

Project-based education with an IIS grant (2020)

‘Teaching reflexivity in fieldwork-based courses’

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Background, learning objectives and course work

Three sessions on positionality, intersectionality and emotions were developed to prepare MA students in European Studies for a fieldtrip to Athens where they were to conduct (urban) fieldwork for one week. The course is taught by two lecturers. The aim of the ‘European Policy Lab’ is to foster an interdisciplinary understanding of European policy-making in practice, allowing students to gain a deeper comprehension of the ways in which EU and European policies are developed, negotiated and implemented on the local level. The ‘European Policy Lab’ is made up of both a classroom lecture/workshop component taking place in Amsterdam and a six-days visit to Athens, based at the Netherlands Institute in Athens, Greece (NIA). Project topics have ranged from urban protests movements, migration to development policies. The group is usually small, allowing for in-depth workshop-style sessions. The students present their work in a 7 500 words final report (70% of final grade), including 1) an introduction; 2) an overview of existing scholarly literature on the topic; 3) a methodology section that describes the preparation and conduct of the field research and any challenges faced, including questions of positionality and emotions; 4) an in-depth analysis of the findings; and 5) a conclusion relating the findings to existing work on the topic.

Students are also asked to keep a research diary (a physical notebook), which is part of their final assessment (30% of final grade). The diary is kept throughout the whole process of preparing this course, the fieldtrip and when writing up the research project. Students use their individual research diary for tracing the progress of both their desk and field research. The diary can also include additional photographic or other visual material – including sketches, flyers or maps. The diary helps to process and visualize students’ reflections on positionality and research methods, including reactions to relevant assigned readings and experience in the classroom and in the field. For the lecturers the diaries are an important tool to follow students’ reflexivity and development of ideas over time.

The fieldwork component of this course, as any other research project in the Humanities and Social Sciences, requires from the students to practice self-reflection in order to conduct the work in an ethical way, taking into account their own biases and their relation to the research subject. As the UvA Diversity Report of 2016 states, “all knowledge and every scientist has a distinct position – recognizing their ‘positionality’ and the underlying power arrangements – creates space for alternative and critical thinking, and the exploration of new angles’ (UvA Diversity Commission 2016, 9)¹. The sessions below invite students (and lecturers) to explore their positionality in knowledge production. They offer a hands-on skills-training to enable students to practice reflexivity in their research projects and might be used/adapted/extended for similar fieldwork-based courses.

¹ UvA Diversity Commission (2016) Let’s do Diversity: Report of the University of Amsterdam Diversity Commission, led by Gloria Wekker, <https://www.uva.nl/en/content/news/news/2016/10/diversity-committee-presents-final-report.html?1571839253220>.

Session 'What is Positionality?' (before fieldtrip)

Preparation done by students before class meeting

Readings on positionality and reflexivity in research and fieldwork:

Hopkins P (2015) Positionalities and knowledge: Negotiating Ethics in Practice. *ACME*.

Nencel L (2014) Situating reflexivity: Voices, positionalities and representations in feminist ethnographic texts. *Women's Studies International Forum* 43: 75–83.

Sultana F (2015) Reflexivity, Positionality and Participatory Ethics: Negotiating Fieldwork Dilemmas in International Research. *ACME*.

1. Students come prepared to speak about their research project – a 5 minute presentation outlining what they will investigate and how they hope to do it
2. Students are asked to begin their research diary (and bring it to class!). This should include:
 - (1) notes on the introductory readings;
 - (2) preliminary thoughts on what they want to investigate and how; and
 - (3) a brief reflection on how they think questions of positionality will be relevant to both the design of the research project and its conduct in the field. Students are asked to reflect on how positionality may/may not be different in comparison to experiences during previously conducted research (in this specific case: interviews in Brussels).



What happens in the classroom

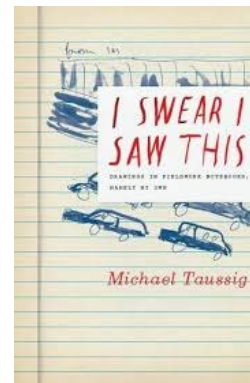
1. Very first brief presentation of students' ideas for research projects to be conducted during course and fieldtrip, followed by feedback and discussion with fellow students and lecturers
2. Introducing and considering positionality based on readings, presentation by lecturers and students' previous research (interview) experience.
 - (1) Positivist versus postpositivist epistemologies
 - (2) Reflecting positionality: ethical responsibility or navel-gazing?
 - (3) What does it entail?
 - a. In- or outsider
 - b. Role, identity and power-relations → which categories can you think of?
 - c. Motivation for research
 - d. Methods
 - e. Theories used
 - f. Dissemination of research

- (4) Lecturers may share their experiences from their own fieldwork, using photographs from fieldwork to illustrate their experiences and fieldwork stories

Reflection time

Students are asked to reflect on their positionality by focusing on aspects a-c (under number (2)) in relation to their previous interview/research experience. Then, they are asked to consider how this might be different in terms of their project, different methods as well as the different context in the upcoming fieldtrip.

3. How can positionality inform our research?
- Playing with identities and roles (e.g. gender)
 - Power not always with researcher but also with research participant
 - Search for differences and similarities
 - Engagement and empathy
 - Writing in and writing with
 - Positionality as an analytical source: “Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*” (Haraway 1988, 581)²
4. Circle back to importance of research diary for documenting fieldwork experiences, reflecting on them and your own positionality.



Why I did not use ‘positionality statements’

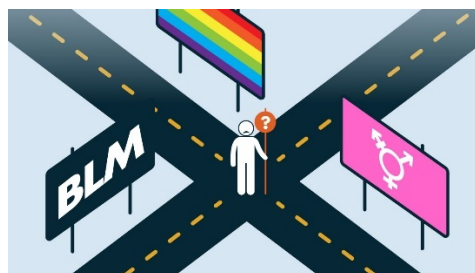
Originally, I had considered to ask students to write a very structured ‘positionality statement’ as a graded assignment. I wanted to develop a catalogue of questions (e.g. about being an in- or outsider, motivation for research, identity and power-relations etc.) that the students would have to answer for the statement. I decided against this in the end. While it would formalize the reflection on positionality, it would also risk making it into a *box-ticking* isolated exercise. Following Nencel (2014), reflexivity should be ‘situated’, thus always done in the context of the research project, its goals and methods. Related, it should also inform research by drawing the connections between researchers’ positionality, what they find in the field, how they interpret it and write about it. Therefore, I opted for encouraging students to think and write about their positionality early on in the project (before the first session) and throughout, using their research diary as well as their final report to do so.



² Haraway D (1988) Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14(3): 575-599.

Session ‘What is intersectionality’ (before fieldtrip)

This session introduces the concept of intersectionality – centering the interaction of different identity categories such as race, gender, class, ability etc. – which also enhances an understanding of the researcher’s and research subject’s positionality.



Preparation done by students before class meeting

Readings on intersectionality:

Crenshaw, K (1989) Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 14: 538–54.

Davis, K (2008) Intersectionality as buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful. *Feminist Theory* 9: 67–85.

What happens in the classroom

1. Introduction of intersectionality using the ‘rocket method’ (student-led learning and build-up of knowledge from the more concrete to the more abstract)³
 - Question 1: What is Crenshaw’s main argument? (students have 5 minutes by themselves to answer)
 - Question 2: What is the problem with anti-discrimination law and policies according to Crenshaw? (10 minutes in a pair to answer)
 - Question 3: Which role does white privilege/whiteness as a norm play according to Crenshaw? (15 minutes in a group of four students)
 - Question 4: What is intersectionality? (whole class discussion)

“Intersectionality refers to the interaction between gender, race, and other categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies and the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power.” (Davis 2008, 68)

2. Intersectionality exercise⁴

Instructions for students

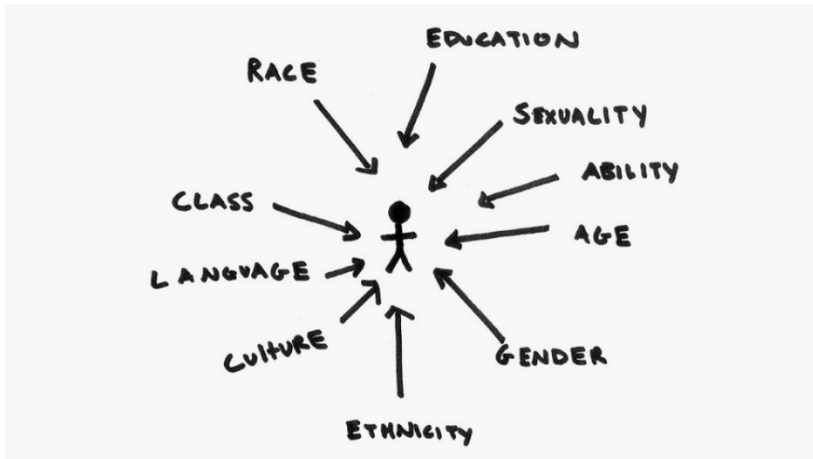
- (1) Form a group of four students and find a place to sit in a circle
- (2) Take five minutes each to think about a situation that a friend/someone you know was in in which this person was discriminated against
- (3) Share it with your group and decide which situation you find most interesting to discuss from an intersectional perspective

³ It is important to strictly time these different parts to create a dynamic and focused atmosphere.

⁴ This is based on an exercise that Prof. dr. Kathy Davis did with the participants of a workshop on ‘Teaching Intersectionality’ at VU Amsterdam in 2019. Instead of asking participants to recollect their own experiences of discrimination, I have found it better to ask them about friend’s experiences they know of. This makes it less personal and emotional and easier to share.

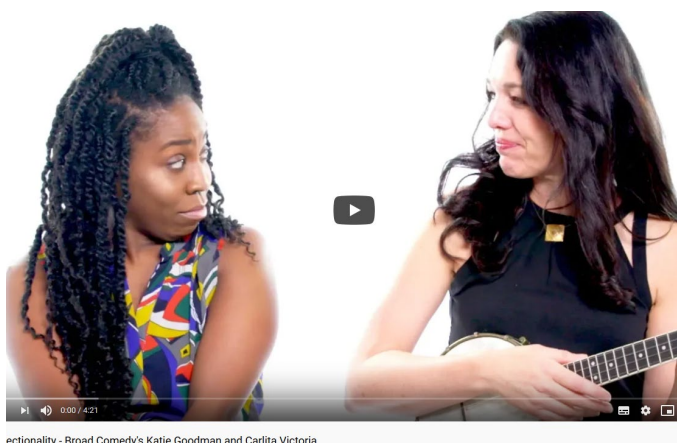
- (4) Think about the different categories and discuss which ones were most relevant for this experience of discrimination

Lecturer hands out tags/signs with categories to each group which they can use to identify relevant categories (see image below for possible categories). Students may also add new categories if they are missing any.



Ask groups to share their analysis of one story/experience and possible challenges faced when thinking about the different categories of discrimination.

3. Video on intersectionality by comedians Katie Goodman and Carlita Victoria



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Hi6W95-fac>

Session 'Emotions in Research' (before and after fieldtrip)

How to deal with **emotions** in research?

Before going on fieldwork, students are asked to read literature on emotions researchers can encounter during their fieldwork. This enables students to recognize the normalcy of experiencing emotions in the field and to become familiar with strategies of dealing with them.



Preparation done by students before class meeting

Readings on emotions in fieldwork:

Blakely K (2007) Reflections on the Role of Emotion in Feminist Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 6(2): 59–68.

Laliberté N and Schurr C (2016) Introduction: The stickiness of emotions in the field: complicating feminist methodologies. *Gender, Place & Culture* 23(1): 72–78.

Smith S (2016) Intimacy and angst in the field. *Gender, Place & Culture* 23(1): 134–146.

While students are reflecting on their emotions throughout the time of their fieldwork, they are asked to present and visualize their concrete reflections when they are back from the fieldtrip, using the following guiding questions:

1. Think of a situation you found particularly challenging/difficult/emotional that you want to share with everyone. Is there any material object (picture, notes, drawing etc. in your research diary) that in some way visualizes this experience and you can show us?
2. Briefly present the situation and reflect on the following questions
 - Emotions
 - Your positionality/position of power (importance of different identity categories such as gender, class, race etc.)
 - Possibility/lack of access
 - Local context affecting the situation
 - What were your strategies to deal with the situation?
3. How can this experience inform your research?
 - What does it tell you about the local situation etc.?
 - How does it help answering your research question?
 - Has your question/interest changed?

What happens in the classroom

In the classroom, students can share their reflections on their emotions and their positionality during the fieldtrip and used their visualizations (e.g. from their research diaries) to make them understandable and accessible. Students will notice that different research topics and context are more or less demanding/challenging for the researcher and experiences of emotions and unease. This exercise has proven to be a good way for the students to work through their experiences but also to consider how their positionality and emotions can inform their analysis of the material collected during their fieldwork.