and with the current climate of international warfare, some European nation-states and higher education institutions define what is, for instance, anti-Semitic speech, and by that silence critical voices. Is this a new stage of political power play? What is the purpose of political and social silencing? How do they relate?

In their *Manifesto for an Intellectual and Political Counteroffensive*, French philosophers, and sociologists Geoffroy de Lagasnerie and Eduard Louis tackle the "archaeology of silence" (de Lagasnerie & Louis, 2015). They posit that the normalization (see also Vieten & Poynting, 2022) of racist extremist views and the shift to the far-right is either encompassed by some intellectuals echoing these perspectives or not challenging them loud enough. They call for more attention in political-institutional contexts, where institutional racisms may affect visible ethnic minorities by silencing their lived experiences.

Thus, we might also approach silencing as a method of intimidating prospective whistleblowing activities on discriminatory practices within institutional settings (see Tiitinen, 2020). What is needed, then, is to speak out and complain against institutional processes of silencing (see Ahmed, 2021). How does this contribute to wider social exclusions of those who experience silencing?

Tirion et al.'s (2023) discussion of "norm erosion" and by-standers who look on socially deviant behaviour sheds light on this in the context of social rule-breaking, finding that when rule-breaking behaviour is confronted, by-standers perceive norms as stronger than if a rule-breaking behaviour remains unchallenged. In this frame then, those who stand by to witness acts of silencing without confronting them may be imagined as complicit in embedded and institutionalised acts of silencing: The claim might be reasonably made then that by-standers uphold silencing, which is layered when given the context that *institutional* mobilisations of power through silencing may overtly or subconsciously intimidate those who witness them, given that institutions have the resource of pre-existing power to silence, re-silence, and reprise against confrontation.

3. Confronting Institutional Silencing in Social Exclusion

In situ, the myriad angles and case examples with which to approach institutional silencing as it is experienced through a social exclusionary lens present an extensive scope for the renewed address of how silencing is shaped and reshaped by power arcs. This thematic issue invited scholars to challenge both how and why institutions house silencing, interrogating processes of silencing as an apparatus of wider power arcs. Further, we were interested in understanding how silencing is overcome and in what ways temporary silence can be resolved without structural damage in giving a voice and being heard. Does silencing have consequences for institutional actors, and can acts of silencing be recorded?

The diverse and international contributions covered in this thematic issue demonstrate the breadth and texture of silencing's interplay in institutional settings and capacities. Paying particular attention to how intersections of social class, gender, race, and ethnicity receive and shape processes of silencing, this thematic issue seeks to situate intersections of individual demographic identity as ventricles of specific vulnerabilities to the silencing, power, and social exclusion nexus, to uncover institutions as instrumental in this. In the remainder of this editorial, we will briefly introduce the articles assembled in this thematic issue.

4. Contributions

From a focus on silencing within family histories, Isola (2024) unpacks intergenerational disadvantage as it relates to silencing, positing issues such as substance use, neuropsychiatric characteristics, and mental health concerns as linked to both "active" and "passive" silencing and consequent social exclusion because of several different institutional capacities. In this discussion, the author highlights that silenced and socially excluded individuals are more likely to internalise discriminatory or otherwise unfair treatment as a renewed facet of passive social exclusion.

Gautschi and Abraham (2024) approach compulsory social measures in Switzerland, discussing the hundreds of thousands of children and adolescents from backgrounds of poverty, e.g., from the minority Yenish population, who were placed in foster families or mobilised as farm labourers. Given the legacy of trauma and violence left by compulsory social measures on many of these children, the authors discuss the taboo surrounding the issue, analysing the public reappraisal that emerged in Switzerland in 2013 under the theme of silencing and silence-breaking.

There is also a place for investigating what artefacts and processes uphold silencing, as discussed by Whelan (2024), who approaches policy documents as "not neutral objects." Approaching policy silences under the context of the Government of Ireland's *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020–2025*, the author holds a delicate discussion about inclusion, representation, and poverty. The theme that systemically embedded disadvantages afford powerful institutions palpable privilege has also been recently expressed by Falzon (2023), who approaches silencing because of imbalances between "developed" and "developing" nations in the UN climate delegation context.

Approaching ableism in grassroots organisations, Tsang (2024) focuses on autistic peoples' experiences of ableism through the lens of Bourdieu's symbolic power. Investigating the lived experiences of autistic adults, parents, disability advocates, social workers, policymakers, and academics, this contribution brings into the fold the multi-faceted role of social oppression and the complexities emerging from the growth of identity politics in advocacy spaces.

Discussing institutional processes of silencing from an inclusive university development perspective, Leonhardt (2024) discusses ableism in higher education settings and its links to postcolonial discourses on silencing. By situating formal access to higher education as a singular, incomplete face of interrogating "ableist-structured norms of ability" and its silencing impacts, the author brings to light the notions of transparency and (self-)critical approaches to inequality as ways to interrogate and hold institutional processes of silencing in a space of consequence.

In an autoethnographic reflection on the way a conflict regarding intellectual research ownership becomes silenced, Alpagu (2024) demonstrates that some leadership programmes of gendered (female) inclusion encompass (racializing) spaces of exclusion. While analytically using Ahmed's (2004, 2012, 2021) work, the author confronts us with intermediate processes of silencing that target those who complain. Nonetheless, Alpagu's personal account also illustrates how to overcome being silenced and how conflictive career interests are deeply enshrined in the culture of neo-liberal universities.

Kusmallah and Ghorashi (2024) turn their attention to the situation of unaccompanied refugee minors while exploring the agency of young refugees in responding to institutional silencing processes in the Netherlands. Four narratives are analysed in-depth, introducing young people who combat institutional attempts to make them invisible and silent.

The perspective on subaltern voices and how to enable speech that is not imposing and reproduces majority views and asymmetric power hierarchy is tackled by Dijkema (2024) as well. Here the example of the Université Populaire is given, a group initiative by actors in a marginalized social-housing neighborhood in Grenoble, trying to bridge class, gender, and ethnicity differences. Instead of interviews, public debates were stirred to overcome the stigmatisation and silencing of people living in the neighborhood of Villeneuve.

In their article, Sipos and Bagyura (2024) take us to Budapest, critically reflecting on the spatial choreography of the Pride parades. The authors follow the historical visibility of LGTBQ+ communities as they were confronted with regulations on their way. They map the development between 1997 and 2022 detecting the 3Rs—routes, regulations, and resistance.

Wilopo and Dijkema (2024) draw on postcolonial and subaltern studies to investigate silencing as a practice in the context of city government responses to anti-racism in Zurich. Discussing also under the frame of Rancière's (de)politicisation, it is found that social movement demands can both allow marginalised voices to be heard and create new silences.

There is a common thread in the contributions made to this thematic issue. All authors confront institutional processes of silencing by shedding light on who is silenced by whom, in what context, and how.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Ulrike M. Vieten (PhD) is a transnational sociologist based at Queen's University Belfast. Focusing on the question how racialised group boundaries are constructed and shift since the early 20th century in Europe, she unwrapped racist discourses of cosmopolitanism in Germany and Britain, investigated European belonging and identity of minority citizens, and publishes, since 2016, specifically on gender, racism, and the far right. As a feminist interested in intersectionality, she takes inspiration from political activism of black and minority scholars across the globe.

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ARTICLE

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Intergenerational Social Exclusion, Silences, and the Transformation of Agency: An Oral History Approach

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Abstract

This oral history article, inspired by research conducted among minorities, explores the interrelations between intergenerational disadvantage, experience of social exclusion, and silence within family histories. During the fieldwork, 13 study participants shared their transgenerational family stories that shed light on intergenerational disadvantage, including substance abuse, trauma, violence, emotional coldness, neuropsychiatric characteristics, and mental health concerns. Study participants had experienced active and passive social exclusion, such as discrimination within service systems, exclusion from the job market, bullying, and discriminatory attitudes. They also believed that their previous generations had experienced social exclusion. This study shows that silence is often a result of the social exclusion experienced by people who deviate from the assumed norm and suffer from disadvantage. To protect themselves from social exclusion, people remain silent. Silence deepens social inequalities by keeping people in weak positions apart and preventing them from acting together to redress power dynamics. Today, however, there are more opportunities than in the past to work on silence and social exclusion, making it possible for these people to shift their positions from being others to being closer to the sources of power.

Keywords

agency positions; intergenerational disadvantages; oral history; silence; stories of occlusion; transgenerational family stories

1. Introduction

Parents' low education, long-term reliance on last-resort social assistance, and problematic substance abuse predict intergenerational disadvantage (Kallio et al., 2016; Kauppinen et al., 2014; Vauhkonen et al., 2017).

However, becoming dependent on social benefits, failing to find employment, or falling into a cycle of substance abuse is likely the result of events that happened generations ago. Albeit more open to interpretation, a qualitative approach may complement statistical information on why disadvantage sometimes accumulates generation by generation. Drawing on the tradition of oral history (Leavy, 2011; Thompson & Bornat, 2017), I asked people to tell small transgenerational family stories. They are stories about the self as part of the generational chain, often retrieved from the family memory (Shore & Kauko, 2017), not reaching further back than three generations in the 19th century, that is, up to the great-grandparents. It is a piece of family lore that an individual can embed in their life story to create self-narrated stability in life (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008; McAdams & McLean, 2003; Thompson & Bornat, 2017, p. viii). The research task was to examine the root causes of the current disadvantage that is faced. This study captures the less obvious and even faint explanations told and interpreted by people who suffer from intergenerational disadvantage and experience social exclusion.

Silence emerges when people are unable or unwilling to speak or do not believe they will be heard. Silence is constructive when, by keeping specific sensitive topics off-limits, it helps the doctor and the patient create trust in interactive situations or families stay together (Toerien & Jackson, 2019; Winter, 2019, p. 228). Sometimes, there are risks involved with being seen and heard, particularly when sensitive information related to vulnerable groups may be used against them. Then, silence may be a form of protection (Samuels, 2021, p. 511). For instance, the ancestors of Indigenous people have protected their offspring by remaining silent during assimilation policies (Blix et al., 2021; Matsumoto, 2016).

Silence is destructive when the justice system excludes people, such as people with disability, from courtrooms (Opotow et al., 2019). Sometimes, medical practices silence those with disabilities (Yoshida & Shanoudab, 2015), or museums give a selective version of history and exclude certain historical events, groups of people, and narratives (Mason & Sayner, 2017; Savolainen & Potinkara, 2021). Consequently, silenced and excluded people may internalize unfair treatment; it is as though people different from the "norm," marginalized or otherized, do not have a chance of living a normal life (Lourens, 2016).

This article examines silences in the transgenerational family stories told by people with experiences of social exclusion due to intergenerational disadvantage. In what follows, I place social inclusion and exclusion (Isola et al., 2021; Leemann et al., 2022), power dynamics (McCartney et al., 2021), silence, and agency in dialogue (Reed & Weinman, 2019). Then, I describe the oral history approach (Leavy, 2011; Thompson & Bornat, 2017) as a methodological attempt to understand the complex interrelations between intergenerational disadvantage, the experience of social exclusion, and silence. The article concludes with a discussion concerning silence as a passive form of social exclusion and how it can be tackled in networks of agency.

2. Framework: Social Exclusion, Silences, and Positions of Agency

Social inclusion equals opportunities to acquire and exercise power in society, communities, and in one's own life. Active social exclusion comprises practices that leave people outside the financial, political, and social circles (Daly & Silver, 2008; Sen, 2000; Silver, 1994). Passive social exclusion involves practices that do not deliberately exclude people but do so regardless (Sen, 2000, p. 15). While social exclusion has been widely researched, more work is needed on the experience of social exclusion (Daly & Silver, 2008, p. 547).

The conceptualization of experiences of social inclusion, based mainly on qualitative poverty research, seeks to respond to this call by focusing on the feelings associated with social inclusion, such as that life is manageable and a sense of belonging and meaningfulness, as well as their perception that they have equal opportunities for participation (Isola et al., 2021; Leemann et al., 2022).

According to McCartney et al. (2021), sources of power include income and wealth, knowledge (education, knowledge production, and media), culture and beliefs (organized religions, cultural norms, and values), collective organizations (political institutions, workplaces, activism), the state, and positions in hierarchies. Having experience of social inclusion reflects being well-connected to the sources of power and having opportunities to exercise power. Conversely, experiences of social exclusion (the sense of non-belonging and meaninglessness, being unable to manage life, and having unequal opportunities for participation) reflect social exclusion practices, such as othering and discrimination. Power dynamics determine what is valued in society and who can access sources of power and attain positions of power. People ignore, silence, or talk negatively about devalued phenomena and groups of people, and by doing so, they simultaneously push others who are different from the expected norm into the silent margins of society to experience social exclusion (Fivush & Pasupathi, 2019; Taylor, 1982).

Fivush (2010) distinguishes between being silent and being silenced. While the former may actively defy those in power and their exclusionary practices (Fernandez, 2018; Weller, 2017), the latter signifies a loss of power—an unwilling loss of voice (Fivush, 2010; Weller, 2017). The exclusion from the sources of power, particularly from knowledge, may lead to what Fricker (1999, 2007) calls epistemic injustice, which precludes people from manifesting themselves and participating in public negotiations, as they lack adequate language. Language is also an instrument acquired from practical activity (Archer, 2000, p. 135), which is not developed further if people stay silent. Then, if they are unable to articulate their experiences, there is a risk that knowledge production about those less connected to sources of power will remain limited.

Not so long ago, at the beginning of the 20th century, assimilation policies, cisnormative order, and racial hygiene and eugenics as hegemonic structures excluded ethnic, gender, and disability minorities even from human rights. It happened in a manner that harmed people then and still harms their descendant's health and well-being today (Alaattinoğlu, 2023; Bar-On et al., 1998; Blix et al., 2021; Matsumoto, 2016; Priola et al., 2014). For instance, Indigenous people survived traumatic state violence by using coping mechanisms, such as avoidance and numbness, that merely hid their trauma and resulted in the transmission of a hidden burden within the family, impacting across generations (O'Neill et al., 2016). It is crucial to understand that historical power dynamics that discriminated against people in the past may continue to contribute to the accumulated disadvantage of the descendants today. However, understanding one's family history under a given historical situation is challenging if the pieces of the family stories have blurred out and lost—or occluded, as Wineburg et al. (2007, p. 66) describe the process. Occlusion occurs when a story can no longer be retrieved from the collective memory. In such cases, the following generations are left without material that they could use to understand themselves and to see opportunities (Fivush & Pasupathi, 2019).

Power, social exclusion, and silence meet in Isaac Ariail Reed and Michael Weinman's conceptualization of agency (Reed & Weinman, 2019). Agency is typically held as an individual property (Archer, 2000). The relational approach considers that agency depends on social relations (Burkitt, 2016; Emirbayer, 1997). Arendt (2018, p. 201) once stated that people acquire power when they live so close to each other that they

have the opportunity to take action together towards a shared project. Reed and Weinman (2019, pp. 10–12) further conceptualize agency by manifesting that agency is persuasive action on behalf of a (joint) project and to have the capacity to shake and change the world. It is intertwined with power and located in various projects (Toprak et al., 2019, p. 369). I interpret Reed and Weinman so that the project has a rector and an actor. Some people—the others—remain entirely outside the project or give it their silent approval (Reed & Weinman, 2019, p. 42). I name all rectors, actors, and others as agency positions.

The relationships between rectors, actors, and others form a composition in which power flows but where it accumulates, particularly for rectors but also to some extent for actors (Reed & Weinman, 2019, p. 14). As a rule, though, power is continuously redistributed everywhere in the chains of rector–actor–other relationships transforming agency positions; Reed and Weinman argue that this process of power redistribution allows previously less noticed issues, such as social problems or subjugated positions, to become objects of policy-making and change social structures eventually (Reed & Weinman, 2019, p. 44). It thus also allows for the improvement of people's representation in democratic processes, such as by identifying and potentially solving their problems (Fraser, 2009).

Indigenous people, LGBTQ+ minorities, or children who are in the care of the state have managed to find ways to sources of power and transform their agency positions from being others to actors and rectors, for instance, by expressing themselves through storytelling and human-interest stories (Bietti et al., 2019; Blix et al., 2013; McCafferty & Mercado Garcia, 2023; Olson et al., 2021; Rieger et al., 2020). Gradually, representatives of these groups have taken and have been allowed to take representation in identifying and framing problems and proposing solutions from their perspectives despite or even because of their weak positions in society. This would not have been possible if they had been unable to come together first, then break the silence around the practices of othering, develop a shared language, produce knowledge from their experiences, and eventually resist discrimination together. By doing so, they have attached to at least one source of power: collective organizations (McCartney et al., 2021, p 30).

3. Oral History Approach

Silences escape exact words and numbers. As the explanative power of statistics and registers decreases, oral history may be a guide for understanding silences. Oral history is an anthropology-led yet multidisciplinary method that taps into processes, creates links between the micro and macro levels, connects public and private experience, complements historical documentation, and considers the study participant as a collaborative partner (Leavy, 2011, p. 16; Thompson & Bornat, 2017). The oral history knowledge is constructivist and inherently open to interpretation. Holstein and Gubrium (2000) characterize a narrative as a continuous process of editing and adjusting to given circumstances. Just as study participants adjusted to the stimulus I gave them, I reciprocally adapted to their stories and, in some cases, eventually joined their projects, where I then saw their agency transforming. In this way, a story is never fixed (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Reflexivity, an essential principle when working with minorities, incorporates listening, observing, and researching in a reciprocal relationship with participants, where both share something of themselves (Waller, 2018, p. 230). As some of the study participants acquired more information about their family history through genetic tests or parish registers, they again contacted me, and sometimes, we, as collaborative study partners, discussed the possible lines of interpretations (Thompson & Bornat, 2017, p. 354; see also Breeze's story below).

Thompson and Bornat (2017, p. 266) suggest that establishing an oral history project makes it possible to give history back to the people who are othered, discriminated, or marginalized. Finding hidden, occluded, or silenced stories and giving them a voice is valuable for those who want to understand themselves now and here as part of the intergenerational chains. Giving a past to people may also help them towards a future of their own making (Thompson & Bornat, 2017). In this sense, the oral history approach makes agency modification possible and is thus a practice of redistribution of power (Waller, 2018).

The call for interviews asked people to give an interview for a research project that studied the intergenerational accumulation of social inclusion and exclusion. A heterogeneous group of people ($N = 28$) were interviewed in 2020. Out of 28 interviews, I analyzed 13 (174 pages of transcribed text) in detail. These 13 interviews touched on disadvantages, social exclusion, and inter/transgenerational features of their families (neuropsychiatric symptoms, mental health issues, emotional coldness, substance abuse, or violence). In this sample, a typical interviewee was a woman whose family had faced difficulties over generations. Ten of 13 interviewees contacted me during my three-month fieldwork in 2020 in a child protection project, and three were reached by the snowball method. When a study participant expressed an interest in preparing for the interview, I provided the following questions:

- What stories do you remember about your family's history?
- What intergenerational traits can you recognize related to, for instance, emotional expressions, consumption habits, or choices of professions?
- Do you explain your life course in terms of what has happened to your family?
- Are there silences in your family that you want to understand better?

The interviews started with a question: What does the term generational chain spring to your mind? The interviews resembled collaborative remembering (Tan & Fay, 2011, p. 403), in which it was my role to listen and sometimes ask further questions, supporting the interviewees by nodding and repeating keywords as the story progressed. The interplay of memory and material, such as a soft toy given by a nanny, embroidered tablecloths a grandmother used, or the clatter of cutlery at dinner with grandparents, helped study participants trace back episodes from their childhood (Savolainen & Kuusisto-Arponen, 2016; Thompson & Bornat, 2017, p. 201). Throughout the fieldwork, I acted openly as a researcher and shared insights into my research topic. These discussions have inevitably steered the study participants as, in the interviews, they felt encouraged to revisit themes, such as the stigma attached to difference, values in a society, and norms within religious communities that had come up in our earlier conversations. However, people reached by the snowball method also covered the same topics without being led to do so.

Three kinds of story types, which more or less followed the questions given in the call for interviews, emerged from each transgenerational family story told in the study:

1. Stories of exclusion and inclusion depicted the experiences related to the manageability of life, a sense of meaningfulness and belonging, and equal opportunities for participation—or lack of them.
2. In the stories of occlusion, study participants aimed to locate and understand silences in their transgenerational family stories.
3. Study participants interpreted their own and their preceding generations' agency in the stories of agency modifications.

Table 1 gathers background information on the participants' age, pseudonym, sample, family, and their interpretations of the intergenerational traits. A considerable number of the study participants' children in this sample had neurological or neuropsychiatric characteristics diagnosed by a psychiatrist, which gave study participants reason to consider the intergenerational nature of neuropsychiatric traits and neurological disorders (see Ghirardi et al., 2021).

Table 1. Background information about the interviewees.

Interviewee's name and sample	Age	Family members	Presumed intergenerational cause of the experiences of social exclusion	Transformations of agency/projects
Ajla Child protection project	middle-aged	spouse, children	neuropsychiatric traits, violence, substance abuse, physical abnormality	breaking the generational chains
April Child protection project	middle-aged	spouse, children	neurological and neuropsychiatric traits, substance abuse	civil action
Autumn Child protection project	young adult	children	sexual orientation, religion	breaking the generational chains
Blossom Child protection project	young adult	children	not known due to the early family placement	breaking the generational chains
Breeze Snowball sampling	middle-aged	spouse, children	neuropsychiatric and neurological traits, substance abuse	politics, improving the status of families with neurodivergence
Cascade Child protection project	middle-aged	children	neuropsychiatric traits	raising awareness of neurodivergence
Clove Child protection project	middle-aged	spouse, children	substance abuse, neuropsychiatric traits, ethnic minority	breaking the generational chains in one's own life
Coral Child protection project	young adult	spouse, children	traumas, substance abuse, neuropsychiatric traits, religion	raising common awareness of neuropsychiatric traits
Dawn Child protection project	elderly	children	self-diagnostic neuropsychiatric traits, substance abuse, violence	voluntary work in a non-governmental organization
Dove Snowball sampling	middle-aged		mental health issues, suicides	remembering differently from the rest of the family
Forest Pixie Snowball method	elderly	children	religion	art
Hazel Child protection project	middle-aged	children	ethnic minority, neuropsychiatric traits	recognizing and understanding silences in one's own life
Rowan Child protection project	middle-aged	children	emotional coldness	participating in the public debate

EU Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) sets the practices for the collection, processing, and protection of data. A statement of data privacy explained to interviewees how a personal register, including audio recordings, transcriptions, and consents, was handled. Data processing proceeded from recording to transcription and further to anonymizing the data and making it less specific; that is, I simplified, for instance, diagnoses into three broad categories: somatic illnesses, mental health issues, and neuropsychiatric characteristics. After this, I destroyed the recordings and the consent forms. I also prepared an ex-ante evaluation concerning the research process. As the data spanning various generations could have made the interviewees more easily identifiable, I decided not to archive the material.

I had to consider how to report the findings on the hereditary nature of neurodivergence and mental health problems. On the one hand, social scientists have been careful when defining any features as hereditary, as such definitions may stigmatize individuals and expose them to discriminatory practices (Meloni & Müller, 2018; see also Clove's story later in this article). On the other hand, the data ended up including several people with offspring diagnosed with neuropsychiatric traits who wanted to be heard with their characteristics as part of the generational chain and who were displeased with the misconceptions and silences surrounding the matter. Due to these reasons, I decided that it was ethically appropriate, particularly as data was carefully anonymized, to make the possible causes of the experiences of social exclusion more visible and to raise awareness of this topic.

4. Findings

Family stories were multidimensional, individual, and always interpretative, making organizing them challenging. However, they all encompassed all three subtypes of stories: stories of social exclusion and inclusion, stories of occlusions, and stories of agency modifications. In the following section, stories of the experiences of social inclusion involve a brief descriptive analysis of the contents. Stories of occlusions represent interpretations in the spirit of collaborative study partnership. In the case of agency modification, it is my interpretation as a researcher. Because the stories of social inclusion and agency overlapped, I describe the inclusion-related findings under the agency modifications.

4.1. Stories of the Experiences of Social Exclusion

The concept of the experience of social exclusion refers to a sense of non-belonging and meaninglessness, of being unable to manage life, and of having unequal opportunities for participation (Isola et al., 2021). In the transgenerational family stories, their experience of social exclusion was intertwined with feelings of being different, such as growing up in poverty, facing mental health issues in the family, experiencing or witnessing violence, and being bullied or excluded from social circumstances due to physical, ethnic, neuropsychiatric, or neurological characteristics that differed from the assumed norm. The study participants described many episodes of everyday experiences of social exclusion.

Hazel felt a sense of inferiority when professionals insensitively judged the home's cleanliness in the presence of a parent. April, in turn, described a deep-seated experience of social exclusion because institutionalized family care practices had excluded her from the labour market. She was confined to her home "without proper breather and social support," as she said. Dove, Autumn, and Forest Pixie's feelings of otherness were linked to not fitting into the mould of the grand family narrative, which aims to maintain

cohesion in a family (Shore & Kauko, 2017). Cascade and Coral were troubled by the lack of understanding of the needs of diverse learners at school. Rowan, as well as Hazel and Breeze, recognized both personal and structural social exclusion. The former included primarily social workers who approached them insensitively, and the latter the system that offered inappropriate services. Rowan stated: "A person treated with respect succeeds better in goals like substance rehabilitation compared to those being looked down upon."

Clove's story demonstrated social exclusion in its roughest form in the material. She and her children had been discriminated against in the service system, as they were regarded as hopeless cases due to the supposed transgenerational patterns:

> Later, I ordered the paperwork concerning my child. It said something like "the mother comes from a poor family. Problems with attachment have continued from one generation to another." They didn't send my child for [a neuropsychiatric] examination, as they claimed that the problems were caused by intergenerational deprivation.

The family had failed to access the necessary services due to the cognitive bias of the professionals. According to them, it was an attachment disorder, which they interpreted as being too difficult to cure, that caused the problems (see also Meloni & Müller, 2018). Eventually, Clove's child was diagnosed with neuropsychiatric characteristics, and they received support. Clove's experience comes close to what April regretted: the public discourse that frames people with intergenerational disadvantage in representations of negativity, deficiency, and persistence makes it challenging to utilize the persuasive power people may have in order to transform their agency positions (Waller, 2018).

4.2. Occlusions in the Transgenerational Family Stories

Sometimes, and particularly when it comes to marginalized minorities, small transgenerational family stories include blurred, lost, and occluded pieces (Wineburg et al., 2007). Some participants pondered the societal reasons behind the occlusions in family stories. In the following, I recount Dove's, Breeze's, and Coral's interpretations in more detail. Dove was a middle-aged and childless person whose family history included various actively silenced tragedies culminating in death. In order to understand the matter better, Dove started studying their family history, filling in the blanks and bridging the discontinuities. It started to become apparent to them that the ancestors had used their authority as rectors even from beyond the grave, as they had "picked only one story" and "at the same time, controlled my understanding of the family history." There was only one monotonous story available—"the path of diligence and suffering"—that was so pervasive that it seemed to veil something important, Dove thought.

Dove lacked concrete content to mend the inexplicable discontinuities and wanted to "push the fragmentary family story forward." They explained that the story of suffering and industriousness had been necessary for the generation that had experienced the Civil War and two World Wars. Still, Dove wanted to make their own story—their agency project. In the interview, Dove vividly described a documentary they found about the 19th century history of mental hospitals. Converted into the language of agency positions, the documentary helped them move on from the position of other to that of the rector who makes a discovery. The following illustrates this:

> People protect themselves. I am sure that someone [in our family] has also been protected by simply tolerating the difficult issues. I just watched a documentary about the island of Seili [a mental hospital]. Women who reacted to something were taken to Seili. It is not all that far from the current world….Even the researcher [in the documentary] was teary-eyed because people had been taken to Seili for the rest of their lives through no fault of their own. They had been, in a way, defined as mentally ill because they had reacted to something.

From the documentary, Dove gained the insight that perhaps there had been mental illness in the family. The historical compassion demonstrated by the researcher played an essential role as it convinced her of the fact that people had been treated unfairly. Then Dove returned their family's intergenerational speaking patterns of their deceased relatives:

> I feel that they [relatives] haven't wanted or dared to tell what life has really been like. I've thought in a way that these peculiar defence mechanisms [denial] in the generations before me have worked for them, but for the generations after them, it has only caused harm through that closure. Denial. And it's unfair. I don't know how it could have gone differently, but in a way, what worked for them doesn't work for us anymore.

In this respect, Dove's narration comes close to what previous studies on Indigenous people have shown. Silence protects, yet it may deepen the vague experiences of social exclusion of the descendants (Blix et al., 2021; Fernandez, 2018; Matsumoto, 2016, p. 122).

Breeze is a middle-aged student, local politician, and mother of a large family in which all children have been diagnosed with some kind of developmental delay or neuropsychiatric characteristics. She was pleased to note that the topic of autism had appeared in the public discourse:

> There is still not enough discussion about the intergenerational inheritance of neuropsychiatric characteristics. For me, it would be important to know that these features are passed on in the family. That they do not appear out of nowhere.

Breeze's great-grandfather had been registered as a vagrant in the late 19th century. Eventually, he settled down and founded a family, although according to the oral tradition, he occasionally ran away from his family. Since it was important for Breeze to seek confirmation of the neuropsychiatric characteristics running in the family, we went on archival trips to find records of her great-grandfather's periods in mental hospitals. Despite our efforts, we found nothing; but one day at the archive, Breeze started wondering about patient diaries with a separate column for "mental illnesses running in the family." One random entry from the year 1911 read as follows: "The parents are cousins to each other. The mother suffered from gloom in her youth. The father's father was a strange drunkard, an aunt from the father's side drank spirits then hung herself" (Lapinlahden keskuslaitoksen potilaspäiväkirjat, 1841–1922, translation by the author)

Retrospectively, that was when I joined Breeze's agency project as an investigative actor by exploring the underlying explanations for the column of hereditary mental illnesses. After social history investigations, we concluded that the column was linked with preventing social degeneration, a project in which psychiatry and social work engaged in the early 20th century. The doctrine of social degeneration posits that mental

degeneration worsens over four generations and ultimately leads to the extinction of the family branch (Huertas & Winston, 1992; Zeidman, 2020). As more and more people, often politicians and professionals, joined this project as actors, active social exclusion practices increased, such as internment and sterilization, against those who were different from the norm. The project also added new vocabulary, such as "retarded" and "degenerate" (Baynton, 2011, p. 44; Roll-Hansen, 1989). After almost 30 years, in 1940, the column for familial mental illnesses disappeared from the patient diaries. It happened at the same time when a liberal-democratic project gradually took over the fear of social degeneration (Meloni, 2016). Notably, victims of violation have still tended to remain silent (Alaattinoğlu, 2023).

Collaborative study partnership with Breeze produced a backdrop against which to examine the occlusions in the transgenerational family stories, on the one hand, and agency positions of the participants' ancestors, on the other hand. As Dove presumed above, denial had probably worked as a defence mechanism to cope with the position of the other or a concrete means to shield oneself or a family member from potential violent interventions or unequal treatment by society or a community. Coral's root story refers to this as well. She supposed that, in all likelihood, her grandparents had tried to solve some problems related to their experienced social exclusion by joining the Scandinavian revival movement. The ancestors then may have left the package of unresolved issues as a social legacy, as Coral, a neurodivergent but also traumatized person probably in the third generation, describes:

> I guess it's been a bit like that, if you think that the religious community has welcomed a broken person with open hearts and love. God has accepted them the way that they are. There was no need to analyze your problems; you could simply leave them behind. But then—boom boom boom—the problems were passed on to the generations that followed, and maybe they even became more difficult in some sense.

Based on Coral's story, I interpreted that the religious community may have been a source of power for Coral's grandparents, providing recognition and a sense of belonging, while the community outside has looked down on them (McCartney et al., 2021, p. 30). A religious community had redressed power inequality by addressing the actor's position rather than considering them as *an* other.

In conclusion, participants interpreted that being different from the assumed norm had probably caused the intergenerational silences. Preceding generations may have faced loss of power but refused to take the role of *an* other by staying quiet. Hiding differences and joining approving communities may have brought people toward the sources of power, away from the position of the other, and toward the position of the actor (McCartney et al., 2021, p. 30). Religion, for example, has nurtured the otherized people, offering them equal status as actors. However, the probable root cause behind the social exclusionary practices is power inequality, which has remained muted. This has potentially increased occlusions in family stories. Silences and occlusions in family stories have kept people with similar experiences unaware and separated from each other. It may have deepened experiences of social exclusion in later generations, caused confusion, and removed the materials they need for self-understanding.

4.3. Modifications in Agency

Family histories implied that different projects emerged in each historical period. In the late 19th century, agency positions seemed to be shaped by religion, labour issues, cohesive societal norms, and fears of

social degeneration. During the early 20th century, transgenerational family stories implied reflections of the agency positions linked to, for instance, religion, spirituality, cohesive agricultural communities, and the labour movement. Few mentions touched on adult education in the labour movement. At the end of the 20th century, family stories revolved around private life, as participants reminisced about their parents' traits, such as professionalism, artisanship, creative efforts, and creativity. Stories once again transferred to the public sphere when it came to the present day. Study participants mainly dealt with agency positions acknowledging diversity. As actors, they engaged in projects that aimed to break the silence and ignorance related to neuropsychiatric characteristics, mental health issues, and the societal roots of social exclusion.

April, a parent of children with neuropsychiatric characteristics, was particularly annoyed about passive social exclusion emerging from the public discourse. She thought that the discourse, focusing solely on problems, strengthens prejudices and increases othering practices (see also Waller, 2018, p. 233). April claimed that we should also talk about social exclusion being rooted in society's narrow-mindedness, lack of understanding, and inability to acknowledge all types of people. She started the interview as follows:

> When we talk about generational chains, we often talk about something negative. Just yesterday, I read an article about the generational experiences of mothers whose children had been taken into care. There had been violence in the family, and it had been passed on to the next generation and the one after that. I'm just wondering why there is no talk about intergenerational talents and skills passed on from one generation to another and refined along the way.

April was an exception in that her parents and grandparents were proud of the skills running in the family. Stories of intergenerational skills were rare in the material and often related to special powers. Dove and Ajla reminisced with pride that there were healers in their families. Cascade had taken her strong-willed great-grandmother as her role model, although she admitted that her strength was sometimes a bit over the top. It may have been a great-grandmother's attempt to gain recognition and power in her community:

> I've been told that she was desperate to show that she was more religious than anyone else in the village. And everything had to always be in tip-top shape. Dear God, what kind of comparisons this must've led to in the community!

Hazel's stories were coloured with problems: substance abuse, a nomadic existence, and long-term placement of children out of home, among others. Her great-grandparents included art dealers and musicians. Having heard that, I asked if she was also creative. At that point, she made a connection with her true talent, which had been hidden amid her difficulties:

> I remember now! I had a great rapport with my grandmother, who probably supported me throughout the difficulties of my wild youth….I used to go to some [labour class] competitions meant for workers with my granny when I was a child. I was a good singer. I had forgotten about all that. It's probably a skill that has been passed on through the family.

Ajla's descendants had been diagnosed with neuropsychiatric characteristics. Ajla herself was severely traumatized by her parents' substance abuse and the violence she had encountered. In addition to all this,

Ajla was physically abnormal. As a survival tactic, she had also resorted to substance abuse. When she browsed through her parents' photo albums after they had passed away and talked with her relatives, it turned out that the physical abnormality was hereditary and associated with an intergenerational experience of violence. Then, during an estate inventory with various relatives present, she discovered that her grandfather and his family had often moved from one town to another. Based on the oral tradition of those present, she found the probable reasons behind the frequent moves and explains them as follows:

> [One relative] said that one of the grandparents had a temper and tended to get into arguments with people. Well, we suspected this was why they had moved so often. They had gotten into so many difficulties in places where they had stayed that the whole family had eventually decided to pack up and move to the next location. Eventually, the map was full of pins indicating where they had lived. So, that's their story.

The bits and pieces of documentation and family lore provided Ajla with an explanation that, likely, the ancestors did not comply with societal norms, resulting in negative social feedback. Disadvantage had probably also accumulated over the generations. Ajla started to resolve this issue as a part of her rehabilitation process, which constituted one of the first transformations from other to rector in her life. She freed and filled in the occluded parts in the generational chains by reading registers and using her imagination and her relatives' recollections. In her family history, she discovered skilled craftspeople, an ability to predict the future, industriousness, and, above all, good and ordinary things. It turned out that the deviation from the norm was not the only thing defining her as a person and determining her agency positions. Earlier, she had already been in the position of actor in her family's child protection matters by allowing the social worker to be a rector in supporting the family's well-being. Slowly, she became empowered enough to take on the role of rector in her project to break the chain of intergenerational social exclusion. Many other participants also took the rectorship when committing themselves to breaking the intergenerational cycle. "Since the social exclusion has taken generations to develop, it will also take generations to eliminate," Clove reminded.

5. Conclusions

Cultural values, norms, and expectations are prone to silencing those who differ from the assumed norm, do not share these values, or belong to an undervalued marginal. Silence (refraining from joining projects by those in power) might also be one of the few means to cope with experienced social exclusion owing to some difference or deviance (cf. Fernandez, 2018). This study shows that silence, particularly when not consciously chosen as an exercise of power, is a form of passive social exclusion, as it prevents people with similar experiences from joining together to form a source of power and thus take action to redress the inequalities that they face (Arendt, 2018; McCartney et al., 2021).

Even though consciously chosen, silence created by the previous generations has problematic consequences for those who follow. Ancestors had only a few courses to exercise power to protect their families, of which remaining silent was the most salient. Simultaneously, being silent has meant using power over the following family members. Staying quiet has hidden opportunities, hampered people's understanding of themselves, and caused them to lose words for experiences. In this manner, silence increases the epistemic injustice of the descendants (Fivush & Pasupathi, 2019; Fricker, 2007). Silence as a passive form of social exclusion may

deepen and even accumulate inequalities generation by generation. At worst, a muted past may mute the future.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, generations who had experienced social exclusion had limited means to modify their agency positions. Mainly, religious communities and agricultural communities provided somewhat conflicting sources of power for them. Descendants in the 21st century have more opportunities to transform their agency positions, make their silences heard, and join and act together to redress discouraging power dynamics. It results from changing power relations developed in the networks of agency positions during recent times.

When people who experience social exclusion share their experiences and realize that they are not alone in their silence, in other words, when they are not others, they are more capable of recognizing and processing silence. Public spaces and products, such as museums, cultural products, photo albums, and registers, among others, help fill in the blanks in their stories. Non-governmental organizations provide various projects to various people where they can promote objectives essential to them. The Internet, despite increasing polarization, brings people closer and connects those with similar experiences, providing peer support and platforms for persuading on behalf of change. The awareness of the majority that there are underprivileged groups arouses interest in them and makes room for their voices to be heard. In this sense, this study supports Reed and Weinman's (2019, p. 44) claim that, since agency flows in networks and power is thus inevitably distributed around them, it is also possible to bring the practices of social exclusion experienced by groups of underprivileged people into the political agenda in the long run. As Blix et al. (2013) maintain, individual life stories and public narratives affect each other. Suppose we allow people to tell their stories in public—alone and together—the power flows to them momentarily. Once they start a project, they accrue power more permanently. By considering power dynamics and injustices in communities or society, narratives can drive change.

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

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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 Vallgårda (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 (Vallgårda, 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 (Vallgårda, 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 (Vallgårda, 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/GMCF18geTcoH3vxI/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; Schönpflug, 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. Vallgårda (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.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Policy Silences and Poverty in Ireland: An Argument for Inclusive Approaches

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Abstract

Policy documents shape and inform policy but they are not neutral objects. Policy documents can also silence through the exclusion and omission of discrete knowledges transmitted through testimony and lived experience. Even where steps are taken to ensure inclusion, policies can be underpinned by a policy making process that also potentially omits and silences through a narrow conception of how to include the voices of those directly affected by policy in the policy making process. This article will address the phenomenon of "policy silences" in the following ways: Firstly, by taking inspiration from Bacchi's (2009) policy analysis framework—which asks of policy documents "what is the problem represented to be?" (the WPR approach)—and focusing on question no. 4 of the WPR framework—which asks, in part, "where are the silences?"—the Irish policy document *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* will be briefly reviewed. Following this, the approach taken in a creative, arts-based, participatory research project which included, mapping, photography and walking interviews as a means of exploring the lived experiences and hidden geographies of poverty will be presented as a way of demonstrating inclusive research practice and as a means of tacitly problematizing and further critiquing an anaemic understanding of inclusion which potentially creates "policy silences." Finally, an argument for forms of inclusion that go beyond current practices to include, in creative ways, the voices of those directly affected by policy in the policy making process will be put forth.

Keywords

Ireland; policy; policy silences; poverty; social inclusion

1. Introduction: What Is the Problem Represented to Be?

Policy silences have been variously referred to in the literature as enablers of "myth-making" in the context of competing values (Yanow, 1992), as instances of omissions that create barriers (Lavoie, 2013), and as "non-decisions" that, in effect, operate as policy choices (Dean, 2022). Silence in and of itself may also be referred to as an active form of policy. Bacchi's (2009) policy analysis framework (hereafter shortened to the WPR approach) asks: "What's the problem represented to be?" It offers a useful tool for analysis that can be operationalised to uncover policy silences. Fundamentally, the WPR approach suggests that policies contain implicit representations of the "problems" they purport to address. For the purposes of this article, this suggests that problem representations that policies and policy proposals in the area of poverty contain require critical scrutiny to help uncover how poverty is understood and presented within these policies, and to explore how this understanding shapes the way these policies are actioned to tackle poverty. Alongside what policies "say and do," identifying silences or absences within policies is also key to the WPR approach, as noted by Flynn and Whelan (2023, p. 5) who suggest that "this is because if policy documents, as a vehicle for discourse 'form the objects of which speak,' absence becomes as important as presence."

Moreover, the WPR approach encapsulates the normative nature of social policy as a social science that is concerned with change for the better and therefore potentially rooted in a strong concern for social justice:

> A WPR approach has an explicitly normative agenda. It presumes that some problem representations benefit the members of some groups at the expense of others. It also takes the side of those who are harmed. The goal is to intervene to challenge problem representations that have these deleterious effects and to suggest that issues could be thought about in ways that might avoid at least some of these effects. (Bacchi, 2009, p. 44)

The WPR approach provides six questions to guide the analysis process. Bacchi (2009) suggests that although these questions should always be kept in mind, not all of them necessarily need to be answered. The six questions proposed in the WPR approach are as follows:

1. What is the "problem" represented to be in a specific policy or policies?
2. What presuppositions and assumptions underlie this representation of the "problem"?
3. How has this representation of the "problem" come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in the representation of the "problem"? Where are the silences? Can the "problem" be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the "problem"?
6. How/where is this representation of the "problem" produced, disseminated, and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted, and replaced?

This contribution is particularly concerned with question no. 4 of Bacchi's (2009) model to illuminate the absence of testimony based on lived experiences as a form of silence arising from an absence of creative forms of inclusion in contemporary poverty policy in Ireland.

Question no. 4 is, in fact, made up of three questions. For this contribution, the question "where are the silences?" is of particular relevance, though all components of question no. 4 are of interest. In Section 2,

the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020–2025* (hereafter *The Roadmap*) is briefly introduced and scrutinised using the WPR approach with a particular focus on the question "where are the silences?" Following this, and once the suggested silences in the policy document have been elucidated, Section 3 will introduce a piece of participatory research conducted in partnership with All Together in Dignity Ireland (hereafter ATD Ireland) to demonstrate good practice in the context of meaningful inclusion while also explicating the potential for rich and deep insight that creative forms of inclusion can engender by documenting one theme. The article finishes with a brief discussion.

2. Poverty Policy in Ireland: *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020–2025*

The Roadmap (Government of Ireland, 2020) is the policy document that currently sets the policy agenda in the Irish context and the context of poverty. It is underpinned by current EU and international policies. Among these policies are the Europe 2020 Strategy, the European Pillar of Social Rights, and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. *The Roadmap* was chosen for review in this instance for two reasons. First, it represents the centrepiece in the context of Irish policy in the area of poverty and social inclusion. Second, it has at its core much to recommend it as a progressive and inclusive policy. However, this has meant that, as a policy set to run until 2025, it has arguably received little critical scrutiny even though it is arguably failing to deliver in key respects. For example, *The Roadmap* maintains the key aim of reducing consistent poverty in Ireland to below 2%. However, the latest available statistics show us that consistent poverty and all other measured forms of poverty (the at-risk-of-poverty rate and enforced deprivation rate) are on the rise (Central Statistics Office, n.d.). Moreover, the policy indicates an ambition to make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive countries in the world, yet social exclusion arguably continues to characterise the lives of many socially disadvantaged people in Ireland in myriad ways (Whelan, 2023a, 2023b; Whelan & Greene, 2023). With this in mind, questions around how *The Roadmap* sets out to "do" inclusion appear to be apt for examination. In a broader sense, according to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, poverty is considered to be for the entire world, developing and developed" (United Nations, 2016, p. 35). Eradicating poverty is a core policy commitment at the international level and the eradication of poverty in all its forms represents SDG no. 1. In the Irish context, *The Roadmap* emphasises the positive role that policy can and should play in people's lives and moves toward the language of social inclusion:

> Social inclusion is achieved when people have access to sufficient income, resources and services to enable them to play an active part in their communities and participate in activities that are considered the norm for people in society generally. (Government of Ireland, 2020, p. 11)

With this framework as the core of the policy, the ambitions, goals, and targets of *The Roadmap* suggest an expanded approach that encompasses a move away from the traditional income poverty focus and towards building social inclusion. In doing so, it targets specific measures and goals to capture progress across areas like housing, healthcare, childcare, and social integration. In terms of actioning and informing this approach, *The Roadmap* is complemented by a process of inclusionary practice. In this respect, as a live document, the policy itself represents a starting point and is underpinned by the Social Inclusion Forum, a national annual event scheduled to run over the lifetime of the policy. The forum is preceded each year by a mixture of online and in-person themed workshops the outcomes of which are fed into the event and can include testimonies based on lived experience. People with lived experience of various issues connected to social exclusion can and do attend and give testimony at the event itself. The forum is hosted by Community Work

Ireland and the European Anti-Poverty Network Ireland and offers a space for various stakeholders and those with lived experience to come together with officials and ministers from relevant government departments—including the Minister for Social Protection—to listen, discuss, and think about issues of poverty and social exclusion. Arising from the forum, a report is issued that covers what was addressed and details action points concerning what more needs to be done (for an overview of the most recent forum see Department of Social Protection, 2023).

On the surface, this appears to be a stellar example of inclusionary practice in policy-making and, in many respects, it is. There are clear and deliberate efforts here to include multiple voices and perspectives and a process of hearing issues along with the potential to action responses is also built in. However, the critique at the core of this article suggests that inclusion arguably can and should take many forms and modes of expression and while participation in online and in-person workshops coupled with the opportunity to either be represented at or attend the Social Inclusion Forum offers the prospect of inclusion for some, these will not be processes that appeal to everyone. In this respect, the precise nature of inclusion is something that needs to be problematised and, again, this is the crux of the critique offered here. Including voices via online consultation processes or through regular meetings with the community and voluntary sectors is fine; however, these steps, when taken alone, arguably make for a decidedly anaemic practice of inclusion that allows for few creative methods of including those with lived experience. An important aspect of this point is that by expecting people with lived experience of poverty to participate exclusively through the ways described in *The Roadmap*, there is a very real danger of exclusion. The policy-making arena is not an equal space and not everyone who policy-makers might wish to include has the agency to articulate their experiences or simply "add their voice." In this respect, more creative modes of inclusion must be considered.

If we now turn our attention back towards question no. 4 in Bacchi's (2009) WPR approach, what is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the "problem" be thought about differently?

We can begin to answer this question in the following way: Real experiences of poverty are left potentially unproblematic due to a limited conceptualisation of inclusion. This may mean that important voices remain unheard and therefore unseen or silenced. This feeds into "policy silences" in that only those who can take part in the policy process in very specific ways are included. The problem could be thought about more holistically by including diverse forms of inclusion that value multiple ways of knowing.

Bacchi (2009) acknowledges that some "problems" appear difficult to eradicate due to how these are represented. By focusing on question no. 4 of the WPR approach, it can be suggested that to address and shape the future to reduce and eradicate poverty, the approach must continue to be inclusive of all involved in poverty-related work, from policy-makers to non-governmental organisations. Furthermore, the approach must continue to include the first-hand experiences of the poor, since their voices provide a better picture of the hidden dimensions of poverty that help tackle poverty and promote social inclusion. In addition to this, however, inclusion needs to be approached in creative ways and this can include things like art, photography, and film as ways of addressing policy silences and informing policy. Pobal (2023), in their guide to creative modes of inclusion in the context of community engagement and local planning and decision-making, offers the following suggestions for engaging non-policy actors in the process:

- Get people talking and moving;
- Use humour; use art;
- Break into small groups;
- Food is a great way to get people talking informally either before or during an event;
- Make the most of venues, time slots, and facilitators that are familiar to those taking part. This can help put people at ease—a friendly space and approach can help make people feel welcome.

These general suggestions from Pobal (2023) offer a good starting point and ground simple but creative ways of including multiple perspectives. In Section 3, details of a research project that was conducted in partnership with ATD Ireland, and which fostered multiple modes of inclusion, are offered as one way of demonstrating what creative forms of inclusion might look like. The purpose of detailing the study and subsequently offering an overview of some findings is not to comment directly on *The Roadmap*; rather, the purpose is to provide an example of good practice in the context of inclusion while also showing how creative techniques can open up new possibilities for the inclusion of voices in ways that offer rich insights.

3. An Overview of the Research

Ethical approval to conduct this research was granted by the Social Work and Social Policy Research Ethics Committee at Trinity College Dublin. The research documented in the remainder of the article was conducted using arts-based creative methods that included mapping, walking, and photography. Supplementary material for this article, including a full research report, a 10-minute animated short, and a full gallery of maps and photographs, can be accessed on the project website (https://sites.google.com/view/povertytalks).

Following O'Neill and Roberts's (2020) "walking interview biographical method," the research was designed around shared walking as an arts-based, biographical method for conducting research that accesses the lived realities and cultures of individuals and groups, through sensory, spatial, embodied, and affective aspects of lives/lived experiences. The creative application of walking as a biographical method extends critical biographical sociology; it is a deeply engaged, relational way of attuning that evokes knowing and understanding through empathetic and embodied learning, and supports biographical research and critical analysis to explore a sense of our past, present, future and their interconnections, social conditions, social relations, social landscape, and their relevance, as well the participatory and policy-orientated possibilities of biographical research.

The research involved a series of 10 walks with 11 participants, two of whom took part as a couple. Participants were recruited through ATD Ireland exclusively and all of the participants were and remain community activists or friends of ATD Ireland. Almost all of the participants have had significant experiences of income-related poverty, deprivation, and social exclusion. All of the participants agreed and indeed wished to have their first names used in whatever publications arose from the project. The names of those who took part are as follows: Andrew, Jimmy and Christina (who took part as a couple), Gavin, Long, Ann Marie, Kye, Philip, Paul, Terence, and Lorraine.

4. Mapping, Walking, and Photography

Participants were asked to "make a map" of a walk they would like to take ideally incorporating a route they saw as meaningful to them in the context of experiences of poverty. Each "mapper" had situational authority, meaning they could choose where to go before and during the walks; maps did not have to be followed strictly or exclusively. Walks could be vigorous or gentle to foster participation from people of all walking abilities. While it should be noted that walking is not a method that will suit everybody, walks were intended to be less about covering distance and more about being in space (O'Neill & Roberts, 2020). All of the walks took place in various parts of Dublin city (see Figures 1–4). Specifically, three of the walks (with Andrew, Gavin, and Kye) took place on the south side of the city centre in the Dublin 2 area, taking in Grafton Street, St. Stephen's Green, Merrion Square, Nassau Street, Pearse Street, and the environs surrounding Trinity College Dublin. Two more walks took place in Ballymun (with Long and Anne Marie) in Dublin 9. Five further walks (with Jimmy and Christina, Paul, Philip, Terence, and Lorraine) took place in the north inner city and city centre area crossing in and around Dublin 1 and including areas as diverse as the North Quays, Talbot Street, O'Connell Street, Mountjoy Square, Portland Row, Granby Row, Dorset Street, and Sheriff Street up towards Eastwall. For clarity, Dublin is divided into 24 postal districts (although there is no D19) with the even-numbered postal districts (including D6W) being generally on the south side of the River Liffey and odd-numbered districts being on the north side of the River Liffey. The exception to this is the area including and surrounding Phoenix Park, which, while on the north side of the Liffey, forms part of the Dublin 8 district (all areas mentioned can be viewed by conducting a simple search in Google Maps and selecting "Streetview"). During the walks, the researcher entered into a conversational interview with the participants about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings about poverty. The interviews were structured only through the use of occasional prompts and did not follow a dedicated interview schedule. The researcher took part as an active conversant. The walk route and landmarks encountered also often stimulated conversation, interpretation, and insight leading to questions from the researcher and specific observations on the part of participants.

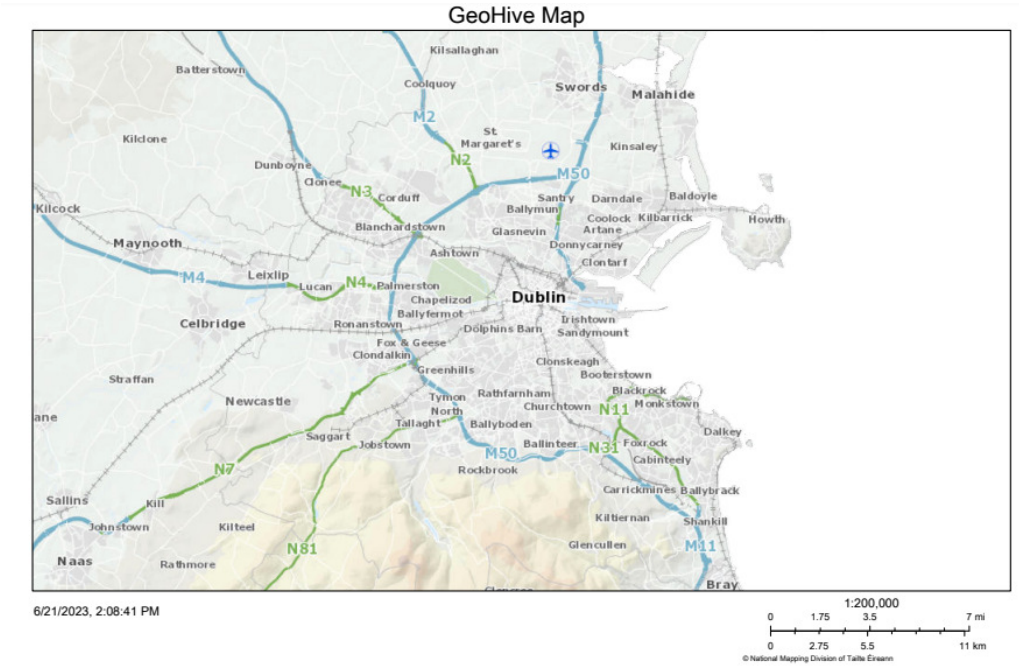

Figure 1. A map of Dublin city and the greater Dublin area.

Figure 2. Dublin 2 and the surrounding areas.

Figure 3. Ballymun and the surrounding areas.

Figure 4. The north inner city and city centre area.

5. Analysis

The analysis and coding process of the transcribed walking interviews made use of NVivo 12 and was inspired by interpretive phenomenological analysis techniques and, in particular, by the concept of a "double hermeneutic" (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 53, emphasis added) which suggests that the researcher:

> Is trying to get close to the participant's personal world…but…cannot do this directly or completely. Access depends on, and is complicated by, the researcher's own conceptions; indeed, these are required in order to make sense of that other personal world through a process of interpretative activity. Thus, a two-stage interpretation process, or a *double hermeneutic*, is involved. The participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world.

This is an important point and one that should be borne in mind concerning the theme reported further on in that while participants were given the opportunity to reflect on the content of the various themes, ultimately what is presented represents the researcher's interpretation of how the research participants interpret their own world.

6. An Inclusive and Participatory Approach

The research had participatory principles at its core and drew from ATD Ireland's (2022) toolkit for conducting participatory research as a source of guidance. In particular, the concept of merged or the merging of knowledge underpins what is presented in this report. In terms of process, this has taken the

following form: Consultation from the outset; collaboration and ongoing opportunities for participant input throughout; and due consideration given to ownership and control of what is produced (ATD Ireland, 2022).

Working in partnership in this way meant that the research was designed in consultation with ATD Ireland at the outset and that opportunities to review and reflect on the research process and the various research outputs were continually made available to ATD Ireland as research partners and to the research participants as co-producers of the work. In practical terms, this meant meeting in person to discuss and review progress while providing opportunities for feedback on drafts of various outputs including the contents of this article which will have been seen and read by the research participants and therefore partly reflects their thoughts.

7. Applying Creative Methods to Foster Inclusion

7.1. Why Walking

In the first instance, as part of the codesign of the project walking was suggested by the research participants as an alternative to traditional qualitative interviews and was universally endorsed by the researcher, the research partners, and the participants. The possibilities of walking as a way of capturing meaning and as a vehicle through which a discussion on poverty and social inclusion could take place was immediately apparent. This is particularly true given that the research participants were offered the opportunity to choose where they would like to walk and so had an immediate ownership of how they would like to frame their thoughts and contribution. In this respect, walking can offer a frame for experience and can help conjure memories that may echo in a landscape while not appearing on any maps.

Many of the research participants understood the prospect of space being inhabited by ghosts, echoes, and potentials instinctively so that, for example, Andrew, carefully curated his walk to make deliberate and conscious observations on poverty and policy which he threaded through his own story. Walking through Grafton Street (an affluent shopping street) Andrew was able to illustrate contrasts and divides as he saw them, later passing Dáil Éireann, the Irish parliament, Andrew made direct connections between experiences of poverty, his own and those of others, with what he saw as failures of government policy. Kye took the opportunity of walking to tell the story of two people whom he loved and to whom he was close, taking in several landmarks in a journey that marked those same people's progression across the city, a city in which they struggled for survival, a city etched with pain that does not show on a map. Joy does not show on maps either. Jimmy and Christina took part as a couple and used the opportunity of being in space to tell the story of how they met, supported one another, became a couple, and later married. Their story revolved around a place, The Granby Centre, which is run by the Salvation Army and opened in Dublin in 1994. Poverty and hardship have been a feature of Jimmy and Christina's story, it has also been part of what brought them together. There are many more examples that demonstrate how walking lent depth and meaning to the interview process from across the dataset. Bearing this out, Kinney (2017, p. 2) notes that:

> In the participatory walking interview the route chosen by the participant to walk is not necessarily representative of a route the participant normally follows, nor does it represent the participants' usual routines or habits. The researcher accompanies the participant on a walk around a geographical location that the participant has selected which is related to the topic being investigated….The purpose of this

> format is to enable the researcher to access the participants' attitudes and knowledge about a specific geographical area.

This additional layer of access that came through being in space and walking along together was a strong feature of the walks that underpin the theme that is presented further on and many insights that arguably would not have been possible in the context of a traditional interview emerged throughout the walks through connections with sound, visuals, the built environment, and the relevance of landmarks. It can also be noted that walking while conducting an interview undoubtedly had an equalising effect and did much to address the power imbalances that can sometimes characterise the traditional interview and this again speaks to the potential that exists in creative modes of inclusion. In this respect, Kinney (2017, p. 3) further notes that:

> Walking alongside a participant is regarded as an inclusive process compared with the traditional sit-down interview because it is viewed more as a partnership, thus reducing power imbalances. It allows participants to feel more comfortable with the research because it is being conducted in a geographical location that they are familiar with.

This latter point about inclusion is important and ultimately foreshadows aspects of the discussion that concludes this article, and which suggests fostering conceptualisations of inclusion for policy making.

7.2. Mapping and Photography

In their photo essay with Faye, O'Neill and McHugh (2017, p. 207) note that "using walking methods, sociologically, alongside arts-based…interventions (in this case photography), participatory collaborations between the arts and social research might make a significant contribution to better knowledge and understanding."

Undoubtedly the photography that formed part of this project added an additional and wholly relevant texture and form of data which has had the effect of also lending additional understanding. So, for example, Paul who photographed Aldborough House (see Figure 5) saw the abandoned and decaying spectre of this landmark in north inner-city Dublin as symbolic of the abandonment and decay of this part of the city in general. Paul also sees the potential asset to the area that Aldborough House could be and sees this as analogous to the potential of the area itself if the right supports and policies were there to help realise it. Revisiting Paul's photographs in the context of his testimony lent a visual component that deepened the insights offered by Paul. Philip's photograph of the gate of Mountjoy prison (see Figure 6) tells a story of the history of the city that has been woven into myth and literature (and the auld triangle, went jingle, jangle) while also telling part of his own story, the prison being a place where Philip spent many years of his life. There are many more examples from across the collection of images that make real and tangible connections with the experiences of the photographers, and these add depth and nuance to the experiences and observations recounted in the walking interviews demonstrating that modes of inclusion can be creative while still being impactful with clear implications for policy.

Figure 5. Aldborough House, 27–28 Portland Row, Dublin 1.

Figure 6. An entrance to Mountjoy Prison is painted with a piece of art that references Brendan Behan's *The Auld Triangle*.

8. A Theme From the Research

Finally, to give a sense of the kinds of deep and nuanced insights that can emerge from inclusive and creative research, a theme from the findings is elucidated. What follows is one of many themes constructed by the researcher in collaboration with the research participants. Nonetheless, it consolidates the value of using creative forms of inclusion while also demonstrating the policy-orientated possibilities.

8.1. Territorial Stigma and Socioeconomic Discrimination

If poverty can be characterised, in part, as a lack of options leading to social exclusion and potentially to a range of other social problems, there are also aspects of what it means to be poor, to be impoverished, and to come from socioeconomically deprived communities that can further exacerbate an already diminished sense of self or sense of community. ATD Ireland have long campaigned toward the censure and eradication of socioeconomic discrimination, which they describe in the following terms:

> Socio-economic discrimination can occur in many forms and can be experienced both individually and collectively. It is often felt within public services, such as in healthcare, housing and accommodation, when seeking employment, education, social welfare or with the police. Those with a lived experience also report everyday incidences of discrimination as a result of their accent, clothing, haircut, address, employment status, etc. People report not being able to get a taxi to their home, being followed around in stores or being refused service in a restaurant. The stigma and shame that results from discrimination has huge effects on mental health and wellbeing. In addition, it can also enormously restrict a person's life and opportunities. (ATD Ireland, 2023)

Much of what ATD Ireland describes here will be recognisable from the data that follows. However, there is testimony within the data that demonstrates ATD Ireland's description in even starker terms. In this respect, ATD Ireland's description also denotes the importance of place by noting that socioeconomic discrimination can be felt collectively or can lead to differential treatment such as not being able to get a taxi home. This speaks to the territorial stigma which Meade (2021, pp. 191–192), describes as "a phenomenon that both expresses and normalizes the othering and the negative construction, representation, and government of certain geographical communities and places."

Meade's (2021) observation is instructive in that it moves the focus beyond an understanding of territorial stigma that is purely about the "stigmatised territories" to suggest that the stigma attached to places does not emerge in a vacuum and that stigmatisation of place is not a neutral act. Rather, people and places are othered "somehow" and perhaps even by desig; moreover, this practice is normalised through representation and governance. Under the next number of headings, territorial stigma and socioeconomic discrimination are explored starting with territorial stigma before moving on to socioeconomic discrimination to show how the stigma associated with a place can manifest beyond the geographical boundaries of those places.

8.2. Territory

Many of the research participants were able to draw very direct links between place or territory and the limitations that can arise through associations with stigmatised territories. In the following excerpt, Long talks about the stigma of place and what this can mean for young people who come from Ballymun where Long lives:

> Many young people, many, they grow up, they will go to other country, will go to the cities, other places, to build a new life, because the Ballymun, the reputation, generation to generation, is bad and, you know, difficult to change the people's thoughts….When you live in Ballymun, they think not much future, young people.

Long is very clear here. He sees a significant association between Ballymun as a place and what people can expect in their lives. Coming from Ballymun means coming from a place that has a negative reputation, something which Long suggests is immutable. Therefore, if people from Ballymun want to "build a new life" the only viable option is to leave, to leave the place and the stigma associated with it, to go to somewhere new so that they can effectively be from somewhere new and have a new address. Long is interpreting the effect of his surroundings here by focusing on what he has observed over a long period of living in Ballymun. However, for others, interpretations were located in both observation and personal biography. Gavin for example, who grew up in Darndale Dublin 17, has strong convictions about how Darndale as an area has been let down by the state through poor governance and a lack of basic infrastructure coupled with strong feelings about the effects that negative representations of places like Darndale can have for those who live there: "There was no infrastructure, there was no jobs, any, like you couldn't even apply for a job cause soon as they knew you were from Darndale like they wouldn't employ you."

Gavin's words here demonstrate that the conditions that exist in a deprived community coupled with how that community is generally perceived work together and can have profound consequences for community members. Gavin offers deep insight through his testimony on the stigmatising and discriminating effects that can accumulate beyond the geographically bounded regions of a community or area. In doing so, he draws attention to a moral dimension, in this case, the moral economy of representation:

> Now we're all unique individuals, we're all unique human beings, like none of us have the same fingerprint do you know what I mean, like none of us think the same, we're all unique, but because we're all in a community we're all tarnished with the same brush…and then you have like the media, who want to slander us, who want to come along with their articles and just keep slandering and slandering the community….I inherited the stigma of that community straight off the bat. Straight off the bat, I inherited the whole stigma [and] everything that came along with it.

This powerful testimony from Gavin captures the essence of what it means to be stigmatised through an association with place; to be denied your individuality, your uniqueness because of your address, to be represented in a way that feels slanderous, that tarnishes. For Gavin, there is no rational or moral argument to be had here. Being born into or otherwise living in an impoverished, disadvantaged, or potentially stigmatised area is not an immoral act, yet it can come with an unwanted inheritance which, sadly, can determine much. That same unwanted inheritance can be mobile and can attach to persons beyond the geographic boundaries of the community, ultimately manifesting in socioeconomic discrimination.

8.3. Habitus

French sociologist and anthropologist, Pierre Bourdieu used the concept of "habitus" as a way to begin to understand how social conditions can reproduce themselves and this is an instructive concept in the context of socioeconomic discrimination. Loic Wacquant, collaborator and friend of Bourdieu, describes habitus as being "the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them" (Wacquant, 2005, p. 316).

In considering what shapes habitus, Bourdieu (1984, p. 170) notes that:

> Habitus is neither a result of free will, nor determined by structures, but created by a kind of interplay between the two over time: dispositions that are both shaped by past events and structures, and that shape current practices and structures and also, importantly, that condition our very perceptions of these.

In simple terms, where you come from, both in the geographical sense and with respect to your social class, is important; it helps to shape you and is often reflected in how you dress, talk, walk, and generally present yourself to the world. Habitus is particularly recognisable through the plain fact that people from different communities, even where those communities are not spatially located very far apart, talk differently in terms of accent and phraseology, perhaps dress differently, perhaps even walk differently, consume differently, and so on. Habitus can also be reflected onto persons in the context of how they are perceived and treated, particularly when they venture beyond the geographically bounded confines of their community. In the following excerpt, Lorraine talks about feeling as though she was being treated differently in the workplace because of her accent:

> I do feel I was treated differently and it made me even, when I started going in, trying to change the way I spoke and—which is something that I just refuse to do now because this is the way I speak, I don't know any other way, you know what I mean?

Lorraine's testimony here captures an important texture of socioeconomic discrimination. In the past, she has felt that she was treated differently because of her accent or the words she used. She is also very conscious that this kind of discrimination is much more likely to occur "outside of the area," that is, outside of her immediate community. She clearly recognises these circumstances as circumstances in which discrimination is taking place as she tries to temper how she is received by adjusting her accent before finally refusing to do so. In this act of reclamation, Lorraine shifts the burden of discrimination away from herself and locates it in those who would treat her differently in the first place: "This is the way I speak, I don't know any other way"; with this statement, Lorraine seems to be asking why should anyone be treated differently because of that.

Gavin is also able to look outward and shift the moral responsibility for socioeconomic discrimination away from himself. In the first instance, Gavin talks about being perceived differently because of his appearance and how he presents himself:

> I'm walking up Grafton street, like, the clothing I choose to wear, like, people can just take it, "oh tracksuit, tracksuit, tracksuit," and then you're sort of, you're looked upon as if you're from a completely different class, based off your image….You can walk into that Starbucks over there, yeah, and just the way I'm dressed, just the way I talk, people are going to look at you. And it's always people from the upper class. And you do get that and it can be blatant sometimes and all it can be is a looking you up and down by the eyes? That's still discriminating. That's just, like, "who are you?"

Gavin recognises what he sees as very open and even blatant discrimination. In this next excerpt, Gavin is also unequivocal about the emotional impact that being perceived in the way he described can have. Yet, he

removes the burden from himself and even manages to empathise with those who would treat him differently: "Oh, you feel it. And do you know what it hurts but, then again, you have to realise it's not you who's the issue. If they're setting out to hurt people, they're probably hurting as well or something."

Comfortable in his own skin, Gavin is able to deflect and look outward. He feels as though he is sometimes treated differently, and this can hurt. However, he refuses to take on the burden of how he is treated and refuses to locate it within himself. Gavin is also very conscious of class and conscious of the reality that for him, being discriminated against or treated differently comes, in the main, from a different place in society and from people with a very different lived reality.

9. Discussion and Conclusion

Poverty is clearly a problem and one that runs contrary to both international and domestic ambitions, it can remain abstract when thought about only in statistical terms. The testimony gathered in the course of a series of walking interviews, examples of which are given in the previous paragraphs, makes concrete many aspects of poverty that would otherwise remain abstract, and remain "hidden in statistics" (Whelan, 2023b). The use of walking, mapping, and photography offers modes of inclusion that go beyond those commonly used in the policy-making process to offer new textures and deep insights to inform and enhance policy. The overarching goal of the research documented here has been to champion lived experience in the area of poverty as a vital component of a holistic evidence base and to tangibly demonstrate the real value of creative modes of inclusion. Approaching *The Roadmap* using the WPR approach (Bacchi, 2009)—focusing on the question "where are the silences?"—it can be suggested that the voice and testimony of those directly affected by poverty can remain unheard via an anaemic conception of inclusion and that not enough has been done in contemporary poverty policy to surface these voices. Having focused in the main here on *The Roadmap* as the dominant policy suite covering poverty in the Irish context, this is not to suggest that the policy neglects the idea of including those with lived experience and those who work with people experiencing poverty completely, but rather it is an acknowledgement that the policy-making arena is not an equal space and not everyone who policy-makers might wish to include has the agency to articulate their experiences in the ways currently being undertaken. In this respect, more creative modes of inclusion must be considered and social policies in the areas of poverty need to develop a more expansive conception of consultation and inclusion with a view to surfacing and centrally placing the voices of those directly affected by poverty in the policymaking frame. Expansive in this context therefore refers to how voices are included in ways that are creative, substantive, and meaningful. So, for example, inclusion might take the form of direct consultation, but it might also include the use of art, photography, workshops, or other creative processes that can help policy-makers connect with the lived experiences of people and people to connect their lives to policy.

While it must be acknowledged that not all research or policy initiatives are suited to such approaches, it must also be acknowledged that where they are, the rewards are potentially incalculable. Using creative methods such as walking and photography and coproducing research with participants who are afforded multiple modes of expression allows for a sense of investment and ownership on the parts of all involved. Focusing on the methods described behind the research described in this article, such approaches are not fully without risk (walking is generally riskier than sitting still, dogs may follow you and buskers may interrupt you) yet being outdoors and in space with someone while engaging in a conversation is also inherently

rewarding and a very natural setting that induces openness and informality. Walking as a method for conducting research can access the lived realities and cultures of individuals and groups through affective aspects of lives/lived experiences (O'Neill & Roberts, 2020). Moreover, maps do not always capture social geography, therefore offering a research participant "situational authority" by allowing them to curate a walk offers the possibility for connections, echoes, and observations to shape the texture of an interview and elicit rich insight. Returning to ATD Ireland's toolkit for conducting participatory research, this has meant a purposeful process that has included consultation from the outset, collaboration and ongoing opportunities for participant input throughout, and due consideration given to ownership and control of what is produced.

When and where possible then, researchers should engage in participatory research as a way of coproducing knowledge and policy-makers should use these processes to shape and enhance policy. Arts-based creative methodologies can help to make the policy-making process accessible and meaningful for participants and should be considered when safe and practicable. Alongside offering the potential for rich and meaningful connection and all-party investment in the process, inclusive policy-making processes also have emancipatory potential and offer the prospect of diffusing power imbalances.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Systemic Silencing Mechanisms in Autism/Autistic Advocacy in Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

This article reveals how systemic ableism operates within grassroots organizations in Ontario, formulating a normative standard for being an autistic person. In-depth interviews were conducted with 50 participants in the years 2021 and 2022, triangulated with document analysis from 2018 and 2022. The study participants consisted of autistic adults, parents, disability advocates, organizers of grassroots organizations, social workers, policy insiders, and academics. The findings show that most autistic adults are pressured to choose sides, either to join autism advocacy that is parent-led or expert-led or to become self-advocates in autistic advocacy. This article offers an original finding that the value policy of pro/anti-ABA of two grassroots organizations in the field of autism/autistic advocacy contributes to identity politics. Ableism operates through Pierre Bourdieu's symbolic power, excluding autistic adults who do not fit into these two main categories of advocacy. Social oppression becomes multi-directional as identity politics takes the stage and diverts from the original goals of social inclusion in advocacy. The concept of a grey area is introduced in theory building, to trouble the essentialist categories of autism/autistic advocacy and invite readers to commit to disability solidarity by moving beyond the dichotomy of sameness and difference.

Keywords

ableism; autism; disability politics; grassroots advocacy; identity politics

1. Introduction

Ableism serves as a form of epistemological knowledge and a "way of being" that constructs a human's identity (Campbell, 2009, p. 28). At the core of ableism is the ontological division of the "able/not-able" (Campbell, 2009, p. 7) and it manifests from belief systems, practices, and structures that favor the ideal human (Campbell,

2009, p. 5). Ableism is not simply a manifestation of "fear of the unknown"; it forms distaste for disability, so much so that disability is cast away to be terminated and to constitute the "unthought" (Campbell, 2009, p. 13). Being the pioneer of modern philosophy, Locke (1982, p. 36) instills a normative divide between those who qualify as citizens and those who lack reason. Locke (1982, p. 36) proclaims that "lunatics and idiots are never set free from the government of their parents" because they are unable to reason. Ableism operates from the cradle to the grave in our lives, dictating the ways to succeed in "abled-ness," with fantasy stories on excellence and flawlessness, forcing a divide between the normal and the abnormal (Campbell, 2009, p. 197). Like Bourdieu's (1989) "common-sense thinking," ableism is systemic and deeply ingrained in our everyday lives. The logic of practice is represented in the equation: [(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 137). Symbolic violence is actualized as agents conform to their "schemes of classification" without awareness that social conditioning has shaped their habitus (p. 81). Classifications produce divisions, wherein groups are separated by polarized concepts (p. 537), such as "high/low," forming the foundation of practices drawn from schemes (p. 209).

Ableism triumphs across generations by symbolic violence, segregating disabled people from society. Symbolic power lies in the legitimization as well as the delegitimization process, thereby reproducing inequality (Bourdieu, 1989). In line with the goal of normalization, applied behavioral analysis (ABA) gains legitimacy as it offers a false promise that "there *can* be life without autism" (McGuire, 2016, p. 223). Broderick (2022, p. 165) asserts that ABA gains power politically and economically by feeding into the "politics of hope, of truth, and of fear." In Ontario, ABA has been established as one of the "core clinical services" of the Ontario Autism Program (OAP) since the 2000s (Autism Ontario, 2023; Government of Ontario, 2022). Pyne (2020) posits that ABA is coined as science in Ontario through "affective and intellectual strategies," albeit insufficient evidence. Broderick (2022, p. 259) further adds that ABA discourses of "science, ethics, rights- and evidence-based" go beyond ideology because the "autism industrial complex" (AIC) materializes and preys on autistic bodies. The ABA industry constitutes a "biocapital" in which autism and capitalism are co-dependent on each other, commodifying and consuming autistic bodies (Broderick, 2022, p. 244). The AIC commodifies every aspect of life, from the media and the education system to producing bodies that satisfy normalcy standards (Broderick, 2022, p. 247).

Roscigno (2019) explains that the biopolitical power of ABA manifests itself as a "philanthropic venture" essential to the social inclusion of autistic people. As a result of framing ABA as the solution to the recovery of normalcy (Lovaas, 1987), stakeholders in the autism community, such as parents and medical professionals, see their lobbying actions as not only justified but kind (Broderick, 2022, p. 252). Indeed, McGuire (2016, p. 93) explains that Foucault's governmentality operates through the "gaze of biomedicine and the gaze of advocacy," imprisoning both the advocate and the autistic child. Advocates who do not follow the normative form of "advocacy's war on autism" (McGuire, 2016, p. 24) risk social exclusion, whereas autistic bodies, in worst-case scenarios, may face death (p. 102). Thus, a "good advocate" is quick to detect the "warning signs" of autism (p. 101), advocate for interventions for autistic people, and raise public awareness that autism is a fearful "thing" (p. 10).

Broderick and Ne'eman (2008) attest that the dominant form of autism narratives renders the "upside down perception of the self-advocate narrative as secondary," estranging groups into two. As an autistic self-advocate, Sinclair's (1993) transformative piece *Don't Mourn for Us* opposed the stigma that autism is death, and his speech was directed against mainstream parents' portrayal of autism in the 1980s and 1990s

(Pripas-Kapit, 2020). Sinclair (2005) explains that while a passive autistic individual might be accepted as a member of groups of the status quo, autistic people mobilized in groups have been seen as a threat to "the interests of parents and professionals." Sinclair (2005) outlines three main tactics used by such groups to delegitimize autistic voices, which include (a) questioning the legitimacy of membership, (b) labeling higher-functioning autistics as unique cases that do not represent the majority, and (c) asserting that autistic activists are incompetent in knowing what is best for themselves. While medical deficit framings of autism originate from non-autistic people, neurodiversity-affirming narratives arise from autistic people and their allies (Broderick & Ne'eman, 2008). Broderick (2022, p. 187) asserts that the introduction of ethics in ABA was motivated by the industry's desire to manage associated economic and legal risks and less of a commitment to bioethics. Overall, current literature presents a dichotomous autism/autistic advocacy, with autism treatment and intervention being the most contentious topic with little agreement among stakeholders of autism communities (Carey et al., 2020, p. 105). While McGuire (2016, p. 65) briefly refers to the collaboration between autism and autistic advocacy, namely the Autism Society of America (ASA) and the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), little is known about alternative forms of advocacy.

This article fills the research gap of going beyond the binaries of autism/autistic advocacy and offers an original finding that the value policy of pro/anti-ABA in two grassroots autism/autistic advocacy organizations (denoted as organizations A and Z) contributes to identity politics. Although it is not the scope of this article to discuss the nature of ABA or its effectiveness, ABA is found to be the major disagreement between the organizations and is critical in the discussion of ableism. It is important to note that the value policy of pro/anti-ABA is inclusive of being pro/anti-intensive behavioral intervention (IBI). IBI is an intensive derivative based on ABA principles (Bark, 2016). First, this article seeks to answer the research question of *how* the voices of autistic adults are respected or disrespected in the field of autism/autistic advocacy. Then, it shows *why* Bourdieu's logic of practice is maintained by structural powers propagated by ableism, prioritizing some voices over others. As part of disability justice, this article is motivated to reveal the silencing mechanisms, with the hope of providing informed knowledge to enhance the decision-making power of autistic adults.

2. Methods

2.1. Case Study Research

Case study research is conducted as the research question is explanatory and it examines a contemporary phenomenon that is not within the researcher's control (Yin, 2018, p. 3). Although case study research is a pluralistic mode of inquiry, explanatory questions are deemed most suitable because processes are tracked across time (p. 10). Most importantly, such a methodology is flexible as it caters to both realist and relativist perspectives (p. 16). This article adopts the latter approach as it examines the different perspectives held by participants. Case studies enable the researcher to utilize a diverse source of evidence, for example, documents and artifacts (p. 12), and are not restricted to a particular type of inquiry (p. 21). The multiple-case studies consist of three cases in Ontario: (a) organization A, (b) organization Z, and (c) stakeholders of the larger disability community (e.g., policymakers, educators, social workers, union leaders, leaders of disability groups, and academics). Organizations A and Z are chosen as cases because they are examples of a polar type. In searching for alternative ways of advocacy, stakeholders of the larger disability community are included as a third case. Yin's (2018, p. 57) logic of replication is applied to the

three cases. The rationale of this research design is to provide analytic generalizations from an iterative process of constant comparison of data and theoretical propositions. For example, original theoretical propositions are re-examined when unexpected findings occur, and data collection continues after a redesign (p. 57). Data collection stops when theoretical saturation is complete, in which no new knowledge is generated from further data collection.

2.2. Research Process

This study begins with exploring the lived experiences of autistic adults and the meanings they prescribe to the construct of disability. The original inclusion criteria pertained to working autistic adults (verbal and non-verbal) in Ontario, Canada, between ages 18 and 64, who were in the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). A social worker provided support with purposive sampling as I was a volunteer during my undergraduate studies. The preliminary findings from the in-depth interviews with 11 autistic adults suggested that autistic adults receive little support once they turn 18. For example, the OAP ends at age 18 (Government of Ontario, 2019), and 58.2% of autistic adults are on the ODSP for income support (Stoddart et al., 2013). Historically, autistic adults on welfare in Ontario are under-researched and underfunded. The dominant discourse on ODSP focuses on highlighting recipients' limited functionality, motivation, and stability to exit social assistance, with little regard for structural oppression (see Lahey et al., 2021). Similarly, the medical model posits that the abnormality lies within the individual, rendering disability a personal tragedy, marked by its deviation from the norm (Ferrante & Joly, 2016, p. 156). The rationale of recruiting autistic adults on ODSP was to counter such symbolic violence because the legitimization of research has continued to benefit the discourse enforced by the medical model, which produces an "ableist/saneist" avenue as experts enjoy the privileged distance from the subjects (Nishida, 2016, p. 152). As an AuDHD researcher, the objective of the research design lies in closing the gap between philosophical arguments and the actual reality faced by disabled people.

The sampling process is a reflective procedure that follows an iterative data analysis process. Theoretical sampling followed after earlier stages of interviews, in which later participants were selected in accordance with new, emerging research questions. As the research design is inductive, I did not expect to find silenced autistic voices. In the exploration of social in/exclusion and disability advocacy, the inclusion criteria were expanded to include parents and autistic adults in advocacy. The division between autism/autistic advocacy, with ABA being the biggest disagreement, was shared by the participants. Purposive snowball sampling was conducted; some contacts were introduced to me, while others were referred to and approached by me. I reached out to other stakeholders (e.g., personal support workers, social workers, policymakers) of the larger disability community through recommendations. Having a diverse group of participants (see Table 1) offers insights into solidarity power despite differences in transversal politics and is beneficial in understanding how agents could face oppression on multiple levels (Cutajar & Adjoe, 2016, p. 511). Consistent with disability advocacy in Ontario, most autistic people are located across the province and are connected through the internet because most disabled people do not have the privilege to commute. It has always been a concern that research fails to reach non-verbal autistics due to accessibility issues (see Williams & Park, 2023). Engagement with non-verbal autistics was possible in this study through interviews by email and Facebook text messaging, in which participants choose the communication channel that best fits their needs.

Table 1. Study participants.

Study participants	*N* = 50
Academics	3
Autistic adults	19
Autistic parents	3
Non-autistic parents	6
Current and former leaders, organizers, or coordinators of autism advocacy groups	6
Current and former leaders, organizers, or coordinators of autistic advocacy groups	6
Current or former union representatives	3
Disability employment specialists	2
Leaders, organizers, or coordinators of disability advocacy groups	15
Personal support workers, social workers	3
Policymakers and insiders	5
SEN Educators	3

Note: Some participants partake in multiple roles.

2.3. Trustworthiness

According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), four criteria should be evaluated to assess the findings, and criteria include (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. To enhance credibility in qualitative research, I adopted the strategies of (a) continuous engagement with participants over time, (b) triangulation, and (c) member checking. Continuous engagement with participants was important to build rapport. An empathetic and safe atmosphere was established with non-judgmental and attentive listening, where all interviews were conducted one-on-one. Second, multiple sources of evidence (see Table 2) were collected to provide a contextual background for the phenomenon as it exists in the real world (Yin, 2018, p. 127). The Hansard transcripts provide rich contextual information detailing policymakers' responses to autism/autistic advocacy groups over time. The statements and news releases published by the Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services (MCCSS) are useful for cross-checking data. After changes to the OAP were announced by MCCSS on February 6, 2019, stakeholders of autism advocacy relayed their grievances to members of the provincial parliament (MPP). For example, a recurring pattern highlights that ABA/IBI was life-changing for parents, and parents could not afford the costs under the new OAP. On February 20, 2019, MPP Ms. Jill Andrew said: "I should also say that one of the parents said that this new plan from the government is a 'death sentence'…a 'death sentence for their children' " (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2019a). On February 21, 2019, MPP Ms. Andrew Horwath stated:

> With therapy and treatment, children who seem to be in their own worlds are able to communicate. They're able to feed themselves. They're able to tell their own parents that they love them. No parent should have to choose between selling their home and denying that to their children. (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2019b)

Following uproar against the new OAP within autism advocacy, the Autism Advisory Panel was announced on May 30, 2019 (MCCSS, 2019b). The OAP Advisory Panel Report, published in October 2019, is a relevant document for triangulation as well. The public information available on organizations A and Z's websites was

reviewed to verify participants' stances towards ABA. Member-checking on the themes drawn from individual interviews was completed with 37 participants, and 13 participants did not participate in member-checking as they were preoccupied. Some participants appreciated member-checking as a space for clarification and reflection while some felt that it was redundant because their perspectives have not changed.

The criterion of transferability is addressed by the "thick description" drawn in this study (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The reader can evaluate whether the findings could be applied to other white colonialist neoliberal capitalist settings. For dependability, the research process is discussed, showing how explanation building occurs (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). For example, preliminary data suggested that nondisabled people did not have the lived experiences of disabled people and thus might not commit to anti-ableism. Later findings highlight that disabled people could also experience internalized ableism. Thus, the theoretical proposition of nondisabled people as an in-group with dominant power and disabled people as an out-group was rejected. Lastly, confirmability is achieved as the findings are based on the data, coupled with the author's reflexivity and positionality (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Table 2. Data sources for triangulation.

	Data	Description	Delimitations
1	In-depth e-interviews with 50 participants	Interviews were conducted to understand the lived experiences of participants. The main topics are (a) disability advocacy, (b) disability policies, and (c) social inclusion.	11 interviews were conducted in 2021 and another 59 interviews were completed in 2022 (ranging from 1 to 4 hours, averaging 1.5 hours).
2	Hansard transcripts house debates	Contextual information on how policymakers debated autism.	The "subject of business" is restricted to topics related to autism, which include "waves of changes for autism," "autism," "autism awareness and acceptance month," "autism treatment," and "Autism Awareness Day Act, 2021." Irrelevant topics such as "land use planning" are excluded. The data include the 42nd Parliament, 1st session from July 11, 2018, to September 12, 2021, and the 42nd Parliament, 2nd session from October 4, 2021, to May 3, 2022.
3	Organizations A and Z's public websites	Public information includes press releases, public letters, petition templates, policy papers, and blog posts.	From June 2018 and June 2022.
4	The OAP Advisory Panel Report	A recommendation report was submitted by a 20-member advisory panel after 18 days of consultations (MCCSS, 2019c).	Report published in October 2019.
5	Statements and news releases by the MCCSS	Public announcements and statements.	From February 6, 2019, and February 3, 2022.

Note: The time interval of the data is delimited to coincide with Ford's government premiership from June 2018 and June 2022 (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, n.d.).

2.4. Reflexivity

Due to the interpretative orientation of TA, Braun and Clarke (2023) disagree with positivist ideas of "researcher bias" because meaning is prescribed rather than rooted in the data. Since reflexive thematic analysis (TA) requires the researcher to "own one's perspective," practicing reflexivity is important (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Wa-Mbaleka (2020) posits that the researcher is essentially an instrument in qualitative research. Keeping a reflective journal was critical as I practiced open-mindedness, welcoming new findings that might stand in contrast with previous data. While there is doubt as to whether triangulation, which is of "realist/positivist quality practices," is compatible with reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2023), TA's flexibility allows me to explain why triangulation is utilized. Triangulation enabled me to explore different points of view and strengthened my contextual understanding of a phenomenon (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

2.5. Positionality

I am an AuDHD neurodivergent Asian female with the privilege of being born into a middle-class family. Traditionally, it is assumed that the researcher and the study participant have a unilateral relationship in which the researcher has power over the study participants. While I have the privilege of conducting this research, my research process coincides with Kinitz's (2022) study, as they outline the emotional burden of examining a topic intimately related to a marginalized researcher. I am both an insider and an outsider, as my identity does not automatically grant me access to disability groups. While insider researchers are often scrutinized for their attachment, detached researchers enjoy the privilege of not having to explain their objective stance (Kinitz, 2022). Besides, neurodivergent brains have long been under scrutiny by the medical gaze in the making of research, as the words of neurodivergent people are judged as the output of invalid brains (Yergeau, 2016).

2.6. Data Analysis

Reflexive TA using NVivo is utilized because it is flexible, compatible with the inductive, iterative research design, and it entails a reflexive process. This type of TA is "artfully interpretive" because it values the researcher's subjectivity as an asset and does not seek to achieve intercoder reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Following the guidelines of the "six phases for analysis" (Braun & Clarke, n.d.), the first stage required deep reading of the data. For instance, interview transcripts and memos were read several times for familiarization. Next, I let the data guide me instead of having deductive codes generated from the literature. I coded for each source of data separately and revisited each set of data to analyze the implicit meanings. Data was coded in relation to the research question. Initial themes were drawn to deliver the latent meanings. For example, the initial themes generated from interviews were (a) infighting about ABA, (b) not enough listening to be inclusive, (c) awareness but not disability acceptance, (d) power dynamics go unrecognized, and (e) government wants a measurable outcome. Each theme consisted of multiple sub-themes, coupled with quotations in participants' words. The initial themes were re-examined closely with continued theme development so that the themes were not descriptions but "meaning-united stories" (Braun & Clarke, 2023). For example, in the within-case analysis of organization A, it was found that A repetitively criticized the OAP for being one-size-fits-all but was focused on securing one type of autism treatment, which is ABA/IBI services. Such a pattern was also confirmed in cross-case analysis, both by the cases of organization Z and the larger disability community. Then, the themes were refined and renamed to

reflect the breadth and depth of the story (Braun & Clarke, n.d.). The last stage was the consolidation of the analytical data concerning the context and literature on autism/autistic advocacy (Braun & Clarke, n.d.).

2.7. Ethics

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and ethical approval was granted by the College Human Subjects Ethics Sub-Committee of the City University of Hong Kong. In cases where participants experienced technical difficulties in giving written consent, verbal consent was recorded by voice memos. During data collection, most interviews were not recorded because some participants felt uneasy about having the interview recorded. Some suggested having the interview recorded, and they were recorded by Voice Memos. While this is a non-funded study, I felt that it was important to add a token of appreciation (25 CAD e-gift cards) to participants on ODSP. Many were happy that I was working on this topic and did not want any compensation. While I commit to protecting participants' rights to privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity, some participants expressed that they wished to be identified. As this study is written for disabled people, it is important to credit their names. As for the participants who did not express such intent, anonymity was ensured by numbering the participants and removing identifiable information from the data.

3. Findings

The findings are structured by a cross-case analysis, explaining the processes involved in silencing autistic voices. In Ontario, A is a grassroots organization founded in 2005 that is known for its commitment to fighting for government-funded ABA/IBI therapy for autistic children. A's decision-making power lies in the hands of parents and medical professionals, with a tokenism of two or three autistic adults on the board of directors over the years. A's advocacy approach is reflective of the medical model, and autistic individuals are often referred to as individuals *with* autism. Indeed, McGuire (2016, p. 4) posits that such a framing isolates autism as an external "thing" from the child, a "thing" to be feared, to be managed, and a "thing" that triggers stress. A prohibits any disagreement upon ABA within its community, in which members are silenced or removed if they voice any concerns or doubts about ABA. Such a phenomenon coincides with Broderick's (2022, p. 109) observation that any disagreements against ABA are framed as being "'emotional,' 'influenced…by ideologies, personal beliefs, and social movements,' and as 'largely the opposite of disciplined science.'" Consequently, some members left A for Z. Z is a grassroots organization established in 2017 and adopts the North American minority group approach in the elimination of societal barriers and the promotion of disability pride and defending that disabled people are the real experts, as echoed in "nothing about us without us" (Goodley, 2017, p. 14). Z's policy prohibits its members from meeting with organizations that promote or provide ABA. While both A and Z condemn school exclusion of autistic people and highlight the need for proper police training, their stances on ABA rendered them oppositional to one another. For example, some autistic adults in A who are supportive of ABA have been criticized for betraying the autistic community and are perceived as anti-LGBTQ because ABA has historically been put into practice on "feminine boys" (Broderick, 2022, p. 143). Hence, autistic adults who do not abide by the all-or-nothing approaches of A and Z are excluded from the conversation.

The sequence of the findings is guided by theory building. The first section introduces the binaries enforced by autism/autistic advocacy and the processes agents took to support their stance in pro/anti-ABA. The second section speaks to the benchmark of what an autistic person should look like concerning functionality and the

distaste for disability. The third section shows that advocates could gain power by adopting a nonpartisan approach. The nonpartisan approach provides insights that taking an ambivalent stance is a creative strategy to break away from dominant forms of advocacy.

3.1. You Are Either With Us or Against Us

On February 6, 2019, the news release *Ontario Takes Decisive Action to Help More Families With Autism* issued by the MCCSS (2019a) was met with uproar amongst A, who wants ABA for autistic children. Parents relayed their grievances to MPP, concerning how the program of providing alternative choices to ABA (such as speech-language pathologists, occupational therapy, and augmentative alternative communication [AAC]) does not address their children's needs for intensive ABA. Thus, parents criticized the new OAP for being a one-size-fits-all program that prioritizes equality over equity. Overall, the political tactics employed by A include: (a) ongoing protests; (b) earning media coverage from public protests; (c) raising public awareness with lawn signs and truck displays; (d) petitions; (e) connecting with municipal and provincial politicians; (f) calling for the minister's resignation; (g) building ties with labor unions; and (h) the use of influence amongst white, middle-class parents. Further, they stressed that the government had broken the 2018 campaign promise as MPP, Ms. Andrea Horwath, reiterated parents' disappointment on February 20, 2019:

> My question is to the Premier. During last spring's campaign, I stood next to the Premier in the leaders' debate when he promised the parent of a child with autism, "We will be there to support you 1,000%….I promise you, you won't have to be protesting on the front of Queen's Park like you" have with the Liberal Premier. I want the Conservative Premier to look at families in the gallery today who have come from across Ontario to protest his policies. Does he feel he has supported them 1,000%? (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2019a)

In contrast to A's disappointment, Z welcomed the new announcement because the previous program, with a central focus on ABA, did not address families' needs (such as AAC). One of the former organizers of Z stated that:

> [A] is centrally a pro-ABA group, and most autistic advocates oppose ABA; the irony is when most autistic youth spoke against their policies, doesn't look good on them…instead of motivating to look past ABA…use that to label us these "neurodiversity high-functioning extremists."

While A argues that the new OAP will cause a crisis in the school system, Z advocates for reversing policy/program memorandum 140 (Government of Ontario, 2021) so that ABA aides would not be allowed in classrooms. In March 2019, Z was invited to a consultation with the government on autism policy for the first time. Equally, it was the first time two autistic people were chosen to join the 20-member Autism Advisory Panel, announced on May 30, 2019 (MCCSS, 2019b). The inclusion of two autistic members in the Panel was met with backlash amongst parents, as a former board member of A stated:

> The controversy comes from adults who did not participate in ABA, [who are] outside looking in, think[ing] it's negative shock reinforcement….I don't want to be told by someone who can speak, drive, and work, no idea what reality is, no idea what my child is, and he may never get a job or speak.

While a few could enjoy a privileged status of periodic involvement in policy negotiations, insiders on the peripheral tend to have minimal effect on policy development. For example, the OAP Advisory Panel Report published in October 2019 (MCCSS, 2019c) misrepresented Z, as one of the autistic panel members was not a member of Z. However, the information remained unmodified in the public document. Most critically, the report does not cover Z's stance on anti-ABA. The value policy of Z entails social exclusion, as a self-advocate claimed:

> When we were contacted by a reporter of a national news outlet, they didn't use any of what we said, "autism was a tragedy and ABA the solution." Autism Ontario wants nothing to do with us because we are anti-ABA.

Such a value policy also results in the social exclusion of autistic adults in the grey, who are less visible as participants reported that they "don't want to be attacked" and "just stay out of it." The leadership of A and Z contributed to identity politics by delineating pro/anti-ABA, as former Ontario Child Advocate, Irwin Elman, confirmed:

> Both groups don't realize their own power, the system makes you feel less power, people on both sides, they are not powerless, but they feel they are stuck. Instead [of] feeling powerless, you look over beside you and fight beside you.

3.2. Silencing Voices in the Name of Science and Functionality

The de/legitimization of autistic voices functions by ableist mechanisms such as tokenism, infantilization, and low societal expectancies. While it is socially acceptable for parents to speak for their children, and for medical experts to speak about autistic people, autistic adults' voices are often deemed illegitimate. For example, an autistic adult in the grey recalled taking further education to counter symbolic violence:

> There'd be parents [who say] "you are not that autistic," so okay, if you don't like my diagnosis, I have a fancy piece of paper…. There is a cultural appropriation, no other groups experience that, you are not +1, this is not LGBT+1, you are not parenting a transgender parent, therefore you are also a transgender extension.

The onus of responsibility is placed on autistic people, explaining how they might fit with the benchmark of what an autistic person should look like. The objectification of autistic people is reinforced by the dichotomous measurement of speaking/non-speaking. An autistic adult in the grey summarized the situation:

> It is ableism, it's using your disability against you, setting the bar for autistic people…so it is parents for kids…so it is only caregivers, or specialists or, like, officials, but where are the autistic people? Where are they? The answer is, if you can speak, you are disqualified, but then if you can't speak, you can't speak.

Although it appears to be a social requirement for autistic adults to explain their legitimacy to obtain a voice, it is socially acceptable for experts to portray autism using a medical deficit framing, with a disregard for power dynamics. For example, A supports the statement by Perry (2019), in which the clinical professional stated:

> Autism spectrum conditions can be likened to heart conditions….Some people may need a heart transplant, heart bypass surgery, a pacemaker, medication, or an aspirin a day….What this proposed autism program will do is akin to giving everyone an aspirin.

The overgeneralization of portraying disability as an unwanted identity feeds into ableism, while many autistic adults do not wish to be normal. This article rejects strict binaries and does not argue for the full abandonment of medical practices. Instead, this article invites the reader to reflect on how the logic of practice has structurally privileged some and suppressed others. The dichotomous societal belief cultivates stories of a pitiful poster child in need of charity and an inspiring "supercrip" who miraculously overcame the disability (Shapiro, 1994, p. 16). As autistic children are argued to be marketable, parents' voices could garner public sympathy, as MPP Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong said on February 21, 2019:

> She told me, "My son cannot speak out against this. He is non-verbal. I need to be his voice. This is going to be terrible for our family and others." (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2019b)

While society may sometimes perceive autistic individuals as voiceless or powerless, it is important to recognize that everyone has a voice. For example, AAC aids non-verbal autistic people in conveying their feelings. Despite the good intentions to speak for or give voice to autistic people, such an action maintains a power hierarchy, sustaining the unequal relationship between the speaker and the subject. Once subjectification is complete, social order is maintained, and power inequalities are naturalized (Bourdieu, 1985).

3.3. Strategic Move to be Nonpartisan to be Heard

Both A and Z were criticized by autistic adults in the grey and some disability stakeholders for maintaining a political minefield in which social oppression becomes multi-directional as identity politics take the stage and manifest as distractions from advocacy. A's former leadership has been criticized for being partisan coupled with a conflict of interest, from being members of the Ontario Association for Behavior Analysis and having worked under the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario in the past. A former member recollected: "[A] was so vocal, it was just a way to shut [A] up and it backfired. It was a disaster." An autistic adult in the grey reiterated: "[A] agitating to get the Liberal Party out of power, really pushed the parents to vote them out." A parent of an autistic child who disagreed with the approaches of A and Z said:

> [A] misinform and they don't let people express their actual experiences if they go against the leadership, but the protests…the lack of fact-checking….Their tactics have done a lot more harm to themselves and their families than they realize because they play politics…it's all about screaming and yelling and getting attention and not about solving.

When asked about the importance of adopting a nonpartisan orientation in disability advocacy, former minister Tracy MacCharles stated:

> Nonpartisan is always ideal as governments from various parties come and go over election cycles and accessibility should be a universal issue. However, the value systems of parties vary. For example, some governments may be more committed to sustainable change and support for people with

> disabilities versus "window dressing" type initiatives that do not really move the yardsticks in the right direction.

Parent advocates shared the significance of maintaining respectful ties with politicians because, in times of crisis, politicians may be able to help them. Sherry Caldwell of the Ontario Disability Coalition explained:

> Whoever is elected, we will work with them, we work with the opposition too, we use all the tricks that we can find…we are a smaller movement than the autism, there are a lot of MPPs out there, call the people with the most influence.

4. Discussion

As part of disability justice, this article aligns with the key principle of "first, do no harm" (Badesch & Ne'eman, 2014). The logic of practice in the field of autism/autistic grassroots advocacy in Ontario maintains a binary value policy that is harmful not only to A and Z but is equally harmful to autistic adults and families in the grey. This policy value diverts from disability solidarity, resulting in the social exclusion of autistic adults in the grey who do not share such black-and-white perspectives. The infighting between A and Z could be exploited by the hegemony as identity politics undermine the broader movement. For example, silencing autistic adults for voicing against ABA undermines their lived experiences. Equally, blaming parents for their decisions to choose ABA for their children will ignore how society is structured to uphold normalization in colonial, neoliberal capitalism. By enforcing strict binaries of pro/anti-ABA, A and Z strengthen the ableist hierarchical structure and undermine disability solidarity. In the name of science and functionality, social exclusion mechanisms operate by policing how an autistic adult should be, using speaking/nonspeaking as a benchmark for de/legitimization. The ability to speak deters the legitimacy of autistic voices, as autistic adults must satisfy the ableist benchmark of being autistic enough to speak, much like the subaltern is only allowed to speak after they have attained such pain that they finally receive the recognition as human (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Instead of fostering a political minefield, agents could break free by creative means, such as practicing nonpartisan advocacy.

In the process of theory building, Bourdieu's logic of practice offers little room to explain autistic adults in the grey. Critics assert that the conceptualization of habitus is deterministic as Burawoy (2022, p. 127) argues that it fails to account for the progression of how an agent comes to realize that they could resist conformity. The concept of a grey area is introduced to trouble the essentialist categories of autism/autistic advocacy. The grey area is a fluid, boundless space that embraces the countless possibilities of being an autistic adult. Garland-Thomson (2011) shows that the experiences of disabled people differ drastically by gender, race, and location. Vernon (1999) asserts that the bigger problem than representativeness lies in how intersectional issues experienced by disabled people are not addressed. Garland-Thomson's (2011) misfit reminds us of how our lived identities and experiences are ever-changing and relational to time and space. To be a good fit in society is to satisfy the "dominant subject positions such as male, white, or heterosexual," as agents enjoy the comfort of not recognizing how their world is designed for their needs (Garland-Thomson, 2011). With misfitting, however, we come into conflict with the world as we reveal the political and relational powers of the "fragility of fitting" (Garland-Thomson, 2011). Notably, I have left the demographics of autistic adults in the grey open for a reason. Contrary to "mak[ing] identities more visible" (Alcoff, 2006, p. 8), I argue that autistic adults in the grey area pertain to all the unheard autistic voices beyond the categories of autism/autistic

advocacy. Autistic adults in the grey area are misfits who do not engage with the world as constructed by the two categories of advocacy. By misfitting, these autistic adults are less visible, and simultaneously, misfitting provides them with the agency to organize disability solidarity.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study demonstrates analytic generalization, in which the findings converge with Sinclair's (2005) summary of the strategies used against autistic adults in the United States. While the findings appear to apply to other white colonialist neoliberal capitalist settings, the limitation of this study is that most of the participants in leadership roles are white Canadians, except for the diversified leadership of autistic advocacy. Some participants stated that being a white Canadian proficient in English has given them an advantage in advocacy. Such a pattern coincides with the literature on how a parent's identity could have an impact on service availability to their children (see Douglas, 2013; Gibson, 2019). Future research could explore how whiteness may have an impact on securing a seat at the table in advocacy. Most importantly, the article offers an original finding that essentialist categories of autism/autistic advocacy contribute to the normalization of what an autistic adult should be, to be a good fit. To combat the ableist hierarchical structure that favors normalization, agents should commit to disability solidarity. First, Broderick and Roscigno (2021) remind us that the "cultural logic of intervention" preys on autistic children; hence, the abolishment of behaviorism in neoliberal capitalism will not stop the AIC from manufacturing interventions for consumption. Second, ABA has evolved to become a much broader practice, as a variety of non-aversive methods could now be labeled as ABA (Carey et al., 2020, p. 94). New changes to the Psychology and Applied Behavior Analysis Act 2021 will become effective from July 1, 2024, pursuant to which behavior analysts will be subjected to comply with additional regulatory requirements (Autism Ontario, 2023). Hence, it is a critical moment for A and Z to commit to disability solidarity, to demand transparency and effective safeguards on ABA reform so that autistic children would not suffer from aversive interventions that have long-lasting impacts on their quality of life. Being misfits would require autistic adults to disengage with the binaries of pro/anti-ABA and commit to joining disability solidarity. For example, organization Z can adopt a more flexible policy, like the collaboration between ASA and ASAN (Badesch & Ne'eman, 2014). After all, organizations A and Z have a mutual interest in advocating for a better future for autistic children. Nevertheless, disability solidarity could not be achieved if autistic voices were silenced in the process for not being like their children. It is critical for agents to rethink power dynamics and the importance of interdependence. The autism file has been treated as a standalone disability in Ontario, for example, a siloed subject debated at the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. The implication of isolating autism from other disabilities could have short-term gains in that voices are louder; it has detrimental consequences of amplifying the medical deficit narrative. Ultimately, the concept of a grey area is introduced as a boundless space of being an autistic adult, to embrace disability solidarity as misfits.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Silent Processes in Higher Education: Examining Ableism Through an Ability-Critical Lens

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Abstract

Universities are regarded as critical institutions that shape society, which on the one hand have a great influence on (successful) social processes, but on the other, are traditionally very privileged and exclusive places of education. Despite various demands to open up to plural perspectives, they are still strongly characterized by powerful, meritocratic, and discriminatory structures, cultures, and orders. (Social) inclusion efforts are always linked to the need to analyze processes of exclusion. This article therefore examines the question: Which ableist practices and culture of silence are revealed in the context of higher education and how can these be linked to the findings of postcolonial studies on the topic of silence? On the one hand, established perspectives (lecturers and students), but above all the perspectives of marginalized and unheard (groups of) people (lecturers with (learning) disabilities) are involved. The results from two group discussions ($N = 9$) with perspectives from these three different positions are presented to work out implicit and explicit processes of silence. The (power) theoretical reference is the concept of ableism, which is linked with (postcolonial) perspectives on the ideas of "silence" according to Brunner (2017a). This article emphasizes that, in addition to formal access restrictions to university education, there are also implicit barriers oriented towards non-transparent ableist expectations of ability, which in turn (re-)produce processes of silence. The case study concerns one German university and shows that formal access to higher education is only one aspect of reducing ableism; above all, it is the creation of transparent structures with regard to set ability expectations, critical-reflective spaces, and a culture of "unlearning" biographically characterized ableist notions of normality. This article therefore focuses on the connection between ableist experiences and the findings of postcolonial discourses of silencing.

Keywords

academic ableism; exclusion; inclusive university development; silencing

1. Introduction

Concerning the "recommendations of supranational bodies (European Commission, United Nations, UNESCO, OECD, World Bank), all higher education institutions are committed to a policy of diversity as well as a policy of inclusion" (Allemann-Ghionda, 2021, p. 474, author's translation). Ensuring this requires an analysis of who is in which form allowed to participate in higher education processes and knowledge formation, and who is not. To enable a truly critical analysis of practices and the epistemically violent structures and cultures that go along with it, a look towards the unsaid or the invisible is needed (epistemic violence is here understood in the sense of postcolonial theory, as a transdisciplinary concept or as a process/relationship in the context of knowledge and knowledge production; Brunner, 2020). This article therefore focuses less on the statistics of who is "present" at the university or has access to it, and with what attributions. Rather, the focus will be on the question:

> Which ableist practices and culture of silence are revealed in the context of higher education and how can these be linked to the findings of postcolonial studies on the topic of silence?

Critical analyses of higher education from a postcolonial perspective are increasingly widespread (e.g., Dankwa et al., 2021), while critical analyses of ableism in the context of higher education (e.g., Brown & Leigh, 2020; Dolmage, 2017) are only gradually developing. This article aims to link the two discourses more closely together by first surveying and visualizing experiences of ableism and linking these findings with postcolonial ideas focusing on processes of silence. The framework will be formed by the four elements of silence according to Brunner (2017a). The descriptions do not claim to be universally valid but rather represent a case study at one German university.

The article is based on a differentiated and human rights-based understanding of inclusion as overcoming discrimination and marginalization, while at the same time recognizing plural perspectives. The article focuses primarily on the category of "disability," which in disability studies is understood "as a social, political, historical and cultural phenomenon" that is "linked to marginalization and exclusion" (Waldschmidt, 2020, pp. 22–23, author's translation).

In the first step, the tension between inclusion and exclusion at universities (Section 2) is considered as the starting point of the analysis. Afterwards, ableism as "counterparts of inclusion" (Buchner, 2022a, p. 66, author's translation) or as a (power) theoretical approach (Section 3) and postcolonial perspectives on speech and silence (Section 4) will be discussed, to enrich the analysis. The methodological design (Section 5) of the empirical study and the ableism-specific results (Section 6) are then presented. This is followed by a post-colonial critique (Section 7) regarding theoretical perspectives on silence, as well as a concluding outlook (Section 8).

2. Higher Education in the Realm of Tension Between Exclusion and Inclusion

On the one hand, universities are traditionally closely associated with an exclusive Aura (Alheit, 2014), currently strongly linked to the terms "elite" and "excellence," which is also reflected in the significance of corresponding international rankings (Helsper, 2009). On the other hand, they should act "socially responsible" as organizations and open themselves up to a broad and diverse public in an inclusive way (e.g., the

internationally significant university social responsibility approach; Goldbach et al., 2022). This broad area of tension, between inclusive aspirations and exclusive processes, is not insignificantly rooted in the close connection between higher education and society. Universities are essential organizations for the transmission and production of knowledge and thus very influential on social processes (Goldbach & Leonhardt, 2023). This can be linked to views of neo-institutional organization theory, which emphasizes that organizations must always be considered "in relation to their environment" and "must generate legitimacy in relation to it in order to obtain the resources necessary for their maintenance" (Buchner, 2022b, p. 440, author's translation, referencing Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Inclusive developments can therefore not be considered independently of exclusive processes as inseparably within social life and also higher education (Lanwer, 2015). Both inclusion and exclusion are not immutable states but "highly different and mutable" (Hauser et al., 2022, author's translation). This elaboration necessitates an analysis of normatively set orders of difference and power that continue in the higher education context. Ahmed (2013, p. 9), for example, shows that the "institutional will" for more diversity is not essentially reflected in structural changes and that structures tend to remain in privileged hands. Rather, it is about integrating into "a common organizational culture," but enabling higher education institutions "to celebrate diversity" (Ahmed, 2013, p. 13). Such an understanding of "diversity management" has been criticized for some time for neglecting structural adjustments and perpetuating rather neoliberal tendencies (Wagner, 2021). Further work in the academic discourse also shows a continuation of meritocratic ideas that are linked to supposedly inclusive policies (e.g., Przytulla, 2021). This leads to various orders that reinforce difference and produce powerful processes of othering and exclusion, as various current academic debates suggest (e.g., Ahmed, 2013; Brown & Leigh, 2020). Higher education thus remains a site of privileged knowledge production that continues to be inaccessible to many.

In the context of disability, there are also various efforts to create accessibility in order to enable more diversity (e.g., O'Brien et al., 2019). However, this often reveals an individualization of disability experiences. One example in the German-speaking world in this regard is the so-called disadvantage compensation, which is intended to reduce barriers at the individual level but requires disclosure of individual attributions and at the same time does not encourage structural change/adaptation (McGowan & Bichsel, 2021).

Inferring from these descriptions, it is necessary not to reduce inclusion-oriented higher education development to a one-dimensional issue. Rather, it needs a processual view that is directed in particular at powerful orders and at the same time enables diversification at higher education institutions.

3. Analyzing Perspectives Through the Lens of Ableism as a Theoretical Framework

For (power-)critical reflection and the development of an inclusion-sensitive practice, ableism is becoming increasingly significant as a concept, and in the process is also showing up more frequently in media and public discussion:

> Ableism stands for the critique of a mode of production of social inequality, through which individuals and groups are de/privileged and specific practices of inclusion and exclusion are legitimized via the recognition and denial of abilities. (Buchner, 2022c, p. 203, author's translation)

The construction of "able subjects" is central and closely linked to individual and, above all, socially shaped notions of capability, structures, and practices. Which abilities are considered self-evident and which should be

acquired in order to be considered an able subject? These ideas and expectations of so-called essential abilities serve to maintain ableist and thus hierarchical orders. These orders are also characterized by a very powerful demarcation between "able" and "not able," which Campbell (2003) calls the "great divide" in her work.

"Ableism is an ideological discourse that fundamentally assumes and demands non-disabled normality, autonomy and usefulness, and is deeply embedded in social structures and in the subjectivity of all" (Maskos, 2023, author's translation). Even if ableism analysis should not be limited to disability (Wolbring, 2008), this category or order of difference is a very central one. On the one hand, disability represents a deficit and, at the same time, constructs an external perception of a supposedly capable subject (Buchner, 2022a, referencing Campbell, 2009). It "has also long been used to justify hierarchies of rights and discrimination between other social groups, and to exclude people not classified as 'disabled people'" (Wolbring, 2008, p. 253).

In comparison to other "isms," ableism has various special features, which is why it will be the focus of this article. Wolbring (2008) describes ableism as a kind of "umbrella ism for other isms" (p. 253) and as "one of the most socially entrenched and accepted isms and one of the biggest enablers for other isms" (p. 255). Not least because the ability-based orders and ideas are found in many other isms in an intersectional sense. The binaries established in ableist orders between a desirable "top" (non-disabled/able) and a "bottom" (disabled/non-able) to be avoided, are particularly characterized by fluidity. "Re-localization to the lower spheres can threaten at any time, for example due to an accident or a psychological crisis" and at the same time there is the "potential for mobility towards the higher spheres" (Buchner, 2022a, p. 67, author's translation). This fragility is accompanied by a high emotionality of this order of difference, as it is always connected with the pressure not to lose one's own positioning or to "improve" it.

A critical perspective of ableism serves to make discriminatory phenomena visible with regard to the production of normality and exclusion. In the context of inclusion-sensitive higher education development, ableism can serve as a perspective for analysis to reveal discriminatory power structures and to reflect on them in connection with processes of change.

4. Speaking and Silence From a Postcolonial Perspective

As the previous remarks have shown, the analysis of power relations and exclusion processes plays a central role in the further development of inclusive (higher education) spaces. Following Butler (2006), it can be seen that the maintenance and reproduction of power relations are ensured, among other things, by the fact that people who are repeatedly marked as "others" consequently also perceive themselves as different. As illustrated by Spivak, it can be added that the "voices" of the marginalized are often not heard or being actively silenced, and they accordingly have little opportunity to draw attention to their situation nor to change it. Spivak (2008) describes this as the power-specific phenomenon of subalternity. She refers primarily to subjective perspectives from the Global South, which she describes as subalterns (see also Nguyễn, 2022). Language is, in this context, theorized as an instrument of power in terms of various facets. Universities also "contribute institutionally to reproducing hegemonies of knowledge" and "practices of silencing build on these structures of dominance" that marginalized people "feel differently" (Nguyễn, 2022, pp. 46–47, author's translation). To dissolve this "silence of the subalterns as a result of epistemic violence," it is not enough to "call on them to speak" (Nguyễn, 2022, p. 65, author's translation). Rather, it is relevant to

analyze who is allowed to speak and who remains silent or is silenced. For such an analysis, however, a clear and differentiated understanding of speaking and silence is needed. Furthermore, it has to be taken into account that for marginalized people speaking is "not only about the wording, the thought, but always also about the question of belonging" (Gümüşay, 2020, p. 35, author's translation).

From a postcolonial perspective, speaking and silence are not/can't be seen as a delimitable/opposed binary. "Silence is neither nothing nor another language, but it is at the same time its presence and absence, just as the element of silence is always inherent in speaking itself" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 36, author's translation). This contradicts the liberal understanding of silence as the pure opposite of speaking and the "self-inflicted weakness" of, for example, "those for whom it seems better anyway if others make decisions for them and also speak" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 34, author's translation). As of late, since the "linguistic discursive and colonial turns," it has become clear that "language and speech are entangled in relations of violence" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 35, author's translation).

For a differentiated consideration, Brunner (2017a) refers to Spivak and other postcolonial thinkers and develops four different elements of silence, which will serve as a basis for the following analysis.

4.1. Privileged Silence and Silencing as a Technique of Power

In this form, silence occurs from a privileged position where "speech can be suspended at any [and self-chosen] point" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 43, author's translation). Silence and concealment can be understood as privilege, also to maintain one's own position/normality, because the assertion of power and knowledge is "necessarily accompanied by the delegitimization, sanctioning and suppression of alternative possibilities of cognition and knowledge" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 45, author's translation). Such dominant "discourses are what not only produce silence but also promote violent indifference to the voice of the other or otherness" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 47, author's translation, referencing Dhawan, 2007).

4.2. Marginalized Silence as a Double Silencing

At this level, the perspective is directed towards those who are to be "controlled and dominated by epistemic violence." Here Brunner distinguishes two forms of oppression according to Dotson (2011):

1. Testimonial quieting: the failure to hear, understand, or acknowledge as a knowing subject the other based on stereotypes and not for lack of knowledge or not wanting to know.

2. Testimonial smothering: experience-based "presupposition that the (non-)hearing counterpart has no adequate understanding of one's own statement or response anyway" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 49, author's translation).

4.3. Rejecting the Silence of Marginalized People as a Starting Point for Change

This element is about rejecting the (existing) status quo without the subject knowing where this leads. This makes it highly risky for the marginalized subject. Brunner again describes two phases: the rejecting, provoking, blocking silence and a developing productive silence. It can be activating and subversive and

bring movement into the power structure or contribute to the "interruption of normality" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 52, author's translation); but only if it is heard/understood by the counterpart, which also requires "forced" (institutionalized) listening on the part of the privileged.

4.4. Silence of the Privileged as a Practice of Solidarity

This form of silence can also be described as "attentive listening" and can be seen as an "essential precondition for being heard as appropriately as possible" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 57, author's translation). This involves more than a guilty or benevolent failure to speak. "This engaged listening necessarily presupposes suspending one's own speaking and truth-telling" (Brunner, 2017a, p. 59, author's translation), which requires hegemonic self-critical reflection.

In the following, the methodological approach and results are presented and described and then linked to the previous theoretical thoughts on silence from a critical perspective of ableism.

5. Methodological Approach

The following question arises from the theoretical descriptions:

> Which ableist practices and cultures of silence are revealed in the context of higher education and how can these be linked to the findings of postcolonial studies on the topic of silence?

This question is to be answered within the framework of a case study and is qualitatively limited to exemplary perspectives of university members and therefore does not promise general transferability. Furthermore, the question is answered in the article in two main steps:

1. Presentation of perspectives on ableism from diverse positions (Section 6)

2. Interpretation of these perspectives regarding postcolonial perspectives on silence as a secondary analysis (Section 7)

The methodological framework used for this is described below and is also summarized in Figure 1.

5.1. Participants and Context of the Survey

The data collection took place with members of the Faculty of Education at Leipzig University. In two group discussions, first four and then five participants were interviewed. In order to answer the question as differentiated as possible, three different perspectives were included: those of lecturers/professors ($n = 2$), students ($n = 2$), and lecturers with experience of disability/so-called subject matter experts on inclusion and education (SMEIE; $n = 5$).

The entire process and in particular the use of the collected data was made transparent to the participants and the voluntariness of participation was emphasized several times during the process. All participants were associated with the university teaching and transfer project Qualification for Subject Matter Expert on

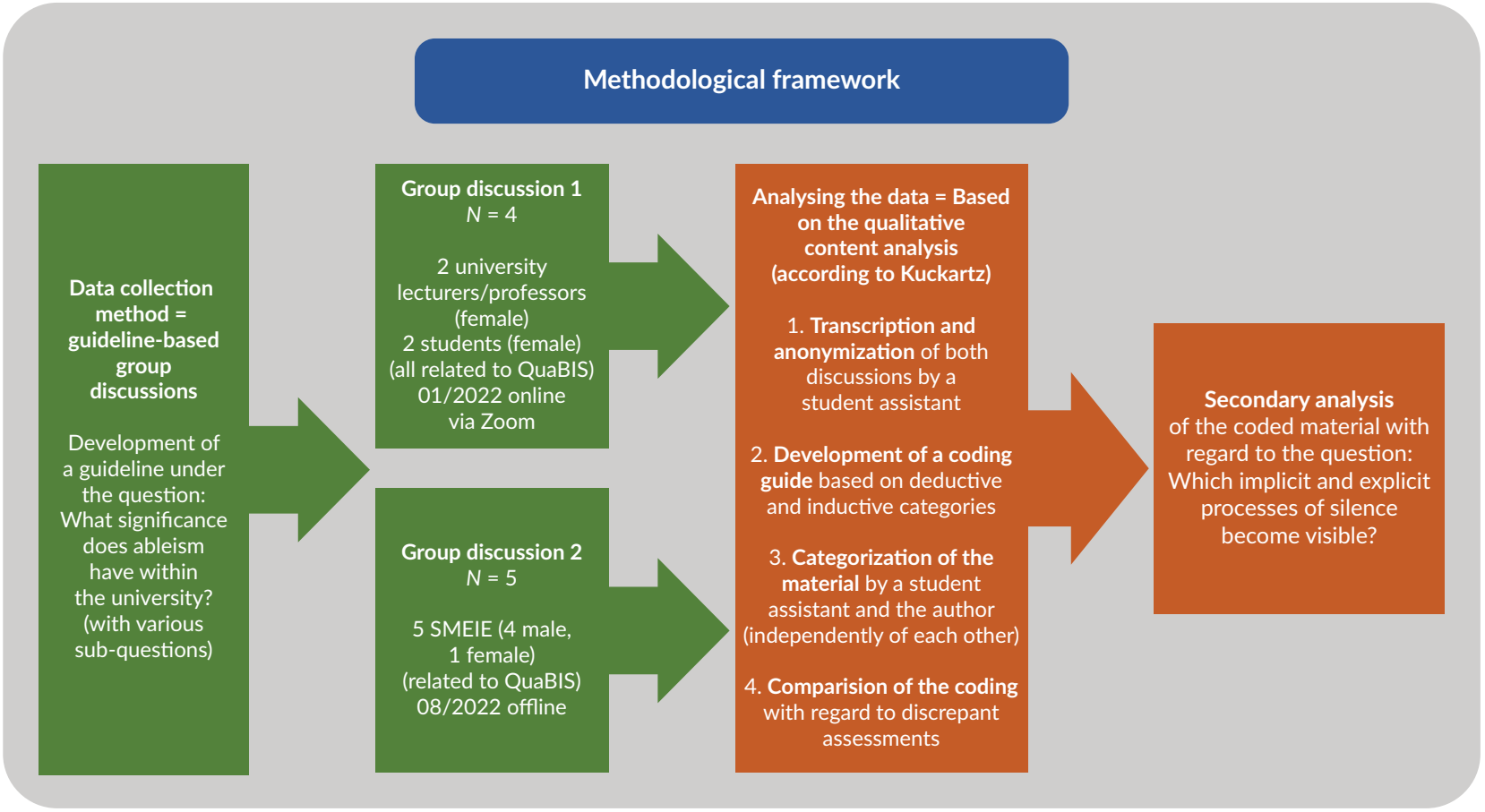

Figure 1. Methodological framework.

Inclusion And Education in Saxony (QuaBIS). As talking about experiences of discrimination requires, among other things, safe and trustworthy spaces, the discussions with the participants with disabilities were held separately from the participants without disabilities. This resulted in the distribution provided in Table 1.

As the QuaBIS project represents an important link for all participants, it is important to briefly categorize it. The aim of the project is to empower people with experience of (learning) disability for various university processes in order to initiate inclusion-oriented developments. Thus, in the period from May 2019 to December 2022, five people were qualified in the areas of teaching, research, and transfer at Leipzig University who had previously learned, worked, and/or lived in various separative institutions of the so-called disability support system. Since January 2023, they have been working as SMEIE at the university, primarily in the context of critical-reflective knowledge transfer in teaching and professionalization, as well as in participatory research and transfer activities. In German-speaking countries, these types of projects (with conceptually very different orientations) have developed under the name of "participatory teaching" in the last 10 years (a critical reflection can be found in Goldbach & Leonhardt, 2023). A more detailed description of the project goals and contents can be found in Leonhardt and Goldbach (2022).

The professors and students interviewed are also closely associated with the project described through collaboration or close (teaching) cooperation. All participants are familiar with the topic of ableism through the project or their own expertise.

5.2. Data Collection

Within the above-mentioned project, two group discussions were conducted to identify and analyze discriminatory barriers and experiences in higher education. The group discussions were conducted by the author, who already has experience in conducting interviews and group discussions with people with and without disabilities in various projects. The focus was on the topic of ableism in higher education. In a first digitally conducted group discussion, two professors and two students participated in the discussion. A second group discussion with the five SMEIE took place later, offline. For the second discussion, the questions of the interview were translated into simple language for better understanding, while the content remained the same.

Table 1. Overview of roles/anonymization.

Group discussion	Role of the person	Anonymized codename in the article
Group discussion 1	Lecturer/professor 1 (female)	Julia
	Lecturer/professor 2 (female)	Sabine
	Student 1 (female)	Sophie
	Student 2 (female)	Mia
Group discussion 2	SMEIE 1 (male)	Adrian
	SMEIE 2 (female)	Laura
	SMEIE 3 (male)	Malik
	SMEIE 4 (male)	Jonas
	SMEIE 5 (male)	Paul

The interview guideline with nine questions was based on a total of three key aspects: (a) basic understanding of ableism, (b) performance-related expectations/experiences at higher education institutions, and (c) opportunities to reflect on discrimination within the higher education system. The questions were not directly related to the topic of silence/processes of silence. The collected data was linked to these theoretical ideas in a secondary analysis for this article.

5.3. Analysis of the Data

The audio material of the two discussions was transcribed by a student assistant. The qualitative material was evaluated using qualitative content analysis based on the content structuring content analysis according to Kuckartz (2014). For this purpose, inductive categories were created in addition to the deductive categories of the interview guide, thus creating a differentiated category system with coding guidelines. The material was coded using this coding guide by the author and again independently by a student assistant. Any inconsistencies were discussed afterward. This resulted in eight categories with a total of 15 sub-categories (see Supplementary File). The data/categories in the topic area of *ableism at the university* are subjected to a secondary analysis in this article regarding the topic of *speaking and silence*. The discussions took place in German; for legibility, all the following questions from the interviews have been translated into English by the author.

5.4. Methodological Limitations and Self-Reflexive Methodological Critique

Since, as described, this is a case study at a single university with reference to only three different roles, the findings generated can only be transferred to a limited extent. The following descriptions therefore do not claim to produce universally valid (or internationally) applicable findings. This would require at least a larger sample, preferably at different universities, which also covers other positions within the system. Rather, the aim is to visualize exemplary findings that are intended to highlight the processes of silence at a university. The fact that the author, who himself works as a research assistant in the QuaBIS project, is involved in the survey ensures a familiar environment within the group discussions. On the other hand, this existing relationship can also lead to limitations or the silencing of statements or social acceptability due to different (power) positions. Also because this article is dedicated to making marginalized voices visible, it is important to emphasize that the author collected and analyzed the data from a strongly privileged position (white, male, with no experiences of disability), and also from within the university system as a research assistant. In this respect, such a non-participatory evaluation of experiential data leaves limits to the possibilities of interpretation. Due to these limitations and the situated entanglement of the author's knowledge, the interpretation must be read in consideration of its limitations and, if necessary, relation/connection to (existing) structures of power/imbalances of power.

6. Results

Four categories emerged from the data material that are relevant to the research question of this article. These are first described and will then be interpreted in the following chapter with regard to the topic of silencing.

6.1. Ableist Cultures and Structures at the University

In the participants' statements, there is a strong overall reference to the interconnectedness of higher education and performance expectations and the associated exclusion of certain people.

These links become clear at different levels in the group discussions. For example, clearly restrictive admission limits to higher education institutions were highlighted, which were already linked to performance requirements before entering higher education. For example, Adrian (192) said: "If you don't have specific degree and achievements…you are denied this path, this privilege to work at the university." In both discussions, it was emphasized that this possibility of access was already inherent to the previous educational path. Sophie (61–63) pointed out, for example, that "it starts in the education system beforehand, which access children and teenagers have to which school, or what resources their parents have." Laura (314) in the second group discussion saw it similarly and emphasized that "it's also up to the teacher, they make such a distinction in school as to who is rich and who is poor. That is such a difference. Or if you have a disability. Do I support them or not?" Overall, high pressure to perform was associated with higher education when it was described as a very "competitive" business (Sabine, 165), which is "very, very demanding" (Julia, 264). Malik (221) emphasized, in this regard, that it is "very rare for people with disabilities to go this path because the pressure from society to perform is not possible for many disabilities to sustain the pressure and performance over time." The high expectations to perform were a very central reason for exclusion for many of the discussion participants. For example, working at a university requires very different abilities, such as "retentiveness, attentiveness, reflectiveness" (Julia, 78), as well as self-active understanding and familiarizing oneself with new systems, high physical functioning, and organizational talent. For Adrian (160), it was primarily "mental abilities" that were required. At the same time, other abilities can lead to exclusion, such as "insecurity" or, as Julia (146) said, "not fulfilling a certain academic language or a certain theoretical knowledge, which is immediately associated with devaluation." With these seemingly clear ability expectations, however, it was also emphasized that these remain completely non-transparent in the context of higher education, which means that they cannot be negotiated by the actors. Julia (83–89) spoke of a "diffuseness that is connected with the fact…that it is often not quite clearly formulated what ability expectations one actually has of me at university" and she described it as "not thematizing, or perhaps even tabooing ability expectations."

For some participants, the structures do provide opportunities for (partial) access, but these are also always linked to making "otherness" visible. Thus, Julia (26) also described that "the constructions, such as compensation for disadvantages…actually presuppose or include these ableist structures." Adrian (490–492) also emphasized that, for them, being at the university is connected with being marked as disabled when he said: "So I would call that exotic and to some extent the main reason for our impairment."

6.2. Experiencing Ableism (SMEIE) and Perceiving One's Own Ableist Actions (Lecturers and Students)

Particularly in the discussion with the SMEIE, their own experiences with ableism at the university were comprehensively addressed. Adrian (346) stated that his experiences of ableism are usually "not conscious, [but] rather unconscious." Direct hostility or open discrimination was not mentioned (Laura, 343). Rather, experiences that relate to one's own insecurities were mentioned, such as the experience of Laura (369): "It was like that with me, I doubted myself because I don't know the technical language." There were also

descriptions of examples that referred to the time before getting into work contexts outside of higher education. For example, Laura (423) said: "The sheltered workshops, they also told me…'why are you doing this project?' They tried to talk me out of it." Adrian (403–404) then connected this to earlier experiences: "They said 'you can't do that because of your disability'…and at some point, you internalize that so much that you say, 'oh, I can't do that.'"

In the university environment, the SMEIE did describe positive experiences that marked moments of recognition, as illustrated by the statement of Jonas (327–328):

> I go to eat in the dining hall….I see countless people there and…as a person with an intellectual impairment…I still see people,…they don't see me as disabled at all. They perceive me as I am. And that makes me proud.

Nevertheless, Adrian (477) saw the danger "that we [as teachers] are only shown as a demonstration effect" and that it becomes something "exotic" (474).

In the discussion with the lecturers and students on the other hand, their own ableist actions were also described, which arises, among other things, from the challenge of teaching or acting in an exclusive/ableist system. This was exemplified by the fact that ableist behavior was made the topic of discussion in events that are not themselves inclusively structured and accessible (Julia, 367). It was further emphasized that one is not free oneself, as Mia (127–128) described: "[There are] certain social ideas in my head…that were taught to me from the outside or that I got from others." Julia said: "I think we are all infested with ableist ideas, that is also unavoidable [because] my own expectations develop along the lines of the expectations that are directed at me" (134–136).

6.3. Lack of Awareness

Key evidence for ableist structures, cultures, and practices was seen in the lack of awareness of the actors in the higher education system. On the one hand, it was described as a "taboo subject" (Laura, 568) or as an "unpleasant subject [for] people who are themselves very privileged at the university…and have not yet had to make use of so much support in their lives" (Julia, 202). Furthermore, it was reported that it is avoided because it asks "unpleasant questions" (Julia, 205), "that many people also feel attacked" (Mia, 230), or that one is "not really confronted with the term in everyday life" (Mia, 30). Adrian (498–499) explained that one also "forgets…to reflect critically" and that university is "a very big structure" in which the subject can get lost (Adrian, 552). At the same time, Laura (577) emphasized that the term itself has not yet arrived in the everyday life of many. Julia (144–145) also pointed out that it is "a great challenge" to "create a culture that somehow carries an ableist consciousness…in other words, to deal with such a non-error culture, which I think we feel is quite a burden here at the university."

6.4. Possibilities for Dealing With Ableism

In both group discussions, possibilities for counteracting ableism at the university were discussed. The results highlighted, for example, how important it is "that it takes place in teaching at all" (Sabine, 161), but that there is also a need for spaces to discuss the topic in order to "think of possible ways out" (Julia, 376). For such

ways out, Julia described it as central to arrive at "new images of ability" (377) and to deconstruct "concepts of ability" (381). This also required a look at one's own "biography…i.e., with what kind of ability expectations have I actually been raised?" (Julia, 134–135). Malik (589) emphasized that it is not enough "if individuals…try to do that." Mia (216) stated that attention must be drawn to such "structures, and they must also be encouraged to reflect." Some of the SMEIE pointed out that more accessibility (for disabled people) must also be created (Laura, 133; Adrian, 596). This would then result in a stronger recognition and confidence of the previously excluded people (Laura, 617–618).

7. Interpretation: Silence as a Result of Ableist Attributions of Ability by Higher Education Institutions

The ableist experiences in the university space described so far are now interpreted in a second step, focusing on the topic of silence and processes of silence. The results show that higher education in its structures and culture is deeply influenced by notions of ability and norms, which in turn have an effect on subjects inside and outside this space. The simultaneous striving to meet "positive" ability norms and avoidance of "negative" ability orders is clearly found in the statements of lecturers and students as well as in those of the SMEIE. In particular, (certain) cognitive and linguistic abilities are considered desirable. Failure to comply with these ability norms is associated with exclusion in higher education. In view of the participants' statements, this exclusion or ableism is already influenced by various (ability-related) aspects well before entering higher education. This happens on the one hand, by a separative and meritocratic school and education system and, on the other hand, by the resulting structural admission regulations. Those who do not pass this ableist educational pathway due to the set ability regulations are denied access to higher education. This process characterized by ableism can certainly be described as a form of silencing since the exclusion is simultaneously connected with not being allowed to speak in the context of central social knowledge production. Following Buchner (2023, author's translation), ableism (in this case the form of silencing) can also be seen as "disempowerment as a double-sided process" of marginalized persons. Subjects are positioned as incapable and, at the same time, hindered in the development of abilities.

Going back to Brunner's (2017a) elements, aspects of "privileged silence and silencing as a technique of power" (element 1) become visible in the results (see Figure 2). Forms of silence are produced and maintained through the delegitimization or denial of skills and knowledge. At the same time, it becomes clear that the intransparency of ability expectations can be seen as a technique of silence that serves to maintain the status quo. Accordingly, on the level of "marginalized silence as double silencing" (element 2), this can lead to the phenomena of "testimonial quieting" and "testimonial smothering" potentially reinforcing each other. This is somewhat reflected in the statements of the SMEIE, which make it clear that the existing and ableist skill requirements can lead to internalized insecurity or "not trusting oneself." This internalized ableism (which, according to the SMEIE statements, also has clear non-university references) potentially leads to a silencing of the persons concerned. At the same time, testimonial squealing is further promoted by a (privileged) lack of institutional and personal awareness within the university of these ableist attributions and orders.

Regarding the aspect of "refusing silence of the marginalized as a starting point for change" (element 3), no direct statements can be found. However, it can be emphasized at this point that access to and existing in higher education for marginalized people is always linked to practices of "othering," since disclosure of difference

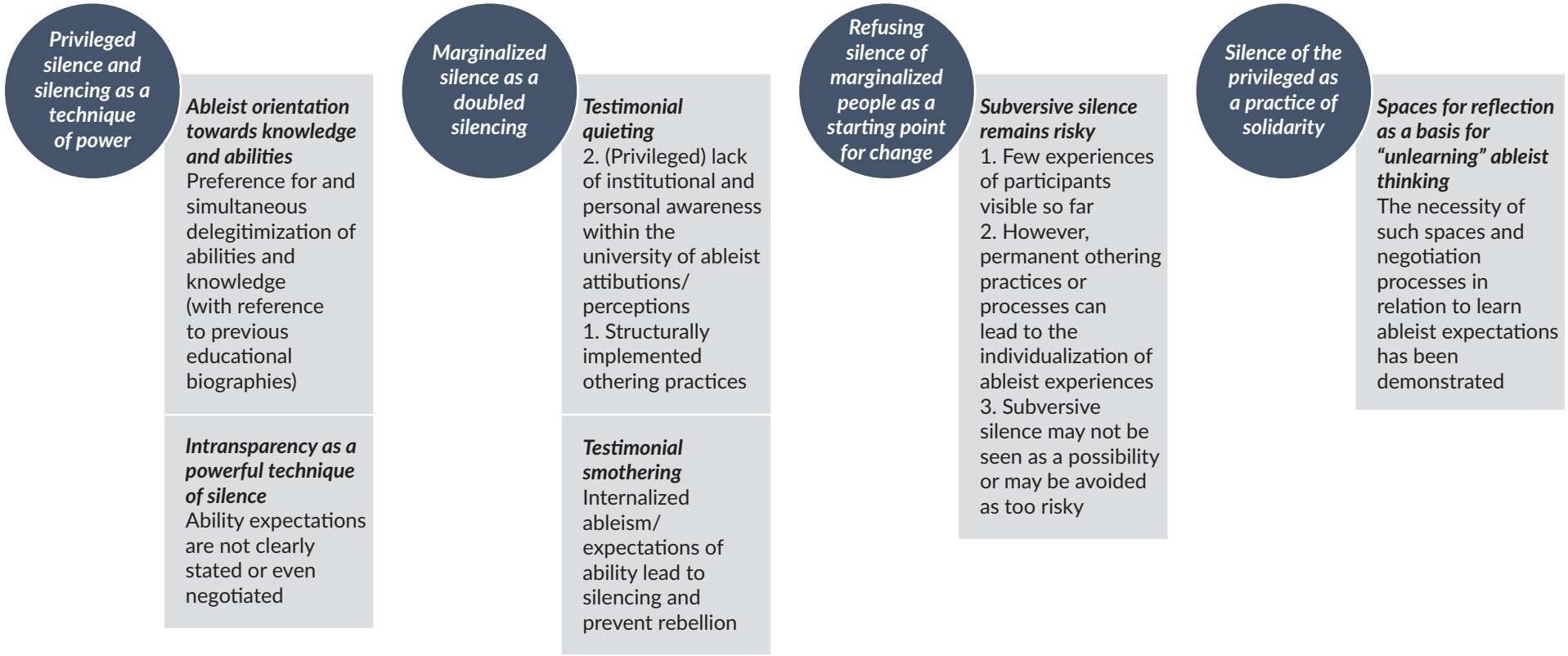

Figure 2. Experiences of ableism in the context of silence processes: The four elements according to Brunner (central results).

(e.g., through disadvantage compensation) is structurally required. Linked to McGowan and Bichsel's (2021) thesis that this construction of disability takes place in the context of a powerful place-making, this could well be seen as an institutionally embedded technique of ableist power towards silence:

> The ambivalence felt by those affected by silencing is not reflected structurally, but rather attributed to the individual, so that the structural violence is not recognized as such. Silencing practices are thus legitimized and reproduce relations of dominance, which in turn can lead to structural exclusion. (Nguyễn, 2022, p. 57, author's translation)

Subversive silence or active (re)speaking against these ableist power structures is invariably highly risky for marginalized groups of people due to these forms of othering.

In the statements on possibilities to deal with ableism at the university, at least rudimentary connections to the fourth element, the "silence of the privileged as a practice of solidarity" (element 4) become clear. The necessity to create spaces for reflection, to question and deconstruct one's own ableist-characterized ability expectations/concepts is described. At the same time, raising awareness and diversification (through accessibility) of university staff are mentioned as important aspects. These approaches can certainly serve to enable solidarity silence or, in reference to Spivak (1996), to initiate "unlearning" as a never-ending process.

Spivak's unlearning means gaining knowledge that is denied by a privileged position and it also means meeting others seriously so that they are able to respond (Spivak, 1996). Buchner (2022c, p. 213, author's translation) also relates this to an ableism-critical perspective and describes unlearning as a "process of coming to terms with 'having become this way,'" which according to him also includes "incorporated ableist thought patterns and privileges." This includes "years of empathic listening and observation" (Castro Varela, 2021, p. 124, author's translation), i.e., a non-hierarchical solidaric silence (Brunner, 2017a). "This involves understanding the importance of knowledge declared unimportant without disregarding the importance of knowledge declared important" (Castro Varela, 2021, p. 116, author's translation).

The results indicate that this unlearning also takes place within exclusive structures and in the context of one's own biographical attachment to social ableist constructions of expectation. Spivak (1993) points to a necessary simultaneous inside and outside ("out-side in the teaching machine," as cited in Castro Varela, 2021, p. 114), since it is not possible to act completely outside the power structures, which makes reaction forms of "subject shaming," as Buchner (2022a, p. 72) describes for example for teachers, obsolete. Rather, in addition to changes in action, it is a matter of structurally and culturally necessary changes or institutionalized critique, as they can be reconciled with the concept of "sabotage" according to Spivak. This means "an [ongoing and never-ending] practice in which what is sabotaged is closely examined beforehand…subjected to in-depth critique…[and ultimately] revised and recalibrated" (Castro Varela, 2021, p. 111, author's translation). "It is not the exposure of error. It is constantly and persistently looking into how truths are produced" (Spivak, 1996, p. 27).

8. Conclusions

In the descriptions so far, an attempt has been made to uncover experiences in the context of ableism at the university and to link these with previous (postcolonial) reflections on processes of silence. In doing so, the

perspectives of professors/lecturers and students on the one hand and lecturers with (learning) disabilities on the other were used and analyzed as examples.

The discussion in this article shows that there can be a close connection between ableist-structured norms of ability and processes of silencing in higher education. Inclusive endeavors inevitably require analyzing these powerful structures and cultures in the context of epistemic violence. One way of dealing with and changing this is seen in Spivak's concept of unlearning. The creation and provision of (self-critical) spaces of reflection within the higher education system seem to be of great importance here. Beyond the explanations given so far, the concept of "critical diversity literacy" according to Steyn (2015) could offer a suitable orientation framework to analytically advance this unlearning and to enable actors in the higher education system "to 'read' prevailing social relations." Overall, it can, also be neither about a pure "diversity of people" (Wagner, 2021, p. 91) nor about a representation of some marginalized people (to speak for others; Nguyễn, 2022). Rather, what is needed are new forms of knowledge production and a "diversity of knowledge" (Wagner, 2021, p. 91) as well as an accompanying decolonized recognition of different forms of knowledge, as described by Mbembe (2016) with the term "pluriversity." This requires a self-critical consideration of inequalities, which can help to "possibly change unequal relations in a direction that is able to understand disadvantaged voices not only as background noise, but as political subjects" (Brunner, 2017b, p. 35, author's translation).

With the special access provided by the QuaBIS project, not only the views of established players such as professors and students could be made visible, but also the experiences of people who had previously been excluded from higher education as participants and lecturers. Even if it was possible to explicitly include the views of marginalized people, the findings only represent an exemplary excerpt. Building on the descriptions in this article, more comprehensive analyses are needed. For example, further university members could be interviewed about the aspects presented here. It would also make sense to follow up on this by visualizing intersectional entanglements in further empirical research in this regard. This article is therefore only an important element in analyzing ableist structures, cultures, and practices and considering them in the context of a differentiated understanding of silence.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Diversity in White: An Autoethnographic Case Study of Experienced Diversity and (Un-)Silencing

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Abstract

Drawing on Sara Ahmed's observation that the one who files a complaint ultimately becomes perceived as the problem, this article exposes the processes of silencing that occur within academia—particularly regarding issues of diversity, racism, and equality, while also exploring how un-silencing can occur in such a context. Despite committing to diversity and equality, academic institutions and their decision-making mechanisms are still largely led by white middle-class individuals with little understanding of intersectional inequalities, thus (re)producing mechanisms that silence those who experience discrimination and inequality. I apply methods such as autoethnography and interpretive textual analysis to challenge dominant (diversity) narratives that perpetuate silencing. Based on memory notes and (in)formal correspondence, the article describes the long process of silencing after an initial experience of discrimination to reveal common institutional patterns and how complainants feel trapped in a labyrinth and consequently forced to "give up."

Keywords

complaint; discrimination; diversity; dynamics of exclusion; intersectionality; juxtaposing narratives; racism; (un)silencing; white feminism

1. What Makes This Article Autoethnographic and Where Did This Article Come From?

1.1. How It All Started—"This Could Happen to Everybody"

At the start of my career, I participated in a career development mentoring program for women researchers—this terminology is specified by the program—at a university in the Global North. This included mentoring, group coaching, and professional training, and lasted four semesters. In my application, I wrote:

> Understanding and accordingly navigating the (academic) system is of particular interest to me because I was not socialized in [country X]. I keep noticing that there are points that I do not quite understand. Therefore, I am sure that I will benefit a lot from the mentoring program in this respect.

Coming from a Kurdish farming family that had been displaced, it seemed like a "dream come true" to be the first and only woman in my family to study and work at a university in the Global North. I was, however, unaware of intersectional discrimination in academia. I was fairly young and new to academia and was not a native speaker of the working languages (on the importance of language in the academic context, specifically to how language contributes to the exclusion of migrants, see Povrzanovic Frykman et al., 2023). From today's perspective, I can say that I was overwhelmed and naïve to believe that the participants in such a mentoring group would be fair, collegial, and ethical in their academic practices. I now realize that it was precisely my insecurity that allowed a fellow participant in the mentoring program to take advantage of my research.

Following the program's conclusion, some participants, including myself, continued to regularly meet for mutual support. During this period, a fellow participant who had, through this program, become familiar with my work on migration and so-called "guest workers"—I will call her MR for "migration researcher" to ensure anonymity and because she has since worked as a migration researcher. MR approached me to collaborate on a joint project funding proposal. The funding call had a multi-layered process, demanding at least two applicants from different disciplines.

I submitted my joint application with her and this was followed by an invitation to continue to the next stage of the selection process. However, significant differences arose between us at this point. I did not experience a sense of trust in relation to her and found her to be paternalistic, domineering, and discriminating. Indeed, for a while, I was subdued, as is often the case with marginalized people. At one point, she stated that my contribution was "only about the guest workers anyway" and everything else was her work: I should, therefore, "take my guest workers." She added that although she could do this part of the research herself, she would "leave it to me." I considered this statement racist and discriminatory because it implies that she did not see me as an equally qualified scholar. Rather, she limited my expertise to "one topic only," namely "guest workers," based on the fact that such "guest workers" have the same country of origin that I do. The same criteria did not hold for her: As a white researcher from the Global North, she could work on "guest workers" without any knowledge of their country of origin or their languages, as she does now, in a project, at the time of writing. I withdrew from our collaboration then (which was a big challenge as she would not take "no" for an answer) and emphasized via email that the proposal approved in the first round could not be used further, especially the parts using my research expertise. I also informed the funding body about my withdrawal from the project application.

I believed the issue was resolved, assuming we would pursue separate research paths due to completely different areas of expertise. But in a subsequent meeting with the participants of the mentoring program, she insisted on discussing it in front of everybody, even though I objected and repeatedly told them that I could not deal with the subject anymore and had already told MR everything that I had to say. The participants repeatedly said that "this could happen to everybody," "this [was] a group matter," and they wanted to hold a workshop, which they would call Peer Conflict, to be led by the program's official coach. However, I did not know that MR had already approached some of the group members, including the program's official coach, from whom she also received individual coaching, and nobody told me that they were aware of the details of

the situation, more than just the fact that there had been a "conflict." I, on the other hand, thought that all the group members were just as surprised and overwhelmed as I was by her public divulgence of our conflict and by her demand for a group intervention (more on this in Section 3).

The group members ignored that the conflict was a matter of unequal power and discrimination, taking MR's perspective for granted. Even now, I do not know what the group members meant by "*this* could happen to everybody," but, to me, *this* represented the group's reductionist interpretation of what the conflict was and how it was represented in the first place: white feminism's interest in getting rid of the "killjoy" (Ahmed, 2010). MR also made the ultimatum that, with both of us as participants, the group "would not be safe anymore" and that one of us would have to leave. This first instance of exclusion was the first step in a longer process in which she took over my network and research and marginalized me in my field. The dynamics in the group made it impossible for me to make it clear that the actual reason for ending the collaboration was my experience of racism and discrimination.

Sara Ahmed argues that "the term *complaint biography* helps us to think of the life of a complaint in relation to the life of a person or group of people" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 20). While a complaint can be the beginning of something, it is never the starting point (Ahmed, 2021, p. 20). This article narrates my *complaint biography*, which began several years ago, but was reduced to a "singular conflict between two" and was dismissed on the grounds that there was "no reason for further engagement with this conflict case." I was also accused of wanting to "monopolize the field" and of being "unreasonable"—something that complainants are commonly told (Ahmed, 2021)—which made me feel very ashamed and shocked.

Institutional denial, poor comprehension, and power dynamics collectively contribute to the silencing of complaints regarding intersectional discrimination. These factors are, moreover, interconnected with prevailing white middle-class interpretations of equality and diversity. Silencing happens in many ways: through requests to repeatedly relate discriminatory experiences even though nothing is ever done in response to the complaints, which causes exhaustion and resignation; through well-intentioned advice from senior academics saying that they experienced the same, but nothing can be done; and through (legal) threats (Ahmed, 2021; Viaene et al., 2023). I did receive a legal threat from MR telling me to "cease and desist your accusations against me and retract them in writing." Otherwise, she would consider legal action "to protect my [her] interests." She also threatened me with the power of institutions "as an employee of the DBC [anonymized acronym]," noting that my accusations "indirectly concern the DBC itself" and she was "in ongoing consultation with the latter."

There have been changes in both demography and the university student population in the Global North, which are partly related to different migratory and mobility movements, including the widespread displacement of people due to violence, economic inequality, and other factors. This has led to demands for equal participation in institutions and society more generally. Consequently, academic institutions recognize that they must at least acknowledge such changes. They mostly do so under the banner of "diversity" (without a clear definition) and apply the contradictory practice of "exclusionary inclusion" (Alpagu et al., 2019). While institutions address the importance of diversity (Ahmed, 2012), the decision-making bodies remain largely dominated by white middle-class-identified people, who have not typically experienced structural discrimination or racism and often lack understanding about intersectional inequalities. In the context of institutional feminism, for example, Rafia Zakaria argues that "it is true that, by and large, the

women who are paid to write about feminism, lead feminist organizations, and make feminist policy in the Western world are white and upper-middle-class" (Zakaria, 2021, p. 5). She further argues that being a white feminist does not require being of white ethnicity. In fact, I also met people of color who did not recognize the cost of discrimination and racism, as one person underplayed my experience by telling me that, in their encounters with her, MR "was not racist to me"—without taking into account that they occupied a position in the university hierarchy higher than MR.

Zakaria (2021) concludes that it is important to note that the concept of whiteness remains fundamental within the framework of white feminism. As Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan states: "Just because they give you a seat at the table doesn't mean they want you to speak at the table" (Manzoor-Khan, 2019, p. 81). In this regard, while institutions at least superficially address the importance of "diversity," it does not mean that they are concerned with providing meaningful support to employees and students most affected by racism and other forms of discrimination. Hence, institutions perpetuate and expand silences while reproducing inequality and the normalization of white middle-class standards. This article questions and challenges structural discrimination and racism using the example of white feminism, which does not mean that white feminism is the only device responsible for such structures. It is just an extension of a larger system and is at the other end of the hierarchy. This is one of the reasons that makes it difficult, even impossible, to demonstrate in an institutional context how gender is also influenced by issues of race and migration.

1.2. What This Article Is (Not) About

That "the personal is political" highlights the connections between personal experiences and larger social and political structures. A common response to complaints is to treat the matter as an isolated "claim" or an "individual case," rather than as a structural problem, which isolates individuals who are labeled as "unreasonable" and "angry" (Ahmed, 2021; Viaene et al., 2023). Furthermore, complainants usually face painful experiences that lead them to display emotions like anger. Paradoxically, these emotions are taken as further evidence to individualize the cases and thus discredit the complainants (Abuzahra, 2023). How to raise one's voice against inequalities and discrimination? How can these experiences be recorded and made public? Most importantly, how to show the link between "the individual" and the social structure?

I apply autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011) as a "political/personal intervention" (Viaene et al., 2023). The method combines (auto)biography and ethnography, which "acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality" and "sensitizes readers…to experiences shrouded in silence" (Ellis et al., 2011). Hence, looking at the societal micro level can explain certain macro-level social phenomena.

Echoing Ahmed (2021, p. 14), who notes that "in remembering, we make the past present; we make the present," this article seeks to make *my present*, a present against forgetting past harms and against being ignored. There are only memories—mostly painful—and correspondences as well as conversations—mostly disappointing—that show largely invisible but deeply unfair academic practices. By combining autoethnography with interpretive textual analysis (Oevermann et al., 1979), which focuses more on the subtle interactions hidden in the data, I aim to make inequalities visible. As such, this article advocates for resistance to situations where complaints about racism/discrimination, scholarly misconduct, and ethical violation are adjudicated according to unequal power relations, which arise from the absence of precise rules concerning integrity and ethical misconduct. As I was told many times, it was clear that MR had hijacked my

research, but there were no legal rules for such situations. Nonetheless, "we have to keep saying it. Because they keep doing it" (Ahmed, 2023, p. 37).

This article is an attempt to figure out how we might think about unethical, unfair, and uncollegial academic environments. It aims to reveal what is happening in academia beyond what we see and show in a CV. Sharing my experiences is an attempt to discuss a theme that is taboo even though it is, apparently and shockingly, a common practice—and those who benefit from the existing power structures often get away with this practice. Before this experience, I could not imagine that something like this could happen. There are meanwhile some attempts to facilitate a more ethical academic environment but I saw that the people involved in such attempts are often overwhelmed. As one of these people told me, they are working for free and do not have much time.

This article is not meant to whistle-blow. All names, including the names of the institutions, are anonymized, which was a challenge. To achieve this, I used pseudonyms but also so-called false trails to facilitate anonymization. I use this publication as the only way that there is for me as a scholar to make people aware of inequalities in academia. More and more publications are emerging (Burlyuk & Rahbari, 2023; Viaene et al., 2023; Zakaria, 2021) as academia becomes more and more diverse, even though the structures stay rather homogenous, e.g., white, binary, heterosexual, and middle-class. What are the costs of these unequal structures for those who are in a less powerful position? What are the costs of neoliberal university structures that demand more competition for recognition and symbolic power (Bourdieu, 2012) under increasingly precarious working conditions? This article shows how, in the context of such a neoliberal university structure, racial exclusions are ignored and sometimes even enabled in favor of white feminism.

What happened to me was unfair and very damaging—emotionally and career-wise—but I was able to find like-minded people (who are not only people of color but also people who are aware and compassionate about the unequal structures in academia) and, most of the time, found my peace. I do not have any expectations that my article will bring "justice" for me, but I hope to bring greater attention, especially within the scholarly community, to the fact that extractive (and violent) practices in knowledge production do not only happen in distant countries but also in the Global North, where the knowledge produced through (forced) migration and mobility is already being exploited.

In the following, two narratives related to the topic of diversity are juxtaposed. First, I will analyze the award-winning "diversity concept" within the university to show that although universities now promote diversity concepts, these concepts do not really work and only serve as "politics of admission" on paper (Ahmed, 2004, 2012). Next, I will reconstruct my email correspondence with one of the program coordinators of the awardee unit and my memory notes from a meeting with program coordinators, demonstrating how this unit "managed" my complaint of discrimination and reinforced the discrimination I already faced. As a third step, I will discuss my attempts to make a complaint after I found out about MR's project. The analysis was conducted with a close textual analysis (Oevermann et al., 1979). To protect privacy, only short excerpts and words were included in the results.

2. The University's Award-Winning "Diversity Concept"

Sara Ahmed draws attention to the "politics of admission," wherein "institutions as well as individuals 'admit' to forms of bad practice, and where such 'admissions' are valued as a form of good practice" (Ahmed, 2004,

p. 1). She further argues that "admitting to one's own racism does not do what it says. Such admissions are not anti-racist actions" (p. 1). "Rather than reading texts for 'what' they say," Ahmed suggests "that texts circulate as documents or objects within public culture, and that our task is to follow them, to see how they move, as well as how they get stuck in specific contexts of utterance" (p. 1). Following this suggestion, I will provide a short analysis of the diversity concept of the university and juxtapose it with my experiences of diversity within the unit.

The subsequent case happened at a university that received a national award for diversity, which the university announced with a short statement on its webpage. For the announcement, a Latin term was used, which ostensibly evokes distinction and implies international repute. The announcement makes the university's diversity project look appealing and interesting but also raises expectations since important institutions, such as government ministries and the university itself, are involved. Furthermore, the title is catchy and suggests that there are concrete plans in place and that action is being taken as it names four concrete directions in which to manage diversity. Although the term "diversity" is used superfluously—appearing six times in three languages (none of them being a language of the Global South)—its meaning is unclear, while it is likewise unclear what it means to manage diversity and how such a thing can even be managed. When clicking to find out more about the concept, a page-long text appears. The text states that all members of the university are affected by diversity and explains that such an understanding of diversity helps the university identify intersectional areas and integrate them. Gender, sexual orientation, age, social/cultural background, and physical/cognitive abilities are given as examples of diverse categories.

The text is ambiguous, difficult to understand, and contradictory. It raises questions about whom it serves and whom it is meant to help. How can everyone be affected by diversity despite the academic debate that brings attention to forms of discrimination based on, e.g., race and gender (Ahmed, 2021; Burlyuk & Rahbari, 2023)? In my academic mentoring program, which was part of a diversity unit that I will elaborate on later, two additional colleagues experienced discrimination and racism. Moreover, previous participants also have reported discriminatory experiences. There are hints of who, indeed, wrote this text—or at least hints that point to their perspective—as evidenced by the ordering of categories they use (gender being the first position), the use of a positive framing (e.g., "physical/cognitive abilities"), and the fact that race is not mentioned. Although the language used in this text highlights people's abilities, it fails to recognize the challenges and discrimination they face.

Instead of solving and addressing existing issues, the concept of diversity is used to create an impression of the university doing everything right. It is a good first step to commit to diversity and equality; yet, evidence shows that these commitments remain instances of "textual performance" if they are not institutionalized (Ahmed, 2004). Only at the end does the statement provide information about how the measure aims to raise awareness of mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, prevent discrimination, and enable career success regardless of personal circumstances or characteristics. There is still no information about the source of this statement or about who is (most) vulnerable to discrimination. Most importantly, there is no information about what an "action" against cases of discrimination (racism is not mentioned at all) would look like at the university.

The question of who is writing and from which perspective becomes clearer when looking at which unit produced the text: It comes from the unit for diversity and gender, though, perhaps unsurprisingly, the award ceremony shows a group of exclusively white people. Bourdieu (2012) argues that awards serve as a means

for recognizing significance and symbolic power, which is how institutions gain legitimacy for what they do. Arguably, this award signifies the effective implementation of diversity initiatives, demonstrating their success "in action." It validates the university's approach to managing diversity, legitimizes the unit, and maintains a system created by white middle-class individuals. But the image of the unit shows how people outside the "norms" are, in practice, not represented (Schick, 2023). Instead, those directly affected by exclusion and discrimination often work under precarious conditions and even for free, e.g., for student unions.

3. What Happened After the Group Meeting

3.1. Experienced Diversity—"But the Group Has to Agree on It"

In the following, I will discuss my email correspondence with one of the people responsible for the mentoring program, showing how her intervention worsened my situation and how a form of white feminism dismissed and covered up my experience of discrimination (Schick, 2023). This correspondence exposes the lack of understanding of those in decision-making positions concerning intersectional discrimination and inequalities (Zakaria, 2021).

After the group meeting recounted in Section 1, I contacted one of the people in charge of the mentoring program and explained the situation to her by phone, including that I experienced racism and discrimination from MR and felt pressured by "the group." I noted that I didn't understand why I should discuss the problems I had with MR in a group where I felt pressured and unheard. I added that this network was important to me, but I might need to leave it. I also requested that she prevent the proposed workshop because I could no longer emotionally deal with the situation and couldn't see what purpose the workshop would serve. She lamented my experiences, but since our group's program had officially concluded, there was nothing she could do, except cover for the coach. I also explained that coaching in a conflict situation from the proposed coach would be inappropriate, as MR had received private coaching from that same person. She followed up our phone call with an email, where she thanked me "for the trust" I had expressed in her and added that "the subject of your call exceeds my responsibility and also my competencies." She still gave me her personal assessment that I should not "give up" (which she formulated as an exclamation) "your [my] place in the group." She continued the email by saying that she thought, "at the moment, [the conflict was] also about…whether and how the group can continue to work together and exist." She continued to recommend coaching and added:

> If your group wants to work on this issue with a coach…[then] whether the conflict you describe is discussed in the group or not can still be decided, there is—among other possibilities—also the option to agree in the group that this topic is excluded (tabooed)—but the group has to agree on this.

The email gives the impression that while the coordinator empathized with me, a bureaucratic understanding of "responsibility" circumscribed her position and limited what she could do. Yet, because she was so kind, she made a personal recommendation to "not give up." At the same time, she distanced herself from the issue of racism and discrimination by not naming what happened and remaining generic in her correspondence, which ultimately dismissed my concerns. I reached out to her due to pressure from "the group," and she insisted that "the group" held the final authority. Hence, she turned my experience of discrimination into *my problem alone* for which she was "not responsible or competent," while failing to explain who was. Paradoxically, although she deemed it *my problem*, she still underscored the importance of the "group decision." She chose to leave me

at the mercy of the dynamic of "the group," despite still using the program's official budget and coach. With the person in charge declaring herself not responsible for racism and bullying, but for keeping "the group" together, "the group" not only succeeded in shifting the focus from discrimination and inequality to a *knowledge problem*, which was intended to be resolved through coaching. Sibel Schick argues that white feminism only focuses on sexism as gender-based discrimination and represents the interests of a supposed "norm woman" who is, e.g., white, well-educated, and not poor (Schick, 2023). This feminism disconnects racism from feminism and aims for "norm women" to have equal status as men in the social hierarchy. On the way up, however, it inevitably exploits people as "collateral damage." The exclusion of multiple marginalized women results in their direct discrimination.

My response to her shows clear anger and disappointment:

> Thank you for your assessment but, in this case, I will leave the group. I don't have the time and energy to be bothered with this issue (in such a large group).

As the program lead, one might anticipate her to acknowledge my feelings and offer support. However, her response was cold, viewing my complaint as an attack. She merely thanked me for informing her about my decision and wished me "all the best" for my "scientific career," which felt cynical given her lack of support. There is a significant difference between having theoretical knowledge about racism and actually *experiencing* discrimination and/or being aware of the structures that (re)produce racist and exclusionary mechanisms. Mariam Malik argues that university lecturers often respond to the naming of racism with scandalization. This can "lead to the formation of a white solidarity community of consenting and silent students" (Malik, 2022, p. 40). Consequently, "racism as such can be dismissed as a complaint" (Ahmed, 2021, p. 2). Complainers are hence labeled as "emotional," but there is no understanding of the emotions—especially rage—caused by racism (Abuzahra, 2023).

In my final email, I wrote:

> I don't know what kind of information you have but there is something very rotten and one-sided going on. I don't see why the group should decide on something that I don't want to speak about. Maybe as the unit [name anonymized], you would like to take that away as feedback? In any case, the structural problems have become more apparent to me as a woman with an "immigrant background."

I expressed how disappointed I was in the unit for its handling of cases of discrimination and exclusion so poorly. She responded with administrative language and thanked me for my feedback. She refused to move beyond a limited understanding of her professional "responsibility," since addressing such a conflict did not align with her agenda. The conflict is delegated to a group that consists of a majority of white women including program participants, its managers, and the coach. The unit and the coach legitimize the unit and its position as a firewall "against patriarchy and the male-dominated world" (excerpt from an email from the coach, justifying the coaching). This demonstrates the unit's limited definition, which divides people into just two genders and ignores distinctions between "women" on the one hand and all other genders on the other. The matter is shifted from racism to a "group problem," which benefits MR at my expense. The unit, contrary to its original claim, does not consider itself "responsible and competent" against discrimination but feels itself responsible only for the maintenance of "the group." Consequently, the unit acts in favor of

appropriative white feminism, which can lead to a perpetrator–victim reversal. The differences that exist between "women" are made invisible.

In the following I will discuss my experiences with individuals and institutions after finding out that MR had submitted the project that we had initially worked on together, showing the consequences of my exclusion from the mentoring program. I also consider how I retrospectively understood why my participation in the group would constitute a "threat [to] the safe space of the group" and why "the group" kept ignoring me after I found out about MR's project; if "the group" wanted to have its "peace," I would need to leave the group. As a consequence, the idea of the "safe space" was used to exclude a "problematic" element, namely a "complainant," who had accused one of their members of racism and scholarly malpractice.

3.2. A Migration Researcher is Born—"Go on Your Own Way, Publish"

One year after leaving "the group," I discovered that MR had submitted the project behind my back based on the proposal we had co-authored. I had invited a scholar to give a talk on the topic, and he told me that MR had contacted him. He asked if I knew her, as the project seemed very similar to mine. She submitted this project with a new co-applicant—without mentioning me in any way. They did not even change the subtitle of the original project, which reflected my precise research focus. Neither of them had any previous experience in my research area and came from different fields; in their application, however, they used concepts, themes, and approaches similar to those of my research. Furthermore, people who had been interested in collaborating with me now supported this project.

I contacted someone from "the group," who was until that point an active member of "the group" together with MR. I will refer to them as CiS, my "colleague in solidarity." I sent CiS the media coverage of MR's project—which was eventually accepted for funding—since she had been the only member of the group to demonstrate solidarity with me. This reconstruction of the incidents only became possible through efforts to share my experiences with CiS. I learned that MR had already contacted some group colleagues, including CiS. This short passage from CiS's statement explains how MR had contacted her before our meeting. The idea of coaching and the involvement of the unit already happened at this stage without me knowing anything about it:

> In the presence and with the support of her partner, MR emotionally described to me at this meeting that this project application was immensely important to her, but that a continuation was in jeopardy because FA surprisingly wanted to stop the cooperation and communication, with the side note that apparently "private and health problems" of FA could be the cause. MR also told me that for her the group as a whole was no longer a "safe space," and that she wanted to address the conflict at the next online group meeting in front of all participants, and asked me for my personal assessment. I advised her to talk to FA in advance and offered to seek professional support from the [name anonymized] unit.

My exclusion from "the group," as well as my marginalization in the academic scene, facilitated her appropriation of the project.

My PhD supervisor and our program mentor recommended that I write a detailed log so that relevant authorities could investigate the matter. Together with statements from my mentor, my supervisor, and the CiS, I submitted my official complaint to several institutions and then experienced a bureaucratic labyrinth.

The funding agency did not want to respond formally to my accusation of racism and bullying on the grounds that it was the university unit's responsibility; "something very wrong happened there." Likewise, the body overseeing scientific misconduct and ethical issues did not examine my primary allegation at all and issued a report that clearly showed they misunderstood my request. However, upon my request to amend this misunderstanding, they refused to reopen the case. Conversely, the diversity unit acknowledged that unethical practices and scientific misconduct took place, but emphasized that my complaints about racism, discrimination, and bullying from "the group" were merely a "claim." This was almost entirely deliberated in "confidential discussions."

This is a short passage from my mentor's statement, who also acted as MR's mentor in the program:

> Since 2015, FA has established a scientific standing as a specialist in migration research…until then, MR had not done any research on migration….It is important for me to emphasize that plagiarism, bullying, and unfair conduct in the academic field should not be personalized, but should always be regarded as embedded in structures of inequality and competition. Also, this conflict is not one between the two junior researchers alone; rather, it also refers to structures of inequality and competition that are linked to social positioning, and in this case above all migration histories.

A passage from my supervisor follows:

> The specific accusation is that, contrary to an agreement after the end of the collaboration, essential parts contributed by FA to the development and conception of the research project were integrated by MR into her own, now-funded application without indicating the authorship. In this way, not only is the essential contribution that FA made to the conception of the research project made invisible; rather, FA finds herself confronted with an appropriation, even expropriation, of the topics and concepts she has worked on for many years. As someone who has known, appreciated, and supported FA and her research for a long time, I find the indignation and disappointment absolutely understandable. However, this is not a question of sensitivities; what is under discussion is an unfair research practice that raises fundamental questions of research ethics….The fact that FA's research input continues to be used after the end of the collaboration, apparently to suggest authentic authorship, is not only dishonest but, frankly, shocking.

The reaction to these statements from the scientific misconduct investigation was that the parties would "not provide any additional information regarding possible scientific misconduct."

Viaene et al. (2023, p. 222) argue:

> The gaslighting strategy of marking young female researchers as "difficult" and "aggressive" is something we take with us while building further up our academic career….We experience challenges in building up new, healthy, and trusting professional relationships due to the feeling of constantly walking on a tightrope….Everything can eventually be used against you.

Upon discovering MR's project, I reached out to the people involved and was shocked to find out the extent of their involvement without my knowledge. MR had contacted my networks for her benefit and expressed

her uncertainty about how to handle me, that I refused to talk to her for no reason, and the perception that I was "not doing well and had private problems." By telling people about my very normal everyday concerns, which I had shared with her during our collaboration, she presented me as unreliable. This strategy worked as people admitted to avoiding me, "not to bother me" since I was "not doing well." I realized that for a while, I became so insecure that I started concealing any struggles or health issues from colleagues in order not to be perceived as a "problematic person."

Viaene et al. (2023, p. 216) describe the concept of "drawbridges" as individuals who offer support to "victims" but refrain from taking action against the institution to safeguard their position. I have also encountered several "drawbridges." One colleague, who had supported MR in the application process, was "shocked" after she read the media coverage about the project, and expressed her solidarity, but ultimately refused to write a statement because she feared possible consequences. Another person from "the group" told me that what MR had done was "simply not okay" and that she didn't think "we could have stopped MR from submitting the application, but everything that happened with the group—I definitely see my (our) responsibility there." The same person added that she needed some time to think about how to react and to see "what the consequences are for me [her]." She never contacted me again. A professor who had supported MR during the submission of the project and could have intervened against MR's practice after I informed him referred to what she did as "cannibalism," but took no action and told me that he had experienced something similar but managed to overcome it. He said I was "very strong" and should "go on my own way and publish."

I felt that they could not understand how outraged I was that my multi-year research work had been appropriated by a researcher, with no former knowledge of the topic, who was from a completely different research area, and marginalized me in my field while claiming that she was the first academic doing such research. This appropriation, with no credit given, felt like a colonialist act. She used my knowledge and network to her advantage and started to attend the same conferences—which was never the case until this project application. When I presented my work, scholars made me aware of "this big project, which is very similar to [my] dissertation, and [that] I should 'exchange and network with MR.' " Interestingly, people were compassionate about MR: The professor who described her actions as "cannibalism" rationalized that she did it because of "her circumstances"; another person told me that they and another colleague supported her because she had a child. Anger is based on the feeling of being excluded, but only privileged people have the opportunity to express their anger. Marginalized and racialized people may show anger but often face increased discrimination as a result. And the root cause of their anger often goes unaddressed. While, e.g., "concerned citizens" are "tolerated" to express their anger at demonstrations, marginalized people seem "too loud, too demanding, too threatening" (Abuzahra, 2023). Similar to how men are being protected against sexual assault accusations due to having close relations with women (Viaene et al., 2023), I found that MR's supporters rationalized that "she is very kind" and "has lots of migrant friends."

3.3. Ambivalent Managements—"How the System Is"

This is a note I made after a meeting with the unit's leadership:

> She begins by informing us why we are gathered here and emphasizes that it is not about "individual cases." They want to hear "my feedback for the future." She does not address my repeated questions about what they can do for me and how they handle situations like my case. I also repeat several times

> that I am not the only one affected by discrimination and racism. I tell her that I don't have a camera with me to record all the racist and discriminatory experiences. She says: "You don't have to record anything, you just have to be credible." She repeats over and over again that what I am saying is just a "claim."

Viaene et al. (2023, p. 210) argue that experiences of institutional abuse "become known through survivors' voices, naturally subjective, emotional, or even resentful." They therefore argue that "reflecting on a traumatic event brings with it the repetition of its violence, making it difficult to describe coherently. Therefore…demanding objectivity to a survivor's description is also an act of violence" (p. 210). I argue that institutions use the demand for excessive repetition to cause another form of silencing, since "victims" need to eventually take a step back to protect their own mental health.

Muzayen Al-Youssef states that racism exists throughout society and is systematic, multi-layered, subtle, and therefore often dismissed (Al-Youssef, 2023). She concludes that "whoever experiences racism has had bad luck," meaning that there are hardly any consequences for racist actions. After the meeting from which my memory notes above emerged, I realized the unit's leadership lacked understanding of my situation, of how this system (re)produced inequality and exclusion (Schick, 2023; Zakaria, 2021). Most importantly, they were very ambivalent; first of all, this meeting only took place after the intervention of two mentors of the program (two distinguished scholars in gender studies), who made the unit's leadership aware of the problems within the program, which shows the importance of hierarchy and power. It was obvious that the unit leadership was overwhelmed and also restricted by the larger bureaucracy, as the unit occupies the lower end of the organizational hierarchy. The same person who told me that I should be credible also expressed: "You are right but that is how the system is. We are twenty years behind when it comes to racism." It was obvious that they, and especially the person with whom I had the phone and email communication, felt sorry and realized that their way of "managing" was problematic. Ultimately, though, in the meeting, they were focused on preserving their own positions and the institution's reputation. Each meeting was a painful experience, which made me feel worse: hurt, sad, outraged, frustrated, and lonely. Consequently, I decided to stop seeking conversation with them to protect my mental health, as I felt they were using these conversations to legitimize themselves by listening to me, to make me feel like they were doing what they were supposed to, but were unaware of how much they had repeatedly hurt me. I understood and experienced very deeply what Ahmed (2021, p. 1) meant when she wrote that "to be heard as complaining is not to be heard."

Although the authorities admitted that "something went terribly wrong" behind closed doors, they did everything to control the official narrative: Only after my persistent demand that something be done about complaints regarding the mentoring program did the coordinators send an email to "the group," reducing the allegations to only "my case" and writing that they had developed "a bundle of measures for increased protection against discrimination and the integration of intersectional perspectives in the future program." Regarding CiS's follow-up question about making the measures public, they offered her a personal and "confidential" meeting to "present the package of measures mentioned."

4. Conclusion

This article discussed a complaint that brought me into conversation with a variety of organizations and people, demonstrating the limitations that institutions face despite the diversity of their members and

despite diversity plans. Complaints against discriminatory and racist practices are regarded as an attack on the system, and institutions tend to deny complaints and make their decisions according to power dynamics. Furthermore, people involved do not necessarily intend to support perpetrators but do so because it is difficult for them to admit to themselves that they work in positions that (re)produce mechanisms that cause painful experiences. However, these responses have consequences for those who have already experienced discrimination. Complainants eventually "give up" and are silenced (Malik, 2022). People who are willing to transform the system are more likely to work in precarious positions with limited opportunities for intervention, because decision-makers tend to be white, middle-class, and often lack the necessary understanding of intersectional inequalities (Schick, 2023; Zakaria, 2021). Therefore, institutions inevitably practice "exclusionary inclusion" (Alpagu et al., 2019) by committing to diversity and equality while simultaneously applying barriers to institutionalizing their commitment (Ahmed, 2021).

I have elaborated upon how my *complaint biography* was "managed" by different actors and organizational units. The racist and discriminatory experiences I had were turned into a "group problem" that could be solved by "coaching"; the fact that racism and discrimination were the actual reason for terminating the collaboration was thus made invisible. This invisibility was then reinforced by the unit in charge, which "did not feel responsible and competent" for protecting me against discrimination, but for maintaining "the group." The university's diversity strategy claims to stand for "protection from discrimination," yet its focus on narrow and reductionist white feminism has done just the opposite. The abuse of "trust" and the commitment to "saving face" are particularly troubling. Actors took what was said about me for granted, namely, that I was "not doing well," "not healthy," discrediting my person, and causing me further "othering," while they discarded what I said as mere "claims." The experienced white (feminist) strategies can be characterized as shifting the matter from discrimination to "a group problem" among women who are supposed to support each other; thereby silencing discrimination and promoting perpetrator–victim reversal; and declaring the person discriminated against a "threat to the group." This shift allowed the unit to maintain the narrative that they *did everything right*. The control of a narrative adapted to a white feminist perspective is also noteworthy: After I confronted those in charge and "the group" with evidence, "my issue" was re-transformed from a group concern to a two-party conflict.

This article reveals how a narrow and reductionist gender perspective that overlooks any differences, inequalities, and power relations among "women," can lead to more inequality, discrimination, and racism. Racism does not always come to light as "explicit" racism, but can instead fall back on "substitute discourses," i.e., by ascribing "health problems" to a person, labeling them as "difficult" or "exhausting," and "endangering" an important project. When MR declared herself as the "victim," she sought protection and support in a group designed to support women, using gender as the only operative category and making racism and scientific misconduct invisible and even impossible to address.

This article shows that it is precisely such a form of gendered self-presentation that the unit feels responsible for: a woman who can show that her career is "endangered" by another, who is not "entirely healthy" and "not reliable." Paradoxically, nobody who was involved in supporting MR asked what the project was about. The same professor who called her action "cannibalism" told me that he did not read the proposal as he did not have time. It was very easy to "other" me, as the person who was "difficult," "has problems," and about whom they felt sorry—but they still held the view that the project and MR were very important and could not be endangered.

My *complaint biography* was closed by the institutions within a year, and I met "drawbridges" (Viaene et al., 2023) and compassionate people who all shared the view—even if from different perspectives—that I follow my way and publish. Here, I am publishing as a way to beyond the limitations of middle-class, white institutions, and white feminism.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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ARTICLE

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Agency in Silence: The Case of Unaccompanied Eritrean Refugee Minors in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Following the so-called refugee crisis, unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) from Eritrea were portrayed negatively in Europe. Although such portrayals are often amplified by media and policy discourses, the main reasons for this negative view were a lack of understanding of URMs' subjectivities, the institutional silencing process they face in their everyday lives, and the ways they show agency in such precarity. This article addresses institutional silencing practices that Eritrean URMs encounter and the various ways they engage with them. Using data gathered during 2016–2018 from Eritrean URMs in the Netherlands, we explore how participants navigate the exclusionary processes they encounter in relation to institutions, such as refugee reception centres, refugee protection organizations, immigration authorities, and schools. Inspired by Sherry Ortner's and Saba Mahmood's work, we show the importance of less dominant forms of agency (delayed or docile forms) in how URMs engage with the power of institutional silencing practices. We then show the (often unseen) agency of these young people as the desire of the "less powerful" or "less resourceful" to "play their own serious games even as more powerful parties seek to devalue and even destroy them" (Ortner, 2006, p. 147).

Keywords

agency; Eritrea; institutional silencing; the Netherlands; unaccompanied refugee minors

1. Introduction

We start with an observation by the first author, from 2016:

> It has been a very heavy morning on all fronts. I just came out of a long funeral service at the Orthodox Tewahdo Church in Rotterdam. An Eritrean minor, whom we shall call Sinit, had committed suicide at

> the age of 17. Her death shocked everyone. The funeral ceremony started with a long prayer headed by a senior priest. Sinit's body was lying in a casket at the front of the church altar, and the priest made several rounds while reciting a prayer in Tigrinya [one of the official languages in Eritrea] and Geez [an ancient language spoken in church]. In a long sermon, the priest talked about the difference between physical and spiritual death, underscoring that the latter refers to the spiritual and eternal body. He said "hence, our daughter has only died physically," and added, "she needs prayers, not mourning." Reflecting on Sinit's life, he said: "She has undertaken a horrendous journey—all the walks, the heat, and the thirst she encountered with all her tiredness. Today, she is leaving us for good." His words were strong and penetrating. People were bowing and nodding in agreement. In addition to Sinit's close friends, guardians, and mentors, several URMs were also inside the church. They came from both near and far. Some were crying aloud and some were sobbing silently. More importantly, they were comforting one another.

Before analysing the importance of this painful event, we first provide a layered description of it, including the performance of Sinit's friends, journey mates, guardians, and mentors. We then illuminate how this event can be situated within broader institutional and interpersonal silencing practices experienced by unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) from Eritrea. The excerpt refers to several issues that will be unpacked later, including the hardship of the journey and the possible reasons behind committing suicide. The hardship of Sinit's journey to reach the Netherlands and apply for asylum was described powerfully by the senior priest, who referred to "the walk, the heat, and the thirst." The "walk" refers to her arduous travels after fleeing Eritrea, and the "heat" and the "thirst" represent the Sahara and the Mediterranean Sea (a common route for Eritreans trying to reach Europe; Belloni, 2016, 2018). His words "with all her tiredness" refer to all the energy and effort Sinit exerted to reach the Netherlands, which ended tragically. According to her friends, Sinit was quiet and modest. Another source told of how she was severely burned in Libya when the *mazraea* (ማዝርዓ,مزرعة literally a "farmhouse," but in this context, a holding place where smugglers keep people before sea crossings) she was staying in caught on fire and the smugglers closed the doors, preventing her escape. After that, she became morbidly depressed.

Although we may never fully understand why Sinit committed suicide, the first author's conversations with URMs and others who knew her offer possible explanations. In addition to her ongoing depression, her sense of helplessness and unhappiness had increased in the Netherlands. Those who knew Sinit said she had had a strained relationship with her caregivers that often left her feeling misunderstood. She had asked several times to be relocated in hopes that improving her living conditions would ease her psychological pain. But it took a long time for her request to be honoured. As we will show, Sinit's sense of muteness in the Netherlands is not an exceptional case; many URMs experience institutional and interpersonal exclusion (conceptualized here as silencing). During the funeral and its aftermath, the first author had informal conversations with several minors who said the event was traumatic for their community. For some, it was as if their own deaths were being enacted in front of them. Sinit's act of desperation and the ways URMs engaged with the funeral process reveal the contrast between their feeling of arriving in a safe haven after a devastating journey and their experience of exclusionary processes in the Netherlands that undermine their subjectivities. Before providing supporting arguments for this statement, we elaborate on how the URMs acted during the funeral.

1.1. URMs Carrying Their Soulmate

In attending Sinit's funeral, URMs paid respect to their soulmate through their collective presence and contributed to the funeral process through their meaningful actions. Their presence was an act of resistance because they were supposed to be in school. It was also an act of solidarity with someone they identified with because of their similar experiences and struggles. And finally, it was an act of cultural caring. By using cultural objects and rituals, they indicated that they are part of a community that cares for each other in times of precarity, pain, and loss.

The URMs' act of resistance requires more explanation. Although schools allow students to attend funerals, students must submit forms to the school principal or their classroom teacher to obtain permission. Unfortunately, the URMs neither submitted the forms nor communicated their intentions to their mentors, resulting in them missing school without permission. Later, when the first author discussed this situation with the URMs, they said: "Why do we need permission for this?" For them, it was natural to just go and honour their peer. It was both an act of resistance against a system that failed to understand them and a demonstration of their lack of connection with their Dutch caregivers, who did not understand their pain over the loss of someone they did not necessarily know. For the URMs, their presence at the funeral allowed the connectivity they felt was strongly needed for healing from this painful event.

2. Institutional Silencing and Agency of URMs

Clark (2020, p. 360) provides a framework to research silence that encompasses consumptive (negative and oppressive), negotiated (discursive silencing based on certain stigmas), and generative silence (as agency). This analytical framework helps us to analyse URMs' actions as informed choices regarding when and how they wish to articulate their experiences, thereby enabling their voices to emerge with spoken and unspoken forms of agency. But it also allows us to consider silencing practices related to the power dynamics involved in how individuals and groups interact and engage with various structural discourses and practices. To grasp the layered nature of silencing in relation to power, we use Lukes's (1986) three dimensions of power as a lens.

Lukes's first dimension of power focuses on visible forms of power or the power of decision-making, that is, the concrete actions and decisions that benefit people in positions of power. The second dimension considers situations in which decisions are prevented from being taken seriously. It is about the structurally hidden face of power, such as when power is exercised by controlling the agenda. The visibly exercised aspect of these two dimensions of power connects to Clark's consumptive silence. The third dimension includes hegemonial or discursive power, which comes close to what Clark calls negotiated or discursive silencing. This level goes further into the deep structures through which different societal actors take certain images of groups and their exclusionary impact for granted. These different dimensions of power produce various forms of silencing in practice.

Significantly, Clark's approach to silence also introduces silence as a form of agency. This approach fits within a broader approach to agency that goes beyond what Mahmood (2001) refers to as emancipatory politics. It creates more space for attending to desires, demands, contexts, and conditions that exist outside the discourse of liberation. In particular, agency for the "less powerful" or "less resourceful" can be about "having desires to play their own serious games even as more powerful parties seek to devalue and even

destroy them" (Ortner, 2006, p. 147). This could entail choosing a position "on the margin of the power" as an "enactment of a personal project" (p. 147).

2.1. Institutional Reception Contexts for URMs: The Netherlands

Refugees and asylum seekers are often portrayed negatively in the public spectrum (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Gray & Franck, 2019; Moffette & Vadasaria, 2016), from being "at risk" to "as risk" (Gray & Franck, 2019, pp. 276–281). They have also been portrayed as "mistrusting," "walking deficit," and "children" (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Daniel & Knudsen, 1995; Dinesen, 2012; Ghorashi, 2010). Such images create binaries such as "victims or threats," which are subsequently reinforced by media frames and discourses (Chouliaraki et al., 2017; Eberl et al., 2018; Moffette & Vadasaria, 2016; Vultee, 2010). These images inform URMs' encounters with institutional settings, including the reception and care system, where they are treated merely as problematic children and victims who are inherently vulnerable and in need of constant intervention (Gray & Franck, 2019, p. 282). Studies have shown that treating (young) asylum seekers as passive victims leads to paternalistic forms of interventions that ignore their agency. An earlier study situating this approach to asylum seekers and refugees within the context of a welfare state (the Netherlands) argued that welfare states' main aim is to help the weaker categories of people in a society (Ghorashi, 2010). Despite this noble promise, an unintended consequence is a fixation on the shortcomings of disadvantaged groups that denies their lived experiences. Ignoring asylum seekers' agency and narratability can eventually lead to their silencing in institutional settings (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017).

While the literature on URMs initially focused on their vulnerability and the psychosocial impact of their past experiences, we have observed a shift towards focusing on their current lives and the challenges they face in their country of destination (Enenajor, 2008; Horgan & Ní Raghallaigh, 2019). This shift also calls for a much-needed focus on the discourses and politics of care in their host communities (Ghaeminia, 2022, p. 89). Ghaeminia identified three discursive approaches to framing URMs in the Dutch context. The first type of discursive frame looks at URMs as an extremely vulnerable group of people who require rescue through additional psychosocial help, protection, and care (Adaku et al., 2016; Crawley, 2010; Huijsmans, 2011; Müller et al., 2019; Vervliet et al., 2015; Watters, 2008; Wells, 2011; Wernesjö, 2014). The second type of frame shows URMs as dangerous. Such frames portray URMs as deviants, damaged children, not "real" children, potential adult liars, problem groups seeking unjustified advantages, and so on (Crawley, 2010, 2011; Eastmond, 2007; Ghorashi, 2010; Ghorashi et al., 2018; Lems et al., 2020). The third type of frame looks at URMs from the perspectives of lack and deficit. Such frames tend to view URMs as economically, socially, and culturally "other," as defective, and as ungrateful to their country of destination (Crawley, 2011). These three discursive framings have a direct impact on the policies of reception and care for URMs and on the host societies.

In the Netherlands, the state is not directly involved in the care of URMs, such as those in this study. Instead, responsibility for the custody of all URMs is delegated to Stichting Nidos, the national guardianship institution for unaccompanied and separated children in the Netherlands. Nidos assigns each child a legal guardian and mentors—the mentors make sure the child eats properly, goes to school, and lives where they are supposed to live. Nidos oversees these arrangements and has agreements with several URMs organizations (contract partners) that provide care for minors. URMs generally stay under Nidos's custody until the age of 18. After that, the municipality they live in takes over responsibility for care, assistance, and housing (Schippers, 2017,

p. 33). URMs' first encounter with the formal institutions in the Netherlands is the Aliens Police. After the registration and screening process, Nidos assumes guardianship as stipulated by the 2014 Dutch Civil Code (Art. 1:253r). Nidos further ensures a smooth follow-up of the asylum procedure and legal representation as mandated by the Ministry of Security and Justice (Goeman & van Os, 2013; Zijlstra et al., 2017). The asylum procedure starts with a summons from the Immigration and Naturalization Service for subsequent interviews and eventually results in a positive or negative asylum decision with the right to appeal. Regardless of one's prospects for receiving asylum, accommodation must be provided, and Nidos remains the sole guardian of all minors.

There are three categories of housing for URMs. The first category is for minors whose asylum applications are not processed right away. These facilities are only for URMs without a residency permit, either because they are in the process of the prolonged asylum procedure or because their asylum request has been denied. These minors face uncertain residency prospects and have a high probability of being refused a residency permit. They are therefore not transferred to the municipality but remain under the care of the Central Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers. The second category of housing is for minors who have obtained a residency permit. After their initial stay at the Ter Apel Reception Centre for Unaccompanied Minors, these minors are transferred to one of the small-scale shelters located throughout the Netherlands. The third category of housing is foster families for children with or without residency permits. The choice of location is based on the minor's age, vulnerability, and the idea that children do best in families from their own (or similar) culture, which helps them maintain their cultural identity.

In the small-scale shelters, children are housed together under the care of mentors. KWGs (*kinder woongroep*, or a children's residential group) usually house children aged 15 and older in groups of six to 10. They have mentors on site 24 hours a day. KWEs (*kleine wooneenheid*, or small residential units) are usually for 16- and 17-year-olds who are considered capable of living almost independently. They usually live in groups of four to five and can contact mentors 24 hours a day (Schippers, 2017). Our study focuses mostly on this group.

3. Methodology

Our main research questions were the following: What are the institutional silencing practices encountered by Eritrean URMs? How do Eritrean URMs engage with these practices through different forms of agency? We used data from two years of participant observations and interviews with Eritrean URMs collected over two years (2016–2018). As a researcher in the youth care system, the first author was able to gain access to the URMs and establish a relationship of trust with them. This helped to gauge the power balance (Kydd, 2006, p. 450) and allowed the URMs to speak about their troubling experiences with various institutions over the years. The first author conducted 15 interviews, four of which will be presented here. Interviews were conducted in Tigrinya and Arabic, and excerpts were translated into English for this article.

URM participants were selected based on snowball-effect techniques and trust-building mechanisms. Building on his long-term relationships with this group, the first author invited the URMs for an interview via phone calls and WhatsApp messages. Most interviews were conducted in the URMs' homes. Occasionally, they took place in parks, on public benches, or sidewalks. In choosing the four narratives selected for this article, we considered the duration of stay in the Netherlands (between two or three years at the time of the interview)

and the extent of institutional silencing experienced by the URMs involved. The participating URMs permitted the first author to take notes during the interviews but not to make audio or video recordings, as they were uncomfortable with being recorded. This stemmed in part from political divisions in the Eritrean community and the fear that what they said could implicate them here in the Netherlands as well as back in Eritrea. Thus, no recordings of the interviews were made (following Bozzini, 2011; Plaut, 2016). The first author paid special attention to the affective and highly sensitive nature of the data-gathering process involving children. He was guided by Vervliet et al.'s (2015) insightful study identifying several critical features of research involving URMs, including the "freedom not to participate," "building mutual bonds," "taking responsibility," "acknowledging requests," "channelling emotions," and "not rushing out" of the research process (pp. 477–479). Inductive thematic analysis was applied to the emerging data while reading the qualitative data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 136). The two authors then thoroughly examined and reflected upon emerging themes: "skipping school," "rebelling through one's faith," "acting dumb," "dealing with impossible demands," and "plotting against the authorities" were extracted from the data and will be discussed next.

To gain participants' approval in an ethical way, we adhered to three key practices: (a) establishing relational trust and maintaining good rapport with participants—the first author is related to URMs linguistically and culturally; (b) obtaining verbal consent—building relational trust was more important than the narrow process of signing forms (Metro, 2014); and (c) creating a safe space to gain verbal consent not only once but repeatedly over time. We were constantly mindful of the sensitivity of participants' needs and concerns, especially avoiding the reproduction of any trauma. Additionally, the conventional rules of conducting research with children and other vulnerable groups—such as doing no harm, avoiding data traceability, and obtaining verbal consent—were carefully observed during the interviews. These methods emerged from a broader interaction context that enabled more intimate and trusting relationships, that is, through active listening and investing more time and energy in building trust.

4. Setting the Scene: A Brief Overview of the Selected Biographies

In what follows, we present narratives from four URMs—Daniel, Yonatan, Ghirmay, and Sham (all pseudonyms)—reflecting institutional silencing and agency in various institutional contexts.

4.1. Daniel's Story

Daniel, a 17-year-old, was born to a farming family in the Eritrean village of Segheneyti in 2002. He left Eritrea in 2017 and lived in various refugee camps in Ethiopia before entering Sudan. After a long journey through Sudan and Libya, he finally arrived in the Netherlands almost a year later. The first author met Daniel in a local school, where he was trying to get access to schooling. Records kept by his guardian indicated aggression, sometimes physical, and withdrawal from social interaction with mentors and translators. When Daniel appeared for an intake at the school, he was wearing a hat. The school principal immediately asked him to take off his hat, which Daniel did reluctantly. Later, Daniel heard the principal describe him as "rude." This judgmental description was probably based in part on what the principal had read in a reference letter accompanying Daniel's application. So his prejudices were seemingly confirmed by Daniel's chosen attire for the intake. Hearing the principal's remark, Daniel got up and left the room with some antagonism. There was no follow-up from either the school or the principal after that, and Daniel did not continue with his education. The negative atmosphere in this encounter was set even before the meeting because Daniel's legal guardian

had shared an unfavourable appraisal of him. Even worse, as Daniel pointed out, the legal guardian was not proactive in the dialogue with the principal. After this incident, other schools did not welcome him.

From Daniel's perspective, when he met with the school principal, he was complying with the norms that regulate admission into an educational institution in the Netherlands. His compliance and his resistance towards such norms need to be situated within his life history, which shows almost no educational experience in Eritrea. Daniel's initial compliance was a form of agency as was his antagonistic expression of tension over wearing a hat and his storming out of the meeting room, which resulted in his withdrawal from the situation. His behaviour illustrates a shortcoming in negotiating unfamiliar contexts and cultural expectations. But the judgement of Daniel's apparent antisocial behaviour is best understood as resulting from specific images of refugees (in this case as being rude) determining the interaction with the school principal. Daniel's account reveals a specific instance of silencing by putting more emphasis on his hat instead of focusing on what he really needs. We see this as an instance of what Clark called oppressive silencing brought on by a school principal's and legal guardian's apparent lack of imagination and empathy. Instead of focusing on Daniel's circumstances and subjectivities, more emphasis was placed on Daniel's defiance of the norms and etiquettes, which were then framed as bad and aggressive behaviour.

This story also evokes a double standard regarding Daniel's guardian. His guardian serves as a parental and protector figure, but he is also a silencing figure who fails to listen to Daniel and make real contact with him and who amplifies the negative portrayal of Daniel by sharing his personal files and records with the school principal. Additionally, the guardian could have prevented this negative portrayal by better preparing Daniel for the meeting with the principal. Thus, Daniel was put in a precarious position in which he felt compelled to act out, even against his caregivers.

Daniel is a minor who is dependent on the principal's approval for education, but he does not know how to act properly to get accepted into school. The combination of his guardian failing to help him navigate the system, the principal not looking beyond the negative images presented to him, the guardian and principal setting the agenda for the meeting, and the young boy who cannot control his temper led to Daniel's long-term exclusion from the education system. Lukes's three dimensions of power are at play here. The first dimension is visible when Daniel is abruptly denied an education opportunity by the school principal. The second dimension is seen in how the guardian sent unfavourable information about Daniel and in how he and the principal set the agenda without input from Daniel. However, the third dimension is much more relevant because, in this meeting, it was taken for granted that Daniel and his guardian should listen to the principal rather than the other way around.

This example of institutional silencing highlights the discursive power of certain images and expectations. Yet, it also shows the negative consequences of Daniel's agency in claiming his dignity and the inability of institutional actors to connect to his lifeworld and to help him navigate the system properly so he could access the education that is obligatory in the Netherlands.

4.2. Yonatan's Story

Yonatan is a 12-year-old boy from the Senafe's Forto neighbourhood in Eritrea. He fled the country in 2017. His first two attempts were not successful, and after the second one, he was apprehended by Eritrean guards

who imprisoned and violently interrogated him. On his third attempt, he successfully crossed to Ethiopia. After a year-long journey, he finally made it to the Netherlands in the summer of 2018. Yonatan first lived with a foster family where he was happy because he was participating in extracurricular activities. However, when that foster family ceased fostering minors like him, he was transferred to another foster family he disliked and various problems started to emerge. He had a roommate at this home and did not sleep well in the bunk bed. His back would hurt so much that he had to sleep on a mattress on the floor. He told his foster mother about the situation, and she assured him she was doing everything she could without truly addressing the issue. The decision to move him from the first foster family, whom he had bonded with, disregarded his preferences and affected his education. The move meant that he had to change schools, and the bus ride to his new school made him feel nauseous. His requests to change to a closer school were ignored, and so his attendance became sporadic: he would show up or disappear on a whim. For Yonatan, refusing to go to school was the only way he could express his agency in a context that ignored his requests. Using the "truancy card" got the attention of the institutions involved and forced them to reconsider the decisions that had been made for him. Yonatan stayed with the second foster family until he was reunited with his biological mother through family reunification in 2019.

Institutional silencing and Yonatan's acts of agency also occurred within the school. On one of the days Yonatan decided to attend school, an incident happened in his cooking class, which he narrated as follows:

> The teacher asked us all to make a dish in the cooking class. I made a nice dish, but when it came to explaining the dish and tasting it, I refused to taste it because I was fasting. So, the teacher was pretty upset with me, and I told him the reason that I was fasting and that I am not allowed to eat any products of meat, butter, or milk [according to Coptic Orthodox faith, such products cannot be eaten during fasting]. But I did not expect that they [the school] would call the guardian.

This quote shows that when Yonatan's faith-based choices did not fit the school norms, he became singled out and silenced. However, Yonatan was active in the process rather than docile. We can identify several aspects regarding the nexus of agency and institutional silencing in this story. Yonatan refuses to taste his cooking class food, arguing that it is against the rules of his faith-based fasting. When Yonatan and the first author further discussed the issue, he argued that openly discussing his fasting experience could negatively impact its authenticity. Furthermore, there is a misunderstanding between Yonatan and authority figures, revealing a clear mismatch in their understanding of the appropriate roles for the teacher, the school principal, and his guardian and mentors. Hence, silencing happened through sidelining factors such as taking Yonatan away from a family he was attached to without honouring his wishes. This shows Lukes's hegemonic operation of power through which institutional choices are privileged above participants' preferences. It is also shown in authority figures' fixating on dominant forms of performance in school regardless of faith-based limitations. Yonatan, however, showed agency by using truancy to attempt to be relocated back to the family he was closely attached to, and he tried to gain control over his life by asserting his faith.

4.3. Ghirmay's Story

Ghirmay is from a small town called Aligieder in the western part of Eritrea. He comes from a family with strong religious attachments. Ghirmay lived in Sudan for some time before embarking on his perilous journey to Europe, eventually arriving in the Netherlands in 2018, where he had lived for less than two years when

interviewed. Ghirmay's caregivers were worried that he may need intensive guidance. He would turn 18 in a few months, and his caregivers thought he might face some difficulties afterwards. One reason for their concern was a previous incident that involved the police.

The interview with Ghirmay took place in the kitchen. After sitting together in silence, the conversation slid towards the "incident with the police." Ghirmay was allegedly involved in a traffic collision with a car, but he insisted that it was not him. An excerpt from that conversation with the first author (FA) follows:

> FA: Would you mind telling me about the "incident with the police"?
>
> Ghirmay: I thought I explained it well, and the issue is closed. Why are they raising it again? It was not me, and I did not do it. That was not me. Listen, the day they say "the incident" happened, I was not even in this place. I was somewhere else. In fact, I was at my previous residence. I was not even transferred here yet.
>
> FA: Why do the police think you have something to do with it?
>
> Ghirmay: I do not know. But a while ago, I lost my wallet in [name of a city in the Netherlands], and I found it after a couple of days. Maybe someone has used my ID. I do not know. I am saying "maybe." All I know is that it was not me who was involved in that incident. Do they have some sort of photo of me or any video of me? I think they have none. So, this does not make sense.

As this situation continued, Ghirmay started to protest against the allegations by refusing to cooperate with his mentors and coaches because they would not believe he was speaking the truth. He protested by completely ignoring them and refusing to do the routines expected of him. For example, he spent time doing things for his church and his church community rather than fulfilling expectations where he lived. In this way, he defied the rules but did not engage in overt conflict with his coaches and mentors. He was subtly resisting with a smile because he felt his side of the story was silenced. After months of waiting and trying to convince his caregivers, Ghirmay was cleared of all charges. The police investigation found that he was not involved in the traffic incident. He knew all along that he was speaking the truth, but everyone was sceptical about his story. During this time, instead of working towards disproving his mentors' and guardians' scepticism, Ghirmay drifted away from them by protesting and disregarding them and every rule and protocol the care system adheres to.

To deal with the negative silencing (Clark, 2020) he was facing (i.e., his caregivers not believing his side of the story), Ghirmay used his faith as a means of expressing his grievances in a quiet, gentle, and non-aggressive way. In other words, he focused on his faith instead of his caregivers' requests. His strict adherence to his faith had earned him respect among his peers, and he worked to maintain that respect during this time. Ghirmay's case reveals how URMs like him deal with the institutional silencing process they face, that of not being listened to and not being believed. In his case, Ghirmay expressed agency by refusing to cooperate with his mentors and drifting more towards his faith.

4.4. Sham's Story

Sham is a 17-year-old boy, hailing from the southern part of Eritrea, who had been living in the Netherlands for less than two years when he was interviewed in 2018. At first, he found it challenging to talk about his life. After some time, however, he explained that his lack of focus was due to his involvement in a court case with his friends. Initially, he told the same story he had told the police. However, when probed further, he changed his account and admitted that the incident did happen. This is the story as he recounted it:

> We went to the city to socialize with my friends. We were having fun. We had a couple of beers. We went outside, and it was quite late. One guy was passing by on a scooter and he uttered an "F" towards us without any reason. And we were upset and we ran after him. We threw bottles and stones. The guy vanished but then he returned with police officers. He accused us of assault and of damaging a part of the scooter, and he wanted 300 euros in compensation. We denied all the allegations. My friends and I had decided not to talk to the police, and we had all agreed to keep our mouths shut. Little did we know that there was a neighbour who saw everything from the window and had a few camera images of the street.

After narrating the story, Sham added that he had been thinking about the case a lot and wanted it all to go away so he could focus on his life here and the family reunification procedure he had been working on. But he had dreaded telling his story for fear of betraying his friends:

> I do not want to betray my friends. You see, we promised each other that we would not tell a soul. If I tell you, I will be small in front of my friends. I will be a snitch, basically, and I do not want to be that way. Do you see what I mean here; it is so difficult for me as well.

In Sham's story, agency is present in the form of self-silencing, by emphasizing his loyalty to his friends while ignoring all charges against him. Group involvement and loyalty have been central to his mode of existence at various stages of his journey. Thus, choosing to be loyal to his friends is an existential choice for him: without his group of friends and peers, he is nothing. Nonetheless, his well-intentioned caregivers were asking Sham to make the difficult choice to tell what had happened, and so he had responded to these motions and pressures with self-silencing and denials. Sham eventually agreed to confess his involvement to the judge, and he somehow managed not to implicate his friends when he apologized. Luckily, the case and the charges were dropped, and the judge granted Sham clemency in view of his past traumatic experiences.

Sham's agency through self-silencing is especially interesting here. The URM community has a common saying: ትም፡ ሕትም, loosely translated as "quiet and quell." Another common expression is ኣይፈልጥን እየ፡ ሓንቲ እያ። ይፈልጥ'የ ግን ብዙሕ ሕቶ ኣለዋ, which translates to "if you say 'I don't know,' it is one definite thing; if you say 'I know,' you tend to invite many questions." In other words, self-silencing is an act of survival (Clark, 2020, p. 365). Sham was highly dependent on the familiar resources and strategies he knew well: to remain silent and lay low. Such behaviour makes sense. Throughout their difficult journeys, many URMs like Sham discovered that secrecy, caution, and discretion were effective strategies when facing various challenges. These strategies also helped them to gain control and express their agency. Sham's response was therefore consistent with what he had been doing for a long time. However, he had not considered the contextual differences at play. In describing his strategies, Sham remarked:

> If you are quiet and act dumb, an official or caregiver exerts more energy and time to help you. If you are lucky, you get sympathy, and if you are really lucky, you get empathy as well. But if you act smart, people do not care about you. They just leave you on your own to struggle with the system. So, why would I be smart? I will lay low!

This quote illustrates that Sham had learned how to respond to and navigate the language of help. It also reveals why many minors prefer to "act dumb"—acting smart makes people not care about you.

5. Discussion

This article explored the institutional silencing practices URMs from Eritrea encounter and the different ways they engage with those practices. Our analysis of Daniel's, Yonatan's, Ghirmay's, and Sham's stories reveals that URMs employ diverse forms of agency—defying educational and social norms, committing truancy, disrupting daily routines, or even testing boundaries in a cooking class—to combat institutional silencing. We drew inspiration from Ortner (2006) and Mahmood (2001) who defined agency more broadly than as only visible and vocal acts of resistance to power structures. This broader framework enabled us to show the variety of ways in which URMs engage with power.

Lukes's three dimensions of power are reflected in all four stories presented. For instance, the first and second dimensions are seen in decisions being made based on the image of URMs as rude and problematic, such as when school authorities set the agenda of a meeting because a URM fails to fulfil certain school norms or when they call a URM's guardian because he refuses to taste the food he made in class. This also connects to what Clark (2020) calls oppressive silencing. The third dimension of power is reflected in underlying assumptions about URMs as liars or criminals, which influence how various institutions interact with them. This connects to shifting discourses about asylum seekers "as risk" (Gray & Franck, 2019) and to dominant discursive approaches that frame URMs as dangerous and not fitting the norm (Ghaeminia, 2022). These are clear examples of what Clark refers to as discursive silencing.

All four cases also demonstrate that the URMs acted in agentic ways by engaging in truancy, abstaining from tasting food, undermining routines with a smile, using faith as a source of resilience, or using silence as a survival strategy. Furthermore, their actions demonstrate their role as social agents capable of acting from the margins (Ortner, 2006). Clark adds to this by considering silence as a form of agency and as a survival tactic. Religion also played a significant role as a tool for coping with institutional silencing. Ghirmay's case illustrates his use of faith as agency, especially when his caregivers did not believe him regarding the police incident. Ghirmay's faith gave him the strength to refuse to play the game, which was informed by hegemonic discourse (Lukes's third dimension of power) that considered him a liar and untrustworthy.

Various studies have emphasized different forms of agency by (young) asylum seekers in the Dutch context (Ghaeminia, 2022; Ghorashi, 2005; Ghorashi et al., 2018; Pozzo & Ghorashi, 2022; van Liempt, 2023). However, what is significant about this study is the choice of community-embedded self-imposed silence to subvert institutional silencing. Sham built trust and loyalty among his peers through self-silencing and secrecy. But his actions also facilitated leniency from the judicial system and displayed a distinct form of agency. Sayings from the URM community, such as "quiet and quell" and "if you say 'I don't know,' it is one definite thing; if you say 'I know,' you invite many questions," reveal how self-silencing and secrecy serve as a form of agency within

institutional practices of silence. So, Sham's behaviour (in line with the Eritrean saying about laying low) is a way of engaging with a system to survive, of playing the game to get the help he needs rather than the help the system thinks he needs. As Clark noted, silence has a survival value. In this respect, Sham and other URMs are using silence strategically, choosing when to speak and when not to speak. Ortner (2006) refers to this as agents' capability to play their own "serious game" in changing the challenge and changing the world around them. In this study, we demonstrated the value of less dominating forms of agency (i.e., delayed or docile forms; Mahmood, 2001) in how URMs deal with the power of institutional silencing practices. We thereby revealed an example of discursive power in which caregivers are blinded by generalized images of URMs or refugees, which limits how caregivers engage with them. In self-silencing their smart side, URMs like Sham show they are quite reflective about the context and the discursive power involved.

6. Conclusion

Returning to Sinit, whose friends and companions carried their soulmate in the funeral procession, a multitude of questions arise. How and why did Sinit fall into silence and ultimately choose suicide? What options did a 17-year-old girl like her have? What could have been done differently to support her? There are many contributing factors in the world of URMs: the hard journey, the experience of not being heard, of being mistrusted, misunderstood, and ignored, and the persistence of negative images. URMs often do not have a voice; others make choices for them. They need to self-silence to fit the dominant image as people who do not have agency, and by doing so, they might actually forget their own strength that got them all the way to the Netherlands. As the narratives we presented have shown, in the Dutch context, there are subtle forms of exclusion even when the intention is to help. The negative images of URMs embedded within the dominant Dutch discourse of (young) refugees have a strong silencing effect. Some of the stories we presented reveal that even if URMs show agency, it might work against them, especially in structures where the power of exclusion does not work in an explicit way. What might have been effective agency during their journey to the Netherlands, which involved explicit forms of power and exclusion, does not always work in contexts where power works in more subtle ways. The institutional silencing creates confusion for URMs compared to clear structures of oppression that they can fight against. However, as we have tried to show, URMs' lack of success in resisting institutional silencing does not mean they have no agency. The URMs in the stories we presented found ways to negotiate the power structure. Unless mechanisms of care based on what they need are put into policy, URMs will continue to take matters into their own hands, even to the extent of self-silencing through suicide.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Participants in this study did not give consent for their data to be shared publicly. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to n.a.kusmallah@vu.nl.

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Challenging Silencing in Stigmatized Neighborhoods Through Collaborative Knowledge Production

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Abstract

Researchers are always potential traitors when they represent what they see or hear. This is of particular concern in the case of people in subaltern positions, who lack the power to challenge possible misrepresentations. This article deals with an old dilemma in critical social science: How to use language when research objects are silenced through dynamics of domination? Is it possible for research to create space for marginalized people to speak for themselves? This was one of the questions of the Université Populaire, a group initiative by actors in a marginalized social housing neighborhood in Grenoble. The community-based people's education initiative was created in a double context of violence and silence. As a result of incidents of violence, media coverage participates in depicting the neighborhood as a place of danger and otherness, which impedes voices from the neighborhood from being heard. The initiative of the Université Populaire made space for speech in this marginalized and racialized area of Grenoble dealing with the consequences of terrorist violence in France. It is an initiative the author has been involved in since its inception in 2015. This article explains how the author sought ways to reduce power asymmetry in research relationships, why she steered away from using interviews for data collection and organized public debates instead, and how this made space for speech.

Keywords

collaborative knowledge production; France; marginalized neighborhoods; postcolonial studies; spaces of speech; subaltern studies; territorial stigmatization

1. Introduction

In the following quotes, Chahid and Kenjah speak about their experience of being subjects of a scientific gaze that seeks to understand and explain certain social phenomena but also has the power to misrepresent the objects of its inquiry when guided by flawed interpretational frameworks:

> [The neighborhood of Villeneuve district] is a symbolic space, a theater where we are prisoners of prejudices and discourses on the banlieue….I see students in small groups, like tourists in a reserve. It makes one feel like one is in a zoo and we're monkeys. (Chahid, street interview, April 24, 2014)

> The Western academy has presented itself to us [in Martinique] with this desire for absolute transparency: science is going to tell us everything, show us everything, and pierce every nook and cranny of the human being, every secret. In return, Glissant says: "Not only is it impossible, but I refuse to be pierced like that, with this gaze. I want to preserve some *maquis* within me." (Kenjah et al., 2019, p. 60).

Chahid and Kenjah experience being subjected to this gaze as a form of domination. I met both of them in Villeneuve, a large social housing neighborhood in the Southern part of Grenoble, France. The neighborhood is directly opposite the Department of Geography and Urban Studies (IUGA) and is an area of observation for students and researchers due to its avant-garde architecture and its materialization of socialist ideals that gave it international renown in the 1970s. Despite its peculiarities, Villeneuve shares with other marginalized social housing neighborhoods stigmatization as an "other" space, "lost to the republic" riddled with violence, and populated by immigrants.

The stigmatizing gaze and language that mainstream journalists and certain politicians tend to employ in reference to marginalized neighborhoods and their inhabitants has made people in Villeneuve reticent to engage with researchers. The stigmatizing discourse around and policies directed at marginalized social housing neighborhoods are experienced as a form of injustice and have the effect of reducing their inhabitants to silence (see Fraser, 1992).

This article deals with the epistemological and methodological challenges of carrying out research in a context of asymmetric power relations and seeks to answer the question of how academic research can represent socially marginalized and racialized inhabitants in a way that is satisfactory for them and that serves their cause(s). It starts with a discussion of the French specificities of neighborhood stigmatization, to be followed by an exploration of the relations between knowledge and power in marginalized neighborhoods; it then discusses the limits of language as a basis of exchange in research settings that are characterized by asymmetric relationships; it continues with an explanation of how research configurations can be more horizontal, motivated by issues of shared concern, and can make space for subalternized voices in public debate.

2. Neighborhood Stigmatization and Its French Specificities

Since the images of burning cars in the banlieues were broadcasted in 2005, the French marginalized social housing neighborhoods became infamous worldwide. They are seen as places of danger and otherness,

places that are "barely known but vividly imagined" (Gregory, 2011, p. 239). My research questions this discursive articulation from the point of view of those living in these neighborhoods. To do so, it looks at, through, and from one neighborhood in particular, called Villeneuve, which extends across the border between the municipalities of Grenoble and Echirolles. The neighborhood counts roughly 12,000 inhabitants of 40 nationalities. It has 4,200 housing units, 50% of which are social housing. Young people make up 30% of the neighborhood, which is 10% more than in Grenoble as a whole. It has the same proportion of managers and intermediate professions as in Grenoble, but twice as many blue-collar workers. In general, marginalized social housing neighborhoods have the following characteristics that differentiate them from other neighborhoods in French cities: (a) contain a high percentage of social housing, and therefore a relatively poor population; (b) contain a higher concentration of immigrants and racialized French citizens (poverty in France is racialized), leading to the racialization of these urban spaces; (c) are marginalized both spatially, in the sense that they are located in urban peripheries and thus stand in "peripheral" relation to an urban center, and (d) symbolically because they are "othered" according to what is considered "normal" and "desirable."

Factors contributing to the marginalization of these neighborhoods are described by Wacquant (2007) in his thesis on advanced marginality. Wacquant's theory has inspired many researchers worldwide to inquire further into the dynamics around the marginalization and territorial stigmatization of certain urban areas (see Garbin & Millington, 2012; Kirkness, 2014; Wacquant et al., 2014). The English term "territorial stigmatization" used by Wacquant and his followers poses some conceptual issues when it travels between disciplines and languages. The use of "territorial" as a synonym for "spatial" is inaccurate if we take into account the distinction between the terms in geographic literature. Moreover, the meaning of "territory" changes when translated into the French word *territoire* (Gregory et al., 2009). To avoid confusion, I use the term "neighborhood stigmatization" to provide clarity about the object of stigmatization. While neighborhood stigmatization is a global phenomenon, there are at least two French particularities. The first is the territorialization of social problems, by which I mean that social policies target certain neighborhoods rather than certain groups of people. The second is the type of discourse that specifically targets these neighborhoods' racialized population. I argue that the spatial vocabulary used to deal with social problems is currently used as a euphemism for racism in France; marginalized social housing neighborhoods are presented by mainstream discourse as "other" spaces. Postcolonial studies provide useful tools to analyze the epistemological sources of the representations of these neighborhoods as "other."

3. Exploring the Relations Between Knowledge and Power in Marginalized Neighborhoods

Postcolonial studies have demonstrated that a typical problem of colonialism is that the power to represent colonized and racialized populations was held by the colonizer. Colonial continuities are still important for racialized people in Villeneuve (Dijkema, 2021). Bouabid, an older labor immigrant I met in Villeneuve, described how having occupied an inferior position in a colonial society seriously affected immigrants' confidence "in the sense that it delayed the rebuilding of one's conscience" and therefore their capacity to critique the French and to defend themselves in public space or discussions (interview, May 9, 2016). The feeling of lacking legitimacy leads to practices of self-silencing, or what Dotson (2011) has called "testimonial smothering," one of the effects of epistemic violence.

In my struggle with the ethics of carrying out academic research in this marginalized neighborhood—that is still dealing with the legacy of colonialism (Dijkema, 2021)—I set out to explore the possibility of collaborative knowledge production in Villeneuve, inspired by critical approaches to explorations (Bunge, 1969; Leshem & Pinkerton, 2019).

I worked with community organizations in Villeneuve that have been created in contexts of crises following outbursts of violence. My research in Villeneuve comes closest to what Nicolas-Le Strat (2013) conceives of as "intervention research." This form of participatory action research is about intervening in and writing about a reality that the researcher helps to bring out, for example by actively participating in initiatives that aim to redress power inequalities in contexts of conflict or oppression. It is through operating changes that forms of resistance become tangible and it is in challenging power relations that they become visible (Nicolas-Le Strat, 2013, p. 79). It takes as a starting point that a situation never just *is*; it is always in movement and that to be able to study a situation one has to gain knowledge of the dynamics involved. The most common form my "interventions" took was the organization of public debates, but marches, demonstrations, theatre, poster campaigns, and group travel were other forms of collective intervention that I participated in. The role I played in these "interventions" varied from participation in existing initiatives to active contribution, i.e., in meetings and public events initiated by existing collectives, to the initiation of new projects. I contributed to the creation of the Université Populaire of Villeneuve and I participated in Agir Pour La Paix. The Université Populaire provides a space where members of community organizations set the agenda for public debates and participants can share their thoughts publicly. I have been involved in the organization of two cycles of debate, the first seeking to understand discrimination, islamophobia, and neighborhood stigmatization, and the second to understand what remains of the colonial past. People participating in the debates had different forms of involvement. Some people in the neighborhood engaged with these topics in informal street debates, others in the regular plenary debates. Then there were the invited speakers, who came from all over France and often came to share their insights on one specific topic; and there were the resource persons, who mostly came from Grenoble and brought important knowledge and local networks to the debate series, which rooted the discussions better in the local context; and finally the University Populaire working group, of which I was a part, and which initiated and guided the whole process. Through these different forms of engagement, the working group has been able to involve a very diverse group of people. With "diverse" I refer to levels of formal education, forms of politicization, age, gender, race, and class. The diversity of the working group itself has made this variety in social, cultural, religious, and national backgrounds possible (for a detailed description see Dijkema, 2021, pp. 250–301).

Agir Pour La Paix was a collective consisting primarily of young and racialized friends and relatives of two young men who died as a result of group violence in 2012. This grass-roots initiative proposed weekly workshops and outreach activities to an audience that more institutional actors had a hard time reaching. The initial motive for which the core group came together was to make sure that the memory of their friends would not get lost and to transform their anger, hatred, and loss into something positive. The themes addressed in their weekly workshops were much wider than what brought them together in the first place. Neighborhood stigmatization, islamophobia, and terrorist attacks were some of the themes on the agenda in the first year. Most participants in the group were doubly impacted by paroxysmal violence, both personally as friends or relatives of Kevin and Sofiane, following the 2015 terrorist attacks, as inhabitants of a marginalized neighborhood, and as associated with Islam. A detailed presentation of the results of the fieldwork, what was collected and how, is available on Zenodo (Dijkema, 2023).

Timewise, my research started with the riots that broke out in Villeneuve in 2010. The framing of this violence in media coverage played an important role in the stigmatization of the neighborhood. On top of this came the terrorist attacks in 2015. As a result, the space for Muslims to express themselves shrunk rapidly, and they felt silenced (Dijkema, 2021, 2022a, 2022b). The term Muslim covers not only those people who assert themselves as Muslim, but also those designated as such but who might rather identify with other terms such as Arab, *maghrébins*, or with national identities. Even if Muslims were speaking out, they were not heard. Drawing on the work of Spivak (1988) on subaltern studies, I understand this silencing as a form of subalternization, i.e., being subordinated to hegemonic power. This experience of silencing resonates with a wider shared and long-term feeling of inhabitants of marginalized social housing neighborhoods that their voices are not taken into account politically. The Université Populaire and Agir Pour La Paix made space for these voices to be expressed publicly.

4. The Limits of Language and the Appreciation of Its Significance

Using language as a basis of exchange in research settings characterized by asymmetric power relations presents a challenge. This section outlines some of the problems I encountered in the field concerning speech as the transmission of knowledge between a researcher and research participants. These are the risks of betrayal, dispossession of one's narration, misrepresentation, and intrusion.

Spivak's observation that the subaltern cannot speak is my main theoretical reference on power relations and voice, and how to make space for subalternized voices. When Spivak said that the subaltern cannot speak she meant that they are not represented in institutions of power and they cannot represent themselves because they lack the power to do so, both politically and esthetically (Spivak, 1988, p. 279). One's capacity to speak can be measured through the ability to leave traces in official records, and even more so through the capacity to make one's claims heard. Being heard means that one is able to attribute meaning to events and that this meaning is taken into account in the way events are then remembered. The difficulty around hearing, listening, and understanding becomes clear through Spivak's understanding of *speaking as dialogue*. Dotson (2011) explains that the problem is that when subalterns speak there is no transaction between the speaker and the listener, that speech does not reach the dialogic level of enunciation. Giving those in a subaltern position the opportunity to speak in interviews, therefore, does not guarantee that a researcher will be able to hear and understand what interviewees are saying. There is always a form of decoding involved in hearing the other, and it is questionable whether researchers have the required codes to understand people in a position of subalternity. Choosing silence is a logical consequence if people feel that what they say is interpreted in terms of what they represent, and if they feel judged.

Mainstream language betrays residents of marginalized social housing neighborhoods and they are well aware of this. If social science is understood as a translation of a social reality made intelligible through a shared academic language, there is always the risk that this translation will be a misinterpretation of the reality being studied. In case of a misinterpretation researchers consciously or unconsciously betray the trust interviewees place in them to make a specific social world intelligible. This evokes the famous *traditore, tradutore* dilemma (Hancock, 2007), reminding us that translation always involves the risk of betrayal. Those who speak from a subaltern position always run the risk that their words will be used against them. During early field research, I engaged people on the street in discussion, and with hindsight, I am aware that I could

have betrayed the people whom I addressed. After all, what guarantees could I give that I would understand what they said, that their words were safe with me? These questions are reflected in the following note:

> The Friday after the terrorist attack on Charlie Hebdo, I am on my way to a meeting in Villeneuve and I decide to stop at the mosque halfway. Around twenty men are standing outside, chatting. It must be just after Friday noon. prayer and I try to engage a group of four young men in conversation I justify my initiative by saying that we hear "all these things" in the media and that I do not want to go by these media images, and that I would rather hear from Muslim people directly. They are quite cooperative. They tell me that Charlie Hebdo should not have published the cartoons of the Prophet, but that they condemn the use of violence. The moment one of them says that Charlie Hebdo asked for it, tension arises in the group. From the rapid exchange of glances between them, I understand that this statement is a source of concern. Some things are not supposed to be said to me as white, non-Muslim, and from outside the neighborhood. Do they secretly agree with their friend, but do not want to state it publicly, or do they disagree and do not want to be associated with this discourse? The others quickly take over the discussion. I get a sense of the importance of image management in the neighborhood and the limits of what could, and could not, be said to me. (field notes, January 9, 2015)

Opting for silence following the attacks is a logical consequence in the context of the criminalization of dissent. In this context, there have been cases when dissent was criminalized (Gresh, 2015). Still, regarding silence, Weselby explains Spivak's contribution by apprehending that "to truly understand the consciousness of the subaltern, we must appreciate the significance of their silence, instead of forcing their representation by speaking on their behalf" (2014, para. 2). One way of doing this is to acknowledge that people in a position of subalternity have the right to opacity. The right to opacity, a concept introduced by Glissant (Caron, 1998; M'bom, 1999), can be understood as the right to withhold information and to withstand the search for "absolute transparency" (Kenjah et al., 2019, p. 60). Instead of taking or collecting information from research participants, researchers should wait until it is given to them. This giving takes place in a reciprocal relationship, where both are subjects. Researchers who take or receive (the gift of) information, do not access the same knowledge.

Warren (2017, p. 5) understands the idea of opacity as acknowledging that the "other" "may not be understandable, may not be amenable to reductive conceptual frameworks." The right to opacity thus also means the renunciation of being intrusive. This idea is similar to Spivak's argument in favor of the right to silence. During my research in Villeneuve, I had to learn to respect silence and privacy and to accept that researchers do not have an intrinsic right to access the knowledge of another. Researchers can only invite the latter to share their knowledge. I relate the right to opacity to my experience with Muslim women for whom the choice to wear a veil was part of their private life, which they did not see fit as an object of my inquiry. As a result, I decided to renounce working on a topic that my interlocutors rejected, and privileged instead topics in which we had a shared interest. The acceptance of not fully understanding the "other" is what the right to opacity is about. The observations in this section lead to the following three concerns: How to work against subalternity in research? How to make sure research participants retain ownership over their stories? And how to establish reciprocity in dialogue?

Despite the difficulties around the use of language in asymmetric power relations in research settings, I nonetheless chose to work with speech. This is because language remains a crucial tool for establishing

relationships, and it is through narration that we can relate to the other. Speech has the function of Ariadne's thread: Sharing words is a means of connecting, with words we can create an existence and weave new worlds together. We create *ourselves* in relation to *others* as we speak, and it is through speaking that we *become*. To exist and to have our existence acknowledged, we need to inhabit the spoken world. We could say that the limits of language are the limits of knowable worlds (Harvey, 2000). The following section presents my explorations with making space for subalternized voices in research design.

5. Reconfiguring Research Relations Through the Creation of Spaces of Speech

The research configurations in which research participants are invited to speak play a part in their ability and willingness to share their experiences and ideas. Hence, finding more organic ways of being in (research) relationships requires a reconsideration of the position of the researcher working with those in a position of subalternity, and the power relationship this implies. Spivak's statement in an interview with De Kock (1992, p. 46) that "you don't give the subaltern voice" but that "you work against subalternity" is an enigmatic but interesting starting point. When asked how to do this, Spivak answers that "to work for the subaltern, means to bring it into speech" (p. 16). However, simply inviting subalterns to speak—in interviews, for example—does not address the issue raised by Spivak about one's voice. How to create space through research so that others can speak for themselves? As subalternity is a relational issue it can only be addressed by a renegotiation of the terms of the relationship. Additionally, subalternity is situated so speaking is also a spatial issue.

As a geographer, I pay specific attention to the spatial aspects of (re)configuring research relations. In this section, I share three observations. The first observation explains what I mean by saying that subalternity is situated; the second deals with the ethical dilemma of "opening" the neighborhood to academic inquiry and proposes a two-way exchange; the third observation is about reconfiguring research settings, moving away from face-to-face to side-by-side settings.

5.1. Subalternity Is Situated

When we say that people cannot speak and are not heard politically, this is only true for certain locations. The ways power relations determine whether and where it is possible or impossible to say certain things became evident during the trial against one of the first invited speakers of the Université Populaire, Abdelaziz Chaambi. When I attended these court hearings it became clear to me that what people can say depends on the spaces that they are in.

The Université Populaire working group invited Abdelaziz Chaambi, president of the organization Coordination contre le Racisme et l'Islamophobie, for its first plenary debate on discrimination, racism, and islamophobia in response to the attacks against Charlie Hebdo and the tensions it produced in the neighborhood. The goal of the debate was to make room for discussion in the aftermath of the attacks when Muslims and those associated with this category felt silenced. Two years after this event, Abdelaziz Chaambi was put on trial for his activism and several participants of the Université Populaire were present at court to show their support and to defend freedom of expression. The first court hearing was in Bourgoin-Jallieu (2017) and the second was an appeal in Grenoble (2018). The following notes show in what way the (im)possibility to speak altered as the group of people who showed up moved from one space to the other: from the policed entry to the

Courthouse to the institutional space of the courtroom, to the public space of the street, and finally to the private space of an association:

> In the highly securitized setting of the Courthouse, it is not possible to speak in the sense of making a political statement and being heard. The placard I brought was not allowed to cross the security check and had to stay there. Was it seen as a source of danger? It looks like specific security measures have been taken for this court case. I feel the tension of the security personnel. Have they been briefed about the supposedly Islamist character of Abdelaziz Chaambi and is that the grounds for their fear? Each of the thirty people that have come to the Courthouse in Bourgoin-Jallieu to attend the trial have to be screened in a prefab building: metal detector, x-rays, and questions. They can only enter this building one by one, in an unclear order, picked by the security personnel. I am to enter second while many people stand in front of me. Public officials and police officers treat us with a mixture of fear and suspicion to which I am not used. (field notes, February 15, 2017)

> The highly policed space of the Courthouse contributes to the criminalization of activists and has an impact on their possibility to speak. This became particularly clear during the second court case in Grenoble when Abdelaziz Chaambi could not defend himself through words because he was not heard, in the sense that public officials could not relate to what he said. The sighs, the intonation, and silent signs of disapproval of the judges looking down upon Abdelaziz Chaambi from their high seats become clearly audible when he spoke the word islamophobia. In contrast, when the judge speaks of a police officer called "Monsieur Israël," suffocated laughs can be heard in the audience. This is a silent confrontation of forces where words do not have the same meaning for those speaking and do not have the same resonance for those listening. It is clear which words have more weight. (field notes, January 25, 2018)

The conditions of speech become possible again when we leave the Courthouse and move to public space, the piazza in front of the Courthouse where those in solidarity with Abdelaziz Chaambi pick up a banner and placards to make public statements (Figure 1). After speaking on the piazza, the group moves to Solexine, a space that is offered to us to meet.

> Once arrived in this space, voices become loud. There is food on the table, prepared with care. Juice, crisps and hummus are going around. Those who want to speak, speak, although it is hard to contradict or even interrupt Abdelaziz Chaambi who is filling the room all by himself and clearly needs to blow off steam, and to release the tensions built up in his confrontation with the judge. I hear new stories from people I've known for quite a while now. Is it this setting that provokes these stories and new positions? (field notes, January 25, 2018)

The previous note demonstrates that subalternity is situated. What could not be said in some places could be said in others. In a similar vein, I understand the neighborhood as a locus of enunciation. What was silenced outside the neighborhood, in mainstream debates and discussion spaces (e.g., television and press), could not be silenced within the neighborhood. It is here that I was given access to inhabitants' stories and statements.

The above experiences bring up the question of what conditions make speech possible and how to configure "safe[r] spaces" that facilitate speech (Kesby et al., 2007, p. 21). Certain group and spatial configurations of

Figure 1. Abdelaziz Chaambi after the court meeting. Photo taken on January 25, 2018.

debate allow or motivate research participants to express themselves. My search to move from hierarchal, and hence vertical, to more horizontal relations has had an impact on the spatial configurations in my research settings. Which configurations could make the exchange of information flow in several directions?

5.2. A Tale of Two Towers

The neighborhood and the university can be seen as two sites of knowledge production. With one foot in each, I could establish connections between two spaces that were experienced as an ivory tower and a fortress respectively. The university feels like an ivory tower to many Villeneuve inhabitants because as a space of symbolic exclusion, it is inaccessible to them, despite being just across the street. Inversely from within the IUGA, the neighborhood also feels like a fortress because of its 1000-meter-long façade (see Figure 2; for an ethnographic exploration of moving between these spaces see also Dijkema, 2021).

In addition to these tons of concrete, there is an invisible border drawn up by discourse that stresses that the neighborhood is dangerous. With associative actors in Villeneuve, we took the initiative to establish relations between these geographically close but socially distant spaces (Breynat et al., 2016; Dijkema et al., 2015). To materialize this link, we created a mobile bench in the market square (Place du marché) of Villeneuve that for a while served as a transitional object between Villeneuve and the IUGA (Figure 3). We rolled this bench back and forth from the neighborhood to the IUGA until after some months it disappeared. Installing a bench in public helped engage in debate with passersby, who would stop for a moment and take some time to discuss, for example, the demolition plans in the neighborhood, upcoming elections, and other questions of public concern.

My hybrid position between the university and neighborhood associations made me aware of the limits, tensions, and complementarity of knowledge production in different spaces, and the possible tensions in bringing together actors from these different positions. Over time I realized that while our interests could be

Figure 2. Façade of the Galerie d'Arlequin, view from the park. Photo taken on November 13, 2016.

Figure 3. Constructing the bench that served as a transitional object between Villeneuve and the IUGA. Photo taken on December 17, 2014, by colleagues from Planning.

shared, the struggles and objectives of the different groups I worked with could never entirely converge. One important point of disjunction is the different interests in knowledge production. There is an important gap between the type of knowledge production that is relevant for community actors and that which researchers can valorize in academic writing and teaching. Tensions have also arisen between the confrontational approach of some local civil society actors that sought to rebalance power relations through direct action and a deliberative form of action that most academics were more comfortable with, especially

when operating in a professional context. For a more detailed description of (im)possibilities in this collective knowledge production see Dijkema (2020).

5.3. Learning to Stand and Walk Side-by-Side

In searching for alternatives to interview settings, in which information usually flows in one direction only, I experimented with side-by-side research configurations. These are group configurations in which the researcher is part of a larger group that collectively reflects on a shared question or issue. Two examples of side-by-side research configurations come from my collaboration with Agir Pour La Paix. Together with members of this collective, I organized a journey to Denmark and the Netherlands. During the journey, I became aware of the repositioning that took place when we were traveling. In the period prior to the trip, it was me who was a newcomer to their neighborhood, posing questions as a result of which, I sometimes felt like an intruder. In the period before the journey, we slowly became a group that prepared its discourse about how to (re)present ourselves to our interlocutors abroad. The physical displacement from a place where I was an outsider and others insiders, to a place where we were all outsiders, altered my position in the group. We came to stand side-by-side, observing a new situation together.

One way of observing together was to walk through different neighborhoods. Walking provided a more relaxing way of discussing, because silences are less problematic than when sitting across from each other in the same room, and bodies behave more naturally when moving than when staying still. Walking has a long tradition in ethnographic, anthropological, and sociological research with communities (Clark & Emmel, 2010; Edensor, 2010; Ingold & Vergunst, 2008) and more recently also in biographical (O'Neill & Roberts, 2019) and participatory research. Walking in the context of my research allowed me access to new spatial configurations. In Echirolles my interlocutors were "at home" and I was foreign; in Copenhagen, the city was foreign to us all (Figure 4); in Amsterdam, I was at home and the other Agir Pour La Paix members were foreign.

Figure 4. Wandering in Nørrebro, Copenhagen. Photo taken on May 19, 2015, by colleagues from Agir Pour La Paix.

Seeing these cities abroad through the latter's eyes was informative for understanding their experiences in Echirolles, for example, what the terms "quartier" and "ghetto" meant to them. The marginalized neighborhood

we visited in Copenhagen could in their eyes not be a "quartier" or a ghetto (as referred to by our Danish interlocutors) because it didn't have any high-rise buildings and was "clean." Despite the merits, it is important to point out that wandering in Echirolles required a significant commitment from the male youth members of Agir Pour La Paix. In their neighborhood they had to deal with curious looks, being seen publicly with a white middle-aged woman. The next section is dedicated to further exploration of what it means to create space for speech.

6. Configuring Spaces of Speech: Discussion Circles, Street, and Plenary Debates

Throughout my explorations, I sought to open up the one-to-one relationship between a researcher and research participants into a much wider circle and to engage with people in places that were accessible to all. To meet my objective of engaging with the inhabitants of Villeneuve without being intrusive, I sought to create space for public debate. Public debates are an invitation to encounter and discuss: If people come, they are driven by their own motives. The topics of exchange were the outcome of collective discussions and reflected shared interests. Configuring spaces of speech is a way to avoid extractive research because what is said is not only said to me, but is said to all those who participate, and therefore I do not exclusively capitalize on the knowledge shared collectively. The spaces of speech took different forms, such as discussion circles, street debates, and plenary debates.

Discussion circles correspond to a variety of debate settings for 10–20 people that involve both learning and working together toward a shared goal. Examples are regular meetings of collectives, weekly workshops in the case of Agir Pour La Paix, and discussion circles in the case of the Université Populaire. The role of the latter was to explore a sensitive topic in a relatively safe environment. It is the relatively small size of the group, the regulation of speaking time, and the round form of the circle that contributed to the intimacy of this space of speech. Although publicly accessible, in order to participate in a meeting or a plenary debate, one has to overcome physical and symbolic obstacles. Each doorstep one has to cross is a hurdle for voices that have been silenced. Therefore, the Université Populaire and Agir Pour La Paix also created opportunities for debate on the street, where the threshold for participation was lower.

Street debates are short and informal discussions in public spaces that aim to engage in conversation with a wide group of people, including those who are typically not heard in public debates and in institutional settings (e.g., community centers) because of the distance between institutions and inhabitants in marginalized social housing neighborhoods. The spatial configuration of street debates fluctuated as members of the Université Populaire working group would walk around the neighborhood, alone or in small groups, going to places where people come together such as the market square, schools, benches, and main roads. The configuration of this space of speech was fluid. Working in pairs of differently racialized people led to interesting results: We noticed that white people tended to look at me while speaking and that racialized persons tended to look at my French/North African/Muslim counterpart. To include these voices in the Université Populaire plenary debates the working group took notes, discussed and analyzed them, and transformed them into a kind of performance (Figure 5) with which we started each plenary debate.

Plenary debates were the outcome of a longer period of organization to which both more intimate and more accessible spaces of speech contributed. Each plenary debate brought together between 40 and 120 people. The setting of the plenary debates was made up of sub-spaces of speech: small tables, where discussion took

Figure 5. Université Populaire preparation of the debate on freedom of expression. Photo taken on March 7, 2016.

place in small groups; the arena, where speakers and participants addressed the entire audience; and the platform, where informal discussion took place before and after the plenary debate, in an informal setting around a table with drinks and snacks. The articulation between these sub-spaces allowed participants to go back and forth between the intimacy of small group configurations and the public nature of the plenary. A diverse audience ensured the balance between safety through some form of familiarity between participants, and contradiction through different social and political positions. Contradiction and disagreement in debate highlight the fault lines in the neighborhood—and society at large—and hence are an important starting point for understanding power dynamics.

What conditions made speech possible in these spaces with different levels of publicity, safety, and group configurations? In what ways did these different configurations of debate make space for subaltern voices? Making space means not only being able to speak but also being heard in a political sense. Politics, according to Rancière, is neither the exercise of power nor the struggle for power; it is about a certain equilibrium (Dikeç, 2007). Politics happens when one challenges the supposedly natural order and the place that one has been attributed in it. Politics occurs, according to Rancière, "when a wrong (denial of equality) has been identified by a subaltern group" and "when they [marginalized] make a statement of dissensus" (as cited in Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014, p. 972). Hence, politics "is the arena where the principle of equality is tested in the face of a wrong experienced by those who have no part" (Swyngedouw, 2009, p. 605). Rancière's conception of politics is about renegotiating the distribution of power. Based on this conception of politics, I argue that creating debate has a political importance in a political context where people say that they are not heard. The plenary debates of the Université Populaire functioned as a political arena. Making space for speech inevitably challenges the status quo, because it involves making space for the expression of what is supposed to remain silent. An indicator that the Université Populaire challenged the status quo is that while the initiative was celebrated by many, it also met significant resistance in the neighborhood and beyond.

While it was a political choice to create these debates in Villeneuve at first, after four years it became a political choice that these topics should be shared more widely. At the end of the cycle of debates about the colonial past and present, the Université Populaire decided to produce a video and a theater performance that answered the question we initially set out with. They drew on the transcriptions and notes of all the different forms of debates and were created in a participatory manner. A group of motivated participants sat together to select the most important statements and stories that served as the script for the play—which was written by one of the neighborhood participants, who was part of the working group—and as the storyline for the video. These were both innovative forms of writing together the results, including people with different levels of formal education and written language. The video and play were performed in three different locations: in the theatre in Villeneuve, the public library in Grenoble city center, and an independently run cultural center in a rural village 25 kilometers from Grenoble. The video provided the images, while the theatre play could transmit the emotional weight of a colonial past that is still relevant in the present. In my village, I asked the local volunteer theatre group to perform the play.

Performing these stories provoked strong emotions both among those belonging to the majority society who recited them ("we did not know") and among the racialized participants of the Université Populaire, whom I invited to come and who now listened to their own words, spoken by others. In this rural cultural center, a lively discussion emerged about how the life histories of the inhabitants of this village had been touched by the colonial past, making space, e.g., for the stories of *pied-noir* families and their trauma, but also made encounters possible between the people of these two places. Evidently, power relations were not challenged in a structural way, but the experience can be seen as a form of speaking truth to power.

7. Conclusion

This article presented some of the obstacles to using speech as a meaningful way of obtaining information in the context of asymmetric power relations, as a result of which research participants are in a position of subalternity. The risk for subalterns who engage with researchers is that they may be misunderstood, misrepresented, betrayed, or dispossessed of their stories. The risk for researchers is that the ones whose knowledge they seek to access choose to remain silent, refuse to collaborate, or do not say anything meaningful.

The explorations described in this section are an epistemological inquiry into more horizontal research relationships and they are a methodological inquiry into developing research methods that create the conditions for researchers to speak with marginalized persons on a basis of equality, and motivated by mutual interests. They involve the collaborative production of knowledge that is of academic and political relevance: academic relevance because the research methods developed give access to knowledge that might remain inaccessible otherwise; political relevance because the methods developed make space for marginalized people to speak out.

These explorations took the form of creating spaces for debate on topics chosen together with collectives I worked with. Making space for speech means that space is created in which speech becomes possible because it is configured in such a way that power dynamics are mitigated. In this space, a public comes together and exchanges with each other about a specific theme. It belongs to the public sphere and is publicly accessible; it may form in public space, but more often forms in a space that is enclosed by walls and

a door as the latter offers a form of protection and separates the space from the street. This closure helps to constitute a group for a particular moment in time and a particular space. The creation of spaces of speech provided the conditions to make the invitation to speak ethical, to make speech possible, and political.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The metadata for this study are available on Zenodo (https://zenodo.org/record/7763080).

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ARTICLE

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Fighting for Space Within the Cis- and Heteronormative Public Sphere: An Analysis of Budapest Pride

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Abstract

The article presents the urban space use of the LGBTQI+ community in a post-socialist and illiberal country, Hungary, by focusing on the historical development of Pride marches within the capital. Examining these events' routes, current regulations, and resistance related to Pride, the article observes acts of silencing and the disruption of silencing concerning the LGBTQI+ community. First, we rely on sexual and intimate citizenship studies (e.g., Plummer, 2003; Richardson, 2017) to highlight the public/private divide and related (in)visibility and human rights issues associated with the LGBTQI+ community within a cis- and heteronormative environment. Second, queer geography and the geography of sexualities are used to better understand the cis- and heteronormative environment within which sexual and gender minorities exist and operate. Regarding the Hungarian context, we assume that "a gradual extension of public space use" is present concerning the public events of the LGBTQI+ community in Hungary (Takács, 2014, p. 202). The article analyzes three aspects concerning the Pride parades held in Budapest through the 3R analytical lens and connected silencing and the disruption of silencing: the spatial routes of the Budapest Pride, related regulations, and the resistance to and of LGBTQI+ visibility in an urban setting. First, through maps, we visualize the routes of the Budapest Pride parades from 1997 to 2022 to understand how the visibility of LGBTQI+ and allies is constricted and regulated in the spatial dimension. Second, following the regulatory approach of the Budapest Pride organization, we focus on how the police ensure these events' and attendees' safety and whether cordons—physical symbols of division between participants, police, and bystanders or protesters—are necessary. The third aspect elucidates the resistance against and toward the visibility of LGBTQI+ people in the urban setting.

Keywords

Budapest Pride; Hungary; LGBTQI+; Pride march; queer space; visibility

1. Introduction

What is Pride exactly, and what is its relevance to the LGBTQI+ community (hereinafter interchangeably referred to as sexual and gender minorities)? While its origins are well-known, related to the Stonewall riots in 1969 in New York, how has its scope shifted? Turesky and Jae-an Crisman (2023, p. 262) note that "the event…evolved from a struggle for queer recognition and freedom from police violence to a space of commodified celebration, with corporate sponsors eager to brand the event with their names." While some suggest that Pride is about the recognition of the rights of the LGBTQI+ community, others, in contrast, refer to it as a commercialized event, coined "pinkwashing," and its recognition-related goals as a way towards greater assimilation and homonormativity (Browne & McCartan, 2020; DeGagne, 2020). Another distinct standpoint is that Pride is a celebration of queer joy, a tool to disrupt hetero- and cisnormative norms in public spaces with bodies that defy and transcend gender norms and binaries.

This article captures the history of Budapest Pride through queer space use and its potential to disrupt the silence of the hetero- and cisnormativity of the urban setting. Focusing on a significant symbolic event like Pride, our aim is to contribute to the broader field of queer geography and sexuality studies by bridging a gap in the literature regarding queer space use in a post-socialist and illiberal country. It departs from a brief overview of the post-socialist and illiberal context and LGBTQI+ rights development in Hungary, and is followed by a section focusing on the theoretical approaches to Pride marches and the specificities of Budapest Pride. The theoretical background is divided into two sections: spatial and legal. The article uses the geography of sexualities and queer geography (Bell & Valentine, 1995; Binnie, 1997; Johnston, 2005; Oswin, 2008) to reflect on the sexualized and gendered aspects of public spaces. Simultaneously, it draws on research in sexuality, as well as sexual and intimate citizenship studies (Plummer, 2003; Richardson, 2017), to emphasize the public/private division and how this relates to exercising certain human rights in the public sphere. More specifically, it addresses the freedom of assembly and expression in the "heterosexual space." In line with the thematic issue, the article focuses on Budapest Pride marches to identify acts of silencing and the disruption of silencing as intimate citizens exercise their freedom of assembly and expression within a cis- and heteronormative urban environment. The third part establishes the research objectives and methodology, while the fourth section provides an analysis of Budapest Pride based on the authors' preliminary analytical frame, the 3R lens (routes in spaces, regulations, resistance). The final part concludes the article with the main findings, their discussion, remarks on the research's limitations, and potential future research goals.

1.1. Post-Socialist and Illiberal Context of Hungary and the State of LGBTQI+ Rights

The socialist period and the post-socialist transformation continue to exert influence on the use of urban spaces, urban planning, and territorial governance. Following the collapse of socialist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, democratic institutions were established, but the democratization process faced challenges (Stenning & Hörschelmann, 2008; Tuvikene, 2016). The social transformations necessary for creating a democratic system did not occur, and the shift to free-market capitalism hindered the adoption of Western democratic norms (Szelényi & Csillag, 2015; Varró, 2010). Systemic corruption and dysfunctional relationships between levels of governance, driven by political power and economic dependencies, posed significant obstacles. These interdependencies meant that national-level politics exerted strong control over municipal governance, including the utilization of urban spaces (Csizmady et al., 2022; Jávor & Jancsics,

2016). Additional post-socialist characteristics include low levels of public participation, negative attitudes towards politics, and a lack of civic engagement (Gille, 2010). Due to the inherited effects of the socialist demobilization strategy in Hungary, public participation is lower than in other post-socialist countries, according to European Social Survey data. The proportion of respondents who had participated in a lawful public demonstration in the last 12 months before the wave of data collection was 2.7% in 2010 and 2.2% in 2018 (Mikecz, 2023, pp. 18–20).

The post-2010 illiberal turn is closely tied to the legacy of the socialist regime (Olt et al., in press). Illiberal elements often mirror features of the socialist system, such as re-centralization (seen in territorial planning) and the extensive power of the state to intervene in municipal affairs (Glasius et al., 2020; Kneuer & Demmelhuber, 2020; Waller, 2023). For instance, the local business tax can be reduced in some municipalities at the government's discretion, and developments can be implemented without the local authority's consent (Pálné Kovács, 2020). In the 1990s, the aim of the new municipal law (Hungarian Parliament, 1990) was to ensure local sovereignty. However, after 2010, a new process of re-centralization began, restricting municipalities' ability to execute developments and take significant action to mitigate social inequalities. Moreover, dependence on national-level politics has been strengthened; political loyalty from local governments can impact a municipality's development potential by influencing the allocation of development funds (Csizmady et al., 2022; Hegedüs & Péteri, 2015; Jelinek, 2020; Olt et al., in press).

In post-socialist and illiberal countries, the state uses public spaces to reinforce national identity (e.g., in Budapest, after 2010, several public spaces were renamed for this purpose) and may partially promote cis- and heteronormative identities. Marginalized social groups, including the LGBTQI+ community, have limited visibility and usage of public spaces (McGarry, 2016). Nonetheless, social movements and initiatives are striving for the free, accessible, and visible use of public spaces. These efforts can lead to positive developments for the LGBTQI+ community, offering opportunities for governments to address exclusion and discrimination.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the transnationalization and globalization of LGBTQI+ norms and rights can also lead to contestation (Ayoub, 2015, 2016; Guasti & Bustikova, 2023). Indeed, many scholars have reflected on anti-gender movements and right-wing sexual politics in Hungary and the use of "gender ideology" as an empty signifier to legitimize and normalize hate speech as an end goal (Barát, 2022; Grzebalska & Pető, 2018; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2017), as well as the concept of genderphobia—"an ideology about the fearfulness of gender…the action of fear-mongering for political effect," and "an aversion to addressing and critically interrogating gendered differences and [the idea of] gender as a social construct" (Takács et al., 2022, pp. 38–39).

Recent legal changes reflect the shift in gender and sexual minority rights and related political discourse since 2010. Notably, in the Fundamental Law, a hetero- and cisnormative understanding of marriage and family is indicated. Furthermore, "the right of children to a self-identity corresponding to their sex at birth" is protected by the highest Hungarian law (Hungarian Parliament, 2011b, art. XVI (1)), impacting the recognition of trans and non-binary identities. This seems to align with the 2020 ban on the legal gender recognition of adults, a procedure that was formerly ad hoc and not regulated. The recognition of kinship ties between parents and children was already limited as Hungary only recognizes the institution of registered partnership, not marriage, for same-sex couples (Sipos, 2023). It became further restricted by changes in the adoption system

by giving legal preference to married couples over single adoptees who may (or may not) be from the LGBTQI+ community (Sipos, 2021; Sipos & Szalma, 2023). In 2022, a child protection referendum ended in an invalid result following the 2021 June amendments to the Child Protection Act. This amendment prohibits not only pornographic content but also the depiction of sexuality as having a purpose in itself, and the promotion of gender deviation from sex, gender reassignment, and homosexuality for children under the age of eighteen (Hungarian Parliament, 1997, 6/A). Connected to this amendment, the phenomenon of "homofoil" (*homofólia*) is taking place—bookstores are being fined for not wrapping up books containing LGBTQI+ characters, visibly signaling "18+ content," and separating them from other publications.

2. Pride—March, Protest, Commodity, or Celebration?

2.1. Theoretical Approaches: Space and Law

Pride marches and parades have intertwined elements of the personal and the structural. Butler (2015) theorized how bodies act in spaces, discussing performativity and subversiveness. The author explains "the spatial organization of power" involving "the allocation and restriction of spatial locations in which and by which any population may appear" (Butler, 2015, p. 85). Johnston and Waitt (2016, p. 102) describe Pride events as "located, fleshy material, indeterminate parades" which "are entwined in particular sets of ideas of gender and sexuality and create geographies of (not) belonging, where people may feel both in and out of place." Following the concept of performativity, Johnston (2005, pp. 127–129) explored two Australian gay Pride parades, relying on the notion of camp. The latter entails an almost parodic exaggeration of gender norms and expressions intended to challenge and subvert binaries of masculinity and femininity as well as heterosexuality and non-heterosexuality. Johnston (2005, p. 130) emphasizes that during Pride marches, "audiences expect to see bodies that defy normative assumptions of gendered/sexed and sexualized bodies, while…at the same time, they attempt to construct bodies as either masculine or feminine." In this way, Pride is a dissident public performance and defiance of cis- and heteronormativity within the public sphere. However, the "geo-temporal" perspectives of Pride must also be addressed. The notion of "geo-temporal dislocation" highlights how politics, actions, or ideas are "relocated" from their original geo-temporal context to a new one, disrupting their initial state. Indeed, the integration of Pride events into the local context can be different based on the "histories and geographies" of countries (Slootmaeckers & Bosia, 2023, pp. 2–3, 16). Plummer (2001, pp. 243–245) considers public spheres "multiple, hierarchically layered and contested." "Gay and lesbian public spheres" create a distinct, visible, and positive culture that seeps into broader public spheres and, on the other, offers "alternative, subaltern cultures." Plummer (2003, p. 70) recognizes—through the concept of intimate citizenship—the idea that personal and public aspects of our lives are interconnected, and even those "that appear to be personal…are connected to, structured by, or regulated through the public sphere."

Based on these theoretical approaches of queer geography and intimate citizenship studies, we assume that Budapest Pride represents this phenomenon as intimate citizens exercise their freedom of assembly and expression in a regulated "heterosexual" public space, the streets of Budapest. Thus, our interest is in understanding Budapest Pride within the Hungarian context, where intimate citizens are temporally present within the "(hetero)sexualized" urban space (Binnie, 1997).

The silencing of intimate citizenship acts or the disruption of that silencing can be affected by the formal regulation of space use: Who is allowed to be "loud and proud" and how? According to Mitchell (2013), the state ensures freedom of expression and its democratic framework and regulation. The state regulates how and where freedom of speech may be realized. The regulation of space use, property rights, and the authorities controlling spaces (e.g., the police) also implies the regulation of free speech. Even if intimate citizens exercise their freedom of assembly and expression, silencing in urban spaces involves regulating space in a way that either restricts these freedoms or limits them in such a manner that the resulting protests and marches have minimal or no impact at all. Our initial 3R framework approaches this by identifying route usage, regulations (including the related role of judicial and law enforcement authorities), and acts of resistance.

Pride is understood in this article as a public event where intimate citizens can exercise their rights, especially the right to assembly and expression, to gain visibility and voice, advocate for their rights and disrupt the silencing cis- and heteronormative spatial environment and its regulation.

2.2. Budapest Pride

The first-ever Pride march in Hungary took place on 6 September 1997, called Gay Pride Day (*Meleg Büszkeség Nap*). While this was the first official march, there were many precursors, most notably Pink Picnics and film festivals. On 13 September 1992, the first Pink Picnic (*Pink Piknik*)—a precursory Pride-like event—took place on Three Border Mountain (Hármashatár-hegy), a safe place relatively secluded from public eyes. This was followed by further Pink Picnics until 1996 (Hanzli & Nagy, 2022, pp. 143–145). After 1997, every year—except 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic—Pride marches were organized between June and September. Additionally, since 2013, LGBT History Month has been organized on an annual basis (Hanzli & Nagy, 2022, p. 204). This is the year that the Budapest Pride LGBTQ Film Festival became an event separate from the Pride marches.

Academic papers recount the general history of homosexuality and queerness in Budapest and Hungary by focusing on what happened before, during, and after the state-socialist period, as well as the historical development of "queer spaces." Newer contributions focus on LGBTQI+ rights or how history affects current trends both within the activism of the community and society's perception of the community itself (Hanzli & Nagy, 2022; Kuhar & Takács, 2007; Kurimay, 2020; Renkin, 2015; Takács, 2014; Tóth, 2013). While queer history has been researched thoroughly in Budapest and Hungary, the article aims to contribute to the research of Pride parades by examining silencing and the disruption of silencing via the tangible case of Budapest Pride, highlighting the interplay between the expressions of non-cis- and non-heteronormative citizens within "heterosexual" public spaces through which the division of private and public, personal and political is defied (Plummer, 2003; Richardson, 2017).

3. Research Objectives and Methodology

This research scrutinizes the case of the Budapest Pride marches using a preliminary model to examine how silencing and the disruption of silencing occur through the use of space, the legislative framework, and the social mobilization of resistance. For these three aspects, acts of silencing and the disruption of silencing are identified. In line with this preliminary 3R model (routes in spaces, regulations, resistance), the following questions are tackled: How did the routes and number of participants associated with Budapest Pride change,

and what is the relevance of specific routes regarding the geographical location of the legislative seat (the Hungarian Parliament) in Budapest? What legal framework can be identified for regulating space use, and does it aid or restrict Budapest Pride and the LGBTQI+ community? Finally, how is resistance present regarding these events?

To answer these questions, we systematically collected information on every Pride march from 1997 to 2022 using academic and online sources to create a database containing important data about the events. This includes dates, number of participants, and routes (highlighting their distance to Kossuth Lajos Square, where the Parliament building is located). It furthermore covers slogans, information on invited speakers and their speeches, and details regarding the use of cordons. If cordons were utilized, the database specifies which group's movement was limited (Pride march attendees or counter-protesters).

The research employs—in addition to details about the length of each Parade's route—details on the availability of estimated participant numbers as a proxy for assessing the visibility of LGBTQI+ individuals and allies. The visibility of LGBTQI+ minorities can be investigated through a range of other sources, including the analysis of printed and social media representations (e.g., content and visual analysis, number of followers and/or attendees confirmed at social media events). However, considering the nature of this event, which dates back to 1997, data concerning the (approximate) participant count emerged as the most accessible, enabling a more objective comparison. It was also deemed the most pertinent information for emphasizing the "popularity" of each parade.

The number of participants of Budapest Pride marches was compiled from the event organizers' official website (https://budapestpride.hu), an online printed press database by Arcanum Digitheca, and other online sources. Considering the dates of the Pride marches, using a margin of one month on either side of the event, the following keywords were used to collect relevant printed and online press articles: *melegfelvonulás* (gay march), *melegbüszkeség* (gay pride), "Pride," *meleg* (gay), *leszbikus* (lesbian), and *homoszexuális* (homosexual).

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the parade was canceled in 2020, resulting in a total of 25 parades for which data were collected. Participation data for 15 years were accessed through the organizers' website, containing the organizers' estimates. For an additional four years, the estimates given in newspaper articles were based on the organizers' estimate but are not available on the organizers' website. Thus, participant numbers were estimated for six marches without referencing the parade organizers. When exact participant numbers were not provided, and only a range was given, we calculated the average of the range for our analysis.

The approximate length of the route of each Pride march was calculated using Google Earth by manually adding and connecting the main points, followed by their visualization. The written descriptions of these routes are available online on Budapest Pride's website on the history of Pride (https://budapestpride.hu/tortenetunk).

The objective was to provide a comprehensive overview of how silencing and the disruption of silencing can occur in a spatially and temporally fixed event (Pride) whose goal is to enhance the visibility and social inclusion of sexual and gender minorities considering the current socio-legal context in Hungary.

4. Analysis

We developed an analytical framework based on which Budapest Pride marches were analyzed. The 3R lens (Figure 1) aims to scrutinize three aspects to better understand silencing and the disruption of silencing. First, the spatial component (including material and symbolic aspects of space use); second, the regulations encompassing the legal framework (including positive and negative aspects, such as freedom and its limitations); and third, resistance through material and symbolic elements focusing on how space is used within the established regulatory environment. Through the first and second components (spatial and legal aspects), we discover how intimate citizens are using space within the freedom and the limits of legal regulations. The third component encompasses these two elements (space use and legal framework) to assess moments of resistance. This includes briefly examining both supportive and opposing stances of social movements and mobilization related to minority groups' rights and equality.

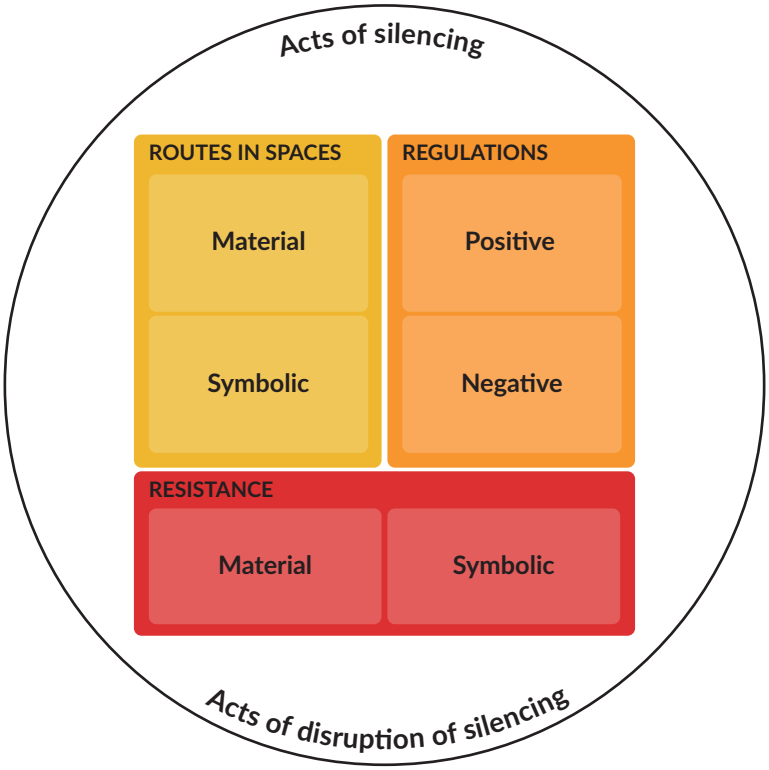

Figure 1. 3R framework (routes in spaces, regulations, resistance).

4.1. Routes in Spaces

Within the 3R analytical framework, routes in spaces are the most visible representation of how the LGBTQI+ community could be present and use public space through the Budapest Pride marches (see Figure 2). As theorized within the geography of sexualities and queer geography, public space is inherently filled with sexual and gender codings, sexed bodies, as well as an everyday hegemony of heterosexuality (Bell & Valentine, 1995; Binnie, 1997; Hubbard, 2008). To be visible is to question these norms of public space and its use. Thus, silencing and the disruption of silencing can occur through space use of sexual and gender minorities.

Regarding the routes in spaces, there are several considerations regarding Budapest. First of all, given the inherent qualities and characteristics of the city, specific routes and squares are considered more suitable for gatherings of significant numbers of people regardless of their purpose (protests, marches, sports events, open-air parades). Second, Pride is about visibility, amongst other core objectives. In Budapest Pride's mission statement, the parade serves as the primary means of expressing and transmitting the organization's values, fostering community, and raising awareness about inequalities faced by the LGBTQ community. Furthermore, it recognizes Budapest Pride's high-level visibility and prominent symbolic role in advocating for the rights and equality of the community (Budapest Pride, 2013, p. 9). Third, related to being a symbol of resistance, the article briefly discusses the role of the Parliament building (Országház) regarding the routes of Budapest Pride.

After the democratic transformation of 1989, the Hungarian local government system became highly decentralized, leading to significant fragmentation. Budapest has a two-tier system of local government: the Municipality of Budapest and its 23 districts' local governments (Hungarian Parliament, 1990). However, the Municipality of Budapest does not represent a higher level above the districts; it possesses its own territory within Budapest, and it also "performs all tasks related to area and settlement development, as well as area planning, settlement planning, and settlement operation that affect the entire capital city or are connected to the capital city's special role in the country" (Hungarian Parliament, 2011a, para. 23 (1)). Therefore, the broad autonomy granted to the local governments of the 23 districts provides flexibility for each of them to devise distinct responses to the evolving socio-political landscape (Egedy et al., 2016; Tosics, 2006). Although the re-centralization process significantly altered various aspects of local governance, the autonomy of municipalities in addressing social issues has remained unchanged as long as their actions align with their financial capabilities (Csizmady et al., 2022).

Figure 2. Routes of Pride marches in Budapest between 1997–2022.

Thus, the Municipality of Budapest and 23 districts have the authority to decide on policies related to the LGBTQI+ community within their jurisdiction. These policies are typically symbolic and rarely extend beyond the level of communication. Initiatives aimed at inclusivity include displaying the rainbow flag on municipal office buildings, offering venue rentals in municipal buildings to LGBTQI+ organizations, supporting LGBTQI+ organizations through communication channels, and local politicians participating in events organized by LGBTQI+ organizations. On the other hand, there are districts in Budapest that are opposed to the LGBTQI+ community. These governments attempt to restrict activities perceived as LGBTQI+ propaganda (e.g., banning a book featuring LGBTQI+ characters in institutions run by the local government) and may engage in hostile communication regarding LGBTQI+ issues. Nevertheless, as mentioned before, the Fundamental Law and the legal framework are more restrictive of LGBTQI+ rights in general, regardless of the municipal authorities' approach to such matters.

It is not surprising that the first march had the fewest participants (around 300–400 people) and was the shortest route (Figure 3). 2009 was an interesting year due to the shortness of the route and the month (September). In the previous two years, Pride participants were subjected to serious attacks. Thus, organizers may have opted for a shorter route. Additionally, this was the year the Registered Partnership Act was introduced and entered into force on 1 July 2009, allowing same-sex couples to legally recognize their partnership (Hungarian Parliament, 2009). Most participants attended the latest Pride marches (2021 and 2022), with about 35,000 attendees. A steadily increasing spike in the number of participants has been visible since 2013.

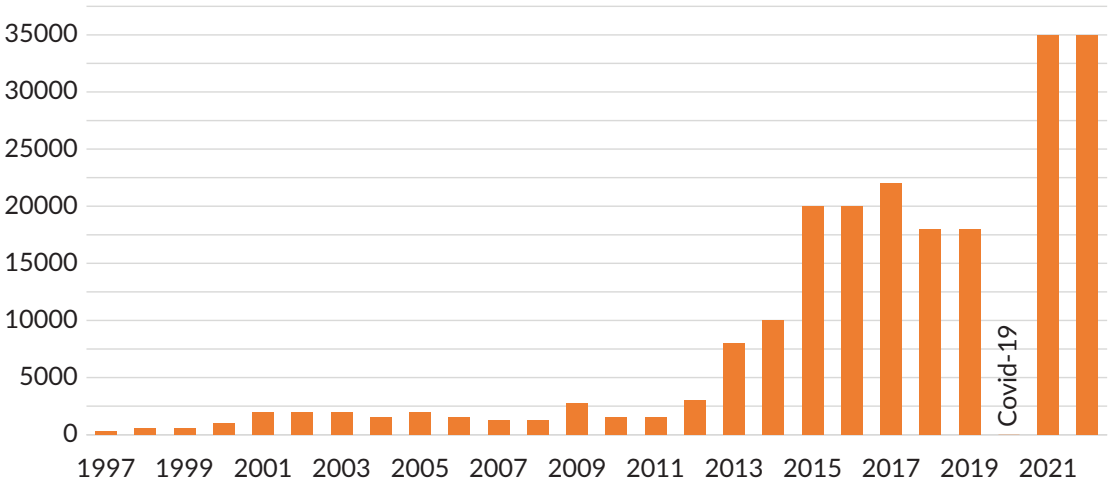

Figure 3. Number of participants in Pride marches in Budapest between 1997 and 2022.

The home of the legislative process, Parliament, and its closeness or distance from Pride routes is of interest as several protests were held in front of this building to express disapproval of specific legislative measures (almost countless since the 1989 democratic regime change). Renkin (2015, pp. 427–428) recounts the 2011 Pride march and its—both symbolic and spatial—distance from Parliament:

> The 2011 Dignity March almost ends at Parliament. But not quite. Banned from entering Kossuth tér—the square surrounding Parliament—we pack into the narrow space of Alkotmány Street. Through the police barricade at [the] street's end, we can just see the Parliament. Clustering together, listening to

> optimistic speeches, the irony of our almost-inclusion is amplified by masses of chanting skinheads on the fence's other side—in Kossuth tér, in front of Parliament.

Based on our dataset, between 2016 and 2019, the Pride marches either started or ended at Kossuth Lajos Square (Kossuth Lajos tér). Nevertheless, most marches either completely "avoided" the Parliament building or "passed by" it. The following quote from Kinga Göncz (MEP from the Hungarian Socialist Party) at the 2011 Budapest Pride reflects this: "It was good that the gay pride march ended in Constitution Street [Alkotmány utca]," because "with the new constitution we will have plenty of work to do," referring to the then newly adopted Fundamental Law (Hungarian Parliament, 2011b), which contains a heteronormative understanding of marriage. She also recalled that "until 2008, gay pride marches did not require police protection. She hoped that the current situation was only temporary" ("Felesleges volt a félelem," 2011). Although in certain instances the route might seem "accidental" owing to the urban layout, it can also be understood as dissident public performativity challenging cis- and heteronormative spaces, as previously delineated in the works of Butler (2015) and Johnston (2005).

4.2. Regulations

The legal framework is crucial in regulating modes of space usage in terms of amplifying and silencing different "voices": The positive side of regulations is the freedom to exercise rights, while the negative one prohibits certain acts, limits, or restricts the exercise of rights. Generally, the right to assembly (interconnected with freedom of expression) can be exercised peacefully, which allows for the potential disruption of silencing of cis- and heteronormativity in the public sphere. However, this right can be restricted lawfully in a proportionate manner to achieve specific objectives deemed "necessary in a democratic society" (Council of Europe, 1950, Article 11). For example, the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1950, Article 11) lists the following in: "the interests of national security or public safety…the prevention of disorder or crime…the protection of health or morals or…the protection of the rights and freedoms of others."

The obligation to notify authorities is a further restriction of the exercise of this right. In Hungary, Act III of 1989 on Right of Assembly regulated the organization of events in public spaces until 2018. Regarding the notification obligation, it stated that organizers were obliged to notify relevant assembly authorities—in Budapest the Budapest Police Headquarters—"at least three days before the planned date of the event" (Hungarian Parliament, 1989, para. 6). After the introduction of a new act, this obligation's timeframe changed to "not earlier than three months before the assembly is to be held and at least 48 hours before the call for assembly" (Hungarian Parliament, 2018, para. 10(1)). The notification must include the organizer's name and address, and the meeting's specificities, including its name, location, time and date, purpose, the number of organizers and expected participants, and whether it is reasonable for the police to be present. Organizers can submit notifications in person or by writing (both through mail and an online system) three months before the date of the event. Thus, even if Pride is "disruptive and subversive" regarding sexual and gender norms, intimate citizens can only participate in these marches if certain regulatory measures are fulfilled, which requires deliberate organization.

Regarding competing events, paragraph 12(1) of Act 2018 states that priority shall be given to one event over the other based on which notification arrives earlier at the assembly authority (Hungarian Parliament, 2018, para 12(1)). This restriction—concerning the duty to notify—soon became a strategic "race for space."

For example, on 24 and 25 April 2021, several right-wing political actors notified the Budapest Police Headquarters about 19 public events to be held on the same day as Budapest Pride (24 July 2021) on similar routes. The events' purpose was noted as "protest[ing] against…LGBTQP propaganda" and aimed to block LGBTQI+ organizations from taking up space for the Pride march. Notably, one was submitted by Előd Novák, president of the Our Homeland Movement (Mi Hazánk Mozgalom), a far-right wing political party with an anti-LGBTQ stance, too early—three months and 10 seconds before the proposed public event's date. Even though the assembly authority rejected this submission, the first instance court, the Curia, annulled it. It noted that although the submission was made at 23:59:50, the request arrived at the assembly authority through the online system 13 seconds later. It remarked that the authority "had two certificates with different dates at its disposal, yet it accepted the certificate with a content that was unfavorable to the applicant as the basis for its decision" (Curia, 2021). Finally, the assembly authority withdrew its favorable decision regarding the route of Budapest Pride for 2021: The Our Homeland Movement took over Andrássy Road (Andrássy út)—one of the widest routes in the center of the capital with multiple pedestrian roads—and Budapest Pride went from Madách Square (Madách tér) to Tabán by crossing the Danube, the natural frontier, and dividing line between Pest and Buda.

Another instance of restrictive regulation, which can be regarded as an act of silencing, was the Budapest Pride ban in 2011–2012. In Resolution 01000/37289-15/2011, the assembly authority decided to prohibit the extension as well as the previously confirmed route of the Pride march. Its reasoning included balancing the right to freedom of movement and the right to assembly, justifying the prohibition of the public event due to its impact on traffic flow (Budapest Police Headquarters, 2011). However, the reasoning for the impediment of the traffic was challenged, and the court overturned the ban, stating that the assembly authorities' arguments were unfounded. However, in 2012, a similar banning decision was delivered by the assembly authority regarding the Budapest Pride (called Walk of Gay Dignity at the time). On September 18, 2014, the lower court's decision was upheld by the Regional Court of Appeal of Budapest, which declared that "the Budapest Police [had] committed direct discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation when banning the Budapest Pride March in April 2012" ("Court reaffirms that police," 2014). The court highlighted that the decisions of the authorities serve as a model for members of society; thus, a discriminatory banning deriving from police decisions violates human dignity and can intensify already existing hostile emotions towards the said community, which can manifest in protests.

4.3. Resistance

Within resistance, we identify material and symbolic elements. Resistance is captured first and foremost through social movements for and against the objectives of the Budapest Pride marches. The social movement connected to the Pride marches was briefly presented within the "routes" section.

The first notable forms of resistance against Budapest Pride marches were the counter-protests in 2007 and 2008. These can be categorized as both material and symbolic, as they had organizational implications for the following marches. In 2007, several counter-protesters chanted antisemitic and homophobic messages while others threw eggs, bottles, and Molotov cocktails at those participating in the Pride march. Several Pride march participants were attacked due to their (perceived) sexual orientation and/or gender identity ("A 2007. július 7-i meleg büszkeség," 2007). In 2008, the attacks intensified both prior to and during the march to the extent that participants had to leave the endpoint (Felvonulási Square [Felvonulási tér]) under police escort for

safety reasons. An article highlighted that "upon the police's request, the gay pride march took a shorter route this year, which was then shortened further: due to far-right counter-protesters, [it] turned back two streets before Oktogon" (Czene, 2010). As Takács notes (2014, p. 202): "After these events, many LGBT people felt restricted in their use of public spaces, being aware of potential attacks, abuse and other acts of hostility."

These incidents led to 10 years of cordon use—separating participants from "outsiders," including potential allies, and "restraining" the values of freedom and visibility represented by these Pride marches. These measures were taken to guarantee the safety of attendees. Furthermore, organizers invited participants to remove any symbols related to Pride, including rainbow makeup, pins, and flags, to avoid being harassed or attacked. In 2018, the policy shifted by establishing entry- and exit points and finally erecting cordons to separate counter-protesters from the marches, not the other way around (Diószegi-Horváth, 2018). Thus, in a way, protection from violent attack translated into a silencing regulation of the organizers of Budapest Pride marches, resulting in an inclusion/exclusion dichotomy for the LGBTQI+ community.

As symbolic elements of resistance, the database includes all the slogans of Pride marches. These encompass references to visibility, coming out, and the freedom of sexual and gender minorities (e.g., "Off with the mask!" [*Le az álarccal!*]; "Freer on the outside" [*Kívül szabadabb*]), as well as human rights, equality, and progress made so far (e.g., "Act for diversity and human rights" [*Tégy a sokszínűségért és az emberi jogokért*]; "Living–together–equally" [*Együtt–élve–egyenlően*]; "20 years of power!" [*20 esztendőnk hatalom!*]). Interestingly, as discussions on marriage equality and the institution of registered partnership unfolded in the Hungarian Parliament, organizers opted for slogans that mirrored these developments (e.g., "A spade, a hoe, and a big bell—equal opportunities for marriage!" [*Ásó, kapa, nagyharang—egyenlő esélyeket a házassághoz!*]; "We are one family!" [*Egy család vagyunk*]). The slogan of the last three years was "Take back your future!" [*Vedd vissza a jövőd!*], a potential reference to the shrinking rights of LGBTQI+ people. Another matter is how these marches were titled by the organizers: From 1997 to 2007, they referred to them as the Gay Pride Day Parade [Meleg Büszkeség Napi felvonulás], while from 2008—the year the most atrocities happened—the event became known as Gay Dignity March or Walk of Gay Dignity [Meleg Méltóság Menete]. In 2009, the event was renamed Budapest Pride (Renkin, 2015, pp. 409–410; see also https://budapestpride.hu/tortenetunk).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

With a focus on the historical progression of Pride marches in Hungary's capital, the article aimed to investigate the use of urban space by the LGBTQI+ community in a post-socialist and illiberal context. The article relied on two theoretical approaches. To explore the spatial dimension, contributions from queer geography and geography of sexualities were used, and for the legal dimension, the notions of intimate and sexual citizenship were addressed. Based on these, the article understands Pride marches as temporally and spatially fixed public events where intimate citizens, especially non-cis- and non-heteronormative ones, exercise their freedom of assembly and expression. The purpose is to advocate for their rights, to raise awareness of the inequalities faced by the LGBTQI+ community, and finally, to disrupt the silencing of the cis- and heteronormative spatial environment and its regulation. As highlighted before, "there is a spatiality to Pride events and…Pride festivals differ both in content and political import depending on where and how they are created" (Browne & McCartan, 2020, p. 187). Recognizing the contribution of other scholars concerning Pride events (Ammaturo, 2016; Slootmaeckers, 2023), this article addressed the specificities of

Hungary and Budapest to present a more thorough account of Budapest Pride's history, emphasizing its spatial and legal dimensions.

Within the analysis of Budapest Pride, the 3R lens (routes in spaces, regulations, resistance) was developed by the authors and applied to a database regarding Budapest Pride marches between 1997 and 2022 to identify acts of silencing and the disruption of silencing (Table 1). First, it sought to delve into the transformation of Budapest Pride marches' routes and participant count. Second, it aimed to identify the prevailing legal framework concerning the LGBTQI+ community and what aids or constrains the organization of and participation in Budapest Pride. Lastly, it explored the dynamics of resistance within this spatial-legal context.

Table 1. Acts of silencing and the disruption of silencing within the 3R lens.

3R lens	Silencing	Disruption of silencing
Routes in spaces	(Infra)structural limits of the town	Closeness to the Hungarian Parliament
		Being in the city center
		Growing number of participants
Regulations	Constraints on the freedom of assembly and expression (e.g., notification obligation on event organization in public spaces)	Guaranteed freedom of assembly and expression
	"Race for space"—competing events with (far-)right-wing actors	
	Institutional silencing in 2011–2012	
Resistance	Counter-protests and related atrocities in 2007–2008 followed by cordon use until 2018	Undisrupted organization of Budapest Pride
		Mottos of pride marches referring to visibility and human rights

As the routes in spaces, both material (number of participants and length of routes) and symbolic (proximity to Parliament) aspects were highlighted. These were crucial because, within these events, "streets are temporally 'queered,' exposing the normativity of heterosexual uses in space" (Browne & McCartan, 2020, p. 188). Thus, the number of participants and/or the length of routes can signal the extent to which non-cisnormative and non-heteronormative intimate citizens are present and can intervene in cis- and heteronormative public spaces. Although a low level of public participation is an ongoing post-socialist characteristic of Hungary (Gille, 2010; Mikecz, 2023), the Budapest Pride march has had a growing number of participants since 2010. This could be due to members of the community and allies showing up in the face of an increasingly stricter legal environment and hostile political environment in Hungary. Legal amendments restricting the rights of the LGBTQI+ community and political discourse could affect societal attitudes. Recent research shows that the social acceptance of the community has not yet changed substantially (Takács & Swart, 2021; Takács & Szalma, 2022).

The regulation element refers to the legal framework that allows or restricts how an intimate citizen can behave in the public space during a public event, specifically within the exercise of the freedom of assembly and expression. Butler (2015, p. 11) states that "when bodies assemble on the street, in the square, or in other forms of public space (including virtual ones) they are exercising a plural and performative right to

appear." Indeed, the possibility of attending Pride marches is the possibility to appear and disrupt cis- and heteronormative space by "queering" them within the spatial-temporal setting of the event. As Plummer (1995, p. 151) points out, "decisions around…access (or not) to representations, relationships, [and] public spaces" are part of the concept of intimate citizenship. In relation to the legal framework, the question of access is relevant, as two instances of silencing from authoritative institutions were identified: first, the Curia decision that allowed right-wing political actors to exercise their right to assembly—even though the formal requirements of notification obligation were not entirely met—and second, the Budapest Pride bans in 2011 and 2012 by the police. In the first case, the highest court of Hungary indirectly approved right-wing political actors' action in the "race for space." In the second case, when the police decision prohibited the extension and the previously approved route of the Budapest Pride march, the judiciary disrupted this act of silencing by declaring that state authorities play a role in society's perception of the LGBTQI+ community and that discriminatory measures may fuel negative sentiments towards it.

Finally, resistance was captured through material and symbolic elements. According to Ayoub (2016, p. 27), "Pride marches and parades are at the center of this collective [political act of] coming out…occupying the public space in resistance to heteronormativity." In response to this visibility and the disruption of silencing through Pride marches and slogans of freedom and equality, anti-LGBTQI+ resistance can be identified. Most notably, the 2007 and 2008 attacks were primary examples of counter-social movements aimed at silencing and making the LGBTQI+ community and allies invisible. These incidents led to the use of a form of material division—cordons—which guaranteed the safety of Pride participants but whose use was counter to the goals of such Pride events. The symbolic aspect of this furthermore reinforced the "us-versus-them" perspective and the idea of a "good intimate citizen" who does not deviate from cis- and heteronormativity, except perhaps within their own four walls.

This article introduced an analytical framework that has the potential to be applied to Pride marches and other events where freedom of assembly and expression is exercised through space use, thereby making a significant contribution to the literature on sexuality and queer studies. Additionally, this study has addressed a gap in the literature concerning the use of public spaces by sexual and gender minorities and allies within the spatio-temporality of Pride in a post-socialist and illiberal country. This provides insights into the dynamics of visibility and silencing and their disruption within this unique socio-political environment.

Despite its strengths, the article has some limitations. While the research focuses on Budapest Pride marches, it does not encompass related events and thus is selective in scope. Furthermore, the proxy of the approximate number of participants of Budapest Pride may not fully encompass the visibility of LGBTQI+ people and allies. Thus, the further inclusion of visibility indicators is needed. Additionally, the question of homonormativity (Duggan, 2002) may be further addressed in accordance with the elements of resistance. Regardless, the 3R analytical lens allows for an in-depth analysis of other Pride-related activities and specific aspects of LGBTQI+ visibility and activism.

Future research endeavors may focus on giving voice to the Budapest Pride (ex-)organizers and participants to uncover the reasons and practices for raising the visibility of the sexual and gender minorities within the Hungarian sociopolitical context. Building on the established database, a more nuanced analysis of elements of resistance elements would yield insights into language and symbol use by both Pride participants and counter-protesters, as well as the media's portrayal of these groups. Furthermore, the 3R analytical

framework analysis could also be applied to Pride in Pécs, the first rural county seat in Southern Hungary to hold Pride marches (since 2021). Apart from generating interesting results as an independent case study, this would facilitate a comparative analysis with Budapest Pride.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Unpacking Silencing to Make Black Lives Matter: Ethnographies of Racism in Public Space

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Abstract

This article focuses on the debates surrounding decolonisation and antiracism in the wake of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in Switzerland. They sparked new discussions within Swiss institutions, particularly city governments, about racism, colonialism, and physical changes to the material environment for which activists have advocated. Based on an empirical example in Zurich, the article examines the dynamics of (un)silencing when city governments respond to demands by local antiracist groups who ask for the removal of racist street names in public spaces. We draw on postcolonial and subaltern studies to examine practices of silencing and being heard, combining it with Rancière's understanding of depoliticisation. The empirical case study shows that the actions and voices of people directly affected by racism were key in advocating for institutional change as well as addressing colonial remnants in urban spaces. This case shows how the demands of social movements can amplify marginalised voices and how they can also lead to new forms of silencing. This article explores the complexity of silencing practices that disregard the plurality of voices, and political movements focusing on the depoliticising of interpretations of antiracism in public debates while simultaneously neglecting the diversity of voices affected by racism. It contributes to debates on how racism is voiced and silenced in progressive and liberal urban institutions.

Keywords

antiracism; cities; city governments; coloniality; colonialism; public space; racism; silencing; social movement; Switzerland

1. Introduction

At the end of 2021, the Zurich City Council announced its decision to cover two inscriptions of the m-word on houses in the old city centre because of its racist connotations. The impulse for this decision was given by an initiative of Kollektiv Vo da., a local collective of Black people and people of colour with Swiss nationality that works against racism and discrimination. It initiated an impactful campaign to bring this issue to public attention. This is only one example of struggles in Swiss cities to remove racist and colonial heritage from public spaces. Other examples are the struggle around the statue of David de Pury in Neuchâtel, the figure of Carl Vogt in Geneva, or a racist mural in a public school in Bern. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement played an important role in this struggle. It was a moment par excellence when material objects worldwide became targets of struggle, including in countries that did not directly lay claims on colonies, such as Switzerland. The visible contestation of monuments that glorified persons who profited from, helped to support, and built systems of slavery and colonialism should be understood as ways to challenge not only the past but also contemporary urban and national narratives. Contestations resonated across the Atlantic as a reminder that the colonisation of the Americas and the racist ideologies that accompanied it cannot be understood independently from developments in Europe. The calls to remove these monuments from public space, and to make space for the narratives of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour, whose (hi)stories continue to be invisibilised and silenced, are often met with resistance from those who feel that removal will lead to the erasure of history. As a result, municipal authorities must deal with contradictory claims and must navigate a shifting political landscape. In this article we aim to unpack what aspects of the antiracist and decolonial approaches are silenced, (re)interpreted and (de)politicised both by public institutions and social movements.

The ways urban governments have addressed the naming of buildings, streets, and statues imbued with residues of colonial histories have been praised, contested, and criticised within communities of colour, social movements, politics, and the media (Colpani et al., 2022; dos Santos Pinto, 2022; Mbembe, 2017; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Newsinger, 2016). Colonial histories and the marginalisation and exclusion of people of colour from and within predominately white European cities are inscribed in city spaces (Cattacin & Gamba, 2021; Ha & Picker, 2022; Nayar, 2016; Rose-Redwood et al., 2022). Cities function as archives (Bacchetta et al., 2015; Burgum, 2022), where colonial history manifests itself materially for example through gable stones, statues, or paintings. Through these objects, cities produce a certain kind of narrative based on, for example, nationalist and racialised representations of citizenship (Thompson & Zablotsky, 2016), which enforces the trope of a normalised white European identity, and ignores and silences its colonial history (Boatcă & Roth, 2016). Interest has arisen in how (city) space produces a historical memory among racialised bodies living within a colonial legacy of violence, exclusion, and exoticisation (Arghavan et al., 2019; dos Santos Pinto, 2022; Fanon, 1961/2007) and how it also produces racist and colonial images of Black people and people of colour resulting in discriminatory institutional practices (e.g., El-Tayeb & Thompson, 2019; Plümecke & Wilopo, 2019).

Postcolonial research shows how Switzerland has participated in and benefited from colonialism (Fässler, 2006; Kølvraa & Knudsen, 2020; Purtschert & Fischer-Tiné, 2015; Purtschert et al., 2012; Schär, 2015; Suter, 2019; Tanner, 2015) and shows the need to expand our knowledge on how this history affects institutional structures, infrastructures, policies and the everyday experiences and behaviours of citizens today (Bassel, 2014; dos Santos Pinto et al., 2022; dos Santos Pinto & Purtschert, 2018; Plümecke et al.,

2023). Switzerland was involved in what has been described as "colonialism without colonies" (Purtschert & Fischer-Tiné, 2015) by participating in or benefiting from colonial enterprises. Through managing and safeguarding wealth generated from colonial activities (Zangger, 2011) Swiss businesses engaged in the international trade of goods, arms, and enslaved peoples (Purtschert et al., 2012), and Swiss mercenaries fought in the French and Dutch colonies (Krauer, 2021; Schär, 2015). Although the bulk of studies in Switzerland approach the colonial past as a historical question, some studies create a link between a colonial past and a racist present (e.g., dos Santos Pinto et al., 2022; El-Tayeb & Thompson, 2019; Terkessidis, 2021). Antiracist and racialised activists with hybrid research profiles are particularly active in placing these connections on the political agenda, notably regarding police violence, racial profiling (Collaborative Research Group, 2019; Thompson, 2021; Wa Baile et al., 2019), museum collections (Ryser & Schonfeldt, 2020), and historical heritage (dos Santos Pinto, 2022; Fässler, 2006). A connection that is particularly relevant for this study are issues around belonging (Dijkema, 2022; Schilliger, 2020) and substantive citizenship, about who has the right to claim rights (Isin & Nielsen, 2008), and experiences of exclusion and feeling out of place in public space (Dijkema, 2021; Vergès & Vrainom, 2021), emphasising how these feelings are rooted in historical colonial dynamics.

This article examines the dynamics of (un)silencing in city governments' responses to demands and criticisms by local antiracist groups who ask for the removal of racist street names on city-owned public buildings. Based on ethnographic observations during public debates and interviews, we draw on postcolonial and subaltern studies specifically examining silencing, and combining it with Rancière's understanding of depoliticisation. This article gives insights into how institutional responses to the demands of social movements can simultaneously amplify the voice of Black people and people of colour, and result in new forms of silencing. It unpacks what aspects of the antiracist and decolonial approaches are silenced, (re)interpreted and (de)politicised both by public institutions and social movements.

1.1. Silencing in Theory

Subaltern studies show the importance of addressing power imbalances in society and stress how having a voice and being heard are essential to social justice. Silencing requires the deployment of power because it is only through the exercise of power that one "determines what is audible and visible, which utterances are of concern for the community and which are to be dismissed as unworthy noise" (Rancière, 1999, as cited in Selmeczi, 2012, p. 499). The core premise of deliberative democracy is based on the false idea that "political decisions should be reached through a process of deliberation among free and equal citizens" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 1). For subaltern groups, such as racialised citizens, it is difficult to openly challenge structurally asymmetric power relations through nonviolent political action, as their claims are often dismissed as noise. According to Dikeç (2007, p. 177), who analyses the political expression of racialised inhabitants in the French banlieues, the problem is that:

> The republican imaginary is so white and so Christian that any manifestation of discontent—either on the streets or in the spaces of institutional politics—by the Republic's darker and non-Christian citizens, quickly evokes concerns about the values and principles of the Republic.

Although the political systems and historical contexts are different, we think that this is also true to a certain extent in the Swiss context.

Silencing is an outcome of epistemic violence which, according to Spivak, is the systematic disqualification of marginalised people's experiences and their incapacity to reflect on the latter through the imposition of a conceptual framework that disqualifies their experience. Epistemic violence still denies racialised citizens in Switzerland their political subjectivity. Its function is to "damage a given group's ability to speak and be heard" (Dotson, 2011, p. 236). In her work on the subaltern's possibility of discourse, Spivak has described the difficulties of addressing epistemic violence, as the latter attempts to eliminate the knowledge possessed by marginal groups (Dotson, 2011). The embodied experiences of inequality are one form of such knowledge, and epistemic violence is responsible for the difficulty in making this knowledge visible and audible.

Our approach to silencing from a subaltern perspective is informed by Spivak's (1988) famous question: "Can the subaltern speak?" Subaltern studies are a specific current in postcolonial studies. Authors such as Guha (1985) and Spivak (1988) borrow the term "subaltern" from Gramsci (1934/2021), who understands subaltern as being in a position of subordination to hegemonic power. They share the criticism of elite historiography and seek to write the history of the subaltern: those who are mostly absent from the archives. The contributions of subaltern studies, and in particular Spivak's work on whether the subaltern can speak, are relevant for analysing institutional processes of silencing. Spivak asks whether these subaltern groups can truly express themselves and be heard within the frameworks of the dominant culture and language, or if their voices are always filtered and shaped by the very systems that marginalise them. She argues that the subaltern's representation is hindered by the fact that they lack the power to represent themselves and that the existing structures of power do not recognise subaltern speech as they are co-opted or distorted, thereby further perpetuating their marginalisation (Spivak, 1988).

Spivak's work speaks to Rancière, and his analysis of the epistemic framework proposed by the "police," a framework that ultimately leads to the disqualification of racialised inhabitants' own experiences and analyses. It is only through autonomous collective action that self-confidence can be rebuilt, and this is exactly what state strategies impede through both overt and silent repression. We draw on some key elements of Rancière's work on the distinction between the police and politics as interpreted by Dikeç (2002, 2007) and Uitermark and Nicholls (2014). The latter assert that "the police order defines what is visible and sayable, what is noise and what is voice" (Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014, p. 972). Rancière describes a system of distribution of places in society that "makes forms of domination appear as if they are founded on a sensible and obvious system" (Dikeç, 2002, p. 93), which Rancière called the "partition of the sensible." Dikeç explains the latter "as a system of sensible evidence, [that] arranges the perceptive given of a situation—what is in or out, central or peripheral, audible or inaudible, visible or invisible" (p. 18). Its function is to distribute and to define who is part of the IN-siders—who is included in the centre, audible and visible—and who is part of the OUT-siders—those in the periphery, inaudible and invisible. Insiders, according to Elias and Scotson (1994), are "the established" who monopolise sources of power and use them to exclude and stigmatise "outsiders." The term we use for the outsiders is the marginalised. The "state's statements define the 'proper place' of things and people" (Dikeç, 2002, p. 95).

Politics, according to Rancière, is not the exercise of power nor the struggle for power (Dikeç, 2007); it is about the distribution of power and happens when one challenges the supposedly natural order and the place that one has been attributed in it. Furthermore, Rancière also tells us, it happens "when a wrong (denial of equality) has been identified by a subaltern group" and "when they [marginalised] make a statement of dissensus" (Uitermark & Nicholls, 2014, p. 972). Hence, politics "is the arena where the

principle of equality is tested in the face of a wrong experienced by those who have no part" (Swyngedouw, 2009, p. 605). By politicisation we mean the translation of anger into political claims, and by depoliticisation we mean being kept away from political influence or control, or the concealment of the political aspect of discourse. If a marginalised group is not part of the "whole," the established interpret their claims not as efforts to build a constructive relationship, but as threats to the existing order.

1.2. Researching Silencing Using Feminist Ethnography and Interviews

This article relies on a feminist ethnography approach focussing on three main aspects: First, our commitment to documenting and analysing lived experience with an intersectional approach focusing on race, gender, class, and other socio-political aspects of people's lives (Wilopo & Plümecke, in press). Second, linking our academic work with engagement in and with social movements (Emejulu & Sobande, 2019; Falconer Al-Hindi & Eaves, 2023). Third, by taking seriously the key challenges to the practice of ethnography and Spivak's question of whether subaltern others can be "given voice" or be listened to or understood by academics, especially without these voices being co-opted, misinterpreted, and silenced within political and scientific institutions such as the university (Craven & Davis, 2013; Schrock, 2013). A feminist ethnographic approach engages in the difficult task of focusing on the voices of intersectionally marginalised groups, such as women, Black people and people of colour, or the working class (Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). This approach highlights the significance of embodiment, emotion, and spaces of intimacy, self-reflection, and positionality (Schurr & Wintzer, 2011).

It is crucial to acknowledge our positionality within feminist ethnography, understanding that while it offers insights into our social location, identities, and perspectives, it is just one aspect of our multifaceted identities (Martin et al., 2022). Both authors are part of various political groups dealing with questions of race, colonialism, and visibility. One author defines herself as a cis-gendered female middle-class person of colour who has been part of various Zurich-based migrant and BIPOC movements as well as movements against police violence. The second author is a white woman, coming from an upper-middle-class background, whose family profited economically from the European conquest of foreign and indigenous lands. She has been involved in various activist movements in France and Switzerland. Both authors have European passports. They are simultaneously allies, outsiders, and insiders as well as being in-between these political groups and academia (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009) and consider academia as a location from which to observe, intervene, and act against injustice (Dijkema, 2024; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008).

This research is inspired by the authors' discussions, conversations, and observations in workshops, institutional debates, and public seminars on decolonisation and antiracism. We conducted in-depth interviews with movements of social and political groups, as well as city officials, who engage in antiracist and decolonial projects in Switzerland. This article is based on a convergence of two research projects: The first project is ongoing and includes observation at 14 public discussions and presentations around the topic of colonialism and racism, as well as an interview with a city official and three activists about antiracist social movements in cities. The second project is based on a research seminar at the University of Basel, "Decolonising the Swiss Urban Landscape," involving urban explorations and interviews with activists on colonial heritage, racism, and how to decolonise the landscape. Both projects focus on racism and colonial entanglements in the urban public space and involve the group Kollektiv Vo da., who initiated a long

dialogue about racism with the City Council of the city of Zurich. Switzerland is governed under a federal system with three levels: the Confederation, the cantons, and the municipalities. The city of Zurich is a municipality and a unit of government that is run by the city parliament and the City Council, an executive government with nine elected councillors operating as a collegiate authority under the publicly elected mayor. The city of Zurich is under the supervision of the cantonal government. It has significant decision-making powers and autonomy within Switzerland's political system.

The data analysis is a continuously reflective process and was inspired by a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). Field notes were taken at public events and all interviews were recorded and transcribed before being coded and analysed. For this article, we chose interview excerpts and ethnographic observations that served as noteworthy illustrations of patterns of behaviour and experiences (Bejarano et al., 2019; Eriksson et al., 2012). These not only showcase distinct characteristics but also reflect occurrences found in different narratives. Public figures and representatives of organisations are not anonymised. Other participants and interviewees were given the choice of whether their statements were to be anonymised or not.

We draw on the work of the antiracist Kollektiv Vo da. in Zurich, and we follow their choice of spelling throughout this article. The collective offers critical reflections on everyday racism in Switzerland through social media and its website. It consists of Black people and people of colour, mostly born and raised in Switzerland, who face racism in their everyday lives. One of the first campaigns of the collective, which formed beginning of 2020, was to contest the use of the racist and colonial term *Mohr* (English: moor) in the names of many buildings in the old town of Zurich. Due to the level of offensiveness and its racist and colonial associations, the abbreviation "m-word" is used in this article (e.g., Darman & Schär, 2023; Nduka-Agwu & Hornscheidt, 2013). According to Arndt and Hamann (2015, p. 649), the m-word "is the oldest German term used by white people to construct black people as different" (translated by the authors). In addition, various scholars have shown that the m-word is part of a colonial and exoticizing racist iconography whose racist depictions are both hurtful and discriminatory (Aikins & Hoppe, 2011; Floyd-Wilson, 2006; Institut für Europäische Ethnologie, 2023; Terkessidis, 2021). Similarly, in their historical analysis of the depictions of the m-word on city-owned buildings in Zurich, the historians Darman and Schär (2023, p. 8) argue that:

> [It represents] a demarcation that is often in the contemporary use of language referred to anti-Muslim and anti-Black racism. These forms of demarcation and racism have always been closely linked to anti-Judaism, anti-Semitism, and other racisms whose origins can be traced back to the Middle Ages. (translated by the authors)

Antiracist groups explain, politicise, and debate racist terms and depictions demanding the removal and contextualisation of these terms and depictions. Nevertheless, the m-word is still being used in racist discourse by politicians, historians, and even the media (Humanrights.ch, 2021; Küng, 2023; Steinlin, 2020). This article addresses how antiracist change occurs by focusing on the struggles over the city-owned buildings with racist inscriptions located on Neumarkt 13 and Niederdorfstrasse 29 in Zurich.

2. Speaking Up Against Racism and Colonialism

In Zurich, the first debates in the City Council about the links between the city of Zurich and slavery in the 18th and 19th centuries took place in 2003, when the left-wing political party Alternative Liste handed in a motion. They invited the City Council to have historians investigate this link (Postulat 2003/13). The motion was rejected, and several new motions followed that continued to demand an inquiry into the involvement of private and public actors from Zurich in slavery, and the slave trade. What was new in the action of Kollektiv Vo da., is that the collective demanded the City Council not only to inquire into the colonial past but take action in the present city environment, by renaming place names with the m-word. These debates started just before the BLM uprising when the City decided to call for a name change for a café in a city-owned building. When the lease for the café was renewed, the public call asked potential tenants to choose a new name for Café M-kopf (café m-head) because the name was considered "outdated" (field diary, 28 March 2023). This call for a new name caused a backlash from both the public and the media. The City's ambiguous and complex engagement with the topic of racism becomes clear through its reluctance to change the name of the building in which the café is based, which is called Zum M-tanz (to m-dance), a term that is equally racist, and a position that Kollektiv Vo da. challenged. The group sent an open letter to Katrin Gügler, the head of the Urban Development Office, requesting that not just the name of the café but also the name of the city-owned building should be changed. Kollektiv Vo da. argued that this racist term is not just "outdated" but also offensive to Black people. Dembah Fofanah, the co-founder of Kollektiv Vo da., explains in an interview that he had to pass by the café and the building as a child and see a negative depiction of a Black man and how this affected him:

> The café has been there since 1980, so the café is eleven years older than I am. It means that it was already here when I was born. I can remember when I was at school, or even later when I was older. I spent time in the centre of Zurich, and I passed the café from time to time. I never went inside the café because I refused to support a café with a racist name as a silent protest, so to speak, but it had an extremely powerful effect even before I was born. I asked myself how it could be that such a café was accepted, which was always very well attended. (interview, Dembah Fofanah, 8 December 2020)

The everyday experiences of racism of Black people through the display of racial images and names can be described as visible racism that is often not seen and not spoken about by white-dominated institutions. Trepagnier (2011) emphasises how white people's passivity feeds into "silent racism" and the production of institutional racism. The Kollektiv Vo da. stresses exactly that. The City's answer fails to recognise Black people and people of colour as equal subjects and denies them the right to dignity in public spaces.

In its response to Kollektiv Vo da.'s open letter, the Head of the Department of Urban Planning, Katrin Gügler, acknowledged the problem of racism in the paintings and inscriptions on the houses. This acknowledgement is followed by the explanation that not every past use of the m-term points to a "crime" against Black people (Gügler, 2020). After reasoning why the history of the names should be seen as important to the City, the letter concludes that the house names are an important reminder of past attitudes:

> We are aware of the racism of the past and recognise that it cannot serve as a basis for how we live together. Today, the name of the building serves as a reference, a reminder of a previously unquestioned

> attitude from which we have since distanced ourselves. If we make this disappear, this discourse will no longer be possible, and contemporary racism will not disappear.

Gügler deems the house names as a reminder of the problematic history and makes a comparison with the importance of the preservation of former concentration camps. This response highlights how racism and colonialism are still perceived as historical phenomena that society has moved beyond in Switzerland (Boulila, 2019; dos Santos Pinto, 2022; Michel, 2016). Referring to racism as a "previously unquestioned attitude" downplays the seriousness of racism and sends a message that such depictions are acceptable or that they are merely part of history when racism remains a serious issue today. This is a tactic that is common to not only shut down conversations on race and racism, but also neglects the voices of people who are affected by racism, and perpetuates racial discrimination through inaction.

The response also maintains that to create awareness of racism, one must maintain a constant reference to it as a reminder of its historical presence. This attitude puts whiteness and protection of white, colonial heritage in the foreground. Gügler's comment shows that the institution's priority is to preserve a colonial history for educational purposes, with a presumed emphasis on the white community's learning benefit, rather than taking seriously and addressing the concerns and experiences of individuals who are affected by publicly displayed racism on city-owned buildings. Thus, it is difficult within predominately white institutions to approach colonial history and connect it to contemporary criticism of racism. Marginalised voices, realities, and feelings are thereby not heard.

3. The Importance of Social Movements

By claiming forms of written resistance, media presence, and demanding the undoing of colonial practices that produce asymmetrical power relations, while simultaneously connecting to the broader global Black community demanding to be heard, seen, and included in political processes, Kollektiv Vo da. made its voice heard. Their capacity to make racism in Switzerland visible relates to Rancière's differentiation between "police" and "politics," where the first defines the normative ordering of what is visible, audible, and sayable, and the second "makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was once only heard as noise" (Rancière, 1999, p. 30). The fact that they have been able to do so has a lot to do with the context in which they made their claims. In Switzerland, the BLM demonstrations created the discursive space to make this critique heard and put pressure on public institutions to address Switzerland's history of colonialism and structural racism. After writing an open letter to the Social Democratic City President Corine Mauch, Kollektiv Vo da. called on other antiracist groups to contact the City and put pressure on different departments, including the City Council. The topic of racist depictions and language would not have received the same attention without Kollektiv Vo da.'s public call on their website and social media platforms to send a so-called "official public concerns request" (German: *Bevölkerungsanliegen*) straight to the president of the City Council. This prompted several dozen requests from the public demanding the removal of the racist inscriptions containing the m-word in the city of Zurich. As a result, the City Council commissioned an internal group titled RÖR (German abbreviation for "racism in public space") to develop an inventory regarding the handling of contentious historical markers in public spaces.

The project group consisted of internal administrative staff from various municipal departments including the city archives and monument preservation, art, equality, archiving, property management, and the "interdepartmental working group on racism" (German: AG Rassismus), which was set up when the city of Zurich joined the European Coalition of Cities Against Racism (ECCAR) in 2007 and is led by the integration office (City of Zurich, 2023). In addition, the Kollektiv Vo da. and other antiracist groups, activists, civil society, and antiracist organisations were invited for an advisory exchange. The purpose of the meeting was to gather ideas, address challenges, and propose solutions for dealing with these depictions of the m-word as racist images in public spaces. Thus, city employees, led by the integration office, set up a meeting to hear the ideas of various groups and then wrote a report for the City Council to make suggestions for possible solutions (RÖR, 2021). The fact that the integration office oversaw organising this consultation shows that Swiss Black people and people of colour are automatically seen as what El-Tayeb (2011, 2016) called "eternal strangers." This is exactly what Kollektiv Vo da. contests, insisting through its name ("from here") that they are not "from there," but that racialised people in Switzerland are part and parcel of society, and should be listened to as such. We can link this to Rancière's (1999, p. 38) observation of confusing equality as a principle with "the empty quality of equality between anyone and everyone." Being invited to volunteer their ideas to the city is not the same as being part of the group that writes the report and makes the decision on finding a solution to address racist terminology in public space. The latter group consisted primarily of white individuals and individuals not affected by racism, who are employed by the city of Zurich. Different activists also criticised the group for their lack of expertise in addressing anti-Black racism and for expecting free advice from antiracist groups without compensating these groups and individuals (Yuvviki Dioh, activist and diversity agent, interview 28 October 2023). All activists and social groups at the meeting called for a prompt removal of the racist words. Based on their results the City Council decided to take action on two inscriptions on city-owned buildings, agreeing to put up information panels and QR-codes to inform on-site about the motivations to cover the word and the mural, explaining why this can have "a racist effect" and stating how organisations of Black people have "repeatedly emphasised that they reject terms containing the m-word as racist and demeaning" (City of Zurich, 2023). Eventually, the City Council decided to take the necessary legal steps to cover the racist words. Kollektiv Vo da.'s demand, however, is that the City fully removes the images. Additionally, other activists demanded more radical change, such as for the City to actively listen and understand their criticism about racism that is rooted and linked to structural inequality that disproportionately affects more marginalised and precarious people than the members of Kollektiv Vo da. (Yuvviki Dioh, interview 28 October 2023; see also dos Santos Pinto, 2022).

Michel speaks about the "politics of postcoloniality" that Black people and people of colour engage in to expose and hold society accountable, by asking which past we want to be visible (dos Santos Pinto, 2022). In the case of the racist terminology in the city of Zurich, the expertise and the work of civil society Black activists and individuals of colour were needed to put pressure on the City to respond to the antiracist public's demands and criticisms. They not only had to expose and speak up against racism and its effects, highlighting the crucial role of public and social movements, but also disrupt the white and "raceless" narrative of Switzerland (Boulila, 2019; dos Santos Pinto & Boulila, 2020; Michel, 2015). Through the global BLM movement, two things happened that are important for giving voice to the demands and criticism of the initiatives of Kollektiv Vo da. in Switzerland. First, it showed how important global social movements are in making racism broachable. Second, it shows how pressure from the streets is vital in revealing, creating awareness, and pushing for institutional change. The BLM movement gave local groups the possibility to link Switzerland to colonialism and racism and with the need to decolonise.

4. Whose Voices Are Heard?

Once the BLM protest reached Zurich the city government made room for marginalised voices to challenge the established order and exposed their lack of awareness, initial errors, and ignorance, while amplifying the voices they sought to silence before. While the criticism from Kollektiv Vo da. was initially not heard and listened to, their demands and knowledge were increasingly acknowledged and sought out. Kollektiv Vo da. suddenly received requests to speak about the situation of BLM in Switzerland, and even in Minnesota, where George Floyd was killed (field diary, 28 March 2023). The collective was suddenly considered to be expert on all topics that had some relation to racism and many Black people and people of colour were asked to inform both the press and institutions about race and racism. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1952/2008) described how people of colour in the white dominant society are forced to wear a "white mask" to navigate through a predominantly white media and institutional landscape. This situation unveils intricate challenges, juggling having their own voices recognised as legitimate within prevailing power structures while struggling to articulate criticisms of these very same structures. This struggle was apparent at one of the many public talks about the m-word and racism in Zurich. The white former law professor, member of the Social Democratic Party, and Head of the National Heritage Protection Society (Heimatschutz), Killias, introduced himself as "a slave" who works for free in the Heritage Protection Association. He confidently used the m-word indicating that he dismisses the criticisms of racism connected to this term which, according to him, is a "historical material witness" (field diary, 3 May 2023). He can make his claims heard. The Zurich branch of the Heritage Society filed a successful appeal to the City's decision to cover the racist name and mural, which had already been approved by the Building Appeals Court. The City Council filed an objection, which is still in process, about the decision to the Administrative Court. This example shows that the white former law professor can freely employ racist language, seemingly without hesitation, while it requires much greater effort and resources from Black individuals and people of colour to be heard and taken seriously and to openly address racism. This highlights an unequal societal power dynamic in which certain voices not only are given more prominence but also face more backlash when expressing their opinions in public.

The City is now forced to legally engage with racism and openly speak about the impact of racist language and colonialism. Thus, the initiative of the Kollektiv Vo da. also forced the self-proclaimed cosmopolitan city of Zurich to take an active and open antiracist stand. Black people and people of colour raised their voices against racism, enabling the Kollektiv Vo da. and their network to be part of the City's advisory group that pressured the City to prompt change. Rancière (1999) would call this a process of "disidentification," through which a marginalised group denies the position it is given in an established order, and disrupts the latter by claiming their equality against all odds. The fact that the City initiated steps to cover the racist names emphasises the potential for people who are affected to challenge the traditional divisions between those who speak and those who are spoken for, and between those who are considered capable of political action and those who are not. The antiracist initiatives to remove the m-word showed the transformative influence of marginalised and racialised groups who establish themselves as political subjects being "from here" and challenge their experiences of racism in public space.

Local antiracist groups, especially those involving illegalised non-citizens, struggle to claim belonging due to their legal status (Schilliger, 2020). Illegalised non-citizen activists highlight the link between racism, citizenship, and economic inequality, which is a more marginal and radical position than the one of Kollektiv Vo da. This dynamic is exemplified by groups consisting of illegalised non-citizens such as the Autonome

Schule Zurich whose illegalised voices and criticism, for example about the lack of adequate housing, right to work, or police violence (Autonome Schule Zürich, 2019; Wa Baile et al., 2019) are sidelined in discussions on racism in Zurich. While solidarity exists among different activist groups in Zurich, being heard by state institutions necessitates using and voicing one's privileges, and speaking as members of society, with equal formal rights is what enabled Kollektiv Vo da. to advocate for issues that directly affect them. Despite the official acknowledgement of the impact of racist depictions, broader structural criticism, such as of the European border regime or the everyday exclusion of illegalised noncitizens, faces much greater challenges to being heard.

5. Conclusion: Inequalities and Complexities of Unsilencing

Institutions often pay lip service to critical approaches, as antiracist and decolonisation discourses and practices are encouraged in liberal environments. Kollektiv Vo da. successfully made the city government speak about their claims. Their name and efforts are stated in the City's annual reports. However, Spivak understands speaking as dialogue and points out the difficulty around hearing, listening, and understanding. Based on the empirical case study it is evident that voicing critique about racism from a decolonial perspective is challenging. The removal of the racist m-word on city-owned buildings in Zurich was neither swift nor straightforward. For institutions to start questioning racism and colonial remnants individuals must draft open letters, liaise with city officials, and mobilise a substantial network to pressure institutions. This effort is predominantly led by those directly impacted by racism, who invest emotional resources in this antiracist engagement. Engaging in institutionalised processes can harm those initiating change, perpetuating their experiences of marginalisation through being ignored, criticised, and ridiculed in public.

The involvement of antiracist groups involved city officials listening to, engaging with, and inviting people affected by racism. This challenges the traditional divisions between both those who speak and those who are spoken for and, in Rancière's terms, the division between those who are considered capable of political action and those who are not. Black people and people of colour's involvement is still limited, their labour unpaid and their voices considered as "eternal strangers" within the political system. Although the Black people and people of colour who spoke up have also planted seeds in the discourse about racism, and have experienced a collective power to name and place structural racism rooted in colonialism, decolonial and criticisms beyond removing the racist names were not heard. Removing racist and colonial words is only a small step towards the decolonisation of the urban landscape and means little without tackling the structural and material struggles around inequality, poverty, and the oppression of marginalised and racialised groups in the city. Even in a progressive, liberal, and cosmopolitan city like Zurich, there is still a difference between the willingness to speak about challenges and openly criticising and acting against racism. Institutions are not necessarily silent about race, but there is partial silencing around recognising various acts of everyday racism and colonial remnants, and connecting these with the history of colonialism that still impacts people today.

We demonstrated how Floyd's killing and the political mobilisation of the BLM movement that followed created a window of opportunity, in which the voices of racialised persons were invited into mainstream media and institutions. They seemed to find an echo, albeit limited, as the window of opportunity closed at the end of 2023 when mainstream media offered platforms for reactionary statements delegitimising postcolonial theory, calling for a strict distinction between political and academic activity.

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