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Challenging Privilege

A Transdisciplinary Dialogue Between Critical Diversity Studies and Ethnographies of

Deservingness

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Abstract

This working paper explores synergies between Critical Diversity Studies (CDS) and

anthropological assessments of deservingness with the goal of starting to map out a new

combined heuristic for analyzing privilege. A discussion of relevant approaches is followed by an

analysis of the figure of the female migrant care worker and her embeddedness in the

transnational dynamic of "nested" privilege. In conclusion, the working paper offers a brief

feminist outlook on how deservingness and privilege can be theorized in conjunction for further

research.

Introduction

This working paper explores synergies between Critical Diversity Studies (CDS) and

anthropological assessments of deservingness with the goal of starting to map out a new combined

heuristic for analyzing privilege. In this way the working paper addresses a particular research and

theoretical gap, namely the inquiry into the interrelation of privilege and deservingness. While

there is a huge and growing literature on deservingness (in anthropology and across disciplines),

the topic of privilege often remains rather implicit, unaddressed, or scarcely theorized. At the same

time, while Critical Diversity Studies have been committed to deconstructing privilege through

intersectional analysis, engagement with the analytical lens of deservingness has remained rather marginal.

This gap is surely not incidental and rests on common epistemological perspectives. Namely, looking at how claims and hierarchies of un/deservingness play out "shines through" – or is implicit in – intersectional accounts of privilege, while grasping the intersections of gender, class, race, age etc. is a necessary aspect of any substantial analytics of deservingness. In this working paper we want to build on this conceptual proximity and explore how we can use systematic comparison and intersections of the two concepts as well as apply them as analytical lenses to concrete socio-cultural "figures", so that both concepts can be sharpened and developed further. Our approach here can be understood as a transdisciplinary engagement and exchange in terms of a "transgression, regrouping, reconfiguration of questions, theories, methods, and solutions" (Maihofer, 2005, p. 200, translated by the authors). In particular, we draw on the holistic approach of intersectional analysis in CDS, which focuses on structural dimensions of inequality and discrimination, and on ethnographic insights into the complexity of personal-experiential and everyday aspects of social locations and hierarchies.

In this working paper we will: first, briefly discuss some relevant dimensions of an intersectional approach taken up by CDS and ethnographies of deservingness with special regards to privilege; secondly, we will apply both analytical lenses heuristically to the figure of the female migrant care worker and her embeddedness in the transnational dynamic of "nested" privilege; and finally, by means of conclusion, we offer a brief feminist outlook on how deservingness and privilege can be theorized in conjunction for further research.

Conceptual Coordinates, Intersections, Synergies

What can an intersectional assessment of privilege in CDS learn from the analytical focus on deservingness and vice versa? In order to start answering this question we will lay out and regroup theoretical and research takes in both sets of approaches.

Critical Diversity Studies (represented by Janssens & Steyaert, 2019; Nkomo et al., 2019; Risberg & Pilhofer, 2018; Zanoni et al., 2016) have by now developed a theoretically motivated critical questioning of formerly established explanations and categorizations. Thereby intersectionality has gained considerable significance because it makes it possible to consider race, gender, ethnicity, class, nationality, and sexuality as simultaneous processes of identity, institutional, and social practice; it also offers more complete and accurate analyses, which can be transferred into policy change applications (Holvino, 2010, p. 266).

In recent research on privilege in the field of CDS, two areas of problems have been identified: First, Diversity management in organizations is most often built on one (and only one) category of difference, neglecting the heterogeneity within such categories. Dennissen et al. (2020) highlight dynamic processes of privilege and disadvantage that play a crucial role in the preservation of single identity categories. Representing more than one category of difference – for example, female migrant worker – can thus lead to a paradoxical marginalization within diversity networks that are built on one single category. Dennissen et al. take up Crenshaw's notion of political intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991, cited by Dennissen et al., 2020, p. 220) to strengthen a critical take on diversity management. The concept of political intersectionality makes it possible to focus on the complexity of privilege that might be ingrained in paradoxical ways when focusing

on one single category of marginalization, and, as we will argue, it allows consideration of related discourses of un/deservingness.

Second, a further area of privilege that needs to be developed is highlighted by Gaibrois and Nentwich (2020). Their analysis of interviews with employees of a multinational organization reveals the construction of a hierarchy of privilege that at the same time is contested by the employees. Thus, they argue, privilege needs to be understood as dynamic and contested, but at the same time as often silenced by those in positions of advantage (Gaibrois & Nentwich, 2020). This conclusion chimes well with a study conducted by Aavik among male managers. She reveals that privilege for managers in power positions remains invisible. Her interviewees' narratives lack references to social categories such as gender, race, and class (Aavik, 2020). The image of the "ideal worker" (Acker, 2006) normalizes privilege and makes it invisible. Meritocracy serves to explain ascent to managerial positions – even if higher positions do not necessarily correspond to higher skills (Connell, 2010) and even if an advantage might be unearned. Still, privilege and advantage often involve a sense of entitlement and lack of awareness of being in possession of it (Aavik, 2020). In conjunction with a sense of entitlement, silencing produces and upholds the privilege of the male managers investigated (Aavik, 2020). They are mostly convinced to deserve the privilege that they are granted.

An ethnographic focus on deservingness forms a synergy with intersectional insights into how privilege plays out (and potentially remains invisible) in particular cases. This combined perspective permits a more holistic and encompassing assessment of the complex processes and struggles individuals navigate in their everyday lives (e.g. their workplace) and from the particular socio-cultural intersectional positions they find themselves in. On the most general level, un/deservingness is a prominent and ascending mode of moralizing inequality and distribution (Streinzer & Tošić, 2022). The context of the everyday is essential when exploring

un/deservingness since it is often "articulated in a vernacular moral register" (Willen & Cook, 2016). In other words, arguments of un/deservingness are "at hand" and can be easily "picked up" and employed without relying on accountable argumentation. Examples of topics and social categories where deservingness is debated and politicized are numerous: (forced) migrants' un/deservingness of status and social security; families' un/deservingness of social aid; deservingness of citizenship based on belonging, productivity, or wealth; deservingness of work, status, or promotion, etc. Un/deservingness is a processual and relational notion, since who is seen as un/deserving changes depending on the socio-political and ideological constellations and events. Furthermore, un/deservingness is commonly claimed "in relation or comparison to" someone else (a category of individuals), as exemplified by debates in Austria featuring the right-wing political arguments that refugees do not deserve to have more income than retired (national) citizens (Streinzer & Tošić, 2022, p. 1). A focus on deservingness helps "unpack" ideological discourses and how these can become law/policy. Ideologically saturated "figures of un/deservingness" are a good entry point for inquiring into hierarchies and inequality and can be understood as historical crystallizations of gendered ideological moralizations of inequality. Examples include narratives and debates about: the "social scrounger" or "welfare queen" (undeserving of welfare); the "undeserving migrant" (undeserving of social security and legal status) vs. the "deserving refugee" (deserving of humanitarian aid); the "capable entrepreneur" (deserving of tax incentives); and the "ideal (male, white) worker" (deserving of respect and privilege).

We propose to further explore figures of un/deservingness by focusing on the prominent contemporary gendered social locations and roles individuals find themselves in and according to which they can be stereotyped as ideologically framed figures. However, internal complexity and diversity (class, gender, citizenship, education, age, etc.), as well as ongoing transformations of the particular social locations and roles, are crucial to be able to look beyond ideologized imaginaries

of moralized figures. This is where a combined ethnographic and intersectional analytical heuristic focusing on interrelated and differential dynamics of privilege and deservingness comes in. With such an approach we can see more clearly how privilege and deservingness coalesce and diverge and shape each other in dynamic and changing ways.

Explored in this way, the male manager, for example (a central focus in CDS analyses), is revealed not merely as privileged, but at the same time as potentially undeserving (of that very privilege and the resulting wealth and power) depending on the particular case and context. A combined ethnographic-intersectional analysis might reveal that managers with a specific cultural or class background could be seen as especially undeserving, since they are too privileged; or managers with certain political-ideological views and more egalitarian leadership practices, as more deserving. To take up a social figure which is gaining significance both in legal asylum regulations as well as in analysis (Strasser, 2022), the queer male refugee and asylum seeker is here briefly discussed due to the paradoxical nature of the homophobia that can play out in ideologically contradictory ways. This figure can be seen as deserving asylum due to homophobia-related danger and prosecution, whereby their home country – especially, if it is a Muslim majority country – is framed as the suppressive "Other" and countries such as Switzerland and Austria perceive themselves as guaranteeing gender equality and sexual democracy (Strasser, 2022). However, at the same time, the queer male refugee can be homophobically stereotyped by the same context. Their deservingness of asylum can be questioned by referring to a kind of humanitarian hierarchy of the "needy". Yet, the queer migrant can be stereotyped and moralized both in their home society and in the country of potential asylum as too privileged to need support, as a middle- or upper-class citizen able to "afford to flee" because of their sexual orientation. In this case, the allegation of (former) privilege serves to legitimate undeservingness based on unacknowledged homophobia.

Challenging Privilege

In order to exemplify the potential of a combined analytical heuristic including the lenses of both intersectionality and deservingness, in the next section we will zoom in on a crucial contemporary gendered figure in more detail: the female transnational migrant care worker. By offering an explorative analysis, we aim to show how such a combined approach can shed light on the ways deservingness and privilege may play out and interrelate in different ways.

The Transnational Female Migrant Care Worker and the Dynamics of "Nesting" Privilege and Un/deservingness

In Western European societies such as Switzerland (as well as e.g. Germany or Austria) the figure of the female care-migrant plays an important role and is an integral part of the current debates on the "care crisis". The percentage of middle-class women and mothers entering the labor market is increasing, in Switzerland the percentage is particularly high (Schwiter et al., 2018). The care work previously done by these women now urgently needs to be replaced. The Netherlands and Switzerland are among the Western European countries where institutional childcare is very expensive and there are not enough day-care places for families who need them. One option for families with more than one child is to hire a migrant care worker. The same goes for the field of elderly care. Care-migrants are mostly low paid and precarious, and they often engage in circular migration (Schilliger, 2019; Schwiter et al., 2018).

Regarding paid and unpaid female care work, an intersectional perspective enables us to address deservingness, privilege, and inequality among women as well as the paradoxical dynamics of "nested"[1] privilege and the un/deservingness ingrained within it. Female migrant care workers

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[1] We are inspired by Bakić-Hayden's work on "nesting Orientalism" (1995).

are assigned to subordinate, low-paid positions. At the same time, a privileged female employer hiring a migrant care worker is able to take a well-paid job. Especially if she is well educated, the expectation that she will enter the labor market gains importance in contemporary societies. Since little value is ascribed to unpaid maternal care work, but income-generating work is more prestigious, her dominant position over the care worker is usually perceived as fair and implies a claim to a deserved privilege – a higher income and more social security than the migrant care worker who looks after children or elderly family members in need. However, if we look more closely at the migrant care worker, she is clearly disadvantaged in her work context vis-à-vis her employer, as her work is less valued. In the Swiss context, for example, this serves to legitimize her subordinate position: she is seen as deserving neither better pay nor better working and social security conditions.

At the same time her status and income are likely to increase in comparison to her home country, which represents the other context of her transnational life. There, the transnational migrant care worker is perceived as clearly more privileged and of a higher social status than (national) care workers and can be seen as undeserving of social security in her home country, where she still might have an entitlement due to former or even current employment. Her contradictory and "nested" position of subordination and privilege, of being simultaneously un/deserving in different ways and of different resources (wage, social security), is embedded in the asymmetrical and gendered distribution of resources on a global scale. Thus, transnational social inequality marks the complexity of her subject position as an employee (Lutz, 2018).

Intersectionality allows for a deeper understanding of such paradoxical outcomes of dependence/independence and the hierarchical positioning of women, and addresses the asymmetrical transnational embeddedness of care-migrants (Binswanger forthcoming, 2023). Hearn and Louvrier (2016) argue that lived experience in the workplace should be considered an

intersectional dimension because it shapes an individual's social positioning. It can even lead to altered identity constructions of the self, depending on the context (Romani & Binswanger, 2019). Viewing the migrant care worker through the lens of deservingness, privilege, and subordination turns out to be dynamic, changeable, and even contradictory, depending on the context in which they are experienced. Engaging with deservingness and privilege thus allows for sharpening an intersectional analysis and for specifying and situating a figure like the migrant female care worker.

A Feminist Outlook

We would like this working paper also to be read as a critical feminist take on deservingness and privilege. Offering a comparative perspective on the interrelation of privilege and un/deservingness in the case of transnational female care workers and their middle-class female employers illustrates the challenge for a feminist account of independence and agency. This analytical perspective captures how both figures enhance independence due to their relation based in the care economy. However, in terms of a feminist intervention, it is crucial to highlight the ambiguous aspects of the enhanced female independence as it might be based on existing and create new intersectional and gendered inequalities and privilege. Comparing the female care worker with her female employer, who gains independence by paying the former less than she herself earns, shows how care work remains feminized and the male-dominated working world remains unchallenged.

A feminist and ethnographic account that locates both figures in their respective different livelihood contexts make it possible to grasp the complexity of the interplay of un/deservingness and privilege. This working paper represents a theoretical and epistemic starting point and accounts for a "thick" description of how female autonomy and agency play out in entangled and ambiguous

ways. Unacknowledged privilege (such as the social security that a well-paid middle-class job entails) and ideologically supported discourses on undeservingness (such as the devaluation of care work) can in this way be analytically named and challenged.

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