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SPECIAL ISSUE
Harassment
in the field

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SPECIAL ISSUE

Harassment in the Field:

Reflections on the personal and professional boundaries
of the ethnographer

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**INTRODUCTION**

Introduction

Lise Zurné
Janne Heederik

Since it took off on social media in October 2017, the hashtag #MeToo has resulted in a global movement as many victims of (sexualized) harassment, intimidation and assault felt encouraged to share their stories and speak up against all systems that allow sexual violence to flourish (Langone March 22. 2018). Still in 2022, we have seen the continuing strength and relevance of this movement: recently, we have witnessed the shocking revelations of YouTube channel #BOOS in which women testified about the abuse of power in a flagship talent show; a well-known soccer trainer was forced to resign over sexually explicit messages; and a prominent professor of anthropology has been placed on unpaid administrative leave following a university investigation. This last incident exemplifies how also within academia, sexual harassment continues to be a structural issue, reinforced by the hashtag #MeTooAcademia, where predominantly (women) scientists brought to light the issue of sexualized violence in academia.

However, what remains neglected in these debates is the issue of safety during fieldwork. In 2014, an American study reported that roughly 70 percent of the 666 field scientists who participated in the survey had experienced sexualized harassment or assault in a fieldwork setting (Clancy, Nelson Rutherford & Honde, 2014). The findings suggest that early-career (women) researchers in particular are victimized/victim to such experiences. This also applies the guest-editors of this issue. Approximately three years ago, we (Janne Heederik and Lise Zurné), got acquainted and shared our experiences of (sexualized) harassment in the field, the impact these had on our personal and professional lives, and discussed how field sites are

rarely included in discussions on creating safe workplaces. As a result, together with LOVA, we created a Working Group titled Safety in the Field and, with the help of members and colleagues, organized several webinars on the issue. These explored the gendered risks of doing fieldwork, the ways in which we navigate safety and vulnerability in the field, and the structural issues that prevent researchers to be better prepared, and better cared for on their return. With the help of Tine Davids, we have now been able to compile a Special Issue on this urgent topic. We are hereby proud to present to you the 42nd edition of LOVA Journal of Feminist Anthropology & Gender Studies, themed *Harassment in the field: Reflections on the personal and professional boundaries of the ethnographer*.

This issue will reiterate how, despite being pushed to the periphery of academic debate, research has indicated how (sexualized) harassment and violence in the field is rather a common experience among women researchers, by some even understood as a “given” (Kloß 2016, 398; Richard and Hanson 2017, 588). We hereby draw on Sinah Kloß’ definition (2016, 399) of sexual(ized) harassment as “coercive behaviour, which may include gestures, actions, and other modes of verbal or nonverbal communication, with sexual connotations, which intimidate, humiliate, and exercise power over another person”. Kloß (2016, 399-400) proposes to use the term *sexual(ized)* harassment to emphasize how this behaviour is not related to sexual attraction per se but rather about control: it is an attempt to ‘destabilize power imbalances’ and reinforcing dominance. While some of these experiences are shared by both men and women researchers, for women in particular fieldwork may include acts of sexual harassment in the form of unwanted attention, catcalling, implicit and explicit sexual advances, sexually motivated jokes, bullying, intimidation, and for some, assault or rape (M. Schneider et al. 2020, 2). Furthermore, these experiences may particularly impact students and early-career researchers, who feel perhaps more insecure about their methodology and position both in the field and the academic community (Kloß 2017, 403). As young scientists have yet to acquire status in the academic

community, the struggle for recognition and need to impress their supervisors may lead to the silencing or downplaying of negative fieldwork experiences (Pollard 2009, 15).

PROFESSIONAL EXPECTATIONS AND PERSONAL REALITIES IN ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK

Several contributions in this issue will describe how in (under)graduate courses, anthropological literature, and institutionalized discourses, fieldwork is commonly presented as a rite of passage (Berry et al 2017, 538; Isidoros, 2015: 40; Kloß 2017, 407; M. Schneider et al. 2020, 2). Fieldwork is a core practice in anthropology: through long-term stays in often unfamiliar areas, ethnographers develop close relationships *with* the people they study in order to gain insights into their way of living (Berry et al. 2017, 537; Ingold 2011, 238).

Particularly within these circumstances, researchers may establish bonds of ‘fictive kinship’ with interlocutors that go beyond the professional and regularly cross-over into the personal (Kloß 2017, 397). Researchers who are deeply ‘immersed’ are often ‘praised’ as this may lead to rich ethnographic data (Irwin 2006; Richards and Hanson 2017), subsequently, little has been written on the negative impact of such intimate relationships on our position and role as researchers. On the contrary, as such closeness and silencing has long been a key benchmark in measuring the quality of the ethnographic research (Appadurai 2017), we are often oblivious to its risks.

This has most notably materialised in the popular trope of the ‘heroic fieldworker who sets out to ‘conquer the field’ (Isidoros 2015; Berry et al. 2017; Hanson and Richards 2017; Kloß 2016, 398; M. Schneider et al. 2020, 3). This trope represents fieldwork as inherently exciting and intriguing, and depicts fieldwork difficulties as something to overcome: fieldwork is an adventure, overcoming its challenges a triumph (M. Schneider et. al. 2020; L. Schneider 2020). Researchers are expected to “do anything for the data” and danger might even be sought after as dangerous ethnographies are “the most glorified and rewarded in

academia” (Hanson and Richards 2017, 596). Additionally, fieldwork difficulties are not to be discussed “unless they might result in higher academic credibility” (Kloß 2016, 398). As such, the heroic fieldworker trope leaves little room for researchers who are traumatized by their fieldwork. For those who have experienced sexualized violence and have not been able to ‘overcome’ their experience, this results in feeling of failure, shame, guilt, stress and loneliness (Pollard 2009, 2). Therefore, traumatic experiences are individualised, deeming the ethnographer themselves responsible for coping with their trauma instead of acknowledging that ethnographic fieldwork inherently carries risks that should be discussed and addressed.

Furthermore, it is not just the fieldwork difficulties themselves that are silenced: the dominant trope of the heroic fieldworker represents foremostly a white, cis, abled male and therefore obscures many of the lived realities of fieldworkers who do not fit into this image. Consequently, this trope hides existing inequalities and tensions, as well as our position as scientists vis-à-vis the questions we ask, the methodology we employ and the knowledge we produce (M. Schneider et al. 2020a, 3; L. Schneider 2020, 189; Rose 1997). Instead, we should recognise that “risks and vulnerabilities of research are intersectional along, inter alia, lines of sex, class, gender, and race” (L. Schneider 2020, 187). Rather than ‘othering’ experiences of researchers that do not fit the dominant norm of the white, cis, abled male, we should take seriously the wide variety of fieldwork realities and “appreciate its methodological potential” (L. Schneider 2020, 187).

SPEAKING TO SILENCES

Feminist scholars have long urged scholarship to analyse the hierarchies between researchers and researched, and reflexivity is now considered an essential aspect of anthropological writing. Yet, in mainstream literature experiences of sexual misconduct remain scarce as many still believe these may damage one’s reputation or career. Additionally, researchers are often faced with top-down

policies on ethics, data management and safeguarding the privacy of our interlocutors, yet, many institutions do not take into account that also researchers may themselves be at risk (L. Schneider 2020). As such, the culture of silence around sexualized harassment and violence perseveres in anthropological practice, accompanied by white androcentric discourses. The aim of this journal is then, inspired by the other courageous authors cited here, to break this silence: to reflect upon these experiences and raise awareness about this gap in anthropological literature and education. We argue that these experiences do not only shape our research, but should also be analysed as to how they impact our intersubjective knowledge production.

It is important to add here that that sexualized violence is often directed at people who do not fit into culturally normative ideals with regards to ethnic, racial or sexual identities. While this seems to imply it occurs more regularly in cross-cultural contexts, we must be careful that we do not exoticize ‘the Other’ as potentially more dangerous. As the following contributions will show, experiences of sexualized harassment often confront us with our own privilege, as many of us have not had to anticipate the prominent role our bodies would play in shaping the dynamics of our research before these incidents (M. Schneider et al. 2020, 3; Watt 2018). Lastly, as the contributions in this Special Issue offer personal accounts of (the aftermath of) sexualized violence, we hereby warn that this may be triggering to some readers.

For this Special Issue, we are proud to present the readers with three research articles, one essay, a column, a poetic intermezzo, an interview, and two book reviews that all question, challenge and reflect upon the ways in which researchers navigate issues of safety and vulnerability during fieldwork. Since all of these contributions are centred around tales of the field, this year’s edition does not include a separate section on fieldwork experiences, as usual in the LOVA journals. As always, we share with you the reports of the LOVA activities organized in 2021 and you can find news and professional achievements of our members in the final section, Personalia.

The first research article included in this Special Issue explores the role of sexuality and intimacy in relationships with participants. In *Desiring researchers*, Loes Oudenhuijsen reflects upon her experiences while doing research on ‘sexually dissident’ women, and questions to what extent navigating flirts, inappropriate remarks, and bold invitations to sex have provided her with insights into their lives. Since these women live in a heteropatriarchal society where homosexual conduct is criminalised, their desire for same-sex relationships must remain a secret. Oudenhuijsen describes how on the one hand she uses her own queerness to establish trust and rapport with interlocutors, while on the other this sometimes also shifted her positionality from a researcher to a potential romantic partner. This interesting dynamic between Oudenhuijsen’s desire to get relevant and intimate ‘data’, and the desire of some of her interlocutors to engage in sexual relationships reveal the shifting boundaries between acceptable flirting on the one hand, and unwanted attention on the other. While most stories on sexual misconduct involve cross-sex dynamics, Oudenhuijsen challenges heteronormative and ethnocentric ideas about gender relations and victimisation while also revealing the complexity of sexuality in fieldwork.

In the contribution *A woman’s doctoral body*, Maria Art¹ retells how the experience of sexualized violence triggered a collapse between the imagined separation of her two bodies: on the one hand, her personal identity as a woman, and on the other, her public and professional self as an anthropologist. Art states that the dominant paradigm taught in anthropology does not take into account the (gendered) risks of doing fieldwork for women researchers, members of the BIPoC and/or LGBTQIA+ community. As most literature does not reflect structural inequalities and presents itself as gender-free, we often take a ‘shut up and take it mentality’ to gendered violence in the field (Berry et al. cited in Art, this journal, 49). This is also reflected in the ways women researchers have to navigate issues of safety in their aims of becoming a successful anthropologist. As the author describes: ‘If you get too close, you might be at risk of violation. If you are too

distanced, you might not get *good data*.’ Addressing the dominant narrative of ‘good data’ and ‘the good ethnographer’, Art describes how she was confronted with feelings of guilt and shame after being raped. Furthermore, a lack of support, and being dismissed and victim blamed led her initially to the conclusion she had failed in being a proper researcher. Consequently, the author of this article has chosen to ‘silence herself’ by using a pseudonym while reflecting upon her experiences. This choice does not only perfectly reflect the artificial distinction between our gender and profession as described, it also unfortunately reveals how victims of sexual violence are still being stigmatized. Reflecting back on her experience, Art analyses her (re) positioning as a woman doctoral student, both in the field and within the university.

The third article explores the difficult relation between gender-based violence in the field and academic writing. In *Vulnerabilities and the dilemmas of writing*, anthropologist Carolina Parreiras describes how the sexual abuse she suffered in the field caused her to rethink the ways in which pain and emotions can be included in theoretical reflections. In an attempt to find words for experiences that are hard to communicate, Parreiras draws on Behar (1996) and Page (2017) to engage in a form of ‘vulnerable writing’. Rather than aiming for ‘academic objectivity’, Parreiras uses the accounts of her personal and subjective experiences a ‘mode of knowing’: to understand the other, ‘what happens within the observer must be made known’ as well (Behar 1996, 5–6). Parreiras hereby demonstrates how reflecting upon the harassment she encountered allowed her to explore the role gender plays in the everyday lived experiences she was researching. While Parreiras was conducting research on adolescents in a set of *favelas* in Brazil, none of her interlocutors seemed to have trouble describing the police presence, gang violence or witnessing of dead bodies in their neighborhoods. However, intimate forms of violence in the private spheres of these adolescents’ lives seemed initially ungraspable. This triggered Parreiras to rethink the relationship between violence and language. Identifying silences as moments of

'impasse', she recognized the same suffering of violence, fear, and constant vulnerability she had herself experienced. By understanding the vulnerability of the other, Parreiras argues she increasingly realized her own vulnerability in the field. As such, Parreiras described that the act of writing became both an act of resistance and a form of healing, through challenging the "limits of the narratable" (Parreiras, [this journal](#), 80).

Furthermore, the essay *Traumatizing fieldwork* by Daniëlle de Jongh describes the long-lasting effects of sexual assault: traumatic experiences during her studies resulted in symptoms of PTSD, including physical unrest, anxiety and concentration problems. For three years, she tried to write her thesis but was plagued by writer's block and panic. In the end, a lack of support caused her to give up her degree, a decision that even thirty years later still leaves a bitter taste. De Jongh argues that universities are often blind for their own part in such cases and emphasizes the need of institutional support: knowledge of the risk of traumatising and PTSD seems non-existent. Instead, openness about the risks and doubts concerning safety in the field is needed, and thesis supervisors in particular should be sensitive to signs of trauma.

In *"It's a lot and it's unpaid labour"*, Laura Thurmann interviews founder Jerika Loren Heinze about the Fieldwork Initiative. The Fieldwork Initiative is an organization that provides training and support for those who are at risk of or have faced sexual harassment, violence, or discrimination during fieldwork. Jerika describes how the idea behind this organization was rooted in a 'whisper network', meaning conversations in bathrooms at conferences and informal support between researchers. While doing this work is partly healing, Jerika explains how most work is done for free as the trainings are rarely funded by universities. This emotional labour exemplifies the kind of exploitation persistent in academia and illustrates our dependency on the commitment of individual scholars and their precarious positions. Hopefully, the increasing attention on sexualized

violence in academia will lead to more acknowledgement and institutional support.

In the column *Getting in cars with strangers*, Norah Karrouche describes how during fieldwork, she realized how the emphasis on the respondent's vulnerability left her blind to her own boundaries and she often found herself vulnerable and uncomfortable. In *The Worst Part*, a poetic intermezzo, author Hannah Schild vividly describes the physical sensations of fear, anger and frustration she felt after being harassed during her first week of fieldwork.

This issue features two book reviews. The first discusses the book *Harassed: Gender, bodies and ethnographic research* by Rebecca Hanson and Patricia Richards (2019). Reviewers Courtney Hayhurst and Tara L. Joly argue that the book is an excellent guide for ethnographers and asks us to rethink the "awkward surplus" in our data. Hanson and Richards call upon an embodied ethnography in which 'the meanings, practices, and experiences that constitute them - are implicated in the research process' (2019, 9). In the second review, Ina Keuper shares her impression of the book *Dwaalgast* by Thera Rasing (2021). *Dwaalgast* is a novel, yet it perfectly fits with the theme of this Special Issue, as it describes the serious physical and mental health problems a white Dutch anthropologist experiences after being harassed while working abroad. Ina Keuper describes how sexualized violence should be understood as part of a complex relationship of dominance and extortion practised through (black) magic and witchcraft.

For the first time, the LOVA journal will also feature a section on student submissions that were part of the course *Gender, macht en grenzen* [Gender, power and borders] at the Radboud University Nijmegen. A course that also hosted the LOVA study day this year. For this course, second-year BA students in Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology were invited to reflect upon on sexualized and gender-based violence in contemporary society in the format of a column, letter, blog, Wikipedia or review. The best contributions were

given the chance to be published in this journal. We have selected two submissions to be featured in this edition. Frances van der Horst' review of the (post) punk song *Mother* by the British band Idles describes how the song triggered her to rethink gender inequalities. In the column *Men catcall, women are being catcalled*, Denise Gorissen uses verbal harassment to discuss the socially imposed dichotomy between men and women and its subsequent gendered dynamics in society. We hope to be able to turn this section in a recurrent one, as it offers a new way of engaging students with our LOVA network.

Finally, we will present a Call for Participants and the LOVA activities organized in 2021, including reports on the webinar *Harassment in the field*, the LOVA Study *Who's afraid of feminisms?*, the LOVA Winter School *Motherhood: The unfinished business of feminism?* and the Marjan Rens Thesis Award 2021. Lastly, recent updates and news from our members can be found in Personalia.

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We wish to thank Tine Davids, Jasmijn Rana, Ina Keuper and the LOVA board for giving us this opportunity to work with LOVA and for their constructive comments and help. A special thanks to the blind reviewers who have put their time and effort into improving this journal. We would also like to thank members of our Working Group, 'Safety in the Field', for all their guidance and support throughout this process. We thank Norah Karrouche, Karin Willemse, Marina de Regt, Mindi Schneider and all other feminist scholars who have shaped our thinking about sexual(ized) harassment in the field. We are grateful for their efforts towards making universities safer spaces. Our time dedicated to this journal is supported by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 679614) as well as the Erasmus Initiative 'Vital Cities and Citizens' of the Erasmus University Rotterdam.

About the guest-editors

Lise Zurné is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Historical Culture at the Erasmus University. Her project explores the representation and appropriation of 20th century violence in historical re-enactments. She is also a co-founder of the ethnovision, a collective of visual anthropologists who provide workshops on the use of visual methods in academic research. Lise is also the co-chair the Working Group 'Safety in the Field' at the LOVA network.

Janne Heederik is a PhD Candidate in Anthropology and Development Studies at Radboud University and a member of an ERC-funded research project on participatory urban governance. Based on ethnographic research in Manchester, UK, her research explores welfare, poverty, and brokerage in contemporary Britain. Janne is also the co-chair of the Working Group 'Safety in the Field', which is focused on research, discussions and publishing on harassment and gender based violence during fieldwork.

About the editor-in-chief

Dr. Tine Davids is assistant professor at the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Development Studies at the Radboud University, where she teaches and conducts research on gender, political subjectivity, globalization, gender mainstreaming, feminist ethnography, and (return) migration, and has published internationally on these research areas. She is a member of the LOVA board.

Notes

¹ Maria Art is a pseudonym, as the author has chosen to remain anonymous.

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