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**Working Paper**

## How to have better discussions about gender, sexuality and safety in field research: A guide to research institutions

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A guide to research institutions

**HOW TO HAVE BETTER DISCUSSIONS  
ABOUT GENDER, SEXUALITY AND SAFETY  
IN FIELD RESEARCH**

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# **HOW TO HAVE BETTER DISCUSSIONS ABOUT GENDER, SEXUALITY AND SAFETY IN FIELD RESEARCH**

**Rose Løvgren**

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## INTRODUCTION

Research institutions are increasingly being encouraged to engage with questions about gender, sexuality and safety in field research. The call to start an 'uncomfortable conversation' (Clark and Grant 2015, 1) has been made by many scholars who have sought to increase awareness about the gendered and sexualized vulnerabilities especially of women and LGBTQ researchers doing longer or shorter periods of immersed research in the fields of ethnography, geography and similar disciplines (Sharp and Kremer 2006; Gifford and Hall-Clifford 2008; Clancy et al. 2014; Ross 2015; Kloß 2016).

This working paper takes its point of departure in the already sizeable amount of academic thought put into these subjects and argues not for such conversations to begin, but for improvements to be made to conversations about gender, sexuality and safety in field research within academia. Based on my own fieldwork experiences and the growing literature on the field, the present paper is intended as a guide for universities and other research institutions to do better when it comes to implementing the many important and long-term lessons from the literature.<sup>1</sup> Just as exposure of the dangers of pedophilia can lead to the bizarre conclusion that schools and day-care institutions need to ban their male employees from hugging children, so too can important discussions about sexuality and danger in fieldwork lead to at times absurd and counterproductive discussions and regulations within research institutions. In this paper, I discuss some of the problematic tendencies in these discussions and present four pieces of advice for institutions and researchers on how to improve them by assembling some of the lessons from the literature and coupling them with my own experiences.

These guidelines read as follows: 1) Safety in 'the field' starts 'at home'. To give researchers a strong sense of bodily integrity prior to fieldwork, universities and other research institutions need to work harder on their own climate of sexual safety. 2) Gender and sexuality is everyone's issue. Some discussions and practices to promote safety implicitly mark certain bodies as less capable of field research, yet gender and sexuality in the field need to be treated as every field researcher's concern. 3) Not only 'stranger-danger'. As is the case more generally, during field research sexual threats often arise in engagements with people known to the researcher, and academic discussions and preparations can do more to reflect this. 4) Gender, sexuality and safety in the field are moving targets. Some of the proposed solutions for promoting sexual safety in field research are too static and unlikely to be helpful in the course of relations that change during the research. As has been proposed in many parts of the literature, safety in the field is better

<sup>1</sup> The long list of references at the end of this paper is intended to illustrate that many of the insights about gender, sexuality and safety in the field have existed for many years, and to provide readers with examples of the pervasiveness of some of the reported experiences of harassment and assault.

promoted through follow-up practices than by working with static conceptions of what signals cultural respectability.

## **SAFETY IN 'THE FIELD' STARTS 'AT HOME'**

Sexual harassment and sexual violence have been reported by field researchers working in countries all over the world (Johnson 2016; Wadman 2017; R.G. Nelson et al. 2017; Gluckman 2018), and statistics show an overwhelming tendency for female researchers especially to have experienced some form of sexual threat or assault during their fieldwork (Whitehead and Conaway 1986; Howell 1990; Lee 1995; Clancy et al. 2014). In some situations, preparing for field research may include engaging with differences in how sexual interest is communicated in another cultural setting and for the researcher to prepare to navigate this context (Kloß 2016; R.G. Nelson et al. 2017; Williams 2017, 1, 2017, 2). But as has been noted by the authors of the 'Special issue on Sexual Harassment in the Field' published by the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, research relations themselves often create demands for reciprocity (Clark and Grant 2015; Johansson 2015; Isodoros 2015; Krishnan 2015; McDougall 2015; Congdon 2015). This means that demands for sexual favors from female researchers are also made when we work within cultural contexts we consider our own or, in the case of diasporic researchers with cultural ties to multiple places, in contexts with which they have strong ties of nationality or kinship. As Maya Berry et al. write, diasporic researchers 'are not merely conducting research, but are connected to the places where we work through familial ties, diasporic relationships, and investments in political struggles, all of which hold us accountable even after our departure' (Berry et al. 2017, 540). This means that 'field' and 'home' are not always easily separable categories, which increases the need for critical and reflective engagements with gendered and sexual safety. In other words, conversations about gender, sexuality and safety in field research need to take into consideration the many factors that affect how a researcher is situated in 'the field'.

Whichever cultural context constitutes the field in a given piece of field research, the university constitutes one form of home, being the point of departure that sets the stage for field research. It is this home which arguably needs to improve its environment for sexual safety in general (Universities UK 2016; Khalid 2018; National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine 2018). With respect to the question at hand, namely how gendered and sexual safety in the field is discussed in academia, there is also a need for more critically informed engagement. Ironically, some forms of conversation about gender, sexuality and safety in field research may serve to decrease the researcher's sense of sexual integrity rather than increase it. While Imogen Clark and Andrea Grant have had the experience that 'male colleagues often seem unaware of the difficulties female fieldworkers may face in their research (both the existing literature on this topic and our experiences in raising this issue attest to this)' (Clark and Grant 2015, 4), I have on many occasions found my male colleagues acutely attentive to this issue.

Attention, however, is not enough to produce helpful advice and promote a sense of safety in preparation for fieldwork. In some cases, this intense attention can do the opposite. While a big part of my academic work has discussed my gendered and sexualized positionality (Løvgren 2018, forthcoming), I have struggled to present on any other topic without the work being considered suspicious if it did not discuss my embodied positionality. For example, after a fifteen-minute presentation about civic education for young men in drug rehabilitation, a senior male colleague told me that it was hard to take my arguments seriously because I had not stipulated anything about how my position as a beautiful young white woman among brown men had affected the research outcome. Certainly, embodied positionality is always an important aspect of knowledge production, but when attention to embodied positionality is so unevenly directed at female researchers it produces us as extraordinarily different. As I will discuss in the upcoming section, the intense attention towards women in the field implicitly communicates that women are less capable in the field than men, since we, and not our male colleagues, have all these issues of sex and gender to deal with. In this section, I start by explaining that some of the expressions of concern about my sexual safety exhibit an extraordinary sense of entitlement to comment on my body which does little to increase my sense of bodily integrity. Encroaching on my professional identity by evaluating my appearance becomes one part of the many boundary transgressions I go through in my work as a researcher at home and in the field. Many places in the literature speak to the same point (Gearing 1995; Williams 2009; R. G. Nelson et al. 2017; Berry et al. 2017; metooanthro.org, n.d.). When I argue that safety in the field starts at home, my point is that research institutions need to work harder on producing a climate of academic debate which feels less encouraged to keep describing the details of our (mostly female) bodies.

A particularly frustrating example of counterproductive advice comes from senior male academics who merge their concern for the sexual safety of young women in the field with comments about how these women are exceptionally vulnerable because they are so beautiful and so sexual. Of course, people do flirt and form relationships at work, and although there are reasons to be wary of the power inequalities in such relationships, this is not an argument against them. The problem is rather that our discussions about how to protect ourselves in sexual harassment should not themselves be sexualizing and harassing. If you find yourself interested in pursuing a sexual relationship with a junior colleague, you should not be the one commenting on the likelihood of her getting raped in the field. Conversations about safety in the field underlined with personal sexual agendas do not inspire an increased sense of sexual safety – they do the opposite. Bianca Williams has raised similar considerations about the important connections between our sense of sexual integrity in our academic lives and our sense of sexual integrity in the field. She reflects on the many moments when

as a graduate student and as a professor, the interactions with academic men push past that moment of verbal appreciation of one's beauty (which some of us like) to that awkward, uncomfortable



place where you're having to weigh the potential damage to your career against the damage to his super fragile, yet powerful ego when you say 'no.' Even now, as I write this, there are stories that I type, and then I erase. Trying to decide whether it is revealing too much; whether there will be long-term professional consequences; whether or not it is appropriate to tell; whether or not it counts as violence; even though the memories have not left me, and I'm sure the men who have done the damage don't think twice about it. (Williams 2017)

This perspective diverges from the take on sexual harassment in field research as exceptional because the field itself is marked as an exceptional space where we are more unsure about the rules of conduct. Liza Mügge, for example, describes that she 'did not openly challenge sexual intimidation in the field in the ways I would do outside the field' (Mügge 2013, 542). As reflected in Mügge's experiences, some preparations for fieldwork may do well to include reflections on how to handle the differences in sexual navigation produced by being in a researcher position and/or being in a different cultural context. But in contrast to Mügge's description of a clear sense of difference between sexual navigation at home and in the field, my experiences in the field were not particularly exceptional in this aspect. On the contrary, walking the thin line of dodging men's unwanted sexual approaches while not severing my ties with them completely because I have academic relations with them is something I have been schooled in throughout my life as a university student.

Taking questions of gender, sexuality and safety in the field seriously entails a deeper appreciation and consideration of how sexual threat works, not as singular moments during field research, but as a factor that follows us through most parts of our academic lives. As I will expand on below, sexual harassment, assault and violence 'in the field' share many similarities with these forms of violence 'at home'. In the words of Pamela Moss, accounts of sexual harassment and/or assault during fieldwork are not 'one woman's account of a singular act' but 'rather a singular woman's account of an experience many women have as part of their everyday lives' (Moss 1995, 447). Universities and other research institutions obviously cannot control the totality of the culture called 'home' by researchers, but they can do much more to promote a strong sense of bodily integrity among women and LGBTQ researchers in particular. One aspect of promoting a better academic culture may be initiatives, such as the American Anthropological Association's Policy on Sexual Harassment and Sexual Assault (2018) and the Training Guides from [metoanthro.org](http://metoanthro.org) (Hanes and Walters, n.d.), which engage with the issue of sexual safety in all parts of academia.

Starting one's preparations for ensuring safety in the field at home therefore includes two types of activity in practice. There are the activities proposed in the guides, which include 'Making your safety plan seminar' (Hanes and Walters, n.d., 2) and preparations for 'How to Obtain Assistance' (American

Anthropological Association 2018, 9) in case of assault (readers looking for more concrete practical advice will do well to consult these two documents). Amy Pollard, moreover, proposes a '*mentoring scheme*, where post-fieldwork students act as mentors for pre-fieldwork students' (Pollard 2009, 23). And then there are the activities which should aim at reducing the level of harassment that we as academics take for granted in our professional lives. These should be ongoing discussions in academia and they concern everyone, as we are all involved in creating the climates where certain comments and forms of behavior are tolerated or even encouraged.

## **GENDER AND SEXUALITY IS EVERYONE'S ISSUE**

There is an underlying tension in the many calls to consider questions of gender, sexuality and safety in the field between the overrepresentation of women in accounts of harassment, threats and assaults in fieldwork (Clancy et al. 2014) and the insistence that these are not only women's issues (R.G. Nelson et al. 2017; Berry et al. 2017). As Esther Newton has argued: 'If straight men choose not to explore how their sexuality and gender may affect their perspective, privilege, and power in the field, women and gays, less credible by definition, are suspended between our urgent sense of difference and our justifiable fear of revealing it' (Newton 1993, 4).

This fear relates to the desire to avoid being further marked as the kind of body that is less capable of field research (Lewin and Leap 1996). Megan Steffen traces the tensions underlying many of the discussions about safety for women in the field to the rape and murder of Henrietta Schmerler in 1931. Schmerler was a young anthropology student at Columbia University who died while doing fieldwork in Arizona (Steffen 2017; Schmerler 2017). Discussing the case, Nancy Howell has noted how:

The possibility that women might not be permitted to do fieldwork because of their susceptibility to rape and murder came close to the surface in [the Schmerler case] [...] women hesitate to speak about rape or threats of sexual assault for fear that their freedom of action will be restricted. (Howell 1990, 94–95)

This fear is not unfounded, as British male anthropologists have historically used gendered and racialized notions of threat to exclude female anthropologists from fieldwork by citing the likelihood of sexual violence (Lutkehaus 1986; Lee 1995). In addition to the fear of professional exclusion or restriction, almost all accounts of sexual harassment, violence and assault describe the process as decreasing one's self-confidence as a fieldworker. As making you feel unprofessional, incapable, like a 'fool in the field' (Moreno 1995, 247) and a 'terrible ethnographer' (Krishnan

2015, 72; see also Ashkenazi and Markowitz 1999; Sharp and Kremer 2006; Gifford and Hall-Clifford 2008; Ross 2015; Clark and Grant 2015; Huang 2016; Williams 2017). It may be tempting in this context to downplay or completely conceal these forms of violence within texts and presentations in academia as a way to avoid having colleagues at the university further promote these feelings (indeed it was Eva Moreno's supervisor who called her a 'fool in the field' when she reported her rape). When my own male colleagues question whether I and other female colleagues who have spoken openly about our experiences of sexual threat during field research are fit to do more fieldwork, those who question us may feel that it is a matter of promoting our welfare. But it also implicitly questions whether we are made of the right stuff, whether we have the 'balls' (Mott and Roberts 2014, 239) it seems we need to be field researchers (see also Clancy 2013; Huang 2016; Steffen 2017).

How are we to reconcile the need to improve gendered and sexualized safety with the need not to mark certain bodies as less capable of fieldwork? I propose that one way to respond to this tension includes a critical engagement with what has been described as '[t]he allure and privileging of danger over everyday practice in field research' (I.L. Nelson 2013, 419). While questions about gender, sexuality and safety in the field do not go away in fields that are traditionally considered safe, the ranking of female bodies as less capable of field research is connected to the often implicitly added value attributed to dangerous field research (Lee 1995). Anthropology and its related disciplines still celebrate stories about fieldworkers who go to extremes to get to the most exciting stories in the most 'exotic' places (Navarro, Williams, and Ahmad 2013; Mott and Roberts 2014; Boesten and Henry 2018). As has been remarked elsewhere in the literature, this tendency also promotes ableism, the notion that able-bodied academics are more likely to produce exciting research. The allure of dangerous exotic fieldwork produces and reproduces the ideal fieldworker within the 'white heteropatriarchal norms of academia that shape what becomes visible, discussable, and publishable about us, as key battlefields for truth in our discipline' (Berry et al. 2017, 554; see also Chouinard and Grant 1995; Mott and Roberts 2014; Ross 2015; Jokinen and Caretta 2016). To counter the tendency to encourage researchers to go and look for danger, we may draw on the proposed strategies of Jelke Boesten and Marsha Henry to curb over-research in dangerous places.

Our suggested strategies are organized around five main questions: what is the research question? What data are already available? What will the research do for the subjects of the study? What are the geopolitical contexts that shape disclosure and the field more generally? And lastly, what are the geopolitical contexts that shape our research? (Boesten and Henry 2018, 582)

Boesten and Henry propose these measures in order to protect research subjects from research fatigue in places which attract extraordinary amounts of research attention due to violent conflict and similar elements of research appeal. But we can also use them or a modified version of them to protect ourselves as researchers, whatever our gender. In other words, we can use them to discourage the notion that all forms of dangerous and thrilling research are important. When the most prestigious research is best carried out by a white, heterosexual, non-handicapped male body, discussions about gender, sexuality and safety in fieldwork will mark other bodies as less capable. This promotes 'the discipline's implicit masculinist 'shut up and take it' mentality in reference to gendered violence in the field' (Berry et al. 2017, 538). That is, the norms for what topics we can speak about regarding our field experiences are shaped by the experiences of the ideal fieldworker as described above. Because ability to withstand hardship becomes part of this ideal, women and LGBTQ researchers especially feel a pressure to shut up about experiences of gendered violence.

Coming back to the question of how men's silence on questions about gendered and sexualized positionality marks those who speak about these questions as differentiated, studies of sexual harassment during field research mention a tendency for some male researchers not to feel troubled by this form of privilege.

Male and female respondents noticed how men often benefitted from being at a field site in a culture more patriarchal than the one where they had grown up, and that some men gladly adopted those cultural norms while in the field. (Clancy 2013)

Related to this issue, Tony Whitehead cites a male colleague for the following comment on his (Whitehead's) own choice not to get sexually involved in the field: 'I don't understand the problem, everybody gets laid in the field' (Whitehead 1986, 232). This comment is in sharp contrast to how the sexualized identities of female researchers have brought up the question of whether they can be trusted to do fieldwork at all.

Making gender, sexuality and safety in the field everyone's issue also means that male researchers should be posed as many critical questions about their gendered and sexualized positionality as female researchers are. The purpose of subjecting male researchers to the same type of scrutiny as female researchers is twofold. First, as has been argued elsewhere, there is still a need for men to increase the way they feel troubled about their own privilege and, in the context of field research, about how they become complicit in gendered inequalities and violence through engagement in research (Cowburn 2013; Pini and Pease 2013). Secondly, asking all researchers difficult gendered questions troubles the ranking of male researchers as better suited for fieldwork. In practice this means, for example, more critically informed practices of risk assessment.

Johanna Hopp describes planning fieldwork as a hitchhiker in Germany while studying at Oxford. She stipulated in her risk assessment form that she would always travel in the company of a male acquaintance and not accept lifts in cars with more than one male over the age of nine (Hopp 2018). These measures were proposed by senior male colleagues, and it was stressed to her that she would not pass the assessment unless she made it very clear how she was going to protect her female body. From one point of view, it is a welcome development that research institutions care about promoting safety and pay attention to questions of gender and sexuality. However, put into rigid frames set up to control whether a female researcher is allowed to do research, it easily produces absurd consequences. To begin with, the implied sexualization of ten-year-old boys and Hopp's sexualized vulnerability in relation to them is strangely perverted. As argued elsewhere, many practices of ethical clearance seem to relate more to protecting the university from legal repercussions than to our safety as researchers (Sleeboom-Faulkner et al. 2017; Onofrei 2018). Universities need to render such rigid gendered and sexualized assumptions more suspect in their institutional practice, in Hopp's case, for example, by not taking it for granted that a male body is needed to protect a female one. Protecting our bodily integrity in fieldwork should be treated as every researcher's issue and not like a punishment placed on female researchers for having such a troublesome body.

While I have proposed that one way to counter the ranking of female bodies as less capable is to trouble the notion that the best fieldwork is dangerous, some female researchers have insisted that their dangerous research was important. According to Cynthia Mahmood, who was raped by a group of police officers in northern India as punishment for inquiring about Sikh insurgency, meaningful research hurts, and because she is a woman, it hurt her in a way that was specific to her gender (Mahmood 2008). For researchers like Mahmood and others, their sense of agency is expressed in the insistence that their sexual aggressors do not get to set the terms of what they are allowed to research (see also Huang 2016; Steffen 2017; Berry et al. 2017). When Mahmood describes the inevitable dangers of doing important research, she also mentions the murder, torture and imprisonment of men. That is, having a female body is not the only way to be vulnerable as a researcher. When researchers have engaged with the critical questions posed by Boesten and Henry and still conclude that their dangerous research is worthwhile, preparing for fieldwork may include being explicit about the sexualized and gendered vulnerabilities involved in a given project and plan ways to respond to possible violence. Notably, the male researchers targeted for murder in dangerous places are often connected to the research context through their nationality. This brings me back to the importance of having in-depth critical discussions about ways to promote the safety of all researchers prior to fieldwork. The academy has a long tradition of preparing a white body with a European or North American nationality to work in the Global South, but following this format does not do enough to help prepare researchers with more complex relationships with their sites of field research, such as diasporic researchers (Henry 2007; Berry et al. 2017).

Related to this issue is a tendency which has bothered me since the beginning of my fieldwork preparations and continues to the present day, namely the over-determination of threats against white women from brown men. Jean Gearing writes of her preparation for fieldwork in the West Indies in the 1980s that her male supervisor 'cautioned me quite seriously that I would be especially vulnerable as a white American woman, because West Indian men perceived us as being the ultimate in sexual desirability and as sexually promiscuous' (Gearing 1995, 189). While this remark was made almost forty years ago, it sounds astonishingly similar to the fieldwork advice I have received on many occasions within academia. When I encourage research institutions to have better discussions, the tendency to be especially anxious about the violence of brown men against white female bodies is one of the problems I seek to address. Again, it is surely important to discuss how to prepare for fieldwork in another cultural context that has different ways of expressing sexual interest. This is not an argument against these discussions. Nor is it a denial of the existence of what has been called the 'Baywatch Syndrome' (Hapke and Ayyanketil 2010, 345) – the image of Western women as more promiscuous in many places outside 'the West' (see also Moreno 1995; Viterna 2009). But there are three important problems with the overwhelming attention to the issue of protecting white female bodies from brown male aggressors. First, it carries a clear colonial legacy of anxiety about racial contamination in which white men have historically been intensely focused on their imaginations of threat from brown men and much less on the threats posed by white men to women of all ethnicities (Stoler 1995; McClintock 1995). Secondly, it often produces the effect of ranking white female bodies as more frail in the face of violence and women of color as more 'able' (Berry et al. 2017, 554) to endure it. This communicates that women of color should endure it and furthers the sense that 'help isn't on the way if we scream' (ibid, 544). Thirdly, as I discuss further in the following section, to a large extent it misidentifies the sources of danger in the field. In the accounts of white women who have been sexually assaulted in the field, the assaults are described as relating more to the concrete field relations at play than to brown men's supposed universal desires for white flesh. These descriptions concur with my own experiences of sexual harassment during field research. Whereas some fieldwork advice from senior colleagues has painted a picture of me as a lone blond woman in a sea of lower-class Rwandan men who were all considered potential sexual aggressors ignited by my provocative whiteness, I have mostly felt sexually threatened in well-furnished offices and always due to demands for reciprocity relating to the research relationship itself. In addition, the banal insight that racial markers are not read the same way in all cultural contexts should also guide our assumptions about how we identify racial threat. That is, women who are considered ethnic others in Europe and North America may still be typed as white in another cultural context (Chakravarty 2012; Fujii 2015).

Whereas Gearing's supervisor described her as being extraordinarily sexually marked in her field research in Central America, women of color have described their experience of 'the naturalized rapeability of black flesh throughout the Americas' (Berry et al. 2017, 546). There seems to be no basis for considering white

women to be more exposed to sexual violence; rather, there is more anxiety connected to violence against our bodies within academia, especially if it comes from cultural others.

## **NOT ONLY 'STRANGER-DANGER'**

This brings me to the more general need for research institutions to update their definitions of sexual threat to include more than stranger-danger. As has been argued by many others,

risk in fieldwork training courses is always constructed 'out there'. We are trained to think about risk in terms of strangers: the mugger or rapist lurking down a dark alley, on a public street, or in the driver's seat of a taxi. As feminists and gender activists have been pointing out for decades, however, rape and sexual assault are most likely to be perpetrated by a woman's acquaintance or 'friend'.  
(Clark and Grant 2015, 6; see also Johansson 2015; McDougall 2015)

In addition to the lessons derived from fieldwork training courses, Williams has described the 'special, hidden rule book for women anthropologists with a set of guidelines that male privilege shields our male counterparts from ever having to read or heed' (Williams 2009, 156). In Williams' case, these warnings included not riding the bus, not taking the train, not taking taxis and not walking on foot (see also Clark and Grant 2015). There is a lot of policing of the possible modes of transport for female researchers so that we can protect ourselves from strangers. The first problem with these practices of academic policing is that they set us up to fail. We will inevitably have to transport ourselves somewhere. The advice that we use no forms of transportation can easily lead to women who have experienced aggression during transportation blaming themselves. The many warnings we receive communicate the implicit damning question in the aftermath of assault: Why would we try to transport ourselves anywhere anyway? For example, Lindsay Gifford found herself with no other way to return to her accommodation from her field site than to take the bus, although she 'knew' that she was not supposed to. When the bus driver attempted to kidnap and rape her, she was left with feelings of self-blame (Gifford and Hall-Clifford 2008; see also Sharp and Kremer 2006; Tsing 2011; Ross 2015). The alternative to transportation is also failure, as reflected in Williams' comment that 'these warnings kept me confined to my room for at least the first ten days of primary fieldwork' (Williams 2009, 158).

To have better discussions about gender, sexuality and safety in fieldwork, we have to trouble the notion that stranger-danger can be avoided through the right

academic policing of women's bodies. While the intention might be to promote our safety, it easily leads to us being blamed for putting ourselves in a dangerous situation in the first place, even though we cannot avoid danger altogether. Discussing the case of Henrietta Schmerler, Nathalie Woodbury blames the victim explicitly, again because she was using transportation. Woodbury writes 'getting up behind a man on his horse, she invited rape and her death' (Woodbury 1986, 3). As noted elsewhere, this is an 'oxymoronic statement' since '[i]f sexual advances are invited, they are not rape' (Tannen 1986, 2).<sup>2</sup> While Woodbury's is a particularly callous description (Steffen 2017), the sentiment is echoed in all the experiences of researchers who have been blamed in their home institutions for being fools in the field after experiencing assault (Moreno 1995; Ross 2015). Better discussions would mean discussing ways to improve sexual safety while stressing that assault is never the victim's fault and that whatever measures we take, we just cannot avoid being placed in situations where people may harm us in gendered and sexualized ways (for examples of how to do this, see American Anthropological Association 2018; metooanthro.org, n.d.). We cannot do this in our everyday lives, so it stands to reason that we cannot when we are doing field research either. Research institutions need to work with responsive measures in addition to preventative ones and to reflect critically on the preventative ones required of female researchers, as we will have to use some form of transportation and cannot always control which form.

The second problem with the emphasis on stranger-danger in the practices of fieldwork preparation within research institutions is that it leaves out the many other forms of gendered and sexualized threats. In the description of Leanne Johansson, her home institution had prepared her well for:

Kidnappings, protest unrest, shootings, muggings and other stranger-dangers [...]. What I was less prepared for, however, was the manner in which the dangers of this external environment shaped, and were shaped by, interpersonal relationships and day-to-day negotiations of them. (Johansson 2015, 57)

Johansson's research took place in a fraught political setting, and what placed her in a sexually precarious situation was her resulting reliance on cultivating personal relationships over the long term in order to navigate her research context. That is, in addition to the dangers of a given research context, fieldwork preparations do well to consider the vulnerabilities of relying on close personal relationships in such contexts. When our safety in the field depends on close

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<sup>2</sup> Another important objection to this characterization was made by Evelyn Kamanitz and Gil Schmerler, who argued: 'Nowhere have we found reliable evidence of any specific taboo concerning a single woman riding horseback with an Apache man or that such an action necessarily implies a sexual invitation or assent. Furthermore, the assumption that Henrietta actually did ride with her murderer – or ride voluntarily – rests on the testimony of the murderer and his brother-in-law' (Kamanitz and Schmerler 1987, 4).



personal relationships this gives a lot of power to the people on whom we depend in the field. This power is at times exactly what places us in a sexually precarious position (Moreno 1995; Onofrei 2018; Løvgren forthcoming).

The condition of vulnerability may be more intense in research settings that are marked by mass violence, but it is still present in research settings where personal safety has traditionally not been considered a big question. The people who have transgressed against field researchers are commonly those with whom they have had some form of intimate working relationship: the father of the host family (Kloß 2016), the research assistant (Moreno 1995), the gatekeepers (Mügge 2013) and the 'friends' of the researcher (Clark and Grant 2015; Onofrei 2018). In Mingwei Huang's description of the violence she experienced while doing fieldwork, 'What happened to me was an ordinary acquaintance rape of extraordinary circumstances' (Huang 2016). In this way, sexual threat during field research often follows the same formula as sexual threat does in everyday settings. As has been argued by Susan Brownmiller in her study of sexual violence, it is a recurring scenario that a man considers himself entitled to sex with a woman known to him. When the woman refuses to comply over time, he then enforces what he perceives to be a sexual obligation (Brownmiller 1993).

Reflections on field research often note how dependent researchers are on the relationships they form in the field (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; LeCompte and Schensul 2010; Pelto 2013), but sexualized vulnerabilities relating to these relationships are mostly reflected upon in texts dedicated to this question and rarely feature in general introductions to the practice of field research. This absence is at odds with the pervasive presence of experiences of sexual threat during field research, especially for female researchers (Whitehead and Conaway 1986; Howell 1990; Lee 1995; Clancy et al. 2014). Marie-Louise Glebbeek reflects on the tension in her field research between cultivating trusting relationships and becoming more precariously positioned sexually:

as time passed (months and even years), I was amazed at how freely some policemen came to speak about the sensitive topics they had considered taboo at an earlier point in my research. [...]. However, one drawback is that the more time I spent with an interviewee, the greater the probability of his making inappropriate sexual advances toward me. (Huggins and Glebbeek 2009, 366; see also Gurney 1985; Warren 1988; Ackers 1993; Clark and Grant 2015)

The goal of much field research is, in one form or another, to become embedded in the context of research – to form relationships with spaces and people, to get closer in order to understand more. Becoming in this way more intimate with a context, we often become more exposed to unwanted sexual approaches. In the words of Dána-Ain Davis: 'Because our research depends on intimacies [...] we

engage in ways that make entry points for external forces/ideas/virus/people easier to enter us' (cf. Berry et al. 2017, 546; see also Presser 2009).

Understanding sexualized vulnerabilities as a condition that increases as the researcher becomes more embedded in her research context also counters the tendency to associate assault in the field with the female researcher's ignorance of the cultural implications of her actions. Discussing Woodbury's characterization of Schmerler as 'stupid', Steffen writes:

it is worth noting that my own assault occurred after the first *jiefeng* or welcome back banquet my interlocutors had ever held in my honor. Both the banquet and the assault were evidence not of my ignorance of local customs but of my integration into them; perversely, both events signified that my interlocutors finally recognized me not just as a person who was part of their community but also as a *gendered* person. (Steffen 2017)

While Moreno's supervisor similarly assumed that she had been a fool in the field, the Ethiopian women in the town where she did her research characterized the violence as an inescapable part of the general condition of female dependence on men. They did not chastise her for having acted wrongly. In their perception, 'There was no need for me to feel ashamed or unhappy. What had happened to me was horrible and dreadful, but, unfortunately, normal.' (Moreno 1995, 243).

In order to have better discussions about gender, sexuality and safety in the field, lack of safety has to be understood as something that derives not only from being a stranger in a cultural context, but also from getting closer and more intimate with a given context. When research institutions prepare researchers for fieldwork, the heightened vulnerabilities for some researchers in the formation of intimate research relationships need to be taken into account (Behar 2012). Taking them into account does not entail discouraging female researchers from forming the relationships on which much field research rely. One way for research institutions to respond to this form of vulnerability could be to set up follow-up mechanisms and encourage us as researchers to share our creeping senses of insecurity with supervisors or other forms of support within the university. Not all sexual violations from known others during field research are preceded by a gradual build up, which means that this method cannot serve to preempt all forms of threat. But many are (e.g. Moreno 1995; Mahmood 2008; Kloß 2016), and mine were too. When I hesitated to share them with my support system 'at home', it related to my sense that the harassing relationship was my individual failure which I would talk into existence by making it an issue. One step towards encouraging us as researchers to share these forms of insecurity rather than internalizing them would be to learn from the lessons available in the literature and discourage notions of sexual threat as related to the researcher's ineptitude in navigating her research context. In practice, this means that a lot of senior

academics need to undergo some form of training to trouble the way gendered and sexualized safety is being defined in universities all over the world. In other words, research institutions need to do more than offer training to the bodies that are considered especially problematic in field research. If universities want to take gendered and sexualized safeties seriously, they need to engage with these questions on an institution-wide basis and equip senior academics with the tools to respond to researchers experiencing threat or assault.

## **GENDERED AND SEXUALIZED SAFETIES ARE MOVING TARGETS**

The last notion I want to trouble in this paper are methods intended to promote gendered and sexualized safety that are not always put into writing, but which circulate or are implicitly assumed in many parts of academia. These include, for example, wearing a wedding ring, wearing loose and supposedly asexual clothes, allying yourself with respectable older women in a research context and/or living with a host family. In this section I will discuss some of the problems with this type of fieldwork preparation advice, arguing that gendered and sexualized safeties are targets that move during the course of field research and as such that many of these proposed solutions do not necessarily serve to promote bodily integrity and can in some cases do the opposite.

It is a recurring theme among the authors of the edited volume *Women fielding danger: negotiating ethnographic identities in field research* that either prior to or in the course of their field research they made ‘modifications in [...] dress and comportment’ (Demovic 2009, 104; see also Subramaniam 2009; Goldstein 2009; Shaery-Eisenlohr 2009). Kat Rito, for example, describes wearing ‘loose-fitting clothing that covered as much of my body as possible, making it impossible for men to sexualize my gender’ (Rito 2009, 61).

Imaginations of what constitutes a conservative dress code are among the elements contained in the unspoken rule book for female field researchers referenced by Williams (2009). However, as Kamala Visweswaran and Nayanika Mookherjee argue, dressing for ‘the field’ carries a range of complex meanings as forms of clothing are interpreted in a multitude of different ways according to the context (Visweswaran 1994; Mookherjee 2001). For LGBTQ researchers, wearing loose-fitting clothing which does not emphasize the assigned or assumed gender identity in the field has been described as furthering their sexualized vulnerabilities rather than decreasing them. Evelyn Blackwood describes how her surroundings reacted to her efforts to dress less sexually by increasing the suspicion that she was not properly gender-conforming.

My host sometimes remarked on this lapse because it raised deeper questions for her about my womanhood. She expressed great satisfaction when I wore local dress on ritual occasions but

eventually decided that my proclivity for pants was a harmless American custom. (Blackwood 1995, 58)

In contrast to Blackwood's experience of leniency because of her status as foreigner, Sneha Krishnan describes a field context that was much more aggressively concerned with whether her clothing indicated same-sex desire (Krishnan 2015). She describes the increased politicization of homosexuality at the time of her field research, and because she was not a clear-cut stranger, she was more precariously situated and more exposed to demands that she dress to accentuate her femininity. 'If I continued as I was, bereft of both man and make-up, I could be seriously taken for a "lesbo"' (Krishnan 2015, 75). When I argue that gendered and sexualized safeties are moving targets, I am referring to both the ways they change according to the context and the researcher's positionality in the context and over the course of time during field research. We cannot dress our way out of being sexualized for a number of reasons. As reflected in the experiences of Blackwood and Krishnan, clothing that is assumed to be asexual may be taken as an indicator of queerness, which can also produce unsafe situations for researchers. Moreover, many research contexts require some form of formal wear which for women tends to mean clothes that signal (modest) female sexuality (Ulysse 2007).

Just as we cannot dress our way out of being typed one way or another as gendered and sexualized beings, we cannot make these positionalities go away by setting up what are assumed to be respectable living conditions or by signaling respectability with devices like fake or real wedding rings. Among the advice given to women in preparation for fieldwork is often to live with a family and in similar ways make efforts to establish some form of 'fictive kinship' in order to achieve the forms of protection afforded to the female members of the cultural context concerned (Price 2010; Caretta and Jokinen 2017). There are several gendered and sexualized challenges that this approach to promoting safety fails to take into account. For one thing, as Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers remarks, this form of relationships also poses restrictions on movement and acceptable behavior for the researcher:

Most women anthropologists [...] who entered into fictive kinship relations with local households found that, as Birkett (2000) has observed, 'as a woman traveler [or ethnographer] was drawn closer into village life as a [family's] child, [sister, cousin], wife or mother, she would also be expected to conform more and more to the behavior expected of a woman in that world. Transgressions of acceptable behavior would not be [as] tolerated as they were when she had been a stranger and honored guest' (213). In short, the 'privileges of an outsider had been lost' (Birkett 2000, 214) once the

outsider had entered into the social roles expected of local women. (Schwandner-Sievers 2009, 189)

In the experience of some researchers the loss of privileges that came with fictive or diasporic kinship within the research context complicated their ability to do research at all (Henry 2007; Williams 2009; Berry et al. 2017). In Sinah Kloß's experience, moreover, the expectation that she should conform to the role assigned to her as a daughter in her host family worked to make her more exposed to sexual assault (Kloß 2016). After a period when her host family had been growing increasingly impatient with her refusal to marry one of the suitors they presented to her, the father of the family attempted a sexual assault within the family's compound. In her interpretation the assault was in part a reaction to how she had not been fulfilling the duties of a respectful daughter by finally getting married. Here I want to stress that gendered and sexualized safety also continues to be an issue when we establish living conditions that are meant to signal respectability. As indicated in the previous section, exposure to sexual assault often increases as intimacy in a given context increases, and taking on a role in a family does not always prevent that. The experience of sexualized vulnerability increasing over time is also reflected in Krishnan's fieldwork, where she lived in a hostel for young women – again a living situation which *prima facie* signals respectability:

I had had to ram a bucket in a hole in the door of the bathroom to prevent my room-mates coming and peeking, only to make sneering comments about my body. Following that, I had seen a bit of graffiti on the wall that I now regret I hadn't had the nerve to take a picture of. It said, 'blowjob you fucking cunt'. I had asked the current occupant of the bed it was near about it, and she had casually responded that the girl who had slept there had been 'maybe a lesbian'. (Krishnan 2015, 71)

Understanding gendered and sexualized safeties as moving targets means taking into account the ways relations and expectations shift over time during field research. In Kloß's case, this happened through the mounting pressure to get married, and in Krishnan's case through the growing unease with her unclear sexual preferences. This is a commonplace insight that has been illustrated in field accounts for many years (e.g. Bohannan 1964; Briggs 1975; Fernea 1989), but it has yet to inform how safety is framed within academic practices and discussions. Relevant to my own field experiences, the advice that female researchers ally themselves with other women does not take into account that access to a given context is often mediated by men (Løvgren forthcoming). The same point has been made elsewhere in a description of negotiating research access as 'a difficult process given that even my alliances with women in the organization were

controlled by male leaders' (Berry et al. 2017, 553; see also Mügge 2013). Moreover, as reflected in the experiences of Krishnan and Grant, gendered and sexualized pressure, harassment and violence can also be carried out by women (Clark and Grant 2015; Krishnan 2015).

The final static assumption about promoting women's safety I want to dispute here is the tactic of wearing a fake wedding ring. This advice, which circulates in many academic spaces, communicates that single women working in foreign contexts should try to come off as married as possible. Schwandner-Sievers, for example, describes using this tactic: 'as a woman alone in places where women hardly travel without male protection, I would wear a wedding ring – I called it my "Balkan ring." The ring was a standard feature ("prop") of my research portfolio' (Schwandner-Sievers 2009, 183). While Schwandner-Sievers felt that this device allowed her more freedom of movement, it is important to note that married women too have experienced sexual harassment, assault (Gifford and Hall-Clifford 2008; Shaery-Eisenlohr 2009) and even rape (Mahmood 2008) in situations where it was known to all the people involved that they were married. Underlying the assumption that we can avoid sexual threat by wearing wedding rings is an understanding of sexual harassment and assault as expressions of sexual interest towards available women gone awry. This is a misconception of gendered and sexualized violence that relates to a range of factors is not always the result of a man's efforts to form a romantic connection to a single woman.

There is also a somewhat dated understanding at work here of a clear separation between 'field' and 'home' in the notion that we can dress up as someone we are not while we are taking on the role of fieldworker. This notion too does not take into account the more complex connections between researcher and field in the case of diasporic researchers (Henry 2007; Navarro, Williams, and Ahmad 2013; Williams 2017; Berry et al. 2017), nor does it seem tenable at a time when the field is increasingly able to reach information about the researcher's home (Madden 2017). Related to this issue, there is a smell of cultural arrogance to the fake wedding ring. I have never heard the device mentioned among women working in Western countries, even though, as I have noted above, sexual harassment is certainly prevalent in these field settings too. Hiding behind a wedding ring signals that the researcher feels entitled to survey the lives of cultural others while maintaining a "'secret' self'" (Miller 1989, 162; see also Said 1979; MacLure 2011). While I have indicated in the previous sections that female researchers may have reasons to be guarded in the formation of some intimate relations, I still hesitate to think that the fake wedding ring is a good way to do this. First, it is unlikely to be very effective against sexual violence. Secondly, it reinforces both unhelpful anthropological binaries between the researcher's lives at home and in the field (Navarro, Williams, and Ahmad 2013) and a static conception of the researcher's positionality within the field. Having said this, however, it has made sense to some researchers to hide parts of their identities and, for example, not be openly 'out in the field' (Lewin and Leap 1996; Goldstein 2009). Balancing how much we reveal and share of ourselves in the field is a delicate undertaking. Although the fake wedding ring makes me uneasy for the reasons mentioned above, I do not

find it feasible to state exactly how much information about ourselves we owe to our sites of research either.

In ending this section, let me also say that I understand why many researchers have felt that it mattered that they dressed in a certain way and/or lived in a certain family structure and that these measures allowed them to do research they would otherwise not have been able to do. Many texts reference a clear difference in the reactions of research participants when a female researcher got married or in other ways signaled increased respectability (e.g. Gearing 1995; Hapke and Ayyankeri 2010). But when we discuss these issues and prepare future researchers for fieldwork, it is important that we stress the tentative quality to all of these positionalities. The usefulness of loose clothing is tentative to the context, the researcher and changing field relations over time, as is living within a family setting or seeking out other women for protection. As is reflected in the many accounts of researchers who have experienced a lack of safety during fieldwork, these insecurities relate to changes in how our bodies are situated in the field. In the phrasing of one fieldworker, her body 'has [sometimes] functioned as a human shield for more vulnerable populations, while at other times it has been expected to serve as a resource to be shared' (Berry et al. 2017, 553). Once again, one part of the response to this form of vulnerability is to work with follow-up practices and ongoing questions about safety in the course of and not only prior to fieldwork (metooanthro.org, n.d.; American Anthropological Association 2018).

## **CONCLUSION**

In this paper I have proposed better ways to discuss gender, sexuality and safety in fieldwork, partly by discussing my frustrations with the ways these topics are currently treated within academia, and partly by presenting concrete ways to improve them. To reiterate, 1) Safety in 'the field' starts 'at home'. Academic debates about safety in the field are often sexualizing and harassing. To be serious about bodily integrity within the university includes discouraging bodily evaluations of female researchers especially in preparing for fieldwork. 2) Gender and sexuality are everyone's issues. Historically discussions about gendered and sexualized vulnerabilities have tended to rank the white, heterosexual, able-bodied man as more suited for fieldwork and they continue to do so. Troubling this notion includes troubling the ranking of dangerous and exotic research as more prestigious. It also includes fieldwork preparation practices which ask challenging gendered questions to all researchers and work less as academic policing of women's assumed-to-be-more-difficult bodies. 3) Not only stranger-danger. First, stranger-danger cannot be altogether avoided. When it is implied that it can be by avoiding dangerous forms of transportation, this communicates that women who are assaulted during transportation were wrong to be going anywhere anyway. Secondly, many forms of gendered and sexualized insecurities arise in intimate research relations as the researcher becomes more embedded in a particular context. Responding to this form of insecurity requires both responsive

and follow-up activities. 4) Gendered and sexualized safeties are moving targets. The activities that best promote safety for a researcher depend on the context, the researcher's position in the context and changing expectations and relations over time, which again means that follow-up activities are needed in addition to preparation.

With these four guidelines, I have sought to illustrate how gendered and sexualized experiences of insecurity are features that for many researchers cannot be altogether avoided. My reason for stressing the pervasiveness of these experiences is first to assert and re-assert that most research institutions have serious problems with sexual harassment and assault. Discussions about safety in field research do well not to construct threat as something belonging 'out there' among cultural others, but as a recurring theme in the lives of many academics. Secondly, I stress the pervasiveness aspect in order to highlight that gendered and sexualized violence does not happen because a researcher is unaware of how to properly navigate her research context. They happen in all forms of field settings, and they happen to cultural insiders too. I stress this to make research institutions work with more helpful understandings of what threat looks like and to increase the number of responsive and follow-up activities. If we start by acknowledging that it is hard to completely avoid gendered and sexualized harassment and assault, research institutions may put more efforts in responding to violence in ways that do not encourage viewing those exposed to it as 'fools in the field'. As Onofrei argues, some initiatives may be seen as promoting an overly formalized approach to fieldwork:

but if we work together, this detail can be corrected and improved to aid fieldworkers in their research. AAA's [American Anthropological Association] work is a big step towards recognising the gender-specific dangers of fieldwork, but this movement needs to be replicated by anthropologists in universities worldwide, otherwise it will remain weak and fragmented. (Onofrei 2018)

Other scholars wanting to discuss the pervasiveness of gendered and sexualized insecurities in field research have been called 'alarmist' and 'offensive' (Clark and Grant 2015, 11). As I interpret this type of response, it partly reflects a desire to emphasize the capacities and benefits of certain positionalities – to show all the ways in which, for example, female researchers are capable and well-received in the field. There is nothing wrong with that type of characterization (e.g. Milroy 1987; Schwedler 2006) as far as I am concerned. But there is something wrong with the aggressive denials of conditions of threat and lack of control during field research. First, it does not reflect badly on the field researcher to be in a condition of weakness, dependence or gendered and sexualized vulnerability. To think that it does reflects ableist and masculinized ideals about what fieldwork should be, which, as this paper has argued, we have many reasons not to accept (Behar 2012; Mott and Roberts 2014; Jokinen and Caretta 2016). Secondly, gendered and



sexualized threats exist, both within research institutions and in the field. However uncomfortable this makes some academics feel, it is way more uncomfortable for researchers to go through these experiences alone and be asked to keep quiet about them for fear of upsetting the frail nerves of the academy.

Readers may notice a clash between this paper's take on weakness and vulnerability – not as aspects that detract from professionalism, but as a general condition in- and outside 'the field' – and my lack of compassion for the 'frail nerves' of those who take offence when some of us want to discuss the more systemic problems of subjugation within academia (e.g. Zieler 2019). To clarify, I do not think the problem relates to the frailty of the nerves that may be upset by hearing about sexual harassment and assault, nor with the 'super fragile, yet powerful ego[s]' (Williams 2017) of the senior academic men who transgress our sexual boundaries. The problem lies in the aggressive assertion of the right to continue business as usual. The problem is that, if your sense of victimization is constituted by the existence of debates that you have had the privilege never to consider before, then that sense of victimization is misplaced. If your sense of frailty relates to the loss of an entitlement which you should not have taken as a given (such as undisputed sexual access to your academic colleagues, or the right to comment extensively on their bodies), then this sense of frailty is not more important than the experiences of frailty for researchers whose careers and overall welfare are demonstrably worse off due to pervasive sexual harassment in academia (R.G. Nelson et al. 2017).

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