Harassment in the field: Reflections on safety and vulnerability during fieldwork

Webinar
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After the success of last year's webinar, 'The Challenges of the Fieldworker: Choosing between success and safety', the Working Group *Veilig in het Veld (Safety in the Field)* organised a second webinar. In the first webinar, we opened up the discussion around the structural issues that prevent researcher to be better prepared and better cared for upon their return. This two-day webinar built on this topic by discussing how these structural issues and experiences of sexual violence itself impact our views of what ethnography (should) look(s) like, and how this relates to our understanding of 'the ethnographer'.

The first day of the webinar started with a keynote by Mindi Schneider who has written on the sexual politics of doing fieldwork, followed by an interactive workshop to discuss and reflect upon our understanding of 'ethnography' and 'the ethnographer' as well as the way we navigate personal and professional boundaries in the field. The second day focused more specifically on digital ethnography, as an increasing number of researchers have been working remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This session questioned how we may protect our professional and personal boundaries in an online setting and how we can ensure the safety of our participants from a distance.

KEY-NOTE LECTURE

The webinar was opened by Mindi Schneider, who gave a keynote lecture titled '*Sham, silence and solidarity*', a title that very poignantly depicted the current workplace culture surrounding fieldwork sexual violence. Schneider referred to the 'open secret' of sexualised violence: while it is generally known that many researchers experience sexualised violence during fieldwork, it is kept silent and rarely talked about in more official university settings. She said: "I wish someone had said: 'Fieldwork can be scary. Fieldwork as a female can be scary'".

Instead, experiences of sexualised violence during fieldwork are often only shared with friends or close colleagues in informal contexts. From a professional perspective, we are discouraged to write about these experiences: they are perceived as distractions from the 'real' data that truly matters. This attitude contributes to the continuation of an 'open secret', which also means that many young researchers often feel they are alone in what they have encountered. However, what Schneider discovered in her conversations with friends and colleagues – and what research has confirmed now as well – is that experiences of sexualised violence during fieldwork are very common and "what seemed individual, was actually something many shared". She mentioned two mechanisms that specifically contributed to the continuation of the open secret of sexualised violence: silence and shame.

According to Schneider, the silence around experiences of sexualized violence is rooted in the 'heroic fieldworker' trope, embodied by the image of the researcher who publishes loads, who's 'tales of hardship' resulted in interesting insights, overcame obstacle and – most notably – approaches trauma as a rite of passage or even as something to brag about. Schneider depicts this as a very masculine trope, based on the old notion of the researcher as the white privileged man. Two insights are important here. Firstly, with a more diverse body of researchers, many experiences will differ from the stereotype of the researchers as a privileged white man. Secondly, the 'heroic fieldworker' trope that

surrounds this stereotype leaves little room for honest reflections on the difficulties of fieldwork, let alone for those experiences that might be traumatising. Moving away from the heroic fieldworker trope would allow researchers to prepare for fieldwork differently and to position ourselves differently in the field.

The second concept that Schneider discussed was shame. Shame for not being smart enough, not meeting certain expectation, shame around coloniality and privilege and shame around female bodies. She argued that shame is more pronounced in the context of our fieldwork, as it comes to the fore when we are in the process of trying to fit in, trying to be a 'neutral observant', and are constantly negotiating our positionality. It is exactly in these instances that bodies, female in particular, become so pronounced and these situations can highlight the unattainable neutrality and thus – since neutrality is expected – the perceived failure related to it. What we can do, according to Schneider, is shine a light on the same that too many of us feel post fieldwork, by brining sexual violence into our fieldwork preparation, methodology and theory.

Shining light on silene and shame raises questions: Is there a responsibility to share traumatic experiences? Who carries these responsibilities? What does responsibility to share mean in terms of personal and public boundaries? What is spectacle and what is speaking truth to power? Who is doing the work, who's time and is it valued? Who *should* be doing the work? Are certain topics and places off limits? And how do we theorise sexual violence that does not fall into white privilege? Schneider introduced these questions for further discussion, but also to highlight that sexual violence needs to be read and discussed at intersections with other discussions.

DAY I: INTERACTIVE WORKSHOP

The interactive workshop on the first day was facilitated by Norah Karrouche and Loes Oudenhuijsen, who both gave short presentations

with questions for further discussions. These presentations were then followed by discussions in smaller groups, after which a more general discussion took place.

Presentation Norah Karrouche

Norah Karrouche's presentation focused on her experience with managing personal and professional boundaries during fieldwork. Karrouche referred to the example of 'getting into cars with strangers' and how, when we are young, we are taught not to get into cars with strangers. A piece of advice that Karrouche had always listened to, until she conducted fieldwork and stepped into a stranger's car, for the sake of data. "I didn't even think that not doing that was an option", she shared, "I was afraid of losing what was most valuable to me at the time: data". As collecting data is continuously emphasised and perceived as crucial to the success of the research, successfully collecting data often trumps protecting personal boundaries. Karrouche connected this development to an overall lack of preparation for early careers researchers, leaving them unprepared to deal with the difficulties of fieldwork relationships and pushing them to choose career success over personal safety. This is especially true for female researchers that deal with cross-gendered relations where dominant ideas about gender are "put on display", as Karrouche said. Finally, she also discussed how experience of harassment, a lack of honest conversation and the still dominant trope of the 'heroic fieldworker', left her feeling afraid the harassment would impact her credibility and made her feel she had a "weak" professional attitude if she would talk more openly about it.

The discussion following Karrouche's presentation focused on how universities can better prepare their researchers, specifically focusing on how early career researchers should be taught not only the importance of personal boundaries, but also tools on how to actively choose your personal boundaries over professional success. The conclusion, in short, was that personal boundaries should always trump access to data.

Presentation Loes Oudenhuijsen

Next, Loes Oudenhuijsen started her presentation with the question: how do experiences in the field shape or reshape our ideas about ethnographers? Her presentation centred around a criticism of a popular perceptions of 'the field' and 'the university' as two separate and homogeneous entities. The problem with such an approach, Oudenhuijsen argued, is that our identity as a fieldworker and our identity as a university staff member are seen as two separate identities, when in reality our professional identity as a researcher is challenged and shaped both by experiences in the field and by the institutions we work for. Instead, Oudenhuijsen calls for 'versatile identity', where our identity as a professional is shaped in relation to ourselves, our fieldwork, our supervisors, our participants, our institutions, and more. Such an approach allows for more room to discuss how we take home our experiences in the field and how these experiences might change our ideas about ethnographers and what ethnographers should look like. In particular, Oudenhuijsen referred to experiences of harassment as well as complicated situations in which boundaries between the personal and professional become blurred. She addressed the impact of the ambiguity of your identity on ethnography and the ability to do fieldwork: who are we in the field? How can you be yourself? Should we, as researchers, be clearer about open and closed doors during our research? These were all questions Oudenhuijsen posed for further discussion.

The discussion focused on what researchers are taught about 'ethnography' and the lived reality of being an ethnographer, both in the field and at home. Participants also elaborated on the difficulty of navigating close relationships in the field while at the same time attempting to keep a professional distance: the lines between friend and researcher are often blurred. This tied in with some of the questions that Oudenhuijsen posed. Participants discussed romanticised ideal research relationships, the balance between being yourself in the field and at the same time protecting yourself, and the difficulty of experiencing harassment by research participants when we also feel a certain loyalty towards (protecting) our participants.

DAY II: PRESENTATIONS

Presentation Sonja Marzi
Sonja Marzi's presentation reflected on the use of digital ethnography and how it changes are relationships with our participants. Firstly, she addressed how digital methods often rely on more extractive methods such as interviews and surveys rather than interactive, participatory methods. Marzi's work focuses on participatory action research and the co-production of knowledge with participants. To challenge the way digital ethnography is often used, she developed a remote participatory audio-visual methodology, where participants use their smartphones to collect data in the form of video material. By doing so, video narratives are created *with* participants, thereby prioritising co-production as well as participation despite the use of digital methods.

However, this method is not without its risks and Marzi specifically highlighted the importance of balancing the collection of this type of data with the safety of your participants. The biggest challenge of using this methodology is that participants are the ones active in the field, while the researcher is only present from a distance. This also means that all the potential risks of the field are carried by the participants. Marzi mentioned the risk of recording videos in areas with high crime rates, high rates of covid infections, shooting minors or public shots and shooting something disturbing or traumatic. In those cases, how can researchers provide support? And how do you create awareness about risks without being geographically present? What unforeseen risks might be overlooked because the researcher is not present? Those are all questions that need to be at the centre of this type of research and that often do not have a clear-cut answer.

Presentation Laura Thurmann
The last presentation of the two-day webinar was held by Laura Thurmann, who is currently conducting research on security practices that women develop and use in order to prevent, deal with and address gendered risks in ethnographic fieldwork. Her presentation reflects on

what it is like to conduct digital ethnography on such a sensitive topic as our vulnerability in the field.

Fieldwork safety, Thurmann argues, is not simply about prevention: it is also about safety practices, support networks and proper fieldwork preparation. Fieldwork safety thus also occurs before and after we are in the field. In her research, Thurmann looks at the individual level, the institutional level and at networks and initiatives that deal with safety. One of her most pressing observations about conducting digital ethnography on these topics is the assumption that she is "safe in the field", because she is conducting fieldwork from home. However, Thurmann argues, safety is not just physical, being at home can also make you feel vulnerable. It can be difficult to maintain boundaries, separating your work life from your personal life, and the emotional heaviness of doing fieldwork at home makes it harder to take distance: everything is 'at home'. Therefore, Thurmann emphasized the importance of setting clear boundaries for yourself. Furthermore, her research has also made her question the idea of the need for researchers to be vulnerable whilst doing research: vulnerable for the sake of better connections, solidarity, and better data collection. She argued it is problematic to see vulnerability as a prerequisite for good ethnography and instead we should more carefully consider and discuss what it means for us as researchers to have close connections in the field and reflect upon how these experiences shape us and our ethnography.

Summarizing, this two-day webinar provided fruitful insights into the different dynamics researchers may have to navigate in order to protect their safety in the field, as well as the institutional dynamics that reinforce may reinforce structural inequalities and risks related to doing fieldwork. We would like to thank all speakers and participants for their input, in particular: Mindi Schneider (Wageningen University); Norah Karrouche (VU University); Loes Oudenhuijsen (Leiden University); Sonja Marzi (London School of Economics and Political Science); Laura Thurmann (University of Manchester); Tine Davids (Radboud University Nijmegen) and Ina Keuper (retired, VU University).