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Beauvoir's Myths as a Concept for Analyzing Gendered Asymmetries

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Abstract: Can the concept of myths, as developed by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, help us to better understand and sociologically examine social inequalities in heterosexual couple relationships? Beauvoir has shown how women are defined as the Other. Her conceptualization of myths plays an important role in the production of asymmetry between men and women. How can we translate these myths, to a sociological micro level to examine couple relationships? We illustrate the feasibility of this approach through the comparison of two qualitative research projects from the 1990s and 2020s with dual-earner couples in transition to retirement. We try to find out how femininity and masculinity are defined in couple relationships, how they relate to each other, and whether asymmetry is at work. What has changed over time and are women (still) defined in a subordinate and derivative way from men?

Keywords: *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir, myths, gender inequality, couple relationship, empirical sociological research

1 Introduction

In *The Second Sex*, first published in French in 1949, Simone de Beauvoir formulates ideas about the 'becoming' of the sexes (in the gender binary). For her analysis, Beauvoir draws not only on different fields of science, such as biology and psychology, but also on contemporary literature, as well as the lived experiences of women at the time. The book was one of the first works referred to by the forming Second Wave feminist movement of the 1960s and 70s. It contributed to the "politicization of the private" (Gerhard 1992, 43) and according to Moi it changed

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the personal lives of countless women in the Western world in very concrete ways (1994, 273ff.). Beauvoir's work also had an enormous political influence on the feminist movement in West Germany (Holland-Cunz 2003). However, it should be noted that in contrast to the book's political influence there was hardly any reference to it in feminist sociological discussions in Germany (Knapp and Wetterer 1992). This omission is in our opinion due to the reception of *The Second Sex* at the beginning of the women's movement. It was a common approach in countless women's self-awareness groups to relate to Beauvoir's writing on a personal level instead of a theoretical one (Gather 1999).

Beauvoir's first volume 'Facts and Myths' broadly develops the idea that gender is socially constructed and that people acquire their gender in a social process (this idea is explicitly taken up by Judith Butler in 1990). According to sociologist Carol Hagemann-White, Beauvoir's approach can be used to describe differences in women's and men's experiences and life situations "without having to resort to biological determinants" (1992, 58). It is therefore hardly surprising that Beauvoir's famous question "what is a woman?" (Beauvoir 2011, 3) as well as her answer to this question "that if she did not exist, [...] they did invent her" (Beauvoir 2011, 203) has remained relevant to this day. The idea that 'the woman'¹ is a construct is widely taken up (though rarely with explicit reference to Beauvoir) in academic feminism from around the 1990s. Instead of presupposing gender as something given, feminist scientists now asked how concepts of difference are created and used to produce and fix gender differences (e.g., Gildemeister and Wetterer 1992; Hagemann-White 1993). These new lines of inquiry correspond with Beauvoir's concept of myths in *The Second Sex*. We believe that the concept of myths offers a unique approach for the empirical sociological study of inequality in western heterosexual couple relationships. In this paper, we aim to show possible ways of applying Beauvoir's concept of myths, using our own research on couples in retirement as an example.

Beauvoir uses the example of novels written by men that were current at the time (with one exception) to demonstrate how women are constructed and portrayed as the second sex in relation to men. Today, more than 70 years after the publication of *The Second Sex*, two questions arise in our discussion of Beauvoir: (1) Can the concept of myths also be used for empirical sociological research on couples? (2) And what can we find out empirically about the social construction of

¹ Beauvoir predominantly uses the singular when she writes about men and women. Her usage of the singular form does not mean, that she writes about concrete individuals as actors, rather her aim is the elaboration of principles. To use today's terminology, it is about the production and reproduction of gender differentiations and asymmetries, about structural connections.

gender when we look at interactions taking place within couples instead of female characters written by male novelists?

Love and partnership, like any other social action, are integrated in and framed by patterns of social order. Heterosexual couples² therefore not only have to navigate the question of how their relationship should be, but also how social gender should be. Through interacting with their partners and the social world around them, couples find their own ways of how male and female gender or masculinity and femininity are related to each other and constructed in their relationship. Since the appearance of *The Second Sex*, there have been some developments in terms of prevailing partnership norms. The asymmetrical-complementary marriage model of the 1960s in West Germany of the male breadwinner and female homemaker was replaced by the adult worker or dual-earner/dual-career model from around the turn of the millennium (Lewis 2002). In the late 20th century “the pattern of regulating couple relationships” (Leupold 1983, 298) is, at least on a normative level, the ideology of the partnership. The ideology is based on the equality of both partners and therefore involves the equal distribution of housework, female employment rights and equal decision-making rights for both partners. It has largely replaced romantic love which contained expectations of female devotion and submission (Leupold 1983).

Additionally, Giddens (1992) notes a trend toward democratization in personal relationships. Accordingly, new models are partnership love and pure love (confluent love and pure relationship). Romantic love now in essence controls the choice of partner (Leupold 1983, Burkart 2018). Even though there are considerable doubts whether the promised equality can be established through the partnership model, it increased the need for discussion and legitimization within couple relationships (e.g., Wimbauer 2021, 52 ff.). This new model makes it difficult for couples to recognize existing inequalities in their relationship, because they are now seen as the result of fair negotiations between equal partners (Burkart 2014, 91). Despite egalitarian partnership ideology and free partner choice, the heteronormative gender order is still at work, contributing to the “reproduction of social inequalities” (Bethmann 2013, 11; see further Illouz 2011; Solga and Wimbauer 2005).

Research from Germany also finds that traditional gender concepts and practices prevail for dual-career couples and female breadwinner families (Jurczyk et al. 2019). Furthermore, there is also an unequal distribution of recognition

2 In this paper, the analysis is limited to white, heterosexual, non-migrant couple relationships in the Western world whose gender norms have evolved with bourgeois society (see Hausen 1978). (The question of how an intersectional perspective) interferes here must be reserved for further research. See on homosexual partnership e.g., Buba, Vaskovics, and Becker 2001, Schürmann 2006 and on families beyond ‘couple normativity’ (Wimbauer 2021).

due to a gender-differentiated division of labor (Wimbauer 2021, 37). Women still carry the disproportionate burden of unpaid care and housework, this is referred to as gender care gap (e.g., Sachverständigenkommission zum Zweiten Gleichstellungsbericht der Bundesregierung 2017; Samtleben 2019). Although the position of the family breadwinner is structurally exhausted (Rusconi and Wimbauer 2013), because more and more women enter the workforce, it nevertheless remains hegemonic, according to Popp (2009).

We believe the concept of myths can help to better understand the persistence of these inequalities and help to trace the hierarchical heteronormative gender order within relationships. We briefly illustrate the feasibility of this approach using research with couples in transition to retirement. To do so, we draw on two of our own empirical works and publications. The first research project we draw on dates back a good 25 years (Gather 1996a, 1996b), while the second was conducted last year (Vogl 2023). By comparing couples from different cohorts, we intend to offer some ideas about how relationships might have changed over time.

Claudia Gather's research and publications revealed general patterns of normative argumentation in couple relationships that may persist to this day. In this paper, we would first like to briefly present and recapitulate these older findings. Analysis of empirical interviews with sixteen dual-career couples in the 1990s (Gather 1996a; 1996b, 2008, 2010) revealed that although femininity was subordinately constructed as the second gender, the interviewed women were not passive but very often actively involved in gender constructions themselves. In terms of content, the constructions were very different, but it was predominantly women who argued normatively.

This means they argued with the aid of gender norms by referring to them approvingly or disapprovingly. Since the interviews we use as an example come from a research project conducted in the 1990s, the question remains as to what might have changed in the meantime and whether there are partnerships that might have come closer to equality. Can these former patterns of reasoning still be found in dual-career couples today? To shed a light on this matter, we draw on results from two dual-career couple interviews conducted in 2022.³ Since the recently interviewed couples rarely use gender as a means of legitimizing certain behaviors, a stronger focus is placed on their experiences with retirement and their distribution of care and housework.

The structure of this paper is as follows: first, we would like to outline the concept of myths in *The Second Sex*, discuss them against the background of some aspects of sociological concepts of the construction of gender, and elaborate its

³ Both interviews are part of the unpublished master thesis by Regine Vogl at Humboldt University in Berlin (Vogl 2023).

distinctive features. Then, the fruitfulness of the concept will be shown using empirical interviews with married couples in the 1990s. Gather has already shown the fruitfulness of this approach, although she noted the need for some modifications from an empirical sociological standpoint (2008). After this first analysis, the question arises whether and how the mechanisms described by Beauvoir are still detectable and effective today.

2 The Myths in Beauvoir's Work

We now begin with the concept of myths developed by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. Our aim is to find out whether and how this approach can be made fruitful in sociological research, and whether it can help to discover asymmetries in heterosexual couple relationships as well as provide an understanding of the origins of these inequalities.

Sociological concepts that address social rules and expectations of gendered behavior include: the concept of (gendered) norms and the social construction of gender, which we will refer to below.⁴ We will leave out the sociological concept of gender roles (see Lopota and Thorne 1978 for a fundamental critique of the approach).⁵ According to Villa (2007, 25), the social construction approach does not explain the asymmetry of gender relations, power, inequality, and the relationality of difference. Carol Hagemann-White described the same problem in her essay on the problems of investigating the constructors of gender (1993). From our perspective, Beauvoir's approach to myths can fill this conceptual gap.⁶

To understand Beauvoir's concept, we must first ask the question: What is a myth? A myth is "a pattern of beliefs expressing often symbolically the characteristic or prevalent attitudes in a group or culture" (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary n.d.). In English and in German, a myth is understood as something that is a fiction and not congruent with reality. Thus, they belong to the field of cultural productions like sagas and poetry. In sociology, there is work by Behnke and Meuser that also uses the term myth to study heterosexual partnerships. They speak of 'couple myths,' which for them are jointly generated fictions that contribute to

⁴ We keep this section short, as it has been discussed before: Gather 2008, 2011.

⁵ The gender role concept, popular in the 1970s and 80s, refers to role theories (e.g., Dahrendorf 2006). Differences in gender behavior at that time were explained by the gender-specific socialization of girls (e.g., Bilden 1980, 1991; Scheu 1977). The concept of gender role contains problems and ambiguities and has essentially been replaced in feminist sociological discussions since the 1990s by concepts of gender construction (e.g., Gildemeister and Wetterer 1992; Wetterer 2003).

⁶ Karin Hausen's 1978 historical analysis of gender characters, that originated in western society in the last third of the 18th century, also includes explanations for gender asymmetries.

the stability of the partnership (Behnke and Meuser 2005, 218). The authors therefore use the term myths because they consider them to be fictions. These fictions, according to Behnke and Meuser and as we will also see later, help to mask actual inequality.

For Beauvoir, myths are fundamentally false representations of reality; they are “mirages” with “group imperative” (Beauvoir 2011, 272). The myths in *The Second Sex* do not depict reality; rather, Beauvoir exposes societal images about women as fictions. These images can serve as values and as role models for socially acceptable behaviors or as ‘collective gender knowledge’ as Dölling calls it (2007). Via these myths women are reduced to certain traits.

Myths, according to Beauvoir, are also multifaceted and elusive because:

It is always difficult to describe a myth; it does not lend itself to being grasped or defined; it haunts consciousnesses without ever being posited opposite them as a fixed object. The object fluctuates so much and is so contradictory that its unity is not at first discerned: Delilah and Judith, Aspasia and Lucretia, Pandora and Athena, woman is both Eve and the Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, source of life, power of darkness; she is the elementary silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip, and lies; she is the medicine woman and witch, she is man’s prey; she is downfall, she is everything he is not and wants to have, his negation and his reason detre. (Beauvoir 2011, 162)

In this short passage Beauvoir exemplifies the diversity and contradictions of myths about women. These myths depict female characters in a variety of ways: Delilah betrays her lover Samson, Judith beheads Holofernes, Aspasia is educated, Lucretia is virtuous, Pandora possesses the box of all evil, Athena is a goddess.⁷ The characters represent evil and good, virtue and vice, vulnerability and strength, salvation and doom. Although these examples show female characters in various ways, Beauvoir argues that these are myths conceived by men and made for them. Women represent everything that men desire and despise. Myths about femininity are thus extremely diverse and malleable.⁸

All myths have one thing in common: They express the subordination of women. For example, in the creation myth of the Abrahamic religions, Eve is made from Adam’s rib and intended to be his companion. In Beauvoir’s interpretation: “Woman thus emerged as the inessential who never returned to the essential, as the

⁷ Beauvoir presents many more myths in *The Second Sex*, e.g., “Beatrice guiding Dante to the beyond, Laura beckoning Petrarch to the highest peaks, [...] as well as Sophia; they attributed the world’s redemption to her.” (Beauvoir 2011, 196)

⁸ In a similar way German first-wave feminist Hedwig Dohm (1876) asked “How then and what, gentlemen, living and deceased, are women in your opinion?” Dohm then lists how women are portrayed by men both as elves, fairies, angels, shy, gentle, tender, and as dragons, demons, cunning, scheming, and so on. These societal images serve to attribute any sort of behavior or action by women to their womanhood.

absolute Other, without reciprocity.” (2011, 160) Myths depict women as the counterpart to men. In each case, their representations correspond with the subjects need of the other as a mirror, treasure, prey, game, risk, and much more (Beauvoir 2011, 202f.). These myths Beatrice/Dante, Laura/Petrarch and so on can be placed on a macro level where they could serve as models of femininity.

In addition to this macro-level, Beauvoir examines conceptions of femininity in concrete French novels to show on a micro-level how femininity is constructed in relation to masculinity. For example, D.H. Lawrence portrays ‘the woman’ as a nymph, André Breton as a siren and savior of humanity, and Henry de Montherlant despises ‘the woman’ as a Megaera (Beauvoir 2011, 261ff.). Each writer shows different portrayals of women in accordance with their individual view: “these myths are orchestrated differently for each individual. The Other is singularly defined according to the singular way the One chooses to posit himself. All men assert themselves as freedom and transcendence.” (Beauvoir 2011, 262)

According to Beauvoir in contrast to myths about women, there are only clichés about men such as: “father, seducer, husband, the jealous one, the good son, the bad son” (2011, 162). These clichés are historically based on male prerogatives, such as the system of the “whole house” which was headed by the “father of the house” and existed before the emergence of the bourgeois middle class in the 18th century (Brunner 1956; see further Opitz 1994). Such male prerogatives existed in Germany well into the 20th century. For example, men legally held the power to make decisions in all important matters for their families including their wives until the 1950s in West Germany. Moreover, it was not until 1977 that women were allowed to take up employment without the prior permission of their husbands. The situation was different in East Germany, where women were able to choose a job autonomously as early as 1949 (BMFSFJ 2011). Whether men are truly free to create themselves cannot be discussed in this context, but it should be noted that there have been promising sociological discussions on multiple masculinities since Raewyn Connell’s work on hegemonic masculinity (1995). For example, discussions on changing norms of masculinity and caring masculinities (e.g., Messner 1997; Scholz and Heilmann 2019).

As we have already mentioned myths about women contain ideas about how they are or how they should be. Beauvoir’s myths are relational, emphasizing the difference and asymmetry of the sexes. The equality taboo later thematized by Rubin (1975) already shimmers through in Beauvoir’s myths. What is special about the myth is that ‘woman’ is defined as the unessential other in contrast to ‘man’. According to Beauvoir, women do not design themselves: “Any myth always implies a subject who projects his hopes and his fears of a transcendent heaven. Not positioning themselves as Subject, women have not created the virile myth that would reflect their projects.” (Beauvoir 2011, 162) The ideas of how women should be are created by men for men. According to Beauvoir, there are only male ideas of

femininity, which Moi calls “patriarchal femininity” (1994, 294). Women, or what women are supposed to be, are defined with reference to men and by men, while men are not defined with reference to them. “He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.” (Beauvoir 2011, 6) Myths about women portray male hopes and fears which, at the same time, do not correspond with reality or the possible realm of experience. They serve men in the process of becoming a subject by naturalizing the feminine as the ‘other’ without a reciprocal recognition of individual freedoms. From this construction principle of femininity: women as the second sex, Beauvoir infers the concrete life situation of the woman, who “chooses herself not as she exists for herself but as men defines her... since her being-for-men is one of the essential factors of her concrete condition” (Beauvoir 2011, 156).

By positioning ‘woman’ as the Other, men have succeeded in subjugating her. Myths are therefore used to justify male privileges and to secure male supremacy (Beauvoir 2011, 288ff.). According to Beauvoir, the fact that women submit to their subjugation and deprive themselves of their freedom to design themselves, is also due to their own convenience. In a recent article, Pickard discusses this with the addition of a temporal perspective. Women persist in a kind of “waiting style ... in a chronic state of ambivalence which impedes women’s ability to fully project themselves into the future” (Pickard 2020, 314). Pickard interprets this as an underlying structure of women’s existence and subordination. Although things are a bit more complex nowadays, according to the author, gender inequality and the “traditional binary relationship of masculinity and femininity” remain in principle (Pickard 2020, 317).

While reading Beauvoir’s chapter on myths, we are repeatedly tempted to read myths as social norms. As with norms, myths can be defaults for action and transgressions, which does not alter their validity: “Experiential denials cannot do anything against myth.” (Beauvoir 2011, 266) Unlike myths, however, gendered norms in couple relationships are more concrete and typically involve ideas about which partner should perform which task. Whereas the applicability of uniform gender-specific norms was already no longer universally valid in Germany at the end of the 20th century (e.g., Koppetsch and Burkart 1999 for milieu-specific orientations).

Now, how is the construction of social gender to be grasped more precisely with Beauvoir? On the one hand, Beauvoir treats the myths about femininity from a sociological perspective on a more macro-sociological level. Myths structurally create gender difference and hierarchy as well as the legitimization for the subordination of femininity. They are collective images, comparable to sociological values (from which norms are derived) and ‘collective gender knowledge’ (Dölling 2007).

What is sociologically interesting about Beauvoir’s myths, in our view, is that they are broader and more variable than gender norms and they can be used to

explain inequality in heterosexual couple relationships. They are asymmetrical because they are created by men and women are defined secondarily. According to this approach, women would theoretically have a secondary part in gender constructions.

At the macro level of myth or collective gender knowledge, there is work that supports Beauvoir's approach: For example, the historical work of Karin Hausen on the emergence of binary 'gender characters' in the 18th and 19th centuries (1978). Hausen shows how in the 18th century the 'female gender character' was developed by men (philosophers, lawyers, scientists, writers) complementary to the idea of masculinity to secure male domination. In the 19th century these ideas of femininity became 'scientifically' grounded in the natural sciences and widely established in new bourgeois middle class. How the binary gender difference became naturalized and scientifically substantiated between 1750 and 1850 is vividly shown by Honegger (1992). The question remains whether these gender characters, which were created on the sociological macro-level in the 18th century onwards, as well as the myths described by Beauvoir are still relevant today?

And moreover: Are new myths emerging in modern society, namely about equality and parity? Are there new myths of femininity, for example that of the 'superwoman' (Vintges 2016), who easily succeeds in all areas of life (career, marriage, childcare, etc.)? What does it look like on the micro level of individuals? Does this principle of construction—men design complementary femininity to match their masculinity to secure their dominance—also apply to concrete partnerships? And does it still apply today? Do women in real life have a say in the constructions of femininity, perhaps even masculinity? Meanwhile, is there also the possibility of women designing themselves into the world? Beauvoir could imagine that the feminine myth will die one day (Beauvoir 2011, 162). Are we on our way there yet? How are myths or the 'subjective gender knowledge' (Dölling 2007) of the participants used and negotiated in relationships?

In the following, gender myths and the question of how and whether they find their way into the relationship will be examined on a micro-sociological level using the example of interviews with couples. Our analysis is a first step to generate theses that could help to answer the listed questions. We cannot give conclusive answers based on our empirical material, but we would like to provide an incentive for further work in this field of inquiry.

In sociological concepts of marriage and love, interactions play an important role. Here, interactions will be examined since they are the place where gender constructions as well as the legitimization of these constructions take place with the inclusion of social order patterns. However, this happens without the actors being aware of this.

3 A Cursory Look at the Empirical Evidence

In the following, we will inquire into the construction processes of gender myths on a micro-sociological level using the example of excerpts from interviews with couples. Beauvoir's thesis is that femininity is related to masculinity and that femininity is derived subordinately as the Other, meaning that men have the interpretative authority for femininity in relationships. We will first present two interview excerpts of two couples from a qualitative empirical study conducted in the 1990s.⁹ Then, in the second empirical part, interview excerpts from a recent research project¹⁰ with two couples are presented to develop first ideas about possible changes over time.

There are approximately 27 years between the two research projects. The most recently interviewed couples thus belong to a younger generation (boomers) than those interviewed in the 1990s.¹¹ All couples were so-called dual-earner couples with roughly equal incomes. All couples were already retired at the time of the interviews or in transition to retirement. The first research project focused on couples in which the husbands were already in retirement. The reason for this focus on retired husbands is the lack of legitimacy of a traditional division of labor in retired couples, caused by the equivalent availability of time for the performance of housework. We now present two very different couples from the older study first, the Hermann couple and the Richter couple (the names of all couples have been anonymized).

9 The empirical research project Gather 1996a, 1996b examined 16 couples in terms of the construction of gender and distribution of power in their relationships. These couples in transition to retirement all had one thing in common: Women's earnings were about the same as men's during their working years. The couples were interviewed jointly by one male and one female researcher. The method of the narrative interview by Fritz Schütze 1977 was chosen for the survey. The interviews were analyzed according to the method of objective hermeneutics (Oevermann et al. 1979).

10 In the more recent research project (Vogl 2023), two couples were interviewed regarding recognition and inequality in their relationships with a focus on the division of domestic labor. One interview was conducted jointly with one additional male researcher, while the other one was carried out alone. The method of the semi-narrative interview (Helfferich 2011, 178–89) was chosen for the research project. The interviews were analyzed in accordance with hermeneutic sociology of knowledge (e.g., Reichertz and Schröer 1994). In addition, key passages from the interviews were evaluated using the sequence analysis of objective hermeneutics (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2021, 311 ff.).

11 According to a study by Ihinger-Tallmann and Pasley generational belonging plays a lesser role for the normative orientation of couples than the time of couple formation. In fact, the type of couple relationship, including the internal division of labor, is typically negotiated at the time of couple formation while taking into account the prevailing social and cultural gender knowledge of the time (Ihinger-Tallmann and Pasley 1987).

3.1 Interviews From the 1990's

In our first couple, Mrs. Hermann worked as an engineer before retirement and Mr. Hermann was a locksmith. In addition to her car driver's license, she also had a truck driver's license. The couple followed a conventional pattern in their division of domestic labor.

The following interview excerpt is about driving:

1. M:¹²—Most of the time I drove.—Right? She thought
2. that so—uh the man has to sit at the steering wheel.
3. W: If I have a man with me, then I don't drive.
4. M: No. She didn't want to. No.
5. M: She could have driven as far as I was concerned.
6. W: Well, I think—I think it's silly when there's a man with me,
7. and the man is sitting next to me; it always looks like
8. looks like his driver's license has been taken away. (Gather 1996a, 106)

It is striking that the wife, who worked as a truck driver in the past, switches to the passenger seat as soon as her husband gets into the car. Here, she shows a more rigid interest in following conventional gender norms than her husband. The imperative: "the man has to sit at the steering wheel!" is originally a demand by Mrs. Hermann, which her husband repeats in indirect speech. She expects that transgressing this convention would be interpreted negatively by their social environment (Mr. Herrmann's driver's license suspension). The woman behind the wheel becomes a threat to the external perception of the couple, because the loss of a driver's license implies a misconduct on her husband's part which could reflect negatively on Mrs. Hermann herself. Therefore, Mrs. Herrmann's behavior could be interpreted not only as an attempt to maintain conventional gender norms, but also as a protection of the couple relationship from misinterpretation by others. However, the theoretically conceivable possibility of recognizing women for skills in the 'male' field (driving a car) does not occur to her. Mr. Hermann seems to be less bothered by a deviation from this convention (line 5). Nevertheless, he submits to his wife's wishes without seeming to notice that she is determining the situation. We see that in this situation, Mrs. Hermann is the one who dictates masculinity and prescribes how Mr. Hermann should act as a man.

Throughout her life, Mrs. Hermann has worked hard in so-called 'male jobs' and has always contributed a significant amount to the family income. Nevertheless—or perhaps because of this—she wants to conform to conventional female

¹² M = man, W = woman, I = interviewer; — means a short pause in speaking.

gender norms. But that only works for her, as can be seen in other parts of the interview, when her husband also takes on his conventional male role. Her ‘femininity’ is only possible in a derivative form, i.e. subordinate to masculinity.

In our second couple, called Richter, the wife was still employed while the husband was already retired. He worked in the insurance business, while she was a librarian. At the time of the interview, Mr. Richter was running the household almost alone, while Ms. Richter was still working. This interview sequence is about the question of who is ‘in charge’ in the relationship:

1. W: He was never the breadwinner, we were both
2. always equals.
3. I: Yes, you were equal then, too, were not you?
4. W: On the contrary. My job is perhaps a little
5. more qualified, right?
6. And (break 2 s)
7. M: She’s lucky that she is uh in the (workplace)—
8. here, so uh uh the sole librarian, so she’s
9. in a sense at the same time head of the library so not
10. just someone who does something there, but
11. she actually has to have the entire area under control,
12. and uh—while I actually earned more money
13. during the time I worked (break 4 s) the the—
14. W: (Quietly) Actually, you didn’t either. Only because you
15. worked forty hours and I worked thirty.
16. M: Yes. But I mean, now, actual money!
17. So right, right? Uh, right, you also only have a
18. three-quarters of a job, don’t you? And uh—but I mean
19. that wasn’t actually the case with us uh—something—like
20. that: I earn the money, or something like that. That actually
21. never—happened to us. (Gather 1996a, 192)

We see in this interview passage that the wife associates superiority and subordination with the breadwinner model. She tries to justify the equality in her relationship by saying that her husband did not correspond to this model and was never the breadwinner of the family (line 1). Accordingly, he cannot derive any potential claims to power from this. Mr. Richter contradicts this view, that he was never the breadwinner, although he did so after first appreciating her professional position. For the assessment of breadwinner positions, he considers the comparison of the absolute income level to be more accurate (line 12–13). He used to earn more than his wife and would therefore have corresponded to the male breadwinner model. However, Mrs. Richter does not want to accept this and tries to assert her point of

view with further justification (lines 14 and 15). Even according to the criterion of income, she does better because of the hourly wage. These two competing versions of the breadwinner model are not discussed further. Mr. Richter seeks his wife's approval by frequently repeating the 'right' (line 17), but when she doesn't respond, he relents. He moves the argument to another level. He now objects to the breadwinner role, saying it does not apply in their relationship (lines 19–21). Ms. Richter also refers to conventional gender norms, mostly male ones, at other points in the interview, but denies their influence on her relationship. From this she derives rights and freedoms for herself.

3.1.1 Comparison

If one compares the two cases, it is striking that both women first try to define masculinity in order to then define femininity in their partnerships. Both women do not initially refer to their own ideas of femininity and then 'construct' (in the Beauvoirian sense) the right man to go with it, but rather they refer to common norms of 'masculinity'. Mrs. Hermann refers positively to these norms—her husband is supposed to be a 'real' man (sitting behind the steering wheel of their car)—while Mrs. Richter refers negatively to them—her husband cannot truly fulfill certain societal norms of masculinity (male breadwinner) and therefore cannot derive any privileges for himself in this regard. In both cases, femininity is derived secondarily from masculinity.

At first glance, it seems as if both women define 'masculinity'. However, it turns out that the mode of construction 'masculinity as the first gender' prevails in both cases. Nevertheless, it is not the interviewed men who construct femininity according to conventional norms, but rather their wives who contradict or confirm conventional norms of masculinity. The men seem to ultimately comply. It is possible that this 'detour' via masculinity to construct one's own femininity is necessary in the two cases, because the interviewed women deviated significantly from the femininity norms of the time. In the early 1990s, there were few social and cultural role models for dual-earner couples.

At the individual level—in contrast to Beauvoir's theory, which assumed that men always define themselves—men might not be completely free to define masculinity as they wish. In these cases, it is not the men who construct a suitable femininity for their masculinity, but it is the women who are actively involved in the construction of masculinity, albeit always with reference to conventional gender norms. Both women argue normatively, even the one in favor of equality between men and women had to first deconstruct hegemonic masculinity (in this case the breadwinner model) in a painful process. But regardless of whether these women were supporting or deconstructing conventional norms of masculinity, it

was always about masculinity first. This assumption by Beauvoir seems to be in accordance with the couples analyzed here.

According to Beauvoir, there is no male myth. However, we would like to doubt this based on our preliminary results. What conventional masculinity should be and how it is specifically embodied in relationships varies. As Beauvoir has shown, there are a variety of myths about women, which also seems to be true for men (e.g., Connell 1995). In the context of this article, we cannot further investigate the (different) myths (or the ‘collective gender knowledge’, Dölling 2007), which perhaps function as a latent ordering pattern for the gender relations in both couples.

Beauvoir’s concept helped us analyze gender constructions to address the question of how gender is defined in these heterosexual couple relationships. As we showed, gender in these analyzed couple relationships is relational, meaning masculinity and femininity are closely related to each other. In contrast to Beauvoir’s conceptualization of myths, sociological empiricism shows that men as well as women are involved in the constructions of gender, albeit in different ways. It happens in everyday communication—not necessarily consciously—as the interviews illustrate. In these interviews women play a significant role in the gender construction within the couple relationship. In particular, they are the ones who argue with reference to more conventional norms. When it comes to the question of which partner should have which tasks and which freedoms in the relationship, it is first about the man, about masculinity, about conventional norms of masculinity. The construction of social gender does not occur freely and equally. In our opinion, this may be a relevant reason for the latent persistence of inequality and asymmetries in heterosexual relationships in the 1990s. It should be noted that this finding might be due to the fact that only elderly couples, in which both spouses earned roughly the same income and the husbands could not fulfill the conventional breadwinner model, were interviewed. The interviews were conducted in the 1990s when double earner couple were very rare and against the conventional gender norms. The question is whether this latent ‘problematic’ masculinity resulted in an increased need for active construction of gender?

In the following chapters we want to examine whether the two women interviewed in 2022 are free to define femininity for themselves without initially referring (positively or negatively) to masculinity. So, what differences can be found in the couple relationships from the 1990s and the 2020s?

3.2 Interviews From the 2020’s

In this second empirical part, we draw on two interviews, that were conducted with retired heterosexual dual-earner couples (Vogl 2023). The couple named Ketwisch comes from West Germany, while the couple named Fuchs comes from East

Germany. Ms. and Mr. Kettwich both hold university degrees and have worked in management positions, while Ms. and Mr. Fuchs received vocational training. The topics of the interviews are similar to the study from the 1990s: questions were asked regarding the start of the couple relationship and the relationship itself, their professional careers, the couple's situation in retirement and the division of care and housework. However, the interviews differ in terms of the concrete questions that were asked. The way of asking questions was also different and the analysis is not about breadwinner norms, but rather about recognition and inequality in the couple relationships (see footnotes 9 and 10). Nevertheless, we believe that these new interviews have the potential to reveal first insights about how the relationships of elder dual-career couples might have changed over time.

What can we learn about the orientations towards difference and equality in these two couples? We start with the West German couple Kettwich. Both spouses worked full-time in the public sector. She is childless, he has children from his first marriage. Both have a high level of professional commitment, as Behnke and Meuser describe for young dual-career couples (2005). At the time of the interview, she has been retired for three years, while he retired a year later. Since the couple was able to set their own focus when answering the questions, the interview largely revolves around their previous jobs and how the couple can find equivalent activities in retirement. Mr. Kettwich has managed to continue to work on a voluntary basis in his field, which he is very happy about. Whereas Ms. Kettwich is struggling with her transition into retirement. Gainful employment was 'very important' for her (Vogl 2023, 59). Even today, the loss of work is "sometimes still painful" (Vogl 2023, 59). With her choice of words, she illustrates the enormous importance that gainful employment had in her life. Now, not only does she miss work, but she even uses the stronger, more physical connotation of 'pain' to describe her retirement. The situation is much better for Mr. Kettwich because he immediately has found a replacement (voluntary work) for his former employment and as a result little has changed in his life (Vogl 2023, 56ff.). In contrast, Ms. Kettwich repeatedly states that she misses her old job. She regrets that she can no longer 'shape' and 'decide' (Vogl 2023, 61). With this, she emphasizes her former management position. Nevertheless, she tries to make it clear that she continues to be active in a similar way to her former job. She says: "... well, I'm actually always well occupied—but I do miss my former type of work" (Vogl 2023, 61). It is important for her to emphasize that she is "always well occupied". In doing so, she refers to performance-based society norms, in particular the 'busy ethic' that Ekerdt described for performance-based societies as early as 1986, although at that time only for male retirees. Retirement continues to be structured in an employment-like manner for the couple (Vogl 2023, 68).

While Mr. Kettwich emphasizes the advantages of retirement, such as sleeping in longer, running errands together and (cultural) activities, at the end of such statements Ms. Kettwich directs the conversation back to her busy ethic:

I actually, actually the day planer is always very well filled—and not just with shopping or anything like that, so of course it has to take place, but really with (inhale) with um—yes with with with meaningful activities (laughs). (Vogl 2023, 70)

The formerly male principle of the primacy of gainful employment before retirement applies to both spouses. They both acted mostly independently of each other during this period. This is also referred to as segmented career paths, which means that both spouses pursue their own careers autonomously and independently of each other (e.g., Dettmer and Hoff 2005; Solga and Wimbauer 2005, 18). The performance ethic continues in retirement as a busy ethic. Although this seems to be more important for Mrs. Kettwich in retirement than for her husband. One possible explanation for this difference is that he found an equivalent replacement for his previous job while she could not. It is possible that as a woman, she must demand recognition for achievements in this ‘male’ field more forcefully to be recognized and noticed. Is she fighting for an equivalent professional position? He seems more relaxed about this.

The topic of breadwinner roles was not addressed during the interview. Therefore, it remains unclear whether this was an issue in the relationship. However, the depiction of gainful employment before and after retirement suggests that pursuing independent gainful employment—or in Beauvoir’s terminology: an independent project—seems to be much more normal for Ms. Kettwich than for the women in the interviews of the 1990s. Nevertheless, one wonders why Ms. Kettwich has to emphasize busy ethics so much? Is it because she has a harder time finding activities that enable her to gain recognition? Does her spouse not recognize her activities enough and this puts her under ‘pressure to prove’ (Vogl 2023, 75) or is it somehow still less normal for women (gender-atypical) to gain recognition in this (‘male’) field of self-realization through gainful employment or similar activities (in retirement)?

Normatively, the couple follows the ‘couple myth’ (Behnke and Meuser 2005) of an egalitarian arrangement. Both spouses are mutually granted professional ambitions. The couple also follows this egalitarian myth in the division of housework. The household has always been done by them together as a couple (Vogl 2023, 64). There are joint agreements that regulate who is responsible for which areas. Therefore, everyone has their own tasks, which are divided according to “preferences and abilities” (Vogl 2023, 64).

1. W: Well, I usually do the dusting and vacuuming—um my husband cleans the
2. kitchen and bathroom—the floors, cleans the shoes—irons his things I iron
3. my things.

4. M: Staircase.
5. W: You clean the stairwell.
6. M: And if I am able to also um um manual tasks. (Vogl 2023, 64)

When Mrs. Kettwich talks about their division of household tasks, it becomes clear that her husband does a lot of it. Among other things, he cleans, which is often considered a female task even nowadays. What's interesting is that they both iron their own clothes (perhaps neither of them likes doing that). According to their depiction, which emphasizes egalitarianism, at best rudimentary remnants of the conventional gender-typical division of household chores can be found in this couple. For example, he does manual tasks. Mr. Kettwich emphasizes that his wife can do some things better (e.g., cooking, although he assists her) and is more perfect when it comes to housework. He says: "There's nothing wrong with her way of doing things, she does it—very perfectly." (Vogl 2023, 64) That is, he recognizes her domestic skills. She also appreciates his work in the household: she trusts him to do the housework well (Vogl 2023, 64).

Behnke and Meuser show (2005, 128) that in dual-career couples, on the normative level, the self-perception of the couple's arrangement is shaped by the idea of an egalitarian arrangement. They understand their cohabitation as a modern arrangement emancipated from traditional restrictions (Behnke and Meuser 2005, 128). This also seems to apply to the presented couple, especially since they do not have children together and have not gone through a family phase in which a re-traditionalization of the partnership typically takes place (in Germany). It is possible that gender as a structural category has lost importance in this couple. What seems to be significant for both, on the other hand, is the category of performance similar to gainful employment, which also determines their everyday life in retirement (Vogl 2023, 74).

What can we learn from this? Unfortunately, we do not know about the Kettwich couple's attitude toward the breadwinner norm, but their partnership does not seem to follow gender-typical norms, but rather to follow individual preferences and abilities. It also seems that Ms. Kettwich has to work harder to get recognition for her performance orientation in retirement, perhaps because this is not yet considered completely normal for women.

The second couple from the 2020s, is the East German couple Fuchs. One difference between the new (East) and the old (West) German states that continues to resonate today is that full-time employment for women was normal, dual-earner couples were the norm, and the breadwinner model was of lesser importance. In other words, the normative background is somewhat different. The couple has children together. Both spouses are retired, and Mr. Fuchs retired two years before his wife. Both spouses completed vocational training. For a period of time, Mr.

Fuchs was home only on weekends due to his job. During this time, Mrs. Fuchs was employed full-time and took care of the household and their first child on her own. Later, Mr. Fuchs switched to shift work while Mrs. Fuchs advanced to a management position. During this time, Mr. Fuchs tried to participate in the domestic tasks, but this seems to have led to marital conflicts. Again, both spouses act autonomously and independently with their career as well as their retirement decisions, which is similar to what is described for many dual-career couples (e.g., Dettmer and Hoff 2005; Solga and Wimbauer 2005, 18). Mrs. Fuchs also finds the first period of retirement very difficult. She experienced a long period of mourning and lost a lot of weight. Mr. Fuchs continued to work in marginal part-time employment at the beginning of his retirement (Vogl 2023, 39).

In contrast to the first couple, the division of housework is not egalitarian, but follows gender-typical norms. Whereby Mrs. Fuchs assigns a few tasks that she does not like to do to her husband. For example, Mr. Fuchs is supposed to clean the windows because this is “heavy physical work” and thus “men’s work” (Vogl 2023, 42–3). For this he receives recognition from his family. According to Mr. Fuchs, Mrs. Fuchs has “the reins” when it comes to their household, which Mr. Fuchs uses to legitimize his low level of participation in household tasks, because “of course you get lazier and lazier” (Vogl 2023, 43). His assertion that she has the reins in her hands, means that she made the decision herself. The unequal division of labor is apparently wanted by Mrs. Fuchs, “that is somehow so very deep—so in there” (Vogl 2023, 44). Mr. Fuchs submits to her decisions in the household. Although he does the “hard, male” work, she has the decision-making power in the household. Despite the factually non-egalitarian division of housework, both try to emphasize that things are more equal between them than in other couples, for example, Mr. Fuchs refers to a male acquaintance as a “pasha” (Vogl 2023, 45). Mrs. Fuchs distances herself from conventional gender-typical attributions of other couples, in which the male spouse regards the household as a purely female matter (Vogl 2023, 45). This means that on the normative level the couple myth (Behnke and Meuser 2005) of egalitarianism is upheld, while a largely conventional division of domestic labor is enforced by Mrs. Fuchs. The couple legitimizes this in the following way: Their division of domestic labor does not follow gender norms, but rather Mrs. Fuchs’ preferences. Since she makes the decisions, the gender-unequal division of domestic labor is self-imposed and therefore not seen by the couple as bending to gender-typical norms. This allows the myth of egalitarianism to be maintained.

3.2.1 Comparison

In both couples, the women worked full-time, and their career development was not secondary to that of their partners. They thus decided their employment

biographies autonomously, i.e., independently of their partners. In these two couples, female life courses align with male ones and focus on the primacy of gainful employment. In the interviews from the 1990s, female full-time employment was less normal and potentially at odds with notions of femininity and the norm of the male breadwinner. Nevertheless, dual careers are not yet the norm for couples in Germany. All current studies on couples show that gender inequality still exists in the division of labor (gainful employment and/or care and housework). The time spent on care work also remains unequally distributed (e.g., 2nd Equality Report: Sachverständigenkommission 2017), even though men spend more time on childcare nowadays. Mothers—especially in West Germany—work predominantly part-time and they generally earn less than their partners (Wanger 2020). Therefore, male breadwinner norms probably still play a role in these couples. The dual-career couples in this example thus represent a particularly positive selection in terms of equality in paid work. For most German heterosexual couples, asymmetry and inequality are likely to play a larger role in the life course.

An interesting parallel can be seen in the Fuchs and Hermann couples, since in both cases the wives insist on doing the housework while the men are largely exempt from it. In the Hermann couple, the division of housework is due to Mrs. Hermann's aspiration to establish congruence with conventional gender norms in order to confirm her femininity. In the Fuchs couple, Mrs. Fuchs makes the decisions about the division of housework. Therefore, the apparent inequalities do not contradict the myth of egalitarianism. However, she is likely able to enforce this division of domestic labor because it is consistent with conventional gender norms that still operate in the background. If the decision-making power lay with Mr. Fuchs and he insisted on doing most of the housework, he might be met with resistance because this would contradict gender-typical norms. As Burkart noted, it has become more difficult to recognize inequalities in couples because they are seen as the result of fair negotiations between equal partners (Burkart 2014, 91).

4 Discussion

In the more recent interviews, femininity no longer seems to be defined in a subordinate and derivative way from masculinity. Ms.Kettwich and Ms.Fuchs have their own projects, which can be seen in their independent careers. That which was formerly attributed only to men, a strong gainful employment orientation, is also present in both women. For them, the loss of recognition from gainful employment becomes a problem in retirement and housework can no longer fill this gap. A strong orientation toward gainful employment, which was formerly typical of male employment biographies, is also becoming standard for these women. This

raises the question whether a structural change with a strong employment norm for women is emerging in Germany? However, this also means that typically ‘male’ problems in retirement, such as the loss of recognition from gainful employment, are now potentially affecting women.

Are women, in Beauvoir’s sense, now free to define themselves? “Perhaps the myth of woman will be phased out one day: the more the woman assert themselves as human beings, the more the marvelous quality of Other dies in them.” (Beauvoir 2011, 162) To speak with Beauvoir, the women presented here from the more recent interviews seem to project themselves into the world. On the one hand, women need “a greater moral effort than the male to choose the path of independence” (Beauvoir 2011, 156); on the other hand, the recognition women receive for doing so might also be more fragile. Nevertheless, Ms. Kettwich and Ms. Fuchs assert themselves both at work and at home. In doing so, the two seem to act independently of their husbands, but not entirely free of social conventions. Thus, it is now the typically male life courses that are lived by both women. Completely independent life plans, beyond a career orientation, are more laborious to design and implement, and they are presumably associated with less social recognition. Do these women now experience the pitfalls of the new myth of the ‘superwoman’ that Vintges (2016) and many others e.g., Fraser (2009) criticize as the new neoliberal orientation?

In the 1990s, the male breadwinner model was still very virulent. The wives surveyed at the time seemed unable to get around it. This too seems to have changed in the meantime, at least among these two (older) dual-career couples. On the narrative level, gender difference and complementarity do not seem to be a relevant category for the Kettwich couple. Both spouses followed their own employment careers, and both have always participated in the household. It seems that this couple not only uses the egalitarian myth for legitimization, but seriously implements it in their everyday life. In the case of the Fuchs couple, things look different: the division of housework still follows conventional gender norms. The question of how and whether gender difference is produced cannot be answered unequivocally for the interviews from the 2020s. Are they egalitarian only at the level of norms and less so in everyday actions? Taking ‘mental load’ as an example, differences between partners become evident among the two couples. In both interviews, women seem to take on more of the planning of social contacts and activities. This is accompanied by a ‘mental load’ that can lead to an (invisible) asymmetry within the relationship.

On the macro-sociological level, subjective gender knowledge (Dölling 2007) might have changed. Egalitarianism seems to have become a central norm to which couples refer or perhaps must refer now. Do gender myths thus lose relevance? Conventional gender knowledge probably still plays a role, albeit a much smaller one than in the 1990s. Maybe nowadays, the gender knowledge must fit

argumentatively under the myth of egalitarianism, at least for the two dual-career couples observed here (Behnke and Meuser 2005). It would be interesting to examine how this plays out in other couples, especially couples in which the women work part-time, which in Germany affects about 50 percent of all employed women (Destatis 2023). Do those couples still justify these inequalities with the breadwinner norm, or do they also strive for the myth of egalitarianism or even a combination of both?

How widespread is the type of egalitarianism of the Fuchs couple? That asymmetries continue to exist in heterosexual couple relationships are indicated by findings of Behnke and Meuser (2005). Similarly, Burkart assumes that although traditional attributions have been softened and broken, and in many cases reflected upon and challenged, the enormous persistence of patriarchal structures and norms is still evident today (Burkart 2018, 250). Is the heteronormative gender order that contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities still at work? Our thesis is, for the most part, yes, but perhaps less strongly and no longer for all couples.

Have the possibilities of being female multiplied and disconnected from masculinity? Are women nowadays no longer the insignificant other, the second sex? Do women now follow neoliberal myths? The myth of the superwoman shifts the problems of reconciling family and career to an individual level. Women have limited opportunities to reconcile family and career due to poor social conditions such as the lack of all-day childcare and splitting income taxation. The myth of the superwoman implies that women can do everything without considering the social framework. Structural failure thus becomes supposedly individual failure.

The comparison of the interviews from the 1990s with those of the 2020s indicates progress for these analyzed couples. The recently interviewed women no longer seem to have to work off definitions of masculinity to define their own position. In contrast to the employment sphere, however, the household still seems to be more of a female domain. Women who claim this sphere for themselves, seem to do so with (inherent) right. But even then, the myth of egalitarianism seems to prevail. Apparently, an unequal distribution of housework must also be brought under this myth.

This new myth of equality prevails at least in part of the population, supported by decades of equality policies and programs and social discourses of equality. Meanwhile, there are other discourses calling for re-traditionalization, and there are also still legal requirements and problematic infrastructures in Germany (e.g., lack of childcare, etc.) that make egalitarianism and its implementation structurally difficult.

Perhaps the boundaries between genders have also become less clear, due to the alignment of life courses. Beauvoir assumes, after all, that femininity is always constructed as a function of masculinity. In the interviews with the married

couples from the 1990s, the distinctions already seem to have become fragile, and the wives have to actively co-construct masculinity. In the couples from the 2020s, the boundaries and specifications have become even more ambiguous over time. Masculinity seems much more uncertain these days due to the weakening of the norm of the male breadwinner (see further Lengersdorf and Meuser 2010; Meuser 2010). The question is to what extent the formation of men as subjects still functions in dependence on femininity.

The diversity of female myths could not be explored more deeply here. There is some indication that femininity today can be thought of in a very diverse and multifaceted way in the sense of Beauvoir. On the sociological micro-level, there are multiple ways in which a couple can shape their gender relations. It is even possible, as we have seen, to legitimize a conventional division of housework with the myth of egalitarianism. At the macro level, the question is which myths (or ‘collective gender knowledge’, Dölling 2007), are still relevant today, besides the egalitarian myth and the myth of the working (neoliberal) superwoman. Which myths have survived until today and how do they relate to masculinity? One could think, for example, of the myth of women’s physical inferiority or of women’s inferior spatial orientation skills, but also of boys/men’s affinity for technology, inferior language skills and so on. How these myths exactly look like and how female myths relate to masculinity must be left to future research. The analysis of the four interviews presented in this paper can be understood as a first step towards the utilization of Beauvoir’s myths for inequality research among heterosexual couples. It remains necessary to examine other retired dual earner couples to understand what patterns emerge in their couple relationships. Based on the results, further quantitative research of distributions could be conducted.

What remains? In our view, Beauvoir’s myths can be a promising approach that can help explain asymmetry and inequality in partnerships and thus fill the gap left open by the concept of the social construction of gender.¹³

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