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Struggling for open awareness – Trajectories of violence against children from a sociological perspective

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ABSTRACT

We focus the concept of "awareness context" to capture trajectories of violence against children. This sociological concept of knowledge goes beyond the concept of "disclosure". It does not focus on the child's mere communication and thus the individuals' being informed about a fact, but aims at the shared knowledge based on which the interaction takes place. The (asymmetrical) relationships between children and adults can prevent children from influencing such shared and action-oriented knowledge, even if they provide information that they suffer violence. The empirical basis of this article is the reconstruction of 154 events of communication, extracted from 15 extensive case files and categorized in a longitudinal research design. These events comprise messages of victims and the reactions of family members, child protection professionals and other interaction partners to them; 64 events can be considered active disclosing already during childhood. For these histories of long and multiple violence where at least one perpetrator was part of the family household, the following insights can be gained: (a) repeated and various attempts by those affected are undertaken to communicate that violence is happening to them, (b) these attempts are countered by a bundle of different strategies to make those affected inaudible, and (c) this happens throughout the lives of these persons.

1. Introduction: Invisible and inaudible children

Child protection literature has commented on *invisible children* several times, already. What is meant by this is that little attention is paid to the child when there is a suspicion that the child's welfare is at risk, that there are cases where the child is not even spoken to or looked at. Such a lack of focus on children has been noted in the everyday practices of child protection workers (Tausendfreund et al., 2015; Alberth & Bühler-Niederberger, 2015; Ferguson, 2017; Chapeau, 2021) and especially where cases have had a fatal outcome (Fegert et al., 2010; Lundberg, 2013; Bastian, 2019). So, while the phenomenon of the invisible child is well known, there is no consensus in the literature about how often this inattention to children occurs. While some studies conclude this happens often and is even a characteristic of professional child protection programs (Alberth & Bühler-Niederberger, 2015), others conclude that it happens rarely and only in very specific circumstances (Ferguson, 2017; Chapeau, 2021).

In the case of invisible children, we are dealing with a lack of attention to the children; the child's condition is not attributed enough relevance to be actively looked into, e.g., because a lot of attention is paid to the parents and especially the mothers (Alberth & Bühler-Niederberger, 2016; Chapeau, 2021). However, when we coin the term *inaudible children*, we mean yet another quality that ignoring children can take on. It is then not simply omitted to consider children's situation, but rather, information about this situation as it is provided by the children is actively blanked out. This then also applies to what the research defines as "disclosure", so if the child explicitly entrusts the experiences of violence to other people. The research findings on such disclosure are unclear. Many researchers say that disclosure is rare as it is complicated by many obstacles children face. This is precisely where they identify the problem and they want to find out how children's disclosing might be supported as a way out of trajectories of violence (Finkelhor, 2008; Kindler & Schmidt-Ndasi, 2011; Morrison et al., 2018; Lemaigre et al., 2017; McElvaney, 2013). But, if such information offered by the child is now blanked out, the child's disclosure becomes at best a marginal event, and in the worst case it becomes an additional negative experience for the child (Sweeney et al., 2019). Indeed, some other researchers show that children provide information surprisingly often, but also that their messages may go unheard (Allnock & Miller, 2013; Andresen, 2018) and this is as well what our results support.

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What is still missing, though, are studies that systematically analyze these interactions of providing information and overhearing: how do children express themselves and to whom, when and how are they rendered inaudible? This is where this study sets in. We want to show that, and how, children's information about the violence they have experienced may well be known to one or more of their interaction partners, and yet remains disregarded. Such information then represents an isolated part of knowledge, excluded from the shared and action-relevant stock of knowledge. *Theoretically*, we refer to this latter knowledge as the "awareness context" – with reference to Glaser and Strauss (1964, 1965) – and distinguish it from merely available information. *Empirically,* we identify and categorize children's attempts to provide information that they experience violence, on the one side, and the strategies of the addressed persons, on the other side, through which the awareness context is (predominantly) closed to children's messages or even to direct observation of violence. We will also categorize these interactions as far as they still take place in adulthood and compare them with what happened in childhood. Taken together, these are 154 identifiable interactions.

The material we have analyzed are 15 extensive case files of individuals who experienced multiple forms of violence in their childhood and who applied for victim compensation in adulthood, according to a law existing in Germany. The files of the authority which decides on victim compensation document in as much detail as possible the events and circumstances of the lives of those affected, before, during and after the episodes of violence. To this end, manifold material is gathered. The responsible authority uses these documents to make its decision on victim compensation appropriately, i.e., to determine the extent of the impairment by the violent acts. As a side effect, a rich pool of data is thus compiled for research, although its use is only possible after extensive data protection processing, in accordance with strict regulations.[1]

The choice of this data material – case files of individuals applying for victim compensation in adulthood – implies that these are histories of violence in which disregarding children's voices was likely pronounced. Thus, the study cannot answer the question of how often children are heard or not heard, nor the question of the conditions under which hearing or disregarding their messages generally occurs. However, it is suitable for tracing children's attempts to make themselves heard and the strategies of disregarding their voices in cases in which the violence suffered was considerable.

2. Theoretical elements: Awareness contexts and generational order

The research on violence against children makes disclosure a central concept (Kindler & Schmidt-Ndasi, 2011; Morrison et al., 2018; McGuire & London, 2020; Gewehr et al., 2021). It recognizes in such "search for help" (Finkelhor, 2008, pp. 102-121) a turning point in the individual trajectories of maltreatment and abuse. But this concept is unsatisfactory, it is a notion of knowledge that does not take into account the interactive and negotiated nature of what counts as the factual basis of action in social worlds. It is merely information about facts, but whether one believes it, and whether one will make it the basis of further interaction – even if its truth seems probable or even given – is far from decided. From a sociological point of view, the knowledge that *guides* interactions also *emerges* in interactions. Hence, the decision – what is to be considered the basis of action – can rather be seen as a negotiation process and the social status of the negotiators play a decisive role. This does not solely apply to knowledge of child abuse or maltreatment but to any knowledge on which we base our actions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The following study aims to show the relevance of such a perspective.

We draw on the concept of the awareness context developed by Glaser and Strauss (1964) and applied in their classic work on dying in hospitals (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). The concept addresses the knowledge configuration on which the interaction is based, even if individual or all participants know or at least suspect that the facts are different – in their case, this is the knowledge of the patient's state of health and imminent death. We adopt the following elements a) that "an awareness context *surrounds and affects the interaction*" (Glaser & Strauss, 1964, p. 670) and is thus something other than just an informational basis; b) that "(t)he successive interactions occurring within each type of context tend to *transform the context*" (p.671), i.e. an awareness is not simply secured once and for all, it remains contested and participants try to enforce or maintain their definitions; and c) that an "awareness context exists and is transformed under *certain structural conditions*" (p. 671) (emphases by authors).

Glaser and Strauss distinguish four types of awareness contexts, depending on how much the knowledge of imminent death determines the interaction (1964, p. 670). From their definition of four variants, we extract two: (1) the idea of an "open awareness context", in which all participants, and admittedly so, assume the same information on the seriousness of the situation and (2) as a contrast, a "closed context". As to the latter we see – unlike in the original version – the distortion (in relation to the information that is available in principle) not in the fact that one side (for Glaser and Strauss, this is the patient) has not been informed, but rather in the fact that one side (i.e. the addressees of the information) fades out the information they received. In contrast to Glaser and Strauss, in our case the conflict around the awareness context is not about receiving and disposing of information (what marks the power imbalance between doctor and patient), but in the attempt to pass on information to a recipient and in the refusal to accept this information (what marks the power imbalance between the children as victims and their caregivers). Hence, it is in these conflicting interactions that we will interpret the transformations of the awareness contexts, i.e. their opening and (re)closing.

As far as the structural conditions under which awareness contexts are changed or preserved are concerned, they are characterized in the study by Glaser and Strauss (1965) by the abovementioned structural asymmetry between doctor and patients that exists in a hospital. In our study, it is the *generational asymmetry,* the unequal distribution of rights, duties and ascribed valuations between children and adults (Bühler-Niederberger, 2010; Alanen, 2009). This generational asymmetry is reflected in the rights and rules of speech, as societies define them differently for certain categories of society members. Children are a social group whose rights of speech are particularly restricted. Formulations that adult members of society can use to open or end discussions – and even very quickly end them –, such as "listen!", "that's enough!", "did you get it?" are hardly available to children in interactions with adults (Speier, 1976; Kent, 2012). In the World Vision study (World Vision, 2018), a representative sample of 6–11-year-old children in Germany was asked whether their opinion was valued and by whom. Two-thirds of the children felt that it was not valued by the teachers, about half that it was not by father and still just almost a third that it was not by the mother (World Vision, 2018). In the Children's Worlds Report (2020) which gathered material on more than 120 000 children in 35 countries, satisfaction with their families was by far the lowest in regards to statements about whether parents listen to children's opinions and whether joint decisions are made. Thus, the possibilities to influence shared and action-relevant knowledge are limited even in normal everyday life.

One last point must be mentioned: it concerns theory, but here not its content, rather its status in the research process and hence the methodological procedure: The notion of an awareness context with the generational asymmetry as a structural condition under which it is maintained and transformed does not constitute a theoretical model from which – in a deductive way – hypotheses would have been derived and tested for our study. Since this is a qualitative study, it is rather the

[1] We thank the responsible authority, the Landschaftsverband Rheinland and especially Horst Bruns, for the support in making the material accessible.

model that showed the greatest fit in the interplay of work on the material and its tentative theoretical interpretation, hence in a mainly inductive approach. Within the framework of this concept, the numerous attempts by victims to make their suffering known and the strategies of blanking out this information that were opposed to these attempts can be interpreted. Or more succinctly: It is this concept answering the question "What does all the action/interaction seem to be about?" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 424).

3. Study design and empirical material

3.1. Qualitative study design: Initial question and steps of research

Initial question: For this study we got access to records of persons who file an application for compensation according to the Victim Compensation Act (OEG §1). There are many grounds on which eligibility for a victim's compensation pension or other victim compensation benefits can be derived; for our study, we selected individuals who based their eligibility on violence they suffered in childhood. Those affected by violence made their request in adulthood, meaning that (a) no other person had done this for them before (which would have been the case, if the application had been made in childhood), and (b) that they still felt massively impacted in adulthood. Taken together, this suggests that the experience of violence probably was in many cases long-lasting and not interrupted in a timely manner. We therefore approached the record material with the still very open question of what such case histories look like, and in particular, why no or at least no sustained help whatsoever was provided.

First step: We started without already formulating a precise question, as this is common for qualitative research practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), and searched the files in an exploratory manner for the information they contained on case histories. Since the extremely extensive and diverse files contain elements of this story at various points in the file and not always in chronological order, in a first step, and preparatory to the actual content analysis, we prepared a systematic short story for each case, which included general data on the persons and institutions involved, as well as a description – divided into distinguishable episodes – of the acts of violence and the child's behavior in seeking help.

Second step: From this initially primarily organizing examination of the case histories, we moved on to a "thematic analysis" (Brown & Clarke, 2006) to further scrutinize the content. The children's *numerous attempts to draw attention to their situation* and to get help stood out as a first theme, as well because those affected reported about it in detail and again and again, e.g., when filing charges or in recorded conversations with professionals. Equally striking, however, were the *reactions of the people approached*, whether they were family members, acquaintances or professionals and we identified them as our second theme. We systematized this thematic analysis by working out an inventory for each case of all the actions of seeking help or keeping quiet and all the reactions that followed, again in the chronological order of the actions.

Third step: In the final step of the theoretical and empirical examination of the material, we searched for a categorical matrix to which the children's actions and the reactions of the interaction partners – which we had now listed completely and as ever belonging together for each case – could be assigned.). The categories are presented in section 3.3. and given evidence items based on a case history in section 4.1. The categorization allowed for a quantification of the interactions systematized in this way. We also looked for a theoretical concept that could capture the character of the analyzed events and found it in the notion of "awareness context" (Glaser & Strauss, 1964, 1965), which we adapted for our purposes and used it in the two variations of the *open* and *closed* awareness context (cf. 2; theoretical elements).

3.2. File material and selected cases

The files which we analyzed were compiled by the "Landschaftsverband Rheinland", this is the authority deciding on victim compensation in North Rhine Westphalia, Germany. This authority tries to get as comprehensive a picture as possible of the violent events and the life circumstances of the person concerned. For this purpose, it collects a wide variety of documents: medical, psychiatric, police and court files, interview protocols within the framework of the victim compensation procedure and witness statements within the framework of investigations of various kinds, school reports, ego-documents (such as e-mails or letters), documents from health insurance companies about previous illnesses, etc. It also collects such documents, as far as possible, over the entire course of the person's life, before, during and after the violent events. In this respect, the material is longitudinal and multiperspectival, containing private documents and documents produced by institutions/professionals. A file comprises 300 to 700 pages. The applications are a checked for credibility by experts and contain their respective reports. Thus, for the interactions that were the focus of interest – the children's help-seeking actions and the responses of those approached – our analysis found, in most cases, statements made repeatedly and in different circumstances, as well as statements by different participants describing the same facts from their distinct perspectives. Unlike previous file analyses (e.g., Kindler & Schrapper, 2017), our material bears the advantage of not following the cognitive and factual selection of an institution within child protection, rather there is thus material produced by various sources.

For reasons of data protection, the files were fully anonymized at the "Landschaftsverband Rheinland". All time, place and name information that could lead to any conclusion about the persons involved were eliminated and, if necessary, replaced by a substitute for reasons of comprehensibility. The anonymization was cross-checked by a second reader. It was only then that the files left the authority and were handed over to and its researchers.

The 15 cases we analyzed were selected from the 101 cases in a given region with urban and rural communities. These were applications which were made after the year 2000 and by the victims themselves, hence, in adulthood. In the introductory section of this paper, we discussed the limitations and possibilities that this sample thus entails for the relevant question of children's inaudibility. Further selection criteria were the following: (1) The perpetrator should be part of the family household and this meant that 75 % of the cases were remaining. (2) From this sample we selected all applications made by men (=4 cases, 5 % of the remaining cases). (3) For the women, we primarily included cases in which the application was already based on various forms of violence. Access to more cases (after three files originally granted by the data protection commissioner) was only gradually given to us. Thus, in the further selection process, we also (4) concentrated on younger women whose experiences were less distant. These decisions are based on the following considerations: (1) According to what we know from reviews of studies (Devries et al., 2018) and from child protection statistics (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2022), the family is most often the scene of violence against children; this applies as well to the data pool to which we had access. (2) We wanted to include as high a number of interactions as possible also for trajectories with male victims, in order not to arrive at statements that apply only to female cases. (3) The third criterion proved to be only ostensibly a distinguishing factor as multiple forms of violence were present in all cases, as the more detailed analysis of the files then revealed, even if these were not used in the official justification of the request. (4) We included younger applicants for victim compensation in order not to be able to make statements only about childhoods of long ago. Applying these criteria, a convenience sample was compiled. A description of the 15 cases with some basic information is given in the appendix (Table A1).

3.3. Categorical matrix

The categorical matrix which we developed to grasp the children's actions and the reactions of the interaction partners remains on a descriptive level. We will subsequently list the categories and give explanations and example items to clarify the assignment – thus also giving a first insight into the courses of events in the analyzed files.

3.3.1. Categories of the child's information providing

(1) *No disclosure:* Victim explicitly mentioned "I did not tell anything", "I hushed up" etc.
(2) *Signs*: Child showed massive and several signs that something is wrong, such as frequent running away, frequent school truancy already in primary school, self-harm, suicide attempt.
(3) *Informing mother*: Victim talks to mother about violent events. Children were 7-, 9-, 12-, 13-, 14-, 15- and two children 10-years-old when they first informed their mothers, mainly about sexual abuse.
(4) *Informing other family members*: Victim talks to relatives especially to grandparents, e.g. two girls wrote letters to grandparents. No informing of fathers or siblings happened.
(5) *Informing a friend:* Victim talks to peers from school or neighborhood about violent events (cousins were included here, to underline the peer level of interaction).
(6) *Informing teacher*: Child talks to teacher.
(7) *Informing social worker/psychologist*: The social workers and psychologists the children spoke to worked for child protection institutions. Nevertheless, the children also took a certain initiative in such interactions. One boy, at the age of 11, went on his own initiative to a children's home in his neighborhood; a girl of 13 years called the youth welfare office. In the other cases, the authorities had been involved in a different way.
(8) *Informing police/lawyer/charge*: In two of the cases, police has been involved by children themselves. One girl called the police at the age of 7, another at the age of 12. In the remaining cases, the contact with police happened when the victim was already of juvenile age or the police was called in by other people. Getting a lawyer was a privilege for victims when they had grown up only.
(9) *Direct observation of violence by third persons:* This category deviates from the logic of this list in that it does not involve any action on the part of the child, but the becoming aware of the violence towards the child through observations by third parties. In some cases, these are relatives, in others acquaintances or neighbors. In 6 cases, mothers eye-witnessed either sexual abuse (3 cases) or massive beating by the partner/husband (3 cases).
(10) *Informing priest:* This was found in two cases and was initiated by the children.

The mere definition of what is meant by the categories of "child's information providing" listed here and what material has been included under these categories already gives an impression of how active the children were in talking about violence. In all our cases the victims characterized the quality of providing information as telling explicitly about the violence, they said e.g. "I told her about it" or "…then I went to the social worker about it".

3.3.2. Categories of reacting to child's information or to observation of violence

(1) *Normalizing:* The person approached explains to the child that the violence experienced was not serious. To give examples: one child was told by her mother that the rape by her 13-year-old brother was "doctor's play and quite normal", in another case the mother said after an abuse "my brother also looked up my skirt", a third mother replied to her daughter "you didn't die of it". Normalizing may be done by other people, too: an aunt says after becoming witness of sexual abuse that the girls would have to do this anyway for their future spouses. Social workers were downplaying the importance of disclosed violence as well: The youth welfare officer said to a 15-year-old girl (after several years of abuse and attempted rape), "she *could* press charges, that *was up to her*", without providing any further support. Normalization can also occur when the child does not disclose and this is seen as an obstacle to reporting then, e.g., when the perpetrator says "all fathers do that to their girls".
(2) *Positioning:* This reaction declares the information false or rejects support as the child is bad, a liar or a trouble-maker. Such reactions came mainly from the mothers who said that the child was only telling this story to break up the parents, that he or she was always lying or had made up this story to get revenge. Like "normalizing" such "positioning" can also occur when the child does not disclose and may have been a barrier for the child; examples are e.g. perpetrators telling to the children that nobody would believe them anyways, e.g. simply because they are children.
(3) *Balancing:* The child's complaint is juxtaposed with something else that is given greater importance. To give examples: Mothers say that the brother should not be deprived of his father; a grandfather points out to the complaining child that the mother might lose her partner's income; in two of the cases social workers advise the child not to press charges or do not support the child as such charges might destroy the family.
(4) *Ignoring:* We categorize "ignoring" when simply nothing happens after the child has told. Ignoring is even more common when acts of violence have been observed or when the child shows massive behavioral problems.
(5) *Threatening:* This mostly happens in combination with "no disclosure" and can arguably be a barrier for the child. An example of this could be the threat by an offender to do something bad to the mother or by another offender to "stab and slash the pets" of the girl. However, in another case, the prospect of being sent to a residential home, in which the youth welfare office was involved, can also be seen as a threat.
(6) *Active support:* In this category we include all efforts of the addressed persons to understand or help the victim, or to influence the offender in any way. This can range from quite helpless and half-hearted efforts to really great efforts.
(7) *Convicting perpetrator:* This category includes all final sentences imposed on the offender in question for an offence against the child.

The list of "reactions to child's information" – as we had to define it in order to capture the empirical material – points to a whole bundle of strategies rendering children inaudible. The next chapter will provide a more detailed insight into this.

4. Results: Lifelong struggling for open awareness contexts

None of the affected persons succeeds before adulthood in transforming the awareness context of the relevant reference persons – i.e., the household in which they live – in such a way that the knowledge of the violence experienced by the child becomes a shared and accepted knowledge. In all cases, there is a struggle for the awareness context and this even continues into adulthood. This struggle for the awareness context will first be shown in the course of a case history (4.1). Subsequently, a systematic overview of the type and frequency of all categorized interactions between victims informing about experiencing violence and reactions of addressed persons will be given (4.2.).

Table 1
Interactions of providing information and reactions during childhood (N = 113 interactions, 15 cases).

Categories of informing	*Reactions*						
	Normalizing	Positioning	Balancing	Ignoring	Threatening	Active support	Convicting perpetrator
No disclosure; n = 11	2	3			6		
Signs; n = 15		1		12	1	1	
Informing mother; n = 18	4	3	4	3	1	3	
Informing other family members; n = 7		1	2	2		2	
Informing friends; n = 9	1	1				7	
Informing teacher; n = 6				1		5	
Informing social worker, psychologist; n = 17	2	2	2	8	1	2	
Informing police; 5				1	1	1	2
Observation of violence by third persons; n = 23	3			11		8	1
Informing priest; n = 2		1		1			
Total	12	12	8	39	10	29	3

4.1. Interactions of providing information and reaction: A case history

Case #2 is a woman born in 1980. At the age of 22, she files a complaint against her father for sexual abuse when she was a child. Subsequently, she applies for victim compensation. Most information on which the case history is based is gathered in these two proceedings. Her mother and siblings testified as witnesses, as did an aunt, a former friend and a social worker from the youth welfare office. The latter was involved with this family and the girl for years and at the time when the sexual abuse by the father and the physical brutality by the mother occurred. Statements also come from the interrogation of the father. From the totality of the statements, the following interactions of disclosing and reaction of addressed persons can be reconstructed:

The girl and her three younger siblings are frequently beaten up with shoes and brooms, especially by the mother who also severely neglects them; care is more or less left up to the father. The girl shows massive problems – school truancy, run away, self-harm – already during primary school. Mother says she is „cheeky and giving bad words" and repeatedly calls her a liar. – We categorize this as "signs" from the child and as "positioning" from the mother, not reacting to the girl's problems as she takes her to be a bad child.

An „educational support" is established by the youth welfare office on mother's request and preparing a home placement of the girl. The mother tells about this: "she realized that I really wanted to place her in a children's home and became somewhat better". Such a home placement represents a constant threat for the daughter, as the daughter will tell later. – We categorize, hence, "signs" from the child and "threatening" from the addressed persons.

When the girl is twelve the father starts to sexually abuse her, regularly, during at least one year. The daughter tells the mother about the abuse by the father. The threatening with the home placement is renewed by the mother. – We categorize "informing mother" and "threatening" as mother's reaction.

The mother again calls the daughter a liar in reaction to continued complaints about father's abuse. The girl – this is the mother's version – tells this story because the parents took her "Game Boy" away to punish her for bad school marks. The mother sticks to this version, even when the father is sentenced to one year in prison (suspended) – shortly after the daughter's informing the mother – for sexually assaulting a mentally disabled neighbor. – We categorize "informing mother" for the child and "positioning" as a reaction.

The girl talks to a school friend about the abuse. This one doesn't believe, and calls the girl a "liar". – We categorize this as "informing friend" and "positioning" as reaction.

The girl talks to a teacher, he doesn't react. – We categorize this as "informing teacher" and "ignoring" as reaction.

The girl addresses the social worker of the youth office, but from the girl's perspective this one believes in the story the mother told about the "Game Boy". – We categorize this as "informing social worker" and "positioning" as a reaction.

Soon after the social worker finds a place in a foster home and the girl is brought to the place, but, the girl escapes and lives with grandparents for the next year. – We categorize "informing social worker" and "threatening" as a reaction. Such a threat may not have been intended, but it was perceived as such.

The girl is in hospital and the psychologist there talks to here as she has unclear abdominal pain. But she doesn't tell him anything as she says „he talked to me as if I were stupid". – We categorize "no disclosure" and "positioning" as a reaction, as it is how she experienced the way he approached her.

The younger sister is now 14 years old and – as a sort of deputy of the children - goes to the youth office and complains about the beatings which both sisters suffer. This time, a different social worker is in charge. This employee now calls the parents, but nothing else happens. The younger sister disappears into the drug milieu shortly afterwards. The mother will later testify that there were never any difficulties with this daughter, except for that one time when she told off the parents. – We categorize "informing social worker" and "ignoring" as a reaction.

The girl has grown up in the meantime. She gets a lawyer to support her in filing a lawsuit. Police takes the report very serious also because the father has a relevant criminal record and the officer found the complainant credible. This can be seen from the note of the police officer who took the complaint, which is in the case file. – We categorize "informing lawyer/police" and "support" as a reaction.

In the court proceedings, the father is sentenced to 2 years in prison on probation, as the victim's statements are considered credible. – We categorize again "informing lawyer/police" and "conviction" as a reaction.

However, the mother still denies that anything had happened, and at the same time accuses the daughter that „she had wanted it" and that she "wanted to break up the family". This is very disappointing for the daughter, who admits during the assessment for victim compensation that she brought the case primarily so that her mother would finally believe her. She says: "All I really want is for my mother to finally believe me, to give me a hug and apologize". – We categorize this as "informing mother" and the reaction is again "positioning".

The victim struggles to open the awareness context, but these efforts show limited success. It is not only the parents who close the awareness context towards clear signs that she is suffering and towards her complaints about violence. Her friend, who was still a child herself, but also the teacher, do not respond to the information, as well. The youth welfare office, which has been active in the family for years – even with two staff members – also does not react to the girl's telling them about sexual violence and the sister's complaints about the beatings. The girl will later express her disappointment by saying that the youth welfare office "was anyway always more interested in a clean refrigerator than in us children". The social worker is questioned during the court proceedings. She confirms having planned a foster home placement and says that "institutionalization would have been a good solution if it had been a case of sexual abuse and there had indeed been such a suspicion".

Table 2
Interactions of providing information and reactions during adulthood (N = 41 interactions, 15 cases).

Categories of informing	*Reactions*					
	Normalizing	Positioning	Balancing	Ignoring	Active support	Convicting perpetrator
Informing mother; n = 12	6	4	1		1	
Informing other family members; n = 7		3		2	2	
Informing friends; n = 3					3	
Informing social worker, psychologist; n = 8					8	
Informing police/ lawyer/charge; n = 11	1				6	4
Total	7	7	1	2	20	4

Evidently, the information as such had been received. However, it was not used as a basis for the work with the girl and there is no apparent effort to clarify the suspicion; instead, the youth welfare office helped to build up the threat of "institutionalization", which the mother used for her own interests. The fact that the father had a relevant conviction at the time was either not known to the social workers or not taken into account.

4.2. Interactions of providing information and reaction: Type and frequency of interactions

The frequency counts show that Case #2 is no exceptional case. Neither in terms of frequency of informing nor its limited success (cf. Table 1). Of the 113 interactions that could be ascertained for childhood (before children were 18 years old), only 11 were "no disclosures" and 15 were merely "signs" on the part of the children (cf. 3. "categorical matrix). The remaining events were either interactions in which information was provided by the child – 64 such interactions – or a third person witnessed the violence, which happened 23 times. If we refer this again to the case level, all 15 children informed at least one person, and 13 of them did so before the age of 14.[2] On top of that, for 11 children a third person witnessed the physical or sexual violence while they were still children.

If we now look at the reactions, "threatening" does occur and, where it is used, seems to favor "no disclosure". Far more frequent, however, are "ignoring" and also the reactions of "normalizing", "positioning", and "balancing". Taken together, these last three strategies are three times more frequent than mere threats and justify speaking of a struggle for the awareness context: persistent attempts to close it off against the efforts of the child and later also the adult victim. In the legitimization of these attempts, even children themselves are included, as this is the character of these strategies, which try to convince children of something: the normality of what happened, its relative irrelevance (in"balancing") or children's inferiority (in "positioning"). But, they are not a hermetic safeguarding of the awareness context that remains contested.

One third of the efforts to provide information are responded to in a supportive way – another clear sign that the awareness context was not fully closed. However, for none of the children does this mean that the situation was effectively changed. From the age of 14 or 15, the acts of violence decreased considerably for all of them, or even came to an end, but only to a very limited extent as a result of the help given. Other events brought relief. Some examples show this: the abuser feared that the girl might become pregnant, the beating parents could be intimidated by the son's growing physical strength, the perpetrator was beaten up by a group of peers. In some cases, the children now also moved out: to friends, grandparents or they lived on the street. Before that, however, in all cases the help given was only temporarily effective. Some examples of help we found can illustrate this: a teacher responds to the child, then hands the case over to child protection, where it comes to nothing; a mother puts the brother and rapist in another room, but only as long as her own boyfriend does not spend the night in the flat; an uncle comforts the beaten boy and speaks to the violent father and a neighbor calls the police, however both efforts do not change the situation in a lasting way. Such efforts of support give the children at least ambivalent information about possible ways out of their situation. And in none of the cases did they lead to further interactions being consistently based on awareness of the child's situation.

If we look at the interactions in adulthood (cf. Table 2), "threatening" no longer occurs, neither does "observing violent acts", since these violent acts by caregivers have now ended. We have also omitted the category "signs". Although stays in psychiatric wards, incapacity etc. are now really common, they can no longer be understood as something to which adult interaction partners would have to react. The struggling for awareness context, however, can still be observed, especially as far as mothers and other family members are concerned. Even towards adult children, they retain the sovereignty of interpretation regarding violence in childhood. Clearly different, however, is the support experienced through institutions. The generational asymmetry is reflected in these institutional contacts: If an adult person turns to social workers, psychologists (including now as well psychiatrists) or the police and justice system for help, the experience can be more positive or more negative, but in principle one now receives support. This did not apply for children.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Inaudible children – like the ones we found in our material – speak about the violence they experience, they usually even speak to several people or let it be known through conspicuous behavior that they are not well. However, the awareness context, the shared knowledge on which interactions take place with caregivers and reference persons, is closed to their information. Nevertheless, it would be far too static to speak of a "curtain of silence" (e.g. Stemple, 2003) or a "wall of silence" (Ingraham & Davies, 2015), as might be the case for violence in institutions. Rather, the awareness context remains constantly contested: the numerous attempts by children to open up and, on top of that, the often highly visible acts of violence are contrasted by the efforts of the addressed persons to close the awareness context to this information again and again. This struggle around the awareness context characterizes the trajectories of male and female victims and it characterizes trajectories that go further or less far back. This may be due to the fact that it is the family that is the scene of the violence, where the interactions between the perpetrator, the victim and the persons addressed for help are intense, hierarchical in principle, and characterized by children's dependence. This could explain the children's intense efforts to improve a situation they cannot avoid, and it undoubtedly explains the extensive strategic repertoire available to adults to counter this rebellion.

This struggle around the awareness context has a very problematic content. Not only does it prevent efficient help, but the victims are very much involved in this process. It is likely that the futile attempts make them feel a lack of self-efficacy. Moreover, the strategies used in order to

[2] From the age of 14, German law speaks of "adolescents" and different provisions apply in some respects. We make this differentiation here for the sake of accuracy, but refer to the Convention on the Rights of the Child for all further statements, according to whose definition a child is anyone under the age of 18.

Table A1
Cases – overview.

Cases, Sex, Year of birth	Providing information to						
	mother	oth. fam. members	friends	teacher	Soc.worker/ psych.	police	Priest
#1, M, 1940	x						
#2, F, 1980	x		x	x	x		
#3, F, 1987		x			x	x	
#4, F, 1979	x	x		x			
#5, F, 1965					x		x
#6, F, 1980*							
#7, M, 1980				x	x	x	
#8, F, 1969	x	x		x			
#9, F, 1967	x					x	
#10, M, 1962	x				x	x	x
#11, F, 1981*			x				
#12, M, 1985		x			x		
#13, F, 1976		x			x		
#14, F, 1993	x						
#15, F, 1993	x		x	x			

* Child provided information only when juvenile, greater than14 years old (cf. footnote 2).

close the awareness context to the information the child wants to bring in imply further emotional abuse: they operate through devaluing the person (*positioning*), devaluing feelings (*normalizing*), juxtaposing supposedly more important family matters (*balancing*), just not reacting to the messages and thus disregarding the person of the victim (*ignoring*) or, finally, through threats, which are rarely carried out but nevertheless have an effect.

Parents retain this closed awareness context also towards their already adult children, even if now threats are no longer observed. In Case #2, described in detail (cf. 4.1), the mother counters the now adult young woman with three arguments: (1) that she is lying, (2) that she "wanted 'it' herself", (3) that she is breaking up the family. The illogical combination of arguments suggests that the mother knows that the daughter is right (the entire course of events suggests this anyway!), but she presumably assumes that one of the accusations will then stick to the victim and that she will thus retain the sovereignty of interpretation. Another mother retains this interpretative sovereignty towards her daughter, who has grown up in the meantime – even though there are witnesses to the sexual and physical violence that emanated from the mother in this case – by writing letters to the "dear daughter" in which she expresses her "deep sympathy" that the daughter is in such a bad way that she is now imagining such things. The now adult victims are at least believed and helped by the responsible institutions – here they are no longer confronted with generational asymmetry – but the inaudible children cannot expect this support either.

Our study is not able to answer the question of how reporting of violence and abuse and the reactions to it take place in general i.e., no conclusions can be drawn on conditions and constellations of failing or successful disclosure processes – and that was not the intention of this study. The 154 interactions that we extracted from the comprehensive file material come from 15 cases that applied for victim compensation in adulthood and thus from persons who still suffer considerably in adulthood. In these histories of violence, the disregarding of children's voices was likely pronounced and little support given. Our results, however, show very clearly that the lack of intervention is not a consequence of the children not disclosing their suffering, but of the rendering inaudible by the adults – and this concerns lay people and also professionals. The lack of help, therefore, is not attributable to the child and his information behavior, but in our cases to the adults and their handling of this information.

Our study also cannot assess how frequent these cases are within all cases of abuse. Its contribution is to draw attention to these patterns of interaction with children, the fundamental asymmetry of the right to speak and to be heard, and to describe this in detail. The fact that children are not listened to and their rights to speak are restricted is – far beyond the issue of violence – also part of the everyday routines of interaction between children and adults, and this is perceived as a problem by the children. This is what studies reported in the theory section of this article (cf. 2.) pointed out and it constitutes a reality of childhood lagging far behind the stipulations of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In contexts of violence, limited access to speaking and being heard is particularly salient, it is an existentially relevant asymmetry between adults and children, and it has so far attracted far too little attention. It deserves more attention in research and practice. In this way, the position of children in society, and especially in the family and vis-à-vis experts, will also come into focus. Without an improvement of this position, no sustainable changes of ingrained interaction routines can be expected.

Ethical approval

The ethical committee of the University of Wuppertal gave its approval for this study on December 1, 2020. A multi-stage anonymization process was devised in consultation with the victim compensation authority and allowed access to the case files.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

Appendix A

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