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**In search of research relations based on reciprocity, the
(im)possibilities of setting up a collaboration between
the University and a marginalized social housing
neighborhood in Grenoble (France)**

Claske Dijkema

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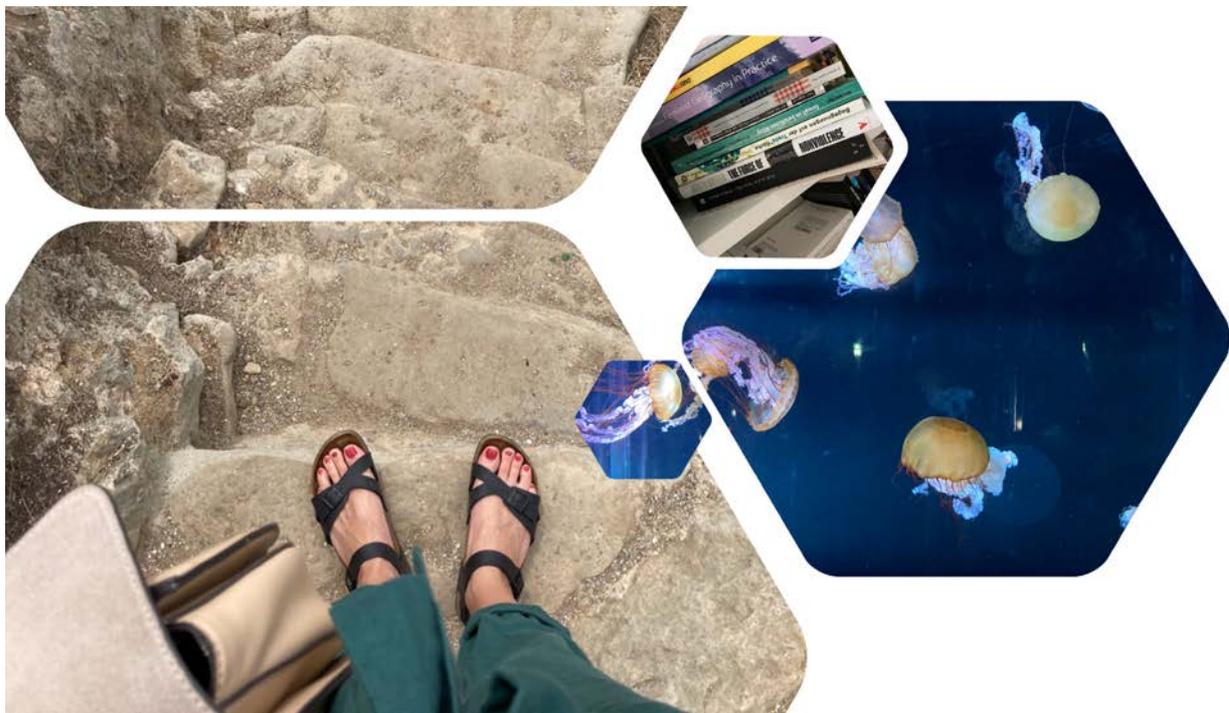


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Feministische Geo-RundMail

Informationen rund um feministische Geographie

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Theme Issue

**Feminist Research Practice in Geography:
Snapshots, Reflections, Concepts**

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II: Fieldwork as a social situation – dealing with political and ethical challenges

In search of research relations based on reciprocity, the (im)possibilities of setting up a collaboration between the University and a marginalized social housing neighborhood in Grenoble (France)

Claske Dijkema (Grenoble, FR)

“We must acknowledge the personal embodied commitments and risks that come along with working through and in modes of inquiry relying on relationships and a deep connectivity to geography and place.” (de Leeuw *et al.* 2017, 161)

This article deals with the search for more horizontal ways of being in research relationships, breaking with the relations typical for the coloniality of knowledge and power (Mignolo 2007; 2012; Mignolo et Escobar 2009; Rivera Cusicanqui 2007). This search is part of my PhD research, developing a decolonial approach to marginalized social housing neighborhoods in France.

From my previous research experience in Zimbabwe (Dijkema 2013), I had learned that joint ownership over the research project, one of the conditions of establishing horizontal relationships, is difficult to meet when the research question has been defined by the researcher alone. A research question defined unilaterally by the researcher may be quite irrelevant to the people or organization the researcher seeks to collaborate with (see also Nagar 2014). I decided therefore to skip the habitual first phases of any research design that deals with defining a theoretical framework and formulating a research question and instead jumped right into phase three, starting my research by choosing a research methodology that would inform the definition of a research question and orient the theoretical framework that could contain this question. Rather than adopting the ‘do no harm’ approach proscribed in social science research ethics (Hesse-Biber et Leavy 2006; Manzo et Brightbill 2007), which is “insufficient to ensure ethically sound research practice” (Hugman, Pittaway, et Bartolomei 2011, 1271), I engaged in intervention research (Nicolas-Le Strat 2013), a French Participatory Action Research tradition, which is about intervening in- and writing about a reality that one helps to emerge. Rather than searching to limit one’s impact in the field, I turned the question around and looked for

ways research could empower participants dealing with oppressive power relations.

During my PhD research I embarked first on a methodological exploration of how to be in (research) relationships based on reciprocity with people that are at the lower end of the power equilibrium in French society and second on a thematic exploration of shared research questions with groups that act from a marginalized social housing neighborhood in Grenoble, Villeneuve. This exploration was driven by the question how to travel and learn in this space (Villeneuve) in a way that would both produce scientific knowledge and be beneficial for those whom I encountered. Throughout my methodological explorations (2013 – 2015), I explored together with seven civil society organizations in Grenoble research methods that could support transformation. Throughout my thematic explorations (2013 – 2017), I explored five overall themes in collaboration with ten different organizations and collectives that mobilized for a political cause in the neighborhood. My objective was to undertake a collaborative research project and to come to a shared formulation of a research question. It was only in the period (2017-2018) that my exploration met both the conditions for the collaborative production of knowledge at the service of social transformation, and the conditions for a shared thematic interest of both political and academic relevance. These conditions were united in the *Université Populaire* project on the colonial past-present.

The *Université Populaire* was successful in formulating a shared research question; in mitigating power relations between persons with different social positions in the group; in making space for different sources of knowledge based a.o. on first-hand experience, academic research, activism and worked with a variety of forms of expression; in making sure that core members of the working group, among whom I count myself, all played equal part in moving the project forward; and in assuring that the formulation of the topic, the conducting of the research, and the interpretation of the results were carried out in a collaborative manner. It is one of the few cases of collaboration where also the ‘writing’ of the conclusions was a joint effort, taking the form of a video document and theatre play. In this article I will not write the success story though but rather present my explorations into possible collaborations between the University of Grenoble and neighborhood actors.

Exploring possibilities of collaboration between the University and Villeneuve

My methodological explorations were partially an epistemological inquiry into the role of knowledge and knowledge production in favor of social transformation and social justice. It was logical to turn to the university as an institution whose mission is to produce knowledge, for which it receives specific public funds, that are not accessible to civil society organizations. The objective of turning to the University and its different institutes in Grenoble was to collectively explore issues of accountability: in whose interest does it produce knowledge, answering the research questions formulated by whom and to what extent are the interests, priorities and questions of inhabitants of Villeneuve represented in academic research?

The University in this context is the Grenoble Institute of Urban Planning (*Institut d'urbanisme de Grenoble*), the Institute of Alpine Geography (*Institut de Géographie alpine*)¹⁷ and Grenoble's School of Architecture (*Ecole d'architecture*) which are situated at the border of Villeneuve. A reason for turning to these institutes in particular is that they had been relocated relatively recently to this marginalized area of the city to support its dynamism (Dijkema, Gabriel, et Koop 2015). Does this geographic proximity create a need for accountability vis-à-vis the neighborhood? What collaborations exist and are both desirable and possible in the future? Those were some of the questions I started to explore with a group that existed of members of Planning, a civil society organization involved in advocacy planning, of Modus Operandi, a civil-society research- and training institute which I co-created, working with minorities that are confronted with some form of violence and of an Assistant Professor in geography, Kirsten Koop, occasionally joined by other faculty members and students. I will explain in more detail three actions that were conducted by this group.

Three actions to explore possible collaborations

The first was a series of micro-debates in public space (2013-2014) at different locations between the University Institutes and Villeneuve in order to establish links between these geographically close but socially distant spaces. One afternoon, to symbolize this link, a group of volunteers created a mobile bench on the market place (*Place du marché*) in Villeneuve that served as a transi-

tional object between different sites (see figure 1). Installing a bench in public was helpful to invite passersby into debate, to stop a moment and take some time to discuss for example conflicts about the use of public space and the demolition plans for the neighborhood.

At the time, we explained the experimentation with the bench as a transitional object for carrying out research in the following terms:

In concrete terms, the action consists of installing chairs in a public area, and thereby generating the curiosity of passers-by so that they can share their point of view on a question of common concern. It leads to the creation of a "public space", even if temporary, in a place that is generally perceived as a place of tension. In this way, it has been possible to engage with very different people: loitering young men, women on the move, the elderly, tenants and homeowners... (Working group, 13 June 2014)

Cited text was produced for the poster presentations during the seminar the working group organized (see figure 2) at the Institute of Urbanism and Alpine Geography (IUGA), and which was the second action it undertook (13/06/2014) to reinforce relationships between the University and this marginalized neighborhood across the road (see figure 3). This seminar created the opportunity for inhabitants to exchange ideas in small groups with faculty members. Its objective was to identify research interests of neighborhood organizations and inhabitants and to find possible links with research being carried out at the IUGA. The seminar was particularly helpful for understanding that it requires time to build research collaborations; and that formulating a research question is a form of political organizing, as it is about identifying entry-points for social change. The latter could not be achieved in this time and place but the seminar was a chance to ask the IUGA to position itself with regard to the responsibilities it was willing to take in relation with neighborhood associations (see Dijkema, Gabriel, et Koop 2015).

The third action of the working group further was a further step to move from informal and individual contacts that it set out with to institutional collaboration between the University and neighborhood organizations. During the international conference "Looking for territories" (18/03/2015), it organized a workshop "*Identifier et construire les demandes territoriales des et par les citoyens*",

¹⁷ After a reorganization in September 2017, they joined to form the Institute of Urbanism and Alpine Geography (IUGA).

which dealt with some of the paradoxes identified in the seminar (see figure 4). For example, inhabitants feel a permanent injunction from public actors to participate politically but when they express themselves politically, they feel unheard. The workshop looked at different experiences of non-formal political participation, during a tour of neighborhood initiatives and debates both at the IUGA and the community center, le Patio. This type of workshop corresponded much more to the interests of academic participants though than it did to the interests of inhabitants, who did not see any concrete outcome or benefit from these discussions (Field notes, 18/03/2015). The collaboration of the working group ended as a result of a disagreement over its institutionalization. Later attempts were initiated to renew the collaboration, after the arrival of new faculty members with both a methodological interest in reinforcing these links and working on questions of urban planning. A number of new collaborations have developed without a means being found to institutionalize the experience.

Disjunctions in research and teaching collaborations

While the idea to turn to the University was logical in principle, during our explorations I identified the following points of disjunction.

- *Different interests in knowledge*: there is an important gap between the type of knowledge production that is relevant for community actors and that which researchers can valorize in academic writing and teaching.

- *Funding*: Even though less so in France than in other European countries, academic research projects still should be covered by specific research funding. The large majority of funding sources in France are public, which is an obstacle as public funding priorities are rarely those of community projects that challenge existing power relations. Additionally, this dependence on the priorities of public actors poses the question of the possibility to critique as well as the independence of research.

- *Time*: The academics that demonstrated an interest in collaboration (by coming to the seminar) dealt with a workload that demanded from them structural overtime. Their participation in a professional context, *de facto* meant doing volunteer work as it did not fulfill any of their professional responsibilities. Also, while pedagogical projects proved to be more apt for collaboration, their

rhythm of being limited to a short period of time during year and involving many students was out of tune with the interests of community actors.

- *Activism*: Tensions have arisen between the confrontational approach of community actors in Villeneuve that sought to rebalance power relations through direct action, such as Planning and a deliberative form of action that most academics were more comfortable with, especially when operating in a professional context. This same limit also applied to pedagogical projects that proposed involvement with a community project during a course.

The obligatory nature of the course gave the students very little room to position themselves in disagreement with the proposed projects. Students' relatively privileged position and lack of experience of racial oppression -with obvious exceptions- meant that they were uncomfortable with the confrontational style of activists in above organizations.¹⁸ This is also true for another project I conducted, offering students a decolonial tour of the city.¹⁹ More generally I have noticed that students, but also faculty members, have difficulty understanding and accepting the distance that many inhabitants of Villeneuve feel from to public institutions including the University, feelings ranging from abandonment to defiance.

¹⁸ Despite their relative longer-term privilege, it is important to keep into mind the precarity of many students in terms of housing and nutrition. There is a difference in the profile of students depending on the program and the discipline. At the IUGA there is a higher percentage of first-generation students than in other faculties, even though few of them are racialized.

¹⁹ See Dijkema, Ali Babar and Eickemeier (2019) for a written account of this experience and an analysis of the discomfort that students expressed.



Figure 1 (left): Constructing the bench that served as transitional object between Villeneuve and the IUGA, May 2014. Credit Planning

Figure 2 (right): Poster presenting the bench as participatory research method, Seminar 13/06/2014. Credit author

Figure 3: Plenary session of the seminar “Les institutions universitaires du pôle Sud de Grenoble dans leur ter-ritoire. Renforcer les liens entre l’université et la Villeneuve”, Institut of Urbanism and Alpine Geography, 13 June 2014. Credit author



Figure 4: Workshop on political participation during CIST conference 2015, 18 March 2015. Credit author

Figure 5 (left): Presentation “Ville décoloniale” to students from the Paris-based Ecole Normale Supérieure, 14/10/2017. Credit author

Figure 6 (right): Rencontres de géopolitique critique, “Déambuler à l’envers de la ville, une lecture décoloniale de la ville”, 07/02/2018. Credit Morgane Cohe



Discrepant accountabilities

My hybrid position between the University and the civil society organization Modus Operandi that partly employed me made me aware of the limits, tensions, and complementarity of knowledge production in different spaces, and the possible tensions in bringing together actors from these different positions. As a result, I could not simply be at the service of community organizations, the ideal I started out with, instead the most that I could do was to search for synergy between different interests.

Over time I came to realize that while our interests could be shared, the struggles and objectives of the different groups I worked with could never entirely converge. I was institutionally linked to a number of organizations to which I was accountable: the University (produce a text with academic interest), the regional government that had granted me a scholarship, my thesis supervisors, my colleagues at Modus Operandi, and the Foundation that funded the latter. The challenge was to see where these interests intersected with other groups and associations, accepting that in some cases they did not.

Reviewing possibilities for collaboration

In hindsight I consider that I set out with a rather paternalistic approach, thinking that inhabitants and community organization were in a sense waiting for the University. The assumption behind the working group's collective questioning²⁰ of the IUGA was that it was paid to produce knowledge and that the neighborhood was in search of or in need of knowledge in order to rebalance power relations. For this reason, naïvely, a collaboration seemed logical, all we had to do was identify the needs. The three actions described above have helped to review our assumptions and adapt our perspectives of collaboration.

In the case of Planning this assumption was to some extent justified as it dealt at the time with citizens in need of expertise in order to be able to contest the decision to demolish social housing in Villeneuve. The hope behind questioning the University was to incite academics to participate in the *Ateliers populaires d'urbanisme* (APU), helping to redress the power asymmetry in a top-down and technocratic urban renovation project, and to encourage them to take a stance. The University was seen as an actor that could potentially recognize and reinforce the legitimacy of Planning and the APU to call into question, for ex-

ample, the demolition strategy defined by the *Agence Nationale de Rénovation Urbaine* (ANRU) for Villeneuve. However, few academics accepted the invitation to join the APU, and instead proposed pedagogical projects to create learning opportunities for students.

With regard to the topics I was interested in, the connections between physical-, structural- and epistemic violence, there was no such clear demand for specialist knowledge from the community groups with whom I established contact throughout 2014 and 2015, as was the case of the *Ateliers Populaires d'Urbanisme*. It was only later that the *Université Populaire* formulated a demand for specialist knowledge when it dealt with discrimination, racism, and the French colonial past. Lacking this knowledge myself, I served as bridge to university colleagues working on this topic.

Beyond a demand for knowledge, I identified a demand among some of the people I worked with in Villeneuve to speak to students and faculty, and to share knowledge in a university context. I therefore reviewed my idea about the type of collaborations I should develop, letting go of the idea that the IUGA should go into the neighborhood and instead focused on opening the University to the voices of neighborhood inhabitants and created opportunities for them to share their analyses of the problems they faced. One such an occasion was to invite Béchir, one of the resource persons I worked with, to teach a group of students from the prestigious *Ecole Normale Supérieure* in Paris about Villeneuve (see figure 5).

Collaborations were particularly successful in two projects: the involvement of academics in the *Université Populaire* cycle on the colonial past in the role of resource persons; and the *Rencontres de Géopolitique critique* that brought together academics, civil society organizations and those directly concerned by oppression in many different spaces in the city (see figure 6 for one such an example). These were not research collaborations as such, but they were moments of joint learning and generosity where each shared their knowledge and looked for ways this could resonate with the knowledge of others. Knowledge here is not purely cerebral but also involves emotions, relations and being touched through encounters.

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²⁰ "Our" in this sense refers to the collective questioning of the University Institutes by David Gabriël, Morgane Cohen and Sebastien Breynat for

Planning, Kirsten Koop as faculty member based at the IUGA and myself for Modus Operandi.

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