

# Doing fieldwork while parenting : between challenging and intensifying structural power imbalances in anthropological knowledge production

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# DOING FIELDWORK WHILE PARENTING

## Between Challenging and Intensifying Structural Power Imbalances in Anthropological Knowledge Production

*Anna Madeleine Ayeh*

### Abstract

Conducting fieldwork as a White woman researcher from the Global North on women's practices of religious knowing in Benin, my work is based on multiple entwined positionalities that require critical reflection. The political categories of race, gender, age, religion, and family status at times linked, at times distanced me from my interlocutors in Benin as well as my colleagues at University of Bayreuth. This article explores the multiple ways parenting has informed my work in Benin and its institutional integration in a German Anthropology department. Using difference as a lens, I enquire how parenting, intersecting with gender, sexuality, and family normativity, has been used to undo difference during fieldwork, while exacerbating structural inequalities with reference to academic funding structures and research organization.

**Keywords:** *accompanied fieldwork, parenting, positionality, reflexivity, difference, intersectionality, un/doing difference*

### Parenting and Power Relations in Anthropological Knowledge Production

Discussions around power relations and positionality underlying and informing anthropological knowledge production have gained momentum in recent years. Equally, debates around accompanied research were enriched by a number of fresh publications from anthropologists who took their children on long-term field trips. Looking at two aspects of knowledge production – the establishment of research relationships during fieldwork, and the obtaining of funding for long-term research – this article examines the relationship of parenthood and power in Anthropology, and academia. Parenthood is theorized as a category of difference that stands on its own while interacting with other categories of difference such as gender, race, age, and career stage. Investigating my own experiences in researching Muslim women's religious knowledge practices in Benin, it becomes clear that my positioning as a parent had highly diverging outcomes in the two aspects under analysis: While it proved very beneficial in the establishment of research relationships across Benin, it presented as a disadvantage in financing and organizing said research.

After laying out the situation of researcher-parents conducting fieldwork with their children, I turn to describe the context of my research. Following a segment on ways of theorizing difference in unequal power relations, with the two approaches of *Intersectionality* and *un/doing difference* at heart, the empirical examples of my relationship with Amina in Benin, and my interaction with *Bayerisches Reisekostengesetz*, a German state law governing official trips of academics, illustrate the divergent outcomes of being positioned as a parent in an Anthropology Department.

### With Children in the Field – A Long Her\*story

As early as 1987, Joan Cassell helped to deconstruct the iconic image of the lonesome (male) anthropologist setting off to the unknown in Malinowskian spirit to describe life in the possibly furthest away corner of the world. She published the edited volume *Children in the Field* (Cassell 1987), a compilation of reflections by anthropologists who had taken their children along to do fieldwork. Ever since, a host of experiences have been shared by academics doing research accompanied by their children, ascribing to them the responsibility of conducting fieldwork while providing care for their children (Braukmann et al. 2020). By focusing on accompanied researcher-parents,<sup>1</sup> I explicitly draw the analytical line not between academic parents and non-parents, but between those who travel together with their children – and in doing so, sharing the fieldwork experience with them – and those who embark on their field trips alone. While parents in academia face particular challenges rooted in academic working culture and organizational structure that has been labelled as intrinsically non-harmonizing with parenting in general (Alber 2005), I here wish to highlight the specific challenges as well as gains that come with doing long-term research accompanied by one's children.<sup>2</sup> Further, I centre being a parent because my interlocutors in Benin did: Being perceived as a parent had – irrespective of my interlocutors' divergent positionalities and social roles – a surprisingly consistent effect on how I was perceived and how people interacted with me. This effect played out in a twofold way. With reference to *parenthood status* on the one hand, being perceived of as a mother meant an upwards shift on the scale of social recognition with all its consequences, i. e., being considered a full adult (in an age-hierarchical society), as more serious and respectable etc. Regarding *parenting* as a (gendered) practice and discourse on the other hand, shared experiences of pregnancy, birthing, and parenting, worries, joys, fears, knowledge, etc. that stem from, in my case, mothering were enacted to create proximity, belonging, and a space of shared enthusiasm and vulnerability. This is already hinting at

<sup>1</sup> In the course of this paper, I at times write “accompanied fieldwork” in order to keep things short. In any case, “accompanied fieldwork” in the context of this paper always refers to researchers who travel together with their child(ren), while I acknowledge that there are other forms of accompanied fieldwork, e. g., partners or colleagues travelling together or researchers travelling with assistants or students.

<sup>2</sup> Speaking about the specific challenges of accompanied fieldwork, I am fully aware that parents conducting fieldwork while leaving their children in their home countries a) don't cease to parent while being in the field and b) face particular difficulties on their own part, one of which being the possibly long-term separation from their kids, (Farrelly et al. 2014). Their experiences shall not be erased in this paper but put aside for analytical reasons.

the different levels and scopes – macro-structural and micro-interactional, public and private – that parenting is salient in and that will occupy us further in this paper.

Joan Cassell describes fieldwork as a “risk of self,”<sup>3</sup> a “profound and emotional experience” (1987, 257f.; cf. Flinn 1998, 7) that leads us, as researchers, to confront our own background, our preconceptions, and eventually our inner selves. In this view, doing fieldwork is way more than one of many elements of anthropological work and career-making, much like teaching, grading student papers, and organizing conference panels. Following Cassell, it should be conceptualized as a highly personal, emotional, and consuming practice of the self. Long-term anthropological field research appears an aspect of academic work that transcends demands, practices, and organizational principles of other parts of the job: In the field, there is often no closing time, boundaries between the public and the private are oftentimes blurred (e. g. between public, familial, and private space or between work and family time), and demands of adaptation and stepping out of one’s comfort zone are high (which is feasible for an adult but might be difficult to endure for a toddler). Whereas the university back home often protects the interests of caregivers through family-friendly policies, e. g. with regard to working hours, the field does not know any such measures that enable boundary-making between wage and care work. These are just some reasons why the ideal researcher is still imagined single-travelling and, much like a blank page in their notebook, ever ready to engage 24/7 with the life of the field, stripped of all supposedly private day-to-day care responsibilities. Accompanied researchers disrupt this normalized image of the detached, single-travelling researcher by moving together with their child(ren) and sometimes co-parents or other family members who provide care for the children.

Besides exploring the field and establishing research relationships, researcher-parents engage in the day-to-day care of their children. This leads to a juggling of needs and requires organizational skills and a well-thought-out care arrangement in the field. Yet still, the model of accompanied research is not one of deficiencies. Instead, many researchers stress the methodical and epistemic benefits of doing research accompanied by their children (Dannenbergh 2019, 175). One’s own parenthood is often described as a status change beneficial to the work – even more by those who have entered the same field once without and later accompanied by their own kids and are therefore able to draw comparisons. It seems to be a shared observation that the presence of children simplifies access to the field and has a “door opening” effect – seemingly irrespective of whether the researcher actively involves their child(ren) in the process of fieldwork or carefully maintaining boundaries between research and family life. Not only with regard to accessing the field, accompanied anthropological researching yields great potentials. The presence of children can render fieldwork more dialogic, as it opens opportunities for exchange about bearing and raising children (Canosa 2018). It disrupts the binary of observer and observed, because the anthropologist and their children and / or partner, their mutual engagement, housing, transportation, and food will be scrutinized by those around them just like the researcher and their family are getting to know all these aspects about their new, temporal home. Research with family facilitates a

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<sup>3</sup> Using the term “risk of self,” she follows Rosalie Wax, who initially titled her book *Doing Fieldwork on anthropological fieldwork* *The Risk of Self*.



reverse of gaze, as it exposes the observer in a configuration of intimate sociality – that to partners and children, as part of a family of one’s own. This comes with normativity: The accompanied researcher is interacting with “the field” with all their values, norms, and moralities on board – aspects that the lone travelling anthropologist is imagined to leave at home when embarking on fieldwork in order to manifest a radical openness towards their interlocutors’ reasoning, towards the normativity of the field, and towards the logic behind all the practices they travelled to understand. By entering the field with their children, accompanied researchers lose control about just how much they want to open their inner selves towards their interlocutors. The exchange with research partners may become dialogic when talking about and observing each other’s experience of parenting. Finally, one aspect becomes clear when reading through the literature: Accompanied field research within anthropology is a gendered mode of working. The majority of researchers travelling together with their children are women; fathers conducting research accompanied by their kids are still an exception (Krämer 2020; Funk 2020). The challenge of juggling paid work and care work as a gendered mode of working translates neatly into the fieldwork context, while men more often than women choose to leave their children in their home countries while conducting fieldwork. The story of long-term research with children is a *her\*story*, affecting women at a much larger proportion than their male colleagues.<sup>4</sup> The institutional marginalization of (women) researcher-parents with their particular needs related to long-term fieldwork is thereby directly pointing to the political question of gender equity – a highly virulent and timely question in academia. Recent conferences and new publications as well as the experiences made during the Corona pandemic<sup>5</sup> testify for the heightened need to address this issue.

In this paper, I reflect on my research by exploring how my positioning as a mother informed my work with Muslim women in Benin on the one hand, and as part of an academic structure framed as “excellent”<sup>6</sup> on the other. I am interested in the question of positioning in a twofold way: Firstly, I am curious to examine how a particular positioning (as a parent) may produce diverging, ambivalent, or even contradicting outcomes in differently structured fields of interaction. Secondly, I am intrigued by the question of multiple positionings and how various categories of difference are (im)mobilized and brought into relation. This paper thereby adds to anthropological discourses on knowledge production and to political debates on gender equality within academia, as well as to debates on difference and power. Theoretically, I am drawing on intersectionality theory because it centres the question of

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<sup>4</sup> In Joan Cassell’s edited volume, we find four accounts of men taking their children to the field, all accompanied by their wives to fully take care of the children while even helping their husbands conducting fieldwork and typing fieldnotes (Cassell 1987, 259). In contemporary accounts, those configurations are rarely to be found, suggesting a more evenly distributed responsibility for wage labour between co-parents and care arrangements that accommodate the careers of both partners.

<sup>5</sup> The effects of the Corona pandemic have been labelled as a rollback to old gender roles (Allmendinger 2020). In the context of academic publishing, the pandemic is described as harmful to women scientists at a large proportion (cf. Kitchener 2020).

<sup>6</sup> After September 2018, my graduate school at University of Bayreuth, the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS), was subsequently integrated in the Cluster of Excellence “Africa Multiple – Reconfiguring African Studies” funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).

structural power with regard to multiple entwined positionalities and the un/doing differences approach because it offers a helpful theoretical outlook on the (un)making of difference in micro-interactions.

### **Researching Muslim Women's Practices of Religious Knowing in Benin**

My PhD project focuses on practices of religious learning and knowing among Muslim women and girls in Benin. I travelled two times to Benin to conduct research on this topic: First in 2017 for three months with my then 18 months old child and pregnant with my second child. The second trip of eight months was together with both of them at ages three years and one year. Both times, I was accompanied by a family member and partly by my partner, the children's father.<sup>7</sup> During a total of eleven months of fieldwork that I worked in Cotonou, Parakou, and Djougou, I attended classes, group meetings, and informal circles of girls' and women's engagement with Islamic knowledge – namely the knowledge of reading and reciting the Qur'an, and cognizance of Islamic legal and historic sources such as *ḥadīth* and *sunna*. I conducted interviews with women learners and teachers, and accompanied my research participants in their everyday – as sellers on the market, during religious festivities, and in their homes. Muslim women in Benin are offered a vast array of learning spaces: They may congregate in mosques, vacant school buildings, or in the backyards of their teachers, who themselves are a highly diverse group: high-aged religious scholars, youth-aged boys, young men, or women past the age of marriage. The learners congregate by profession (e.g. the Central Market group consists mainly of market sellers), or by proximity or affiliation to the space where knowledge is offered – one's mosque, a learning circle in the neighbourhood, an uncle's Qur'anic school. The learning contexts differ in character, ranging from highly formalized school settings to intimate private gatherings. Consequently, the participants form a diverse sample in terms of class, age, and languages, while all sharing that they are Muslim women living in an urban setting in Benin.

Modes of knowledge transmission, teaching and learning practices and the atmosphere of the learning groups diverge starkly depending on the age of the learners: Children and youth are taught in Qur'anic schools with clearly defined learning goals and a hierarchical organization. For women past the age of marriage and first childbirth, the groups are organized more freely and are less hierarchical concerning the relationship between instructors and learners. Here, interactions between teachers and learners are much more dialogic and freer than in the children's groups. Most adult women's groups fulfil solidary functions as well, with members supporting each other in times of sickness, marriage, childbirth, and death. Some organize communal activities during festive seasons, such as joint excursions to villages during the holy month of Ramaḍān in order to educate other women on questions of religious ritual. Interestingly, there seems to be a life-course related gap in terms of religious

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<sup>7</sup> I offer a more detailed description of the organization of both trips and the care arrangement for the children in the part "No Official Trips with Family."

learning: Girls normally complete Qur'anic schools around their age of marriage, resuming their learning some years later when their children have outgrown toddler age. This holds especially true for highly formalized learning settings that women with babies rarely attend. Neighbourhood-based groups, mainly those headed by women, are much more suitable for mothers to visit alongside their small children. Different aspects may explain this: First, a female-headed group constitutes a women-only space that creates ease for women to breast-feed during the sessions – an act that is deemed inappropriate within a mosque. Also, some groups are more loosely organized in terms of curriculum, making space for the close and flexible engagement small children demand. Another factor is space, with neighbourhood-based groups happening in family closures where smaller children can easily move around alongside older children in the private realm of the house while their mothers are reading the Qur'an. In general, though, the first years after marriage and having first children appear to be a phase of intense occupation for women, who are often traders, characterized by high demands in terms of care work and economic activity. Religious learning, I argue, has a specific timing as well as specific life-course related functions: During youth, it is understood to prepare for marriage and parenting, endowing the women with an Islamic morality to make a good wife and mother. After years of procreation, care work and *trouver* ("finding" resources) to provide for the children, women return to the field of religious learning in order to cultivate their own spiritual selves, to attain knowledge to be passed on to one's children,<sup>8</sup> and to enjoy community with other women in a highly gendered social context.

With reference to the question of motherhood (as a status) and mothering (as a practice) relating to positionality and power, I want to emphasize two aspects here: Firstly, motherhood is not framed as a choice in my research context, but a) as an integral part of a woman's life-course. It appears thereby as a normative element of a proper biography, and b) an occurrence that rests on God's grace and may not be tempered with by (wo)man. Apart from influencing the timing of children, e. g. by refraining from sexual contact for some time after the birth of a child, people may not seek to govern their sexuality in ways that may prevent pregnancy. Consequently, other biographical trajectories, such as attaining a higher level of education, or working on their professional careers or business, are subordinated to that of motherhood / mothering. Secondly, as the remarks about hierarchies, age, and teacher-learner-interactions above exemplify, motherhood status, along with marriage, plays out as a powerful marker of identity and positioning within society in Benin. Even within Islamic education – which is discursively framed as a uniform education, a life-long endeavour of acquiring knowledge about one's religion for everyone irrespective of their gender or age – motherhood equips womanhood with certain privileges, such as being able to tease and joke with the teacher, expose one's breasts in order to feed a baby, etc.

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<sup>8</sup> This aspect is central to the discourse of the schools' founders, and the argument is often expanded to the question of the future of society in a broad sense. In this view, mothers are understood to be the child's first teacher. Bestowing mothers with an Islamic morality in the sense of the respective founders, they would educate the children to be good Muslims and eventually contribute to a better future for society as a whole.

## On being White,<sup>9</sup> Woman, Non-Muslim ... Mother – Entwined Axes of Positionality and Ways of Theorizing Them

Generally speaking, (anthropological) research is grounded in multiple axes of positionality in the field – that is, of positioning oneself as well as being positioned by others. The researcher's positionality impacts how they “see” and construct the field, how they process information and show up in research relationships. It also informs how people “see” the researcher, what they share with them and where they take them to (Adjirakor et al. 2021). Reflecting on positionality, then, is of major importance to contextualize research findings and knowledge production (Chiseri-Strater 1996, 119). Positionality results from an ensemble of categorizations (ascribed by the self and others) ranging from difference to belonging. Self-positioning and being positioned by others can thereby present as identical, disputing or even opposing. Further, particular categories of difference or belonging may be underscored, while others may be suppressed. Yet still, positioning does not only operate on an interpersonal level, but is integrally shaped by histories, societal discourses, and power structures – making positionality a deeply relational issue. In order to approach the question of positionality theoretically, I am drawing on two approaches: First, *intersectionality theory* as established by Crenshaw (1989), and, secondly, the *un/doing differences* approach by West and Fenstermaker (1995), expanded on by Hirschauer (2014).<sup>10</sup>

Timely approaches to human differentiation generally emanate from two shared conceptions – (1) that categories of difference are constructed and not given, and that they are made (ir)relevant by actors / agents, and (2) that there is multiple membership to various categories of difference that presents as overlapping or entangled. A considerable number of works on the second aspect revolve around the question of how to imagine this multitude of memberships – e. g., as addition or multiplication, as overlapping circles, road intersections or hybrid new units.<sup>11</sup> Further, different approaches focus on different levels on which differentiation plays out, such as the structural versus the micro-interactional level. Finally, the approaches differ in the scale of empiricism they demand.

*Intersectionality theory* focuses on structural positioning, more precisely (and politically) speaking on structural discrimination and privileging. This is no surprise considering its origin: Intersectionality theory stems from the analysis of legal discrimination and yields a stance of political research-activism. In 1989, American lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality, inviting us to imagine one's social positioning as crystallizing at an intersection of a number of selected “roads” that represent central categories of discrimination. At the intersection, these categories do not simply add up, but form specific forms of positioning, as Crenshaw points out:

*Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling*

<sup>9</sup> Racial categories in this paper are spelt with capital initial letters to highlight their constructedness.

<sup>10</sup> While West and Fenstermaker speak of doing, Hirschauer has added the dimension of the undoing – the ignoring and the making irrelevant – of differences.

<sup>11</sup> For an overview on sociological conceptualizations of multiple belongings see Hirschauer 2014, 175–180.

*from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. 1989, 149)*

While in early intersectional analyses, a triad of categories – gender, race, class – took centre stage, its perspective was subsequently expanded in order to include sexual orientation, (dis)ability, age, and religion. The discussion around which categories to enclose in an intersectional approach is ongoing and has theoretical as well as political saliency. Broadened approaches to intersectionality that circulate today include body, attractiveness or beauty, nationality, social background / family / social networks, health, income, and reproduction / generativity (the latter being important for the context of this paper), analysed as subjugated to a capitalist logic. Degele and Winker (2007, 4–10) suggest to organize an intersectional approach by analysing three levels while stressing the need to study all three levels in their interdependences and co-productions: 1) structure – the capitalist economy that outsources unpaid care and family work in a gendered way and is characterized by unequal distribution of / access to resources based on the categories race, gender, class, body; 2) symbolic representations – the norms, ideologies and representations that confirm the hegemonic status quo by mobilizing various categories of difference, and 3) identities – the creation of difference and belonging through mobilizing various categories in order to find community in an insecure context.

The third level put forth by Degele and Winker resonates with Hirschauer's conception of *un/doing differences*: While intersectionality focuses on structural differentiation and hierarchization as a given, Hirschauer (2014) asks which axes of difference are in force where and when (181), and which ones are glossed over, ignored, or made irrelevant – by individuals, in interpersonal relations, but also by groups, societies or in certain temporal phases. He is interested in “ephemeral moment[s] of undecidedness and non-differentiation between the relevance and irrelevance of social differentiations” (170), on moments of actualization, neutralization, biographic and / or historic cycles or trends (182). He takes on a praxeological stance on difference, highlighting the importance of *doing* difference and consequently introducing the possibility of an *undoing* – that is a situational dissolving, ignoring, irrelevant-making – of difference in historical, biographical, or interactional moments. Strongly postulating the necessity of approaching the question of difference empirically, Hirschauer proposes to imagine multiple differences not as being simultaneously co-produced (as West and Fenstermaker argued), but as competing. The interesting question resulting from this approach is, then, whether (and how) people at a particular moment in time tie in with these differences in / through micro-interactions, discourses, biographies, techniques etc. (Hirschauer 2014, 183).

I propose to combine these two perspectives because both seem relevant in the analysis of different aspects of difference in this paper and, more broadly, in my work: Intersectionality theory is putting power structures centre stage and therefore presents as indispensable in the analysis of a research configuration like my own, whereby I as a White researcher sent by a White academic institution from the Global North is academically benefitting from the knowledge of Black interlocutors living in a structurally peripherized country in the Global



South. Global power structures heavily inform this relation in many aspects. Further, doing fieldwork as a White anthropologist in an African context carries a loaded history: Anthropology was, in its formative period, tightly entwined with the imperial project of colonialism, and – despite ongoing discourses and practices that aim at its decolonization – the discipline has not yet fully stripped itself from researching preliminarily poor, indigenous, and marginalized communities – the “others” –, leading critiques to see it as a way of having “the knowledge of people living there disbursed on one’s own pay slip” (Arndt 2020, translation my own). Irrespective of my own intentionality or political aim, this macrostructure remains at the same time underlying and dominant in the context of my research endeavour. While acknowledging these macrostructural power imbalances, Hirschauer’s perspective of un / doing differences gives theoretical fodder to many an experience I had with the women I worked with – namely that of my interlocutors glancing over, condoning, ignoring, or openly resisting the expression of differences between us. The shared aspects of mothering were referenced often in everyday interactions that I propose to theoretically frame as moments of *undoing differences*.

### **Amira and I: Expressing Difference and Belonging between Mothers**

While researching Qur’anic schooling in 2013 for my MA thesis, I worked with youth-aged Qur’anic teachers, accompanying them through town and to the football court while sharing their youth status as a single-travelling student. Returning to Benin as a married PhD student with my first child and pregnant with my second, I was considered a fully adult woman and mother, now being addressed by strangers as *tata*, aunty. Reflecting upon my experience with child(ren) in my research field, my own motherhood obviously played a role in my relationships, also in those with adult women in the Qur’anic learning groups. After-lesson conversations among women who shared experiences of childbearing and –raising would quickly slip to topics related to mothering: How are the children doing? What impacts their health? How does one get them to take their malaria medicine? Many times, I was asked more questions than I asked. A lot of my interlocutor-mothers found it exciting to hear about childbirth practices in Europe – something they had heard a lot of or watched documentaries about. Highly intimate aspects of life swiftly became object of casual talk and joking in the safe space of a shared experience of being woman and mother. I want to illustrate the implications of a shared positioning as a mother using the example of my relationship with Amira – a woman whose race, age group, religious and political affiliation, class / socio-economic situation, and educational background I do not share.

Amira is an elderly woman in her seventies living in the bustling city centre of Parakou in Northern Benin. Having been a market woman for the past decades, she attends the market mosque’s women’s group every day. Due to her high age and religious proficiency, Amira is respected by her fellow attendees and is consulted on all kinds of questions concerning the lecture of the Qur’an. The male teacher at the school (who is a generation younger than Amira) regularly draws on her expertise during classes or asks her to speak to the group about



“women’s issues,” such as menstruation, that he considers shameful to verbalise himself. Amira birthed seven children, all of whom are now grown up. During my research, one of her daughters, Maïmouna, gave birth. In the following weeks, Amira took me to her room on several occasions, knowing I was a mother myself. There, we would sit together, Maïmouna with her baby boy curled up on her chest, discussing what to do against sore nipples from breastfeeding, and how to find the newest fabric to wear as a uniform to an outdoor. During these conversations, our communication developed a dialogic dynamic of mutual exchange. Drawing on a shared experience of mothering, the women allowed me into the private space of the bedroom, Maïmouna being at ease with me seeing her topless, all giving in to her new role as supplier-on-demand of breastmilk for her new-born baby, just as I was when coming around with my baby. Momentarily, Amira and her daughter implied my belonging to the in-group of mothers whom sweet and traumatic aspects of birthing and mothering could be shared with. Difference was implied (or *done*, with West, Fenstermaker and Hirschauer) when they asked me questions about how giving birth works where I came from. They had heard that all babies came via caesarean “over there” and were keen on hearing my stance on this, thereby mobilizing (or *doing*) difference based on race and/or origin/nationality.

I vividly remember how Amira got to know I was a mother. We attended an outdoor together and as I held the new-born baby and congratulated his mother, I engaged in what in the research area are common patterns of joking<sup>12</sup> – claiming to get married to someone’s child or offering one’s own child for marriage to someone’s child. So, I said: “one day this sweet boy here will marry my daughter.” Amira, standing right beside me, was quick to reply: “Ah, he is Black! Can your daughter marry a Black [person]?”, to which I responded: “Why not? Apart from that, she is Black herself.” From there, the conversation evolved around the question of her father’s origin, and, getting to know that he was Ghanaian, Amira exclaimed, excitedly: “Waouh! Then you are one of us!” I was quite surprised about her reaction. Later, I came to interpret Amira’s statement as an act of *undoing difference*: Highlighting my mothering a Black child, and kinship alliance with a Black Ghanaian family, Amira chose to momentarily ignore my White European positioning while constructing me as “one of them.” In this particular instance, Amira mobilized mothering and kinship at the expense of race, religion, nationality, and socioeconomics, in order to *undo the many differences* that inform our relationship. Meanwhile, looking at the intersection of mothering and class, my own mothering differed in many ways from that of Amira and many other women in Parakou: I didn’t have to worry about being able to provide food for my kids; I was able to buy a stack of diapers in a maxi pack instead of buying them piece by piece (or not buying them at all because they are too much of a luxurious product to afford); My children had health insurance from the day they were born; I took them to the poolside in some of Parakou’s hotels once in a while to treat them. My mothering is privileged. There are many aspects in mothering that could have been mobilized in order to *do difference* between me and many of my interlocutors. Interestingly enough – apart from the frequent questions about birthing prac-

<sup>12</sup> *Joking* relationships are well documented in social scientific African studies. For an analysis of joking relationships in the research region see Schottmann (1998).

tices in Europe – they were never actually mobilized in this way. Mothering, at all times during my research in Benin, played out as a complex of shared practices, worries, vulnerabilities, and imaginations that created belonging between me and the women I worked with. It was always used to *undo differences*. Along with Canosa I argue that assuming the role of a mother alongside that of a researcher may render a person more accessible to research participants and others in the field (Canosa 2018, 85), and even contribute to the “dismantling [of] differential power relations,” as Farrelly, Stewart-Withers and Dombrowski (2014, 2) frame it. It is crucial to note, however, that my mothering and family configuration largely corresponds to what Julia Pauli calls the “family normativity” (Pauli 2020, 50) of the field: it matches the idealized type of family in Benin with children being born into heterosexual wedlock. Some irritations to the dominant family and gender normativity in Benin, such as the fact that I had been perceived as the one who travelled for professional reasons, while my male partner was mainly taking care of the kids, were mostly glanced over.

### **No Official Trips with Family: Institutional Constraints on Accompanied Researching**

While empirically and methodically, my research benefitted largely from the presence of my children in the field, the organizational, respectively bureaucratic, context of taking them along posed a number of challenges. I will exemplify these challenges in the following passage by singling out two aspects – that of funding the travel and medical costs of my child(ren) and that of financing childcare in the field. These are just two out of many challenges that long-term accompanied fieldwork poses for a researcher which Stolz et al. (2020) in their introductory chapter provide a comprehensive overview of them all. Some of them are difficulties that require organizational creativity and out-of-the-box-thinking while others are existential. Often, they result in a temporal and/or financial disadvantage that can pose a career impediment – especially for women, as I have outlined above. (Unresolved) questions concerning accompanied fieldwork therefore directly touch on broader issues of gender equality and policies aiming at supporting families within academia.

First, the financing of travel and medical costs for my children was unclear over long stretches of time – a fact that generated considerable financial insecurity on my side. Generally speaking, the reimbursement of field trip costs, including costs for accompanying travellers, depends on the funding scheme that the overall project financing is subjected to. In my case – as I was then employed directly by the university (and not, e.g., holding a scholarship or being financed through third-party funds) – the financing of my field trips was subjugated to *Bayerisches Reisekostengesetz* (BayRKG), the Bavarian state law governing official trips of, among others, university members. BayRKG applies to the following groups of people:

*This law regulates the reimbursement of expenses for official trips and official errands (travel expense reimbursement) of civil servants and judges of the Free State of Bavaria, civil servants of the municipalities, municipal associations and other public corporations, institutions and foundations of public law and those officials delegated to these employers. (BayRKG Art. 1 § 1, translation my own)*

In consequence, BayRKG is not applicable to people who (have to) travel with the official traveller, but do not qualify as members of the groups mentioned in the wording of the law – such as partners, children or childcaring persons travelling with the researcher. Further, the wording of the law shows that it has been drafted with short-term business trips in mind, leaving some aspects difficult to apply in the context of long-term anthropological fieldwork. Therefore, BayRKG is *doing difference* in relation to a) official travellers who are compelled to travel with care-receivers, and b) anthropologists for whom long-term official travelling to far-away places presents as the norm. Consequently, whereas researchers who obtain funding by a different organisation, such as e.g. the German Research Association (DFG),<sup>13</sup> may bring the costs for accompanying travellers directly and easily to account, BayRKG doesn't offer any such flexibility. I found myself obliged to cover the travelling and medical costs of one, respectively two, child(ren) travelling with me. With the obviously relatively small salary of an early career researcher, this posed a substantial financial challenge to me. Clearly, a law that would provide for the covering of like costs would have to carefully define the boundary between necessary and unthrifty company of the researcher by family members. This is mainly a question of the children's age as well as the care arrangement in place back home and would have to take the situation of single parents into account – a complex field to draft an equitable legal framework for. It touches on normative and morally charged questions such as: When is a child able to be without their parent for, let's say, six months? Will the answer to this question be different if we speak about a duration of three months, or one year? Can a breastfeeding parent be expected to wean their child in order to leave for fieldwork? Can a partner who would take over the full childcare during the supposed absence of the researching parent be expected to reduce their hours at their job? Would the law provide for a substitution of the then temporally reduced salary of this partner? Important to mention here is that travelling costs for co-travelling children vary immensely depending on their age. While a child below age 2 travels to Benin for less than 50 Euros, children above age 2 pay a full (adult) ticket of about 800 Euros. Relating this to the large variety in salary between a PhD student with a research assistant position and a full professor, one starts to imagine how differently the financial load of travelling with one's kids impacts families in such different configurations – and how detailed and carefully one would have to draft a law that *undoes differences* towards all of them. Bringing intersectionality back in, things become even more complicated (and political), if one reflects about other categories of difference apart from gender and parenting on the part of the PhD student: How does, e.g., class play

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<sup>13</sup> While my graduate school, as mentioned above, has been integrated in a DFG-funded scheme of excellence, I remained subordinated to BayRKG due to my working contract at the Chair of Social Anthropology.

out in this particular case, equipping one PhD student with savings and institutional knowledge to seek assistance, while leaving the other alone in a situation of existential insecurity?

Secondly, organizing childcare during anthropological field research can be an equally tricky and nuanced field to think through. Using my case to exemplify, my funding scheme had defined that a caretaker would receive the minimum wage of the research country, that is, Benin. The logic behind this is clear: Researchers are expected to find a suitable person or institution in their location of research and employ them for childcare, just as they do back home. Practically, things can be more complex, with language barriers or divergences in pedagogical practice in place. In my case, the children travelling with me are raised speaking German and Twi while not mastering any language of the area of my research. Consequently, I recruited a Twi speaking family member from Ghana for childcare who, for this task, paused their paid work that had to be substituted, and was in need of travel coverage from Ghana to northern Benin. My partner was, as the co-parent, legally excluded from receiving funding for carrying out childcare – the boundary between kin-care and state care stood firm. Nevertheless, he was oftentimes around to care for the children, travelling at his own costs while half pausing, half juggling aside his personal career. I personally know several colleagues who lived the same situation – their partners being there, literally “between the lines” of the forms we have to fill in order to get our expenses covered, without being able to receive compensation for the pausing of their occupation for the benefit of their partner’s research projects. In the question of childcare, similar to the aspect of funding of travel costs, a variety of factors are decisive: again, the age of the children, also their language proficiency, the availability of a suitable caretaker, among others. I want to expand on the aspect of normativity here: As Cassell (1987) as well as Pauli (2020) mention, being in the field accompanied by one’s children leads to a shift of the role normativity plays in the fieldwork endeavour. While the ideal-type researcher of the anthropological imagination is fully detached from their normative baggage, being in the field with one’s children means being in the field with one’s normative stances (Haug 2020) – with a position towards e.g. what the role and place of children in a family / community / society is, what boundaries children should experience, if a parent should set them at all, how and in which activities children should be in- or excluded.<sup>14</sup> In field contexts where parenting common sense is perceived to be differing (in some cases radically) from one’s own stances, it can be difficult to find a person that one confidently entrusts their children to. In any case, finding a suitable person to care for one’s children in a fully unknown place can be a time-consuming endeavour – in a situation where (research) time is tendentially short and precious. With this aspect in mind, it appears even more necessary that co-parents ready to take over childcare during their partner’s research time become legally eligible to receive financial compensation. Else, their situation remains just one out of many examples of “how the everyday structure of academia promotes the invisibility of researcher’s care obligations” (Dannenberg 2019, 174). Some authors even per-

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<sup>14</sup> Think of the famous descriptions by Liedloff (1989 [1975]) being astonished about babies in a Venezuelan Yequana community playing with sharp knives and at the edge of abysses without any concern, let alone fear, on their parents’ side. Liedloff portrayed Yequana parenting – in a not unproblematic, romanticising manner – as an alternative to a perceived Western parenting style characterized by overprotectiveness, a timely discourse that is being led under the buzzword of “helicopter parenting” in Germany.

ceive it “as somewhat taboo to acknowledge the presence of our families, in other words to blur and even violate the boundaries of our field sites with visible traces of our personal lives and relationships, however important these relationships and biographies are in enabling us to understand the phenomenon we are studying” (Frohlick 2002, 52).

### Outlook: Which Place for Researching Parents?

Being perceived as a mother during fieldwork informed my positionality positively as my family model corresponds largely to a hegemonic image of family, sexuality, and reproduction in my research context – to what Julia Pauli calls the “family normativity” of the field. It mobilized generalized images of a parent being a serious and responsible person. It facilitated access, opened a shared space of belonging between mothers, thus directly supporting the approach of my project that explicitly focuses on women’s life worlds. In many situations during participant observation, casual conversations or interviews, mothering was the ground for my interlocutors to *undo difference* and thereby dismantling macro-structural power relations that differentiate us. Reconnecting my empiric examples to the theorizing on difference, power and privilege discussed above, it has become clear that categories of difference may produce ambivalent, changing, or even opposite positionings, depending on the context. Categories of difference do not necessarily produce definite positionings in terms of exclusion or inclusion. Rather, positioning is *done* in many small interactions. A shift in positioning (such as becoming a mother) may reinforce or disrupt difference or belonging, allowing people to draw on or withdraw from it. Within the institutional structure that my work is embedded in, I was quite clearly deferring from the ideal image of a single-travelling PhD student, with legal regulations *doing difference* towards parents who seek to conduct long-term fieldwork accompanied by their children. With access to resources that could cover medical and travel costs of my children as well as adequate childcare being (legally) limited, I encountered a situation that produced insecurity and left me with hours of correspondence that I would have preferred to dedicate to my project. In the end, part of my expenses could be covered due to interpersonal networks of people at the top of academic hierarchies – due to *Herrschaftswissen*. A structural solution that would provide security for researching parents in precarized parts of academia is up to now not in sight. The institutional normativity rewarding independence from care responsibilities and the field normativity rewarding parenting status produced diametrically opposed outcomes with regard to my positioning as a mother.

Supporting researcher-parents is a way to actively overcome gendered inequality in academia as well as disadvantaging of young scientists in precarized contracts. Regulations with a possibly high flexibility that will work for a variety of family models, travel plans and researching / parenting configurations are needed in order to live up to the much-stated pretension of promoting gender equity and family friendliness in academia. Some researchers do brilliant interviews with their kids playing around, others prefer their kids to stay with a care person while they do interviews. Many variables from the child(ren)’s age to their language proficiency, rural or urban research setting, research duration, to mobility play a role.



Consequently, a one-fits-all-solution cannot be a feasible goal for efficient support structures. Researchers with experience in accompanied fieldwork are experts on these questions and should be consulted and included in the reworking of regulations. Needless to add that, as any expert, they should be paid for sharing their expertise.

Doing research together with one's children enriches anthropologic fieldwork in manifold ways. Returning to Joan Cassell, who called fieldwork a "risk of self", she expands her argument unto parenting and concludes:

*In parenting, we also risk ourselves. [...] Children are fragile links between our past and future, fears and hopes. We are doubly at risk, then, when our children are in the field. In attempting to learn and grow, we risk failure and sorrow, our own and theirs. In exposing ourselves, we expose them.* (1987, 257 f.)

In taking our children along, we are exposing them to the field reality, whether they want it or not. Speaking with Cassell, it means "risking them" alongside risking ourselves – a situation requiring ethical reflection at its very least. Yet the "risk of self" in both fieldwork and parenting presents an opportunity, an epistemic tool to open one's perspective towards people we seek to closely connect to – our children and our research participants alike. But while "the field" may reward the multifaceted risking of selves involved in fieldwork, academic structures oftentimes put extra-risk on researcher-parents, and researcher-mothers especially.

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