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Reflexivity through *positionality meetings*: religion, muslims and 'non-religious' researchers

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ABSTRACT

This paper contributes to current debates on positionality by critically discussing and comparing three researchers' experiences doing research involving Muslims. We introduce *positionality meetings* to enhance reflexivity in qualitative research projects. Based on empirical evidence from our independent projects and the positionality meetings, this paper illustrates how efforts to understanding each other's perspectives and positions, which differ in identities and biographies, challenge our accounts of self-reflexivity. Due to their deliberative character, positionality meetings reveal new and sometimes uncomfortable insights into, for instance, insider and outsider relationships and our attitudes towards religion as a research subject in a particular political context. The paper highlights several stages of the meetings to demonstrate the deliberative practice's value throughout the collective reflexive process. Serving to an interdisciplinary audience, we encourage qualitative researchers to engage in positionality meetings. Therefore, we conclude this paper by providing recommendations on how to organise such meetings.

1. Introduction

This paper contributes to debates on positionality, reflexivity, and situated knowledges by introducing 'positionality meetings' as a powerful element within thequalitative research cycle. It builds on the experiences of three researchers working in the field of geography, whose work, to a different extent, features research involving Islam and Muslim people. We emphasise the usefulness of such positionality meetings, mainly when conducting research in social locations researchers have no direct experience with or do not share similar social positions as those researched. Using empirical data, we illustrate how collective deliberative reflexivity enriched or changed our understanding of data, knowledge production, and research encounters. However, to find such an epistemic advantage, these social elements need to emerge in the research process. We argue being exposed to critical, confronting, often challenging discussions in positionality meetings forces researchers to venture beyond the act of self-reflexivity and to incorporate enriching insights about one's position as a researcher in our current research projects as well as in a broader socio-political world.

Researchers should be reflexive towards the social processes and contexts in which knowledge is obtained (Crasnow, 2014). Based on the work of feminist researchers such as Gillian Rose (1997) and Donna Haraway (1988), many qualitative scholars acknowledge that they are imbued in their research projects. Scholars are not able to see 'everything from nowhere' as Haraway (Haraway,

1988, p. 581) explains the illusion of a 'Godtrick,' referring to all knowledge being partial and embodied and that power is always involved in its production (Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1997). Miled (2019) explains, 'reflexivity is to dig deep into who/what we are. Reflexivity is a process that brings the researcher's self to the central stage and makes her/him [sic] visible' (p. 5). There are many ways in which researchers practice reflexivity during the qualitative research cycle, and perform or communicate their reflexive processes in writing up their research (Pillow, 2003). Some scholars, however, have critiqued the relatively static practice of listing one's similarities and differences since it does not acknowledge the complexity and fluid character of positionality (Hopkins, 2007; Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015; De Koning et al., 2012; Miled, 2019; Ryan et al., 2011). Indeed, Pillow (2003) argues that reflexivity often seems an (unconscious) attempt to write towards how our insider or outsider perspectives benefit the research or what we think readers might desire to hear to justify our research positions. She is wary about the commonness and acceptance of those 'too comfortable' ways of reflexivity among qualitative researchers, which undervalue relationships and structures of power (See also Ward & Wylie, 2014).

This paper advocates positionality meetings as a process to critically engage with these relations of inequality or oppression in research. Therefore, we draw on notions of standpoint theory. It postulates the researcher's multiple and fluid social positions to achieve a 'standpoint' in the research process (Ryan et al., 2011). Feminist standpoint theory attempts to 'transcend the bifurcation of the subject and the object, the objective and the subjective' (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004, p. 208). Hence, standpoint theory brings about the 'insider/outsider who has "double vision",' recognising positions of subordination, but emphasises the epistemic advantage of those in these positions regarding the relevance of certain types of knowledge, i.e. the epistemic subject (Crasnow, 2014, p. 148). However, epistemic privilege is not automatic and therefore oversteps perspective. A perspective arises from the shared response to 'social experiences, relations, traditions, and historically and culturally specific ways of organising social life' (Nelson, 1993, p. 147). So, where a change in an individual's social location changes their perspective (Crasnow, 2014), it does not necessarily equip them with the political awareness on the practices of power or forms of oppression (Harding, 2004). Feminist standpoint theory goes beyond thinking of social locations and also emphasises the crucial political element in which research encounters are embedded and knowledge is produced (Crasnow, 2014). The feminist standpoint theory, therefore, is about transforming awareness and provides opportunities for collective action and establishing a political consciousness.

Over the past years, several papers advocate for collective strategies to enhance reflexivity by pointing out the value of involving other researchers in reflexive processes. These can be described as working separately together (Siltanen et al., 2008); perspective-taking (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017); kitchen-table reflexivity (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015); collective reflexivity (Leggatt-cook et al., 2011); collaborative reflexive analysis (Caretta, 2015); and affective registers in team research (Jakimow & Yumasdaleni, 2016). Indeed, Ryan et al. (2011) note 'even within the constraints of budget and time, it is invaluable to find some space in which to engage the community [peer] researchers in this reflexive process – for example, through brainstorming sessions or focus group discussions' (p. 59). These strategies enable researchers to, as Kohl and McCutcheon (2015) explain, tease out 'the nuanced ways in which we, similarly to all researchers, perform our identity, continuing to challenge each other on assumptions about our identity and its effect on the research process' (p. 758).

This paper underlines and substantiates the added value of collaborative strategies and contributes by introducing a reflexive tool that we call 'positionality meetings'. Whereas others have shown the value of spontaneous or unintentional accounts of reflecting with others (e.g. Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015), or focus on working in research teams towards consensus or an 'interpretive us' (e.g. Siltanen et al., 2008), the positionality meetings we propose are a deliberative reflexive practice aimed to achieve meta-consensus. The meetings are intentional, structured and provide time and space for careful considerations of other perspectives without the necessity of achieving a common understanding in team research. Consequently, this collective practice not only

stimulates to engage in critical and confronting discussions, but remains open to disagreements between researchers when the meetings evolve.

To illustrate our argument, this paper applies research on religion in the field of geography as a contextual lens. Section two, contextualises religion as a concept of analytical interest and briefly introduces our respective research projects based on which we, as 'non-religious' researchers, initiated the positionality meetings. Section three highlights four stages of the positionality meetings and presents the empirical data underlying our main argument. It informs the reader about the setting in which our positionality meetings took place and demonstrates how this deliberate reflexive tool can provide new insights into our (changing) perspectives in relation to our research subjects and regarding the research themes and processes of knowledge production. In conclusion, we serve to a broader audience of qualitative researchers, working on different topics from different disciplines, by translating our findings into recommendations on incorporating positionality meetings as a deliberative reflexive tool.

2. Researching religion

Feminist theories and approaches in several social science disciplines have long neglected the study of religion as a powerful signifier of Otherness and its aspect of oppression (Frankenberry, 2018). This absence is reflected in the field of geography as well, yet religion has gained significance in the last decades, partly because it became a prominent marker of social difference (Henkel, 2011; Hopkins, 2009, 2007; Kong, 2010). In recent years, anti-Islamic sentiments and growing Muslim populations seem to have nourished an increased number of studies concerning Muslims in the European context (e.g. Kong, 2010; Van Liere, 2014). Several studies have demonstrated 'Muslimness' as a prime identity and politicised marker of difference in many western societies (e.g. Naber, 2005). There is an increasing amount of research agendas concerning Muslims, many of which are conducted by non-religious researchers (Ryan et al., 2011). This raises questions about positionality (Henkel, 2011; McCutcheon, 1999; Ryan et al., 2011). For example, are those researchers able to understand the interviewees' experiences? Moreover, is it even ethical to research a politicised and often stereotyped 'other'? Henkel (2011) wonders, 'does one need to be religious to do research on religion – or should one, in order to be "neutral", not be religious at all? This question could also be put differently: Is it an advantage or disadvantage for a researcher to be a believer when studying religion?' (p. 394).

Furthermore, in discussing reflexivity, the angle of religion is especially of interest because of the antagonism between religion and science (Henkel, 2011). In the second half of the twentieth century, the widely accepted secularisation thesis suggested a link between processes of secularisation and the rise of innovations, modernity, and science (Henkel, 2011). In many social science disciplines, religion became largely neglected in interpreting social phenomena. However, that seems to be changing in the last two decades. As a concept of increasing analytical interest among academics, religion constitutes a significant part of peoples' private lives and even seemed to re-gain importance in public spheres, partly because of a more pluralistic religious landscape due to immigration and globalisation (Mansouri et al., 2016) and new forms and expressions of religion and belief (Ajrouch & Kusow, 2007; Henkel, 2014). This renewed interest in religion is often approached through post-secular theory. Beaumont et al. (2018) introduce the term 'reflexive secularisation' as an approach to understand post-secularity away from the 'secular/religious schism'. They argue religion and the secular are always interdependent and entangled. Forms of both emerge in their differences. Nevertheless, many scholars still seem to ignore or shy away from including religion into their projects (Henkel, 2011). It is essential to be reflexive on our stance towards religion embedded in a socio-political context to produce knowledge regarding religion in contemporary societies, perhaps for researchers who do not identify as religious.

This section continues with our respective projects in which religion played a role in different ways. It is important to note that our projects share similarities, e.g. interwoven with difference, power and space, and involve research encounters with Muslim people. They differ, for example, in focus, the phase of research, Muslim population, geographical context, and the centrality of religion in the research design. In the following, we briefly introduce our independent research projects and main concerns regarding our positions as 'non-religious' researchers, which served as input for our positionality meetings.

Laura: 'Religion was a central theme from the beginning of the research. My PhD project aims to understand the interaction between experiences in everyday urban spaces and how religion is explored and negotiated by young Muslims while moving from youth to adulthood (e.g. Kapinga & van Hoven, 2020). Two cases are involved in the project: Vancouver (Canada) and Groningen (The Netherlands). I conducted in-depth interviews with young adult Muslims (aged 18–30), male and female, and from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds. As an "outsider", a non-Muslim, white female researcher, I was conscious about my position from the beginning. Perhaps prompted by interviewees asking if I was religious myself, during the data collection, I also began to experience some uncertainty as a non-religious researcher being interested in religion. Reflecting on those issues with Rik and Reza provided new insight into my approach to religion as a research subject and how this is intertwined with our biographies and processes of knowledge production.'

Rik: 'Opposed to Laura and Reza, notions of religion, Islam and Muslimness gradually emerged throughout the research process. I (white Dutch, male, non-Muslim) draw upon experiences and spatialities of everyday life by young Syrian refugee males in the Northern part of the Netherlands (e.g. Huizinga & van Hoven, 2018). Given the exploratory nature of my study, I did not focus much on religion during the interviews, and neither, perhaps being cautious, did the interviewees. Partly because of the meetings, I increasingly began to consider religion as something "researchable" and of analytical interest on the one hand and something that should be researched, especially researching Syrian refugees. Going back to my transcripts after the meetings, I was able to distinguish better the ambiguities inherent to the personal biographies of the Muslim interviewees. For example, becoming more sensitive to the role of religion in participants' former societies, helped me to grasp experiences of integration in the Netherlands.'

Reza: 'I investigate how "difference" is lived in/through the body by addressing "ordinary" Muslims' everyday experiences of Othering, responses to it, and the role of urban space in relation to Othering (e.g. Shaker et al., 2020). My interviewees are from diverse and various backgrounds and levels of engagement with Islam (a spectrum of orthodox to liberal Muslims). I felt I needed to be careful how to approach my interviewees, how to introduce myself, and how to remain engaged in sometimes nuanced yet challenging religious conversations. I grew up within a Muslim family and context but would not identify as religious. I have noticed that some interviewees automatically seem to consider me as a Muslim brother. When Laura, Rik, and I started talking about our positionalities, I had not started my fieldwork yet. Those positionality meetings gave me an idea: I added a theme to my interview guide for my participants to reflect upon me as a researcher as a sort of feedback. Further, our discussions provided me with an interesting opportunity to be more critical about recruiting interviewees, conducting interviews, employing language, and remaining engaged in observations.'

All three of us experienced positionality meetings as valuable for our projects. In the next section, we do not intend to justify our positions or perspectives. Instead, it demonstrates how the positionalities enhanced our reflexive processes.

3. Enhancing reflexivity through positionality meetings

This section draws on empirical data to illustrate how the positionality meetings functioned as a methodological tool that enabled us to go beyond self-reflexivity. Based on our data analysis, we identify four stages relevant to this process. All stages emphasise the deliberative aspects of our

reflexive practices as fundamental to our positionality meetings. By deliberative, we mean the intentional, planned and thus structured nature of our reflexive practices over time (Section 3.1) and the efforts to carefully and critically consider each other's standpoints and perspectives (Section 3.2). Such a deliberative practice also enables positionality meetings to evolve over time and, consequently, allows the meetings to reveal more nuanced differences in our dispositions, perspectives and reasoning (Section 3.3); and to maintain a space for critical deliberation and confrontation without the necessity to work towards a consensus (Section 3.4). The order of these sections seems to describe the development of our positionality meetings as a linear process. However, this process was dynamic, allowing us to move back and forth until a point of saturation was defined. In this way, we could be flexible in our positionality meetings as new discussion points often emerged because of fieldwork experiences, readings or personal reflections.

3.1. Emergent: a deliberative practice

The planned meetings emerged from more spontaneous and informal conversations. We initially started to share our self-reflections, experiences and challenges on an irregular basis. Working in adjacent offices, informal discussions often took place in the corridor or one of our offices. We valued these informal and spontaneous interactions as they supported our reflexive processes, and realised we could learn from each other's experiences and perspectives. From December 2018 to May 2019, we organised eleven audio-recorded 'positionality meetings' of one to two hours long. Despite being planned, the meetings kept an informal character. Before a meeting, we often formulated a topic guide based on new experiences, ideas and struggles to frame our discussions. However, similar to the meetings Leggatt-cook et al. (2011) describe, the conversations often took unexpected twists and sometimes they proved to be chaotic, going back and forth between different topics. They contained moments of joy and laughter but also heated discussions in which we probed deep into each other's viewpoints. Unlike our previous fleeting talks in the hallway, the planned setting provided a space where we pushed ourselves to deliberate, where we addressed issues critically and challenged each other's reasoning. Consciously sitting down for the sake of reflexivity, we could not naturally walk away, triggering and stimulating more uncomfortable accounts of reflexive practices (Pillow, 2003; Ward & Wylie, 2014).

Planned meetings imply an investment in terms of time to learn from each other. Due to the evident pressure of time in academia, it is essential to schedule several meetings in advance (e.g. Ryan et al., 2011). Our meetings were planned for roughly five months, with at least two weeks in between consecutive meetings. This schedule allowed us to continue our discussions while providing us with sufficient time to bring up new insights or struggles. While our meetings held recurring themes – such as the shifting perceptions of agency, power and privilege in research encounters – taking the time for this process enabled the content of the meetings to evolve (See section 3.3). Deliberation is an unsteady process, and perceived achievements from short deliberative practices might just be a product of the anticipatory process before deliberation, not necessarily the actual deliberation (Curato et al., 2017). Moreover, becoming familiar with other researchers' perspectives is a slow process (Siltanen et al., 2008).

Furthermore, as Curato et al. (2017) explain, time is an essential factor as deliberate practice 'requires amenability to preference transformation' (p. 32). As emphasised by Finefter-Rosenbluh (2017), the structured setting implies researchers' willingness and dedication to learn from others and be curious about other perspectives. To better understand our positions and how we produce knowledge, researchers should enter the positionality meetings as equals and work towards inclusive communication practices, something that can be challenging and fragile depending on the setting (Curato et al., 2017). In line with other collective strategies (e.g. Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015; Siltanen et al., 2008), this meant we agreed on establishing a 'safe space', maintained through frequent follow-up questions after discussions to make sure we all felt safe to be uncomfortable.

Such a safe space is further strengthened by a shared understanding and effort among researchers to critically assess the other's (self)representation in their respective research projects. Hence, the meetings allow and motivate researchers to be vulnerable and uncomfortable, openly challenge, question or criticise each other's perspectives, interpretations and reasoning. In our case, we found common ground in our research projects on religion in the Netherlands and Canada. Representations of Muslims or Islam are politically sensitive, making the social inherently political. Based on our different individual social-political positions, we quickly recognised the potential value reflexive deliberation might offer in exploring such positions as sites of epistemic advantage (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004).

Having set the stage for positionality meetings as a deliberative practice of reflexivity, the following three sections demonstrate this collective practice's value by highlighting successive stages of meetings. Next, we explore the benefits in the early stages of the process in discussing our changing positions as insider/outsider throughout the research process. We continue by illustrating how positionality meetings evolve into discussions that reveal the 'unfamiliar' aspects of our social positions, i.e. blind spots and dispositions. Lastly, we discuss what we think researchers should strive for in positionality meetings and explore how a point of saturation can be defined.

3.2. Commencement: challenging self-reflexivity

We started the first meeting by discussing excerpts of transcripts and field notes based on self-reflexive processes. This early stage of the collective practice revolved around critical debates on self-locations we already considered necessary concerning relationships with research participants in a particular political context. This included discussions on experiences in which we felt different or similar to our interviewees, and on surprising or challenging situations while collecting data or approaching potential participants. Similar to other authors sharing notions of self-reflexivity, we experienced our position as changing from one situation to another, and as somewhat fluid throughout the research process (e.g. Hopkins, 2007; Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015; Miled, 2019; Ryan et al., 2011). Some aspects of our identities, such as gender, religion, race, were prominent in our independent notions of self-reflexivity regarding insider-outsider relationships. During the meetings, those accounts of self-reflexivity were challenged critically by different interpretations or explanations for particular situations that came to the fore in our collective practice.

For instance, Laura shared that being a non-Muslim female researcher seemed to make it easier to, besides women, also interview young men in this specific project on young Muslims. She illustrated this to Rik and Reza with an excerpt of a conversation in which Azra, an interviewee, reflects on the 'awkwardness' between young Muslim men and women.

[**Laura interviewing Azra, Female, 20**]

Azra: I don't know if you noticed this with the people you talked to, but there is awkwardness between like Muslim women and Muslim men when they are together. Have you?

Laura: No, not really. […] Can you try to describe the awkwardness?

Azra: mm they usually don't look at you right in the face or like avert their eyes, look away, talk softer. It's just awkward. It's just they don't know what to do or what to talk about.

Laura: I interviewed more males, but I didn't have that experience so much. Do you think it is because I'm not Muslim?

Azra: Yeah. I feel yeah.

Laura: And do you also feel more awkward if you talk to a guy who is Muslim than to a guy who is not Muslim?

Azra: Yeah, I do for sure. Because they act awkward, so that makes you feel awkward, so you act awkward. It's like a cycle really. [laughing].

Laura figured not being Muslim was an advantage to interview male interviewees in comparison to being a Muslim female researcher. Azra might, for example, have felt 'awkward' being interviewed by Reza, whose interviewees often assume he is religious. However, Reza challenged Laura's reasoning by referring to an excerpt of his interview with Yusuf.

[**Reza interviewing Yusuf, male, 25**]

> Yusuf: I think [if you were a girl], I would've done the interview, but I would not definitely have met you in person. Perhaps I wouldn't call, but maybe through emails … of course, because you have an Islamic background, it gives me more incentives to help you out because you're my brother, and I want to help you out and see you succeed.

This excerpt suggests that some of Reza's interviewees would not have participated if Laura, female and Dutch, was the researcher. Hence it challenges Laura's self-reflexivity, which helped her assess her position on the insider/outsider spectrum and better 'place' the research encounters with her interviewees. We realised that our self-reflexive practices seemed to focus more on our self-locations' advantages and sometimes showed unconscious attempts to justify our positions. Our collective practice, then, pushed us away from these too comfortable accounts of reflexivity (Pillow, 2003).

Going beyond self-reflexivity is illustrated by further insider-outsider discussions as well. Laura and Rik felt they were, correctly, never seen as Muslim, while Reza's felt his background, name and Middle Eastern facial features seemed to make his interviewees assume he is a religious as well. The meetings, for instance, proved that language was crucial. Reza grew up in a Muslim majority country and is familiar with religious codes that naturally created common ground with his interviewees. Indeed, Henkel (2011) explains: 'In their religious texts as well as their conversations, members of religious groups often use certain language and terminology that can sometimes be difficult for outsiders to understand' (p. 395). Also, Reza was often referred to as 'brother' by interviewees, and his familiarity with Islam was reflected in his use of language in the interview transcripts. Moreover, experiences of discrimination, racism, or Islamophobia seemed to be more elaborately, or at least more strongly, addressed in Reza's interviews.

[**Positionality meeting** – 19 December 2018]

> Reza: Have you [Laura] noticed that they are not very willing to say everything to you? I mean, for example, about racist encounters? […]. Because you are one of 'them' […], a very privileged typical white girl, you know, European.

> Laura: Yes, hmm … I notice […] maybe some are hesitant, but I don't notice what they don't say, of course.

[**Positionality meeting** – 6 March 2019]

> Reza: There is this one girl, she uses a lot of like 'white folks', like she says: 'they don't understand us. I'm used to this white gaze at me. I'm now strong enough cause I have the guts to wear my scarf and face this white gaze, I'm stronger than you.'

> Laura: The language would be very different … I mean some talk about 'white people', but not like this. I guess that would be very different if I would do those interviews.

While Laura and Rik did realise that participants might be hesitant to share such experiences, their transcripts also contained participants' racist experiences. The interviewees often elaborated on religious understandings and practices and referred to specific verses in the Quran. In the process of self-reflexivity, we tend to focus on those situations in which participants do share those experiences with us as 'outsiders'. However, differences and similarities among our insider-outsider positions demonstrated how Reza responded from a 'double vision'. The collective reflexive practice in which we tried to understand each other's interpretations and reasoning highlighted Reza epistemic advantage, and in a way, the epistemic disadvantage of Laura and Rik concerning the depth and level of detail on specific topics.

For Reza, the discussions with Laura and Rik were also a useful addition to his accounts of self-reflexivity. Being generally considered a Muslim insider comes with some challenges and disadvantages (See also Miled, 2019). Finefter-Rosenbluh (2017) argues that considering the outsider perspective is an effective and valuable reflexive strategy for 'insiders'. Consider the following excerpt from Rik.

[**Positionality meeting – 6 March 2019**]

> Rik: I think my interviewees talk more about being a Muslim in the Netherlands because I'm not Muslim. They are young guys that practice less religion, but they do not want to inform their family and friends because they are all watching each other and social pressure and social control is very high. However, they do want to talk about it.

The richness of the data on intracommunity dynamics was often elaborately discussed in the interviews conducted by Laura and Rik. Interviewees often mention feelings of being judged by others in their Muslim communities. Indeed, Ryan et al. (2011) note that it is often easier to talk about concerns or worries to someone who is an outsider from one's community. Outsiders might produce richer data on other topics, which was an added value to Reza's self-reflexive notes. Learning to understand other's perspectives challenged our perspectives by revealing more confrontational or uncomfortable insights. Therefore, it is essential to stress the relevance of the group composition's diversity for collective reflexive practices. Various insider-outsider perspectives and social locations are valuable input in the critical discussions and disagreements since they allow to bring different perspectives to the meetings.

As other collective strategies suggest, the positionality meetings provide insights that move beyond self-reflexivity (Caretta, 2015; Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017; Jakimow & Yumasdaleni, 2016; Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015; Leggatt-cook et al., 2011; Siltanen et al., 2008). Despite our attempt to be critically self-reflexive, the meetings revealed how we seemed to draw more attention to our epistemic advantage. The collective and deliberative practice confronts us also with epistemic disadvantages.

While this 'emergent phase' of the meetings resembles the often criticised practice of listing similarities and differences between researchers and participants, exploring these familiar self-locations and insider-outsider perspectives together is a fruitful starting point for the positionality meetings. From here, the deliberative practice provided opportunities for the meetings to evolve into more unfamiliar aspects that were somewhat oblivious in the self-reflexive processes.

3.3. Evolvement: exposing blind spots

The positionality meetings provide space and time for the deliberative practice to evolve. Allowing meetings to evolve is vital as insights of the first meetings might result from latent individual reflexive practice or can reflect anticipation of a learning process. Unexpected insights resulting from deliberative reflexive practice can only occur in a series of positionality meetings (see Curato et al., 2017 on deliberative practice). Collective reflexivity can expose blind spots. Blind spots are particular aspects of our social positions which were not part of our self-reflexive processes before the meetings, yet seems to influence the ways we produce knowledge.

Religion was a central topic of discussion in our meetings. The nuanced differences between our stances and attitudes towards religion as a concept of analytical interest became meaningful. We gradually 'teased' out more nuanced differences among our perspectives and interpretations by comparing religion's role in our own lives – our attitudes, ideas, and behaviours. Laura and Rik's biographies seemingly share many analogies based on age, social class, ethnicity and education. Both have lived in similar settings, walked similar life paths, and were different from Reza – never practised religion or self-identified with a religious denomination. The meetings, however, lay basic distinctions in our attitudes towards religion. During our discussions, we realised that we often referred to our biographies, which helped us better explain our perspectives on and understand religion. Following Henkel (2011), indeed, we found that 'believers, atheists and agnostics, all need

to be aware of their biography, with contingencies of cultural imprints and the influences of the religious or areligious milieu within which they grew up.' (Henkel, 2011, p. 396). Discussing our trajectories, it became apparent that in the past, Laura had been more in contact with religion than Rik, for example, by attending a Catholic primary school and secondary school. Other small nuances in, for instance, upbringing, seemed to shape their different attitudes towards religion. Exploring our different attitudes is reflected in some vulnerable, honest, and confrontational discussions.

> **[Positionality meeting – 20 March 2019]**
>
> Laura: Yeah, I think you have a very secular perspective [...] well, I think ... Like you [Rik], are you really atheist?
>
> Rik: well, what comes to my mind every conversation [positionality meeting] and maybe I should not even say it, but I'm going to say it, but even considering religion, that this is something like... it goes maybe a bit far to say we shouldn't do it at all, but sometimes I feel religion is also an instrument to maintain inequality, to give people religion, like it makes people happy and keeps them happy.
>
> Laura: Yeah, but you assume that God does not exist in this whole story.
>
> Rik: Yeah. Well. That's where I struggle with. Like... my thoughts on this topic change. Like, if I see people that are very religious or converts, and they arrange their lives according to religion, I understand like who am I to judge. But at the same time ...
>
> Laura: You judge.
>
> Rik: Yeah, I judge, maybe it is not really appropriate, but yeah for sure, I do.
>
> Laura: For me, to be honest, I'm not religious and don't want to be religious, and I don't believe in God, but I would not see myself as an atheist, I think.
>
> Reza: Maybe, agnostic?
>
> Laura: yeah ... probably. I never really thought of defining myself like this, but I don't exclude the idea that something higher exists. Maybe that small nuance made me interested in religion in the first place.

Following this excerpt, such persistent differences in Rik and Laura's stance towards religion influenced their research design. They are likely to remain to influence their respective research projects and the ways we produced knowledge. For instance, it might have evoked Laura's interest in religion, making it central to her doctoral thesis. In contrast, as explained when introducing his work (section 2), for Rik, religion gradually became part of his project. When the meetings evolved, it underlined that our attitudes and positions could not be divided into a religious-secular schism, but rather emerge in the differences between the two. Religion and the secular are entangled (Beaumont et al., 2018). In the process of self-reflexivity, we had already realised our knowledge was partial and embodied, and data is interpreted and communicated through our 'filters' (Cook, 2005; Haraway, 1988; Rose, 1997). However, these collective meetings further exposed, at least in part, the (in)consistency of these 'filters' and traced out ways of self-reflexivity which were familiar and comfortable to us. Over time, this deliberative practice provides a space and time to share and critically question each other on more 'unfamiliar' aspects we would not have captured by self-reflexivity.

3.4. Saturation: open for disagreements

The previous sections illustrate that being exposed to critical and confronting voices of other researchers proved invaluable to go beyond our initial positionality concerns and to force us to reconsider previous views and accounts based on self-reflexivity. In this final part, we focus on how and when to conclude a series of positionality meetings. We highlight the importance of not striving for consensus in positionality meetings; the consequences of such a starting point for group

dynamics, and the point of saturation to avoid getting lost in an infinite process of unravelling social positions and identities.

We argue that researchers engaging in positionality meetings should not aim to reach consensus. Deliberative practices are plural and not consensual (Curato et al., 2017). Furthermore, claims of epistemic justification in many collective reflexive practices per definition are a product of situated knowledge (Harding, 2004). Instead, the positionality meetings should seek to establish meta-consensus. Curato et al. (2017) explain that meta-consensus can arise out of deliberative reflexive practices and involves mutual acknowledgement about the legitimisation of other viewpoints and interpretations. Instead of finding unity, reaching meta-consensus means group members' reasoning processes become more transparent, providing clarification in moments of difference and disagreement and pushing awareness of the political contexts and practices of power.

Furthermore, we argue that by not striving for consensus, we maintained the earlier described 'safe space' that is fundamental to our positionality meetings. It was crucial for our meetings to create a 'safe space' where we could feel secure being uncomfortable, vulnerable and confrontational. However, it is important here to address what our notion of safe space entails. This space might evolve differently when being reflexive in a research team than with researchers working on independent projects. Working reflexively in a research team has benefits for reflexive processes as members can work together to conduct and interpret interviews (Caretta, 2015; Siltanen et al., 2008). Often there is a common goal besides the reflexive process, in which the team works towards a consensus, such as a code scheme to analyse the data, or an 'interpretive us' (Siltanen et al., 2008). While this process is fruitful for team-research throughout all stages of the qualitative research cycle, in practice, power dynamics will be in play, despite examples of teams that made agreements on working in a non-hierarchical way (Siltanen et al., 2008). Project members will occupy different roles throughout the research process, and a stimulus to deliberate will depend on (perceived) expertise, confidence or affiliation with the project (Caretta, 2015; Jakimow & Yumasdaleni, 2016). Our meetings distinguish themselves from such team-based practices by proposing a tool for cross-project reflexivity. In the positionality meetings, there is no pressure to reach consensus; hence it enables the participants to remain open for critical deliberation, disagreement and confrontation up until the final stages of the meetings.

We illustrate this using one of our discussions on how we – consciously or unconsciously – attempted to 'manage' how participants might see us. When approaching potential participants, Laura, for instance, demonstrated an understanding of the variety among Muslims since she was worried people considered her as ignorant or holding superficial understandings of Islam or Muslims. Our positionality meetings revealed that we seem to share aspects of our lives selectively, convey a particular message – close to – whom we are and contributing, for instance, to establish rapport and enhance the conversation flow. Although we cannot be certain about how we are seen by interviewees (Bolognani, 2007), those unconscious and conscious attempts to manage our positions and relationships raise ethical issues and uncertainties. Reza shared the following experiences.

[Reza interviewing Fatima, female, 19]

Fatima: Basically, the goal is to make our whole life a form of worship. We often discuss how can we make everything we do into a form of ibada [worship]. Maybe even sitting here is also a form of ibada because I'm helping you, a Muslim brother, who is doing research, and I'm giving my precious time to help you. It is also a form of ibada.

Reza's field notes – 29 January 2019]

He (interviewee Mohammed) was also calling me 'my brother'. Is it because of my use of religious language or because of my country and religious background? But I told him I grew up as Muslim, and I did not tell him that I am not religious anymore. Is it ethical?

Reza's struggled to position himself in relation to his interviewees, something we discussed extensively in the positionality meetings. He felt some interviewees could take his biography and

beliefs as troubling. It raised critical and confrontational ethical debates in the meetings on what to share or say when interviewees in his project seem to assume that he is Muslim. Should he inform his interviewees he is not religious? Would it be unnecessarily confrontational for the interviewees or disrupt its flow or the established rapport? The excerpt below presents a part of this ethical discussion.

[Positionality meeting – 6 March 2019]

Laura: Did any of your interviewees ever ask you [if you identify as Muslim]?

Reza: No, no, but one of the interviewees is a personal connection, and he or she could know via others.

Laura: Do you think they would care? Because you have a Muslim background.

Reza: That's a good question. I don't know. Probably.

Rik: I don't think so.

Reza: No?! How come? It might have some influence.

Rik: Yeah, it might have some influence, but I mean...

Reza: Well, abandoning is something else. If you are not Muslim, again, no one cares. Like this white dude is asking me these questions: ok, cool! But this fucking guy, he kind of left us, and he is asking me these questions.

Rik: But now you are filling in the blanks.

While this topic was discussed at length, we did not agree or consensus on the 'right' way of solving or handling these kinds of situations. We argue that not working on the same project minimised power dynamics since everyone works independent and is responsible for their research. This allows the positionality meetings to remain open for critical, uncomfortable and unfinished accounts (Pillow, 2003), which should be prioritised practices of collective reflexivity in positionality meetings.

Not working towards a consensus did not mean we were aimlessly engaging in this never-ending collective practice. The meetings continued to shape and redefine our attitudes. We reflected several times on what we learned from our discussions. This excerpt is one of the honest examples.

[Positionality meeting – 20 March 2019]

Rik: Something else that I learned so far from these discussions is the data analysis. Indeed I also look different at the data, but also in the context of intersectionality, to add an extra dimension to this person's identity. But also, to better understand the context where they come from [...].

Laura: So you mean these discussions made you more aware?

Rik: Yeah, in the last few months, it is also part of the research, but also through these discussions.

Laura: Interesting it does not only affect the way you look at research, but also the way your own ideas change in a way. Not that now you become religious, but more your views on others change or on accepting others. Not that you were not accepting.

Rik: Well . . .

Reza: Well, I have more sympathy for them to be honest, because I was also like sort of what you said Rik, like religion in the twenty-first century, are you kidding me? [. . . .] They're sticking to their beliefs with all these hardships, and it's very important for them.

During our meetings, and as illustrated in the excerpt above, Reza's relation to religion seemed to change, which also changed his sometimes skeptical perspectives on those who believe. Similarly, Rik felt inspired to reconsider religiosity in his theoretical framework and data analysis. Sharing

what we learned or how our views had changed often evoked topics for further discussion. Consequently, throughout our meetings, all of us, and Reza in particular, learned we had developed a fascination for positionality. Making the researcher 'too central' in the research became a substantial topic of discussion, which implicitly helped us determine the point of saturation.

The meetings enabled us to recognise how reflexivity can benefit our understanding of our interviewees and our insights in knowledge production and when reflexive discussions seemed to become close to self-indulgence (see Kobayashi, 2003; Pillow, 2003). In this way, our final meetings helped us not get stuck in an infinite process of refining our epistemic positions based on our social identities (see also Crasnow, 2014). Although researchers and 'the researched' are not linked together based on solely one social relationship (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004), the meetings stimulated us to develop an awareness of relevant socio-political locations of ourselves in relation to the research topic. With this paper, we do not want to claim we 'achieved standpoint', yet positionality meetings are a simulating process in this regard, as our perspectives gradually shifted. Our critical discussions and only in relation to our specific research projects allowed us to explore this epistemic privilege spectrum, which is thoroughly political, historical, and habitual. When no new insights emerged from the meetings in its current constellation of researchers, our collective practice reached saturation and planning further meetings was no longer necessary or valuable in our respective reflexive processes.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

Positionality meetings are a novel and practical approach to practice reflexivity. The exposure to multiple perspectives and social positions revealed new insights into attitudes towards religion and our relations to interviewees. By discussing situated knowledges and epistemic advantages of the researcher and the researched, a group consciousness emerged, which touched upon the social nature of knowledge production and shaped a political awareness of the structural and everyday practices of power. We mainly focused on the religious forms of Othering, which deserve more attention in standpoint debates; however, positionality meetings can be applied to different projects with various themes imbued in relationships and structures of power and oppression. While the meetings were never intended to pull off the 'God-trick', to see 'everything from nowhere' (Haraway, 1988, p. 581), they were crucial in providing us with more insights into how those personal filters come to be in a particular political context. Thus, in line with other collective strategies, the positionality meetings enable researchers to moves beyond self-reflexivity. The contribution lies in its deliberative practice, which pushes towards more uncomfortable and confrontational accounts of reflexivity, which remained rather unexposed in our attempts to be critically self-reflexive prior to the meetings (see Pillow, 2003).

We encourage researchers to integrate positionality meetings into their qualitative research projects and offer recommendations for organising such meetings. To allow the meetings to evolve gradually, it is essential to set the stage for a deliberate practice by scheduling multiple meetings beforehand. It proved to be useful to work with a two-week interval between consecutive meetings as often new perspectives needed to 'sink in'. Unlike more spontaneous talks in the hallways, where we could simply leave a confrontational disagreement, the meetings' planned character provides a commitment to learning and a 'confrontational' space and time. Therefore, creating 'safe space' is essential to share, confront, (dis)agree, and negotiate. We suggest avoiding power hierarchies between the people sharing and questioning each other. To maintain such a safe space throughout the collective reflexive process, it is essential to refrain from working towards consensus. Furthermore, we emphasise it is valuable to include researchers with different social positions and perspectives regarding biographies and identities (e.g. cultural or religious background, gender, educational training).

The final recommendations are related to the content of the meetings. The themes discussed and the conceptual depth of the meetings evolved over time. It is useful to start the meetings by considering one's positionality concerns, insecurities and experiences based on self-reflexivity

and illustrate this with excerpts, field diaries and transcripts. From there, differences and similarities in interpretation are likely to occur, providing a basis for critical, confrontational and uncomfortable insights. To reveal 'blind spots', it is also essential to pay attention to how differences in interpretations cannot be explained differences in social locations and move beyond aspects of our positions we are somewhat familiar with. As our empirical evidence shows, besides discussing self-locations and insider-outsider perspectives relational to interviewees, it is valuable to critically reflect on perspectives and attitudes to the research concepts, such as religion, to gain nuanced insights on knowledge production.

Considering the fluid and contradictory character of positionality (Hopkins, 2007; Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015; Ryan et al., 2011), we demonstrated how the meetings themselves could change researchers' perspectives, attitudes and positions. Regular evaluation is necessary to consider how the meetings have changed the researcher's perspectives and have led to new insights concerning the project. Evaluation is also essential to determine a point of saturation. We suggest ending the series of meetings when no useful insights emerge and when a meta-consensus is reached. Planning further meetings for collective reflexivity was no longer necessary or valuable for our respective reflexive processes concerning our current research projects, at least not in the same constellation of researchers.

Disclosure statement

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

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