

The Challenges of the Fieldworker: Choosing between Success and Safety

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On June 19, 2020, the Working Group *Veilig in het Veld (Safe in the Field)* organised their kick-off seminar, discussing the challenges fieldworkers face when experiencing sexual harassment and intimidation in the field. While the #MeToo movement resulted in more openness about experiences of intimidation and sexual harassment of scientists at universities, the issue of safety during fieldwork is rarely addressed. Our own experiences and preliminary ethnographic research indicate that fieldworkers often find themselves in vulnerable positions as this method requires long-term stays in unfamiliar areas and close (working) relationships with people on whom we are dependent for our data collection. Additionally, hierarchy and competition lead to reluctance to report such experiences as we tend to think this may hinder our academic success.

The seminar specifically aimed to discuss the role and responsibility of universities regarding these issues. Therefore, we invited seven speakers of different universities in the Netherlands to share which support systems are currently available. We also asked two experts for a presentation, and we had prepared questions to be discussed and to examine what should be done differently. The

webinar was attended by about thirty participants, most from the Netherlands. Below we present a short report of the event.

Presentations

The webinar was opened with a short welcome by LOVA chair Marina de Regt, after which we introduced the Working Group and our motives for organising the webinar. The series of presentations was kicked off by Bram van der Meer who shared his experiences of working as an investigative psychologist within universities. His work focusses on *concerning behaviour* which includes intimidation, harassment, bullying, stalking, and other forms of assault. It was particularly striking how often such concerning behaviour is not reported. Bram presented an Australian study (Warren and Grime 2016) which demonstrated that 70% of 1,400 female respondents experienced sexual harassment during their student life, but only 5% had reported this to the university. Reasons included feeling ashamed, fear of one's position, fear of the offender, and a lack of trust in the university's response. Bram concluded with presenting the plans of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, which focus on detecting behaviour early on, providing better care and support, and prioritising the victims' return to a safe working place.

After Bram's presentation, the seven invited speakers shared how their institutions respond to researchers' experiences of harassment and intimidation during fieldwork. While there were variations among institutions, the overall take-away was that very little has been done to support researchers during and after their fieldwork. Many speakers claimed there were no safety policies or that little or no information was available on the issue.

This was illustrated by Karin Willemse of Erasmus University Rotterdam who had found a manual discussing safety and fieldwork of her university's International Office and questioned whether it was known by supervisors and their students. The issue mostly comes down to the responsibility of academic staff. Kim Knibbe of

University of Groningen, for example, told that she actively brings up sexual harassment and intimidation during her courses in fieldwork preparation. She described assignments in which students were invited to reflect upon unsafe situations, including their own biases towards what is considered unsafe. Some other speakers had also incorporated literature about the topics in their curriculum. However, there was a general consensus that too little attention was paid to this issue on an institutional level.

The presentations session was closed by Jerika Heinze, a PhD candidate at Radboud University Nijmegen. After having experienced serious harassment herself, she had started *The Fieldwork Initiative* to create an internet platform for and of victims who struggled with gendered violence and harassment while conducting research.¹ From Jerika's inspiring talk, we learned about the important work of this grassroots network of students and researchers across the world. Completely run by volunteers, the initiative provides training for students, supports students and researchers who need help urgently, and provides a platform with shared stories, handbooks, and reading lists.

Discussion

The presentation of Jerika Heinze formed a great starting point for an inspiring discussion, which tackled the four questions we had prepared:

1. What kind of trajectories are most appropriate to broaden the outreach of a project of awareness-raising?
2. What steps need to be prioritised in raising more awareness among not only students but also supervisors and management at universities?
3. Do you have examples of initiatives or alternative approaches at universities or other research institutions?
4. What role can LOVA play in taking further the discussion and possible solutions?

The discussion was lively, with many participants actively contributing ideas on what the next steps could be. One of the first suggestions that everyone agreed on was better preparation. This included making gendered inequality and violence one of the main topics in pre-fieldwork courses. While an ample amount of time is used to discuss gatekeepers, establishing access, and interview techniques, safety within the field should be the first priority. An option to embed this in teaching would be the assignment described by Kim Knibbe, in which students are invited to reflect upon potentially dangerous fieldwork situations.

Another point mentioned was the importance of regular contacts between supervisors and students during field research. Supervisors should become more aware of the vulnerability of (young) researchers. However, as Jasmijn Rana of Leiden University emphasised: it is only when we feel safe enough that we dare to talk about what difficulties we experienced, and this is more likely to occur in informal situations. It is therefore important to establish a close connection among supervising colleagues and between peer students. It might also be useful to involve someone who is not the student's supervisor, for example an area or methodology specialist. As Jerika Heinze encountered during her work for *The Fieldwork Initiative*: most people are willing to talk, share their experiences, and feel supported.

However, not all individuals might be comfortable having these conversations. Another suggestion was to establish specific guidelines for students and superiors. It is often unclear if, where, and when harassment and intimidation should be reported. As mentioned above, almost none of the attendees was aware of any university safety policies that were in place. This fuzziness contributes to the stigma and why, in general, we know so little about the frequency and impact of these experiences.

Additionally, attendees Sinah Kloss and Mindi Schneider emphasised that while negative fieldwork experiences happen during our work

assignments, they are still considered personal problems. One is expected to process and deal with them privately and let it not affect our academic performance. However, as this happens relatively frequently, it is rather inherent to our field of work. As anthropologists our research depends upon personal connections, we should therefore consider this part of our academic content and reflect upon such experiences in our output.

Lastly, several participants highlighted the importance of a decolonial and intersectional perspective. Janne Heederik, for example, pointed to the importance of avoiding to exoticise far-away destinations and depict these as inherently more dangerous. Jasmijn Rana complemented this by stating that risk assessments also have the potential for exoticising, and we should be careful in how we use them.

Overall, there seemed to be four central themes that were addressed. Firstly, we need to strengthen our horizontal support connections and collaborate as students and as supervisors when problems occur. We also learned that there is a need to raise more awareness among supervisors and university staff on how to respond to these issues. Next, an institutionalised support system should be created at universities and research institutions. And finally, although there is an increasing number of publications on the issue, we have to continue addressing it in academic writing and discussions, to raise awareness and tackle stigmas and shame around the topic.

Survey results

At the end of the webinar, we invited all attendees to participate in an online survey in order to understand how researchers and their employers have dealt with experiences of intimidation and harassment. The results correspond with earlier studies on the issue. Of the thirteen respondents that participated in our survey, 69% declared to have experienced issues of (sexual) intimidation and harassment themselves. About 30% reported they did not seek help afterwards, while others responded they sought support from their

family or friends (40%), colleagues (10%), supervisors (10%), or confidentiality counsellor (10%). We received particularly striking answers to our open question regarding what kind of response and assistance was offered after reporting the issue, and whether this was considered adequate. Respondents indicated they felt ignored as it was deemed “a personal problem”, they were offered unrealistic solutions as “don’t go to the field alone,” or felt they caused “problems” for the department. Another respondent indicated she felt vulnerable because of her unofficial position. 85% of the respondents felt they were not adequately prepared for fieldwork by their employers. Additionally, 62% of respondents did not know of any safety policies or plans for fieldworkers, while 38% said there were simply none. Our last open question focussed on what changes are considered necessary to take care of researchers who experienced trauma. The most common answers were about increasing awareness, pre-fieldwork training with a specific focus on this issue, safety policies, better aftercare in the form of counselling, and to get rid of the stigma surrounding (sexual) harassment and intimidation, particularly for victims.

Follow up

The webinar and survey results have directly inspired our Working Group *Veilig in het Veld / Safe in the Field*. We formulated specific goals based on the given input, namely: invite a master student to research how often and in what kind of situations researchers feel their safety is undermined, develop pre-fieldwork training, and relieve the stigma by composing academic literature on the matter.² Do you have any suggestions or would you like to be involved? Then, please, contact our Working Group through LOVA.³

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Notes

¹ See <http://fieldworkinitiative.org/>.

² A vacancy for such a position at the Anthropology Department of Leiden University can be found at: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/research/research-projects/-social-and-behavioural-sciences/pip-safety-in-the-field>.

³ Send an e-mail to: safety@lova.network.

References

Warren, Lisa and Ken Crime. 2016. "The Evolving Nature of University Campus Safety in Australia." *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management* 3 (3-4): 200-214. doi: 10.1037/tam0000073