

BEATA IWANICKA

Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland
Faculty of Educational Studies
Department of Special Educational Needs
e-mail: beata.iwanicka@amu.edu.pl
ORCID: 0000-0003-2192-7959

Philosophy of experience and the problem of mothers with disabilities

Abstract. *The article presents a theoretical philosophical reflection on the nature of experience in relation to disabled mothers. An attempt was made to review the existing concepts of experience, especially in the field of philosophy of science, pragmatism and phenomenology. It was important to distinguish between the categories of experience and experiencing, where the latter term was chosen as more appropriate to describe the experiences of disabled mothers. The empirical experiences of these women cannot be captured precisely without understanding the very nature of experience/experiencing.*

Keywords: *experience, disability, maternity, phenomenology, pragmatism*

Experience is one of the fundamental categories in social sciences and pedagogy. In the pre-scientific times, experience was part of human and every-day cognition. Aristotle was the one to carry out a philosophical reflection on the nature of experience, believing that it is a kind of spontaneous cognitive approach that concerns something individual, and that is authenticated by sensual cognition. What has been written in the sensual and intellectual memory of a particular person, then goes to form his or her own life experiences. In this sense, all knowledge about the world, including scientific knowledge, comes from experience.¹

¹ *The Philosophy Book*, DK Publishing, New York 2011, pp. 56-63.

In the modern era, experience has become an important category in Francis Bacon's deliberations – he has distinguished several types of experience, including every-day and structured experience, thus anticipating the contemporary division into every-day and scientific experience. John Locke played a special role in valuing experience, as he co-created the new direction of empiricism and stated that experience is a source of truthful cognition, and so what is known directly has an advantage over conceptual cognition, which is secondary to experience.²

Kazimierz Sośnicki drew attention to the importance of pedagogical empiricism. Transposing the philosophical meaning of empiricism on pedagogical sciences, the author noted that in extreme empiricism one could assume that the upbringing should not be limited by anything, because all qualities of the pupil depend on his or her life experience.³ More modern philosophical epistemology takes into account not only the so-called “bucket theory of knowledge,” in which a man is a kind of “bucket” passively absorbing all experiences. Philosophy of science points out that perhaps what is more legitimate is the “searchlight theory of knowledge”⁴ in which, as Karl Popper explains, it is important to realize what expectations, hypotheses and questions precede experience in the cognitive process.⁵ This is an important discovery not only for philosophy, but also for pedagogy, as it shows that experience is something that can be “co-created” by the subject.

Zbyszko Melosik, discussing contemporary pedagogical trends and currents, drew attention to the importance of pragmatism.⁶ This is a contemporary philosophical trend, co-created among others by William James and John Dewey. The former believed that the truthfulness of a given phenomenon is determined by whether it occurs within an individual's experience and whether it is subject to some kind of control against experience. James believed that the category of experience covers a broad spectrum, and in addition to cognitive elements it also embraces emotional and volitional elements. At the same time, he thought that experience was something deeply subjective, that cannot be rendered objective, a kind of an individual stream of consciousness, in which the individual gives meaning to his or her experiences.⁷ James' reflections on experience were marked by an anti-intellectualistic attitude, reminiscent of a reflection made two centuries earlier by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's, who was also reluctant to start the intellectual upbringing of a child too early.⁸ William James believed that the most profound

² M. Krąpiec, *Doświadczenie*, in *Powszechna Encyklopedia Filozofii*, Polskie Towarzystwo Tomasza z Akwinu, Lublin 2001, pp. 673-674.

³ K. Sośnicki, *Istota i cele wychowania*, Nasza Księgarnia, Warszawa 1967, pp. 65-66.

⁴ K.R. Popper, *Wiedza obiektywna. Ewolucyjna teoria epistemologiczna*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2002, p. 409.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 406-409.

⁶ Z. Melosik, *Pedagogika pragmatyzmu*, in Z. Kwieciński, B. Śliwowski (eds.), *Pedagogika*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, vol. 1, Warszawa 2008, pp. 307-323.

⁷ H. Buczyńska-Garewicz, *James*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 2001, p. 86.

⁸ Cz. Kupisiewicz, *Z dziejów teorii i praktyki wychowania*, Impuls, Kraków 2012, pp. 149-155.

and primitive level of living should be valued, where lies “the good of all the [...] seeing, smelling, tasting, sleeping, and daring and doing with one’s body [...]”⁹ Experience is the fundamental criterion for all truth in this concept. James’ colleague John Dewey also wrote that much depends on the quality of what we experience. In his opinion, each experience has two aspects: (1) the immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, (2) and its influence upon later experiences. Thus, in other words, each experience exists on the basis of previous experiences.¹⁰

Science philosopher Karl Popper stated that, from a scientific perspective, experience is something that we can treat on one hand as something that we accumulate “in a bucket” (we gather experience in our memory, the bucket). However, we can also adopt the “searchlight” point of view, in which the experiences are not entirely accidental, and it is up to our mind to act as a searchlight “illuminating” experience that is important to us, as a subject.¹¹

The creator of phenomenology, an important part of the contemporary interpretative paradigm, Edmund Husserl, has come to the conclusion that each experience is intentional, and thus is directed towards something and is about something concrete. However, experience understood in this way is not fully objective in nature, but it is in a way constituted for the mind, each time it is “created” through its intentional grasping.¹² Still, the aim of social sciences on this “map” of the theory of experience would be to explain social reality on the basis of everyday experience.¹³

The term “phenomenology” comes from philosophical discourse, one of several significant directions of thought of the 20th century. Phenomenology meant not only a school or an intellectual direction, but also a method that was applied in different areas of knowledge. In its broader sense, phenomenology is “a theoretical point of view supporting the study of direct experience understood literally, where behaviour is determined by the phenomena rather than by external, objective and physically descriptive reality.”¹⁴

There are two meanings assigned to the concept of *phenomenon*. The first one assumes that in a realistic approach the phenomenon is nothing more than an aspect

⁹ W. James, *Pewien rodzaj ślepoty w człowieku*, transl. P. Kostyło, in W. James, *Życie i ideały*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, Biblioteka Myśli Pedagogicznej, Bydgoszcz 2010, p. 105; reference in English: W. James, *On a certain blindness in human beings*, New York Henry Holt and Company, 1899, p. 38, <https://archive.org/details/onsomeoflifefside001778mbp/page/n43> [5.02.2019].

¹⁰ J. Dewey, *Doświadczenie i edukacja*, transl. E. Czujko-Moszyk, Warszawska Firma Wydawnicza, Warszawa 2014, p. 19; reference in English: J. Dewey, *Experience and education*, <https://archive.org/details/ExperienceAndEducation/page/n7> [5.02.2019].

¹¹ K. Popper, *Wiedza obiektywna...*, pp. 402-403.

¹² D. Zahavi, *Fenomenologia Husserla*, transl. M. Świąch, Wydawnictwo WAM, Kraków 2012, p. 39.

¹³ T. Buksiński, *Doświadczenie w naukach społecznych*, in T. Buksiński (ed.), *Doświadczenie*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Instytutu Filozofii UAM, Poznań 2001, p. 77.

¹⁴ A. Ryk, *W poszukiwaniu podstaw pedagogiki humanistycznej. Od fenomenologii Edmunda Husserla do pedagogiki fenomenologicznej*, Oficyna Wydawnicza „Impuls”, Kraków 2011, p. 23.

of an object or a situation. The second understanding of the concept of phenomenon can be described as correlativistic. According to this approach, every thing, every object of any category and the whole being can be presented to the consciousness as mere facts, as certain data. In this way an attitude of reflexive distance is determined, from the perspective of which every transcendence and conviction about the real existence of an object, whether absolute or intentional, are suspended, “put in brackets”. Phenomenological reflection focuses on recreating different aspects of individual experience. It therefore aims to identify the main components of a phenomenon or experience that make it unique or distinguishable from others.

In pedagogical research, phenomenology is connected with phenomenography, the latter also placed within the interpretative paradigm.¹⁵ It deals with qualitatively different ways people use to experience and think about phenomena. Phenomenographic studies try to describe “things as they are,” in the way they are presented through the accumulation of ways of thinking about the world.¹⁶ It is a method dedicated to educational research, enabling the discovery of human subjective concepts of reality. One important assumption in this trend is that what is vital for the researcher, is to be aware not of oneself as a subject, but of other people.¹⁷

Motherhood is created by various factors. These include internal determinants (e.g. fertility, health, plans, opinions, attitudes, women), as well as external factors (e.g. economic conditions, role models in the media, group and state support). In my research I focus on internal determinants, i.e. on the opinions and experiences of mothers with disabilities in relation to motherhood. The existing literature focuses more on the functions that mothers perform from the point of view of the society, rather than on their own feelings and experiences. Research so far has focused on women with disabilities in their professional and public lives.¹⁸ The data is scarce and not large, and it seems that this problem does not arouse too much social interest in Poland. Motherhood of women with disabilities is still an ignored and neglected topic, and a few authors who take up this topic even write that: “it is a terra incognita on the map of research on both disability and maternity.”¹⁹ This problem is partly

¹⁵ F. Marton, *Phenomenography: A Research Approach to Investigating Different Understandings of Reality*, „Journal of Thought” 1986, vol. 21, no. 3.

¹⁶ R.G. Paulston, *Pedagogika porównawcza jako pole nakreślania konceptualnych map teorii i paradygmatów*, transl. Z. Melosik, K. Sobolewska-Myślik, in Z. Kwieciński, L. Witkowski (eds.), *Spory o edukację. Dylematy i kontrowersje we współczesnych pedagogiach*, Instytut Badań Edukacyjnych, Warszawa 1993, pp. 41-42.

¹⁷ J. Moroz, *Fenomenografia jako metoda badania treści świadomościowych*, „Pedagogika Szkoły Wyższej” 2013, no. 1, pp. 35.

¹⁸ D. Kornas-Biela, *Postawy społeczne wobec małżeństwa i macierzyństwa kobiet z niepełnosprawnościami*, in W. Janocha, K. Zielińska-Król (eds.), *Kobiecość a niepełnosprawność*, Wydawnictwo KUL, Lublin 2015, p. 18.

¹⁹ B. Banasiuk, *Matki gorszego Boga*, in R.E. Hryciuk, E. Korolczuk (eds.), *Pożegnanie z Matką Polką? Dyskursy, praktyki i reprezentacje macierzyństwa we współczesnej Polsce*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2012, p. 356.

a result of silence of mothers with disabilities themselves, and is particularly visible among women with hearing loss. Hearing disability, in comparison to other disabilities (visual, motor, etc.), alienates the disabled from communication in a particular way, and the risk of social isolation of hearing impaired mothers is very high. My future research will allow me to identify areas that may pose potential problems to empirical investigations, and will be a contribution to further, in-depth studies. In this way, what is important is not just cognitive results, but also the possibility of carrying out analyses as one of the sources of change in the area of perception of mothers with disabilities.

Let's attempt to define the category of experience and to distinguish between experience and experiencing. Experiencing means experiencing something while being open to something. In other words, experiencing is a process in which the subject acquires something (and can share it with others).²⁰ Experience, understood in a quantitative way, can be accumulated, it is therefore the basis of all testimonies and all biographies. The life of every person, the period of his or her activity, consists in gaining new experiences and shaping them (using these experiences to change oneself).²¹ In collecting experiences, what is important for the individual is a continuity, that makes it possible to differentiate individual experiences (among which some may have a good educational impact on the biography of the person, while other not).²² The above is also connected with the subjectivity of experiences – two different people may associate the same place with two different things, depending on the time in which they visited the place.²³ Experience itself, although potentially repeatable, has something of mystery to it (sometimes it comes to us in unexpected and different ways).²⁴ When it is incidental (e.g. the experience of an accident), then the subject is forced to solve it, to be exposed to the impact of external experience which suddenly occurred in his or her life.

In the light of the concepts above, experience can be distinguished from experiencing in the following way. Experience is something that happens to an individual, it can be acquired against one's will and gathered in different situations while performing various activities. In pedagogy, examples of important but negative experiences are, for example: the experience of being a victim (e.g. in the classroom), the experience of a failed lesson, or the experience of the loss of

²⁰ T. Buksiński, *Przemiany doświadczenia*, in T. Buksiński (ed.), *Doświadczenie*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Instytutu Filozofii UAM, Poznań 2001, p. 7.

²¹ D. Lalak, *Życie jako biografia. Podejście biograficzne w perspektywie pedagogicznej*, Wydawnictwo Akademickie Żak, Warszawa 2010, p. 39.

²² J. Dewey, *Doświadczenie i edukacja*, transl. E. Czujko-Moszyk, Warszawska Firma Wydawnicza, Warszawa 2014, pp. 28-29.

²³ W. James, *Pojęcie świadomości*, transl. H. Buczyńska-Garewicz, in H. Buczyńska-Garewicz, *James*, Wiedza Powszechna, Warszawa 2001, pp. 158-159.

²⁴ W. James, *Życie i ideały*, transl. A. Stańczyk, P. Kostyło, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Kazimierza Wielkiego, Bydgoszcz 2010, p. 102.

a child by the mother, which is linked directly to the subject of the present article. Experience therefore can be random, since it is not entirely up to the person to decide what experience will be gained in the course of his or her development as an individual and a member of a circle. Experience can also be partly quantified (e.g. how many times a woman has been pregnant?). One of the roles of pedagogy is to guide the growing individual and understand them within a certain stream of experience, but the teacher and educator does not have a full influence on what experiences his or her pupils will receive or which ones they will accept and make part of their mental state. Experience is also a subjective one – sometimes it tells the story of a personal experience.²⁵

Experiencing would be different from experience in that it is by experiencing something what we are open to something.²⁶ This distinction is in line with the philosophers' reflections mentioned earlier (Popper's theory of cognition, Dewey's giving meaning to experiences, or Husserl's intentional cognition). The experiencing subject usually wants to know what interests him, what attracts his attention, what is his goal and objective in his development. For example, a student who wants to learn, wants to experience new knowledge. A teacher who is open to experience tries to make oneself better and to reflect on different situations occurring in his or her professional surroundings. Coming back to the main topic of this article – disabled mothers, by experiencing motherhood, want to experience having a child and caring for it. On the other hand, experiencing something while being open to new experiences does not yet determine whether the experience will eventually turn out to be positive from the perspective of a person's goals and values. For example, women who had wanted to become mothers can experience post-natal depression and can also realise, while taking care of their child, that their idea of motherhood changes with the experience they gain. Gaining new experiences does not necessarily have to be stress-free. According to Joanna Kobosko, there is a link between the experience of social anxiety and different styles of coping with stress by mothers of disabled children.²⁷ Moreover, the researcher also notes that the essence of experience is to build a relationship with another person, which in turn allows to develop a sense of oneself as a person. In the case of deaf children, however, the above comes with a number of problems, including the trauma generated by the environment that sometimes does not accept the deafness of the child.²⁸

²⁵ W. Łuszczuk, *Normatywny i interpretacyjny paradygmat w badaniach pedagogicznych*, „Zeszyty Naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Humanitas w Sosnowcu. Pedagogika” 3/2008, p. 16.

²⁶ The difference between experience and experiencing is partly based on: T. Buksiński (ed.), *Doświadczenie*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Instytutu Filozofii UAM, Poznań 2001, p. 7.

²⁷ J. Kobosko, *Doświadczenie głuchoty dziecka przez słyszące matki dzieci głuchych a style radzenia sobie ze stresem i samoocena*, „Człowiek, Niepełnosprawność, Społeczeństwo” 2013, vol. 3, no. 21, p. 43.

²⁸ J. Kobosko, *Doświadczenie siebie jako osoby głuchej – badania nad młodzieżą głuchą i jej słyszącymi matkami z perspektywy interpersonalnej*, „Człowiek Niepełnosprawność, Społeczeństwo” 2010, vol. 1, no. 11, p. 101.

Experiencing can have a certain specificity to it. It is not quite something that can be subject to upbringing. This is because experiencing is based on various concrete life situations that do not always have specific goals. Such is, for example, the situation of mothers who decide to have a child, although this decision was neither taken consciously, nor planned in advance. These women find themselves face with an “accidental” experience, but they try to approach the situation in a constructive way, i.e. to turn it into experiencing something they actually want (in this case – having a child).

The present paper chooses to use the category of “experiencing,” rather than “experience,” because it was assumed that all deaf mothers, regardless of their individual biographies and partners, having decided to experience motherhood, were open to the new experiences of this life event. In other words, mothers experience motherhood not because it is an accidental experience for them, but because there is a certain aspect to it that permanently and consciously changes their lives. Using John Dewey’s terminology, the experience of motherhood becomes for these women something that fundamentally changes their further experiences and their biographical perspective. However, this experience is no longer an accidental issue, but it becomes experiencing that is open to the new and the unknown.

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