

Fieldwork Methods and Experiences of Sexual Harassment and Assault

Introduction: Sexual Harassment and Gender-Based Violence in Political Science Fieldwork

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Political scientists recently have taken great strides in addressing sexual harassment and assault in the discipline. Little has been said, however, about sexual violence that political scientists may confront during field research. Field research involves any data-collection activity that occurs away from a researcher's home institution, including visiting a prominent archive, interviewing political elites, and conducting direct observation of political phenomenon, and fieldwork is widely considered essential to data collection and career development across political science subfields. Field researchers may experience numerous power disparities that put them at acute risk for sexual or gender-based violence in the field, and evidence suggests that such experiences are pervasive and professionally devastating. In an effort to reduce gender-based violence and discrimination across academic worksites, several disciplines and institutions have developed specific guidelines and protocols to prevent and address sexual harassment and assault during fieldwork (Berkeley PATH to Care Center 2020; University of California, Riverside 2018; University of Toronto, Department of Anthropology 2019; Woodgate et al. 2018). Political scientists, however, have largely failed to conceptualize field placements as work settings or to address gender-based violence during fieldwork in our curriculum, training, and policies. Instead, they rely on deeply held methodological fallacies that insist on a field researcher's absolute privilege, trivialize experiences of sexual violence, and weaponize rape myths to portray survivors as professionally incompetent (Hunt 2022).

This symposium compiles the contributions of researchers who have engaged in fieldwork as well as administrators who have studied and developed policies to ameliorate sexual harassment and sexual violence in other academic work environments, such as the American Political Science Association (APSA) and university departments. Together, they describe the particular risks and conditions of political science fieldwork and explore how best to adapt insights and efforts in violence prevention from other spaces and disciplines to political science fieldwork. This symposium seeks to protect and advance pluralism among field researchers and the discipline at large by starting a broader conversation about sexual harassment and assault during fieldwork. It identifies sexual violence as part of a continuum of gender-based violence that begins before fieldwork and explores consequences of the discipline's toleration of pervasive gendered power inequities. The symposium contributors explore the practices and policies found in other disciplines to suggest ways to engender the systemic changes necessary to address sexual harassment and assault during political science fieldwork.

In her article, Carol Mershon argues that ethical responsibilities in the field extend beyond the rights, welfare, and privacy of human subjects protected by Institutional Review Boards to include ethical responsibilities to ourselves as field researchers and to other scholars. Mershon suggests that field researchers have an ethical responsibility to engage in actionable self-reflection, reflecting on identities and power dynamics in the field, recording self-reflection over time in a diary or journal, and using the diary to reflect on difficult experiences, including forms of trauma. She argues that field researchers also have the obligation to reach out to advisors and mentors for counsel and to take action when their intuition indicates that their safety in the field is jeopardized. This action might include contravening their ideal research design by avoiding contacts, altering research plans, and activating emergency protocols, and part of the power of Mershon's article is the way that she establishes personal safety as an ethical obligation above and beyond obligations to funders, institutions, and communities.

Actionable self-reflection also entails being honest and open about research-related trauma. Mershon argues that researchers have an ethical obligation to speak out about experiences of gender-based harassment in the field to destigmatize survivors. Doing so may help other researchers to avoid

trauma-related events during field research and to minimize their harm if they do occur, helping them to thrive personally and professionally despite obstacles in the field. In a novel turn, Mershon also identifies two ethical responsibilities that those with power in the profession (e.g., advisors, graduate programs, mentors, and mentoring programs) have to those with less power: (1) disseminate knowledge about the occurrence of sexual violence and resources available before and during fieldwork that might prevent it and other forms of trauma; and (2) debrief all returning field researchers and respond supportively to any research-related trauma that they

not consistently marginal: they likely helped the researchers secure interviews with political elites. Because of their age, caste, and gender, Malik and Roychowdhury were not perceived as a threat to older male political bosses and police officers. Their gender also likely helped them articulate their project and secure funding because men typically are reluctant to engage in research about sexual violence even with male perpetrators, thereby reducing competition. Additionally, both scholars were extraordinarily privileged: from elite, upper castes with prestigious external funding sources and access to material status symbols, foreign education, and diasporic

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may have experienced. In this sense, Mershon provides a radical and welcome departure from the victim blaming and rape myths that are still common in political science literature.

In their contribution, Aditi Malik and Poulami Roychowdhury describe the inadequacy of their fieldwork training that failed to prepare them for the intersectional gendered strategies—in this case, silence and interrogation—they faced as young, unmarried, upper-caste, and middle-class women trying to gather information from older male subjects, who often were interviewed in groups. In preparation for field research, Malik and Roychowdhury were given detailed advice about how to carefully sequence their interviews in order to earn the trust of male political elites by showing deference and respect to local hierarchies. They also took care to dress “traditionally” in an effort to avoid unwanted male attention. Nevertheless, in political party offices and other all-male communal spaces, Malik and Roychowdhury found that male respondents used gendered strategies to interrogate their trustworthiness, credibility, and qualifications, as well as to refuse to answer further questions about specific types of violence. These individuals who may have been complicit with or active in violence might well have avoided answering questions about their violent proclivities under any circumstances. Yet, these subjects’ reactions were specifically gendered in surprisingly intersectional ways, indicating that the researchers were violating appropriate gender roles, given their caste and unmarried status. Respondents invoked models of virtuous and respectable upper-caste, unmarried, affluent women to shame the researchers and flatly remind them that such questions disregarded intersectional norms of propriety based on their gender, caste, and marital status.

Malik and Roychowdhury found that their identities were not the basis for consistent privilege or marginalization. For example, being young, upper-caste women was the basis for men to block their research at times, but their identities were

communities that created, on the face of it, the singular unfettered access of the privileged elite. Yet, that same upper-caste, elite status that facilitated their advanced education provided the model of feminine respectability with which informants silenced them during interviews. After being questioned or silenced, Malik and Roychowdhury found limited success in reestablishing rapport by reverting to acceptable caste-gender roles by emphasizing their submissive status as young, naïve scholars merely trying to learn. Nevertheless, the mix of gender, caste, religion, age, marital status, and the wider context of political violence created fluctuating and gendered power dynamics for which they were unprepared. Malik and Roychowdhury suggest that graduate programs could improve how they prepare students to conduct fieldwork by addressing the pervasiveness of gender-based violence; the simultaneity and multiplicity of privilege and oppression; and the need for structural rather than individual solutions to identity-based obstacles to data collection.

Writing under a pseudonym because doing otherwise would jeopardize his ability to conduct future field research in Russia, Campbell M. Stevens speaks about his experience and the necessity of “field closeting” in order to conduct fieldwork in the Russian Federation as a gay man. In his article, Stevens presents a notion of field closeting that is informed by Sedgwick’s (2008) assertion that being gay requires a constant reevaluation of circumstances and relationships such that each new encounter necessitates a decision about if and how much of one’s identity to reveal in order to maximize safety and acceptance. Field closeting may entail refusing to disclose the existence of significant others, adopting salient heteronormative roles, changing social media profiles, and avoiding social events, depending on the micro-context. Unlike the colloquial binary of being either “in or out of the closet,” the field closet is endlessly adjustable, and Stevens describes the benefits, costs, and devastating uncertainty of constantly reassessing boundaries as a matter of personal safety.

Like Malik and Roychowdhury, Stevens is careful to note that he largely benefits from systems of privilege in his life as a cis-gendered white American male and that his fieldwork preparation trained him to anticipate benefiting from power dynamics in the field as a result. Indeed, male American scholars were a rare commodity in Russian regional capitals when he first arrived in 2013, and he quickly established a robust social network as other scholars in the field invited him to give public lectures, asked for his advice on grant and conference proposals, and sought his company. Yet, the passage of Russia's so-called gay propaganda law in 2013 marked a radical shift in both the legal and social landscape of his field site, necessitating the expansion of his field closet. Modeling the self-reflection advocated by Mershon, Stevens changed his research plan to focus on archival work and prominent regional elites rather than non-elites or public spaces that seemed less predictable and more uncertain under the circumstances. In early 2014, Russia annexed Crimea and his US nationality became an explicit liability. In a troubling yet fascinating geopolitical fusion of nationality and sexuality, sanctions levied by the United States against Russia increased distrust of Americans in an environment that already framed homosexuality as a tool of Western imperialism. Previously an asset, Stevens' Americanness had become a burden, and regional interlocutors stopped responding to his calls. Given the changing circumstances in the field, Mershon's actionable self-reflection might have helped, yet Stevens had few options other than completely truncating the study. He felt compelled, like so many of us, to go ahead with his research because he had received precious funding. In any case, he was loathe to sabotage his career by throwing away years of language study and preparation just when he was beginning his dissertation fieldwork.

Shortly after the annexation of Crimea, Stevens was attacked and beaten in the street by three young men. He did not file a police report and never discovered the identity of his attackers or their motive. The uncertainty left him painfully confused and disoriented as he questioned whether he had put himself and/or his study participants at undue risk. Unsure if he was attacked because he is American, gay, or some combination of the two, Stevens ultimately decided that the attack was random—although the unknowability undermined his confidence to ascertain the most basic risks in the field. The effects were both indelible and crushing. Always feeling unsafe, Stevens withdrew from all social activities, again reconfigured his project, finished a few interviews, and came back to the United States after only five of the 12 anticipated months of fieldwork.

Like Malik and Roychowdhury, Stevens adapted to the changing landscape by modifying his research design in the field several times. Yet, he concludes that—akin to women's attire—field closeting offers little more than “an illusion of control” over circumstances and power dynamics that are beyond any one individual's control. Ultimately, field closeting allowed Stevens to conduct field research that otherwise would have been impossible. As a discipline, we undeniably benefit from this diversity of voices and viewpoints in our

profession. Yet, field closeting also contributed to the creation of the illusion that his personal choices could protect him from harm while putting him in situations of considerable vulnerability that culminated in the attack. Moreover, it resulted in personal costs that no one should have to assume for their job when his partner of two years was unwilling to accompany him back into the closet.

In her article, Rosalee Clawson argues that we need to treat all field sites as potentially high-risk workplaces and that combatting sexual harassment during fieldwork should be considered a fundamental issue of research integrity. Research integrity is concerned with research misconduct including plagiarism or falsification of data and detrimental research practices such as exploitative supervisors or abusive publication practices. Universities require researchers to participate in training to ensure research integrity and to have bureaucracies in place to enforce regulations; however, for the most part, they do not currently extend to sexual harassment. Clawson argues that sexual harassment should be considered a detrimental research practice because it negatively affects researchers' productivity, mental and physical health, willingness to remain in the profession, and our collective research enterprise. She suggests specific ways that different stakeholders can remove the burden of safety from individual researchers by constructing universal protocols and anti-harassment climates.

Clawson, who has significant administrative experience, relates that she was unprepared when, as department head, a graduate student revealed that she had been sexually assaulted during international fieldwork. Despite her extensive administrative experience, Clawson had never received any relevant training on how to support this student. Like Mershon, Clawson emphasizes that we all must take responsibility and be held accountable for sexual harassment, wherever it occurs. She identifies the myriad steps that different stakeholders—including universities, funding agencies, department chairs, advisors, project leaders, instructors, individual scholars, and professional associations—must take to ensure research integrity. This includes establishing avowedly anti-harassment cultures and developing universal protocols that explain how to report sexual harassment in the field and provide resources for survivors.

According to Clawson, all universities should provide a general safety plan that stipulates what to do if sexual harassment occurs, including researchers' options for reporting, resources available, and their rights in the field. These protocols can then serve as a basis from which individual researchers build their own site-specific safety plan. Advisors, supervisors, and project leads are responsible for establishing an anti-harassment culture, which entails being trained themselves and ensuring that researchers receive appropriate pre-fieldwork training, including the development of detailed in-field protocols for addressing sexual harassment. Departments and instructors must adjust their graduate curriculum to specifically address the possibility of and prepare students to navigate gender-based violence in the field. They also should establish protocols for conducting post-field debriefings to ensure that

incidents of sexual harassment not immediately reported are identified and that any harm caused by them is addressed. Funding agencies must allow research design modifications, value research designs attentive to the potential for sexual harassment in the field, and cover expenses associated with safety protocols (e.g., paying for extra staff, appropriate housing, flexible travel plans, and research teams). A research-integrity approach envisions how each of the various stakeholders must take action to combat sexual harassment and support survivors of it. Like Mershon, however, Clawson also identifies the ethical imperative for researchers to speak out: “Frank discussions of sexual harassment empower researchers to confront, address, and report harassment” allowing them to “share strategies, celebrate our agency, and ultimately enhance our ability to navigate these challenges.”

Each contribution to this symposium forces us to reconceptualize power and privilege in both the field and the discipline, while also moving the burden for the prevention of gender-based and sexual violence from individuals to our collective profession. In a brilliant essay on the epidemic of prolonged sexual harassment of elite gymnasts by coaches and trainers, Novkov (2019) argues that decrying individual sexual predators as aberrant monsters is insufficient in preventing gender-based violence. Instead, she argues that we must explore the complex cultural and professional power dynamics that allow and normalize such violence by harnessing the deep-seated desires of highly driven young athletes to excel in an extraordinarily competitive environment. Novkov noted that this system that produces both great athletes and routine sexual predators is premised on physically separating young female athletes from their home and support groups, cultivating an undue dependence on their coaches and trainers, and embracing a professional culture that valorizes the routine denial of their physical and emotional needs. Young athletes are systematically required to ignore pain, discomfort, pleasure, and their own personal safety in the name of professional advancement. This creates a context in which sexual violence is one of many forms of exploitation that they must endure if they want to succeed.

Novkov’s argument is one of a continuum of violence. This concept was developed by Kelly (1988) to demonstrate how shocking and widely repudiated acts of violence against women are not individual pathologies but rather the natural outcome of commonplace and broadly accepted forms of patriarchy (e.g., male aggression and entitlement). In many ways, gender-based violence experienced during fieldwork is simply the natural outcome of ongoing and intersecting continuums of violence. Like elite gymnastics, both political science and the university system more generally are dominated by men who, as Mershon points out, passively benefit from sexual harassment even when they do not actively harass anyone. Moreover, the profession writ large benefits from the unpaid or underpaid labor of graduate students and junior scholars. Like young female gymnasts, self-abnegation is institutionalized and normalized among political science doctoral candidates and early-career scholars struggling to finish their degree, land a

tenure-track job, and establish themselves in their field amid situations of acute precarity and stark competition. In recent years, two prominent and otherwise privileged Princeton graduate students have been kidnapped while conducting fieldwork. According to a third Princeton graduate student (Sanchez 2023), there is pressure and incentive to conduct risky research:

It’s a higher risk, but then there’s potentially a higher reward. I think that’s part of why students are encouraged to do this. If you go to lengths that other people aren’t willing to go to, you find things that other people haven’t found, and you have an advantage when it comes to writing a really great dissertation.

Our profession must grapple with the internal power dynamics that propel graduate students to undertake undue risk while the benefits of their expertise disproportionately accrue to universities and professions that disavow any particular interest in or ability to ensure their personal safety.

Moreover, gender-based violence, in particular, does not suddenly manifest in graduate school or field settings with the arrival of any individual scholar. Unfortunately, gender-based violence and workplace harassment exist in all field sites before any one researcher arrives. Similarly, by the time political scientists experience gender-based harassment or assault in our profession—whether in their department, at professional conferences, or during fieldwork—they most likely already have had extensive experience with and conditioned survival responses to gender-based violence. Continuums of violence that are perpetuated in our profession and home institutions, which normalize patriarchal aggression and self-abnegation among subordinates, increase the likelihood of experiencing that violence during fieldwork.

Additionally, feminist international relations and security scholars have shown how the suspension of the rule of law during armed conflict can engender continuums of gender-based violence in which violence against women becomes institutionalized during and after the conflict. This entails the normalization and massification of gender-based violence among perpetrators but also draws on observations that initial acts of violence often render people vulnerable to additional acts of violence. These insights are particularly helpful in considering the unique security risks faced by political scientists, who often conduct field research in contexts of fragile rule of law with the precise intent to study political violence. Generalized political and environmental violence create a continuum with gender-based violence such that it is almost impossible to distinguish between the two. Each of the acts of gender-based violence described here occurred to young scholars in contexts of political violence, in which rule of law was contingent, at best, and widespread uncertainty and fear circulated around personal safety generally. These stories illustrate the heartbreaking impossibility of identifying a single, aberrant reason for individual acts of violence and the devastation that the ensuing confusion and ambiguity create on the survivor’s ability to construct a

coherent explanatory narrative about their experience that allows them to restore their feelings of personal safety (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004).


Finally, experiences of gender-based violence during field research are not limited to the field but instead are part of the continuum of gender-based violence between field settings and our hierarchical and patriarchal discipline. As such, they form a tragic continuum with experiences back home, exposing survivors to repeated marginalization and harassment after returning to their home institution. Political scientists have long bemoaned the “leaky pipeline” to the top in which women, talent, and diversity go missing (Fraga, Givens, and Pinderhoughes 2011, 48). Despite comprising an increasing percentage of doctoral students, women remain underrepresented among tenure-track and tenured faculty. We do not know how many scholars give up on field research or an academic career because of gender-based violence during fieldwork. However, we do know that sexual harassment disproportionately affects women, who are more likely than men to leave faculty positions and less likely to be promoted (Spoon et al. 2023). Moreover, women are more likely than men to feel pushed out of their job and to cite negative workplace climates, including dysfunctional leadership, feelings of not belonging, and explicit sexual harassment and discrimination (Spoon et al. 2023).


To increase the number of diverse voices in our discipline, particularly those of women, political science departments and universities must take seriously the internal power dynamics and the continuum of intersectional, gender-based violence. As a discipline, we collectively must create robust measures for the safety and well-being of all of those scholars who by age, gender, sexuality, nationality, and rank are vulnerable to gender-based violence. This begins in our home community and department and extends to field sites. The path to do so exists if we choose to follow it. ■


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