

## Exploring Collectivity. Interdisciplinary Methods

Protocol of the PhD-Workshop as part of the conference “Manufacturing Collectivity. Exploring the Nexus of Gender, Collectivities, and Law”

### Introduction

The PhD Workshop set out to address the following questions:

1. *What do we mean by the terms ‘collectives’, ‘processes of collectivization’ and/or ‘collectivity’?*
2. *What are the connotations and implications these terms have in our respective fields of research and/or academic disciplines?*
3. *How does interdisciplinarity play a role in studying collectivity?*
4. *What are the challenges and/or surprises one encounters with regard to theory, methodology or ‘the field’ when exploring collectivity?*

To discuss these questions six doctoral students held short presentations on their research topics and Prof. Dr. Sarah Elsuni and Prof. Dr. Martina Klausner gave commentaries. All participants of the workshop were invited to participate in the following discussion.

### **General remarks of Sarah Elsuni**

When focusing on the concepts and processes of collectivity Sarah emphasizes the question: *Why do you focus on collectives? What is the benefit of this perspective on collectivity?* She warned us to be considerate because of the „**Benennungsdilemma**“: Naming\_defining social groups as legal category or collective helps as an analysing tool but can also reproduce power relations and essentialisms. *How can we describe collectives without reinforcing differences between collectives or rendering them invisible within groups? What are the criteria for collectives? Who defines the directions of belongings? Are they defined by the inside or outside? Who are the stakeholders?*

### **General remarks of Martina Klausner**

Martina suggests to analyze the specific relationship between the one and the many by asking three questions:

- **When** is a collective? (this is not a grammar mistake, it emphasizes that collectives are not stable or fixed)
- *What brings a collective into being?*
- *What are the effects of collectives?*

Moreover, Martina reminded us to remain open to those questions which lie underneath or between the more obvious stories.

### **Presentations and discussion**

#### **Session 1**

#### **Enikő Anna Virág – Collectivities in the Hungarian #metoo discourse**

Enikő focused in her research on three dimensions with regard to the #metoo movement: victimhood, profession and gender. Using a discourse analysis she identified three narratives

- The victim is also a spokesperson of the victims in general
- Rejecting collective female victimhood
- Manufacturing alternative collective victimhood

## Responses and Discussion

Sarah Elsuni focused on stakeholders of Enikö's research in particular the „public opinion“ and asked *What does media mean? Traditional media or social media? Who defines public discourses? Who defines the public? Is „the public“ the Collective? She gives to consider whether there is a democratic value of trial by media in postfactual times. How do trials by media gain legitimization?*

Enikö shared the concerns about trial by media. She pointed out that it also helps democratic processes: When criminal justice is not really effective especially when it comes to gender-based violence, then often trial by media takes place.

Starting point was online media: statements from social media made their way into traditional media being quoted from facebook. This is why her research is far from representative, but indicative of *What can you say publicly and what not?*

Martina Klausner asked: *How do media spaces generate specific issues and form ideas of solidarities?* She wouldn't start with the collectives, rather than asking: *When is a collective (because public opinion does not simply exist)?* She referred to Ian Hacking's „Looping effect“: The naming and categorization of collectives have an impact on the ways of categorizing and not only the other way around. *What about different positions and how are they valued? In what ways are they more useful or more vulnerable?*

The further discussion highlighted how public displays of solidarity are key to the workings of trial by media. In the end it often boils down to a 'race of victimhood', because the perpetrator is portrayed as a kind of a victim too. Then the question comes up: *Who is the biggest victim? And who is deserving of solidarity?*

## Nina Fraeser – The workings of stories in collective responses to sexual violence and abuse

Stories connect people, this is why Nina asks among other things:

- *How do shared stories contribute to collectivity?*
- *Would we have done the same when we had known stories like ours before?*
- *What are the affective inheritances that allow and restrict the possibilities for collective action?*

## Responses and discussion

Sarah Elsuni challenged Nina's research: how does looking at stories of collectives relate to a powerful public / private distinction. *What happens when the violence stays private within this group?*

A similar question concerned Nina: *When did feminists start to problematize sexual harassment within leftist groups?* It usually started with sexism, abuse of power and violence within groups. In the archival material one can see sentences like 'and then the case of sexual violence moved from the shared or squatted house to the public' and with the public they refer to the wider radical left scene. Hence, public and private shifts in these contexts: the collective house becomes the more private context and the political scene the public, since the state and the general public are not so much their point of reference due to their autonomous, antiauthoritarian politics.

Martina Klausner points out the situational mapping Nina did in her research as a helpful analytical tool. In medical anthropology storytelling was used, in order to enable living with illness narratives to draw a picture of what it means to be ill. *How are the available stories formative to healing or disease in different ways? What are the structures of confessions, therapeutic and empowerment through voice? What is the affective inheritance of those stories?*

Nina gives another perspective by asking *What is absent from my mapping?* The „victim’s“ perspective is the most interesting, but the documents in the archives are mostly about the relations of groups and individuals to the perpetrators of sexual violence. Absent is also the whole aspect of gossip, both in good and bad ways. One starting point of the research is though, how collective responses to sexual violence can be much more harmful than the experience of violence in the first place.

### **Hannah Vögele – Collectivity**

Hannah focused her studies on constitutional colonialism and in particular in intimate relationships and asks:

- *What does property in society?*
- *How does property structure our relations?*

### **Responses and discussion**

Sarah Elsuni asked why her focus is on collectives. Hannah pointed out that she rather thinks about collectives in terms of relationships: *How can we relate to ourself and our body? What is the concept of self-ownership and how does this work in relation to others? (What) does „My body my choice“ say about property – does it presume a position of owning one’s own body?*

Martina Klausner asked *how are the processes manifested by legal norms (property rights)? But also implicate: What’s absent? What kind of materials are missing? What kind of stories cannot be told? How could this interfere with our understanding today? How can we identify failures in today’s reading?*

Hannah developed the questions further and asked: *How do specific histories get lost? Is it intentional? What about the absence of specific archives? E.g. Photos are only from the colonialist perspective. How can one work with the available archives?*

### **Further discussion**

- *How are collectivity and solidarity linked to each other? Is solidarity the effect of collectivity?*
- Differentiation between collectivity and collectivization: Concepts are processual and can change. *If the process of collectivization is a process from the outside, how does it shape the categories of collectivity?*

### **Summary of Sarah Elsuni of Session 1**

- We talked less about the definitions of collectives or tried to describe collectives; but focussed on processes of collectivization.
- Again: *When is a collective? What brings a collective into being?*
- Different concepts of solidarity to understand collectivity
- Stories and narratives push for questions of intersectionality (refers to Crenshaw): *Who is telling the stories? Whose experiences are neglected or ignored?*

- We need to understand the situatedness of collectivities from a historical perspective.

## Session 2

### Judith Höllmann – The whole being more than the sum of its parts? Reflections on the relationship between individual and collective

Judith reports about the interdisciplinary disconcertments which lead her to questions about *collective identity: the “more” as collective attribution of meaning?* When describing collectives as sharing one identity: *The “more” might be found in collectively produced texts and “objects [that] can be seen to conjure sui generis agencies”?*

#### Responses and discussion

Martina Klausner highlights the interdisciplinary tension and disconcertments which are a very interesting starting point. Furthermore, it makes a difference, if you are looking at websites as objects or if you sit in Meet-Ups: *What are people actually saying and what is written online? What are the criteria in law to talk about collectives as an object? What do these criteria say about membership? What expression of individuals are out there?* She refers to Christopher Kelty’s „The Participant“ who used the term „Contributory Autonomy“, which might help to specify the individual articulation.

In order to understand the „object“, Martina asked *How do objects articulate and express themselves in a certain way?*

Sara Elsuni is interested in understanding „Gemeinwohl“ (common good). Being in this triangle between individual interests, collective interests and public interests leads to the question: *What is a public interest?* The legal understanding of society might differ: *Isn’t the state actually working as a social collective?* Moreover, there is a disciplinary bound: labor unions are a legal person and entity.

### Svenja Spyra – Affective communities? Method(ological) reflections on subjectification and queer collectives

Svenja states that affects (and emotions) and language have an important effect on how people are related to and within collectives. Hence, she centres the following questions:

- *What was said and how it was said?*
- *How is the use of language entwined with affects?*
- *In what ways do subcultural hegemonies have an effect on what (queer) femme-ininity means or how it can be performed?*

#### Responses and discussion

Martina Klausner recommended taking a deeper look into *what are the specific moral grounds of the concept of solidarity?* Concepts of solidarity can be completely different, meaning also national or right wing.

Sarah Elsuni stated that the challenges in using language increase even more once we move from social sciences to applied sciences. Law forces us to implement concepts etc. Law uses language as categories. *What if you don't only stay in your sociologist perspective, when it comes to applying your thoughts?*

## **Adrian Lehne – Dimensions of Collective Identity**

Adrian questions how social groups were historically constituted and what shaped their self-understanding. In order to assess collective action, he needed a more precise framework than the terms “movement”, “scene”, or “community”. Therefore, he turned to collectives and the possible usage of the term collective identity. In an empirical example he investigated *Safer Sex as part of collective identity among gay men in the 1980s?*

### **Responses and discussion**

Martina Klausner emphasizes Adrian’s research as an example of how different forces shape collectivity from the outside and the inside. It shows the moment of friction and tensions; when collectives got under pressure. She asked: *Different grammars of risks and solidarities – how do they work with the grammar of law? Why is safer sex not “outside politics”?*

Adrian pointed out the challenge of balancing the big trap that when you study collectives through the perspective of law you might overestimate „law as the leading force“.

Sarah Elsuni asked: *What kind of debates are you focusing on? Criminal law?* It could be interesting to look at current anti-discrimination law (Susanne Baer). *The specification could be not staying on the theoretical level; rather take a look at persons, collectives, identities?* There is a challenge in interdisciplinarity since the view on concepts of collectives and collectivization is always depending on the researcher’s disciplinary and theoretical background.

Within the further discussion the question came up: *Did the concepts of safer sex create a collective?*

Adrian’s observed a big debate during the 1980ies whether there is a need for safer sex or not. Since there existed a force (the ongoing criminalization of HIV) to position oneself to the questions, it created new forms of collectivity among gay men.

He asks: *What categories does law produce?* Even though the law and the court avoided talking about the „category gay men“ (other than as sex worker), their interpretations of HIV transmission as criminal assault still had a mobilizing effect on gay men as a collective.

### **Discussion about Methodology**

Nina referred to Detamore and asks *How much are we part of the collectives we research? What does this ‘being part of’ do to us during research?*

- Maybe it indicates some aspects of collectivization?
- The time differences are important. What is the effect of researching historic collectives to which one relates by identification or political affiliation but not as being bodies in the same time/space?
- Of course, the researcher has an effect on the subjects: sharing opinions / finding them sympathetic or not/ pushing the uncomfortable away / influencing stories that are being told – even when those stories lie far in the past.

**Collectivity & “the state”:** „The state is not an entity“: 20 people would give you 20 different definitions. Once the term „state“ is turned into a legal entity, it becomes an object. In this objectified way it becomes „THE state“. Overall, „the state“ is still materialized, but in very complex and processual ways.

It seems much easier, if your research object is closer to your own political values. It enhances critique and makes it more complicated and interesting because you usually gain a deeper understanding through this proximity.

### **Summary by Martina Klausner**

- language is specifically performative depending on the context: lawyers need clear cut definitions. What would happen if lawyers couldn't access such clear-cut definitions?
- tension and disconcertments are not only taking place in interdisciplinary working, but also how terms of law are used in institutions or are used to understand phenomena in a better way.
- such tensions are also extremely productive to challenge each other: what can we learn from completely different ways of understanding?
- at the same time, and this counts for terms and methodological approaches alike: you need to be precise in your own discipline

### **Book recommendations / Links**

- Ejeris Dixon (Editor); Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (Editor): Beyond Survival Strategies and Stories from the Transformative Justice Movement
- Mariame Kaba - We Do This 'til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice
- Niamh Stephenson and Dimitris Papadopoulos: Outside Politics/Continuous Experience
- <https://www.dukeupress.edu/Queer-Activism-in-India/>

### **Evaluation**

#### **What is your takeaway of this PhD Workshop for the conference?**

- The role of stories in the formation of collectives and their transformation.
- The importance of looking at the process of collectivization instead of a clear definition of collectives.
- I found it very inspiring to learn about the "dimensions of collective identity", as a way to look at organizational markers.
- The notion of affordance echoed for a while... (M. Klausner)
- different outcomes of "collectives" like solidarity, a sense of belonging, identification, etc. depend on the questions of who defines and where, when and how processes of collectivization take place

Still looking for more answers to the question of how collectivity relates to solidarity?

- The devil lies in the detail - but also the wonder does. I enjoyed the close-ups we got by looking at conceptions of collectivity through details from case/empirical material. I will be looking for this as well in the following presentations

- Rethink: What is the benefit of thinking about collectivity - collectives - processes of collectivization (instead of other concepts/approaches)? And if we do so, be more precise in describing what constitutes such relationships?
- collective identity as struggle

### **What do you think about differently now?**

- Thinking about solidarity through responses to sexual violence
- Who defines a Collective? What does it mean to think through the perspective from the outside and inside?
- what does our/the researcher's own position, identification or belonging mean for a project of "queering" methodology in reference to the text of Mathias Detamore
- Additional ways to look at structures and -in the moment collectivity-
- Interdisciplinary conversations are even more challenging than I already knew: we can relate so much better to the kind of stories which suit the stories we know already/which we bring with us to the conversation
- Language is performative in very different ways in activism and the different sciences.
- Being more cautious and aware of the inside - outside dichotomy (is it?)