

Experiential Gender Research

The Body as a Source of Meaning and Change¹

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My interest in the question of how people experience their gender began with my empirical studies of families (König 2012). In the narratives of women and men who live together with children, I observed that gendered ways of being include definitions, roles, social categories, conventions, and feelings that are explicit, known, and thus easy to say, such as: *I'm a bad mother because I work a lot*. Obviously, this statement by a woman relates to a pattern that is constitutive of the binary gender order of bourgeois societies. Women are responsible for (the wellbeing of) their children and should therefore be at home. In such statements the social category of being a mother, the personal understanding of one's tasks as mother, and language are very closely connected (Scott 1991: 794). However, "the available social categories aren't sufficient" (ibid.: 795) to express the meaning of the experiences people have around work and family. There is often *something* intangible about one's gender in a specific situation. This intangible *something* became apparent in many of my interviews.² There are moments in the interviews when the narratives stop flowing. The interviewees lack words, start to stutter, or use figures of speech such as: *Coming home from work, which takes place far away from home, I feel like an empty shell*.³ If I had signaled that the expression of unclear ideas, impulses, and thoughts that may seem crazy at first was welcome, many interviewees made use of this chance to find out what exactly it is that they felt or perceived and started to explore their meaning of social categories, gendered roles, and situations (König 2012; König/Wojahn 2016; König/Maihofer 2004). When the woman who feels *like an empty shell* starts to explore this

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- 1 This text is based on an essay written together with Ulle Jäger (Jäger/König 2020). Parts of the text have been translated from German.
 - 2 Schirmer (2010) introduces the concept of *something* as a tool for analyzing interviews in her micro-sociological study of drag-kinking practices and uses it to refer to "border areas of the (possible) real" (Schirmer 2010: 69, author's translation). There are moments in Schirmer's empirical material "in which apt designations are struggled for" (Schirmer 2010: 69, author's translation). Schirmer shows that the *something* can find its way into language and thus become real under certain circumstances.
 - 3 On this example, see also König/Erhart 2023.

figure of speech, the meaning of reconciling work and family shifts. She is no longer *speaking about* being guilty towards her children. Instead, by *speaking from* the feeling “like an empty shell,” she starts focusing on the strict separation of work and family, which is reinforced by commuting between two towns.⁴ She returns home with the feeling of emptiness because her experiences at the workplace remain there. By expressing this, which occurred for the first time during the interview, the woman becomes aware of a new idea of how her life situation would have to change for it to be better. The solution would not be to stop working (and thus to be a good mother) but to mediate the private and the professional. Even if the form that this mediation could take is unclear, the process of explicating the bodily implied meaning of being a commuting mother (which goes beyond what the shared everyday meaning implies) – clearly leads her to relax. She senses that she has woven a thin bridge over a problem, even if the problem remains. The scope of this shift in meaning cannot be overstated. It is central to this woman's possibility of being a working mother in the world she belongs to. I follow Scott, who emphasizes that with new meanings of identity categories “the possibilities for thinking the self” change (Scott 2015: 795).

In the following, I argue that *the body has a special significance in this change*. Something new that is meaningful to people's gendered mode of existence often initially occurs with reference to bodily senses and our complex lived experiences. Crucially, it is impossible to apply the old patterns or schemata of the hegemonic gender order to these experiences of oneself, and one's body. People must go beyond the prevailing conventions of thought and language to elaborate and express the bodily implied meaning of their gender in a concrete situation. Reinterpretations are needed. Or, in the words of the American philosopher and psychotherapist Eugene T. Gendlin, to whom I refer in the following, one could say that *fresh* formulations are needed that advance what is to be expressed about one's own unique, new, different ongoing experiencing of gender (Gendlin 2004a).⁵ I am interested in these bodily experiences,

4 Gendlin et al. (1968) use the term *speaking from* and emphasize the intricacy of language and body. See also Gendlin 2004c.

5 I see here a strong parallel to Roland Barthes' efforts to create a new form of writing that strives to abolish the “scientific gesture of writing about something” (Tholen 2008: 408, author's translation). Barthes, Tholen continues, “envisions [...] a writing in which the product is not separated from production.” “Barthes does not philosophize with an objectifying claim, but he thinks and writes in an explicitly subjective attitude. And he does not do this in a manner of an oeuvre, but in awareness of the provisionality, the momentariness, and the fragmentariness; entirely in accordance with his idea of a subjectivity that expresses itself and makes itself heard in the awareness of being *an I* and not *the* subject: consequently not the subject of an (‘arrogant, ideological’) discourse, but an individual with his own, peculiar desire and the desire to want to live according to nuance.” (Tholen 2008: 412, author's translation) In *Le Neutre* (2002), Barthes elaborates that for this kind of writing and living it is necessary to outplay, escape, or undo the paradigmatic binary oppositions that structure and produce meaning in bourgeois capitalist societies. Barthes wants to avoid the renewed

which are not yet categorized, and the processes of finding words for and thereby giving meaning to them, because on a general level they signal a change in the binary gender order as a paradigm.

Gendlin's philosophy of the implicit inspires the idea of Experiential Gender Research. Gendlin is not a gender researcher, nor is his work known to gender researchers, yet his approaches can serve to provide new impulses to the field of gender research. Following his philosophy of the implicit, it is possible to systematically refer to the body and lived experiences without falling back into essentialist notions of gender. Furthermore, with a focus on people's ongoing experiencing of their existence in the world, nuances and varieties of gendered being become visible and thus the transformation of the hegemonic gender order comes into view.

In the first section, I explain what I mean when I speak of the materiality of gender. I refer to Maihofer's (1995) concept of *gender as a mode of existence* and extend it with phenomenological assumptions about the material body (*Körper*) and the living body (*Leib*). In the second section, I then explain how the phenomenal quality of gender can be included in empirical research – without falling back into naturalizing or essentializing gender. At this point, Gendlin's philosophy of the implicit comes into play. What is special about Gendlin's approach is that he has not only sought answers to the question of how the new comes into the world, but has also developed methods that enable and support these processes of change. His work is characterized by a pendular movement between theory and practice. For Gendlin, philosophizing is connected to a certain form of practice. This harkens back to an ancient understanding of philosophy, which always included practices (Schoeller 2008: 387). For Gendlin, philosophy is a "phenomenological practice" (ibid.: 386), a particular form of dialogue that presupposes attentiveness – to oneself and to those with whom we dialogue. Moreover, it is a dialogue that acknowledges the creativity of language. In this dialogue, Gendlin changes the usual way of producing knowledge. He does not begin with what is already known to derive something new from it by logical combination; instead, he starts with that which is still unknown or unclear and which first shows itself bodily (like the empty shell), to let new insights come from it step by step (Deloch 2010; 2017). In the last section of this text, I explain how we can use Gendlin's method in gender research that aims to explore lived experiences that have not yet been categorized.

affirmation of the neutral, and thus does not define it, but sets out to find texts in which it takes place.

1. Gender as a Mode of Existence

When I say that the body has the potential to imply something about gendered ways of being in the world that is not yet represented by the existing symbolic order, I don't refer to a natural or ahistorical understanding of gender. By focusing on processes of experiencing one's gendered body, I take up Andrea Maihofer's concept of gender as a mode of existence (*Geschlecht als Existenzweise* 1995). This concept does not take gender to be a mode of essence or an expression of something internal; instead, gender is a mode of existence, and more exactly, a hegemonic mode of existence. It is hegemonic because individuals must orient themselves towards the dominant gender norms and subsequently comply with them to be an intelligible gender. They must embody a gender that precedes them. Gender, in this understanding, is thus a complex social practice. The social order is incorporated in this social practice, and subjects are disciplined and normalized (Demirović/Maihofer 2013: 11; Jäger/König/Maihofer 2013).⁶ However, as individuals strive to fulfill hegemonic demands – and this is central – these demands assume “material reality” in the individuals. From this perspective, an individual's gender is not only constantly being reproduced, but also, over time, takes on a specific form. Gender has a reality for the individual; it is and is lived as a mode of thinking, feeling, and doing (Ahmed 2006; Maihofer 1995; Moi 2015).

In this understanding, gender is not purely discursive. It exhibits a phenomenal quality. The phenomenal quality or materiality of gender can be determined by the physically visible and palpable body, which has clear boundaries and with which we can actively reach out into the environment. The body is vulnerable and finite. And above all, it is embedded in the symbolic order – as Scott and others have pointed out with reference to gender. For example, when we see a person with a penis, we naturally assume that this person is a man. We do not read the penis as a sign of femininity or womanhood.

However, our bodies consist not only of a surface that we can touch, but also of an interior that we feel and sense. Phenomenological approaches distinguish bodily senses (tingling, throbbing, pulling, warmth, cold, pulsation, swelling, moisture, ...) from emotions and these in turn from affects. All three, however, are characterized by the fact that we cannot control them. We are affected by them, or they seize us. Thus, we cannot easily distance ourselves from our bodily affective stirrings or

6 Furthermore, gender is assumed to be constitutively interwoven with class, ethnicity, and sexuality in individuals. However, these dimensions do not only form a unit, but they also “each unfold specific dynamics, contradictions and lines of division: subaltern men can be racist, sexist oppressed women can belong to the ruling class” (Demirović/Maihofer 2013: 11, author's translation). Therefore, it is important to consider the constitutive connection *and* autonomy of gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality in equal measure.

break through them. They are absolute, have a *subjective presence* (Lindemann 1993, author's translation), and are considered pre-reflexive in phenomenology. Bodily senses, emotions, and affects either appear or do not appear. And because they confront the individual with themselves, we are our lived body (*Leib*).

Though we understand this somatic or bodily affective dimension of gender as materiality, this does not entail the naturalization of gender. Everything that makes itself felt at the level of the body in the experiencing of the self is not understood as natural from an existentialist-phenomenological perspective, but as subjectively real and unquestionable (*unhintergebar*). From this perspective the central question is not where a sensation or a feeling comes from (for example, is it an instinct or culturally conditioned), but how a bodily sense, which I cannot escape, is effective in a concrete situation (Jäger 2004: 212). We are interested in the function of sensations and feelings.

2. Processes of Explicating the Implicit

So far, research on gender has primarily examined the historicity of bodily experiences. The central assumption is that the body, feelings, emotions, and affects are embedded in the symbolic order of society and in relations of power and domination. For example, the vulnerability of bodies is distributed very unequally in accordance with social positions (Butler 2009).⁷ The body is understood as a space or place “where a certain body knowledge becomes effective” (Jäger 2004: 212, author's translation). Thus, people experience their bodily selves according to the sexual body they have. Or, conversely, certain feelings and sensations signify the sexual body a person has (Jäger 2004: 146, author's translation). In phenomenological gender research, this close referential connection between material body (*Körper*) and lived and sensed body (*Leib*) is described as a social requirement. Furthermore, it is assumed that the gender order is so resistant to change primarily because it is materially anchored in bodies.

However, our feelings include not only the bodily stirrings that *fit* our gender, but also resentment of the gender order. “Discomfort with a given order,” writes Jäger, “[expresses itself] first and foremost bodily” (Jäger 2004: 221, author's translation). As Robert Gugutzer emphasizes “the corporeality of social actors [...] is the essential source of social change, since being perceptibly affected by social circumstances is typically the trigger for becoming active in action and changing the circumstances” (Gugutzer 2014: 102, author's translation). Feminist scholars have often described

7 The assumption of the historicity and sociality of experience is closely linked to feminist, queer, and postcolonial phenomenology's critique of the assumption of a universal bodily subject (Ahmed 2006; Beauvoir 1949; Irigaray 1980; Young 1990).

how their anger about prevailing conditions and androcentric forms of knowledge triggered new models of thinking and a different understanding of science. Thus, unpleasant feelings do not necessarily lead people to conclude that they must adapt to the social order. According to Jäger, the body is “a place of possible deviations” (Jäger 2004: 222, author’s translation). Moreover, dissatisfaction is not the only bodily condition that leads to criticism and change. As Roland Barthes suggests lust is also a “critical principle” (Barthes 1974: 78).

If we assume that both discomfort with the old and desire for the new are first felt physically, then the body seems to have a specific potential. Here lies the core of Gendlin’s philosophy of the implicit: The body can sense something that is not yet represented by the existing symbolic order. Every self, Gendlin argues, has a palpable bodily sense of what is meaningful to it in a situation, in addition to already formulated cognitions. Gendlin insists that, while language is always already at work in any situation, experience, and thought, at the same time, the body is never absorbed into pre-existing linguistic concepts or categorically limited by linguistic possibilities. The body is part of the symbolic order, and it is more than this symbolic order (more than what is already conceptualized linguistically). “The body,” Gendlin writes, “can always give more feedback to words than can ever be derived from concepts or forms or distinctions” (Gendlin 1993: 694). In living processes, there is always *something* that goes beyond pre-existing concepts and linguistic possibilities and can be perceived bodily.

The implicit meaning does not exist before or without language. [...] the human body is never before language. But the implied meaning is not the result only of language. The relation of language to the body is more intricate than just with or without. Your body understands well the language and the phrases it rejects. But it can generate a bodily implying that goes beyond what the already-shared common meanings could imply. The body knows the language, and it always moves on freshly again, beyond the already existing meanings. (Gendlin 2004a: 132)

With reference to Gendlin, we do not understand the implicit meaning as pre- or extra-linguistic. Experiencing is not a purely internal process, but always an experiencing in interaction with the world. At the same time, situations can be bodily experienced as meaningful in a specific way. Body, language, and situation are one in experiential thinking. The body is situation. Schoeller (2008) describes this as follows:

Instead of starting from the subject-object schema as the starting point of both theories of knowledge and objects, Gendlin sets ‘interaction first’ as the inescapable starting point (from which he develops subject and object). Instead

of starting with sense data, Gendlin starts with the concept of situation, in which perception and perceived first form an interdependent 'body-environment'. Instead of starting from a concept of experience, he shifts attention to the 'function' of experience, like the pragmatist orientation of James and Peirce. Instead of assuming causality as the basic mode of change, he assumes the principle of 'occurring into implying'. (Schoeller 2008: 392, author's translation)⁸

Phenomenology assumes an immediate relationship between the body and its environment. The link between the body and the socially structured environment is "affectively tinted" (Lindemann 1993: 33, author's translation). We always react to demands and questions of the environment on the bodily affective level. Following Gendlin, however, the reverse case must also be included: A situation changes according to how it feels to us.

The very word 'interaction' sounds as if first there are two, and only then is there an 'inter'. We seem to need two nouns first. [...] It is commonly said that each of our relationships brings out different traits in us, as if all possible traits were already in us, waiting only to be 'brought out.' But actually you affect me. And with me you are not just yourself as usual, either. You and I happening together makes us immediately different than we usually are. Just as my foot cannot be the walking kind of foot-pressure in water, we occur differently when we are environment of each other. How you are, when you affect me is already affected by me, and not by me as I usually am, but by me as I occur with you. We want to devise concepts to capture this exact aspect of 'interaction first': What each is within an interaction is already affected by the other. (Gendlin 1997: 30, cited after Schoeller 2011: 240)

This characterization of the relationship between body and environment is central to Gendlin's understanding of the body, which he primarily develops in *A Process Model* (Gendlin 1997). In this conception, the living body cannot be separated from its environment. Therefore, every change in the environment implies a change in the body and its condition and vice versa.

8 "Statt vom Subjekt-Objekt-Schema als Anfangspunkt sowohl der Erkenntnis- als auch der Gegenstandstheorie auszugehen, setzt Gendlin als unhintergehbaren Ausgangspunkt 'interaction first' (von wo aus er Subjekt und Objekt entwickelt). Statt mit Sinnesdaten zu beginnen, setzt Gendlin beim Begriff der Situation an, in der Wahrnehmung und Wahrgenommenes zunächst eine interdependente 'Körper-Umwelt' bilden. Statt von einem Konzept der Erfahrung auszugehen, verlegt er, ähnlich der pragmatistischen Ausrichtung von James und Peirce, die Aufmerksamkeit auf die 'Funktion' von Erfahrung. Statt Kausalität als Grundmodus der Veränderung anzunehmen, geht er von dem Prinzip 'occurring into implying' aus." (Schoeller 2008: 392)

Your situation and you are not two things, as if the external things were a situation without you. Nor is your bodily sense separate from the situation and merely internal. It is certainly not just an emotional reaction to the danger. It is that, but it also includes more of the intricacy of your situation than you can see or think. Your bodily ... *is* your situation. It is not a perceived object before you or even behind you. The body-sense *is* the situation, inherently an interaction, not a mix of two things. (Gendlin 1992: 347, emphasis in original)⁹

By means of this understanding of the body as an interaction process, Gendlin transcends the binary opposition of the subjective and the objective.

We could fashion a new sentence that is neither subjective, nor objective, nor both: The body *is* an interaction process with the environment, and therefore the body *is* its situations. The body isn't just a sealed thing here, with an external situation over there, which it merely interprets. Rather, even before we think and speak, the living body is already one interaction process with its situation. The situation is not out there, nor inside. The external 'things' and the subjective 'entities' are derived from one single life-interaction process (which they always bring along with them). (Gendlin 2004a, emphasis in original)

Because of this transcendence of a binary opposition of the subjective and the objective, we do not have to devalue bodily sensing as subjectivity, and we no longer have to contrast bodily sensing with the objective situation (Schoeller 2011).

Following Wittgenstein, who points out that the meaning of a word is its use in language, Gendlin emphasizes that language itself contains a creativity that is *more-than-logical*. Language is not only viewed in terms of its function of reference and representation. It has a potential for creativity. Whenever a term is applied in a concrete situation, the meaning of that term intersects with the situation and changes accordingly. In this conception, speaking is to be understood as a bodily process. Gendlin emphasizes the responsive use of language. That is, whether an expression is true or not is to be measured by the specific sensory reaction of the speaker to their own expression. The terminology or turn of phrase speakers use to express something affects not only whoever they are speaking to but also the speakers themselves. When one pays attention to implicit meanings, that is, to what exactly someone means by using a certain word, a metaphor, an image, a color, [...], "an almost inexhaustible bodily alphabet" (Schoeller 2011: 242, author's translation) appears.

9 Gendlin uses the dots ... to express that the bodily sense of something or a situation "refuses a conceptual generalization and yet flows into any expression as situational awareness" (Schoeller 2008: 388, author's translation).

One senses 'quadratic empty boxes' that 'hurt.' 'Knots' that 'crowd,' 'thick walls' that separate the living from the dead; one feels 'unfriendliness,' the feeling of 'being unwanted,' 'inner insecurity,' but also energy, the 'good feeling' of 'not being alone'; one feels a specific 'connectedness'; one feels something 'cuttingly painful,' one feels something 'gray.' (Schoeller 2011: 242, author's translation)¹⁰

Gendlin locates this bodily situational sensation between the conscious and the unconscious. It "is the layer of the unconscious that is likely to surface next" (Gendlin 1998: 37). Since there was no term for this area "in-between," Gendlin introduced a new, idiosyncratic word for it: the *Felt Sense*. By means of this coinage he "seeks to fill a conceptual gap that circumscribes a situational 'knowing' that we cannot 'make', synthesize, or construct, but at most evolve"¹¹ (Schoeller 2008: 388). In processes of exploring the *Felt Sense*/the implicit meaning of an issue, the coherence of an expression is checked with reference to one's own experiencing. If there is a congruence of bodily experience and its expression, something is felt that Gendlin calls *Felt Shift*, a bodily *Yes, that's how it is!* that is also often connected with reactions visible from the outside, such as exhaling, relaxing, smiling, a letting go of the whole body.

Gendlin is not saying that the gut knows better. He argues against separating head and gut and focusses on the "intricacy" of linguistic categories and experienced meaning as a source (Geuter 2015). The goal is congruence, where a person can say, *this is how it is*. A feeling of coherence only arises when thoughts and body are congruent with each other. The central point is that, when this congruence is achieved, only the person themselves can feel and decide. "The body cannot be read like a language, and we cannot look up the meaning of bodily sensations in an encyclopedia." (Ibid.: 99, author's translation) But it is possible to accompany people (interviewees, clients) throughout the "process of exploration" (ibid., author's translation). Schoeller calls the back and forth between expression (language) and what is to be expressed (experience, feeling, *Felt Sense*) "phenomenological reflexivity" (Schoeller 2008: 386, author's translation). It is about a sensitivity to the reciprocal effects. The relationship between what I have to say and what I say is subtle but experiential. Finally, Gendlin presents the expression of lived experiences as an ongoing process. The explicated is not identical with the implicit. That which is bodily felt in the form of the *Felt Sense*,

10 "Man spürt 'quadratische leere Schachteln', die 'weh tun'. 'Knoten', die 'drängen', 'dicke Mauern', die Lebendiges von Totem trennen; man spürt 'Unfreundlichkeit', das Gefühl von 'Unerwünschtsein', 'innerliche Unsicherheit', aber auch Energie, das 'gute Gefühl', 'nicht alleine zu sein'; man spürt eine spezifische 'Verbundenheit'; man spürt etwas 'schneidend Schmerzhaftes', man spürt etwas 'Graues.'" (Schoeller 2011: 242)

11 "Gendlins Wortprägung des 'felt sense' möchte eine begriffliche Lücke füllen, die ein situatives 'Wissen' umschreibt, das wir nicht 'machen', synthetisieren oder konstruieren können, sondern höchstens weiterentwickeln." (Schoeller 2008: 388)

and which one wants to say, is developed further by being expressed: It is carried forward. The experience guides the choice of words, but at that moment, the experience also changes.

In accordance with these theoretical considerations, Experiential Gender Research does not seek to bring to light what is hidden or buried. It is not a “discovery of truth.” This kind of exploration does not investigate experience *per se* but the processes of expressing (e.g., finding words, movements, sounds, pictures for) the meaning of one’s gendered mode of existence with reference to bodily experiences. This kind of explication of how people experience their gender in concrete situations leads to new experiences. Subjects transform and transcend themselves in these processes of explication. This “series of subjectivities” (Foucault 1996: 85) emerges through different experiences in each case and can therefore never be considered complete.¹² Experiential Gender Research supports these processes.

3. Doing Experiential Gender Research

If we understand the living body as an ongoing, unfinished process whose stubbornness possesses an emancipatory potential (Landweer/Marcinski 2016), we become increasingly aware of both the structural boundedness of gendered modes of existence and transformations of gender and gender relations. In this understanding of gender, how a person perceives and assumes the gender they have become and what it means for that person to be a particular gender in certain situations remain open questions. For example, women experience exposure to male violence as women, and this experience is reflected in their habitus. However, it is also very likely that this experience is not shared by all women and that it is experienced differently – depending on their social, sexual, and racialized position. This is where Experiential Gender Research comes in and asks: How do subjects experience (*Erleben*) the experience (*Erfahrung*) of fear – regardless of whether it is justified or not and whether discourses generate it.

General questions that Experiential Gender Research seeks to answer are: How do people experience their gendered mode of existence in any given societal context? What meaning does it have for somebody to be a certain gender in concrete situations? How is gender constituted in lived experiences and in its entanglement with

12 “An experience is something,” Foucault says in an interview with Ducio Trombadori, “from which one emerges changed” (Foucault 1996: 24, author’s translation). He understands the writing of his own books as an experience that has changed both him and what he thinks, as well as the readers of his books. “An experience is always a fiction, something self-fabricated that did not exist before and then suddenly does.” (Foucault 1996: 30, author’s translation) In that sense, an experience is neither true nor false.

other dimensions of existence (class, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, health, age, religion)? Because subjects experience themselves as gendered through this bodily lived dimension, to what extent does this dimension present itself as a condition for transforming gender orders?

In the final section that follows, I address “the material” we need to answer these research questions. In literature, film, theater, music, dance, and art we find many examples of the articulation of bodily implied meanings.¹³ They not only represent multiple bodily experiences but also produce them in processes of reading and reception. Aesthetic-literary and aesthetic-musical forms of experience allow barely spoken and articulated experiential dimensions of sexuality, desire, and corporeality to be experienced and made visible (Meizel 2020; Patch/König 2018; Roth 2016; Wolf 2018). The reality first produced by literary language and correspondingly aesthetic-sensual signs can be understood as material that helps to explicate the bodily implied meaning about one’s self and one’s desire that is not available in everyday language. At the same time, aesthetic experience has a transformative potential with respect to gender and sexuality, because it mobilizes the desire for a reality that must first be produced (Klein 2017; Tholen 2008; Wolf 2019). “Literature,” writes Toni Tholen, “is the medium of a fundamental openness.” It poses the questions of meaning and existence “in a non-generalized and i.e. undogmatic way” and answers these questions “tentatively, playfully, imaginatively, but also hesitantly, skeptically” (Tholen 2008: 395, author’s translation).¹⁴ Literature and art transcend and exceed the learned and available patterns of interpretation for classifying one’s experienced gender. For example, contemporary literature since the late 20th century shows an increasing concentration on precisely those gendered modes of existence that have not yet been provided for, articulated, and made visible in the social gender order. These gendered modes of existence gain aesthetic form with the help of metaphors,

13 The following remarks on bodily experiences in literature and art are taken from the proposal of the Research Training Group *Gender as Experience. Constitution and Transformation of Social Ways of Existence*, which is financed by the German Research Foundation (DFG). The proposal was jointly written by Walter Erhart, Oliver Flügel-Martinsen, Valerie Kastrup, Tomke König, Petra Kolip, Diana Lengersdorf, Julia Roth, Rainer Schützeichel, Heidemarie Winkel, and Benedikt Wolf.

14 “Es sieht so aus, als ob die Literatur, gerade weil sie Fragen des Sinns, des Leben- und Existierenkönnens auf eine nicht verallgemeinerte und d. h. undogmatische Weise stellt und tentativ, spielerisch, phantasierend, aber auch zögernd und skeptisch beantwortet, gegenwärtig am ehesten die Aufmerksamkeit auch von Wissenschaftlern angrenzender Disziplinen auf sich zöge. Denn die Literaturwissenschaft ist das Medium einer grundsätzlichen Offenheit. In ihm bewahrt und realisiert sich immer wieder das Gelingen wie das Scheiternkönnen eines gelebten Lebens, und auch der Akt des Lesens und Schreibens ist in ihm stets der Kontingenz, der Endlichkeit und Vorläufigkeit verbunden und damit der Immanenz des Lebens selbst.” (Tholen 2008: 395).

images, rhetorical figures, literary utopias, and dystopias, as well as experimental collages and riddles.¹⁵

Compared to the rich material of literature and art and the research that has been undertaken on the articulation of bodily experiences in literature, film, theater, music, dance, and art, social science is still at the very beginning. Though sociology (of the body) emphasizes the potentials of one's own and the examined body as a source of knowledge (Gugutzer 2017) and the biographical-narrative interview is considered particularly suitable for body-related questions (Abraham 2017b; Abraham/Müller 2010), it is still an open question whether and if so how we can gain access to the bodily experience of social actors (Klein 2017). In this context, Schoeller asks: "How is it possible to sensitively grasp entire situations and/or specific aspects of them? How are those woven sensibilities of unique complexity possible that world literature has lived by and given expression to over the centuries?" (Schoeller 2011: 235, author's translation)

While third parties can describe bodies based on observation, this is impossible for lived experiences and bodily senses. To learn something about the meaning that a situation or issue has for someone on the bodily level, we need descriptions from the people who are experiencing them.¹⁶ In phenomenology, lived or bodily experiences are considered challenging to investigate empirically because they are pre-reflexive and systematically removed from consciousness. The problem is seen in the fact that the body "reaches into dimensions of life and experience that lie before language" (Abraham 2017a: 457, author's translation). Another facet is our inability to vocalize certain things about the body, which arises both from the fact that the body is all too familiar to be accessible, and because, from a "psychoanalytic perspective, the body is a phenomenon that has been and continues to be subject to massive processes of cultural splitting off, repression, and taboo" (Abraham 2017a: 458, author's translation). The researcher's task is to offer an interpretation that brings these hidden aspects to light. I followed this approach for a long time; however, I found it an increasingly unsatisfactory way of doing sociology, because the structure-bound elements of gendered modes of existence were usually foregrounded. I rarely discovered anything new using this approach.

In following Gendlin's approach, bodily experiences can be qualitatively determined. It is not easy or natural for most people to turn to the bodily implied meaning of an issue, mainly because they are alienated from their lived experiences due to hegemonic judgments and evaluations. However, Gendlin assumed that in principle everyone can turn to their bodily senses and that there are conditions that make referring to the implicit meaning of issues possible.

15 Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2017), Kim de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch* (2022), Sasha Marianna Salzmann's *Außer Sich* (2017).

16 This is one reason why Gendlin calls his approach *first-person-science*.

Here is an example from a familiar human process: Consider how you ordinarily speak. When you are ready to say *something*, you say it in a few sentences. But if others invite you further, or you think further alone, “*it*” can expand on and on. Then it (what you were ready to say) turns out to have had a great many strands and parts. Some of what comes surprises you. Did that all already exist in your *readiness* to speak? Surely not, and yet in some way it was there. The incomplete way it was there I call “*implicit*”. (Gendlin 2012: 4, emphasis in original)

With *Focusing* (Gendlin 1978) and *Thinking at the Edge* (Gendlin 2004b), there are two systematic and learnable techniques for experience-based conversations whose elements can be transferred to conducting and analyzing qualitative interviews. These techniques allow the bodily implied meaning of an issue to be made explicit in a twofold sense. On the one hand, it becomes possible to explicitly name what researchers have so far only done intuitively in qualitative interviews when trying to follow and understand their interviewees. On the other hand, experiential interviewing offers concrete instructions to support an interviewee in grasping the implicit, and thus to broach the *something* that first and foremost makes itself felt bodily at the border between the conscious and the unconscious. To make words come, we must keep sensing what we have ready to say. The words are not yet there for what we want to say but we have them “in a bodily way. The readiness to speak is an implying. It implies something that comes next. If you give it permission, it will make actual sentences. Speaking is one way of ‘*explicating*’. Actual events can *explicate* the implicit” (Gendlin 2012: 4, emphasis in original).

The central task of researchers/interviewers is to open a space in which it is possible for the interviewees to explore themselves. The researchers accompany the interviewees in this exploration. They follow everything that is said empathically and acknowledge it unconditionally. The goal is to support the process of expressing the implicit in an open-ended way.

In an experience-based interview, metaphors and initial formulations are a starting point for further exploration. The focus is primarily on the new things that are significant for the interviewee around the respective topic. The interviewee is accompanied in formulating the topic and all that is connected to it for themselves in a fresh way, as it is currently relevant for them.

In her methodological notes “on bridging the hiatus” between the pre-linguistic and the linguistic, Abraham refers to the special significance of metaphors. She speaks of preverbal “forms of symbolization that are particularly suited to building bridges between the structures of meaning” (Abraham 2017a: 468, author’s translation), which includes, in addition to metaphors, poetic speech, images, sounds, smells, and dreams. She notes that what she calls “research subjects” use these forms of symbolization to give expression to the realm between the conscious and the unconscious: “Research subjects often use forms of language and emotional as well as

bodily modes of articulation that belong to the realm between the conscious and the unconscious, or between rationality and affectivity/consciousness, and thus provide significant points of contact for opening up latent layers of meaning.” (Ibid.) At the same time, she points out that the researcher can make targeted offers to stimulate such expressions: “[I]n the research process, targeted offers can be made to stimulate or envision memories and narratives via preverbal perceptions and preverbal forms of expression” (ibid.). For Gendlin, what is revealed here is not only understood as memory. He understands the bodily sense as implicit meaning, through which the actualizing tendency of a self shows itself. If the implicit meaning is made explicit, something is “carried forward.” In the form of a metaphorical description (“This is kind of like [...]”) the language barrier is broken – something new is expressed. In this way, it is also possible to explore retrospectively how someone (an interviewee) feels concerning this situation, which ambivalences are perceptible, which impulses for change become noticeable, what prevents them from following these impulses, and what supports them in giving space to their developmental desires. Coherent meanings and impulses for change can be explored and explicated beyond the structure-bound order. The coherence of a bodily sense and an expression can only be checked and confirmed by the person who has made the respective expression. The interviewer’s task is to ask whether what was said corresponds to the felt meaning of the interviewee’s experience.

After conducting interviews, the central task of the researcher is to draw structural and general conclusions about the individual that has emerged in the interviews. Experiences are individual because we have them alone, but we can also only have them if they elude pure subjectivity and are linked to a “collective practice” (Michel Foucault). Researchers are therefore “tracing the movements of the ‘something’” (Schirmer 2010: 70, author’s translation) that has become visible. Guiding questions are: How does this *something* come to exist? Under what conditions will this *something* “take on the quality of the ‘real’ (and if so, for whom, in what way, with what stability)” (ibid., author’s translation)? And finally, “under what conditions is it actually able to make a difference” (ibid.: 411)? Answering these questions, Experiential Gender Research aims to develop a precise vocabulary for what cannot be said, thought, and felt in the binary gender order so that it can be understood by those who do not have these experiences. In this way, the structures of the lived and embodied realities and experiences of modes of existence should become recognizable.

To conclude, I will summarize the central ideas of Experiential Gender Research. Experiential Gender Research wants to make visible the already lived but not yet explicated ways of being gendered in the world. It does not focus on the body to look for natural or buried aspects of gender. Instead, it aims to learn more about how people are experiencing their gendered modes of existence and how they develop new meanings for them with reference to bodily senses. There is *something* at “the threshold of awareness” (Rogers 1977) that can only be developed by the person themselves

to give new meanings to their gendered being. These new meanings for one's gendered being do not already exist; they are not merely waiting to be decoded or interpreted. It is one of the distinctive features of Gendlin's thinking to point this out. This is the more-than-logical of which he speaks. In the interplay of the reference to *something* and the attempt to express it, the implicit but not yet nameable becomes explicit. The research is thus directed towards the implicit, the vague, the difficult to say.

In this way, the researcher's view is detached from the binary order. Instead of finding only narrowness or expanse in experiences of gender, for example, and then connoting this binary structure in turn as female or male, the gaze is directed towards the diversity of implied meanings of gender.¹⁷ Echoing Roland Barthes, we could also say that with nuancing as an organizing principle, the binary paradigm has been outplayed, escaped, or even undone (Barthes 2002). Gendlin's theory and practice of the implicit provides a tool for thinking beyond the existing categories of gender, for thinking differently, and for feeling ourselves in our diversity. Which patterns will emerge remains to be seen. Ultimately, Experiential Gender Research aims to enable the description of the conditions under which schemes of distinction take on new meanings. Through this, we would gain access to the richness of nuances in our experiences that are easily overlooked by processes of abstraction. Through this, the diversity of the logics of self and world relations, as well as the aspects of gendered modes of existence that do not merge into the binary order – that resist it, expand it, and change it – become visible.

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17 Kinsey's (Kinsey et al. 1967) extensive study of sexuality in the United States in the 1950s provides a good example of what can become visible with a similarly broadened view. Against the background of a surprising range of sexual practices, preferences, and orientations, a categorization of the population into homosexuals and heterosexuals ends up making little sense.

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