

Combatting Sexual Harassment in the Field Is Fundamental to the Research Enterprise

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Field research, defined as “leaving one’s home institution in order to acquire data, information, or insights that significantly inform one’s research” (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015, 1), is a beneficial research practice. It also is a practice with significant safety risks, including sexual harassment, that can undermine the research process and harm researchers. Thus, combatting sexual harassment in the field is fundamental to maintaining the integrity of the research enterprise.

Sexual harassment is “gender harassment,” including verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are hostile or exclusionary toward an individual based on gender; “unwanted sexual attention,” which includes verbal and physical sexual advances, rape, and requests for sexual favors; and “sexual coercion” in which opportunities are linked to sexual activity (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine 2018, 2). The scope of sexual harassment in the field includes harassment that occurs while conducting the research itself (e.g., during interviews), as well as in the broader field environment (e.g., on public transportation).

Political scientists have dedicated limited attention to sexual harassment in the field. The most prominent textbook on field research in political science does not explicitly mention sexual harassment in the field (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015). The American Political Science Association (APSA) *A Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science* (APSA Committee on Professional Ethics, Rights and Freedoms 2022) discusses sexual harassment but fails to address specifically the issue within the context of field research.

Furthermore, at universities, sexual harassment in the field frequently is given short shrift. Field research often is ignored by university policy or perceived as outside of the university’s purview (The Fieldwork Initiative 2020). This is problematic because a *field setting is a work setting*.

This article begins with a brief examination of what scholars know about sexual harassment in the field. I then argue that the concept of research integrity should include attention to sexual harassment, and I explain why this is particularly important for field research. Next, I discuss how conceptualizing sexual harassment in the field as a research-integrity issue allows us

to identify key stakeholders and to propose steps that they can take to combat harassment and support victims. The article concludes with a brief summary.

First, however, I describe my own positionality. I have significant administrative experience at a US university. I have served as a department head, director of a policy institute, and co-director of diversity and culture of inclusion for a large-scale engineering research center. My knowledge on sexual harassment in the field stems from seeking information on how to combat the phenomenon; no training was ever provided as part of my administrative duties. As department head, I was unprepared when a graduate student recounted her experience with sexual assault during international fieldwork. My background makes me attuned to the need for policies, training, and trip-specific preparation to help researchers lower the risk of sexual harassment, address it if it does occur, and support the victims of harassment.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE FIELD

Field research often is a risky endeavor. It can place researchers in unfamiliar, remote, and isolated situations (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015) and make them highly dependent on others—including gatekeepers, informants, and team members—to carry out their study (Hanson and Richards 2017; Woodgate et al. 2018). In many cases, norms, rules, and conditions will differ from a researcher’s typical academic setting (Gluckman 2018; Woodgate et al. 2018). For example, a researcher who was conducting team-based fieldwork described how deeply team members were interconnected by explaining that they “built up relationships and learned about one another through living together, eating together, collecting data, conducting research, and during our free time” (Zanotti and Marion Suseeya 2020, 976). In some instances, field researchers may not have independent access to communications or the ability to leave a site, and they may be dependent on gatekeepers for food, transportation, and emergency services (Berkeley PATH to Care Center 2020; Woodgate et al. 2018).

Although to my knowledge there are no data on the prevalence of sexual harassment in the field using representative samples of field researchers, opt-in surveys (Clancy et al.

2014) and scholars' own harrowing firsthand accounts provide evidence that sexual harassment occurs with some frequency in the field. Scholars have documented that dangers can occur at any moment, including entering a home-based field site (Clark and Grant 2015); conducting interviews (Sharabi 2020; Sharp and Kremer 2006); gaining access and building partnerships with gatekeepers (Hunt 2022; Moreno 1995; Mügge 2013; Schneider 2020; Schneider, Lord, and Wilczak 2021); interacting with informants and participants (Johnson 2009; Ross 2015) or their friends (Huang 2016); and being in public spaces (Hunt 2022).

Scholars also have documented that sexual harassment in the field can happen to anyone and everyone. Clancy et al.'s (2014) survey demonstrated that women scholars, especially women trainees, were most likely to report experiencing sexual harassment in the field—yet, no one is immune. Sharabi's (2020) account of being propositioned by a high-status, male interviewee while conducting ethnographic research in India reminds us that men can be sexually harassed. He was shocked at the time of the incident and felt fear when the harasser texted him later asking where he was staying and when they could meet again. A researcher's race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, disability, gender identity, and/or religion may raise additional obstacles (or advantages) depending on conditions in the field (Demery and Pipkin 2021; Ragen 2017; Townsend Bell 2009). It is important to note that it is the particular context that ultimately matters because those who might be at increased risk of sexual harassment varies based on the field site and societal power dynamics (Demery and Pipkin 2021; Kloß 2017).

In short, research on sexual harassment in the field demonstrates that it is a "ubiquitous problem" (Woodgate et al.

health, willingness to remain in the profession, and—ultimately—the entirety of the research enterprise (also see Brown 2019; Hunt 2022; Nelson et al. 2017).

Consider the negative impact when researchers' productivity declines or they are driven systematically from the profession due to sexual harassment. Whose voices are not at the table, and with what personal, societal, and scientific impact? When scholars—disproportionately women scholars—experience sexual harassment, it affects "researchers, research products, and the research environment" (Benya 2019, 56).

Also consider how men's careers can benefit from the sexual harassment of women. From the elimination of competition for men (whether or not they are harassers) to the decrease in harassers' workload when women students avoid the scholar, Mansfield et al. (2019) described how men's success is predicated on the abuse of women. APSA has documented the underrepresentation of women—especially women of color—in the discipline and shown that they are even more underrepresented at the full professor level (APSA Task Force 2022). Sexual harassment likely contributes to this attrition.

Conceptualizing sexual harassment as an issue that undermines the research enterprise helps us to think broadly about how to address it. It is an issue about and for which all of us as researchers should care, take responsibility, and be held accountable. This research-integrity approach should hold for how we combat sexual harassment generally at universities and in the discipline. It is especially important for how we address sexual harassment in the field because field-based harassment often is perceived to be a phenomenon outside of the work setting and therefore rarely addressed by curriculum, training, and policies. Sexual harassment in the field is a

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2018, 6) with a detrimental impact on the research process and the researchers. For that reason, combatting sexual harassment in the field should be considered fundamental to the research enterprise and therefore understood as an issue of research integrity.

REDEFINING RESEARCH INTEGRITY

Research integrity is concerned with research misconduct, such as plagiarism and the falsification or fabrication of data, and detrimental research practices, such as exploitative supervisors or abusive publication practices (Benya 2019). Universities require researchers to participate in training to ensure research integrity and to have bureaucracy in place to enforce regulations (Benya 2019). Sexual harassment, however, generally is not addressed in definitions of research integrity. Benya (2019) convincingly argued that sexual harassment should be considered a detrimental research practice because it negatively affects researchers' productivity, mental and physical

largely invisible topic (Kloß 2017) and will remain a threat to the research enterprise unless changes are made to treat field sites as potentially high-risk workplaces.

HOW STAKEHOLDERS CAN COMBAT SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN FIELDWORK

After scholars have conceptualized sexual harassment in the field as a research-integrity issue, we can identify the stakeholders who should take steps to combat it and support the victims. These stakeholders include universities, funding agencies, department chairs, advisors, project leaders, instructors, individual scholars, and professional associations. Viewing sexual harassment in the field as a phenomenon that fundamentally affects the research enterprise requires an "all-hands-on-deck" approach to addressing it through institutional policies, training, and trip-specific preparation.

Universities have a responsibility to develop universal field-site principles and protocols (Schneider 2020). These

policies will establish an institutional culture that is avowedly anti-harassment and can act as the base on which individual researchers or project team leaders can build for their unique field setting. These policies should articulate how to report sexual harassment in the field and the resources that are available to support survivors.

A report by the University of Washington is an excellent model (Woodgate et al. 2018). It emphasizes anti-harassment training, a common set of standards, field-specific planning, reporting structures, and resources for victims. The report also emphasizes the importance of considering the relationship and balance of power between the victim and the harasser, including whether the individuals are from different institutions, whether the harasser is someone outside of a university, and whether the harasser is a peer or senior to the victim. The University of California, Berkeley, also provides a helpful resource for thinking specifically about how to protect and empower students who are conducting team-based fieldwork (Berkeley PATH to Care Center 2020). It focuses on field placement, preparation, support for victims, and post-field debriefing.

Funding agencies also can have a role by requiring grantees to have protocols in place to lower the risk of sexual harassment (Rinkus et al. 2018). For example, funding agencies could require that fieldwork proposals include a safety plan (including what to do if sexual harassment occurs), a training plan given the risk level of the field site, and a field safety rights document (Berkeley PATH to Care Center 2020; Hanes and Walters n.d.; Walters and Bergstrom n.d.; Woodgate et al. 2018). Because funding agencies shape research norms and expectations, this would put pressure on laggard universities to establish appropriate policies.

In addition, funding agencies need to allow research-design modifications when scholars experience sexual harassment (Hunt 2022; Schneider 2020). Flexibility is imperative for prioritizing safety and ensuring that victims have sufficient time to receive appropriate care. Funding agencies also should value research designs that are attentive to combatting sexual harassment, such as protocols that include interviewing in pairs (Rinkus et al. 2018). It is important that funders award grants that cover expenses associated with safety protocols. For example, graduate students who are seeking funding to work on their dissertation should be supported in their request to pay staff to accompany them on interviews in high-risk situations.

As front-line administrators, department chairs are instrumental in ensuring that university policies are conveyed to project team leaders and advisors and implemented so that field sites have rules and consequences (Nelson et al. 2017). Interviews with field researchers revealed that sexual harassment was less likely to occur “when appropriate behavior was outlined, modeled, and enforced by senior members of the research team” (Nelson et al. 2017, 717). Even when they are not part of a team, researchers can minimize danger by developing clear safety protocols and having resources for support readily available.

Departments also are responsible for ensuring that appropriate curriculum is offered to graduate students. For example, training can be incorporated into methods coursework and

department leaders can work with supervisors and advisors to share information (e.g., online training materials) with students (see, e.g., The Fieldwork Initiative 2020 and UC Riverside Risk and Safety Training n.d.). Moreover, advisors and supervisors are responsible for their own training and for providing training that is tailored to specific field sites before their students and/or collaborators embark on research work. This is even more important for male supervisors who typically have no experience with sexual harassment and therefore may be unaware of the dangers that female researchers face (Clark and Grant 2015). Department chairs also should ensure that reporting mechanisms are understood by all field researchers. Department chairs have a key role in creating a trusting climate in which scholars know that reported incidents will be addressed appropriately with substantial post-trauma support and no victim blaming.

Project team leaders and advisors are responsible for establishing an anti-harassment culture and ensuring that researchers receive appropriate pre-fieldwork training (Colaninno et al. 2020). This training should include the development of detailed in-field protocols for addressing sexual harassment. Research teams can develop community principles that encourage scholars to assist one another and to speak up if a situation is going awry (Nelson et al. 2017). Principal investigators might require bystander training, for example, for anyone working at their field site (The Fieldwork Initiative 2020).

For those researchers who are entering the field alone, pre-fieldwork steps can be taken to learn the laws and norms regarding sexual harassment in international locations, to identify resources for support, and to understand the appropriate reporting structure if harassment occurs. Field researchers working with nonprofit organizations and community groups can develop a memorandum of understanding to establish expectations concerning professional behavior and to express commitment to anti-harassment principles (Berkeley PATH to Care Center 2020). “A Long Journey Home” guides provide a set of questions for safety planning (Hanes and Walters n.d.) and information on how faculty and mentors can support a student in crisis (Walters and Bergstrom n.d.). Once researchers are in the field, Hummel and El Kurd (2021) emphasize the importance of peer-support networks.

Advisors and project leaders must consider who is at heightened risk in a particular context and address those concerns through policy (Demery and Pipkin 2021). Training should include information to equip minority scholars who face added risks (Field Inclusive, Inc. n.d.). Advisors and project leaders who do not share the identities of those at increased risk are no less responsible for being aware of the dangers and creating an environment that reduces risk as much as possible.

More broadly, the training must be situated within a theoretical context that recognizes the role of gender, sexuality, intersectionality, and power in shaping researchers’ experiences (Schneider, Lord, and Wilczak 2021). Focusing on the mechanics of the training is insufficient. We must dismantle the myth that experiencing sexual harassment in the field is a

professional failure or a deficiency on the part of a researcher (Huang 2016; Hunt 2022; Ross 2015). Care should be taken to ensure that training is focused on eradicating harm and not simply an exercise in legal protection for the university and other entities. Moreover, it is critical that we press our institutions to address the broader phenomenon of patriarchy that results in the sexual harassment of women in the field and elsewhere.

Supervisors, administrators, and funding agencies must be prepared to respond appropriately when academics experience sexual harassment in the field. The University of Toronto Department of Anthropology (2019), for example, provides a guide that includes protocols to respond to incidents of harassment. To illustrate, principal investigators should pay for travel home if a team member is sexually harassed (University of Toronto Department of Anthropology 2019) and ensure that victims do not suffer retaliation for reporting it (Colaninno et al. 2020). Planning for the field should include a discussion of services for sexual harassment survivors, such as financial support for health care needs and research completion (Huang 2016).

Post-field debriefing should ensure that incidents of sexual harassment that were not immediately reported are identified and that the harm is addressed (Berkeley PATH to Care Center 2020)—assuming, of course, that victims are willing to report. Victims' autonomy should be respected if they do not want to report.¹ Victims are the best judge of the implications of reporting. They will bear the consequences, which can be especially detrimental when the perpetrator has a powerful position in the discipline or is their advisor.

It is challenging for universities to support victims who do not report sexual harassment. One way to support these scholars is for professional organizations (e.g., APSA) to establish a fund to assist victims of sexual harassment in the field. This would allow the victims to seek support outside of the university context for medical care, travel, and other expenses.

A research-integrity approach allows us to envision how various stakeholders can take responsibility for creating the best possible scenarios to reduce sexual harassment in the field. Explicit knowledge and clear guidelines will construct a culture that lessens the risk of sexual harassment (Colaninno et al. 2020; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine 2018; Nelson et al. 2017). Moreover, frank discussions about sexual harassment empower researchers to confront, address, and report it, and they provide women the opportunity to “share strategies, celebrate our agency, and ultimately enhance our abilities to navigate these challenges” (Ross 2015, 184). Training also reduces the anxiety of going into a field site (Clark and Grant 2015).

CONCLUSION

Some scholars may think that the time, effort, and bureaucracy involved with training, formal protocols, and reporting structures—not to mention the resources needed to create safer field sites and support victims—may hinder research productivity. The question, however, becomes: Whose productivity? If we understand sexual harassment in the field as a research-

integrity issue, then we must recognize that it has an unacceptable negative impact on careers and research outputs.

In summary, sexual harassment in the field is detrimental to research and researchers, especially women scholars. I recommend treating sexual harassment in the field as an issue of research integrity. This conceptualization requires all of us as scholars to have a role in combatting sexual harassment and providing post-trauma support and to demand that institutions do the same. To combat sexual harassment in the field, many stakeholders—universities, funding agencies, department chairs, advisors, project leaders, instructors, individual scholars, and professional associations—have a responsibility to ensure safe workplaces and an obligation to provide support when the worst does occur.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTE

1. In the US context, mandatory reporters are required to report incidents of sexual harassment to their university's Title IX office. If victims do not want to participate in the ensuing Title IX process, they should not be pressured to do so.

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