

Integrating Ethics, Methods, and the Dynamics of Power in Political Science Fieldwork

Virginia Sapiro, *Boston University and University of Wisconsin–Madison, USA*

The articles in this symposium underscore at least three common points about understanding and combatting sexual harassment in the context of social science fieldwork:

- (1) This problem draws our attention to research as a matrix of social relationships in which we are obligated to understand the *ethics of these relationships*. As Carole Mershon pointedly asks: “What are the ethical responsibilities that we as researchers have not only to the people who we study but also to other scholars and to ourselves as scholars?”
- (2) We cannot effectively understand this matrix of social relationships without considering the *multiple and overlapping power relationships* within them. Sexual harassment draws our attention to gender-based power, but these articles rightly underscore some of the other—and intersectional—power relationships based on class, race, nationality, and standing within the profession that is itself a marker of status and power.
- (3) We cannot leave understanding the harms of these dynamics—and we certainly must not leave identifying prevention and amelioration solutions—to the individual insights of those involved. These insights must be *integrated manifestly and systematically into normal professional training and resources* available to those involved in research fieldwork.

A MATRIX OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND POWER

Fieldwork is created by a matrix of social relationships. At the most basic level—and most traditionally and conventionally understood—there are people who engage in observation and interpretation (as well as communication about the observation and interpretation) and those who are observed. Here, “observing” does not mean the common dictionary definition of watching but rather the full range of methods we use to see to understand human behavior and the workings of their institutions, communities, cultures, and societies. I purposely use the phrase “to see to understand”; fieldwork is an empirical framework for research that we can pursue through an array of different particular methods and techniques, but they all involve observing or seeing before we think we can understand.

There is a substantial literature on the ethics of the relationship between the observing and the observed that I neither fully summarize nor cite here. However, two strands are variously well known. The strand that already should be familiar to any veteran of methodology courses—or, certainly, any experienced researcher—is the set of issues raised by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process. By the 1970s, the work of the “Nazi doctors” had become infamous (Annas and Grodin 1992). However, also infamous was a wide range of other abuses committed under the guise of American medical and social science research, from the Tuskegee syphilis study to the involvement of researchers in CIA-sponsored studies to a wide range of studies in other social science areas. This growing awareness of the human harm created by the unethical pursuit of medical and behavioral research led to the creation of a National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research through the National Research Act of 1974.

The National Commission’s Belmont Report (1979) outlined three fundamental ethical principles that should structure the process of research:

- (1) *Respect for Persons*, entailing both “the requirement to acknowledge autonomy and the requirement to protect those with diminished autonomy.” The latter requirement underlays special attention and requirements for research on children and incarcerated or otherwise institutionalized people.
- (2) *Beneficence*, interpreted as both “respecting their decisions and protecting them from harm but also by making efforts to secure their well-being.” In other words, beneficent actions state that we should “do no harm” and “maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms.”
- (3) The principle of *Justice*, by which was meant a fair and equal (or, probably better, equitable) distribution of the burdens and benefits of the research. The report pointed to both the Nazi research and the Tuskegee syphilis study as prime examples of unjust research. It concluded that “whenever research supported by public funds leads to the development of therapeutic devices and procedures, justice demands both that these not provide advantages only to

those who can afford them and that such research should not unduly involve persons from groups unlikely to be among the beneficiaries of subsequent applications of the research.”

The National Research Act also invented the IRBs—that is, committees at research-producing institutions to review proposals to determine whether they meet the standards of protection of research subjects (or, later, “participants”) through an ever-increasing array of specific requirements. The process at all levels was driven largely by medical science and experts in medical science such that much of the execution of the policy often was done primarily by people with little social science familiarity. These practices provoked considerable complaint and action, not because of the basic principles of respect, beneficence, and justice but instead because of the application¹ (Schrug 2010).

Discussions of a basic framework for ethical principles reached back to both Kant and the Nuremberg trials, among other sources of ethics theory and practice. However, a newer strand of the literature on the ethics of the relationship between the observing and the observed—especially relevant to the problem of sexual harassment in field research—was a rich body of feminist epistemology and theory of knowledge developed in the 1980s. This literature also is too extensive to summarize fully, but much of it revolved around what then was called *standpoint theory*, derived from long-standing Hegelian and Marxian theoretical traditions. Standpoint theory argued that our observations and knowledge—regardless of particular methodologies—are situated in our historical and social locations, shaped by where we stand in the matrices of structural social relationships (Haraway 1988; Harding 2004; Hartsock 2019). As feminist theories, these theories focused especially on social relationships of gender, sexuality, and reproduction.

These studies led to powerful critiques of research literature across the social science and biological disciplines for their standpoints in male experience—especially white, middle-class, American male experience. However, feminist scholars also drew from them questions and guidance about how they should carry out their own research and the dangers of ignoring their own standpoints in observation and interpretation. Considering the social matrix in which researchers and research subjects existed, feminist scholars criticized traditional understanding of the separation of researcher and research subject, the assumed superiority of knowledge and knowledge-gathering expertise of professionally trained researchers, the exclusion of research subjects from the active process of knowledge creation, and the knowledge created by the research. Feminist methodologies of research and teaching attuned to situated knowledge are preoccupied with avoiding the impacts of their own parochialisms and privilege.

Early feminist standpoint theories, epistemologies, and methodological guides did not focus only on gender as an independent category of social relationship. This literature emerged partly from Marxist and Marxian theory; therefore,

it was established in dialogue with questions of class. Moreover, most of the scholars in this field worked to understand the impact of the larger matrix of standpoints, including especially race and being American and American-trained. The contributions of scholars who were women of color—especially African American women scholars—were particularly important in this regard. One of their major contributions was developing powerful theories of *intersectionalities*, or the *interrelationships* among identities and standpoints embedded in all of us that shape our perspectives (Collins 1986; Collins and Bilge 2016; Crenshaw 1989; Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith 1982). By invoking this term, it is important to note that several streams of standpoint theories developed continuously over the decades, with interactions among different emphases. As Collins and Bilge (2016, 53–54) observed:

Many contemporary scholars either ignore or remain unaware of this period, assuming that intersectionality did not exist prior to its naming in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Instead, they point to African American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw’s “coining” of the term as a foundational moment for intersectionality. Crenshaw’s work is very important. Yet we take issue with this view that intersectionality began when it was named. Choosing this particular point of origin erases the synergy of intersectionality’s critical inquiry and critical praxis, and recasts intersectionality as just another academic field.

Those intersectionalities, often ignored by American-focused American scholars, include the impact of nationality—especially the privileges of coming from one of the world’s most powerful nations (Collins and Bilge 2016; Harcourt et al. 2022).

An intersectional understanding of power and domination moves well beyond identifying some people categorically as dominators and some categorically as subordinated because of their race or their gender or their sexuality or their class, for example. Intersectional understandings of domination also should be self-reflexive, pointing out the variety of positions any one of us occupies, rendering each of us liable to dominate and/or be subordinated depending on the context. In her essay, the great Black feminist writer bell hooks (1989, 20–21) stated this powerfully:

I understand that in many places in the world oppressed and oppressor share the same color. Right now as I speak, a man who is himself victimized, hurt by racism and class exploitation, is actively dominating a woman in his life—that even as I speak, women who are ourselves exploited, victimized, are dominating children.

As researchers and teachers, context matters and has a shape-shifting impact on academics as we move through our situations and lives. Kondo (1990) observed this as an anthropologist of her own life and, as a Japanese American scholar, she undertook her fieldwork on gender, work, and identity. After some time working in Japan, she caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror and was shocked to see that she was self-presenting not as a Japanese American woman but rather as a

Japanese woman, and she concluded that it was time to go home.

ETHICS AND THE MATRIX OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND POWER IN THE CONTEXT OF FIELDWORK

The Belmont Report's three fundamental principles of ethics in research (and, I would add, teaching) have not become stale in the past 45 years. Respect for Persons, Beneficence, and Justice continue to provide guidance as values for shaping research and teaching. However, historical change is bound to reshape how we apply these values to our work. Women, people of color, LGBTQ people, and others previously excluded or virtually silenced in the profession are more present and voluble than we were even at the time of the Belmont Report. This presence and decades of critical scholarly work have increased our understanding of the dynamics of systems of domination. This, in turn, changes—or should change—how we understand and apply the values of Respect for Persons, Beneficence, and Justice. Sexual harassment is a prime example.²

Sexual harassment has existed forever, as has rape, but it is worth noting that, by all accounts, the term *sexual harassment* was coined only in 1974, when the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research was launched. No one involved in that project would have heard of sexual harassment. A phenomenon that has no name would not be one to which they would—or could—pay attention. The Belmont Report was published in 1979, the same year that MacKinnon published her book that

scholars go, they are subject to the structural inequalities based on gender and other hierarchies, although these inequalities vary in how they operate in different contexts. In addition, scholars in the field face other vulnerabilities that can interact with those structural inequalities. They have left behind their everyday supports and usually are in settings where—even with years of study—they lack full language and cultural fluency, including norms and expectations based on gender, race, sexuality, and other bases of domination. Working alone can render researchers vulnerable to those who may harm them. The fact that political scientists often engage elites as subjects and informants, or that they study violence and terror, places them in especially vulnerable positions. Furthermore, the issue is not only scholars alone in the field. In our study of sexual harassment at American Political Science Association meetings, we learned of systematic and forceful evidence about colleagues who seem to assume that the usual ethical and professional principles do not apply when they are away from home. Traveling with colleagues and mentors has its own challenges, sometimes from where it is least expected.

However, the problems of sexual harassment in the field must account fully for the *matrix* of social relationships in which any individual scholar or teacher is situated, as well as the *contextual* or shape-shifting nature of the relationships among power, domination, and social relationships. Some of the articles in this symposium offer suggestions for resources. Nevertheless, our education for research and teaching should embed these aspects of professional experience in what is, after

There always will be calls for new forms, new rules, new checklists, and new bureaucracy. Surely social scientists—especially political scientists—should be able to understand the power dynamics and ethics of research and teaching relationships and address them as part of the basic framework of our professional training and activities.

arguably did the most to launch the legal and political study of sexual harassment and, ultimately, the creation of public policy (MacKinnon 1979).

Like other forms of harassment embedded in categorical systems of domination, sexual harassment is a fundamental violation of ethical principles, including the principles so widely accepted but not equally applied. It is an abuse of human dignity based on gender. However, systematic reports reveal that it remains common in our profession and discipline (Sapiro and Campbell 2018) including, as the contributors to this symposium underscore, in the context of fieldwork. Likewise, abuse of human dignity on the basis of race or sexuality (or other social group identities) violates research and teaching ethics. It is a challenge for those undertaking research in the field and, as in all common research challenges, we must train people in how they might avoid participating or being victimized and how to address it when it does happen.

The context of fieldwork provides special opportunities for abuse as well as challenges for those who participate. Wherever

all, for social scientists a clear and explicable framework of understanding social relationships, power, and ethics. There always will be calls for new forms, new rules, new checklists, and new bureaucracy. Surely social scientists—especially political scientists—should be able to understand the power dynamics and ethics of research and teaching relationships and address them as part of the basic framework of our professional training and activities.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. An example of the uninformed impact of IRBs: at my institution, as well as others, IRBs tried to block social scientists from using archived survey data (e.g., the American National Election Studies and the General Social Surveys) because the researchers did not have “informed consent” from all of the research participants.

2. This brief discussion on ethical principles and sexual harassment draws on my earlier discussion (Sapiro 2018), in which I stated my opinions on the subject.

REFERENCES

- Annas, George J., and Michael A. Grodin (eds.). 1992. *The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code: Human Rights in Human Experimentation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1986. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems* 33: 14–32.
- Collins, Patricia Hill, and Sirma Bilge. 2016. *Intersectionality*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Anti-Racist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140:139–67.
- Haraway, Donna. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14: 575–99.
- Harcourt, Wendy, Karijn van den Berg, Constance Dupuis, and Jacqueline Gaybor (eds.). 2022. *Feminist Methodologies: Experiments, Collaborations, and Reflections*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Harding, Sandra (ed.). 2004. *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*. New York: Routledge.
- Hartsock, Nancy C. M. 2019. *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays*. New York: Routledge.
- hooks, bell. 1989. "Feminism: A Transformational Politic." In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, ed. bell hooks, 19–27. Boston: Southend Press.
- Hull, Akasha Gloria; Patricia Bell-Scott; and Barbara Smith. 1982. *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press.
- Kondo, Dorinne K. 1990. *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- MacKinnon, Catharine A. 1979. *Sexual Harassment of Working Women*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. 1979. *The Belmont Report: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects Research*. www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/belmont-report/read-the-belmont-report/index.html (accessed August 25, 2023).
- Sapiro, Virginia. 2018. "Sexual Harassment: Performances of Gender, Sexuality, and Power." *Perspectives on Politics* 16 (4): 1053–66.
- Sapiro, Virginia, and David Campbell. 2018. American Political Science Association Committee on Professional Ethics, Rights, and Freedoms Report on the 2017 APSA Survey on Sexual Harassment at Annual Meetings. www.apsanet.org/Portals/54/journals/APSA%20EthicsCommitteeSexual%20Ha-rassment%20Report%20Final.pdf?ver=2018-01-04-132931-660.
- Schrag, Zachary M. 2010. *Ethical Imperialism: Institution Review Boards and the Social Sciences, 1965–2009*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

New APSA Publications!

TEACHING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT **GLOBALLY**



AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

EDITED BY

ELIZABETH C. MATTO | ALASDAIR BLAIR
ALISON RIOS MILLETT MCCARTNEY | TAIYI SUN
ELIZABETH A. BENNION | DAWN MICHELE WHITEHEAD



Teaching Civic Engagement Globally

In this new volume, teacher-scholars from around the world share insights and provide innovative examples of courses, programs, and practices that prepare students for effective civic engagement across diverse political contexts.

apsanet.org/teachingcivicengagement

Political Science Internships: Towards Best Practices

This edited volume offers a set of “best practices” for political science internships for faculty, students, and administrators by grounding recommendations and standards in pedagogical research.

apsanet.org/internshipbook

Political Science Internships

Towards Best Practices



AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION

EDITED BY

Renée Van Vechten, Bobbi Gentry, & John C. Berg

