

ENCOUNTERING SILENCING

Forms of Oppression
in Individuals, Families
and Communities

Edited by

***Michael B. Buchholz
and Aleksandar Dimitrijević***



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Acknowledgements

This book grew up almost naturally from one of our previous joint efforts. Even though we were still intensely focused on our co-edited book on loneliness, it dawned on us that the problem of silencing did not get enough space in our previous book with this word in its very title. We began modestly, but once you start paying attention to silencing, you realise it is everywhere around and inside you.

Being psychoanalysts, we then recognised that something also had to be said about hearing silencing, although (and precisely because) that process is a more mysterious part of therapeutic work. Illustrations were everywhere, from earlier that day or decades ago, from psychoanalytic couches, mental health care institutions, various social groups, literature, the arts ...

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Introduction: silencing the traumatised and hearing silencing

Aleksandar Dimitrijević and Michael B. Buchholz

Silencing is not a frequent, everyday word in English. In many languages, there are no specific words for this phenomenon (for instance, in German, you have to say “zum Schweigen bringen”—literally “to bring to silence”). While both the professionals and the general public are increasingly aware of the importance of trauma, silencing, which follows trauma almost ubiquitously, remains under the radar. PEP-Web contains only a handful of papers with the word silencing in their titles, which are all very recent—one from 2007 and four published during the last five years. Hopefully, we are slowly waking up.

The prospects are even worse with the phrase “hearing silencing” (which is never mentioned on PEP-Web). One may even wonder what it means and how it is supposed to be done. Like hearing the silence in psychoanalytic sessions and everyday conversations was not tricky enough (see Dimitrijević & Buchholz, 2020b)!? Or hearing the persons silenced by some traumatic experience(s) or relationship(s) during their development finally open up and articulate “their voices” is not challenging enough emotionally!? This book goes one step further as it is an invitation to closely observe the very practices and processes of silencing used by perpetrators of abuse and totalitarian institutions alike.

Both our clinical practices and research endeavours have taught us that silencing is everywhere around us all the time, nowadays, as well as throughout historical epochs. It is essential to remember that trauma gets followed by silence and silencing so often that they can both seem as its integral parts. Also, we could say that it is not possible to overcome trauma because silencing and silence that surround it leave more profound consequences. We must try to understand those processes the best we can to become capable to recognise and prevent their effects.

Moreover, we have embarked on this project of exploring some of the darkest aspects of human communication because we believe that it is actually silencing more than trauma per se that leads to mental pain and disorders. And we want to proclaim that only the acceptance of this and a focus on hearing silencing can finally fulfil psychoanalysis's intersubjective capacity and promise.

In this introduction, we will review, first, conceptual considerations related to silencing and hearing silencing, and then, second, the chapters that build this book.

Silencing and hearing silencing: conceptual considerations

How to recognise silencing?

We need to begin with the question of why silence, sometimes for many years or even a whole lifetime, accompanies trauma. There are different ethical and legal implications to this question, but, viewed from a psychological perspective, the answers are, although complex, in most cases unambiguous. We will here review some of its most significant aspects.

Many traumatised persons go through the process that we call self-silencing. They do not know how to present and explain their experiences and feelings to others and/or themselves. Thus, they carry them in silence, unable to articulate them. Many of them, however, may behave like this for a variety of different reasons:

- The definition of trauma indicates that it is an experience that cannot be integrated with the rest of the personality and is expected to occur in dreams or flashbacks rather than in dialogues;
- Our attention as victims or witnesses is focused on the horrors of suffering and not on the silence and silencing that surround it, and

- they do not have to seem as integral parts of what is happening, which leads to their exclusion from sharing with others;
- Children very often grow up accustomed to certain forms of abuse, so they do not think that there is anything to say about it or have not adopted/developed the words through which these painful experiences can be named and expressed;
 - Members of groups who have survived social trauma avoid talking about their experiences, hoping that this self-silencing will protect others, especially their children and grandchildren, from the presumed overload.

Silence, of course, can also result from an active effort, conscious or unconscious, to prevent the victim, and sometimes the perpetrator and the witness, from revealing the facts surrounding their trauma(s). In all these situations, we are talking about silencing.

Every group—family, class, company, and state, not to mention “totalitarian institutions” such as churches, prisons, military barracks, monasteries, and psychiatric hospitals—has developed mechanisms for silencing victims. Interestingly, these practices were described first in social science literature under the heading “asylums” (e.g. Foucault, 1975; Goffman, 1961). The perpetrators do not want other people to know, the victims do not want to be perceived as different and labelled, and witnesses do not have the strength to face the pain and fear of punishment. To achieve this, each one resorts to the so-called “conspiracy of silence” (Danieli, 1984), which does not have to be explicitly agreed upon, but all integrated members of one community are aware of the topics that should better be avoided.

The mechanisms by which this is achieved are numerous. Again, listening to and thinking about trauma is difficult, so we can easily deny it with exclamations like “I cannot believe it!”, “I’m stunned!”, or “Impossible!” Many people, for example, find it unbearable to imagine themselves as a traumatised child, and it is probably impossible to ever fully imagine the loss of a body part or sexual abuse that has never happened to us.

An adult who physically or sexually abuses a child may threaten her that disclosure will lead to an even worse punishment, or try to bribe the child with gifts. Witnesses can deny the possibility (“Don’t talk nonsense”, “I know him, he would never do it”) or minimise its seriousness (“It happens to everyone”, “You know how many times I have ...”,

“Everyone needs that”), whether they honestly believe in that or are being hypocritical. In some cases of marital violence, the victim may choose to remain silent because of begging and promises, which are, as a rule, not fulfilled later.

In addition, a parent-witness may have been a victim of the same abuser and cannot protect the child because of, for example, fear of retaliation.

People often hope that silence will help traumatised people or at least not remind them of painful experiences, and many victims believe that their problems would burden others and thus try to protect others from themselves by keeping silent. This often happens between parents and children or grandparents and grandchildren, where silence is often seen as a protective shield for the young.

At another level, large groups working to expel, kill, or exterminate entire communities use silencing mechanisms that target many people at once. Over the last hundred years, propaganda has served many times and in many different societies to convince people that they should not believe their eyes or ask any questions. All too often, victims are dehumanised and treated not as persons but as numbers without names, personality traits, and emotions. Through pseudoscientific approaches such as eugenics or typified jokes, members of certain groups are described as less valuable or even as if they do not belong to the human race at all. Witnesses can be subjected to various forms of social pressure, such as discrediting, marginalisation, ostracism, censorship, imprisonment, and assassination.

Some large groups or nations that have committed mass atrocities, war crimes, or genocides barely ever mention the wrongdoings that they did. Change usually has to wait for at least twenty years until a new generation grows up and starts asking questions about guilt from the past. Sometimes one is reminded of the biblical word that the cure of so many cruelties, atrocities, and crimes takes seven generations—and during that time, many other events follow and cover the initial trauma, which makes the artistic expression of collective traumatic experiences essential (see Dimitrijević, 2020).

Throughout history, and in many societies even nowadays, women have been prohibited from access to education, the professions, and financial independence, which is why they could not raise children on

their own, and usually cannot return to their parents as divorcees. It was often impossible for them to protect themselves or anyone else, and they had no choice but to suffer in silence.

Many modern humanitarian and social organisations and professions, such as coaching, often claim that it is more important to focus on the future than on the past, on positive thoughts and feelings, so despite possible good intentions, they effectively silence the expression of pain and produce more harm than good.

What are the consequences of silencing?

An experience is traumatic because it is utterly unexpected, uncontrollable, and unpredictable, and it remains difficult to imagine, distance oneself from, and analyse. Worse still, an individual faced with rejection and disbelief almost automatically begins to doubt his or her mind. The younger the victim, the more likely she is to be subjected to “silencing herself”. The biggest problem is that a child trusts adults more than herself. Her parents seem to be almost omnipotent, more practically than intellectually. They are disproportionately taller and more robust, so the child also thinks they understand her feelings and motivations better than she can. If, therefore, the adult who has such a role refuses to believe in the testimony about child abuse, the psychological consequences for the child will fall into one or more of these categories:

1. **Splitting.** The most significant number of cases of abuse occurs in family homes, and abusers, in over 90 per cent of cases men, are well known to the child—fathers, grandfathers, uncles, older brothers, family friends, and next-door neighbours. In many of these relationships, the child is attached to the perpetrator, and he initially plays the role of a “secure base” in the child’s life, a source of comfort and motivation to explore the physical, social, and mental worlds. Disorders in the child’s mind occur because it is impossible to reconcile attachment to, for example, the father and the fact that he is, at the same time, the source of fear and pain. If left alone, the child must maintain a positive mental image of the father and therefore denies, “refuses to believe”, that the abuse occurred, even in cases where it is repeated. The process mentioned above creates

a split between the idealised image of the father with which reality is harmonised and the child's perception of her- or himself as terrible, accompanied by a feeling of guilt, an unconscious belief that the child caused everything, and feelings of inadequacy, badness, and worthlessness.

2. **Superficiality in emotional processing.** Especially in preschool age, a child will not survive without her parents but can without her mind, so she renounces her mind when faced with a choice between the two. If my father abuses me, and my mother does not believe me, I begin to think that I invented it all, that I either hallucinated it all or developed it out of malice (the child, of course, would not be able to verbalise it like this). As a result, the capacity for profound emotional processing, commitment to inner mental contents, interest in one's own and others' motives and intentions, and even interest in feelings, closeness, or dreams disappears or never develops (Dimitrijević, 2020; Fonagy et al., 2002), to the extent that some people spend almost their entire lives in loneliness and avoiding others.
3. **Separation of memory, thinking, and feeling functions.** People who suffer from any disorder associated with trauma cannot remember the initial event exactly; they cannot reason, speak coherently about it, and experience the feelings that accompany it (see Allen, 2006). Because of that, for example, memories appear suddenly, in dreams or as “flashbacks”, accompanied by intense emotions and physiological reactions, but also by the victim's fear that he will “lose his mind” and that he cannot think about them. Or someone keeps coming back to the same topic, recounting some horrible event in detail, and analysing the details, but at the same time, he is emotionally frozen; the feelings that would be expected to follow the memory are missing.

The combination of trauma and silence/silencing can, therefore, lead to complex personality disorders, addictions, low quality of life, and mental disorders. Many studies conducted in different countries confirm that people diagnosed with mental disorders report many times higher levels of trauma than the general population (see Dimitrijević, 2015). What makes the situation even worse is that many perceive the treatments—especially coercive hospitalisations, electroshocks, and asylums from which there is no hope of ever getting out—as a repeated combination of trauma and silencing.

In contrast, a traumatised child to whom at least one person offers trust, support, and understanding has a high chance of overcoming the problem and even growing into someone who understands someone else's pain better and can offer more help. Almost three quarters of psychotherapists report painful childhood experiences (usually chronic illnesses in the family, most often depressed mothers), with pronounced resilience and the capacity to understand feelings and intentions (Dimitrijević, 2018).

4. **Somatisation.** One of the most apparent consequences of silencing (and/or self-silencing) is the phenomenon of somatisation, considered, among other things, the basis of psychosomatic diseases. Emotions, sensations, and impulses that cannot be mentalized remain or turn into bodily reactions: heart palpitations, skin rashes, asthmatic breathing, incontinence ... The same is the case with emotional reactions that are forbidden from expression (and cannot be sublimated, to use Freud's language). For instance, the anger we do not dare express can become a stiff neck. All too often, to hear what was silenced, we have to listen to the body and not to the words.
5. **Social isolation.** A silenced person might develop feelings of worthlessness, badness, inadequacy, shame, and fear that the experience could repeat in social situations. Also, the perpetrator can persuade the victim that this will undoubtedly happen. The victim then chooses rather to stay isolated than share the experience with anyone due to the feeling that social interaction could harm and does not bring anything valuable anyway, although loneliness is one of the most painful experiences for every human being (see Dimitrijević & Buchholz, 2022).

The mechanisms of silencing

If silence leaves such far-reaching consequences, it is essential to understand how this happens. The better we understand the mechanisms/practices of silencing, the better we will be able to develop strategies to prevent its occurrence or eliminate the consequences if it has already occurred. However, not enough is known about this. The number of potential practices at the individual and societal levels, their possible phases, mutual influences, differences concerning age and cultural

affiliation—none of this has been systematically and sufficiently investigated yet. What follows is, therefore, a preliminary list.

- **Isolation.** Even without any knowledge of psychoanalysis and psychology, every abuser knows that the most important thing is to isolate the victim before and most often after the abuse. It is easier to beat, insult, rape, and imprison someone if you deny them the support of close persons. That is why the victim is either lured to a secret place or put in conflict with those who might dare to defend her. Especially when it comes to children, the act is a surprise since the perpetrator is usually extraordinarily kind and generous until that moment.

In many cases of repeated abuse, although not always, the abuser tries to keep the victim in isolation. It is often not a matter of physical isolation but forcing the victim to believe that no one can be trusted. For that, threats, blackmail, and bribery are used, but convincing the victim that no one will believe her anyway, that everyone would laugh at her—and thus, avoid her out of disbelief.

- **Narcissistic seduction.** Many abusers do their best to convince the victim that she was chosen because of her uniqueness and that harassment is the most substantial proof of her uniqueness. The victim is made to believe that only she understands that gods or angels chose her, that it is her unique talent, irresistibility, and capacity to help the abuser and “save” him. The victim should then suffer pain, insults, sexual exploitation, or slavery because they are presented to her as a reward and a sign of mercy. Contrary to all of this, some abusers present themselves as “chosen”, as if they know how to or can do something that “mere mortals” will never be able to do. As a rule, they gather followers, make a strict selection, and present abuse as mercy they give to someone. In both cases, the victims are silent because they are afraid they will lose a specialness they are now convinced they have received.

Many victims also feel that their experience of abuse is unique and that something like that has never happened to anyone else. Because of that, they feel shame, which relates to narcissism, further isolating them because who could confuse others and at the same time admit that she does not deserve respect in her own opinion?

- **Feelings of guilt.** Many victims feel they are to blame for what happened to them, which can be especially noticed in abused children. This is an unconscious mechanism by which the abuser's guilt "ends up" "in" the victim, who begins to recognise it as her own and acts as if she caused everything (Dimitrijević, 2020). When it comes to intense feelings, a child may believe that she is (irreparably) bad and try all her life to help others, save and preserve them, or make everyone happy (Frankel, 2015). The persecutory guilt does not have to be the result of physical or sexual abuse. It can also come from chronic somatic illness or depression in the family that the child thinks he or she caused or from direct parental criticism, demands, and accusations.
- **Identification with the aggressor.** A practice of silencing similar to the previous one can be used in a generalised way. In these cases, the victim may, to a large extent or entirely unconsciously, take the perpetrator's position and feel within herself what she suspects the perpetrator expects from her (Frankel, 2018). (This does not have to include any third person against whom the victim will become aggressive.) Therefore, the victim may feel that she deserves this "punishment" and do whatever she thinks the perpetrator expects in order to forgive and love her again. This process is painfully apparent in people who do not show authenticity; they do not dare to make their own decisions or think independently. Everything we see in them and what they can see in themselves is built to adjust and identify with the aggressor's expectations.
- **Linguistic tools for silencing.** Although it sounds paradoxical, language is a compelling means of silence. It can be used directly or indirectly. An excellent illustration of the direct use is that in Germany, after the Second World War, the word "Nestbeschmutzer" appeared, literally "the one who makes the nest dirty, the nest-polluter". It was a label and a source of pressure for those who refused to remain silent about the crimes committed during Nazism. Implicitly, it also included a claim that the nest (homeland and individual family homes) was clean (without guilt) as long as everyone remained silent. A prevalent version of this is telltale, a word used derogatorily even when a child wants to report peer violence. Indirect use refers to the fact that some words or expressions necessary for expression

or accusation are not something we learn spontaneously at home or as a part of instruction at school. After a certain number of sessions, many psychotherapeutic patients try to talk about the abuse for the first time but do not know the right words. The problem is not only euphemisms (for example, “educational slaps” as a description of physical abuse in schools) but the fact that talking and listening about trauma is usually avoided and that the terminology for its definition is not developed. It is enough to remember the silence surrounding sexuality—how parents rarely initiate conversations with children, interrupt their questions, or change television channels.

- **Denial of the right to education.** The primary mechanism of abuse of women for thousands of years has not been physical force or weapons but the rejection of the girls’ right to attend schools, become literate, and choose professions. Most women are financially dependent and cannot leave the perpetrator. In patriarchal societies, parents will not accept them as divorcees, and they cannot support themselves and their children. Another critical aspect of girls’ education is not being introduced to basic knowledge about conception, pregnancy, and contraception. A woman who has her profession and source of income and can decide and control how many children she will have can hardly be subjugated and turned into an enslaved person.

In many societies, especially where monotheistic religions play a crucial role, the same is true for boys, that is, men. The translation of the Bible into the languages that people use in everyday life, for which some were burned at stakes in London in the sixteenth century, is a consequence of the insight that it is easier to rule over illiterate and dependent people. An updated instance is the attempt to murder Malala Yousafzai, who in 2012 was shot in the head point-blank by a Pakistani Taliban for advocating that girls should be allowed access to education.

- **Centralisation of power.** Every dictatorship strives to establish a system where all decisions will be made in one place or even by one person. The space for discussion, consideration of various possibilities, voting, and the opposition’s existence are abolished. In the ideological domain, only one voice remains, and everything else is silenced. Although formally there may be institutions and divisions into, say, republics, regions, and municipalities, all decisions come

from the same place as none of the people who work there dare to express their opinion or take any initiative. Leaders of the Nazi party believed they were capable of classifying art, Stalin also “knew” how to compose and write novels, and Tito gave speeches against jazz. It is unusual but repeatedly confirmed that huge masses are willing to remain silent for decades and, over time, lose the capacity to make decisions; they become dependent, like the citizens of many colonised countries, just as sociologists describe adult patients in psychiatric asylums (e.g. Goffman, 1961).

- **Propaganda and censorship.** Political organisations, specific ideological orientations, and interest groups, such as financial ones, use the mass media and even the educational process to convince all the users that only their ideas are correct and only their products are valuable. This was widely used by Josef Goebbels, Hitler’s minister of propaganda, and in Soviet cinematography and arts, and has in recent decades become the primary purpose of countless television channels, which bombard their audiences with advertising without ever double-checking the actual quality of consumer products or political figures and organisations. And such is the enormity of this trend, now also on social media, that one is constantly, probably in all countries and languages, flooded by propaganda to the level that truth can quickly be silenced as just one among millions of voices.

During this process, all other voices—political or commercial competition—are either squeezed out with the hope that no one will hear of them or belittled and portrayed as less valuable or dangerous. Thus, in totalitarian regimes, only one voice can remain in the political arena. However, such fear creeps into citizens that they are no longer allowed to talk about the traumas they are experiencing on their own, either on a social-collective or individual level. In regimes called democratic, on the other hand, such a large number of voices is often heard that none of them matters anymore (for example, in the form of the “right” to have and express an opinion on topics about which one knows nothing), or the voices change at such a tempo that they become irrelevant after a few days. Such efforts could be directly focused on banning the publication of information on mass crimes (in the Soviet Union, for example, it was not allowed to write about Nazi pogroms against Jews in Ukraine),

convincing the public that a crime did not happen or that it was an accidental consequence of good intent (like the regular depiction of the colonisation of Africa, the Americas, Australia, and India), but they are also about powerful companies persuading us that their latest products will solve all our problems, or well-connected managers presenting their latest client as the most talented musician ever. It is regrettable for us as psychoanalysts that this whole field was grounded in his books by Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays, the so-called father of public relations.

- **Dehumanisation.** Victims are often portrayed as less valuable or unworthy of being included in the human race, so crimes against them are committed without a bad conscience, at least on a conscious level. Thus, the Nazis reduced all their victims to numbers, without name and surname, origin, age, education, marital status, and social status, as expressed in income and dressing like a hobo or tramp, losing all rights to use administrative support or public transportation. So every day, they killed certain number-bearers, calling them lice, with whom it was impossible to sympathise. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, similar (eugenic) views were spread, claiming that Bosnian Muslims were carriers of bad genes because their ancestors changed religion out of weakness and killing them was simply cleansing society of an irreparably inferior group, otherwise previously marked by jokes always presenting them as hopelessly stupid. The worst part of this process is that the victims accept the hatred of others towards themselves and the feeling of worthlessness and deserving punishment, and thus the belief that it makes no sense to complain and express their suffering.
- **Conspiracy of silence.** Large groups sometimes do not mention a crime for years or decades, although no explicit agreement has been reached (see Danieli, 1984). Everyone is silent about it; it is not in newspapers or books, children do not learn about it in history classes, and families and friends do not discuss it. Once it is discovered what actually happened, no one can explain how the conspiracy of silence came about or who initiated it. On the level of smaller groups, the conspiracy of silence can be a matter of convenience, comfort, profit, family dynamics, and the structure of mafia organisations.

As mentioned, those who try to break this conspiracy are often threatened, labelled, or ostracised, so this is likely kept intact due to fear, isolation, and other mechanisms listed here. One excellent illustration for this is *Afterward*, a documentary by Dr Ofra Bloch, a psychoanalyst and filmmaker from New York, who tried to radically listen to those she was raised to regard as the other—the Germans and the Palestinians—and occupy her double role as victim and perpetrator. Her efforts to make sense of the present and open the door for a future—an afterward—were met with acts of silencing from various groups, which aimed to discard any narrative not based on the schematic and oversimplified binary of us/them and victims/perpetrators.

How to hear silencing?

The history of psychoanalysis is full of evolving steps of listening. Initially, it was named a “talking cure” by Bertha Pappenheim, a patient of Josef Breuer. Then, Freud taught a whole culture how to listen to “slips” and read or listen to unconscious intentions. Theodor Reik (1948) coined the term “listening with the third ear”. Another line of thinking about listening was opened when Haydée Faimberg (1996) taught us vertical steps, like “listening to listening”. Others joined with the observation that we “see” images while we “hear” words. Musical listening in the treatment room could be described and connected (see Grassi, 2021) with evolving skills of talk and formulation. Donnel B. Stern (2009) made an enormous step forward when he guided clinicians’ attention to the ways of hearing unformulated experiences. The multiple variations of silence became an object of study, and silence could no longer be considered the opposite of talking but an element of it (Dimitrijević & Buchholz, 2020). And, because we must breathe in and breathe out, we learned to view silences as an embodied rhythmic structuring of our talk. We follow this historical line of evolving clinical skills in understanding silencing and responding to it.

This book is guided by the idea that there is not only silence but robust silencing processes—directed to others and oneself. Silencing—this is an unusual word; it points to “being made silent”, following a powerful imperative of “Don’t tell!”, “Never talk about”—and creates a clinical and theoretical challenge. How can we think of elementary

life events never shared with anybody else? How can a therapist ever get the hunch of an idea that there is something to be told about which the potential teller still has no grasp? Is this an unconscious process or unconscious “material”?

The answer our contributors here point at is that silencing is the malignant consequence of power—and we immediately come to see that “power” is a human dimension, which still has not attracted much theoretical attention and energy in psychoanalysis. Power is, as it were, a silenced topic in the history of psychoanalysis, too. Being silenced is an intrinsic aspect of being traumatised, and psychoanalysis is not free from this in its history. Being silenced is also a social topic, and it all depends on the human capacity for listening, receptivity, and endurance.

The problem of silencing is so sinister and ubiquitous simultaneously that attempts to open closed mouths would have to be systematic and well organised. Here is a sketch of the many levels of these attempts, all based on the general assumption derived from clinical practice that “change needs connection” (Buchholz, 2019).

1. Trauma-focused psychotherapy. Both individuals and small groups who experience trauma and do not get the opportunity to express their pain need access to effective forms of psychotherapy. It should not be forgotten that the term “talking cure” was first used by one patient to let her doctor know that nothing helped her as much as the opportunity to talk about everything that was coming to her mind and thus completely overcome all forms of silencing that she was exposed to. Almost a century and a half has passed since then, and various psychotherapeutic approaches have been developed, many of which have been empirically confirmed to be helpful. In addition to the further development of psychotherapy, which is necessary, it is crucial to make these achievements available to as many victims as possible. This specifically means that it is required to:

- Train many professionals to be able to listen to traumatic experiences and help those who have experienced them
- Decentralise mental health services so that (among other things) psychotherapy becomes available throughout each country

- Make psychotherapy available free of charge for persons suffering from certain mental disorders through the state's financial support for specific institutions
 - “Detoxify” psychotherapists’ programmes to intervene “against” symptoms or develop programmes for (or against) silencing; “just listen” is a better device; to quote prominent researchers, introduce psychotherapy as a “low-level technology” (Wampold & Imel, 2015), after a most thorough worldwide overview of psychotherapy outcome research.
2. **Psychological support to families.** Throughout their development, which lasts several decades, families are fragile systems facing numerous challenges. This refers to the skills of overcoming (inevitable) conflicts without the use of (physical) force, ways to recognise children's needs and support their independence, finding new purpose in the “empty nest”, and discovering the meaning of old age. Parents need to recognise the signs of trauma or depression in their children, ways to help themselves, and when and how to turn to professional help. In many marriages, it is necessary to accept the idea of equality, whether it is in decision-making, financial plans, or sex life. In every family, it is necessary to develop the habit of talking openly about feelings, problems, and fears of feeling silenced.
 3. **Literacy.** Mass literacy still needs to be achieved in many countries of South-Eastern Europe and on many other continents. People must have a sense of independence, a professional identity, access to essential information, and feel enough self-esteem to defend their dignity.

In recent years, the process of “emotional literacy”, helping people acquire basic skills of recognising feelings in themselves and others, and expressing, naming, and discussing them, has been mentioned more and more often. These processes are most probably closely related to the increasing use of the internet, smartphones, and social networks since the “dictionary of feelings” is learned from literature, especially poetry, in which there is less and less interest among younger generations.

4. **Education to respect others.** All institutions, from the family to the national assembly, governments, and courts, have the opportunity to treat other persons as equal subjects, with respect for their integrity

and dignity, or to direct all their power to subjugate and enslave them. The educational process must include a focus on understanding the importance of human rights, protection, and respect, both in the political and private spheres. This could, over time, reduce the occurrence of abuse (many forms of which are still not recognised as abuse today), as well as the silencing of anyone's voice.

5. **Art education.** Psychological research shows that this is most easily achieved through a focus on artistic expression in school education. If you want children to be more empathetic, empathise more and more accurately, and be more willing to help others, introduce them to as many hours of singing, drawing, songwriting, or drama sessions as possible (Winner & Hetland, 2008). This requires expressing certain feelings, imagining other persons' feelings, as in a character in the play, or someone else who drew something, which will later be transferred to everyday life.
6. **Change and consistent application of the laws.** It is necessary to change many existing laws and adopt many new ones to establish independent human rights institutions consistently. All victims of individual or social trauma should be provided with psychological support and legal protection so that they can feel safeguarded before they dare talk about their experiences. It is true that some of these laws and institutions already exist in some countries. However, it is necessary 1) to insist on the consistent application of these laws, penal policy, and internal control of the police, and 2) to defend their independence from the executive power that longs for it to be the only authority. In the Netherlands, protectors of the rights of psychiatric patients are lawyers employed by an institution independent of both the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Health. It is impossible to influence them when, upon patient complaints, they visit mental health institutions and write reports, recommendations, and penalties. In contrast, Serbian protectors of the rights of psychiatric patients are lawyers employed by psychiatric hospitals, whom the directors of those hospitals can fire.
7. **Democratic institutions.** Citizens follow examples from state institutions, from the highest levels to local ones. And just as initiatives are needed that come from mass groups of citizens who protect and demand their rights, it is essential that those in charge set an example

of openness to listening to others, acknowledging and correcting mistakes, respecting limitations, and fulfilling obligations. This is important at the level of everyday events but also when it comes to historical misconceptions and hostilities. All minorities and languages, and a variety of political options, deserve the opportunity to articulate themselves. Democracy is a demanding and slow dialogue, but it is the system that is the least silencing one of all we have tried so far, especially in participatory forms, such as the Swiss one.

We also propose including ethics in therapeutic reasoning as the most relevant dimension in psychotherapy and as the most vital impulse to influence societal institutions.

What is in this book?

Naturally, it is only possible to cover some of the above-mentioned topics in one book. Our effort was focused on what we see as the first step in tackling this challenging topic. In twelve chapters, we provide detailed descriptions of silencing in various contexts and with frighteningly omnipresent influence.

This volume starts with a comprehensive review of the silencing of victims and perpetrators. Forced to silence himself because people refused to hold their ears accessible for him and his survival in Auschwitz, Primo Levi broke down—that no one was open to listening to what he had gone through destroyed his belief in humanity and a common future worth the effort. But he and his fate are only the starting point for an endless series of human beings who endured enormous suffering but could have recovered if only there were someone capable of listening. More than the trauma itself, it is the experience of not finding anybody capable of listening patiently, with warmth and devotion, which destroys the ability to tell one's story and the belief in human sharing.

This lesson runs through the centuries with a clear trace. However, although clearly articulated, it is silenced often enough, even too often. In psychoanalytic training, people are taught a lot of theory and theoretical understanding. Even so, the ability to let oneself become seized is taught only in some supervisory courses (Buchholz, 2015;

Jefferson, 2017). Often enough, theoretical debates prevail; they dominate and silence participation, compassion, and untold experience—not infrequently by ascribing a unique role to “emotions” and ignoring that emotions are consequences of experiences, not their causes (Feldman-Barrett, 2017).

There are many efforts to silence victims, witnesses, and perpetrators. However, fortunately enough, there is the phenomenon of whispering. Certain documents were not burnt, places were not destroyed, and undetected witnesses were not killed. Something or someone survives and, often enough, after decades of silence, begins to whisper, meeting other whisperers, and the whole story emerges like a river starting from the most miniature fountain. All these phenomena can be noticed, observed, and documented by historians and other scientists (e.g. Figs, 2008), and we have the task of reintegrating this into our corpus of clinical and general human knowledge. These efforts sometimes require courage, as clinical institutions have participated, and sometimes still do, in silencing what their clients had to say. It could be a task for the future to clear psychoanalytic theorising from misguided efforts of that kind.

Such efforts could have the potential of hearing Hamlet silencing himself and realising those efforts in the Hamlets of our days. As is shown in the second chapter here, *Hamlet* paradigmatically sensitises careful readers and spectators of human stages to the painful potential of being silenced or silencing oneself. Other pieces, like Grossman’s novel *Stalingrad* or Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain*, are read here as modern reconfigurations of Hamlet’s fate: massive efforts at self-silencing.

Stephen Frosh, in his contribution, points directly to the difference. It is not silence that is addressed here but the acts of silencing happening in institutions established to help traumatised and sexually abused children. Frosh uses the term “murmuring”, which comes very close to “whispering”, a term which we took from the historian Orlando Figs (2008). The closeness of these two metaphors points to a similar observation of the same event structure; one is a macro perspective of a whole society, Stalin’s Russia, and the other is an institution of help and care. And Frosh describes as highly relevant the role of the “second adult”, the person who knows and silences what could be observed in cases of child sexual abuse. There is a mode of traumatic identification where

observers act as if they were traumatised themselves—they foresee the many serious difficulties, the imposition of personal strength expected from them, and that they must decide which side to take. This decision guides their idea and agenda of help.

Roger Frie, historian, social philosopher, and psychoanalyst, has chosen his topic after a deeply personal exploration of his family's involvement in the times of German National Socialism. This personal “working through” enabled him to write an impressive contribution about the Elaine Massacre in Arkansas in 1919. Anywhere from several hundred to almost a thousand African Americans were shot by white farmers and soldiers. Frie met people whose parents or grandparents had survived. He addressed them as victims in the expectation that they would want to share and make public what they knew from the family conversations. But he found that an event with so many people being killed is incompletely documented by the administration, and people hesitated to talk about what parents and grandparents had told them about it. Whether to continue silence, to murmur or whisper, or to fully share their knowledge depends on a reflection about one's future state in their community; they have to anticipate the effects of talking and sharing concerning what Frie calls the “silence of white complicity”. An actual relational context co-determines if something is told or if self-silencing continues.

To talk or remain silent—this is hard to decide also for women who were victims of sexual violence. This is so powerful a fact that Babette S. Gekeler opens her contribution by pointing out the consequences this has for published statistics about the frequency of such events. Silencing controls data. Her reference point is the debate about the US Supreme Court's decision on abortion rights of June 2022. This topic risks the violation of superordinate values as basic guarantees for individual existence. Thus, we cannot question individual rights or possessive individualism, as all human beings have the right to live a life on one's own. People have the right to have rights guaranteeing life on their own, including the right to pursue happiness. Female bodies, in whole or in part, are not in another person's possession, and they are not equivalents of enslaved people. Gekeler speaks of the “silencing of women” with the implicit question of how men position themselves. Why is that? Because men are attracted by female bodies and are abrasively appalled

by female bodies. This paradox leaves most men speechless, as the author shows us in a well-informed walk through the history of medicine from Hippocrates to the Middle Ages, including horrible pandemic times and many surprising books from the days when dead female bodies were surgically opened for the first time. Freud can be included in the line of this history, and his way of silencing evidence about some horrible practices in the Vienna of his days has been laid open by Carlo Bonomi, an Italian psychoanalyst on whose work Gekeler draws. Freud was not only a great discoverer. He was a silencer, too.

In the sixth contribution to this book, we describe how another heretic, named “Bento”, from the Spinoza family, was silenced in the seventeenth century. All the Amsterdam Jewish community members were forbidden to exchange a single word with him—he had asked too many questions, pointed out inconsistencies in Jewish belief systems, and spent his life writing (and then grinding lenses for eyeglasses and telescopes). It is as if the power of the Inquisition, whose tortures forced many poor people to speak unbelievable truths, is of mighty influence still today but replaced by other silencing forces. Galilei and Copernicus suffered from the same fate, and it is no pleasure to remind psychoanalytic readers that Ernest Jones, Freud’s hagiographic biographer, blocked the publication of some of Ferenczi’s writings for more than fifty years. But, of course, he claimed, it was in the best interests of Ferenczi’s reputation. In this chapter, we are taken through a long history of mutual silencing in and between Jewish and Christian traditions, which is a forerunner for some silencing practices in psychoanalysis.

The next chapter is devoted to another instance of silencing that affects large groups of people, specifically children. Ana Altaras Dimitrijević writes about the destiny of schoolchildren, especially the gifted ones, who are told not to pose questions or solve tasks in their way. Illustrations from three continents make the text convincing, and psychological considerations, like the “stigma of giftedness” or “anti-achievement peer pressure”, make it alarming.

From here, we go to the chapter on censorship, which gives an impression of a particular case subsumed under the category of silencing giftedness. This time, it is about ideological control and stifling the voices of creative, sometimes genius artists. From various examples, almost all

of which come from the twentieth century, we learn about the power of propaganda and the greed of the powerful to control everything, even the imagination. If we want you to use our symbols, buy our products, express our emotions, and think our thoughts, we have to make everyone sing in unison and eliminate each dissonant voice.

The final third of the book is more directly focused on clinical issues. First, we try to clean our own backyard and discuss the problem of silencing in psychoanalytic institutions. Thanks to the increasing availability of the original documents that were never planned for publication (like correspondence, diaries, minutes), we now know a great deal about various attempts at censoring psychoanalytic publications, ostracising creative members, and, consequently, building institutions on the principles of loyalty and obedience. The subsequent brain drain (also discussed in the chapter) cannot come as a surprise after all this.

Silencing is a ubiquitous clinical phenomenon. We therefore proceed with various illustrations of this, both in the narratives of clients or in the “interventions” of psychotherapists. And once you start paying attention, it becomes evident that every client’s traumatic experience is followed by pressure to remain silent. Family therapy seems to be an even more powerful X-ray for detecting these processes than individual treatments. Michael B. Buchholz, this time from the role of a seasoned family therapist, supervisor, and educator, describes situations when several family members can be led to the recognition that current symptoms stem from unexpressed, very often silenced, old pain. The book’s finale was focused on a special topic and entrusted to a unique author. Gail Hornstein writes about the silencing of persons with mental disorders, who were (and at many places still are) never asked, quoted, or even named. Hornstein, who has devoted significant portions of her professional career to studying this silencing process and the ways of overcoming it, also describes how she has repeatedly been discouraged from doing research in this domain.

We are delighted that this book has been a medium for all these authors to articulate their perspectives on some of humanity’s darkest sides. We hope that the reader(s) will boldly join us in this attempt to hear the unspoken horrors, as that may be the only way to overcome current and prevent future trauma, silencing, and mental disorders.

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CHAPTER 1

Silencing victims, witnesses, and perpetrators

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Introduction

There was a time when intrepid researchers had to report the “conspiracy of silence” even in helping professions, including among psychoanalysts (Danieli, 1984; see also Dimitrijević & Buchholz, 2020). They knew and did not know (Grand, 2013; Jack & Ali, 2010). We encounter this phenomenon almost everywhere and on all the levels of every society. In this chapter, we will focus on the very openly violent aspect of silencing: how victims get silenced by perpetrators and/or witnesses and how witnesses and perpetrators get silenced themselves.

Silencing the victims

The scope—from societal to individual

Many survivors of the Shoah were shattered when they tried to tell other people about their experiences after the war. Primo Levi was devastated by the response of his audience. After his lectures in Munich, many people came up to him, ignorantly patting him on the back and telling him he should be glad to have survived. In the words of a psychoanalyst