

Sexual Harassment and Assault During Field Research

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ABSTRACT

Political scientists have recently taken great strides to expose and address sexual harassment and assault in our academic departments and professional conferences. Little has been said, however, of the sexual violence and discrimination that political scientists confront during field research. Female field researchers may encounter a number of power disparities that put them at acute risk for sexual violence during fieldwork, and evidence suggests that experiences of sexual misconduct in the field are both pervasive and professionally devastating. This article challenges the discipline to break its silence on sexual violence during fieldwork, remove the stigma of incompetency assigned to survivors, and support field researchers in confronting sexual harassment and assault in the field.


Political scientists have recently taken great strides in addressing sexual harassment and assault in the discipline. Little has been said, however, of sexual violence that political scientists may confront during field research. Evidence suggests that experiences of sexual violence during field research are pervasive and professionally devastating. Field researchers may experience numerous power disparities that put them at acute risk for sexual violence in the field, and deeply held methodological fallacies that insist on a field researcher's absolute privilege, trivialize experiences of sexual violence, and weaponize rape myths to portray victims as professionally incompetent all work together to silence survivors. Political scientists must ascertain the extent and impact of sexual violence in the field, destigmatize survivors, and extend or adapt preventative and restitutive institutions adopted in universities and professional associations to field sites.

WHERE THERE IS NO HASHTAG

Inspired by the #MeToo Movement, American political scientists recently denounced sexual harassment and assault in the discipline. A short course at the 2018 annual American Political Science Association (APSA) convention in Boston entitled #MeTooPolSci spurred a corresponding hashtag and a National Science Foundation ADVANCE grant to address sexual harassment in political science departments and professional associations. Dozens of political scientists filed lawsuits or made public statements regarding their experiences with sexual harassment. A few powerful super-harassers were finally retired after decades of

brazen attacks, and there was perhaps a brief moment of collective soul searching regarding how we allowed such serial predators to reach the top of our profession. A series in the *Washington Post* explored the gender gap in political science and the role of sexual harassment and assault in achieving it, and a 2019 special edition of the *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* detailed experiences of sexual harassment in political science departments and at professional conferences from the perspective of victims, administrators, advocates, and theorists. APSA and regional associations undertook efforts to ascertain the extent of sexual harassment at annual meetings, adopted anti-harassment policies, and appointed meeting ombuds to address harassment that occurs onsite during conventions.

One shortcoming of these efforts is that they hew closely to US legal notions in which sexual harassment creates a hostile work environment, understood spatially as academic departments or professional meetings alone. Little has been said about employment-based sexual harassment and assault that political scientists endure outside of university or conference settings. This silence is unusually pronounced and particularly problematic for experiences of sexual harassment and assault that occur during field research. Field research, defined as "leaving one's home institution in order to acquire data, information, or insights that significantly inform one's research," has become increasingly common across political science subdisciplines and is widely considered indispensable to collect data, help researchers avoid overgeneralizations and reductionism, establish valid causal inferences, and trace complex pathways of cause and effect over time (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015, 1). As such, field research is not only a legitimate but also a required method in many subfields, and women constitute approximately 42% of all field

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researchers in political science (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015, 48).

The increasing prevalence of fieldwork among political scientists has led to a proliferation of articles and textbooks that offer practical, methodological, and ethical advice on how to conduct field research, particularly in dangerous contexts (Fujii 2012; Hertel, Singer, and Van Cott 2009; Hsueh, Jensenius, and Newsome 2014; Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015; Sriram et al. 2009; Tripp 2018). Although this body of literature provides guidance on everything from how to avoid ATM fees to ethical obligations towards research participants after leaving the field, it fails to mention that sexual violence may pose a serious threat to field researchers; how to design fieldwork to mitigate the risks of experiencing sexual violence; how to identify, stop, or report sexual harassment or assault in the field; or if and how to proceed with research after experiencing sexual misconduct in the field. Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read (2015, 58) report that a stunning 25.8% of international projects and 10% of US-based field research endeavors are “affected” by gender inequality—more even than projects that are affected because they are in active conflict zones (20.1%) and comparable to those that are affected by “other” security concerns (27.5%), political repression (31.7%), or lack of infrastructure (31.2%). They did not elaborate on what gender inequality might consist of, however. Overall, the profession has been sluggish to grapple with the occurrence of sexual harassment and assault during fieldwork and to recognize field sites as

extraordinary risk for sexual violence (Hanson and Richards 2017; Howell 1990; Ross 2015).

By all measures, sexual violence seems to be a pervasive and debilitating problem during field research. My first experience with sexual assault in the field was when I was preparing for future field research during an undergraduate semester abroad. The father of the host family I stayed with hugged a little too long, gave salutatory kisses progressively closer to my mouth, and pressed his body against mine in gross and uncomfortable ways. Acutely aware that his entire family, including his wife and two children, relied on the income they received for hosting me, I coped with it by avoiding him and the home: staying out and taking extended trips. He picked up where he left off, however, with the next exchange student to stay with them—a woman who coincidentally would become a friend of mine. He kissed her directly on the lips without bothering to groom her first, getting himself reported and herself a new host family.

During the next 20 years of intermittent field research, I was groped and harassed so extensively on the street that I became physically violent, getting into fistfights with leering aggressors. I was raped by a local mentor and gatekeeper at a “social function” at his home that never materialized. A colleague and friend leapt across a table to lick my face and propose a threesome with his pregnant wife. Men I barely knew routinely propositioned me for anal or group sex. An elderly lady verbally assaulted me in a public bathroom, claiming I was a deviant “she-man”—a terrifying expe-

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workplaces in need of safeguards against this violence. This silence led Hall-Clifford (2019) to describe fieldwork as a place “where there is no #MeToo hashtag, no groundswell of activism to support women’s rights.”

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ASSAULT DURING FIELD RESEARCH

According to a 1990 study by the American Anthropological Association, sexual violence occurs among all occupational groups and in all societies (Howell 1990). Female field researchers “are not

immune from this wider context” of pervasive sexualized violence (Ross 2015, 180). To the contrary, they may be at acute risk. The relative geographic, social, and institutional isolation of field research, dependence on powerful local men for research assistance and entrée, and the existence of demeaning and dehumanizing sexual stereotypes about foreign women may place female field researchers outside of local protective networks and at

rience given the violence that gender-nonconforming people face in much of the world. Unfortunately, my experiences hardly seem unique. One colleague overdosed on a homemade cocktail of drugs she had on hand in a desperate attempt to replicate emergency contraceptive after a sexual assault. Another was assaulted by her own doctor, a third was raped, a fourth was gang raped, and a fifth moved into my one-bedroom short-term rental to escape an abusive living situation. Since I began working on this project, female colleagues have shared stories of being drugged, sexually harassed by key

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informants, and sexually assaulted by both gatekeepers and strangers during their fieldwork. Researchers from other disciplines have long shared similar experiences. Anthropologist Eva Moreno (1995) wrote about enduring months of abuse by her research assistant, in a futile effort to preserve her research project, until he raped her at gunpoint. Geographer Karen Ross (2015) described being serially

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assaulted by key informants who had a central role in facilitating her research and community immersion. Eva Huseby-Darvas (1999) was publicly harassed by key informants as a way to trivialize her in a male-dominated political sphere. Sherry Ortner (1996) endured frequent sexual harassment engendered by a common perception in her field site that white women will initiate sex. Anna Tsing (2005) was sexually assaulted in the cab of a truck. Rachel Hall-Clifford (2019) survived an attempted rape by a stranger who yanked her off the street and forced her down on her knees over a half-full dog food bowl, proclaiming, "I'll show you, bitch." In a separate instance, she fled a field site and severed relations with a key informant when the informant's husband tried to force his way into her room in the middle of the night.

Quantitative research also suggests that sexual violence against female field researchers is pervasive. Stanko (1992) found that nearly one in three female members of the American Society of Criminology was sexually harassed during fieldwork. Clancy et al. (2014) concluded that 59% of field researchers in the life, physical, and social sciences had experienced sexual harassment in the field and that 19% had been sexually assaulted. Sociologists Hanson and Richards (2017) interviewed dozens of field researchers who reported experiences of harassment and assault during fieldwork that ranged from quid-pro-quo demands for sex in exchange for data to acquaintance rape. Although extensive evidence suggests that sexual violence is a common and devastating experience for female field researchers, only one political scientist has written of her experiences dealing with sexual violence during fieldwork (Johnson 2009).

ENFORCING SILENCE: MYTHS OF RAPE AND PRIVILEGE AMONG FIELD RESEARCHERS

Victims of sexual misconduct in the field have powerful incentives to remain silent. They often want to protect research subjects, particularly those who already are criminalized or marginalized (Bourgois 2004). Victims rightly fear widespread misogyny in legal institutions that protect rapists and variously criminalize victims for everything from sex outside of marriage to committing libel (Johnson 2009; Moreno 1995; Ross 2015). Many forms of sexual violence experienced by field researchers do not explicitly violate the law or are tacitly condoned. There is often no obvious person, place, or institution to which to report sexual harassment or assault while in the field. Whereas Institutional Review Board protocols protect research subjects, similar protections and considerations are not extended to researchers themselves (Sriram et al. 2009). Field researchers with internal or external funding may not have the necessary latitude to change their research design in response to experiences of sexual violence. Other scholars may have a personal desire for professional success that they are unwilling to surrender.

These obstacles make reporting and confronting sexual violence during field research infinitely more difficult than at one's home institution. I was sexually harassed by senior professors as a graduate student and again at my first tenure-track job. In both instances, the harassment was disgusting and humiliating; it made me feel embarrassed and out of place in the department, causing me to miss out on professional functions and opportunities in order to avoid those individuals. I even turned down the last year of my graduate fellowship in lieu of serving as a teaching assistant for the man who was harassing me. Yet, in both places, mentors,

advisors, and university administrators guided me through the process of filing Title IX complaints. One man with dozens of other complaints was forced into retirement; the other apologized and ceased harassing me. In graduate school, I pieced together a series of fellowships and part-time gigs that turned out to be more prestigious and lucrative than my forgone graduate stipend; deep and enduring social networks provided housing, transportation, and moral support. Even threats to retaliate against me by ensuring I never got a job proved to be either empty or impotent. Instead, the formal and informal institutions available at my universities helped resolve the harassment—however imperfectly—without creating insurmountable hurdles to my career.

By contrast, when I was sexually assaulted just weeks after arriving at my field site, I had no mentors or social networks to turn to for support. In one case, I continued living with a man who was assaulting me out of concern for the financial consequences for his family. Most of the sexualized violence I experienced in the field was not technically illegal; there were no EEOC or Title IX offices to be found even if it were. External funding made it almost impossible to modify my research protocols; even changing my primary research affiliation to another university to avoid the man who raped me proved onerous because my funder had longstanding ties to the more elite institution. Without a work visa, getting another job was inconceivable, and turning down or abdicating a prestigious grant midway would have been professional as well as economic suicide. Worst of all, I was extraordinarily dependent on perpetrators in the field for housing, access to data, connections, and the success of my study and career. All of these factors made my experiences with sexual violence during field research far more personally and professionally devastating than harassment by senior colleagues in my respective departments.

Field researchers may share several recognized risk factors for sexual harassment and assault including being female; social isolation; relative youth; lack of economic autonomy; a professional culture that values self-abnegation and dangerous risk taking; and dependence on powerful local brokers for data, connections, and entrée (Hanson and Richards 2017). Nevertheless, political science field research methodologists continue to draw on "latent masculinist tendencies" that emphasize the researcher's unqualified privilege (Ross 2015, 181). Fujii (2016, 1149) famously argued that "going to the field is a privilege in and of itself. Just because funders, Institutional Review Boards (or their equivalent), and dissertation supervisors have given a project the 'green light' does not give researchers an automatic 'right' to intervene in people's lives without considering the power implications of what they are doing." She further noted that the benefits of fieldwork disproportionately accrue to the researcher. This continuous emphasis on unqualified privilege obscures the complex ways in which field researchers are embedded in shifting webs of power relations that are neither static nor unidimensional such that they may simultaneously or alternately experience qualified privilege and discrimination. Caretta and Jokinen (2017, 280), for example, reported feeling "unprepared and vulnerable" when a man chased one of them down the street screaming, "I'm coming for you! You, white woman!" They mistakenly believed that being white, educated Europeans "would prevent anyone from daring to physically attack" them during field research.

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only the former is considered a *professional* failure that raises red flags about the quality and competency of the scholar, suggesting that she did not know her field site well and jeopardizing all subsequent data and conclusions stemming from the project. Victims are well aware that reporting sexual violence in the field can negatively affect their professional standing, destroy research and professional connections, jeopardize the timely and affordable completion of their project, impede or delay their degree or tenure, and ruin the prospect of future grants and research collaborations (Hanson and Richards 2017). Upon return from fieldwork in Kenya where she had been raped at gunpoint by her field assistant, Moreno (1995, 247) overheard her supervisor say to a colleague in her department that “she must have acted like a fool in the field.” A 1990 report on field research by the American Anthropological Association noted the reluctance of field researchers to report being victims of sexual assault in the field, even anonymously, because it calls “into question the relationship that the fieldworker is supposed to establish with colleagues and with the subjects of his or her study, as a matter of professional competence” (Howell 1990, 89). “[T]here is a tacit assumption often at work that a competent anthropologist would not place herself in a position where she could be raped in the first place” (Moreno 1995, 220).

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Political science field manuals openly question the competence of female field researchers who are victims of sexual misconduct, chastising them for lack of preparedness and professionalism. In this respect, it is worth considering the words of Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read (2015, 131) in the only passage dedicated to sexual violence in their landmark guide to field research, tucked in a short section dedicated to “emerging social challenges”:

Learning about the culture and context of the field site can help scholars begin to understand what is locally permissible behavior for someone of their age, gender, and marital status. For example, in some places, a female scholar who shares a beer with a colleague in a bar may unwittingly signal promiscuity. Even a one-on-one interview in a public plaza between a man and a woman may be interpreted locally in unintended ways. Being familiar with the context will also help scholars understand signals being sent by others’ invitations, and know when and how to respond in the negative politely. Sometimes humor can lighten a scholar’s rebuff of an unwanted advance by a stranger, close colleague, or neighbor—yet again, the humor must be context-sensitive.

Combining common rape myths that women are sexually harassed or assaulted because of what they consumed or wore with a newly weaponized professionalism, political scientists insist that “advanced language skills, extensive knowledge of the subject and region under examination, and, at the least, minimal social skills”—in short, professional competency and “appropriate dress”—will protect women in the field from sexual assault (Schwedler 2006, 425). “We carefully select our attire, are

conscientious of our body language, and attune our behavior so as to present ourselves as acceptable to the field,” note Mazzei and O’Brien (2009, 379). “Dress professionally and appropriately for the observation setting. Women researchers must often navigate complex, locally engendered expectations of ‘appropriate’ dress and conduct as well as personal safety. Learn to *listen* and *watch*,” urge Hertel, Singer, and Van Cott (2009, 307; italics in original). Neither are Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read (2015, 131) unique in warning women to use humor to maintain the other person’s comfort while they are being harassed or assaulted. Mazzei and O’Brien (2009, 374) also suggest that female field researchers attempt “lighthearted sarcasm (rather than a tone of rejection)” when sexually harassed to “maintain the pursuer’s ego” at all costs, “strategically deploying gender so as to not threaten rapport.”

Given this widespread embrace of rape myths in the profession, field researchers systematically trivialize experiences of sexual harassment and assault during field research—if they mention it at all—while taking pains to emphasize that being a woman in the field does not hinder research. They make joking reference to sexual violence as though it were a minor inconvenience, brushing it off as the “awkward, sometimes embarrassing particularities of

being a female fieldworker (e.g., frequent marriage proposals)” (LaRocco, Shinn, and Madise 2020, 4), even when it leads to physical violence (Reinhardt 2009). Experiences of sexual harassment are reduced to “cultural misunderstandings” that “in no way kept me from conducting my field research” (Henderson 2009, 293). Despite feeling “constantly vulnerable, nervous, and eager to leave” the field, Caretta and Jokinen (2017, 280) insist that their experiences with sexual harassment and assault “did not influence data collection.”

Instead, female field researchers are encouraged to embrace traditional gender stereotypes and “strategically deploy” their gender, flirting with vulnerable local men to induce them to break rules and assume unwanted risks that benefit the woman’s research (Mazzei and O’Brien 2009; see also Townsend-Bell 2009). Invoking Carol Warren’s famous observation that acting like an “incompetent female” allowed her unique access because her study participants assumed she would not understand what she saw (Warren and Rasmussen 1977), Ortobals and Rincker (2009, 289) suggest that young women “can be successful in field research when framing themselves as young, eager learners who want mentors (i.e., the interviewees) to convey experience and knowledge.” Schwedler (2006, 425–26) maintains that although women might be subjected to “mild harassment” such as “being followed, verbally harassed, and even sometimes groped...female scholars actually enjoy more access than male researchers” and are able to meet both privately with women and publicly with men because of their perceived “third sex.”

The effects of sexual violence in the field are not enhanced data collection but instead personal and professional devastation. In my own case, I dropped out of university classes and extracurricular groups to avoid the man who raped me, losing budding friendships, educational opportunities, and promising research connections at the country's richest and most prestigious university. Years later, the colleague who licked my face and proposed a threesome with his pregnant wife still reminds me in a quasi-annual email apology of both our lost friendship and professional collaborations. Other survivors of sexual misconduct in the field describe fleeing homes, moving vehicles, and research sites; abandoning research topics and locations; altering case selection and other components of their research design; and adopting defensive and at times violent behaviors that restructure field methods and data collection while raising unexplored and deeply complex ethical issues (Hall-Clifford 2019; Johnson 2009; Moreno 1995; Reinhardt 2009; Ross 2015). Survivors have had their research findings challenged for not interviewing or citing sexual predators, and they have been marginalized in the profession due to lowered productivity (Hanson and Richards 2017). And these are just the effects on those left standing. 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). How many women gave up on fieldwork, research projects, grants, degrees, jobs, or seeking promotion and tenure because of sexual harassment or assault in the field, leading to that pernicious absence of women in political science as either authors or subjects?

A ROADMAP FORWARD

The worst of the sexual harassment I faced in the field has long abated, ameliorated by age, motherhood, marriage, economic independence, professional resilience, and deep social networks built over decades in the same region. In many ways, it makes little sense to speak up now given the likelihood of being stigmatized as unprofessional and unaware—the fabled female field researcher who failed to “*listen and watch*” (Hertel, Singer, and Van Cott 2009, 307; italics in original)—thereby indelibly marring my research and career. I am deeply concerned, however, with how sexual violence during field research shapes the contours of our profession and how our collective silence jeopardizes our students, junior colleagues, and collective knowledge production. We must break the silence surrounding sexual violence in the field that forces women to individualize and internalize their experiences, evolving from what Moss (1995, 447) describes as thinking about sexual harassment and assault as “one woman’s account of a singular act” to “a singular woman’s account of an experience many women have as part of their everyday lives.” We must collect and disseminate data on the occurrence and impact of sexual violence in the field. We must modify both graduate and undergraduate curricula to help field researchers anticipate, identify, and respond to sexual harassment in the field instead of being blindsided by it. We must stop prioritizing *entrée* and *rapport* over safety, address implicit male bias in fieldwork methodologies, and explore field researchers’ relative privilege and risk with greater nuance (Ross 2015). We must unequivocally stop sustaining rape myths and blaming women for their own victimization. We must diversify our methodological universe, opening the door to collaborative and other innovative types of research that do not insist on social isolation,

and promote “good-enough field researchers” who prioritize their own safety and enjoyment by recognizing that “not all information is worth the risk it might take to obtain” (Johnson 2009, 322). It is time that political scientists lay bare the pervasiveness and devastating impact of sexual violence during field research and build the curriculum, institutions, policies, and political will to address it. ■

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