



# Listening to the Social World of the Child: A Phenomenological Proposal

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## Sammanfattning

I denna artikel vill vi bidra till den teoretiska diskussionen om att "lyssna på barn" i relation till "barns delaktighet" genom att föreslå en fenomenologisk reflektion kring att lyssna på barnets sociala värld. Genom att använda exempel från forskningsintervjuer med barn och unga som beskriver sin levda erfarenhet av att delta i familjerättsliga processer, är vårt syfte att visa hur en fenomenologisk reflektion kan möjliggöra en förståelse för vad som konstituerar sociala relationer i barnets värld. En fenomenologisk utgångspunkt i lyssnandet kan erbjuda en kontextuell förståelse av komplexa och mångtydiga erfarenheter. I synnerhet kontrasteras den relationella, konkreta aspekten av att bli hörd eller att ha blivit hörd som ett barn-i-världen mot den föreställning om barns rätt till delaktighet som finns i vuxenvärlden.

**Nyckelord:** barns delaktighet, att lyssna, barns röster, familjerätt

## Abstract

In this article, we wish to contribute theoretically to the intersection between "listening to children" and "children's participation", by suggesting a phenomenological reflection on how to listen to the social world of the child. By using examples from some recent research interviews, in which children and youths recollect their lived experience of being involved in

family law proceedings, our purpose is to show how phenomenological reflection can offer insights into the constitution of social relations in the world of the child. A phenomenological approach to listening seems to allow for complex and ambiguous experiences to be understood contextually. In particular, the relational, concrete aspect of being-heard or having-been-heard as a child-in-the-world is contrasted with adult conceptualizations of children's right to participate.

**Keywords:** *children's participation, listening, children's voices, family law proceedings*

## Introduction

The ongoing issue of how to “listen to children” has been a persistent concern in social research on children and childhood, and has also been somewhat related to the phenomenon known as “children's participation” (e.g., Komulainen, 2007; Lundy and McEvoy, 2011; Mannion, 2007; Spyrou, 2011; Sundhall, 2012; Twum-Danso Imoh and Okyere, 2020; Wyness, 2016). The relationship between listening to children and children's participation is not only covered within childhood studies or children's rights research, but is also to some extent included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). However, in Article 12 of the UNCRC, children's participation is expressed as the state's responsibility to “assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely”. Nevertheless, these views are also supposed to be “given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (UNCRC, see, for example, CRC/C/GC/12 2009, No. 15 and 28). On this point, Lee (1998, p. 457) once stated that “in the light of considerations of age and maturity the Article remains ambivalent about children's ability to represent themselves, and thus ambivalent about their place in decision-making.” This ambiguity regarding children's place in decision-making is, what Lee (1999) calls it, distributed to those who are supposed to listen to children, whereas children's participation becomes a relational issue between the world of the child and the world of the adult.

The relationality of children's participation has been acknowledged in the additional comments in Article 12 (CRC/C/GC/12 2009, No. 3; see Blaisdell et al., 2021). There, participation is mentioned as “ongoing processes” that, through dialogue and mutual respect between children and adults, should clarify how both children's and adults' views are considered and where both views should “shape the outcome of such processes” (CRC/C/GC/12 2009, No. 3). However, within the still-emerging field of childhood studies, researchers have argued that the relational aspects of not only children's rights (e.g., Wall, 2008, 2010) but also childhood in general need to be put forward (e.g., Spyrou, Rosen and Cook, 2019). Traditional views on concepts such as maturity and agency seem to imply the necessity of assessing children's competencies and characteristics, but such assessments might in themselves turn into obstacles, consequently silencing children's voices (e.g., Birnbaum and Saini, 2012; Eriksson and Näsman, 2009; Facca, Gladstone and Teachman, 2020; Holmqvist, 2019; Mattsson, 2008; Spyrou, 2019; Sundhall, 2012; Wall, 2010). According to Tisdall (2015), this silencing of children's voices is due to the difficulties of inserting ideas of children's participation into systems that are already fundamentally adult-oriented. This

adult-orientedness within research, policy and practice becomes particularly clear when children are regarded as unable to reach agentic ideals or express something that challenges normative views within the adult world (cf. Tisdall, 2016, p. 365). In other words, we seem to be faced with different adult conceptions of the meaning of children's participation, conceptions which in themselves appear to complicate the implementation of participation, or at least, as Tisdall (2015, p. 192) remarks, give it an "uneven impact on decisions." What if we were to try to bracket those adult conceptions and instead move towards the meaning of participation and its relatedness to listening to children as experienced within the world of the child? What would that bring to the table?

In this article, our aim is to explore the phenomenon of children's participation and how it relates to listening to the social world of the child, in the sense of seeking to understand the lived experience of the phenomenon within an interpersonal context. In the context of childhood research, the difference between the so-called "children's perspective" (i.e., children's own perspective) and "a child perspective" (i.e., as understood by adults) has been highlighted as an important distinction. However, the "child perspective" has been criticized for losing its analytical sharpness because of its vague definition (Halldén, 2003; see also Skivenes and Strandbu, 2006; Zetterqvist Nelson, 2012). Johansson (2003) has earlier pointed out the connection between "the children's perspective" and its relevance to phenomenological inquiry in the context of research and education. Johansson equates perspectives with phenomenological lifeworlds, whereas we suggest using the term "world" in relation to the phenomenon of children's participation. We believe the use of "world" allows for a more complex understanding of the relevance structures of multiple social worlds, while also avoiding the risk of regarding perspectives as something inherent within the subject, as phenomenology seeks a return to what makes these perspectives possible in the first place. The everyday lifeworld was described by Schütz (1962) as inhabiting many different types of worlds, each constituted by its own unique relevance structure. The relevance structure was described by Schütz as a province of meaning constituting what is socially relevant in a particular world. Following phenomenological reasoning, relevance structures are often taken for granted within the social world to which they belong but could be disclosed following critical reflection. From such a phenomenological stance, the adult (professional) world might not readily understand the meaning of children's participation in how this phenomenon is constituted within the world of the child. It seems reasonable then to propose a phenomenological approach to listening to the world of the child, in order to disclose the phenomenon of children's participation.

We will use excerpts from an ongoing empirical study being conducted in Sweden that explores social relations during family law proceedings within the narrative of the world of the child.<sup>1</sup> The excerpts are meant to exemplify how it is possible to listen to the world of the child and to the meaning of children's participation, specifically focusing on how social relations become relevant within the world of the child. By proposing a phenomenological approach, as well as taking Lipari's (2010) theoretical work on listening as our point of departure, we wish to emphasize the difference between "hearing" and "listening", as this is helpful when it comes to understanding not only what constitutes listening but also the

meaning of participation and being open to the world of the other. Moreover, we draw on a phenomenological understanding of the family law proceeding as living through a social situation, where sociality is acknowledged. However, at this point it is important to stress that it is not within the scope of this article to suggest practical methods for listening to children's views. Rather, the exploration is meant as a theoretical contribution to how one can listen to the world of the child. In the following, we will begin with the phenomenological proposal in relation to some themes within current research literature on children's participation and discuss how this proposal relates to listening to children within family law proceedings.

### Proposing the use of a phenomenological approach

The phenomenology of the social world was originally explicated by Schütz (1962, 1967). Even though terms such as “provinces of meaning” are used by Schütz, the concept of world does not formally refer to a physical area (as in geography), but to a structure of relevance constituted by meaning. This means that a world is also accessible through one's imagination and memory: intentional acts that also allow for going from one world to the other. Nevertheless, the concept of a world does not refer to something esoteric or mystical but is something that we all refer to in everyday life, as in the business world, the world of science, the world of old age, the world of dreams, and so forth. As Guenther (2020, p. 11) puts it, “phenomenology gives us a language to articulate the relationships without which we could not be who we are or understand what we experience.” To use an everyday example, the relevance structure of the professional world, as in attending a professional meeting, is different from the relevance structure of the world of leisure, as in “hanging out” with close friends. In other words, intersubjectivity provides for the possibility of the constitutive process of any relevance structure of a social world.

Following a phenomenological approach to listening, Lipari's (2010) theoretical work could be helpful, since she regards listening as an act focused on the other, as opposed to a focus on our own experience in the act of hearing. Such an account of listening implies that you can hear without listening, but you cannot listen without hearing. Additionally, Lipari (*ibid*) points to the fact that when we listen, we should not try to categorize what we are listening to or base our listening on what we already know. Instead, we should be attentive and present to what is being expressed. Hence, Lipari's point seems similar to how a phenomenologist would seek to understand the social world of others, that is, by being open to a discovery of how expression relates to the social world of the other, by describing how meanings are context-dependent (Schütz, 1962; Throop, 2018).<sup>2</sup> Such a type of listening could help us to avoid oversimplification, something that has also been advocated by childhood and children's rights theorists (e.g., Eldén, 2012; Komulainen, 2007; Quennerstedt, 2013; Spyrou, 2011; Sundhall, 2012; Wall, 2019), and enable us to stand outside conformity (e.g., Lipari, 2010). A phenomenological approach to listening to the social world of the child can allow us to participate in what is complicated or ambiguous, in an attempt, as Schütz (1962) once pointed out, to understand a particular world from its own

unique structure of relevance. Perhaps such an approach, of being open to the social world (cf. Throop, 2018) and following the expression of the child within its own world of social relationships, would lead us to understand how to listen to the world of the child, while also acknowledging the child as at times being existentially thrown-into a situation (e.g., family law proceedings) constituted in the world of the adult. To be able to acknowledge and listen to the social world of the child, we would have to focus on social, interpersonal relations as something that is experienced in the context of the world of the child.

Thus, a phenomenological approach to listening to children seeks the meaning of an expression within a given situation and from the interpersonal context of the social world of the child. Such an approach would also be congruent with the existential-phenomenological philosopher Merleau-Ponty's (2010: p. 142, 374) work from the mid 20th century, in which he sought an understanding of the child that went beyond the conceptions and theories of the adult world. He saw the contemporary conceptions and theories of the adult as depicting the child as an adult in miniature, something unfinished, which amounts to depriving the world and consciousness of the child of its own holistic structure. The proposal of a phenomenological approach, especially through Merleau-Ponty, aligns with other emerging understandings of participation within childhood studies, where it is seen as embedded in children's "everyday lives" and embodied rather than rational (e.g., Wyness, 2016). At the same time, the approach of listening to children should not be mistaken for a search for "authenticity", a search questioned within some childhood studies (cf. Komulainen, 2007; Spyrou, 2011; Tingstad, 2019). Phenomenology could rather be a contribution to finding a way to transcend the problem of "authenticity" (cf. Hammersley, 2017; Tingstad, 2019; Tisdall, 2016; Wyness, 2016), as well as the problem of "voice" (cf. Komulainen, 2007; Spyrou, 2011; Sundhall, 2012; Twum-Danso Imoh and Okyere, 2020). Twum-Danso Imoh and Okyere (2020, p. 1), for instance, argue for a practice that is "more holistic, inclusive and aligned with the meanings that children themselves attach to their everyday lives as well as to the key personal and social relationships that they value." Instead of basing children's rights on traditional concepts of agency and autonomy, a phenomenological approach is ethically congruent with the relational turn in childhood studies, where rights are seen as an expression of the mutual interdependence and responsibility of humans (e.g., Holmqvist, 2019; Mannion, 2007; Spyrou, 2011; Spyrou, Rosen and Cook, 2019; Sundhall, 2012; Wall, 2019).<sup>3</sup> As Schütz (1962) has pointed out, to awaken our doubt is to bracket what we take for granted. It is suggested here that attentiveness should be directed towards the meaning as it presents itself when one listens, as the voice alone can never be considered sufficient in understanding the child. In other words, the voice of the child cannot be seen as something in itself. Any type of expression needs to be seen in its interdependent relation to the relevance structure of the social world – as meanings are context-dependent.

However, seeking to understand the world of the child does not make matters any easier. Sadowski and McIntosh (2015) have provided us with an example of complex insights that could be difficult to comprehend or utilize for the adult world. In their qualitative phenomenological study on children's views of shared-time parenting arrangements after

a divorce, it became clear that what was important for children to feel psychologically secure was their parents' ability to provide a sense of shared emotional space, rather than equally shared time. Also, Smart (2002) has shown that what was experienced as being vital for children within custody disputes was the way in which their relationships were sustained and managed. Such findings might be difficult for professionals and parents to tackle because, within the context of post-divorce parenthood, it seems easier to manage children's time or other more concrete matters than relationships and emotional states. Smart (2002) concluded that a genuine devotion to listening to children could imply higher ethical demands, since it is more difficult to find solutions that also show the child sufficient respect. Furthermore, listening need not be limited to, for example, the child's view within family law proceedings, or to the situatedness within family relations, or even to the individual experiences of such relations. Listening might instead be an attentiveness to the whole situation, including the historical situatedness of the multiple worlds involved, which, in turn, includes structural inequalities and othering (cf. Knezevic, 2020). As such, we could reach for deeper insights into what children's participation might mean.

### **Listening to experiences of participation within the social world of the child**

The examples<sup>4</sup> presented below indicate a specific purpose in which the researcher listens to the research participant's lived experience of their interpersonal relations (as in a focus on the social world) as it was remembered being lived through during the time of the family law proceedings. The excerpts presented are part of a qualitative phenomenological study on "children's participation" in the context of family law proceedings. Hence, we are dealing with how to listen to meanings within a world in research interviews, which indicates a focus on past experiences. Following the phenomenological approach to interviewing in qualitative research (Churchill, 2022; Englander, 2020),<sup>5</sup> the focus of the qualitative interview is to listen to meanings constituted within the lived experience of a phenomenon in the context of a life situation within a social world. The fundamental selection criterion to participate in a phenomenological qualitative study is to have had an experience of the phenomenon (Churchill, 2022), although specific criteria depend on research design (Englander, 2020). In regard to the research design of the study from which the examples were drawn, the selection criterion of having been a child (as in the formal age of a child) during the formal process of the family law proceedings (i.e., the situation) was crucial. Nevertheless, the interviews were conducted four years after the formal process of the family law proceedings, which meant that some of the research participants had, at the time of the interviews, passed the legal age of being a child. A reasonable age and time limit was thus considered so that the participants could provide the researcher with rich qualitative research material. We have chosen excerpts from interviews with two participants, who we have named "Nicole" and "Seyma". The participants have been found through verdicts in three different regional courts, where they, on their own or through their parents, have communicated interest in participating in the specific



study. Purposely, the excerpts we use concern the meaning of children's participation as it relates to listening.

### **The examples**

A brief presentation of each participant's situation will precede the excerpts, in order to clarify contextual factors. During the interviews, Nicole, who was 15 at the time, expressed that while growing up she felt dependent on her parents to bring her happiness. However, the fact that she felt, at the same time, that her parents were preoccupied with their own problems, left her with an experience of them not being able to bring her happiness after all. Neither did the decision of the court ease her problems, as the outcome and ruling meant that she had to stay with her father, even though she wanted to live with her mother, which would have given her the opportunity to change schools and escape from the present situation where she was being bullied at school. In this situation, she felt constrained and dependent on her parents. Nicole talked a lot during the interviews about not feeling listened to and not having a voice throughout the several assessments that she had participated in. She regarded herself as quite mature and described herself as an unselfish person. Furthermore, Nicole said she had always been clear about her views (e.g., where she wanted to live) and had been consistent in expressing her views over the course of the family law proceedings, but it was only after an incident at her father's house that a decision was made allowing her to live with her mother instead.

Seyma, who was 21 at the time of the interviews, first came to Sweden in her early teens with her mother and siblings. Seyma described herself as stubborn and as someone who took a lot of responsibility for her family. Her parents had already gone to court over custody in Seyma's country of birth, so she had experience of proceedings in two different countries. She experienced great difficulty in talking to Swedish social services about the domestic violence she had been exposed to while growing up, as well as immediately before the family law proceeding. In connection with her parents' court case, Seyma was placed with her mother and siblings at a domestic abuse shelter, where they had to stay for four months. This was also a difficult situation for Seyma, as she felt that such an arrangement limited her own life on several levels. She expressed feelings of being thrown-into a situation she did not feel comfortable with in a moral sense. Seyma felt strongly opposed to the decision to place them in a domestic abuse shelter while her father was free to walk the streets as he pleased. She did not want to accept these conditions and actually left the shelter for school at one time, even though she was not allowed to do so.

### **Being heard but not listened to**

The excerpts presented below relate to experiences of talking to professionals, and we will elaborate on the meaning of those experiences. We will see that Nicole downplays the importance of the latest assessment that was made, and that she was, at the interview, more attentive to the situation as a whole:

- Nicole (N): *The assessment was not that special.*
- Interviewer (I): *No.*
- N: *Considering that I almost grew up in the district court. It feels like my parents have always sort of talked about who I should actually live with.*
- I: *Mm.*
- N: *So, like, each, it feels like the district court, and to go there, and the assessment, was an everyday matter.*
- I: *Okay.*
- N: *It sort of just feels like something you grew up with.*
- I: *So, you have been involved in several assessments?*
- N: *Yes, it's been like that for eleven years in my life, so.*
- I: *Okay.*
- N: *And I don't think it was so special, it was, it was very, very difficult.*
- I: *In what way was it difficult?*
- N: *Because I moved up here for a reason that I would not want to move up here for.*
- I: *Mhm.*
- N: *And it became so much at once, so it felt like I was just living a joke. And then it was like that, because you have to go and talk to someone to see, to see if they will say who you should actually live with.*

Nicole's downplaying of the assessment is not so much about downplaying its importance or the difficult feelings. It is more about her experience of the situation as something common, as her everyday, lived experience of being-in-the-world. The assessment and her participation, within the adult world's understanding of what it means to participate, are for her something secondary and something within the structure of relevance that belongs to the adult world, and something she understands that she must adapt to in order to get a decision about where to live. When growing up, she experienced ongoing discussions of where she should live, and she has throughout the process been clear about what she wanted. For her, participating in an assessment was connected to the difficulties it brought to the situation, that is, the increased feeling of distress, instead of something that in a formal and moral sense signified the granting of her rights. She expressed a feeling of not being a part of the process and of not being listened to, irrespective of whether her own views were congruent with a court decision or not. In a phenomenological sense, the meaning of participation as experienced within the social world of the child had not been seen as something that could be formalized within the meaning of participation in the adult world. In other words, when listening to her, she experienced the adult world to have been more concerned with the idea or concept of participation within its own system of relevance, rather than with listening to how she, as a child-i-the-world, experienced her situation. However, research has highlighted that for children to feel listened to is connected to the actions that the social worker takes, insofar as such actions are based on what have been



expressed by the child (McLeod, 2006). For Nicole, it was also significant how professionals acted in relation to her views, but this was in a negative sense, as it was closely connected to how she experienced that the professionals did not act in relation to her views and hence, did not listen to her. In addition, Nicole felt that it was her father's actions rather than her views that guided the professionals.

In a sense, when the meaning of children's participation within the world of the child is rooted and contextualized in the experience of not being listened to, as it seems to have been for Nicole (and, as we will see below, also Seyma), a possible passive experience might be the consequence (cf. Twum-Danso Imoh and Okyere, 2020). As our example indicates, only hearing the child can increase the overall negative experience of participation within the situation (cf. Komulainen, 2007). In the case of Nicole, being heard by professionals eased her mind; however, she never felt as if the professionals listened to her experience, or as if her experiences of the interpersonal context meant something within the overall situation. When engaged in professional roles within the systems, structures, and horizons that are connected to the adult world, perhaps there is a need to critically reflect on meanings that are taken for granted, meanings that might not be relevant within the social world of the child. We might hear but not listen to how the interpersonal meanings, as expressed by the child, constitute their social world. If listening instead was seen as a way to turn our attention to the interpersonal meanings as expressed by the child, and to how these meanings relate to the overall relevance structure of the social world of the child, then perhaps we would be able to transcend the experience of passivity. As Lipari (2010) has suggested, we would turn our interaction with the child into an active one. That being said, we might be able to avoid certain limitations of the professional situation, which can be seen in the meaning of Nicole's expression of "living a joke". This example also illustrates how relevance structures of worlds could be interpreted based on interpersonal meaning. More specifically, "living a joke" refers to Nicole's experience of still not feeling listened to even when she got to move to her mother, because she understood that the decision was grounded in reasons belonging to the adult world instead of to her world. In other words, the meaning of this expression points to her understanding of the relevance structure of the adult world and how that relevance structure is not open to listening to her.

Similarly to Nicole, Seyma did not feel as if she was listened to, even though her views on the decisions made during her parents' court proceedings were aligned with those of the professionals. Seyma specifically remembers the uncomfortable situation when talking to representatives of social services:

*Interviewer (I): When you met with the social services, what did they ask about?*

*Seyma (S): Yes, well, what had happened, how did it happen, how it is, that is, if it's difficult, if we needed help, and yes, that kind of questions.*

*I: Mm, how did you feel about being asked about that?*

*S: Yes, well, it was actually difficult because I was, me and my siblings are, very introverted and don't want to talk about those things.*

*I: Okay.*

- S: *And all of a sudden, we're supposed to talk about things like this with people we don't know.*
- I: *Mm.*
- S: *Answering their questions, so that was actually very difficult.*
- I: *Mm.*
- S: *It felt very hard to answer their questions and to get to hear those questions, I mean, because we didn't want to accept what had happened, and suddenly we get those questions that we have to answer, like we know what really had happened, and answer and defend ourselves and defend ourselves in the right way.*

As we can see, the interpersonal situation of telling the social workers about her experiences was difficult for Seyma. Seyma's experience of talking to professionals obviously differed in terms of content from Nicole's experience. Nicole was critical of how the professionals listened to her generally; she did, however, have rather positive experiences of talking to the professionals, which is something that some researchers have highlighted as quite common (cf. Eikrem and Andenæs, 2021). Both Seyma and Nicole are attentive to, and critical of, the sense of participation that the professionals provided them with. Nicole is focused on not being properly listened to, while Seyma wants to be more listened to – as in having a say regarding how professionals should handle matters of domestic abuse – and less heard – as in not having to talk about difficult experiences. Within the situation of participating, even though the roles of the professionals gave special opportunities to listen to the interpersonal context, the same roles, in their adulthood, seemed to limit the professionals in truly listening to the social world of the child and what was relevant in such a world. Hence, this experience of “talking to” professionals is something we would like to regard as part of an experience of being heard, while listening instead becomes connected to the overall sense of participation. For Seyma, the social situation of answering questions posed by strangers felt like a burden when communicating, but she was also attentive to the interaction of having to “answer, and defend,” as well as doing so “the right way.”

Thus, the concept of “having a say”, regarded as some kind of a task for children to perform, seems to be upheld by adult ideas and conceptualization of the phenomenon of participation. As Knezevic (2020, p. 99) puts it, it seems as if “the ‘truly’ speaking bodies are not the bodies of children but the embodied gaze of the professionals”. One way to go beyond the problem of “the voice” is, as suggested by Komulainen (2007, p. 22), to “include considerations of the dynamics of human communication and interaction”. Komulainen turns to Bakhtin's dialogical model for the perspective of mutuality, where we instead turn to phenomenology in order to reach an openness to the interpersonal context of the world of the child. It becomes important then to point to the fact that the child is already participating within the situation. Thus, when the child is being asked to participate, what the child is already attentive to and already participating in is somewhat neglected. Furthermore, researchers have earlier stressed issues of constrained contexts regarding certain groups of

children, where some individuals might actually have difficulties in participating because they are situated within an already constrained context (see also Bordonaro and Payne, 2012; Knezevic, 2017; Komulainen, 2007; Tisdall, 2016; Twum-Danso Imoh and Okyere, 2020). These constraints not only exist in regard to the adult professional's competence or abilities, or the child's difficult family context, but could also be understood as constraints in regard to the adult meaning of participation. Both Nicole and Seyma experienced constraints when heard by professionals, although in rather different ways, but they were nevertheless both attentive to their own actions or wishes as something they felt accountable for in relation to parents and/or professionals.

As we have seen above, Seyma experienced feelings of being somewhat forced to talk about things she did not want to talk about, as well as being held accountable for the things she was asked to contribute with. Nicole was also attentive to such an experience, as she felt she was responsible for the feelings of one of her parents even if she felt the decisions were made solely by the professionals. In other parts of the interview, not referred to above, Nicole felt accountable for certain decisions being made, and that she was to blame for her parents' suffering and the outcomes of the court orders even though she never felt that she had been involved in any of the decisions. Such experiences can also be seen as a part of what constituted her somewhat surreal feeling of "living a joke". What Seyma and Nicole express are different variations of what we would like to refer to as the lived experience of participation, where only being heard and not listened to seem to be mixed with feelings of guilt and accountability. Thus, even when the adult world is not letting children influence decisions, there could still be an experience within the world of the child of being accountable for what happens. Hence, protecting children by preventing them from participation, or from having an influence, by not listening to them or not allowing their views or actions to count, might not actually protect them from feelings of distress during the family law proceedings. That is, what the adult world regards as protection or participation might in the social world of the child mean something that contradicts the approach of the adults (even if it is well-intentioned). Such insights are, to some extent, present in the work of Trinder (1997), who reviewed earlier studies where children's experiences of participation alternated between feelings of guilt about being part of a decision, a sense of satisfaction, and feelings of insecurity regarding whether they should or could have acted differently. Some of those children regretted having said anything at all, because what they had said kept haunting them, as the social actors in the adult world kept bringing it up in various ways depending on how it would fit the adult situation (Trinder, 1997). Hence, the participation as practiced within the relevance structure of the adults seem to lead, to some extent, to the risk of causing greater distress. In other words, participation within the world of the child seems to go through a change in meaning, that is, from potential benefit for the child to a potential distress, when participation is not attuned to the relevance structure of that world. Hence, listening to the social world of the child is important in order to realize such subtle, yet significant changes in meaning, so that plausible emotional consequences can be prevented. To do so demands that the professional reflects on what is taken for granted within the relevance structures of the adult professional world. Perhaps such a stance could be more congruent with ethical practice.

## Conclusion

We have tried to show how listening to the interpersonal context of the social world of the child could disclose rather ambiguous and complex experiences of what it means to participate within the situation of family law proceedings. By regarding participation in such a situation as something more than just adults inviting children to be involved in the assessment and instead acknowledging children's active social part within the family, we see an opportunity to transcend the meaning of the adult conception of children's participation.

We regard our proposal for attentive listening, in a quest to be open to the social world of the child, as a way to avoid what is taken for granted in the traditional adult meaning of participation (cf. Haldar and Engebretsen, 2014; Komulainen, 2007; Spyrou, 2011; van Bijleveld, Dedding and Bunders-Aelen, 2015). We do, however, avoid interpretations of the voice and expressions such as "authentic," which risk being understood as meaning something one-dimensional and individualistic. Instead, we have addressed the possibility to listen, that is, to be attentive and open to the social world of the child and the child's interpersonal relations. As our examples have clearly shown, we acknowledge participation, in the sense of an ongoing relational process between children and adults, as something that is already taking place, whether professionals are involved or not. We therefore suggest that the meaning of participation must begin with an understanding of the social world of the child. At the same time, the active involvement of professionals brings something more to the phenomenon, in which the distinction between hearing and listening seems crucial, as in not letting the professional adult sense of children's participation cause greater distress for the children involved in the processes of family law proceedings.

The phenomenological approach gives us an opportunity to address some of the different meanings that a phenomenon such as children's participation might have in different social worlds, due to the different relevance structures that are involved in these worlds. Also, it highlights the relationality of those worlds, to what is socially (including historically) inherent and intersubjectively constituted. However, when one is open to the world of others, matters seem to become more complicated and ambiguous, which demands more of the person who is listening. It includes a sense of responsibility of not only listening to children's views and what they say about their situation, but also demands a critical reflection on what one takes for granted in the adult world and how it relates to the world of the child. To reflect on what is taken for granted is not something that is easily done, nor is taking measures for what such reflections might make one aware of, but it may be what is required for change to be possible.

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## Notes

1. The interviews that we use excerpts from were originally conducted for an empirical study, approved by the local ethical review board in Lund, Sweden, Reg. No. 2017/654. The study is in the process of being submitted as an empirical article elsewhere. Therefore, the research procedures, methodology, and results of this study will not be accounted for in this paper, because that would deviate from our present purpose.
2. There are also differences between Lipari's (2010) theoretical work of listening and a phenomenological stance, as she, for instance, highlights misunderstandings as a possibility related to listening (reminding us that the other is truly "other"), while a phenomenological approach would rather turn to a reflection of empathic listening to preserve a second-person access (e.g., Englander, 2020). Nevertheless, this example also shows that both approaches stress the importance of reaching an understanding that focuses on the other rather than on our own conceptions or experiences (or simulations, etc.) when we listen.
3. See also Tisdall (2016) for a further discussion of agency within family law.
4. Important to stress is that listening is not limited to verbal communication, even though that is what this article focuses on (see, for example, Tiefenbacher (2022) regarding the importance of observations that are open to expressions and non-verbal communication, and Tisdall, 2012).
5. For a recent overview of the research methodology utilized for this particular study, see, for example, Churchill (2022).

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