



WHAT FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY HAS TO OFFER TO REFLEXIVE MIGRATION STUDIES

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Abstract

This paper investigates the normative, epistemological, and methodological challenges of achieving reflexivity in migration studies, and it suggests a better engagement with feminist epistemology as a solution to these challenges. Specifically, it argues that feminist standpoint theory and the situated knowledge paradigm can contribute to critically interrogating key concepts in the field and avoiding reproducing power structures. While this argument is not new in itself, rare are the explicit demonstrations and detailed analyses of the positionality of the researcher and its impact on research. This paper presents an example of a research design that focused on a social problem that affects society as a whole, intimate partner violence (IPV), and the ways in which it cuts across issues related to migration. Instead of taking migrant-related categories as its entry point, it took Swiss institutional responses to IPV as its object of study. The study was based upon an extensive ethnography in three institutions responsible for IPV: a police emergency unit, a women's shelter and a medicolegal centre in a French-speaking Swiss canton. This paper demonstrates that by shifting the gaze from 'migrants' to the social and administrative contexts that mark them as such, we can study migration-related issues without reproducing the normative categories that reflexive migration studies aims to deconstruct.

Kew words

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1. Introduction

Calls for greater reflexivity within migration studies have been increasing in recent years, so much so that some talk of a ‘reflexive turn’ in the studies of migration and mobility (Nieswand & Drotbohm, 2014). Some scholars question methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Others argue for the de-migranticisation of research on migration and integration (Dahinden, 2016). Still others suggest denaturalising (Amelina & Faist, 2012) and critically reviewing (Dahinden, 2016; Korteweg, 2017; Schinkel, 2018) the categories commonly used in migration research. They argue that too often the distinction between ‘categories of social practice’—including *migrants* and *integration*, but also *asylum*, *refugee* and others—and ‘categories of analysis’ becomes blurred, leading to mistaking emic administrative categories for etic analytical tools (Brubaker, 2013). It has also been argued that it is especially necessary to take into consideration the power relations embedded in knowledge production about migration, because the struggle over the inclusion and exclusion of members in a given society lies at the heart of the phenomenon under study (Horvath, Amelina, & Peters, 2017).

While these theoretical and/or methodological calls to incorporate more reflexivity into migration studies and to take power relations into consideration are increasing, how exactly this reflexivity can be achieved in practice remains unclear. In this paper, I address three of these challenges: the normative, the epistemological, and the methodological. These challenges are amongst those to be addressed by the European Sociological Association’s Research Network in Sociology of Migration in its Towards Reflexivity in Migration Studies conference in January 2021 at the Technical University Berlin¹. According to the conference organisers, *normative challenges* refers to the difficulty of treating a politically charged public problem that is highly present in public discourse, debated with the use of racialised terms, and represented in racialised ways by the media. On the one hand, if scholars are to produce useful knowledge for the current challenges faced by authorities and society at large, they need to discuss these issues in ways that are consonant with the socio-political landscape of the moment. On the other hand, they must be careful not to reproduce normative political discourses and categories that reinforce hegemonic power relations. The *epistemological challenge* is related to the foundations of migration research and the ways in which researchers’ positionality impacts the interpretation of their empirical findings, particularly because researchers are generally highly educated members of the middle class with little personal experience of the regimes of control and discrimination they investigate. Related to this is the *methodological challenge* of avoiding reproducing power relations and systems of domination in a context in which most research on migration has produced knowledge ‘about’ and not ‘with’ so-called migrants.²

To address these issues in practice, some scholars have suggested a better engagement with feminist epistemology in the field of migration studies (Abji, Korteweg, & Williams, 2019; Amelina & Lutz, 2019; Dahinden, Fischer, & Menet, 2020). In this paper, I make transparent my own personal experience and its impact on my research practice in order to offer a concrete demonstration of what such an engagement can look like. I first describe feminist standpoint theory and the situated knowledge paradigm. I then argue that feminist epistemology’s call for research projects that adopt ‘research principles and practices that are both intellectually alert to and sensitive about what disadvantaged groups want to know’ (Harding & Norberg, 2005: 2011) can serve as a guiding principle to help us meet these challenges and put into practice the reflexivity that migration studies researchers have so

¹ <https://www.europeansociology.org/research-networks/rn35-sociology-migration>

² https://www.europeansociology.org/sites/default/files/public/PDFs/RN35_midterm2020_conference_theme.pdf

often called for. Finally, I offer an example of what a migration-related research project that adheres to this epistemology can look like. Using the example of a recent project that focused on a widely recognised problem for society as a whole—intimate partner violence (IPV)—and the ways in which it cuts across issues related to migration (Khazaei, 2019), I demonstrate how feminist epistemology helps shift the gaze from ‘migrants’ to the social and administrative contexts that mark certain people as such, and how it allows us to study migration-related issues without reproducing the normative categories that reflexive migration studies aims to deconstruct (Abji, Korteweg, & Williams, 2019; Amelina & Lutz, 2019; Amelina & Faist, 2012; Dahinden, Fischer, & Menet, 2020; Nieswand & Drotbohm, 2014).

2. Knowledge and Power

In line with other postpositivist approaches, feminist epistemology cautions against the pretence of neutrality and objectivity in knowledge production (Harding, 1986). Feminist scholars have interrogated the conventional standards of what is considered ‘good’ science (Harding & Norberg, 2005), arguing that such standards, though intended to generate impartial research by distancing it from the researcher’s personal values, which are perceived as biases, in fact work to hide the researcher’s positionality (Harding & Norberg, 2005). In their attempts to produce objective and neutral knowledge, scholars have in fact produced knowledge that is situated in a position they are unaware of (Haraway, 1988). Consequently, a wide range of themes, subjects, and lives have been overlooked by academic knowledge production, including the lives and experiences of women (Harding & Norberg, 2005) and racialised minorities (Hill Collins, 1989).

Harding and Norberg (2005) have argued that value-free research is both unachievable and undesirable. Critical studies of the history of science have shown that denials of the close relationship between knowledge and power do not suppress that relationship, and that a refusal to acknowledge that relationship merely entails a denial of responsibility for perpetuating it (Haraway, 1988). Conventional standards of objective and positivist knowledge produce knowledge that is ‘unlocatable, and so irresponsible’, in the sense that it is ‘unable to be called into account’ (Haraway, 1988, p. 583). Positionlessness paradoxically implies that one is the sole knower in a given situation (Haraway, 1991). Haraway suggests that a better understanding of the social world is only possible through the adoption of a partial perspective, and that overall knowledge can only be a result of the accumulation of the ‘bits and pieces’ that different researchers with different standpoints and experiences produce (Haraway, 1988, p. 590).

Standpoint theory (Harding, 1991) and the situated knowledge paradigm (Haraway, 1988) are two interrelated strands of feminist epistemology. Standpoint theory holds that researchers need to recognise the specific positions from which they see and write (Harding, 1991) and should consider all knowledge as situated (Haraway, 1988). Consequently, the only way to produce more honest and transparent knowledge is to situate the viewpoints and experienced lives of researchers by interpreting the outcomes of their studies in their historical, social, and political contexts (Harding, 1986).

The question that arises, then, is this: what does a research project that adheres to this epistemology look like? Harding and Norberg (2005, p. 2012) call for attentiveness to the power differences in the research processes themselves ‘in terms of who defines the research project. Who defines what counts as a problematic situation? Whose concepts, questions, and hypotheses are the focus of research? Whose theories and methods of producing knowledge are favoured?’ Sensitive about producing knowledge useful to disadvantaged groups, these research projects prioritise ‘studying up’ (Nader, 1969)—that is, ‘studying the powerful, their institutions, policies, and practices instead of focusing only on those whom the powerful govern’ (Harding & Norberg, 2005, p. 2011). Such research helps to further our

understanding of how ‘our lives are governed not primarily by individuals but more powerfully by institutions, conceptual schemes, and their “texts”’ (Harding & Norberg, 2005, p. 2011). It targets social policies, sometimes directly, and deploys the power of science on behalf of disadvantaged groups (Harding & Norberg, p. 2005). Such projects include critical ethnographies whose objectives extend beyond description to pursuing the goal of understanding ‘social life in order to change the way that those in power marginalise those with less power’ (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 236; see also Bailey, 1996, p. 25; Sleeter, 1996).

What can standpoint theory and the situated knowledge paradigm offer, and how they can be put into practice in the field of migration studies? What kinds of answers and strategies can feminist epistemology provide to produce critical knowledge on migration? As mentioned before, these questions are tackled increasingly in the field of migrations studies (Abji, Korteweg, & Williams, 2019; Amelina & Lutz, 2019; Dahinden, Fischer, & Menet, 2020). This paper contributes to this discussion by presenting a research project that applied the principles of feminist epistemology to the institutional treatment of a migration-related social problem in Switzerland. Before elaborating upon the epistemological and methodological details of the research design, I provide an overview of its general objectives and main findings.

3. Investigating the Swiss Institutional Treatment of Intimate Partner Violence

Starting from the observation that state actors name, frame, and treat IPV differently depending on whether it involves individuals identified as Swiss/European nationals or (non-European) migrants—and this despite the fact that it concerns the same social problem, is handled by the same institutions, and involves people living in the same territory—the research project I present here was guided by the following research question: what assumptions and procedures made this differential treatment possible? This project thus investigates how institutions and their agents reproduce the mechanisms of othering in their otherwise benevolent activities to support victims of IPV. Institutional actors name, frame, and treat IPV as either a psychological/individual-based phenomenon or a cultural/gendered problem depending on their perceptions of their service users. To understand how this double standard is put in place and the institutional mechanisms that facilitate the reproduction of these logics of othering, I conducted an extended ethnography. The study traces the journey of women who experience IPV, both Swiss nationals and those categorised as migrants, from the moment they come into contact with state institutions responsible for supporting victims. The study was based upon extensive fieldwork in three public institutions responsible for combatting IPV: a police emergency unit, a women’s shelter and a medicolegal centre in a French-speaking canton in Switzerland. The fieldwork involved four months of extensive immersion in each of the three institutions between 2014 and 2016. Observations, informal ethnographic interviews, and formal expert interviews were the main methods of data collection.

This investigation found that the institutions in question employ a dual framing in regard to the role of gender in IPV and use it to justify and legitimise different practices for Swiss nationals and migrants. For IPV in general, a politics of silence regarding the gendered dimensions of IPV prevails in the studied institutions, which results in de-gendering the problem and portraying it as an individual and interpersonal phenomenon. In cases of IPV involving Swiss nationals, these institutions ignore a sociological reading—according to which IPV is a highly gendered phenomenon that can be exacerbated by structural risk factors such as socioeconomic difficulties and precarious legal status—in favour of a psychological reading (see Cardi, 2015, p.16) that emphasises the individual characteristics, personal

vulnerabilities, and biographical histories of the victims and perpetrators. The narrative of violence is often interpreted as a series of unique experiences rather than symptoms of gendered domination. This process of de-gendering IPV takes different forms in different institutions. In the case of the shelter, which has contact exclusively with victims and is committed to offering practical help and support at a reasonable cost, this framing lends itself to psychological and individual-based solutions such as psychotherapy. In the case of the police and the medicolegal centre, by searching for evidence and focusing on bodily injuries at the expense of other forms of violence, the definitional frontier of violence is redrawn so that it is ultimately associated exclusively with physical violence. In the process, IPV becomes the subject of public action against physical and incidental violence. Consequently, its structural dimensions, manifested in gendered power relations and men's coercive control over their female partners—which featured in its original definition as a form of violence against women—become ignored. This again contributes to the silencing of gendered power relations and renders IPV a gender-neutral form of physical violence no different from other forms of interpersonal violence.

The framing of IPV involving so-called migrants (i.e. non-Europeans)³ differs significantly. This framing names, explains, and processes IPV cases as a gendered problem symptomising masculine domination. But this framing appears only via the mobilisation of these migrants' 'culture': IPV is framed as resulting from the gendered power relations that are supposedly inherent in non-European cultures. This study demonstrates that the discourses of public agents contain references to an imaginary 'elsewhere' that can vary in terms of its siting and boundaries, but which is considered to entail a certain culture that is more violent towards women, or even in general, than its 'European' counterpart. This discursive differentiation results in practical consequences, leading to differences in how these institutions process IPV cases, despite the fact that there is a uniform public policy on IPV. As Mahmood insightfully demonstrates in *Politics of Piety* (2005), the importance of a given discourse and the practices it engenders must be sought beyond their meanings for the speakers who affirm them. Specifically, their importance lies in the work they perform in shaping individuals and orienting their acts, sometimes even unconsciously. In the cases investigated in this study, the discourse state agents employ performs the act of distinguishing between us and them. In other words, when it is assumed from the outset that the ways in which different groups of people act violently or react to violence can be distinguished, then the differential handling of these acts is perceived as both natural and legitimate. This study shows that different lenses are used to interpret a similar problem, depending on the categories of the population involved (Volpp, 2000, 2001). The logic of psychologisation and individualisation behind the general framing of IPV, which is applied in cases involving Swiss or European nationals, is replaced by the logic of culture in cases involving migrants, treating them not as individuals, but as representatives of their community (Volpp, 2000). This double standard, implemented through different institutional and professional logics, makes gender-based analysis an instrument of differentiation that racialises IPV.⁴ It makes IPV a problem that first and foremost pertains to migrants rather than a social problem that, as a significant body of research has demonstrated, is transversal to all social milieus and regions of the world. The same problem, sometimes the very same acts of violence, are read as more or less serious depending on who committed or threatened to commit them. These different readings thus manufacture a difference that in turn serves to justify the differential treatment of migrants with regard to IPV, ultimately contributing to the othering of this category of people.

³ Although some of these individuals are Swiss citizens, they may still be considered migrants because of their migrant background.

⁴ This finding confirms yet again what has been widely recognised for decades about the use of gender discourse in processes of othering (e.g. Nader, 1989; Abu-Lughod, 2013; Guénif-Souilamas & Macé, 2004; Hamel, 2005; Korteweg, 2017).

4. Applying Feminist Epistemology to a Migration-Related Research Project

How did feminist epistemology contribute to designing a research project that is reflexive, and that avoids reaffirming the normatively charged category of *migrant* as a fundamentally different and specific object of study?

Often perceived as a migrant myself, in my field research I attempted to take advantage of opportunities that arose because of this perception as possible sources of critical insight. Instead of examining differences between IPV cases that are related to migration status, as would have been the case in more classical research in migration studies, I focused on the activity of categorisation, in Asad's (2017) sense, and the act of differentiation. Instead of taking differences in IPV cases involving Swiss nationals and so-called migrants for granted, I asked whether the difference under consideration is based on actual and empirical conditions or is derived from a racialised understanding of migration.

To demonstrate how exactly feminist epistemology helps in analysing or deconstructing normative and hegemonic discourses about migration, in the next section I first trace parallels in my experiences and perspectives, illustrating how I perceived my research object and how I was perceived by the protagonists I encountered in my fieldwork. This reflexivity with regard to my personal experiences demonstrates how my research produced situated knowledge. These parallels were constitutive not only of my research questions, but also of the methods and field sites I chose.

It has been widely demonstrated that ethnographic knowledge is inevitably mediated by the ethnographer's particular characteristics: their gender and class, pre-existing knowledge and personal commitments, analytical interests, and so on (Clifford & Marcus, 2008; Denzin, 1997; Fabian, 1983). What is it like, then, to be perceived as an Iranian migrant woman living in Switzerland who wants to conduct an ethnography of institutional responses to IPV against women in the context of migration?

5. Clarification of My Standpoint

Following my arrival from Iran in 2007, I vividly remember my surprise and even shock on encountering media representations of Iran in my new country of residence. I realised that media representations of any issue involving Iran, from its nuclear program to women's mandatory wearing of the hijab, always showed women in black chadors in the streets of Qom, a small town whose sole significance is that it hosts a theological university. There was no trace of Tehran and its politico-sociocultural dynamics, and I was unable to recognise my own life experience and what I knew of the life experiences of others connected to me in Iran. I frequently found myself explaining to my Swiss friends and acquaintances the gap between what was perceived here to be the life of young women in Iran under its Islamic government and my own experiences. I felt it necessary to explain that what they saw in the media was a very conservative and radical fraction of political and religious reality in Iran, and that the hijab was far from being the most important aspect of the social inequalities in women's lives there.

I began to realise that what bothered me was that the critiques of social issues in Iran formulated within Swiss/European public debates did not correspond to the formulations of Iranian activists. I perceived these critiques not as innocent manifestations of solidarity with progressive social movements in Iran, but as the outcome of a homogenisation and distortion of the realities of the political and social context of Iran to fit with a specific rhetoric of othering. I perceived these accounts as stigmatising and condescending homogenisations of Iran that ignored all of its socio-historical complexity. Accordingly, Iran was constructed as inferior to Switzerland in terms of women's status, social justice, and freedom, whatever those terms mean; and this construction was used to justify the unspoken and undeclared superiority of

Europe (or Switzerland), sometimes expressed through trivial words that were intended by the tellers to be neutral statements of fact and not stigmatising or racist claims. What most disturbed me was that the belief that the situation in Switzerland was surely better than that in Iran in all ways, especially for women, was prevalent in not only the media and the public's common sense, but also academic circles.

My relocation to Switzerland caused me to become aware of the distance between how I perceive myself, my country of origin, and my social status and how other people saw me. It also rendered explicit the processes of categorisation that underlie the category of *migrant* and the representations that often accompany it. Being categorised as a migrant and having experiences that differ from those of non-migrant researchers cannot automatically be assumed to grant one some kind of epistemic privilege (see Harding, 2004, p. 9). However, as Brah (1996, p. 207) suggests, it can serve to create a space and a vantage point in which an understanding of the processes of othering can be more readily accessible. Haraway explains that these positionings are 'not exempt from critical re-examination, decoding, deconstruction, and interpretation' (1988, p. 584). 'Rather, a standpoint is an achievement' (Harding 2004, p. 9), and one must learn how to use it and the opportunities arising from it as sources of critical insights into how dominant categories are constructed.

I believe that my experience influenced my decision to reverse the perspective in my approach to the study of IPV. Instead of starting from a common belief regarding the existence of cultural differences (and resulting in culturalist approaches to IPV), I decided to deconstruct this widely held belief. Looking from this personal vantage point as someone who is categorised as a migrant woman, and in alignment with the premises of feminist epistemology and critical ethnography, I sought to be attentive to what other (migrant or non-migrant) women who were victims of IPV would experience in their encounters with public institutions. Instead of focusing on pre-given categories of people, I focused on institutional responses and their consequences for the services received by women who sought them. Furthermore, I did not focus on the subjectivity of individual public agents, but instead on those agents' actions and the consequences thereof, as well as on their professional and institutional standpoints. Another researcher with a different interest may have focused instead on attempting to understand the reasons and individual meanings that these professionals imputed to their actions and behaviours.

But as Smith put it,

We begin from where we are. The ethnographic process of inquiry is one of exploring further into those social, political, and economic processes that organise and determine the actual basis of experience of those whose side we have taken. Taking sides, beginning from some position with some concern, does not destroy the 'scientific' character of the enterprise. Detachment is not a condition of science. Indeed, in sociology there is no possibility of detachment. We must begin from some position in the world. The method [applied] here is one that frankly begins from somewhere. The specification of that somewhere and the explication of the relations to which it is articulated . . . [were] the aim[s] of [my] inquiry. (Smith, 1987, p. 177)

By adopting a partial perspective (Haraway, 1988), I hoped to add a piece of knowledge that would be more interesting to female victims (whether or not they were migrants). Finally, it should be noted that this specific standpoint was not only a self-proclaimed one, but also one in which I was constantly placed by others during the fieldwork. As Blatgé (2014) has argued, fieldwork is not reducible to the collected data; sometimes apparently insignificant events observed at the beginning or end of the investigation can also constitute sociologically

significant material that merits analysis. The next section examines some of those events and their significance for my data and findings.

6. A 'Migrant' Background and Field Access

In this section, I present a few episodes from my fieldwork that demonstrate how others' perceptions of me influenced my research throughout every phase, from its inception to the successive phases of negotiating access, research development and completion. The perceived statuses—migrant, woman, and intern—assigned to me by my interlocutors, and by participants, affected the data-collection conditions I experienced and thus affected what I could or could not observe and provided a first indicator of public agents' framings of IPV involving Swiss nationals and 'migrants'.

The first time my assignment to the category of *migrant* by gatekeepers affected my research was before my fieldwork began, when I was negotiating access to a police emergency unit. I had deployed various strategies to attempt to meet with the principal gatekeepers who could provide me with the administrative and ethical clearance required and put me in contact with the police chief, who had the authority to accept or reject a researcher's presence at a police department and during interventions. At last, after several unsuccessful attempts during the course of an entire year, I managed to meet with the deputy police chief in May 2015.

On my arrival at his office, he asked me to present myself and my background and explain the objectives of my study, my questions, and the procedure I would use in conducting my research with the municipal police force. I explained my educational and professional background, describing my former experiences in Iran as well as my situation as a doctoral candidate in Switzerland. Employing the terminology that the police uses in regard to IPV, I informed him that I was interested in exploring Swiss institutional responses to 'domestic abuse' cases in relation to migration and explained that I was primarily interested in identifying the different ways in which professionals frame domestic abuse in cases involving 'migrants' and cases involving Swiss nationals.

He told me that my subject was very interesting and relevant to the police's own concerns regarding how best to deal with domestic abuse. 'Moreover', he added, '*you* are the best person to conduct this research. The problem of domestic abuse must be very present in your home country, and you can better understand and help us understand its relationship with migrants and migration here in Switzerland'. The deputy police chief framed my research project in 'othering' terms, with me as a representative of 'them'. This is all the more interesting because it was only following this conversation that I was finally granted access to the police site. Although I do not know this for certain, I believe that my background and status as a 'migrant woman from a Middle Eastern country', which were explicitly discussed in this meeting but not in my previous attempts, played an important role. The deputy police chief emphasised that the assumed prevalence of domestic abuse in my home country not only justified my interest in the subject but would also enable me to develop a better understanding of the phenomenon among migrant populations in Switzerland. He then assured me that he would try to convince his commander and told me that I would be put in touch with their head of training and development to develop a feasible research procedure.

In the study, I analysed the conditions of possibility for the assumption that there is a particular form of domestic abuse among migrants whose understanding required an insider's perspective. Further encounters enabled me to understand more about the 'insider knowledge' I was assumed to 'naturally' possess because I was a migrant. This presumed knowledge was not based on an understanding of the specific conditions that a migrant status could be expected to produce, but my assumed cultural proximity with 'migrants'. What Piedalue (2017, p. 563) has characterised as 'simplified culturalist explanations of gendered

violence' were also usually evoked to locate IPV in racialised places and upon 'othered' bodies during the fieldwork. Thus, it was the differences between Swiss nationals and 'migrants' that were offered as explanations for IPV among migrants, side-lining expert knowledge of IPV in general.

The relationship between my background and assumptions of my expertise on 'migrants' problems and particularities' also affected my fieldwork on several occasions, when I was assumed to be a 'cultural expert' and asked by professionals to interpret what a 'migrant' woman had said or why she had behaved in a certain way. I continued to receive such requests even after I had concluded my fieldwork, when I was asked to explain, for example, why an Algerian man addressed his boyfriend as 'vous'⁵ and if I knew whether this was a common practice among Algerians. (I had no idea.) Below, I narrate in more detail one such incident that exemplifies what representations of my background could entail in the eyes of my interlocutors, and what these reveals regarding the culturalisation of social relations and problems (Sangari, 2008). This incident is also indicative of how my interlocutors perceived their service users who were categorised as migrants.

7. Cultural Expert

Two months had gone by since I had begun my research in the medicolegal centre. I had already passed the first probationary one-month period and had been granted access to consultations conducted by the centre's staff with individuals reported to be victims of interpersonal violence. One day, the director of the centre intercepted me on my way to the daily staff meeting and said: 'It looks like you'll be hired!' Surprised, I smiled and asked her to explain. She told me that they had discovered that a patient in the emergency unit was a victim of IPV; she was from Iran 'or somewhere where your language is spoken' and did not speak French very well. They had suggested to her that she should come directly to the centre after undergoing her medical examination so that she could benefit from a consultation and obtain a medicolegal certificate. But because they could not find a professional interpreter that quickly, the director wanted me to not only conduct my routine observation at the consultation, but also assist by translating, if needed.

Acting as a translator during the consultation, I learned that the woman was a 20-year-old from Afghanistan who had been hospitalised earlier that day after attempting suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills. I translated all that this young woman said to the nurse, as she found it easier to speak in Persian (Farsi) than in French, but she was able to understand the nurse's questions without my assistance. She explained that her husband had kicked her out of their apartment after an argument. She had tried to seek help from the police and some women's shelters, but they did not consider the incident serious enough and did not offer her immediate help. Upset and shamed, as her situation was now known by her family as well, she attempted to commit suicide. When the nurse finished asking her about the details of the argument and how she was feeling, we paused the consultation to engage in a brief brainstorming session with a forensic doctor, following the centre's usual procedure.

At the doctor's office, the nurse started to explain the situation, and she turned to me at one point and asked: 'Tell me, is it a cultural thing in Afghanistan that if a woman's husband kicks her out, it would be so shameful that she'd commit suicide?' Because she did not perceive being kicked out of the house as serious enough to warrant a suicide attempt, she assumed that there may be a cultural explanation for this woman's decision. And because the young woman was Afghan and I was Iranian and we both spoke Persian, she assumed that I might know something about this presumably 'cultural' behaviour.

⁵ 'Vous' is a more formal form of 'you' than 'tu'. In French, lovers usually use the term 'tu'.

Shame or dishonour at being thrown out of her home may have been central to this young woman's understanding of the world, but what is interesting for our purposes here is the nurse's assumption that I as a migrant woman might have some insight into the behaviour of this woman, who comes from another country and has a completely different socioeconomic background than me. We were both categorised as migrants and assumed to share a culture to which this professional did not have access. This example illustrates how my background provided additional insights into some professionals' decisions regarding and interpretations of IPV cases involving migrants. It also reveals how a cultural interpretation of behaviour when the person is categorised as a migrant could replace the interpretations that were employed in cases involving Swiss women. Expert knowledge of IPV could help explain how such psychological pressure could result in a suicide attempt. The nurse did not mobilise this knowledge, however, and instead treated the suicide attempt as a cultural phenomenon.

These kinds of encounters reminded me that 'perceptions matter' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 144), and that how I was perceived in the field affected how I conducted my research, and how my interlocutors accepted me or reacted to my presence. My standpoint also affected the writing phase. I could not completely forget my own experience of being a racially marked migrant woman in Switzerland, as a result of which these incidents resonated differently with me than they would have with someone who had never needed to explain her reactions and decisions in terms of her culture or nationality. As Harding (2004, p. 7) argues, 'knowledge is supposed to be based on experiences, and so different experiences should enable different perceptions of ourselves and our environments'. This is especially true for a study that investigates the effect of victims' perceived migration status on how institutional actors deal with IPV. Consequently, my findings and analysis were the outcome of what my standpoint allowed me to see and say. Stemming from a partial perspective, they can hopefully contribute to a more complete account of the phenomenon under study when added to other situated studies that have focused on the same issue from other standpoints.

8. Conclusion

Scholars have argued that standpoint theory and the situated knowledge paradigm can contribute to attempts to critically interrogate key concepts in the field of migration studies and avoid reproducing power structures. However, explicit demonstrations and detailed analysis of the impact of researchers' positionality on research are rare. This paper has offered an example of what a transparent and explicit account of the researcher's specific standpoint and the situated knowledge that results can look like.

At the outset, I identified the normative, methodological and epistemological challenges inherent in achieving reflexivity in migration studies. I addressed the normative challenge of producing useful and timely knowledge while avoiding political discourses and categories that reproduce hegemonic power relations by reversing the gaze. This approach contributes to and draws on recent calls within migration studies for greater reflexivity in the conceptualisation of analytical categories such as *migrants* and *integration* (Dahinden, 2016; Korteweg, 2017; Schinkel, 2018) and offers an example of how migration studies can be de-migrantised (Dahinden, 2016). Accordingly, the research design of this project did not focus specifically on migrants, but on all beneficiaries and their interactions with the given public institutions. This research design made it possible to avoid treating the category of *migrants* as a pre-existing and supposedly natural one, and instead examine the processes through which this category is created.

The research design also addressed the methodological challenge of going beyond mere disclaimers regarding the need to avoid methodological nationalism when doing empirical research on migration (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). The study focused on a problem that cuts across society as a whole and, instead of taking migrant-related categories as the entry

point to the study of the problem, investigated the processes through which those categories are constructed in the discourses and practices of public agents. Shifting the gaze from migrants to the social and administrative contexts that mark certain people as such is one way of studying migration-related issues without reproducing the normative categories that reflexive migration studies aim to deconstruct (Dahinden, 2016).

These achievements were made possible by adopting feminist epistemology and the lessons learned from it. Feminist epistemology teaches researchers that failing to consider their research choices is a political question: because research design can co-shape public discourse and become closely entangled with state policies, a 'migrantised' research approach risks reproducing pre-existing problematic categories (see Schinkel, 2018, p. 15). Furthermore, standpoint theory and the situated knowledge paradigm argue that, because every researcher is positioned, they can only produce situated knowledge. This paper has demonstrated how paying particular attention to my positionality as a member of a minority social group and making transparent my embodied experience of being categorised as a migrant made possible new insights and resulted in a specific situated knowledge. I argue that any research would benefit from such a fine-grained analysis of the knowledge-production process with regard to the standpoint of the researchers who conduct it. Acknowledging one's positionality is a necessary step in achieving reflexivity and producing responsible knowledge both in migration studies and more generally.

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