

BREACHING TABOOS AT WORK
A DIALOGUE ON (WHILE) BREASTFEEDING

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This dialogue is a tribute to Monica Meijnsing, who for a long time has been the only tenured female staff member in the philosophy department at Tilburg University. The two characters in this dialogue talk about a social norm proscribing breastfeeding in public, discussing its role within academia. As the characters discuss this norm, they also consider the dependence of cognition on the body, and the merits of the idea of ‘privileged perspective’ in standpoint epistemology. These are some of the themes on which Monica has spent most of her career as a teacher and researcher. Monica, we hope you will enjoy this piece, and we thank you for being an inspiring role model.

29 FEBRUARY 2020. TWO COLLEAGUES HAVING A GLASS OF MILK AT TILBURY’S

Alex: Hey Dani, can I tell you something?

Dani: Sure, Alex. What’s up?

Alex: You know I am going to teach this course on feminism, right? Well, I came across an interesting paper.

Dani: Which one?

Alex: It’s called “The breastfeeding incident.”¹

¹ Davidson & Langan (2006).

Dani: Oh, what's it about? I can only imagine an incident involving breastfeeding...

Alex: Haha, what do you imagine when you think of a breastfeeding incident?

Dani: Leakage... or a mother's squirting breast milk on another person when she's asked to go somewhere private to breastfeed her baby.

Alex: It's kind of related.

Dani: Ah, okay. What's it about then?

Alex: So, two teachers invited a female guest lecturer. Since she was still breastfeeding, it was decided in advance that she would breastfeed her baby of five months in class during her teaching, if the baby would get hungry.

Dani: So, what's the 'incident'? And do we know these teachers?

Alex: Well... the incident is just that she lectured while breastfeeding. And no, we don't know these teachers. But it did occur to me to do the same thing here.

Dani: I don't get it. Why is that an 'incident'? Was it a big deal for the students, for kids from this 'woke' generation?

Alex: Yes, it was a big deal for students. And it would be quite a big deal to do it here too, I believe. Just think about it: have you ever seen a woman, who lectures while breastfeeding?

Dani: No, but I've never seen babies in a classroom either. I've seen teachers with dogs in the classroom, though.

Alex: I guess that's because women do the breastfeeding at home! They are supposed to do so. Anyway, just bear with me and I will explain a bit more.

Dani: Okay.

Alex: The course in which this happened was a course on feminism, which is how I came across the article. The students, the article says, were really thrilled this woman would come and lecture. Mainly because they believed she was a wonderful example of a woman having a successful academic career and

children. So, before she came to teach, they looked up to her as a role model. Oh, and the guest lecture was on violence against women, her area of expertise.

Dani: So, how did the students react?

Alex: They reacted as the teachers had expected. All of them recognized, and made clear afterwards, that the breastfeeding was a transgression of a norm. The students were stunned when it happened. The authors of the paper say students were uncomfortable and even disturbed by it. It led to heated debates in class and on campus afterwards.

Dani: But which norm was transgressed?

Alex: So, I would like to answer that, but that is not an easy question. There is a norm against breastfeeding in public, of course. Yet, these days it seems to be OK to feed in public, if one sits quietly in a corner. So, the precise norm at work here is not clear. But it has to do with the fact that she combined breastfeeding and lecturing. In the case described, the students' response was so strong that the teachers made this breastfeeding incident central to the remainder of their course: they interviewed all students about it and asked them to reflect on it. In the paper, the teachers clarify that they believe in the pedagogical value of *teaching through transgression*.² And they argue that students' response was actually a form of violence: students really did not appreciate a woman would do 'breastwork' while she was supposed to do 'headwork'.

Dani: So, then, do you think the transgressed norm – whatever that is exactly – exists because good lecturing demands undivided attention, or perhaps because taking good care of a baby requires undivided attention? I can imagine babies being pissed off that their mothers are moving around and talking when they are eating.

² Especially relevant here: Garfinkel (1964); Bicchieri (2006); Proulx & Heine (2010).

Alex: Hold on, babies that are allowed to drink are never pissed off! They get angry when they are hungry. But you raise an interesting question; I think it was the breastfeeding itself.

Dani: If you're right, I'm wondering whether the students felt uncomfortable because of the breasts – if breasts were exposed at all. Then again, everybody, by the age of university students, has seen some breasts.

Alex: Well, that too is a good question. I have wondered about it too. But actually, the students commented that the feeding had happened very discretely. My impression is that they were disturbed by the fact that the teacher attended to her baby while she was – and while they were - supposed to focus on her lecture. So, I think the norm she violated was that she was breastfeeding while asking for intellectual attention.

Dani: Well, to turn things around, from what you tell me, it might well be the case that students found that while 'motherhood was not interfering with the guest speaker's scholarly life,'³ her scholarly life was interfering with her motherhood. But what were students asked anyway? And why did these teachers-researchers qualify it as 'violence'?

Alex: A woman can and should be nurturing. And that is also why we think women make for good teachers, right. Refusing to nurture one's students in the way students expect it is an act of defiance. Looking after the baby, letting your body and boobs do what they are supposed to, that is not something you can do while you teach... apparently.

Dani: As a matter of fact, it's probably distracting for all parties involved: for the baby, the mother, the students...

Alex: The authors think, rightly I believe, that that is because thinking is seen as the opposite of all bodily activity. Interestingly, they suggest that the

³ Davidson & Langan (2006): 442.

opposite of intellectual purity is bodily sexuality,⁴ and that this incident shows how the female body can be so easily sexualised.

Dani: What do you mean by that?

Alex: Well in order to judge the lecturer's behaviour as immoral or obscene, students may well have sexualised femininity: 'the bad, sexual teacher brings into the discourse of feminist pedagogy not the breast', which is seen as her capacity to nurture, '... but the breasts.'⁵ Breastfeeding in public questions phallogentric culture, in which students are imbued, where breasts are defined to satisfy man's sexual needs, and are basically sex toys.

Dani: Mmmmh... But do you think the authors of that paper have any special epistemic authority to judge this incident? I mean, do female, feminist teachers have any special standpoint to judge this incident as violence?

Alex: Yes, well, the thing is the teachers asked students for their responses, as I mentioned; and what the students said was telling. The students insisted on 'there being a time and place for everything; whereby 'breastwork' should be done at home, in private and only 'headwork' in public. They did not realize that even people who think of themselves as emancipated and enlightened still subscribe to and comply with – and even seek to enforce – norms that can be oppressive.

And, YES, I think the teachers had a special perspective the students lacked, while they also realized the extent to which they themselves had been complicit in the oppression of women in academia; playing by the rules, using neutral language to describe the academic norms that work against female academics as merely 'symbolic violence' as opposed to 'violence.'⁶ And so, I believe that it made sense to do this experiment as a way of teaching by transgressing.

⁴ Young (1990): 128-129.

⁵ See: Gallop (1995): 87.

⁶ Davidson & Langan (2006) 449.

Dani: I like the teaching by transgressing approach. In one of my courses, I ask students to do a breaching experiment. After some hesitation and complaints that this assignment doesn't comply with the Education and Examination Regulations, they realize it's a really good way of testing their understanding of how social norms, the grammar of society, work. Sadly, that course doesn't exist anymore.

Yet, now I have two questions about this breastfeeding case. How are the norms on breastfeeding 'oppressive' exactly? I think students have been silly, but not oppressive or violent in any way. It's unfair to victims of actual violence and oppression to use these terms so loosely and inappropriately.

Alex: The authors, if I recall correctly, even claim that 'violence is actually gendered, and the extent of violence against women is minimized, extenuated, and subtly exercised, even in the ivory tower.'⁷

Dani: I'm not sure I agree with this claim; but how do *you* understand *oppression* and *gendered violence*?

Alex: As a form of oppression, in Iris Young's sense.⁸ Saying that 'if a child is still on the breast, then the teacher should still be at home' is a way of maintaining that any woman must behave like a man when teaching. So, breastfeeding is not allowed: they enforce the unwritten rule by protesting her action and criticizing her. And really, they do have power over her: if these students complain, it will have a negative effect on her career. The fact others have this form of power means they can keep women who breastfeed out of the public eye while breastfeeding. So, it feeds oppression not only in the form of violence, but in the form of marginalisation, too: a woman who wants to feed her child cannot be a useful contributor to society – at least not in the relevant sense of doing paid work.⁹ Plus, by enforcing the rule, they also do

⁷ Davidson & Langan (2006): 440.

⁸ Young (1988); also relevant: Frye (1983): Ch. 1.

⁹ Young (1990): 53-55.

not allow room for questioning that breastfeeding and teaching cannot go together. So, it is also powerlessness that results: the rules cannot be changed – except by transgression.

Dani: Even assuming there's no good reason to comply with that rule, I still don't see the violence, or oppression. Young says violence means 'the members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person...'¹⁰ The incident we're talking about doesn't involve any of this. I appreciate our students can have a lot of power – the 'customers' are always right, after all. But they didn't attack or physically threaten anybody.

Alex: Well, an attack on a person does not have to be physical. The norm against breastfeeding in public has been internalized. Fear of violence is what keeps it in place – even if some believe they want to keep it for reasons of privacy, one may wonder what that privacy is for. I see the norm's existence as a way to domesticate women: women should care for children in silence and at home. Young also says that what enables actual physical violence as a form of oppression is any behaviour that is perceived as a threat to the identity of a dominant social group. She actually includes as forms of violence: 'harassment, intimidation or ridicule, simply for the purpose of degrading, humiliating, or stigmatizing group members', because of 'the social context surrounding them.'¹¹

Dani: I see. So it seems Young came to develop her views somewhat differently from the way she first expressed them... But, if you are right, why is there this norm proscribing breastfeeding while lecturing in academia? What

¹⁰ Young (1988): 278.

¹¹ Young (1990): 61.

does it mean that violating that norm threatens the identity of a dominant social group?

Alex: It means it challenges their 'basic security system.'¹²

Dani: Couldn't it be some students were breastfeeding mothers themselves, and they felt uncomfortable, because the lecturer violated a norm shared by most mothers concerning how to breastfeed with care? If that's the case, then this incident actually shows disagreement within the same social group. No identity threat; just identity re-negotiation.

Alex: Well, there is no claim here that all women view the norm as oppressive: instead, the idea is that the norm exists, that it *is* oppressive and hard to challenge. To say that the norm is what women themselves want to have in place is a similar line of reasoning to the idea that many women want privacy when feeding their child. There are two readings of this line, I believe: one is normative and one is descriptive. Descriptively, what these mothers want depends on an internalized norm.

Dani: That might or might not be the case. So, what?

Alex: Hang on. According to the normative reading, women *should* want the norm in place, or *should* want privacy when feeding. But that is basically to restate the norm.

Dani: Not sure it's merely a restatement, but what about the idea that *that* would be a form of 'gendered violence'?

Alex: Well any kind of protest that basically shows a woman is a *persona non grata* for not behaving according to certain societal norms, the norms of the dominant social group, is a threat of violence. Young is right to insist, I think, that violence includes threats and criticisms that are personally targeted against those who deviate by those who have more power (including those who have

¹² Young (1990): 133.

internalized the norms set by those in power): these threats are not empty threats, in a society where gendered violence is widespread.

Dani: I really think *violence* is most aptly applied to attacks involving physical harm or intending to cause physical harm. There must be some plausible threat of physical attack.

Alex: But how do you call threats, on twitter for example, that feminists of various convictions and backgrounds regularly receive? Such tweets threaten with violence.

Dani: Well, feminism is not homogeneous. Recently, I saw many nasty tweets directed at feminists from other feminists. Anyhow, violence and threats of violence are just two very different things. I would call twitter threats just 'twitter threats', probably coming from some keyboard warrior.

Alex: Aha okay, well this may relate to the point you raised with the question of a privileged perspective. Violence is not to be limited – in my view – to physical attacks. The fear of them, so any threats and all threatening behaviour, falls under the scope of that form of oppression that I call 'violence.' This fear constrains, binds, and alters what a woman can do.

Dani: That applies not just to women.

Alex: Yeah, but what I was going to say – I am not just a woman reading this work. I am a teacher. And I still breastfeed. It means I do have a perspective on this that is somewhat different from the students', or yours... Because you do not know how difficult it is to ensure that breastfeeding goes well. It's not the case that a woman can just skip a few feeds or so.

Dani: Do you mean that some feminist standpoint is privileged¹³ over others when it comes to know certain facts, like whether or not the breastfeeding incident involves a form of violence?

¹³ Especially important to this discussion are: Harding (1987); Fox Keller (1984); Hartsock (1983); Haack (1993).

Alex: I have never liked the idea of a privileged perspective. But we all have different life experiences, and the knowledge we have largely derives from life experiences. I needed to learn a lot about breastfeeding in order to acquire the skill and to breastfeed successfully: the process is not at all straightforward and natural, which is how it is presented. I needed knowledge, from a book which a friend sent to me, which I now have. I know that others lack that knowledge.

Dani: Okay, so, the idea is that it is experiences, and – I would also add – one’s sources of testimony, that define somebody’s standpoint: moms have a distinctive outlook on this breastfeeding incident, because their experiences and sources are different from those of people who have no experience of breastfeeding, or no relevant sources of testimony. So, it’s not that everyone who is, in some sense, ‘socially oppressed’ or who endorses some feminist views, has a better understanding of this breastfeeding case. And it’s not the case that all breastfeeding mothers must have the same understanding of this case either.

Alex: Exactly. I know how many social rules I should not break when it comes to breastfeeding, and how hard it is to make breastfeeding work (given social pressures not to and the lack of information in society). But even so, the case has made me realise, too, that for as long as these social norms go unquestioned, I don’t even realise their existence. The breastfeeding incident shows this invisible web of mutual expectations in a vivid way. I would never have thought of breastfeeding while teaching, even as I have breastfed in cafes and on the train. That is funny, right. Breastfeeding while sitting in a café and chatting with a friend is okay, but breastfeeding while teaching or at my open space office desk is a no-go; no way I would have considered it!

Dani: Yeah, we agree on this. So, there’s nothing special in what is called ‘standpoint epistemology’. It is just an empiricist epistemology: people with more experience of a phenomenon and more exposure to relevant sources will

know more, or with more confidence, about it than those with less experience or no sources – given they take the time and effort to reason about their relevant experiences and pay attention to the evidence they have about the phenomenon. For example, if some women are more exposed to sexual assault than other individuals, then, all else equal, they'll be epistemically privileged when it comes to the phenomenon of sexual assault. And the breastfeeding case is another example where some female teachers, those with enough experience and evidence, will know better.

Alex: Yes, we agree. What is interesting is the idea that some perspective is privileged, the idea that some knowledge may be harder to acquire for those who dominate, can help to empower those who think they are utterly powerless. One reason is that part of their powerlessness is that their experiences and testimonies are not entering into the mainstream body of knowledge. The epistemic authority of people from marginalised groups is often dismissed just on the basis of their social identity, which is one main form of what Miranda Fricker labels an *epistemic injustice*.¹⁴

Dani: So, Alex do you think you're going to do something similar in your course?

Alex: Yes, I would like to... I know I can do it. I have breastfed while correcting essays too... so, I know headwork and breastwork are compatible. But I am afraid. It takes guts to do something like that.

Dani: Do you think you may get into trouble? That somebody will report you?

Alex: Yes, that's my fear. I feel strongly about the cause and its pedagogical value. The current norms mean one must choose between breastfeeding (being at home) and working.

¹⁴ Fricker (2007).

Dani: Well, perhaps more lactation booths should be introduced in public places, including classrooms, or perhaps we should just ignore students' infantile complaints?

Alex: 'Nursing mothers' rooms' may not be a good response. I also feel strongly about ensuring women are not unjustly treated in academia; breastfeeding is not a choice the brunt of which is fully an individual woman's to bear.

Dani: What do you mean? Better support, in whatever form, for families and mothers doesn't seem like a bad idea... But perhaps there are disagreements on the best policies within the group of breastfeeding mothers.

Alex: Well, I don't believe there is any such group.

Dani: There are associations, forums, and support groups, of and for breastfeeding mothers... and in some countries special policies for them too.

Alex: Okay, even if there is a social group of breastfeeding mothers, there are always divisions, like you suggested. If anything was learned from feminists and their successes, and failures too, it is that no one person, and also no one group of women can speak for all others; it would be to reduce all experiences to one. But there is actually some unison about women not being penalised for their choices.

Dani: Okay, so, again, why do you want to do this breaching experiment?

Alex: More and more often, women make it to the higher, even the highest ranks in academia. And yet there is no real challenge to the biases and policies that keep the existent structures in place. Clearly, to achieve more diversity, things have to change in these patriarchal institutions.

Dani: Sorry to interrupt, but I don't think the goal should be to achieve more diversity. That's a red herring... The goal should be to achieve more social justice, and individual liberty too.

Alex: Well, we're talking about women in academia now. What has to change is not just breastfeeding policies. It's about different expectations about roles and careers in academia. Women should claim their space there, especially since women have been stereotyped as irrational and intellectually inferior, which the lack of female professors tends to reinforce. There is still no equal representation in many fields that require 'headwork', because of women's role at home. Here in the Netherlands, it is normal for women to work part-time. One may wonder why: what do they do there? Well, actually, breastfeeding is one of these things; it may explain why Dutch women tend to argue against the 'breastfeeding mafia'. In my experience, it is hard to continue with breastfeeding if one does not work part-time; while, if one manages to continue with it, expressing milk at work, it likely comes at a cost of one's productive output: the legally allowed time spent expressing milk at work cannot be compensated, because one is also feeding the baby in the evenings and at night, unless one gets compensation in terms of research time. So, it is actually quite a warped situation for women who want to continue making an (academic) career that breastfeeding must be done in a way that nobody sees it *or should hear about it*. That breastfeeding is to be done but breasts must be hidden is one of the many contradictions of the female experience.¹⁵

Dani: I think I appreciate what you mean. I see that the breastfeeding case can be an instance in a wider pattern of differential treatment in academia. I certainly agree there is some pattern, and there should be much better family-friendly policies for academics here and elsewhere. I wouldn't put too much weight, however, on stereotypes about irrationality, and inferiority when it comes to structural change aimed at justice.

Alex: Think about this. The oldest university in the Netherlands was founded in 1575. But universities in the Netherlands became open to women in 1876.

¹⁵ Bueskens (2015): 205.

Women took care of the household, and this was viewed as an obstacle to their participation in intellectual activities. That most women did not do intellectual work was reinforcing a view that they were also incapable of doing it; not naturally endowed with the capacities – or even the right moral sense to judge matters fairly! Anyway, I trust you know all that.

Dani: I have some knowledge about women in academia. But taking care of the household involves intellectual skills and ‘headwork’ too.

Alex: Okay, but that is another discussion; housework continues to be undervalued and non-remunerated. The point I am raising is just that breastfeeding continues to be something women have to compromise in order to make it to the work floor, while for as long as they breastfeed, they are domesticated once again. What is interesting, and helpful, too, I find, is that the authors of the paper note that breastfeeding while teaching challenges the dichotomous distinction between mind and body.

Dani: Ah that’s interesting. What do they say exactly about that?

Alex: For as long as a woman is associated with flesh and blood, being often objectified, seen and judged by her body, she seems out of place in an environment that is associated with ideas of purity, intellectual activity, where one is to perform a job that requires thinking, a ‘head job’.

Dani: A ‘head job’...?!

Alex: Yes, the authors make this point that the Thinker – Le Penseur – the sculpture by Auguste Rodin, currently symbolises the ideal of academic philosophy. It is an image of cold stone, and the head is emphasized. It is a male, too, of course.

Dani: That sculpture was initially named The Poet... It was part of doorway surround called The Gates of Hell.

Alex: Anyway, as I see it, one very interesting thing is that when breastfeeding, the body takes over some of the thinking. It synchronises perfectly with the

baby's needs: what, when, and how much to feed is being regulated – the milk even changes along with the stages of development. So, as I see it, the body is itself a thinking thing! This idea runs up against what I think is the view of a majority of philosophers of mind and students, but it may help to show that there's really no need to deny that I can think with my head while my body feeds the baby, almost automatically.

Dani: Yeah, it's a bit like being high, just on oxytocin. The point about flesh being bound up with mind is an important one.¹⁶ And I think breastfeeding-and-teaching may be a good case for illustrating how the dynamics between our brains, bodies and what's beyond our skin can shape our mental activity. I should tell you that as a researcher interested in mind-body relationships, I am always mindful that body shapes, skin colours, sexual preferences and gender identities, physical abilities, socio-economic conditions, influence how we learn and value stuff. I'd be curious about how breastfeeding might make a difference to mental activities like teaching and learning.

Alex: One of the points I really want to make, which is why I care deeply, is that when my body is 'allowed to think', I am saved a lot of effort of thinking with my head. That is to say: pumping milk in order to feed your baby while you are at work means a lot of mental effort goes into worrying and being frustrated. Worrying about pumping on time and pumping enough; being frustrated with how little milk one expresses or how one's research can lag behind... I would have to expend none of that energy, if I could feed the baby while working or at work.

Dani: That puts into perspective the sorts of challenges involved in this 'incident'. But now I am asking myself another question, if one can learn to breastfeed... I mean, can it become an effortless, skillful activity over time, with

¹⁶ Especially important to this discussion are: Varela, Thompson, & Rosch (1991); Clark (1998); Shapiro (2019).

practice? Something like walking or cycling become skillful activities that require minimal cognitive effort with time and practice?

Alex: Yes, very much so. Once you and the baby have acquired the skill, you have one hand free to eat, read, write, phone or work. Multitasking is something one quickly learns, because feeds regularly last twenty minutes, but can last a lot longer. In fact, once the baby can hold its head, he or she...

Dani: ... or they...

Alex: ... or they find the breast on their own; all that is needed is that you provide access and that the baby is close enough to your body. The baby can also be in a carrier, which allows one to walk around.

Do realise, though, that when you breastfeed a child, and especially when you pump milk, it is literally taking energy and all the best nutrients from the body. So, it makes one tired. If the baby is close, the warmth means that the loss of energy is partially compensated for. It is also why pumping milk is harder; the body may not give any milk or as much milk as when a baby is suckling: the baby is the best pump.

Dani: Okay, I see.

Alex: Formula is more the norm now than before. It is actually the highly educated and privileged who manage to breastfeed despite work – or who can take a few more months off work to breastfeed for some longer. Many women stop well before the recommended six months, let alone that they breastfeed the baby for the first two years in which it is possible to do so.

Dani: Okay – I did not know that. In any case, what do you plan to do with this class? Did you get any input from colleagues?

Alex: Yes. So, when I read the paper, one question of particular importance to me, too, was this: did the guest lecturer show her breasts while she fed the five-month-old baby, or did she feed it discretely?

Dani: Do you think that should make any difference, whatever 'discretely' means?

Alex: Discretely, as in: not showing the breast, nipple, head of the baby.

Dani: So, discretely as in... hiding.

Alex: I sent a general message to colleagues 'Hey folks, I found a really interesting study,' describing the breastfeeding incident and what it could teach us about breaking taboos in academia. In that message, I didn't mention whether the breastfeeding 'incident' had happened discretely. I admit that I didn't want to comment on that aspect, perhaps prudishly, or maybe I didn't want it to matter.

Dani: What did they reply?

Alex: Well, an otherwise active WhatsApp group went all quiet for days. What happened, after a day or so is that the only heterosexual male left the app-group. Without an explanation. He just left.

Dani: He might have had 'breastfeeding envy'. Fathers should demand breastfeeding rights too...

Alex: Hahaha, oh well, who knows. See, it is OKAY to leave the group if you get too many messages that are a distraction. But, like a female colleague said when I asked her in person: the fact that he left confirms the point that this topic is a taboo in academia.

Dani: Yes, it seems so. Or, at least, he did not think the subject deserves any attention.

Alex: Yes, regrettably that might be it. And to be fair that thought enangers me, because viewing it as 'a women's issue' sustains male ignorance and privilege. But, then, the other colleagues did not respond either. My female colleague said that she had not responded to my message, because she didn't know how discrete the breastfeeding had been.

Dani: She could have asked that question, if she cared.

Alex: Yes, but I understand her hesitation. Even asking the question is problematic, because there is that unease to accommodate sexuality in academia – as well as a tendency to sexualise female bodies, as we discussed. At any rate, her openness to me when we talked face-to-face proves that people do think it is relevant whether or not a mother exposes her body, shows her breasts, when she breastfeeds.

Dani: Perhaps, teachers should ask if it's okay they breastfeed before breastfeeding. You know, sometimes I clip my nails in my office, and I floss too. But I ask for permission to the people around first. Maybe some folks find that 'inappropriate', for whatever reason.

Alex: So, indeed, one might wonder why the teachers did not simply ask the class in advance whether breastfeeding in class was okay with them.

Dani: On the other hand, I can see how asking for permission defies the point of teaching by transgression. That takes an actual breach, a 'showing by doing'.

Alex: Yes, that is probably it. Asking for permission would lead to a discussion and that would stand in the way of the norm being breached. It would also make the students the authority on what a female lecturer may do or may not do, which I guess is what they wanted to move away from.

Dani: Oh well, what I take away from the 'breastfeeding incident' is that our background schemas and beliefs – our situation, the perspective through which we understand the world and people around us – are heavily shaped by experience, and experience can vary markedly between people. Think of experiencing a world without social media or without a smart phone.

Alex: Yes, that was our point about situated epistemology.

Dani: So, if someone says something or behaves in a certain way that appears wrong or ignorant or misguided or offensive to me, what they say and do may actually be sensible given their experiences and backgrounds. It seems to me

that incidents like the one you've been describing often involve a failure of perspective-taking, on all sides.

Alex: Yes. That's right. I could understand the silence, even if it also outraged me. But the radical perspective-taking approach can mean one takes the side of the party that is dominant, ignorant, and dominant because of their ignorance, as well as ignorant because of their dominance...

Dani: No need to take sides. The point of perspective-taking is not to agree with the other person either. The point is to gain some understanding of where one is coming from. Every time we do our best to appreciate the point of view of other people, we demonstrate to them that we take them seriously, that we are in good faith, and that their views won't be taken out of context or misinterpreted.

Alex: Yes. I have experienced, though, that when we discussed feminist issues, some of the white male students in class claimed that they were oppressed.

Dani: Well, that would be a good opportunity for some radical perspective-taking, given that many other groups claim to be oppressed, but only some actually are, perhaps unbeknownst to the loud students in your class.

Alex: So, yes, if that works that would be great. But, in politically charged discussions it is really hard to avoid the trap of a blame game. To me it seems so obvious that being privileged comes with some special responsibility, but that it doesn't – in itself - make others think of one as a bad person; one does not need to endorse oppressive norms or structures. But students find it hard to admit that some of the norms that they endorse are oppressive or part of an oppressive structure... So, the radical perspective-taking approach may be a good option, when people respect everyone's views from the outset, but I'd like to combine it with a 'breaching approach'.

Dani: Well, that would be a wonderful idea. I'd say go ahead and breastfeed away.

Alex: Yes, I'm considering that. I should do so while I still can... Thanks!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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