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## **Sociology of the Body—Teaching Embodied Approach through Autoethnography**

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**Abstract** The article presents and discusses the way of teaching sociology of the body whose aim is to allow students to become familiar with embodied methodology and make them methodologically sensitive. The research tasks given to the students are based on analytic autoethnography which influences the students' methodological development. Examples of the students' works are presented and discussed, particularly in terms of the advantages they might bring in the educational process and difficulties that they may cause to both the student and the teacher. As the most valuable benefits deriving from this way of teaching the authors indicate: raising methodological sensitivity, the ability to link embodied experience and knowledge with theoretical concepts, self-understanding in terms of social processes, but also putting into practice the perspective of embodiment in the social sciences. The courses of the sociology of the body in Poland and their status at Polish universities are presented as the context. The authors claim that the skills learnt during this course are crucial for students of sociology and for their methodological competencies, not only in the field of sociology of the body.

**Keywords** Sociology of the Body; Teaching Research Methods; Autoethnography; Embodied Approach

“**T**he somatic turn” in sociology can be observed not only in the sociological fields of interests and theoretical dimensions, but also in the discipline’s methodology. As a result, the embodied approach has been developed in the last few years. This approach can be understood as “an orientation to research that reveals the significance of maintaining an awareness of the em-

bodied aspects within any form of investigation in order to reveal questions that can be explained through theory (or theories) considered appropriate” (Wellard 2015:197-198). Following Wacquant (2011) and his understanding of body as both a tool and a research subject, we want to consider “embodied approach” as a methodological perspective that, on the one hand, is focused on embodiment

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and its experience (embodied experiences as a research subject) and, on the other hand, on body as a tool of sociological exploration which allows the gathering of data on these aspects of social life that go beyond verbal cognition.

In Poland, students of sociology have several courses related to methodology and research methods. They usually have separate courses on quantitative and qualitative methods and a course whose aim is to prepare and conduct a research project. The courses of qualitative methods are dominated by “external,” disembodied techniques and methods of data collection, such as interviews, external observation, and discourse (or content) analysis. The awareness and significance of embodiment in the research process is not taught during these courses,

in spite of the increasing number of publications on body and embodiment in sociology.

The skills related to embodied approach can and should be learnt, as we argue in this paper, during courses of sociology of the body. Their aim should not only be a presentation of the most important social theories and an analysis of body images, but also the teaching of research methods which allows the students to become more reflexive towards their own and the respondents’ embodiment during the research process. Therefore, the article is focused on the methodological dimension of the courses of the sociology of the body and the students’ research tasks. Its aim is to show how students can be taught the embodied approach by conducting their own autoethnographical studies,

during which one's body is used as both a research tool and a site of inquiry.

The article starts with a brief description of teaching sociology of the body in Poland. In the following part, it presents the research tasks, that is, conducting autoethnography, proposed by the first author to her students. Then, examples of the students' works are presented and discussed, particularly in terms of the possible ethical, analytical, technical, and methodological difficulties they may cause to both the student and the teacher. The last part puts emphasis on the usefulness of this way of teaching in terms of a student's methodological knowledge and research practice.

### **Sociology of the Body Courses in Poland**

In the last few years, growing interest on the body within Polish sociology can be observed, which is confirmed by a significantly larger number of publications on different aspects of the body/embodiment, conferences, and theses (Jakubowska 2012). On the one hand, there is a significant number of quantitative studies on physical appearance or physical activities, but, on the other hand, the number of qualitative studies is growing and they concern such different aspects as, for example, dance (Byczkowska 2009; 2012), disability (Kowal 2012; Niedbalski 2015), prostitution (Ślęzak 2012; Wojciechowska 2015), yoga practice (Konecki 2016), climbing (Kacperczyk 2016), female sport (Jakubowska 2014), and tacit knowledge (Jakubowska 2017). Polish sociologists who choose the body and embodiment as their main research area have become recently interested in sharing

their knowledge and introduced courses of sociology of the body at Polish universities.

The courses of the sociology of the body are taught at several Polish universities. In the academic year of 2015/2016, they were offered to sociology students at four universities (Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, University of Lodz, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, and University of Gdańsk). These courses are not obligatory for all students and have an elective character. This means that they can be chosen by students among other lectures that are offered by particular institutes (in Lodz and Torun) or take place only in the frameworks of a particular specialization or teaching module. In Poznan, they are taught in the framework of the culture studies module, and in Gdansk in the framework of sociology and anthropology of culture. They take on the form of lectures and seminars and consist of 15 or 30 hours. However, some issues related to the body appear during other courses offered to sociology students, such as gender studies, sociology of medicine, social psychology, or sociology of sport, although very often these courses are also elective.

The syllabi of sociology of the body courses are based on "classical" theories related to the body, which present it as a subject of discipline practices, stigmatization, body as capital, source of individual and collective identity, et cetera. As a consequence, they reproduce, to a large extent, both during classes and via exams, a perception of the body through discourse and representation. Significantly more rarely are these courses focused on embodiment, make students familiar with the

phenomenological approach, and raise issues such as embodied experiences, embodied knowledge, or perception of the body as both a research topic and a tool (Wacquant 2011).

In the teaching of embodied approach, it is substantial to deliver the relationship between understanding of embodied self and understanding of other people and their (bodily) experiences. In this context, it should be mentioned that sociology of the body is taught mainly by the younger generation of academics, and usually by female lecturers. One can indicate several factors that explain the domination of young female researchers-lecturers. First, the younger generation is more interested in the sociology of everyday life, microsociology, and the “new” subdisciplines related to them, such as sociology of the body, but also sociology of emotions, leisure studies, sociology of sport, et cetera. Second, sociology of the body/embodiment is closely related to feminism and gender studies, which are also dominated by young female researchers. Third, one should also mention personal reasons, for example, the fact of being pregnant that changes the female researcher’s perspective on seeing and experiencing the body or the growing popularity of semi-professional sport activity (serious leisure).

This domination of young female scientists, as we supposed, can influence a way of teaching embodied approach and the manner in which the students describe their embodied experiences. Both of the authors belong to the category described above and share, to a large extent, similar teaching experiences. However, we are convinced that

it would be valuable to collect the experiences of other lecturers (men, people of different ages, etc.) in further studies when discussing the ways, possibilities, and constraints in teaching embodied approach.

In the following part, courses conducted by the first author will be described and discussed. These courses, focused on embodiment and methodology, are presented as a way of teaching sociology of the body and embodiment whose aim is to give students the possibility of becoming familiar with embodied approach in social research.

### **Sociology, Body, and Dance—The Methodological Practice**

To describe the course of Sociology of the Body (and the related Dance and Body—Sociological Perspective), some of the most important features need to be presented. At the University of Lodz, Faculty of Economics and Sociology, this course is elective and consists of 15 hours of exercises. First, it was held during the IV and later III year of sociology in a group of circa 20 students. Classes are held in Polish. During the classes the students discuss texts on sociology of the body/embodiment which include both classic and less popular articles on theory and research in this area. Active participation in classes and reading the texts is the basis for a positive mark at the end of the semester. The student may choose to complete a methodological task in order to receive the highest mark.

During the course, the students receive a lecture on the qualitative methods such as interview,

observation, visual data, and analytic autoethnography<sup>1</sup> (hereinafter referred to as AA, which will be explained in the subsequent section).

In 2010, the first author conducted classes for her students on the “Dance and Body—Sociological Perspective.” The course presented the most significant, both classic and modern, sociological concepts concerning the body and methodological problems in embodiment research (also concerning dance). Students were offered a lesson of a belly dance (where the first author was the teacher, having practiced the genre for 5 years at that time). They could, but were not obliged to, prepare an autoethnographic report on this experience. Among the fifteen students who participated in this exercise, the majority of them were female; there were only two men. The lesson took place in a dance hall equipped with large mirrors, which are very useful when teaching or learning dance. The group had a short warm up, then exercised belly dance steps and moves, and at the end of the lesson they did some stretching. After this lesson the students had two weeks to hand in their reports from this autoethnographic exercise. In later years, during the “Sociology of the Body” course, students were supposed to choose either an interview or autoethnography on any chosen topic concerning embodied experiences.

### The Analytic Autoethnography

The method that the first author proposed to her students to get familiar with embodied approach

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<sup>1</sup> The students had various methodological courses earlier in the curriculum. The lecture is only supposed to explain the specificity of use of qualitative methods in embodiment research.

was autoethnography. Its main characteristic is that the researcher acts as an element of the phenomenon being researched, sometimes the main one (Wall 2008:39). It focuses on understanding oneself instead of or additionally understanding others (Gobo 2008:62-63). As the method itself has various versions and definitions (Denzin 1972), it is important to clarify the exact type of autoethnography that is taught and used during the course. Leon Anderson (2006:373-378) distinguishes two kinds of autoethnography. The first one, referred to as *evocative autoethnography*, is rooted in the postmodern tradition and requires mainly a description of the researcher’s own experiences and feelings. The second type, *analytic autoethnography*, is rooted in the ethnographic tradition (Anderson 2006:373). During the classes, the analytic version has been introduced, due to its ethnographic roots and its correspondence with qualitative methods presented in the lecture.

Autoethnography has been chosen as the most appropriate technique to teach the students on embodied methodology, as it makes use of the researcher’s body in the most profound and sensible way. One of the crucial issues in autoethnography is its emphasis on the researcher’s body. Although it is not possible to exclude the researcher’s body from the research process, in autoethnography, the body is located in its center, which is particularly visible in the studies focused on skills acquisition, for example, in the fields of sport (Downey 2005; Allen-Collinson 2008; Stephens and Delamont 2009). A researcher gathers data through and in the body, but also describes his/her own embodiment experiences. There are many examples of AA studies in

the field of embodiment approach. These concern medical procedures (Hoffman-Riem 1994), therapeutic relations with one's body (Lussier-Ley 2010), ballroom dancing (Picard 2002), or adoption issues (Wall 2008). One of the most popular examples of research on dance and embodiment is Carol Rambo Ronai's strip dance study. The researcher was an erotic dancer herself, analyzed the data collected in the interviews with other dancers, and wrote down field notes.

During the courses with students, the most important features of AA, presented below, are lectured on and later discussed. The discussion is based on a few articles concerning the use of AA in embodiment research, the teacher's practice, and the students' own methodological experiences derived from the use of other methods.

The first feature is complete member researcher (hereinafter referred to as CMR) status (see also: Rambo Ronai 1992:310), which means that the researcher must be a full member of the group under study. Analytic reflexivity is the second important feature of a well-conducted AA. It implies the researcher's awareness of his/her relatedness to the research field, to the phenomenon, and to the group under study. The researcher is able to understand the experiences and actions of others because he/she is a part of them. The third feature, narrative visibility of the researcher's self, is considered necessary because data generated using this method have a great influence on the researcher's self. The fourth feature, dialogue with informants beyond the self, points to another feature of AA (Anderson 2006:386), namely, the data are only a set of the re-

searcher's impressions, but the researcher can reach outside his/her own self, which makes the results more possible to extrapolate on the experiences of other actors. In autoethnography, a researcher combines field notes with "headnotes" (Sanjek 1990), that is, being engaged in the studied practices, he/she describes subjective experiences and the experiences of other social actors. Commitment to theoretical analysis (Anderson 2006:378) is the fifth feature of AA. It is important to bear in mind our main aim, which is gaining scientific knowledge and analyzing the data in order to construct a theory and understand the phenomenon researched as thoroughly as possible.

Autoethnography as a technique roots a researcher in the bodily experience of a social action or phenomenon. As presented above, these bodily aspects of embodiment take various forms and refer to numerous research areas, as any human activity is embodied.

### Examples of the Students' Autoethnographies

This section consists of samples of the students' work. We decided to include only some parts of their transcriptions to present different topics. We chose work which presents deep sociological (self) understanding, a good research workshop, and ethical sensitivity. All authors agreed to publicize their work anonymously. The citations from the AA reports are an example of what students may learn about embodied approach in its two dimensions that have been distinguished. First, as the cited data illustrate, it gives a large amount of information

about embodiment. Second, it reveals the body roles in the research process. In the beginning of each section, there is a whole citation from the student’s autoethnography, to present the described situation, the student’s way of expressing. It is followed by a table, depicting three elements: an analytical code, a fragment of the citation, and autoethnographic skill represented by the student.

### Autoethnography after Group Belly Dance

#### Class 1

Distraction—observing my own body in the mirror and the effort to concentrate on exercising positions in a proper way. I think none of the steps was executed properly. Embarrassing movements which made me concentrate on the parts of my body which I mostly refuse to accept, that is, breasts, thighs, butt.

Finally, I tied my sweatshirt around my hips to cover my backside.

Looking for an ally in my friend (joking, laughing, commenting) to reduce the tension and show a false distance to my body and figure.

Lack of control over my body. I tried to copy a pose that was showed, but unsuccessfully. I felt pain in my arms.

Feeling jelly-like when shaking my hips, I stopped very quickly. I was very ashamed observing myself in the mirror.

Bum warm-up I exercised this way for the first time, I was astonished that one can exercise the body this way. [June 2010, 3rd-year female student who had never tried a belly dance before]

**Table 1. Analysis of Autoethnography after group belly dance class 1.**

	Codes	Citation	Autoethnographic skill
1.	social actors’ attitudes towards their own body, followed by emotions	<i>Embarrassing movements which made me concentrate on the parts of my body which I mostly refuse to accept, that is, breasts, thighs, butt.</i>	self-perception visibility of self in the narration
2.	embodied strategies of coping with certain problems; shame due to exhibiting one’s body	<i>Finally, I tied my sweatshirt around my hips to cover my backside.</i>	visibility of self in the narration
3.	embodied strategies of coping with certain problems	<i>Looking for an ally in my friend (joking, laughing, commenting) to reduce the tension and show a false distance to my body and figure.</i>	becoming aware of own emotions and practices dialogue with informants beyond self
4.	comparison to other bodies or a hypothetically perfect body	<i>Lack of control over my body. I tried to copy a pose that was showed, but unsuccessfully. I felt pain in my arms.</i>	analytic reflexivity
5.	lack of acceptance of one’s own body	<i>Feeling jelly-like when shaking my hips. I stopped very quickly. I was very ashamed observing myself in the mirror.</i>	becoming aware and description of self-perspective
6.	discovering new ways to use one’s body	<i>Bum warm-up I exercised this way for the first time, I was astonished that one can exercise the body this way.</i>	visibility of self in the narration

## Autoethnography 1

It was my fate, one of those “things” I have inherited from my mother, the only one I’m not happy with is migraine headaches. Anyone who has ever had to deal with migraine headaches knows that this is not just “bam!” and suddenly your head hurts. It is often accompanied by other ailments, after which it is easy to see what is evolving. In my case, the ailment that precedes a migraine are vision problems and photophobia. This time too. The strange feeling of haze and fatigue in my eyes signaled to me that in the coming days it would not be too interesting [recognition of bodily signals]. In the course of preparations for Christmas, I tried to ignore problems with my sight and focus on what I was doing because this is often my way of coping with various ailments, just to be occupied with something else and not think about it.

However, this did not last long because of this distinct one-sided headache. First, it is a fairly moderate pain which generally allows one to function normally, only later does it begin to “play out.” And that’s what part of my yesterday was like. Fighting and trying to ignore the initial pain. Later it was worse, the pain, as my mom says, “fired up.” I wanted to curl up into a ball and not move. I was irritated by the light, all the more distinct sounds, and the slightest movement of my head caused an irritating and characteristic pulsation of pain on one side of my head, specifically on my forehead. With all this pain I always have this strange feeling that all of one side of my face is becoming sore. At the worst moment the migraine made me nauseous. And so, I sat there and suffered until the evening. Curled up in a ball, under the blanket, trying not to move. [December 2012, 3rd-year sociology female student, migraine experience]

**Table 2. Analysis of Autoethnography 1.**

	Code	Citation	Autoethnographic skill
1.	referring to other persons’ bodily experiences, socially shared knowledge	<i>Anyone who has ever had to deal with migraine headaches knows that this is not just “bam!” and suddenly your head hurts.</i>	analytic reflexivity complete member researcher
2.	recognition of bodily signals	<i>It is often accompanied by other ailments, after which it is easy to see what is evolving.</i>	self-consciousness and self-knowledge
3.	embodiment management; distancing oneself from the body	<i>In the course of preparations for Christmas, I tried to ignore problems with my sight and focus on what I was doing because this is often my way of coping with various ailments, just to be occupied with something else and not think about it.</i>	visibility of self in the narration
4.	socialization of bodily experience	<i>Later it was worse, the pain, as my mom says, “fired up.”</i>	dialogue with informants beyond self
5.	embodiment management	<i>And so I sat there and suffered until the evening. Curled up in a ball, under the blanket, trying not to move.</i>	complete member researcher

## Autoethnography 2

The selection was made based on the question, “What I don’t want to do the most?” The answer was “dance,” which, in my opinion, represents what I am the worst at: movement, spontaneity, energy. Of course, such associations have been worked out in the course of quite a number of “slips” associated with dance rehearsals in the past. Dancing in the company of others requires giving up control of the situation, “rejection of the reins,” and simply having fun. Self-distance seems to me to be crucial here. Feelings that immediately handicap my dancing attempts are shame and fear. The excessive fear of ridicule and impeded ability to “relax” result from being a textbook example of a person suffering from

ACoA<sup>2</sup> (confirmed by a therapist). It may be that it was an attempt to “relax,” try a momentary, drastic change in the perception of myself, and my body in particular. The session was conducted for 5 songs with the lowest difficulty level. I decided on the lowest of the three possible difficulty levels because I was aware of being a bad dancer and perhaps not fully aware at the time of the choice, hoping to “cope” with the task and consequently experience a positive change in perceiving my own motor abilities. By the start of the song I had automatically begun to move, as if communicating to my body that “we will be dancing now.” [January 2013, 3rd-year sociology male student, the “Just Dance” game on the Wii platform]

<sup>2</sup> Adult Child of Alcoholic.

**Table 3. Analysis of Autoethnography 2.**

	Code	Citation	Autoethnographic skill
1.	recalling past bodily skills	<i>“dance,” which, in my opinion, represents what I am the worst at: movement, spontaneity, energy. Of course, such associations have been worked out in the course of quite a number of “slips” associated with dance rehearsals in the past.</i>	self-perception and self-knowledge
2.	attitude towards their own body, followed by emotions	<i>Dancing in the company of others requires giving up control of the situation, “rejection of the reins,” and simply having fun. Self-distance seems to me to be crucial here. Feelings that immediately handicap my dancing attempts are shame and fear.</i>	analytic reflexivity
3.	change in perception of the body	<i>It may be that it was an attempt to “relax,” try a momentary, drastic change in the perception of myself, and my body in particular.</i>	self-observation
4.	perception of bodily abilities	<i>I decided on the lowest of the three possible difficulty levels because I was aware of being a bad dancer...</i>	visibility of self in the narration self-knowledge
5.	communication with own body	<i>By the start of the song I had automatically begun to move, as if communicating to my body that “we will be dancing now.”</i>	visibility of self in the narration

The examples taken from the students' notes reveal a wide range of issues related to body and embodied experiences. One can observe that appeals to social norms concerning the body appear in the texts, along with embodied strategies of coping with certain problems, issues of shame and shyness concerning bodily issues or socialization as a process of gaining a perspective on one's own body perception. They also present some of the actions taken because of these experiences and, what is important, they show the causes and effects. The language is also important, as it shows emotions, restraint towards one's own body, and lack of control.

Thanks to the conducted autoethnography, a student has the possibility of observing and feeling one's own body and embodied experiences. In this process, they learn in practice what it means to use one's body as a research tool. The body which remains "absent" (Leder 1990) during everyday life becomes visible and situated in the center of the research process. Moreover, the students have to overcome the constraints related to the non-verbal, tacit nature of embodied experiences (Jakubowska 2017) during the process of taking notes.

The aim of the students' task is also to make them aware that each individual body as a research tool has its opportunities, special abilities, and limitations. For example, researchers' inability to swim may affect his or her research on water sports, poor musical hearing may be a disadvantage when conducting research on dancers or musicians. On the contrary, if the researcher practices a certain activity like sport, art, et cetera, they may have embodied knowledge and experience in the subject, which

will, in an obvious manner, influence the outcomes of the study. If one is aware of these aspects of their body, and does not treat it like if it were just an "invisible" or "objective" tool, they may search for some research and analytic solutions.

Apart from methodological knowledge, the value of self-discovery is another benefit that comes from the students' assignment. The task to observe oneself causes the bodily experience to be verbalized and thought through, which makes it less obvious and more prior to change or active acceptance in one's private life. Understanding own and other people's embodied experience (along the lines of Rambo Ronai's research [Rambo Ronai and Ellis 1989; Rambo Ronai 1992; Rambo Ronai and Cross 1998; Rambo, Presley, and Mynatt 2006]) is very important in the educational process of all social science students, thus autoethnographic exercises<sup>3</sup> were usually used in the courses that the first author taught.

The autoethnographic task stimulates students to conduct self-reflection and also sensitizes them to become a "research participant," thus increasing sociological ethical awareness. This is important in many fields of sociological activity, not only in research situations or scientific work. It is our deepest conviction that our work, that is, as academics who shape our students' ways of thinking, is not only to teach the technical issues (such as conducting interviews, observations, surveys), but also to shape their ethical perspectives as researchers,

<sup>3</sup> Autoethnographic exercises are not referred to as autoethnography because the students are usually not complete member researchers and they use this method only once during the course.

HR managers, social workers, or whoever they decide to become after graduation. We hand them the tools of researching and understanding social behavior, so we should also give them the necessary ethical tools, which sometimes may mean excluding them from their comfort zone.

The ethical challenges during these courses are a crucial matter, due to a sensitive character of the subject, touching personal experiences. Occasionally, students come through difficult emotions, even bursting into tears when realizing the difficulty of living with a certain body condition. When this happens, the teacher always serves with time to talk personally with the student.

Another question that we could add to the list is establishing proper and fair criteria of evaluation. The work of the students is usually quite personal and sometimes reveals more or less intimate information about the student. Therefore, the work is not presented in the classroom, even anonymously, as usually the classes are up to twenty students and some topics could be easily related to a particular person.

Also, as we have mentioned before, the methodological assignment is voluntary, and only for students who want to get the highest mark. It is therefore important to find a balance between the objectivity of the theoretical and methodological requirements towards the assignment and the sensitivity of the student when analyzing the embodied experience. The evaluation criteria which the first author has established are: open-mindedness, methodological skills (e.g., posing questions), analytical thinking, and the logic of narration (in case of AA).

The next step (done during the next course) in teaching sociology of the body and research methods should be an analysis of the collected material which will teach distancing oneself from the gathered data, changing one's perception of one's own experiences (from personal to analytical), theoretical thinking about the described phenomena, et cetera.

## Conclusion

The concept of teaching sociology of the body as presented above fits into the theoretical and empirical changes that have taken place within this subdiscipline. First, it is rather focused on embodiment and embodied experience than on body representation and surveillance, which is visible also in the used research technique. Second, the representatives of the social sciences have become increasingly more interested in the body as a source of knowledge and as a tool of its acquisition, which can be observed, among others, by more common use of the notions such as "embodied knowledge," "bodily knowledge," or "somatic knowledge" (Parviainen and Aromaa 2017). And, third, the domination of the phenomenological approach has influenced research methodology (Jakubowska 2017). The majority of studies are based on ethnographic methods, which consist of different types of observations (including video observations), qualitative interviews, and, increasingly more often, apprenticeship (Downey, Dalidowicz, and Manson 2015) and autoethnography (Anderson 2006; Ellis and Bochner 2006). One of the crucial aspects of the last two methods is their emphasis on the researcher's body which fits into the methodological embod-

ied approach. In AA, the same person is being researched on and is the researcher, he/she gathers data through and in the body, but also describes his/her own embodiment experiences. This entails new challenges towards self-understanding and self-analysis in terms of one's own corporeality and social relations.

The way to teach sociology of the body as we have proposed not only fits into the current scientific trends, but has a number of advantages for the students. First, it teaches the role and influence of a researcher's body in the research process. Second, it demonstrates one's body as a tool of investigation

and of inquiry. Third, it draws attention to everyday habitual embodied experiences that remain, to a large extent, non-verbalized. Fourth, it makes one sensitive to ethical issues such as taboo topics, difficulty of verbalization of certain issues, respect to any bodily differences, et cetera. We are convinced that the skills that students learn during the courses of sociology of the body are useful not only in this area of research, but also allow to develop many competencies and make them better researchers in general. Moreover, this way of teaching sociology of the body, that as subdiscipline paradoxically has remained "disembodied," allows the moving of it towards its embodiment.

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