Representing experiential knowledge

Citation for published version:

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1080/14781700.2020.1846606

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
Translation Studies

Publisher Rights Statement:
This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Translation Studies on 10/12/2020, available online: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14781700.2020.1846606.

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
Representing experiential knowledge: Who may translate whom?
Şebnem Susam-Saraeva*

School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, UK
* S.Susam-Saraeva@ed.ac.uk

Translators and interpreters often take on assignments where the limits of their knowledge vis-à-vis the topics in question are tried and tested. In most cases, the situation can be remedied through the research they undertake, e.g. when translating scientific texts or dense philosophical debates. There is a myriad of resources to clarify terminology, extract factual details, and familiarize oneself with topic-specific discourses. When it comes to translating/interpreting narratives with intricate details of experiential and corporeal knowledge, however, certain challenging questions arise. The knowledge recounted is often highly “personal”, “subjective”, “relative”, and can take on as many forms as there are people on earth. Abstract information gleaned from books or the Internet may not help the translators to make sense of this kind of knowledge, let alone be able to pass it on in a different language and culture.¹

Differences between educational/theoretical knowledge vs. experiential knowledge are thrown into sharp relief when one is translating material that involves the depiction of sensations (e.g. pain, pleasure, hunger) or emotions (e.g. elation, fear, shame). Such material may range from interpreting for a rape victim immediately after the crime, to translating personal accounts of abuse at indigenous residential schools, of war crimes, or of “peak experiences”, such as life changing events with potentially transformative powers (e.g. extreme sports achievements or deep spiritual experiences). I would argue that such narratives are founded upon cultural formations which take “the body” and its experiences as their starting point. The same goes for narratives emerging from racial, ethnic, sexuality and gender-based identities. Therefore, the translation of the latter may raise similar issues.

In all these cases, the translators/interpreters would be expected to have relevant educational/theoretical knowledge to be able to understand the accounts as much as possible and/or to possess relevant observational knowledge derived from previous work in similar situations. Nevertheless, when the issue at stake is the interpretation of highly significant and ever-changing details that make up personal narratives, a rather controversial question arises: whether we need translators/interpreters with supposedly “analogous” life experiences for material based on experiential knowledge.

Similar issues have been raised in recent news coverage in relation to cultural products other than translation, such as theatre, film and literature,² fuelling debates around representation: who has “the right” to represent whom? In this provocation piece, I would like to pose comparable questions about translation and translation studies by using examples from three different areas: my research on the translation of childbirth narratives from English into Turkish (Susam-Saraeva 2020), my observational/experiential knowledge as a birth doula, and recent debates in the film industry regarding representation.

Experiential knowledge and its translation

For their first births, women usually rely on “educational” knowledge gleaned through books, antenatal courses, as well as conversations with friends, family and healthcare professionals.
For subsequent births, however, women make decisions based on their own experience of first births. As Kim Hensley Owens observes, “a woman’s own bodily experience of childbirth seems to trump any other form of knowledge or experience” (2015, 142). The interpretation of the events at first births become the guiding principle, as women gain authority by having lived through the experience. Expecting mothers also find the support of others who have “been there” invaluable. Here is a passage from a birth story, depicting the atmosphere at a birthing centre in the US:

You can feel the good vibrations. Even in the consultation room, you find the same climate of laughter. I don’t mean to be sexist, but it was much easier for me to have something as intimate as prenatal checkups done by women who had had babies themselves. This fact also made it easy to expose my questions and fears to them in a way I could never have done with an obstetrician. (Gaskin 2003, 90)

Relatability thus emerges as a key factor in establishing positive relationships antenatally with healthcare professionals, based on assumed mutual understanding. A similar situation arises perinatally. Somewhere during the “transition stage”, towards the end of labour, mothers often realize there is “no way out” of the intensity of the sensations in their bodies and exclaim: “I can’t do this!” The birth attendants, who look into a mother’s eyes and say: “Yes, you can. You are already doing it!” gain their authority through their own bodily experience of having given birth (experiential) and/or through their professional experience of having observed and supported countless other births (observational). A mother may exclaim: “But you don’t understand! None of you understand!” In such a case, it may help to be in a position to say: “I can understand more than some; I’ve been there”, even though one can never fully understand how this mother is experiencing contractions at this moment in time, as opposed to oneself or previously supported mothers. Nevertheless, as Fiona Nelson points out:

Giving birth is a unique and profound experience, and many women believe that only another woman who has gone through the experience can understand the significance of the physical ordeal, the social consequences of the transition to “mother” and the intensity of emotion one can have for the baby born of one’s body. (2009, 44)

Let me give two examples of how such experiential and corporeal knowledge can be substantially misrepresented in translation, when the translators in question seem to find it difficult to relate to. In the American midwife Ina May Gaskin’s classic Ina May’s Guide to Childbirth, a mother observes: “Two days before my due date I was experiencing a remarkable, heightened sense of awareness – colors seemed brighter, crisp and clear. I was feeling dreamy and soft” (Gaskin 2003, 93). In the Turkish translation this passage becomes: “Beklenen tarihten iki gün önce duyugularımda çok güçlü bir hassaslaşma oldu – renkler çok daha parlak, keskin ve net görünüyordu, ayrıca dalgın ve kırılgan hissediyordum” (Gaskin 2015, 135; “Two days before my due date I experienced an intense sensitivity in my emotions – colors seemed brighter, crisp and clear, and I was feeling dreamy and fragile”). 3 An intense and uplifting sensorial experience, which sometimes occurs either immediately before or during labour and invites the mothers to be more aware of their surroundings and remain in the moment, is thus turned into the cliché image of a “fragile” and “sensitive” expectant woman. In another story, a mother concludes: “The ecstasy of birth was so wonderful” (Gaskin 2003, 21), which is translated as “Doğumumda çok kuşku bir hal vardı ve bu muhteşemdi” (Gaskin 2015, 41; “In my birth there was a state of exhilaration and this was magnificent’), turning the corporeal/spiritual experience of the mother (ecstasy) into a more emotional one shared by all those present at the birth (exhilaration), more in line with the Turkish societal expectations surrounding birth.

The difficulty of accurately expressing corporeal and experiential knowledge in a given language, let alone translating it into another, is evident. Furthermore, having experienced “the same” life event is never sufficient. The seemingly same bodily experience – in this case, the
expulsion or removal of a foetus from a uterus – is lived in a myriad of ways, depending on the medical and social infrastructures available, the cultural expectations surrounding birth, the various rituals accompanying labour and birth, and one’s own attitude towards pregnancy and parenthood. Following on from this thought, other questions arise: would someone who has never witnessed a home birth believe in its “transformative” power and be able to deal with the spiritual overtones evident in some of the home birth stories, eschewing a judgemental approach? Or, in cases of traumatic experiences during childbirth, would a translator be able to do justice to someone else’s trauma, if they themselves have not suffered any childbirth-related PTSD?

It is good to pause here and reflect upon the repercussions of this line of thought. In approaching this issue, I find the concept of “translator as secondary witness” (Deane-Cox 2013) particularly useful. A “secondary witness” is “one who listens to the [survivor’s] testimony with empathy and helps to record, store and transmit it” (Assmann 2006, 9; cited in Deane-Cox 2013, 310). Intrinsic to any act of secondary witnessing is “the desire to assist the original testifier, in both senses of the word: to be present as a listener, and to support the transmission of their testimony” (2013, 312). While Sharon Deane-Cox has introduced this concept to translation studies within the context of Holocaust memoirs and testimonies, detailing highly traumatic corporeal experiences associated with concentration camps, I find it equally useful in the study of the translation of other narratives based on experiential knowledge, particularly those arising from corporeal experiences. Being fully present, listening and showing empathy should still form the basis of the translator/interpreter’s response to the narration of any such experience:

The presence of the listener facilitates the communication of past experience and trauma; bearing witness becomes contingent on reception, and the receiver of the testimony is integral in its realization. Hence the status of the secondary witness, the one who, despite not having first-hand knowledge of the original events, becomes a necessary and active figure in the restitution, mediation and transmission of memory. Likewise, the translator as a hermeneutic listener to and receiver of the survivor’s lived experience plays a fundamental role in its reconstruction and retranslation. (Deane-Cox 2013, 311; my emphasis)

The concept of “secondary witness” thus highlights the possibility that one may not have the same experiential knowledge and yet still be able to comprehend and translate someone else’s experience through attentive listening and conscientious mediation. It can therefore be an illuminating concept when complex issues of representation arise, as I shall discuss later.

Another important concept I would like to introduce to the discussion is that of “debriefing”. In doula training, considerable emphasis is given to debriefing one’s own birth experiences – both one’s own birth and the births of one’s children, if any. This is to ensure that doulas will not carry over excessive baggage to the births they support. This baggage can take the form of one’s own fears, regrets, expectations, or even joy at the births they themselves experienced as a baby or parent. The risk associated with incomplete debriefing and not working sufficiently on one’s own emotions is “having an agenda of one’s own” while supporting new parents. This can take on the form of acting like a “saviour” or pushing one’s own opinions about how birth should look and feel like on to other people; neither of these positions leave room for new mothers to make their own informed decisions. In such cases, the doula can easily turn from a witness/facilitator into an agent/activist, inadvertently steering the mother’s journey towards a course where it is no more the mother herself but the doula chasing after her own “ideal” birth.

The repercussions of these observations for translators/interpreters should be clear. In translation studies, we are familiar with cases where, for instance, anachronistic activism is
introduced to translations of texts predating any such activism, such as anti-slavery or pro-suffrage. Similarly, source texts which do not have explicit LGBTQ+ links may become more LGBTQ+ friendly in translation. While there is growing emphasis on the visibility, presence, and agency of the translators/interpreters in the discipline within the last two decades, there is relatively little questioning of what these notions may actually mean in situations where the source author’s subjective and experiential knowledge are in question.

What happens, for instance, when translators and interpreters have similar experiential knowledge and share similar concerns and agendas with their source authors/clients, but have not “debriefed” sufficiently to be able to stay open to someone else’s personal account in all its similarity and difference? Translation studies has begun to address some of these ethical questions, mainly in relation to gender and power. However, to my knowledge, we still do not expect the translators/interpreters—or researchers, for that matter—to go through a vigorous debriefing process before embarking upon new projects.

Let me offer some examples for such insufficient debriefing from the birth narratives I examined. A mother refers to her partner, who is “an outspoken advocate of natural and home birth” (Gaskin 2003, 15). This is translated as “doğal doğumun kuvvetli bir savunucusu” (Gaskin 2015, 32; “an outspoken advocate of natural birth”). References to home birth, its possibility, availability, even desirability, are omitted. In another example, birth is depicted as an emergency, when a mother is talking about her baby right after the birth: “of course, we got to hold her immediately” (Gaskin 2003, 28). This is translated as “Elbette onu hemen yakalamamız gerekli” (Gaskin 2015, 49; “of course we had to catch her immediately”).

Talking about her experience of reading another book by Gaskin, Spiritual Midwifery, a different mother tells about being struck by the “allure and beauty of birth” (Gaskin 2003, 53), which turns into “ebeliğin büyüsü ve güzelliği” (Gaskin 2015, 82; “allure and beauty of midwifery”). In these examples, a particularly cautious and fearful approach to birth emerges, whether consciously or unconsciously, on the part of the translators. This approach does not leave room for the positive emotions and experiences expressed by the mothers telling their stories. It is of course difficult to say how much of this fear can be attributed to societal convictions regarding the risks and dangers of childbirth and how much to actual personal experiences. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the translators would have benefited from a thorough debriefing and becoming more aware of their own observational and experiential knowledge before embarking upon this project.

Deane-Cox proposes “a prescriptive approach to secondary witnessing in Holocaust translation: that translators must listen perceptively; that they must strive towards an analogous reconstruction of the original testimony, its choosings and imaginings, its analytical attempts and its communicative intentions” (2013, 321–322). Close and careful listening, as well as empathy which does not cause the translator to “sink down” with the narrator but uphold them instead, emerge as key factors in the translation of experiential and corporeal knowledge, especially if the experiences are traumatic ones; this is true both for translators/interpreters with similar life experiences and for those without. This seems to be the key to avoiding appropriation and assimilation of unique personal experiences into what is known/normal/common or to refrain from transferring these experiences into the target language altogether.

**Issues of representation**

In the introduction to this piece, I have pointed out a further dilemma regarding texts which take “body” and the various identities derived from it as their starting point, such as racial,
ethnic, sexuality and gender identities. This aspect of representation has recently raised considerable debate in the film industry, among others. Well-known actors who do not identify as LGBTQ+ defended their “right” to interpret gay or lesbian characters on the big screen; they noted that it is their training in acting and their wide-ranging experience in fleshing out various characters that enable them to “play roles beyond [their] experience”. On the other hand, the tendency of Hollywood to give queer roles to actors who do not identify as LGBTQ+ has been heavily criticized by LGBTQ+ communities, with references to “gayfacing”, echoing earlier accusations of the “‘blackface’ of Laurence Olivier in Othello, or Alec Guinness in A Passage to India” (Gilbey 2019). As a result, one actor announced he is not to take on any more similar roles, “to make sure [he] won’t be another straight boy taking a gay man’s role”. Similarly, an actress denounced a project in which she had initially agreed to portray a transgender man, in order not to take “acting opportunities away from members of marginalized communities”. A transgender actor quit a musical project when the main role of a transgender woman was given to a cisgender man. At the root of this debate of course lie the power differentials due to heteronormativity. “No openly gay man has ever won a best actor Oscar, but straight actors have taken home the prize for playing LGBT roles”; so far “fifty-two straight people have been nominated for Oscars for playing gay characters”. Authentic representation also seems to be a key issue which crops up in these debates, as in the case of the internationally acclaimed movie Blue Is the Warmest Colour, hailed as one of the first movies which managed to – more or less – successfully depict a lesbian love story, albeit without any lesbian actors or director involved. In the words of the actor Andrew Haigh:

If you are a straight actor you are often applauded for playing gay, congratulated on your bravery, commended on your skill to pull off such a tricky feat. You rarely see a gay actor applauded for playing straight. And if a gay actor does play gay, there is often the assumption that no acting was really required in the first place. (Cited in Gilbey 2019)

A similar discussion has already started in the translation/interpreting industry and translation studies. For instance, earlier works on the translation of camp in the 1990s and early 2000s (see e.g. Harvey 2003) mainly aimed at raising awareness on the part of translators (who do not identify as LGBTQ+) to specific characteristics of camp which help form some gay identities in the Anglophone world, therefore encouraging all translators involved to carry out their due research when translating these texts into other languages. Now we are in an era where one can hear a translator of Ocean Vuong second-guessing their role as they themselves do not belong to the LGBTQ+ community, and panels being organized around the ethics of “translating gay identities”. We also hear calls for people seeking asylum based on their sexual orientation – and the persecution, abuse and violence they had to endure – to be supported by interpreters who come from the same or similar backgrounds (Ware 2019). As Ware observes, it is not uncommon for these asylum seekers to be interpreted by people who are judgemental and prejudiced towards them due to their own religious and cultural upbringing (2019, 9). These interpreters may use derogatory language and treat their clients unkindly or may not be familiar with other words to describe the situation. Feeling comfortable with LGBTQ+ discourse, terminology and issues, both for the client and the interpreter, emerges as a key issue in such encounters:

Often LGBTI+ asylum seekers, especially those who have been through a traumatic experience, feel naturally more at ease with professional interpreters who are also LGBTI+, as there is more reassurance that there will be no judgement. The relational position of the LGBTI+ interpreter (i.e. in terms of sharing the same sexuality or gender identity as the client) will give the asylum seeker confidence and may make them more open to sharing their story. (Ware 2019, 10)

While it is clear that such a match could ensure a safer environment for the asylum seekers, where they will not feel judged or denigrated by their fellow compatriot interpreters, to my mind there is still a problem here: does an emphasis on “same sexuality or gender identity”
guarantee a fully listening ear? Going back to our concept of secondary witness, such witnesses “are apt to assimilate the unfamiliar to that which they have experienced or can understand” (Stumm 2010, 356; cited in Deane-Cox 2013, 312). So even when an interpreter and the asylum seeker “share the same sexuality or gender identity”, they may have had totally different experiences of it based on their levels of education, professional lives, cultural openness, financial means, etc., back in their home countries, as well as in their host ones. As Deane-Cox argues, “to appropriate the sheer otherness of the survivor’s experience into recognizable modes of being and saying would belie the trauma therein, not least the attendant dilemmas of understanding and representation” (2013, 312). It is clear that having had the “same” experiential knowledge can thus occasionally become a hindrance rather than a blessing.

These debates link back to the issue of authenticity. Let me give an example from the work of Serena Bassi (2017), who examines the US-based online project It Gets Better and its Italian counterpart Le Cose Cambiano [Things Change]. The online projects are awareness-raising campaigns designed to encourage LGBTQ+ youth to be resilient and hopeful in the face of homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and other forms of prejudice. Bassi argues that the Italian version is a “localization” attempt, based on videos uploaded by Italian LGBTQ+ individuals, rather than a more straightforward audiovisual translation of the American videos into Italian. Bassi convincingly demonstrates that this strategy to achieve some form of equivalence between the two sites actually does not work, as the participants who volunteered their videos in Italian approach the idea of time, change and queer identities very differently from their American counterparts. What is important in this debate for our purposes, however, is the very decision to “authenticate” the experiences of this youth through a recourse to autochthonous accounts of struggles and obstacles, rather than having recourse to translation. In this particular case, translation was not deemed “authentic” enough to encourage the Italian youth to come out and live resilient lives. Therefore, the “voice” was handed over to Italian LGBTQ+ youth.

A related question in terms of representation is whether translators are expected to ask the permission of authors to translate them if they are coming from very different ethnic, racial or gender-related backgrounds. For instance, would a “white settler” translator of a Canadian indigenous author have “the right” to translate a novella set in a reservation? Could the author in question object to the choice of translator? Could the translator and publisher nevertheless go ahead with their choice? Are we heading towards an era where interest, enthusiasm, and professional experience might be challenged by anxieties around authenticity and “politically-correct” representation, where one will be able to translate/interpret only those one shares some kind of affinity with?

Researching translation

A corollary to the rather unsettling discussions detailed above is the question of who has “the right” to do research on these topics. Does it help if scholars have similar experiential knowledge and come from similar backgrounds? For example, what are the responses to white, “central” scholars who study translations from racial/ethnic minority groups? How much do scholars who are not part of the LGBTQ+ community know about the day-to-day realities of its members, and would they be able to analyse translations of works produced by them (see e.g. En and En 2019)? Let me briefly address these issues by returning to the work of a scholar who encountered some resistance to her work on rhetoric and childbirth as someone who had not mothered at the time. At the early stages of her research on birth narratives, Hensley Owens was met with resistance and subtle criticism from her audience:
They seemed to suggest I could not (should not) authoritatively inquire into or make claims about childbirth because I did not (then) have personal experience with it (…) Some mothers in my audience felt my lack of experience with childbirth made my inquiry into the subject suspicious, an ethical violation. My voice, then that of “inexperienced” woman, could not match their own. (2015, 138–139)

Other scholars working on the topic are aware of their own positioning and the way it influences the writing and reception of their work. Tess Cosslett notes: “I wouldn’t have written this book if I hadn’t myself given birth. I might not have been so critical of the natural childbirth movement if I hadn’t given birth by emergency Caesarean” (1994, 155) – even though she offers this acknowledgement in the conclusion of her book, rather than in her introduction.

Hensley Owens rightly observes that “the idea that personal/bodily experience with a topic should bolster one’s claims, or even legitimize an inquiry in the first place, seems at once perfectly reasonable and perfectly absurd” (2015, 139). She refers, for instance, to male scholars’ work on pregnancy and birth (not only through obstetrics and medicine, but other fields such as sociology and history), and notes that “no personal experience is narrated” in their texts and that “readers do not know whether their research was instigated or affected by personal experiences with childbirth, and yet readers seem to accept their scholarship without that experience or experiential positioning” (140). She thus exposes the double standards underlying this stance. A similar statement can be found in the words of a practicing midwife, who had no children of her own and was continuously asked by the women she supported whether she had any: “Funny how they don’t ask or expect this of male obstetricians or think less of their oncologist because they too don’t have cancer”. I agree with Hensley Owens’ further elaborations on this issue:

I argue that scholars need not have personal experience to have the authority to inquire into topics, even bodily and contemporary topics, in part because experience itself is always something of a construct, but also because scholarly authority ultimately rests in scholarly training. At the same time, personal experience has value for scholars, and there is a potential value for readers of scholars disclosing and examining that experience when it inspires, affects, or is affected by one’s scholarly work. (2015, 141)

Where does this dilemma leave the translation scholar, though? Expectations regarding the existence of connections between experiential knowledge and one’s own research area are still alive and well; one can imagine a straight scholar carrying out research on translations of queer authors and facing similarly challenging questions such as those directed to Hensley Owens. How that scholar would address such criticism mostly depends on their own research strengths, erudition, emotional and intellectual investment in the research topic, etc. However, we may nevertheless find ourselves asking a parallel question to the one we asked above in relation to translation and interpreting: Are we heading towards an era where scholarly authority will at least partially be based on experiential and corporeal authority?

Conclusion

In this provocation piece, I aimed at raising more questions than I could possibly answer, in the hope of initiating a lively debate. I believe in the importance of this debate, as turning a blind eye to it, encroaching from other fields, would risk issues of inclusion and exclusion both for translators/interpreters and for translation scholars. In this concluding section, true to my role as the “provocateur”, I would like to throw in a few more observations.

In an age where “truth” has become a dubious word and “authenticity” has become even more sought after, it seems like we are more and more in need of hearing “stories” from
the mouths of people who can claim authoritative “insider” knowledge on a given subject. We want these stories to be “told” or “interpreted” by those with credibility, those “who have been there”, even though “there” may not be the same as that of the source. Inadvertently, we also seem to perpetuate the “echo chamber” syndrome in cultural productions, by not being able to “listen to” a radically different voice than our own and trying to “give voice to” it, or by criticising those who try to represent others who have radically different experiences than their own. On the other hand, the danger of assuming to easily understand someone else’s experiential knowledge, especially if that knowledge seems to contradict mainstream opinions of the body and self, could ultimately amount to obliterating that knowledge. Consciously acting as a secondary witness to an experiential narrative and giving more thought and attention to debriefing may prove to be necessary antidotes.

Ultimately, though, we need to start recognising the significance of different types of knowledge and stop prioritising only those associated with intellectual prowess and cultural/economic capital. In an article which focuses on a translation project for LGBTQ+ migrants in Austria, Michael En and Boka En examine “how translation expertise is negotiated in relation to ‘translation’, ‘activism’, and ‘LGBTIQ* questions’” (2019, 213), and how different forms of knowledge can exist and be claimed by different agents according to their educational, professional and political/personal backgrounds. They propose “a distinction between identity position (e.g. an ‘expert’ or ‘lay’ translator) and knowledge practices (i.e. actual, contextually contingent knowledge processes” (213). Their research presents LGBTQ+ experiential knowledge as a form of expertise, different from a translator’s professional experience, but nonetheless a crucial component for this particular translation project. They observe that:

[While “lay” translators pre-emptively emphasized their ostensible disadvantages compared to “expert” translators, only one of the non-LGBTIQ* participants framed their lack of knowledge on LGBTIQ* matters in this way […] All other non-LGBTIQ* participants – both “expert” and “lay” translators – did not phrase this specific lack of knowledge as a lack of expertise. Instead, they framed it in more positive terms by emphasizing what they had learned in the translation process. While “lay translators” constructed translation expertise as unattainable for the uninitiated, “LGBTIQ* laypeople” saw LGBTIQ* expertise as something that could be acquired if they put work into it. (En and En 2019, 222)]

The authors argue that what is needed “is a more complex understanding of expertise in the context of translation work” focusing on “an understanding of expertise as multiple and partial”; on the fact that expertise is “not an inherent property of any individual or group” but “is actively constructed and deconstructed in specific contexts and specific interactions”; and, on the importance of “distinguishing between individual roles/identities and specific, situated knowledge practices” (En and En 2019: 226–227).

Throughout the industrialisation period in the West and the rise of science as “a belief system”, experiential and subjective knowledge has come to be deemed “inferior” to “expert”, “professional” or “objective” knowledge. In many academic disciplines, such as medical humanities and social sciences, this stance is currently being questioned. The intention of this piece has been to initiate similar debates within translation studies, as well as to invite translators/interpreters to both embrace their subjective/experiential knowledge and be aware of the difficulties involved in remaining open to the subjective/experiential knowledge of others.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).
Note on contributor
Şebnem Susam-Saraeva is a Senior Lecturer in Translation Studies at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. Her research interests have included gender and translation, retranslations, translation of literary and cultural theories, research methodology in translation studies, internationalization of the discipline, translation and popular music, and translation and maternal health.

Acknowledgements
This debate began at a conference organized at the School of Translation and Interpretation, University of Ottawa, on 15–16 November 2018, titled “Naming and Translating ‘The Marginal’”. I would like to extend my thanks to Luise von Flotow for organising the event and to all the participants for the discussion and feedback. The research this piece is based on was made possible through the Bank of Montreal Visiting Scholarship in Women’s Studies, which I held at The Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies, University of Ottawa, in autumn 2018.

References


Nelson, Fiona. 2009. *In the Other Room: Entering the Culture of Motherhood.* Black Point: Fernwood.


---

1 It is worth noting here that this difficulty of making sense of experiential and subjective knowledge of course applies to everyone, not just to translators and interpreters. Similar issues are faced by those who need to respond to this kind of knowledge in any way or are affected by it, including partners, students, judges, etc., raising some basic ethical, philosophical and epistemological issues. However, for the purposes of my argument, I will try and limit the discussion to translators and interpreters.


3 All glosses into English are my own.

4 This is in line with the findings of my previous research on the topic, which indicate that translators have found it rather difficult to introduce the concept of home birth to Turkish audiences in a meaningful way (Susam-Saraeva 2010).

5 For more details on the translational choices in this project, see Susam-Saraeva 2020.


7 https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/jan/14/gay-roles-actors-assassination-gianni-versace-bohemian-rhapsody


12 Anonymous, personal correspondence.

13 https://www.bl.uk/events/translating-gay-identities

14 I would like to thank Arianne Des Rochers for raising this question during her presentation at the “Naming and Translating ‘The Marginal’” conference, University of Ottawa, 15–16 November 2018.

15 Hensley Owens explains the possible reasons underlying this resistance as follows: “Some women in the conference audience seemed to expect, even to demand, personal, bodily experience as a warrant for my academic claims. I suspect those responses had to do with childbearing being so politically and ideologically charged; sometimes, when women hear another woman’s story, or even scholarship about women’s stories, they respond not so much to the stories or the experiences themselves so much as to the assumption that the other woman’s choices and stances imply and/or require judgement of their own choices and stances” (2015, 140).