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Violence, veterans, and mental health

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Violence, veterans, and mental health: Collaborative and practitioner research on the afterlives of war

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Gigengack initiated a series of research-led collaborative projects on veterans and mental health with postgraduate students from Vrije Universiteit (VU) in the Netherlands.¹ The focus of these projects was on how research participants navigate the shifting military, healthcare and sociocultural environments they face during and after military service. Methodologically, these projects combined semi-structured interviews with ethnographic methods and initially focused on military veterans in the Netherlands. In response to a request from linked institutions and student researchers, for two projects we decided to broaden the focus to include a military conflict beyond the confines of the Western world, and in another project we included another uniformed service (the police).

Collaborative projects between experienced and novice researchers constitute the most fundamental form of teaching the craft of research. With the increasing split between research and teaching, however, this form of academic practice has fallen in disuse. It is only recently, with the emergence of such funding requirements of dissemination, validation and capacitation, that collaborative projects have gained more standing as a new and innovative form of research-led teaching.

In fact, the collaborative project on veterans and veteran care is modelled after previous experiences of the Vrije Universiteit (VU), Hogeschool Amsterdam (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences), and the Municipality of Amsterdam. In the Dutch academic landscape, collaborative research is still rare, which makes the contribution of Edinburgh to VU practice pedagogically noteworthy.

The collaborative model involves the participation of a small group of students under close supervision of an experienced researcher. The objective is threefold. First of all, the model of apprenticeship is very interesting for students, as is this is the best way to learn doing research on a specific theme. Students are requested to go through the full empirical cycle of research and connect their material to theories on veterans and veteran care.

¹ This project contributed to, and built on, Gigengack's postdoctoral research for the Afterlives of War project, a comparative study of combat trauma, which is led by the University of Edinburgh and funded by the European Research Council.

Secondly, the collaboration brings the participating researcher further as well. It may yield information that is difficult to obtain otherwise, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. This project facilitated Gigengack's access to different categories of veterans.

Finally, the collaboration ideally also responds to the need among some institutions of capacity building. Regarding the themes of veterans and veteran care, representatives of the Veteran Institute identified such a need: apart from the PhD studies financed by the Veteran Institute, there are hardly any study programmes addressing the social and cultural dimensions of veterans and veteran care in the Netherlands. This form of capacity building is recognized as important in that graduated students raise awareness of the organizational dimensions of trauma. This is why representatives of other uniformed services, in particular the Amsterdam police, have expressed interest in this project; after successful pilot research, in the coming year police will be involved in collaborative research.

Students were (and still are) recruited from the VU Departments of SCA (Social and Cultural Anthropology), COM (Culture, Organization and Management) and BCO (Beleid, Communicatie en Organisatie), with the following ad, distributed through the appropriate channels

Critical military studies

Through the University of Edinburgh, I participate in comparative research with veterans and military. Veterans are military who have been in one or more missions; they are active or post-active military. Possible themes are experiences with trauma and resilience, moral injury, experiences with an organization of violence, confrontations and accommodations with the "psi-ences", veterans as emancipation movement, accommodation with the state, specific missions, mission-related themes, units, target groups. Students should mobilize veterans in their own networks.

Within the overall research line of BECOMING AN EX, two projects have been completed. One of these, with Simons, focused on veteran officers, who have been quite successful in their transition from the armed forces to civilian life. The other project, with Nelemans, focused on lower rank military, many of whom were still conscripts, who were not officially diagnosed with PTSD, and who often harbored feelings of rancor to the MoD. These two projects underlined the importance of exit strategies, and the recommendation for MoD to facilitate these.

Within the research line of MILITARY AND VETERANS ETHNOGRAPHY, three smaller projects were executed in Amsterdam. One project, with Trip, focused on the commemoration activities of veterans in Amsterdam. This project documented the private commemorations of veterans during official events. The project with Staal, documented and theorized identification and

disidentification processes through the rituals that young recruits undergo. Finally, the project with Danielle Graman studied how female military construct femininity within the armed forces as gendered and gendering institutions.

In addition to these core lines of inquiry, two more lines of inquiry have been opened.

Within the research line POLICE, POLICE WORK AND TRAUMA, the project with Kloosterman documented the impact of police being filmed by citizens, a relatively new form of bystander conflict. This research line will be expanded, by police studying the police. In addition, the Fellow has submitted a research idea with the Dutch funding body *Politie & Wetenschap* (Police & Science).

The final line of inquiry concerns veterans and veteran research in a non-European context, namely post-conflict Colombia. This has resulted in two awarded projects on the personhood and subjectivities of former guerrilla and paramilitary combatants.

List of projects have been completed within this scheme with links to .pdfs of the thesis where available:

- 1) Simons, Daan (2018) *Officieren veteranen en hun habitus*. (Officer Veterans and Their Habitus.)

http://www.ubvu.vu.nl/pub/fulltext/scripties/26_2599382_0.pdf

- 2) Nelemans, Lizette (2018) *Het Oedipuscomplex bij veteranen die kiezen voor het civiele leven*. (The Oedipus Complex amongst veterans who chose civilian life.)

http://www.ubvu.vu.nl/pub/fulltext/scripties/26_2580569_0.pdf

- 3) Staal, Femke (2018) *Groepsmacht is strijdkracht*. Groepsvorming en identificatieprocessen van militairen. (Group power is Combat Force. Military group formation and identification processes.)

- 4) Trip, Sientje (2018) Herdenken door veteranen in een generationeel perspectief. Betekenisgeving en identiteitsvorming van veteranen op de Nationale Herdenkingsdag. (Commemorating Veterans in a Generational Perspective: Meaning making and identity formation of veterans on the National Remembrance Day.)

- 5) Graman, Danielle (2019) Vrouwelijkheid in de Krijgsmacht De ervaringen van vrouwelijke militairen als minderheidsgroep binnen de gendered en gendering organisatie van Defensie. (Femininity within the Armed Forces. The experiences of female military as minority group within the gendered and gendering Defence organization.)

- 6) Kloosterman, Rolf (2017) De Gefilmde Politie (The filmed police.)

http://www.ubvu.vu.nl/pub/fulltext/scripties/26_2569017_0.pdf

- 7) Voets, Liesbeth (2018) Reintegration of ex-combatants in Colombia: A Paradox of Progressive Peace Process. Nominated for ID Leaks Thesis Prize

http://www.ubvu.vu.nl/pub/fulltext/scripties/26_2581375_0.pdf

- 8) Roldan de Jong, Tamara (2019) The Construction of Peace: Subjectivities of Former FARC-EP Combatants in Colombian Peace Process. *Cum laude* thesis.

http://www.ubvu.vu.nl/pub/fulltext/scripties/26_2651238_0.pdf