On the Translatability of Gendered Experiences

Socio-Historical, Feminist-Postcolonial, and Phenomenological Reflections

Heidemarie Winkel & Magdalena Suerbaum

1. Power Asymmetries and Epistemological Pitfalls: An Introduction

It is a winter morning in Berlin in early 2020. A group of women are seated around a well-laden table enjoying a long breakfast. Children of various ages play in the kid's corner of the small room. While the children play, run around, and occasionally interrupt their mothers, seeking resolution to some emerging dispute, their mothers chat. Most of the women at the table only recently arrived in Germany and attend the weekly gatherings organized by a project dedicated to the support of migrant mothers. Among the women, most of whom came to Berlin from countries located in Western Asia and North Africa and who communicate predominantly in Arabic, there are three White,[1] German-speaking women who hold German citizenship: two social workers and Magdalena, a researcher. On this day, the women discuss various topics: they share their experiences of legal status determination in Germany, complain about their encounters with bureaucrats, but also recommend recipes to each other, and exchange stories about the early days of their marriages. Widad's two-year-old daughter climbs on her mother's lap and pulls up her mother's top. While Widad breastfeeds, she asks Magdalena whether she has weaned her fifteen-month-old daughter already, and Magdalena shakes her head with a smile. Widad and Magdalena have had regular conversations during the preceding meetings about a suitable moment to wean their daughters and empathized with each other's challenges. Siyam suggests wearing a turtleneck pullover and keeping the child busy and distracted once one decides to wean. Aysha shares her struggles of potty training her son and complains that the teachers in the kindergarten do not support the process. Layyan asks Magdalena when German mothers commonly start potty training, and

1 Following the Critical Whiteness approach (Dietze 2009: 222), the notion of whiteness indicates a structural power asymmetry; thus, it is not about phenotypical or *racial* markers.

Magdalena shares the various pieces of advice she has received from kindergarten teachers, acquaintances, friends, and family. Layyan tells the women that she began training one of her sons back in Syria, when he was eighteen months old. However, she had to interrupt the process when the family was forced to flee their home. Over the course of the six months that the family spent traveling from Syria via Turkey and Greece to Germany, she could not continue potty training, and the interruption meant that her son would still wet the bed occasionally. The women, among them Magdalena, share their empathy with Layyan: they smile at her, touch her arm briefly, say a few encouraging words, or give advice before moving on to discuss another topic.

This ethnographic vignette, created as part of a research project on migrants' experiences of legal status determination in Germany, could be used as a jumping-off point to discuss various questions, including the main concern of this chapter. Primarily, we are interested in the possibilities of theorizing social experiences of gender in contexts defined by differences of positionality, as in the vignette, and the extent to which these experiences are translatable into theoretical knowledge, in the sense of Edith Stein's (1917) phenomenological notion of empathy (*Einfühlung*) with the experience of "other" people. To this end, we take the dimension of caring for children as empirical reference point, and ask whether the fact of being the primary carer for children that both researcher and interlocutors share, creates a common ground of experience. Can the experience of motherhood and caring for children bridge apparent differences, for example in terms of legal status, class, racialization, and nationality, between researchers and researched? And what do we learn about the translatability of gendered experiences in phenomenological terms if we consider motherhood as a social role that researcher and researched have in common?

In the following, we seek to combine the analysis of the above-mentioned ethnographic encounter with an epistemological critique. Ethnographic knowledge production is prominently characterized by diverging experiences that are, among other things, a result of more or less hidden power dynamics and knowledge hegemonies between researchers and researched, whether in terms of racializing structures, unequal legal status positions, or varying socio-cultural bodies of knowledge, such as about motherhood and care in the vignette. We assume that these fault lines of experience characterize the encounter between privileged, White, Western researchers and non-White, non-Western interlocutors in a way that makes it necessary to revisit the conceivability and translatability of gendered experiences in the research process to reflect the inherent epistemological imbalances. Anthropologists have been particularly active in addressing this epistemological bias since the 1980s. Nevertheless, "the" White, Western researcher, her standpoint, and the asymmetry of power vis-à-vis "the" Other tend to escape notice (Abu-Lughod 2001, 1991).

At first glance, this epistemological critique seems familiar to feminist theory. As early as the 1970s, feminist approaches acted as a powerful irritant on the self-image that social sciences such as anthropology and sociology had as disciplines that reflected reality by means of an objectifying methodological and conceptual apparatus. By contrast, feminist theory has emphasized the social situatedness of knowledge production (Harding 2012), highlighted anthropology's male bias (Strathern 1987), and unmasked the androcentric closedness of sociology's conceptual apparatus (Smith 1974, 1979).[2] Half a century later, however, it is evident that feminist theory itself is characterized by the production of exclusions and asymmetries. Postcolonial feminisms have demonstrated to what extent Western, European feminist theory is shaped by a White, colonial episteme[3] and a system of racism (Combahee River Collective 1977; Anzaldúa 1987; Mohanty 1988, 1997; Spivak 1988, 1990; Gümen 1996, 1999; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 1996, 1999; Lugones 2007, 2008).[4] The existence of Eurocentric epistemological privileges refers back to the guiding question of this chapter on the translatability of social experiences of gender. What might be the epistemological pitfalls and limitations in translating experiences of gender into concepts and theories?

Against the backdrop of the following considerations, these questions prove to be all the more pressing: As indicated above, empirically based research is constituted as encounters of socio-politically, economically and culturally[5] contingently positioned subjects. Researchers and interlocutors are differently involved in – and affected by – processes of gendering, sexism, classism, and racialization in their respective lifeworlds. This is reflected in diverse social positions, unequal legal or class statuses or, as in the vignette above, migration trajectories and biographies of displacement. As a result, research unfolds as an *intersectionally structured social configuration of power asymmetry*. This configuration reflects mutually interlocking relations of epistemic and structural inequality; they are part and result of colonial, uneven social histories as revealed by various postcolonial social theorists (Randeria 1999, 2006; Chakrabarty 2010; Mignolo 2000; Quijano 2000, 2016). This does not mean, however, that interlocutors are passive, unaware of existing power asymmetries, or have no agendas of their own in their contact with researchers. How they respond, for instance, by sharing certain knowledge and narratives while hiding other experi-

2 Dorothy E. Smith (1974, 1979) identified a male epistemological privilege in the production of theory. She illustrated how concepts and texts act as building blocks of gendered power processes in academic discourse.

3 The notion of the White episteme has been further discussed by Heidemarie Winkel (2021a).

4 In Germany, the critical analysis of White feminism goes back to the 1980s, in texts such as *Farbe bekennen* (Oguntoye/Opitz/Schultz 1986).

5 The notion of culture is used in a meaning and knowledge-based sense (Winkel 2021b).

ences, has been discussed and highlighted, for example, by Marita Eastmond (2007) and Kirsten Hastrup (2004).

Although the social sciences have long sought "to offer an unparalleled position from which to scrutinize Western assumptions" (Strathern 1987: 279), social-scientific knowledge production is structured by hegemonic worldviews and concepts. The notion of gender that is predominantly used in the social sciences, for example, has its origin in the analysis of bourgeois-capitalist societies; it is thus a core instance of knowledge hegemonies and the related problem of the translatability of experience. Postcolonial feminists and theorists have dismantled gender as a colonial category of knowledge accordingly (Lugones 2007, 2008; Patil 2017); among other things, they have revealed the constitutive function of bourgeois notions of femininity, motherhood, and domesticity for the self-affirmation of Europeans as civilized people (Comaroff/Comaroff 2002; Dietrich 2007; Habermas 2016). Researching experiences of gender is therefore not unproblematic. The epistemological challenge is not only about the question of *what experience of gender* – in the sense of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) – can be talked about, heard respectively, understood and dealt with accordingly in the research process without reproducing subalternity and othering.[6] It is also about whether the notion of experience *per se* can be assumed unquestioned as a foundational concept. The gender historian Joan W. Scott already questioned "the authority of experience" as an unconditional "challenge to normative history" (1991: 776) several decades ago. She challenges us to explore the assumptions that underlie the theoretical formulation of experiences, and, as Saba Mahmood suggests, "perform the difficult task of [conceptual] translation" in order to make it "travel across cultural and historical specificities" (2005: 163).[7]

Following Scott, we hence start from the premise that the notion of experience – envisioned as the "origin of knowledge" – includes an epistemological pitfall that is inherently connected with a particular Western, European "vision of the individual subject", not only as "the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built" (1991: 777) but rather as the bearer of an autonomous, independent will. This vision includes a universalistic notion of the self as self-determined, bounded subject that limits the possibility of imagining a multiplicity of notions of personhood, as suggested, for example, by Suad Joseph (1993, 1994, 2005, 2012, 2022). Hence, the historicity of the concept of the individual, gendered self in bourgeois-capitalist societies has to

6 Subalternity can be understood, following Spivak, as the status of those that stand outside the dominant discourse. The subaltern cannot speak or be heard, because s/he is "marked only as a pointer" (Spivak 1988: 163) by hegemonic invocations; this includes scientific invocations. The way people are constructed as objects of scientific inquiry (as well as in others spheres of social life) has also been discussed by Ian Hacking (1983).

7 In her famous study *The Politics of Piety*, Mahmood (2005) deals primarily with the concept of individual autonomy as well as liberal ideas of emancipation and agency.

be reconsidered. Otherwise, the constructed nature of experience as a foundational concept could be lost from view, as Scott (1991: 777) notes, and, as we would like to add, by extension, the social mechanisms that make up gendered experiences.

We begin by briefly reflecting on the genealogy of the notion of experience in European thought and its importance as a foundational concept in the social sciences. We start from the premise that there is a semantics of experience that we can trace in socio-historical terms, namely a particular inner-directedness and self-centered mental orientation towards the world, which gained in importance in 17th and 18th century European history as a result of increasing individualization. Consequently, we understand the notion of experience as having a history and a kind of ontological quality that is linked to structural changes that belong to that period as well as related liberal ideas of personhood and political agency. After locating the concept of experience in the knowledge horizon of European societies, related challenges are outlined for a gender-sensitive analysis that is aware of colonial legacies of knowledge production. Against this backdrop, we deepen the discussion of epistemological pitfalls from a postcolonial feminist perspective. Finally, we briefly discuss the vignette on motherhood and care to exemplify the possibilities and pitfalls of the translatability of gender.

2. Experience as a Foundational Concept in European Thought

The way the social sciences – including anthropology and sociology, the disciplines to which the authors of this chapter belong – approach and conceptualize experience is the result of an epistemological shift in European philosophical thought that can be traced back to the 17th and 18th centuries. It resides in philosophy's dissociation from the positivist science of naturalism with its mechanical-causal understanding of nature and human existence and its tremendous impact on the conception of gender, namely as natural, categorical difference based on dimorphism.[8] In contrast to naturalism, *phenomenological philosophy* as in the case of Edmund Husserl (1963[1913], 1989[1915]), and *philosophy of mind* as found prominently in Wilhelm Dilthey,[9] are based on the conviction that the "object of philosophy […] is formed by the […] facts of consciousness" (1982: 41).[10] In both philosophical currents, the emphasis is on the study of consciousness as experienced by a person, that is, the orientation of consciousness toward a phenomenon, which manifests itself as an experience of or

8 Claudia Honegger's (1991) seminal study discussed the impact of naturalistic thought on the anthropology of gender.

9 Dilthey can be considered a forerunner of both anthropology and sociology.

10 Translated from the German source by the authors: "Der Gegenstand der Philosophie wird durch den Inbegriff der Tatsachen des Bewusstseins gebildet" (Dilthey 1982: 41).

about that object, such as in the case of a maternal gesture of care towards a child. For both approaches, the social world with all its moral facts – such as the gender order – exists "only" in consciousness: "Nothing else is given to me. For what is given is given only in consciousness" (ibid.). Phenomenology and philosophy of mind thus naturally assume the historicity of consciousness and ask for "the conditions of the conceivability of this consciousness" (Dilthey 1982: 42). Consequently, consciousness – and the experience related to it – is a contextually contingent sense of orientation.[11] Alfred Schütz (1974, 2004), who was instrumental in founding phenomenological sociology, picked up on this, formulating the problem of the conceivability of consciousness as the question of the possibility of understanding the other (*Fremdverstehen*), while Edith Stein (1917), who was an early student of Husserl's, conceptualized the problem of the traceability of experience as a question of empathy (*Einfühlung*).

Today, it seems self-evident to us that the facts of consciousness in our inner experience are at the center of the humanities and that lived experience is the nucleus of primary reality (Turner/Bruner 1986). Since the 1980s, this includes an increasing awareness of the physical dimension of lived experience as "embodied consciousness" that is "drenched with symbolic meaning" (Turner 2008[1984]: 50). While a new interest in the body as "an experiencing agent" (Csordas 1994: 3) crystallized, the understanding grew that the category of experience has generated a paradox: On the one hand, the manifold ambivalent realities of human existence come to light, namely as subjective experience; on the other hand, the notion of experience carries a risk of promoting "unexamined cultural assumptions concerning articulations of self, subjectivity and social action" (Desjarlais/Throop 2011: 93) that configure – and might hence prevent – the recognition of further possible modalities of being and experiencing the social world. Sociological and anthropological knowledge about human experience, such as the experience of gender, is hence necessarily partial, limited, and structured by time and context (ibid.: 90).[12]

Most sociologists and anthropologists are aware that the socio-historical and cultural focus on experience can be challenged at the level of its conceptualization. Of course, the capacity to differentiate between one's own experience and the (observable) behavior of other persons is a basic feature of the human condition (Schnettler 2008: 141). The patterns in which this capacity unfold, that is, the varying modalities of orienting, sensing, and experiencing each other, evolve according to

11 With this position, Dilthey also turned against the philosophy of idealism, which presupposes the existence of ideas and concepts, when he postulated that we "possess reality as it is […] only in the facts of consciousness given in inner experience" (Dilthey 1883: 3, cited in Bräunlein 2012: 127).

12 Furthermore, phenomenological anthropologists stress the intersubjectivity of human experience (Desjarlais/Throop 2011: 91; Horton 2009).

different political, cultural and economic realities. As a result, the experiencing agent is shaped by related social notions of self and other (Turner 2008[1984]). Liberalism's conception of the person as autonomous subject, for example, and the accompanying experience of self as endowed with an autonomous will, is the result of political revolutions and intellectual currents in European thought. This mode of experiencing the world is gendered; as manifold feminist political theorists have pointed out, women's exclusion from political, economic, and social rights results in a very different experience of the social world (Pateman 1988, 1989; Nussbaum 1999; Okin 2004). This points to the existence of varying modes of experiencing social reality and different ways in which these are gendered; for example, the connective, relational conception of gendered personhood, which Joseph (2005) identified as the center of experiencing self and other over the course of more than thirty years of ethnographic research in Lebanon.

There is evidence that the theoretical challenge we are talking about in this chapter is fundamental; we assume that the relevance of (individual) experience as a core element of social orientation and sense-making, and as empirical data, is a socio-historically traceable phenomenon that has gained in significance within the framework of European philosophical thought. To put it precisely, the notion of – and interest in – experience is closely linked to European intellectual history as it concerns philosophical concepts of the person, the self, and the basic conditions of self-awareness (Mauss 1985). This is not the place to systematically reconstruct these processes. It can be stated, however, that self, individual consciousness, and experience became the focus of European philosophical conviction in the 17th century. As Marcel Mauss states, it was Fichte who "founded all science and action on the 'self'", and Kant who "had already made of the individual consciousness, the sacred character of the human person" (1985: 22).

In the framework of European, bourgeois-capitalist "modernity," then, individual experience finally became the ubiquitous hub of social existence – and "the bedrock of evidence" and scientific interest (Scott 1991: 777). European sociological knowledge production centered particularly on the question how the individual became the central unit of sociation in the transition from the estate-based to the bourgeois-capitalist society, and how subjects have become conscious – of themselves and others – as individual objects of imagination and experience (Simmel 1989[1901]). This notion of individual personhood was nourished by the currents of contemporary European intellectual life that we have already mentioned, such as the political philosophy of liberalism, which facilitated an idealization of individual autonomy and experience (Mahmood 2005: 13–14; Young 1990). The liberal notion of the self remains a central tile in the mosaic of individual consciousness and orientation in post-migrant, capitalist European societies to this day (Foroutan 2019), while capitalism, for its part, needs autonomous selves who function as separate, bounded beings (Joseph 2022). It was not until the second half of the 20th century

that Women's Studies and Gender Studies dismantled the androcentric bias of political liberalism and of European social-scientific thought (Smith 1990; Okin 2004). Until the 2000s, the need for women to catch up in terms of modernization and to fully join in with individualization were common topoi in the global north, once more confirming individual experience as the focal point of social existence – and the foundation of social-scientific evidence.

These opening considerations show that experience is not a neutral term, but a multifaceted phenomenon whose meaning and relevance are closely linked to social place and time as well as to existing global hierarchies in knowledge production. Against this backdrop, we consider the extent to which *multiple patterns* of gendered experience are conceivable beyond the universalistic notion of the autonomous, individual subject as the bedrock of experience.

3. Multiple Patterns of Gendered Experience: Gender as a Category of Analysis

Thinking of the *experience of gender* – as well as the concept of experience itself – as a multilayered, plural, and contextually contingent phenomenon likewise requires to situate gender as a category of analysis socio-historically. This means, for example, considering gender as a constitutive signifier in the symbolic order of Western, European self-conceived "modernity" (Kröhnert-Othmann 2014).[13] This means, bourgeois notions of gender developed not only as a central structural, institutional, and socio-cultural component of the social order within European nation-states, but also in relation to non-European societies, namely as a symbolic order of difference. This symbolic order goes back to colonial times (Boatcă 2021). While White, European women functioned as the markers of "civilization" and cultural representation in the framework of nationalist European self-understanding, women of color in the colonies were particularly vilified (Dietrich 2007). Ann Stoler (2002) analyses the foundational quality of sex in the material terms of colonial projects. As Rebekka Habermas (2016) shows using the example of the German colonization of Togo, Black women were victims of systematic, structural sexual violence. However, European constructions of femininity not only affected the legal and social status of African women during colonialization, but have a lasting impact on women in postcolonial systems and contexts (Mama 1997).

As a result, the experience of colonization is not only a cardinally gendered experience that usurps the minds of the colonized and, consequently, their conception of social reality. Gender itself is a colonial category of knowing, sensing, and

13 The discussion in this subchapter is based on Winkel's considerations in *Multiple Gender Cultures. Gender as an Epistemic Test Case of Plural Modernities* (2021b).

experiencing the world; it rests upon the colonial divide between "the West," its "civilized" gender order and "the uncivilized rest" (Hall 1994). As an analytical category, gender is hence closely intertwined with the bourgeois gender arrangement. It is without a doubt the gendered social fabric of capitalist society and its political, legal, and economic constitution based on the private/public divide (Winkel 2022) that shapes how the notion of the binary gender order was included, for example, in European sociological theories around 1900, namely as a natural matter of fact (such as in Durkheim's, Simmel's or Weber's concepts of society). The cultural practice of binary sex categorization, the knowledge code of heteronormativity, and male dominance have not only been taken for granted by most European sociologists and anthropologists, but have also been depicted as ubiquitous and universal features of worldwide social change toward "modernity". Consequently, most European sociologists' and anthropologists' understanding of gender was – and in many ways still is – ethnocentric insofar as a particular historical set of assumptions about gender is made the starting point for the study of non-European societies. As a result, a certain, historically particular socio-cultural "normality" is transferred to an object of research that subsequently appears quasi-necessarily as "different" or "other," while the epistemological feature of the "unproblematic and unmarked Western self" remains untouched (Abu-Lughod 1991: 467). This is why we suggest not to take the social place and function that the notion and constitution of gender holds in White European "modernity" for granted, but to ask about the location of gender in the axiomatics of sociological and anthropological thought.

Radically questioning the translatability of the experience of gender, literature emerging from Black African diaspora studies has analysed notions of Black mothering and how it emerges from within contexts of racism, discrimination, and structural inequalities (Collins 1994; hooks 1991; Reynolds 2005). African and Middle Eastern feminists such as Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997), Fatima Mernissi (1975), and Zethu Matebeni (2012, 2014) argue that cultural and epistemological imperialism gave gender explanatory power in non-Western societies, but misinterpreted the social order of knowledge, related gender codes, and modes of experience by erroneously transferring the concept of essential, naturalized bodies to the social realities of contexts such as Morocco, South Africa, and the Oyo-Yoruba in Nigeria. While Mernissi shows how religious notions of female sexuality shape gender reality in Morocco and other North African contexts, Oyewumi stresses that seniority and not gender has been the organizing principle historically among the Oyo-Yoruba in Nigeria and that gender was not conceived as biologically based ontological difference. Similarly, Matebeni criticizes Eurocentric concepts of queer African – e.g., lesbian-African – identity, that are based on the ontological binary.

The transferability of the gender ontology and related notions of reproductivity, domesticity, or the private/public divide that is so central to this ethnocentric conceptualization of gender, have meanwhile been critically questioned in various

interdisciplinary fields (Habermas 1993; Comaroff/Comaroff 2002; Alber et al. 2022). Critical of applications of European conceptual categories to understanding African societies (but also of some of Oyewumi's arguments, which she considers authenticist and reductionist), Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2003) suggests engaging with existential phenomenology to explore African women's everyday experiences. She is particularly interested in the dimension of embodied existence and inquiring "what each culture and historical context makes of the biological body, and what this body makes of the culture and historical context in turn" (2003: n.p.). Against this backdrop, we briefly discuss alternative approaches to the study of the experience of gender beyond the Eurocentric mental map.

4. Feminist (and) Phenomenological Approaches to the Study of the Experience of Gender

From a feminist-phenomenological perspective, tracing the experience of gender requires – as discussed above – consideration of the respective socio-historic context. Simone de Beauvoir already pointed out that becoming a woman is shaped by lived experience in a particular social setting. Her idea of *cultural becoming* is based on the conviction that "the human condition is indefinite and ambiguous: it allows for different variations and modifications" in diverse contexts (Sara Heinämaa, cited in Landweer/Marcinski 2016: 12). With Judith Butler (2002), this can be further thought of as the constitution of gender that is historically and culturally situated, and as performatively produced. But what does this mean for the notion and operation of experience itself?

For Sara Ahmed, the core of the concept of experience lies in the way consciousness is directed at certain phenomena. Accordingly, she asks what it means for our perception of sexuality – and the same is true of gender or motherhood – "to be lived as oriented" (Ahmed 2006: 1). This is a question of how subjects apprehend the world, that is, how "we come into contact with" the world with our living bodies[14] (ibid.: 2), for example with the child that needs care or with others who judge one's performance as a mother. As Ahmed argues, the direction of our orientation is never neutral, but its meaning is related to space and time; she underlines this with the example of the difference between "the East" and "the West" as "two sides of the globe": "the East is associated with women, sexuality and the exotic, with what is 'behind' and 'below' the West" (ibid.: 13–14). Whether we orient ourselves to the left or the right, look up or bend down is hence a meaningful orientation that shapes our experiences and may also reveal tensions in this regard.

14 The notion of the living body refers to Husserl's notion of the *Leib* (Ahmed 2006: 2).

Avtar Brah points to these possible tensions and conflict inherent in experience when she emphasizes the need to perceive of experience "as a practice of making sense, both symbolically and narratively; as struggle over material conditions and over meaning" (1992: 141). However, her suggestion also raises the possibility of reckoning and thinking with *multiple modalities of gendered experience*, namely in a non-hierarchical way. This is similar to Saba Mahmood's view. When thinking about the relation of theory and ethnographic data collection, she sees the need to question taken-for-granted perceptions of the world, arguing that "the terms people use to organize their lives are not simply a gloss over universally shared assumptions about the world and one's place in it, but are actually constitutive at times of very different forms of personhood, knowledge, and experience" (Mahmood 2001: 209).

Mahmood urges us to take seriously how the people with whom we conduct research, frame and structure their lives and to consider the terms they use and the meanings that are attached to them as crucial aspects of how people inhabit, experience, and encounter the world. Alexis Shotwell (2011: xv) stresses that knowledge depends on the knower's position and that some knowledge cannot be understood beyond particular knowledge positions. We might add that this includes the position of the living body. Shotwell also suggests taking seriously people's implicit understanding, which might come to the surface "at sites of a certain rupture in habitual activity, or points of breakdown in our conception of our selves" (ibid.: xvi).

Alternative concepts to the notion of the autonomous, bounded (and gendered) self have been developed over the past decades, for example in the context of migration (Jackson 2013) and familial networks in Arab contexts (Joseph 1993, 1994, 2005, 2012). Drawing on his analysis of migration trajectories, Michael Jackson stresses that people continuously change and adapt in relation to their surroundings, the people who accompany them, the circumstances they face, and their wellbeing. He thus proposes to think of the self as "several rather than singular" (Jackson 2013: 202). Joseph (1993, see also 1994, 2005, 2012) seeks to destabilize the prevalence of Western psychological constructs and gender binaries in feminist thought and to show a variety of selfhood. She proposes the concept of patriarchal connectivity to capture the fluid and relational character of the self. With this concept, she seeks to fathom an active and intentional relationality "that can take various forms under different political economy regimes" (Joseph 1993: 467). Over the course of more than thirty years of ethnographic fieldwork in Beirut, Joseph found connectivity to be reciprocal, interwoven, and shaped into a system of gendered and aged domination. In other words, she argues that patriarchal connectivity supports "the production of selves who invited, required, and initiated involvement with others in the shaping of the self" (ibid.: 468). Opposing the idea of a "true" self that has "true" desires, Joseph also shows that desire is constructed relationally in a matrix of culturally constructed meanings. She cautions that "the connective self and the individuated self are cultural models, or "'ideal types' that guide social behavior and can guide so-

cial analysis" (Joseph 2005: 87) of personhood and relationships. Nevertheless, these ideal types do not completely capture the messy, complex, and contradictory nature of lived realities. As far as the study of gendered subjectivities is concerned, Joseph thus proposes, based on her ethnographic research, "a notion of subjectivity that is always in motion, always in relation" (Joseph 2012: 16).

While we value Joseph's conceptualization of selving, we do not follow her skepticism vis-à-vis the body as a productive point of departure (Joseph 2012: 16). Rather, it might be fruitful to think of embodiment with Iris Marion Young (2005: 9), who stresses that phenomenological descriptions of women's lived body experiences have the potential to show why women who are differently situated, such as the women in the vignette above, come to sympathize with other women's (embodied) situations. This will be deepened in the following subchapter.

5. Pitfalls of Translatability: Exploring Experience in Ethnographic Encounters

In order to discuss the pitfalls of researching experiences of gender and the difficulties of making them translatable, we are now going to focus on the ethnographic vignette introduced at the beginning of this chapter. This is an elaboration on ethnographic research conducted in Berlin over the course of sixteen months in two phases between December 2017 and March 2020. Magdalena collected data in a refugee shelter, a legal advice center, and a project dedicated to refugee mothers and their children. Her fieldwork spanned her pregnancy, was on hold during her parental leave, and was resumed when her daughter, who occasionally accompanied her to fieldwork meetings, was ten months old. Magdalena's transition into motherhood sensitized her for various new research topics, such as the embodied experience of legal precarity (Suerbaum 2023a) or the challenges of mothering during displacement (Suerbaum 2023b, 2022). Furthermore, being an (expectant) mother while conducting ethnographic research significantly affected Magdalena's encounters with her interlocutors. Topics pertaining to experiences of motherhood and childrearing were recurring elements of conversations she had with many migrant women. Nevertheless, while Magdalena and the women she met occupied the same social role, this did not mean that their experiences as mothers necessarily had much in common at all. In fact, motherhood for most migrant women was deeply marked and shaped by their limited legal protection, financial constraints, and uncertain future perspectives. By contrast, Magdalena embodied and brought to research encounters aspects and privileges of White, German, middle-class motherhood.

Revisiting our initial questions, we would like to ask whether caring for young children creates a common ground of experience in encounters of researchers and

interlocutors and allows for certain experiences to be "translated". Kelly Dombroski describes herself as an "edgewalker" and her field site as "a relational space centred around the moving trajectory of [her] mother-body" (2011: 52). She applies the notion of the edgewalker to capture her positionality vis-à-vis the Chinese women she talked to about mothering and childrearing. The women considered her parenting style familiar, while simultaneously seeing in her an example of Western motherhood by virtue of her nationality and ethnicity. In a similar vein, Magdalena experienced that with her transition into motherhood, topics of conversations changed and that it was taken for granted that she knew, understood, and lived through certain bodily experiences. At the same time, however, the migrant women Magdalena met were aware of various differences in childrearing practices that they tied to their respective socialization, level of religiosity, and living conditions. While Magdalena frequently experienced moments of intimacy in which women gave her advice as an (expectant) mother, taking for granted a form of mutual understanding because of the exposure to similar embodied experiences, such as pregnancy, birthing, breastfeeding, interrupted nights, emotional turbulence, she also realized and was made aware that she did not live through moments of racialization, discrimination, speechlessness, the daily worries about loved ones who were far away in conflict zones, and the coming to terms with experiences of war and displacement.

The exchange about maternal duties among the migrant women, the social workers, and the researcher at breakfast that was introduced in the ethnographic vignette at the beginning of this chapter can be initially understood as a shared experience. Thinking with Rosalyn Diprose (2003: 38), who argues that familiarity and belonging are "located in [the] body as an atmosphere that informs [one's] perception of the world and of others," particularly the conversation about the shared bodily experience of breastfeeding and weaning lends itself to assume that the women felt a momentary sense of belonging and mutual understanding in which experiences could be shared. "Through habituated dwelling with others" (Diprose 2003: 38) and through living certain values in relation to other bodies, one can grasp a sense of belonging to a community. Accordingly, we suggest that the women seated at the breakfast table experienced themselves and related with each other via their mothering practices. Motherhood constituted a "modality of engagement" in this situation (Douzina-Bakalaki 2017: 13). Hence, it might be fruitful to perceive of their experiences of care for children as one form of being in a momentary community with each other; this does not exclude the simultaneous existence of power asymmetries. The community that formed around their experiences, worries, and questions concerning care for young children exists alongside communities of experience that many other social groups – e.g., Black women, lesbians, or widows –

can be assumed to participate in.[15] Following Diprose, sensing familiarity and being part of a community does not rely on commonality but rather on difference: "The difference community lives from is the other's difference that [one] cannot grasp but that initiates [one's] movement toward the other and towards the world" (Diprose 2003: 40). Thinking with Diprose helps us to perceive shared bodily experiences as connecting without denying the existence of differences in terms of influences such as poverty, displacement, and legal precarity, which affect the migrant women and Magdalena differently. Thus, being in conversation with each other based on mothering practices is a form of community that does not require sameness, rather, it lives on and through differences that result from one's particular mode of *becoming*, and this means, phenomenologically speaking, from the particular way subjects have come into contact with the world with their living bodies (Ahmed 2006: 2).

Ultimately, writing about conversations about mothering practices, motherhood as a common ground and about the question of translatability of experiences needs to involve the realization that "there are no pure power-free sites from which to speak and act" (Gedalof 1999: 2). Thus, it is crucial to attend to "the working of power differentials between particular groups of women" (ibid.). The existence of multiple power differentials along the lines of legal status, financial precarity, nationality, and racialization and their effects on motherhood are as powerful if not more powerful in the research process as shared experiences of caring for dependents. These differences, for instance the legal and bureaucratic inscriptions (Horton 2020) that migrant women experience in their contact with the German migration regime, cannot be naturalized and taken for granted. The asymmetrical encounters between researcher and interlocutors need to be thoroughly historicized and colonial structures that enabled them need to be acknowledged. Hence, conversations that revolve around the mothering body and might allow for a community to be established need to take account of the positions of bodies that are always already "inscribed in power geometries which mark their 'affective capacities' (Tolia-Kelly 2006: 213) in unequal and diverse ways" (Salih 2016: 2).

The fact that the prerogative of interpretation remains in Heidemarie's and Magdalena's hands is an ongoing challenge, a continuous request to be attentive to the various structures that informed the contact between Magdalena and the migrant women; it turns the concern with the translatability of experiences of gender into a continuous task. Thus, we suggest that translating experiences of gender can always

15 We do not want to imply that being a mother constitutes a *natural* form of solidarity with other women. Communities of experience, as we perceive them, may involve forms of solidarity but this is not a prerequisite. In this chapter, we are primarily interested in identifying how the translation of gendered experiences may become a possibility, despite the existence of unbridgeable hierarchies and asymmetries within communities of experience.

only be partial, power-induced, incomplete, and formed by structures of dominance and asymmetry.

6. Conclusions

The chapter started from the assumption that power effects make it necessary to reflect on the translatability of experiences in the ethnographic research process. We argued that experience is a historically and contextually contingent sense of orientation and that the individual, as an "experiencing agent" (Csordas 1994: 3), is strongly shaped by their positionality. We traced how the notion of experience, as it is often taken for granted in the social sciences, developed over time and was shaped by the European history of ideas. Moreover, we sketched how gender as a category in the process of knowledge production comes with particular baggage and a problematic colonial history. Throughout the chapter, we tried to highlight how the idea of the autonomous self has been repeatedly challenged by various scholars. While we acknowledge that we are deeply socialized in the traditions that we critique and thus cannot step out of established academic traditions entirely, we may at least point to the relevance of thoroughly scrutinizing the genealogy of terms we use when producing knowledge and translating fieldwork encounters into theories and concepts.

We believe that the ethnographic vignette shows us, on the one hand, how living with similar challenges such as care responsibilities for children is one of manifold conditions that can affect relationship during ethnographic research. As the introductory scene indicates, being a mother can translate into a sense of community inviting certain conversations to take place and particular experiences to be shared, which does not mean that it is a privileged condition that automatically excludes non-mothers from conducting research on this topic. Motherhood, as a shared experience, is thus understood in this chapter as an example of a social role that has the potential to influence dialogues and relationships during empirical research. Nevertheless, caring for children, which is deeply affected by legal categorizations, biographies of displacement, impoverishment, and many other factors, remains an experience that researchers may never fully be able to grasp and empathize with, as we sought to point out. We believe that we cannot solve the question of how translating experiences of gender is possible. Yet, we can fine-tune our practices, our empathy (*Einfühlung*), accept limits of shared experiences, and most importantly, continuously question the tools and terms we use in the process of knowledge production.

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