PROFESSION SYMPOSIUM

On Research Ethics and Ethical Responsibilities: Facing Up to Sexual Harassment and Assault During Field Research

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What are the ethical responsibilities that social science researchers have, not only to the people we study but also to ourselves as scholars and other scholars? This article argues that as political and social scientists, we need to expand our notion of research ethics, to adopt a notion that embraces treatment of our subject–participants and ourselves as researchers. This study is anchored in the still-growing literature on research ethics in fieldwork and draws on political science work on the ethical implications of the risks and realities of sexual violence for scholars who conduct fieldwork. The article looks beyond political science to feminist-informed research in the social sciences as it develops the argument about the ethical responsibilities of social scientists. In investigating the overarching question, the article addresses resources for survivors of sexual harassment and assault during field research.

Three clarifications are in order before proceeding. First, I acknowledge that scholars conduct varied types of research beyond their home institution and adopt varied methods in doing so. Moreover, such variations in fieldwork influence scholars' and subject–participants' power and vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, these subtleties do not affect this argument. It is crucial to reflect broadly, as I do here, on ethical responsibilities in social science research beyond home institutions.

Second, I address an expansive readership composed of political scientists who do and do not conduct field research, who are women, scholars of color, and other minoritized scholars, as well as gender-conforming men, and who are at multiple career stages. I recognize that those engaged in fieldwork are both junior and senior scholars. Although I speak to graduate students and other junior scholars, I also direct the study to those with power in the discipline. I use this phrase as a shorthand, umbrella term for senior scholars within departments including chairs, directors of graduate study, mentors, and dissertation advisors, and—beyond departments—those who contribute to decisions about research funding and to leading the profession. Along with the diverse readership comes a unified message: as social scientists, we should act on ethical responsibilities; however, precisely what we do varies with our position.

The third clarification follows naturally from the second and centers on responsibilities that differ with positions. Senior scholars share responsibility for training junior colleagues and, for example, debriefing them after fieldwork. Senior scholars share the responsibility for peer mentoring so that, for instance, they should debrief senior colleagues after fieldwork. Lines of accountability reach beyond the department and university levels so that, for example, journal editors and leaders in professional associations provide guidance on ethics (American Political Science Association 2020; *American Political Science Review* 2021).

The first section of this article examines recent scholarship on research ethics in fieldwork, which extends beyond the long-standing conception that research ethics are focused on the rights, welfare, and privacy of "human subjects" in human research. That first section develops the study's argument about the ethical responsibilities that we as researchers have to ourselves, which distill to—in a word—self-reflection. In the second section, I turn more specifically to the novel literature that focuses on those who conduct research, including their exposure to and experience of sexual violence in fieldwork. The second section builds on the first to elaborate the argument that advisors, graduate programs, mentors, and others with power in the profession have ethical responsibilities to disseminate knowledge about resources for all researchers who experience trauma in the field. Third, guided by the study's expanded notion of research ethics, I identify resources for researchers who survive sexual harassment and assault in the field. As part of that discussion, I argue that those who train colleagues to engage in field research have ethical responsibilities to debrief all researchers—not only those who risk or survive sexual violence in the field—as they move toward completion of their research. Accordingly, I provide examples of resources for debriefing. The last section integrates the study's implications.

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THE NEW SCHOLARSHIP ON RESEARCH ETHICS IN AND BEYOND THE FIELD

The enduring conception of the rights, welfare, and privacy of subjects in "human subjects" research remains the basis for national-level policy in the United States and the delegation of implementation of that policy to university-level Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2008). A novel literature on ethics in field research moves beyond attention to the human research participants to consider the humans who are conducting the research (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Howe 2022; Hunt 2022; Kapiszewski and Wood 2022; Kaplan, Kuhnt, and Steinert 2020; Knott 2019; Krystalli 2021; Shesterinina 2019; Simic 2017; Skjelsbæk 2018; Wood 2006). Work in this new subfield conveys a range of recurring themes, of which I focus on four.

First, reframing the previous statement, standard understandings of ethics in human subjects research as embodied in IRB processes and approval do not suffice for social science field research. Of course, researchers have an ethical responsibility to consider the rights of and the potential for risk, harm, and trauma for their subject–participants. I follow Ackerly and True (2019, 29) in using the term "subject–participant" to emphasize that the people we study are crucial to "helping us define our question, to create the data, and to analyze that data." As researchers weigh ethics and ethical responsibilities in interacting with subject–participants, they also must weigh those responsibilities for themselves and other scholars as researchers.

Second, and related, social scientists of all types—not only those who conduct fieldwork—should interrogate ethics and ethical responsibilities. Responsibilities for ethics, moreover, are ongoing and do not cease with the end of the research phase per se (American Political Science Association 2020; *American Political Science Review* 2021; Fujii 2012).

A third theme in this literature concerns the special challenges of fieldwork in conflict and postconflict settings. As Wood (2006, 373) contended, "[T]he ethical imperative of research ('do no harm') is intensified in conflict zones by political polarization, the presence of armed actors, the precarious security of most residents, the general unpredictability of events, and the traumatization through violence of combatants and civilians alike" (cf., e.g., Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018).

Fourth, not only in conflict and postconflict contexts, the relational nature of research with subject–participants means that "the researcher's exposure to trauma…may make them more likely to expose participants to higher degrees of harm" (Knott 2019, 142). Indeed, "trauma-informed research methodologies" have developed (Howe 2022, 363, *passim*), which are designed to safeguard both subject–participants and people conducting research.

Together, these themes form the basis for the argument that, as political and social scientists, we need to adopt an expanded notion of research ethics, one that embraces treatment of our subject–participants along with reflections about ourselves as researchers. I contend that our ethical responsibilities as researchers in and beyond the field entail the practice of *self-reflection*, as emphasized in feminist-informed research (Ackerly and True 2008, 695; Ackerly and True 2019). As we engage in self-reflection, we should reflect on our identity as a researcher, recognizing the power dynamics at play as we interact with subject–participants. To record our self-reflection over time in the field, we should maintain an informal diary or journal in which we ponder what seems to work and not work as we interact with our subject–participants and to generate knowledge about them and our research questions (Browne and Moffett 2014; Ross 2015). We should use the diary to reflect on difficult experiences in fieldwork, including forms of trauma, and on what we might do to reach out to advisors and mentors for counsel.

THE NEW SCHOLARSHIP ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE FIELD

Recent literature is related to and stems from the novel scholarship on ethics in field research, focusing on sexual harassment and assault in the field (Anonymous Forthcoming A, B; Hanson and Richards 2017; Howe 2022; Hunt 2022; Kloß 2017; Krystalli 2021; Shesterinina 2019; Simic 2017; Skjelsbæk 2018). I focus on a few recurring themes and use them to articulate this argument.

First, studies show that women scholars experience pervasive sexual harassment and assault in the field. For instance, Hunt (2022, 331) cited a study documenting that almost one third of female members of the American Society of Criminology experienced sexual harassment during fieldwork. These patterns align with what we know about, for example, experiences of sexual harassment at American Political Science Association (APSA) annual meetings (Sapiro and Campbell 2018). There is reason to believe that others who likely face relatively high risk of trauma in the field include Black, Indigenous, and people of color scholars; scholars with disabilities; gender nonconforming scholars; nonbinary scholars; and other members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, and diverse gender/sexual identity community. However, empirical research should be done to enlarge the evidentiary basis for this assertion.

Second, this pattern means that the conduct of field research and relationships with subject–participants are gendered in ways that women, nonbinary, and other minoritized scholars often cannot escape and that gender-conforming men often do not have to contemplate (see, e.g., Hanson and Richards 2017, among many others). Again, and related, profoundly unequal power dynamics mark the research that we as social scientists conduct in and beyond the field (Ackerly and True 2019; Mershon and Walsh 2016).

Third, because women, nonbinary, and other minoritized scholars are more likely than gender-conforming men to encounter sexual violence in their professional lives, and because field research is inescapably gendered and defined by power dynamics, "having open conversations about experiences with sexual violence is not only necessary to help better prepare female [and all] researchers for the field but also to confront still latent masculinist tendencies in the ways in

which methods and methodological strategies are conceived, practiced, written about, and esteemed" (Ross 2015, 181).

These recurring themes culminate in this study's argument that those with power in the profession, including advisors, graduate programs, mentors, and mentoring programs, share the responsibilities to furnish guidance on ethical issues in conducting research with subject–participants (American Political Science Association 2020, 17, 20; *American Political Science Review* 2021, vi). As part of that guidance, we share the responsibilities to *disseminate* knowledge about resources available before and during fieldwork that might prevent sexual violence and other forms of trauma (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Hunt 2022). The following section identifies resources.

RESOURCES FOR SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN FIELDWORK

The identification and use of resources can begin before departure for the field and continue while researchers are in the field and after their return. The largest anti-sexual violence organization in the United States, Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN 2022), provides trained support specialists via a 24/7 hotline and online chat. RAINN offers an online curated collection of resources for survivors of sexual abuse. Also in the United States, the National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC 2022) provides resources for survivors as well as their allies, advocates, families, and friends. It promotes research on sexual violence, and its website contains a searchable library on sexual violence, prevention, and related topics. The MeToo Movement (2022) has a range of resources, including its online curated resource library. The NO MORE Global Directory is "a first-of-its-kind, comprehensive international directory of domestic violence and sexual assault resources in every UN-recognized country and territory in the world.…It is intended to serve as a global hub of information and resources for victims and their loved ones" (NO MORE 2022). The NO MORE Foundation, in turn, is "dedicated to ending domestic violence and sexual assault by increasing awareness, inspiring action, and fueling culture change" (NO MORE 2022).

Some resources focus on the experience of US citizens or researchers outside of the United States. Pathways to Safety International (2022) is directed to all US citizens living, working, or traveling abroad who have survived sexual violence. The organization seeks to assist, advocate for, and empower survivors of sexual violence. Speaking specifically to the scholarly community, the Fieldwork Initiative (2022) offers articles on sexual harassment in fieldwork; organizes events such as an online conversation on "Welfare in Fieldwork" with its founder; maintains an updated (as of 2021) listing of handbooks; hosted a two-day online workshop on "Preventing Harassment in Science"; and recounts a series of "Field Stories" on its Facebook page. In addition, the Fieldwork Initiative provides training in which participants learn how to develop strategies to minimize potentially dangerous situations in the field; it emphasizes that researchers are never to blame or at fault for violence or threats of violence. In yet another effort, the Fieldwork Initiative administers the private networking group on Facebook, "Women* in the Field."[1] The "Get Help Now!" page lists its WhatsApp number, urges visitors to send a direct message on the Facebook page, and invites comments in the private Women* in the Field group. The Fieldwork Initiative also runs a @MeTooFieldwork Twitter feed.

Aware of such resources for survivors of sexual violence in and beyond fieldwork, senior scholars have ethical responsibilities to *debrief* all researchers returning from the field regardless of, for example, fieldwork duration, methods adopted, researcher rank, researcher demographics, or a high-risk site classification (Hunt 2022; Ross 2015).[2] As senior researchers conduct peer mentoring and researchers at multiple career stages seek to debrief colleagues returning from the field, they can consult resources offered by professional associations (American Political Science Association 2023; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine 2023); journal editors (*American Political Science Review* 2021); and contributions to this symposium (Anonymous Forthcoming B). All researchers need post-fieldwork (or post-research-intensive phase) debriefings in which they can discuss resources to help them readjust to university rhythms, organize and conduct data analysis, plan and draft write-ups, and so forth. These debriefings should aim to respond to trauma experienced during research. Therefore, as part of the debriefings, all researchers should receive listings of local mental health professionals that they might consult confidentially if needed. For instance, the listings could include a university's employee-assistance program, if one exists.

Advisors, mentors, graduate programs, and other senior scholars within and beyond departments have the ethical obligation to disseminate knowledge about the resources available to researchers and to prevent sexual violence and other forms of trauma while conducting research. Senior scholars, moreover, have ethical responsibilities to debrief all scholars to respond to those who risk and survive trauma in research.

IN PLACE OF CONCLUSIONS

As I was writing this article, I thought about my experience of secondhand trauma in my dissertation fieldwork. In that research, conducted decades ago, I discovered in a few interviews that respondents had endured daily threats to their lives from people in their workplace who belonged to a terrorist cell. I remember my shock when they told me of the threats and

their efforts to counter the threats, for instance, by changing their commute to work every day. I do not remember any specific responses I made to their revelations. I do know that, privately—while I was still in the field but after some time had passed (a few days or a week perhaps)—I thought that their experience, although extreme, made sense. This occurred during a phase of heightened terrorist activity in Italy. I had started conducting interviews soon after the Red Brigades had kidnapped a US general and Italian and US special forces had rescued the general. My respondents had experienced trauma given their proximity to the terrorist cell, its activity, and its threats against them. I had experienced secondhand trauma.

My direct experience of research-related trauma occurred when I was raped toward the end of my 13 months of dissertation fieldwork. I needed a long time to process, even acknowledge, what had happened. I believed I could not talk to anyone about the rape. Eventually—a long time afterward—I received professional help for survivors of post-traumatic stress disorder. Even after that, I waited many years to reveal to members of our profession that I had survived rape as part of dissertation fieldwork (Moyer and Mershon 2021). I exemplified the common self-silencing of a professional who survives sexual violence: I long used self-silencing as a mechanism to avoid anticipated blaming, shaming, and other types of denigration from other professionals (Hunt 2022).

I now deliberately describe myself as a survivor (not a victim!) of rape to try to express the agency, courage, strength, resilience, and dignity of anyone who endures that form of violence. As a survivor, I have ethical responsibilities toward myself and others. I aim to put those responsibilities into practice by contributing to this symposium and by seeking to expand ongoing conversations about the risks and realities of sexual violence borne by marginalized colleagues in our scholarly community.

As researchers, we face many and varied ethical dilemmas during our fieldwork and during our career. In recognizing the risk and incidence of sexual violence for minoritized scholars, what ethical responsibilities do we have? In recognizing that they differ with our position, I identify three major responsibilities. I argue that all researchers, across positions, have the ethical responsibility to practice self-reflection, which leads to knowledge and action. In my case, as a senior scholar, I am aware of the resources for colleagues who have experienced sexual violence during fieldwork; therefore, I act by writing this article. I further argue that two central ethical responsibilities for senior scholars within and beyond departments are to disseminate and debrief. Advisors, mentors, graduate programs, and other senior scholars within and beyond departments have the ethical obligation to disseminate knowledge about the resources available to researchers and to prevent sexual violence and other forms of trauma while conducting research. Senior scholars, moreover, have ethical responsibilities to debrief all scholars to respond to those who risk and survive trauma in research. These three ethical responsibilities form the "through-line" for this article. By shouldering these responsibilities, we face up to sexual violence in research.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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

NOTES

1. The asterisk in the name of the networking group indicates the inclusion of nonbinary researchers.
2. I emphasize ethical responsibilities to debrief all researchers, not only those who survive trauma. Survivors should not somehow be "required" to publicize their experience, which could magnify and prolong the trauma already endured.

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