

Getting in cars with strangers

Norah Karrouche

While growing up I was frequently reminded of the fact that riding a bike after dark was dangerous, and that girls and women should always be cautious of unfamiliar men. My mother used to warn me to never get into cars with strangers. But during my fieldwork, I found myself riding in cars or meeting in secluded places with men I had never seen in person before. Why did I keep doing so, even though it made me feel highly uncomfortable and vulnerable?

Many ink has been spilt on the types of relationships (female) researchers and their (male) subjects may develop over the course of fieldwork, and how power relations between the two can be unbalanced. As researchers, we may fear we ask too much from our respondents, careful not to take advantage of them in any way. In most methodological accounts of fieldwork, social scientists reflect on the appropriation of respondents by researchers, and not the other way around. I always viewed myself as the dominant actor in exchanges with informants. As a student, I was mostly taught that respondents are vulnerable subjects that can easily be overpowered and whose boundaries must be preserved and respected. I fear that this emphasis on the respondent's vulnerability implicitly discouraged me from maintaining my own boundaries during fieldwork. Thinking in terms of power relations in such a one-sided manner made me get into cars with strangers. Like many other fieldworkers, I ignored my own boundaries and needs. I forgot that I, too, am a vulnerable subject.

Until that one time when things turned sour and I was harassed by one of my male respondents. It made me re-evaluate and reinterpret my position as a female researcher towards my male respondents.

By downplaying the possibility that I could be on the other side of a power imbalance, I had been looking at transgressions of my personal boundaries during fieldwork as personal failures and had been fearful of being seen as unprofessional by my peers for addressing them. It made me tolerate unwanted touch and ignore suggestive texts or comments from my respondents. It made me get into cars with them, even though I felt unsafe doing so. It could also have made me, knowingly and willingly, silence transgressions I would otherwise strongly condemn and oppose.

But it didn't. Learning how to navigate personal boundaries and recognize unsafe settings in fieldwork situations are skills we can, and should, all learn. Had I done so before the start of my fieldwork, I would have thought differently about power imbalances and would have considered my own position as potentially vulnerable. I would have made other choices. I would never have gotten into cars with strangers.

About the author

Norah Karrouche is an assistant professor at the History Department of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. She specializes in historical culture and memory in Morocco, Algeria and among North African communities in Europe, with emphasis on the history and representation of Berber culture, literature and arts.