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Key issues effecting field researcher safety: A reflexive commentary

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Abstract

This article raises concerns about the, arguably, obscure position the issue of field researcher safety holds in our training curricula, supervision processes and across our research communities. A variety of discursive tensions are discussed as preventing a full realisation of researcher safety as a significant issue for social research practitioners. These tensions include the impact of privileging violence over the wide range of risks inherent in researching the social context, the ideological construction of the intrepid researcher as someone who bravely enters the field, often without an understanding of the environment or cognisant of potential risks; thus relying on a combination of courage and wit to develop an understanding of the issues under investigation. A third tension arises out of the elevated position afforded participant safety in the discourse on research safety. A hierarchy of issues has constructed researcher safety as a lesser concern to that of participants and (importantly) institutions. Next, decreases in researcher safety are discussed in relation to efforts to gain participant rapport and the impact of marginalised status on our safety as researchers. Finally, various organisations and workplaces' risk adverse approaches to safety are presented as superficial institutional tasks that provide minimal safety to the individual while providing the organisation with maximum protection.

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This article raises concerns about the, arguably, obscure position the issue of field researcher safety holds in our training curricula, supervision processes and across our research communities. A variety of discursive tensions are discussed as preventing a full realisation of researcher safety as a significant issue for social research practitioners. These tensions include the impact of privileging violence over the wide range of risks inherent in researching the social context, the ideological construction of the *intrepid researcher* as someone who bravely enters the field, often without an understanding of the environment or cognisant of potential risks; thus relying on a combination of courage and wit to develop an understanding of the issues under investigation. A third tension arises out of the elevated position afforded participant safety in the discourse on research safety. A hierarchy of issues has constructed researcher safety as a lesser concern to that of participants and (importantly) institutions. Next, decreases in researcher safety are discussed in relation to efforts to gain participant rapport and the impact of marginalised status on our safety as researchers. Finally, various organisations and workplaces' risk adverse approaches to safety are presented as superficial institutional tasks that provide minimal safety to the individual while providing the organisation with maximum protection.

Introduction

Initially, our interest in researcher safety arose in response to situations where our safety has been compromised in a variety of field research settings. For instance, on one occasion one of the authors was carrying out an interview with a woman in her home when her estranged partner rushed through the front door and planted a well-aimed uppercut to his chin: a male's presence apparently providing sufficient evidence of his wife's infidelity. A separate incident occurred when, in the midst of an ethnographic study on youth gangs, a knife

was held to the throat of one of the researchers. Less dramatic situations have included exposure to tuberculosis, contracting impetigo and scabies and heightened levels of emotional and psychological stress. Inherently, our interest in researcher safety has been continually piqued because of the lack of attention the safety of social researchers has generated. Through our experiences in graduate school and interactions with students and research teams in the New Zealand and Australian context we have been surprised by the lack of exposure graduates and researchers, in general, have to issues pertaining to the safety of those carrying out social inquiry.

Like other commentators (Arendell, 1997; Borbasi, Chapman, Read, Gassner & Dunn, 2002; Hughes, 2008; Hughes, 2004; Lee, 1995; Paterson, Gregory & Thorne, 1999; Sharp & Kremer, 2006), we agree that, compared to the focus on participant safety, researcher safety considerations have generally held an obscure position in social science training and field research practice, and the safety of research practitioners does not feature prominently in research-related dialogue (Sluka, 1990). However, we differ from other commentators in that we do not believe we can remedy field researcher safety's obscure position through a *set of prescriptive safety behaviours and considerations* (see Paterson et al., 1999). Prescriptive efforts have included the need to listen at the door for yelling or screaming before entering a house (Greater Vancouver Mental Health Service, 1996: cited in Paterson et al., 1999); taking mobile phones to interviews (Borbasi et al., 2002); driving through unfamiliar neighbourhoods prior to the interview to identify escape roots (Paterson et al., 1999), and telephoning participants with a history of drug or alcohol addiction or psychotic mental illness immediately prior to the interview to determine if the participant is intoxicated or symptomatic. If, according to these prescriptions, the situation is assessed as 'unsafe' the research engagement should be abandoned (Monahan, Applebaum, Mulvey, Robbins & Lidz, 1993).

We argue that these types of prescriptive strategies can place social researchers *at risk*, as opposed to their intended effect of offering protection within the research environment. For example, there is no certainty that such strategies will provide the social researcher with the necessary in-depth knowledge of participants' history of drug or alcohol use, or whether or not they have been using immediately prior to the moment of engagement, and whether or not someone is potentially aggressive or violent given our ability to 'masquerade' at the moments prior to and during the initial act of research

participation (see Young, 2011). Given the complexity of the social context within which participatory social research takes place, relying on a standardised, administrative checklist to ensure our 'safety' appears inadequate.

In an attempt to move attention away from administrative, prescriptive strategies, this article critically explores a variety of discursive tensions that we believe preclude adequate consideration and adoption of field research safety. The review is intended to encourage discussion about what we, as a community, mean by safety and what is required to alleviate the tensions so our members can undertake research in the safest way possible. The following discussion has been framed by a number of discursive tensions that have arisen from a combination of fieldwork experience, observations and a review of extant literature.

Tension 1: Definitional constraints

Perhaps one of the reasons for the lack of attention given to researcher safety is that the notion of safety in the field research context is poorly conceptualised. In a significant amount of literature, *safety* has been simplistically constructed; heavily focused on acts of violence, a residue perhaps of a related overemphasis of the literature on 'risky' research topics that are construed as 'emotive or politically charged issues' (Kovats-Bernat, 2002; Langford, 2000; Monahan, Applebaum, Mulvey, Robbins, & Lidz, 1993; Paterson, 2000; Sluka, 1990; Williams, Dunlap, Johnson & Hamid, 1992). As a consequence, the authors' concern is that research topics and potential (and real) research populations not considered potentially violent, receive insufficient attention at the supervisory (individual) and institutional levels (for example, in relation to human ethics committees).

When safety considerations are restricted to high risk situations, safety becomes a purely field-based consideration. As such, 'safety' is time and location bound: limited to the time actually spent in the field or the time engaged in an interview. Such constructions fail to acknowledge that safety extends outside of the actual research interaction and that safety needs to be framed to include the researcher's physical, psychological and emotional wellbeing during and after they have exited from the field (see, for example, Coles and Mudaly, 2010). Additionally, the wellbeing of wider members of the research team needs to be included in definitions of safety. For instance, Hughes (2004) stresses a broad timeframe and extended conception of safety:

Safety extends beyond data collection, where risks may be most apparent, to encompass professional wellbeing and social responsibility amongst the research community (2004: 938).

The significance of developing more wide ranging conceptualisations of safety became apparent when one of the authors was involved in an ethnographic study that involved youth gang members in South Auckland, New Zealand (Roguski, 2008). Given the large number of interviews, Roguski employed the services of a transcription company. After the first few weeks of transcribing the company owner contacted the researcher because a number of transcribers, upon listening to the narratives, were concerned about the researcher's physical and emotional safety. In discussing the issue further the transcription company's manager and Roguski established a weekly debriefing session between the researcher and the transcribers which provided an opportunity for the team to air their concerns and ensure that the researcher's wellbeing was not compromised.

To some extent the lack of conceptual clarity can be understood given that we often work in discipline-specific research silos. The very nature of our discipline-based specialities often preclude information sharing and results in disciplines differing in the extent to which fieldwork safety is broached as a topic and the extent to which the researcher is exposed to operative strategies that may mitigate risk. For instance, those from an anthropological or sociological background may be more likely to have been passively exposed to health and safety considerations through various ethnographic accounts and, more formally, through research method courses that involve direct engagement with research subjects. As such, the student is exposed early to the breadth of potential safety considerations ranging from parasitic and infectious diseases (Howell, 1990), carrying out fieldwork in violent/conflict contexts (Sluka, 1990; Williams et al., 1992), engaging with vulnerable populations (however they are defined - Liamputtong, 2007) and the possible need to undertake a short course in "barefoot doctor medicine" prior to entering the field (Howell, 1990). In contrast, fieldwork safety discussions are notably absent from disciplines that stress laboratory-based experimental designs. In these disciplines, fieldwork is generally excluded as a methodological option. We argue that it is no longer appropriate to design research curricula with a narrow discipline-specific focus. Rather, the various disciplines need to acknowledge the growing eclectic nature

of social research and, therefore, ensure that curricula include a diverse array of research methods and research considerations, such as researcher safety, in all their dynamic manifestations. This inclusion will in turn result in the development of a multidimensional conceptualisation of safety that is inclusive of field research, despite the complexity of the social context within which it takes place.

Tension 2: The intrepid researcher

Field research safety's enigmatic position can also be attributed to the way in which the fieldwork researcher has been constructed within the social sciences. Historically, fieldwork has been framed as an *intrepid journey* whereby the researcher is positioned as bravely, perhaps naively, entering a field setting that, more often than not, is significantly different from the social context from which they came (Howell, 1990; McGranahan, 2006). In this sense the field researcher, often without an extensive understanding of the fieldwork environment, or cognisant of the myriad of potential risks (especially to themselves), has relied on his/her skills (almost always inadequate for the task at hand) and a requisite degree of courage to develop an understanding of the social context under investigation. Numerous accounts of the exotic field researcher exist within literature: most notably Evans-Pritchard's (1977) *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* and Malinowski's study of the Trobriand Islands (for example 1922, 1926, 1927, 1929, 1935, 1944; see also Howell, 1990; Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000). In addition, we have more contemporary accounts of the exotic and daring with the likes of Margaret Trawick's (2007) description of her fieldwork in Sri Lanka with the Tamil Tiger freedom fighters and Pierre Bourgois' (2003) ethnography *Selling Crack in El Barrio*. Within this context, aspects of the intrepid researcher reflect elements of the superhero: the brave researcher entering a foreign environment. Risk is in some way synonymous with the research experience and those who align themselves with the intrepid archetype may be less cognisant of risk and the incompatibility of ethics and the risk placed on the individual researcher.

A second indication of the intrepid archetype is reflected in accounts of researchers needing to portray themselves as fearless and unshakeable. For instance, in reference to her ethnographic study of auxiliary carers in two British nursing homes, Lee-Treweek (2000) describes removing any reference to the emotional impact of her study for fear that being viewed as overly

emotional could minimise the study's findings. In this sense, the emotional impact of the research is purposely not reported for fear that the researcher's professionalism will be brought into question; perhaps self-censorship having arisen from a need to avoid criticism that the researcher's 'objectivity' has been compromised or that the individual researcher has actually failed to meet the requisite archetype.

The existence of the need to censor experiences in order to attain the necessary institutional and academic credibility, is further reinforced through commentators who claim authority in the area of safety through accounts that, despite years of fieldwork experience, they have never had a breach of safety, theirs or anyone else's (see for example Williams et al., 1992). Unfortunately, such statements reinforce the message that any safety violation minimises researcher credibility and, as such, act to silence safety-centred dialogue. As a community we need to revisit any messaging that acts to silence our experiences. If we as researchers feel as though we are somehow viewed as unprofessional because of a breach of safety we will refrain from sharing our experience and inherently hinder the very dialogue required to highlight researcher safety as a key consideration.

Finally, the intrepid archetype is located in how field researchers have extended researcher capability to the realm of the superhero. This can manifest in two ways. Most notably, in the authors' experience, are situations where pre-emptive efforts to explore safety-related issues or efforts to provide supervisory debriefing or clinical supervision have been met with field researchers' resistance. As a point of illustration, one of the authors recently supervised a study that placed interviewers at risk of considerable psychological stress. As such, a paramount concern was that field researchers were emotionally and psychologically supported during and post-fieldwork. Attempts to install a formal clinical supervisory mechanism were initially thwarted by a team of highly experienced field researchers on the grounds that:

"I have been doing this for years"

"I don't let the emotional stuff get to me"

"I have my own ways of coping"

"Don't you think clinical supervision is an overkill?"

Obviously, such reactions counter research supervisors' efforts to ensure the physical, emotional and psychological safety of researchers/interviewers pre- and post-fieldwork. Rather than positioning ourselves as superheroes we argue

that field researchers need to assume the need for supervision and incorporate clinical supervision, as a matter of course, as a key consideration *when developing studies.*

The superhero is also located in accounts of navigating risk through some form of intuitive knowing. For example, in discussing an ethnographic study of crack distributors in New York City, Williams et al. (1992) highlighted the role of a 'sixth sense' in navigating risk.

> [A] reliance on prudence, common sense, and a 'sixth sense' can help reduce physical violence to a minimum. Different kinds of dangerous situations can be handled by evasion and movement away from the danger, controlled confrontation, or rapid departure from the setting (Williams et al., 1992: 361).

Inherently, the intrepid archetype positions researcher safety as a secondary consideration: *the intrepid archetype is somehow exempt from supervisory or safety constraints.* This is due in part to the exoticisation of (Western) research fieldwork as some kind of 'rite of passage', especially within the disciplines of Anthropology and specific approaches in Sociology. While, in practice, neither discipline views being unsafe as an integral component of field work research the existence of the intrepid sojourner as a discursive frame provides a context of possible risk. This is further reinforced through a practice of privileging participant safety.

Tension 3: Privileging participant safety
Field researcher safety may hold a less than preeminent position due, in the main, to the chequered ethical past of the disciplines of medicine and social science. Among the most well-known dubious examples of research from these disciplines include the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment (see Gray, 1998), Stanley Milgram's experiment on obedience to authority figures (Milgram, 1963) and the debate surrounding the release of Laud Humphries' study *Tearoom Trade* (1970). These types of research have naturally resulted in focus on participant safety considerations.

An indication of the privileging of participant safety is reflected in the focus of human ethics committees. Table 1 presents the outcome of a content analysis carried out by the authors on each of New Zealand's universities human ethics committee applications (AUT University, n.d.; Lincoln University, 2009; Massey University, 2012; Otago University, n.d.; Victoria

University of Wellington, 2007; University of Auckland, 2012; University of Canterbury, n.d.; Waikato University, n.d.).[1] Most notably, researcher safety questions were the least common with only three of the eight universities including at least one researcher safety focused question, this however equated to between 1 and 3 percent of the total count; a marked difference from the number of participant focused questions (ranging from between 39 and 52 percent of the total count).

Table 1 Requirements of New Zealand University Ethics Committees

	Administration (including project classification, reporting, timeframes, sources of funding and investigators)		Project Description		Participant Related Safety and Ethics		Researcher-Related Safety		Bicultural Considerations (including consultation with iwi and hapu and dissemination of findings)		Wider Social, Cultural and External Institution-Related Considerations		Physiological Tests, Tissue and Body Fluid Samples (including biological disposal)		Total number of codes analysed
	n	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	**n**	**%**	
Auckland University	30	19%	32	20%	62	39%	2	1%	14	9%	7	4%	12	8%	159
AUT	44	27%	21	13%	73	44%	3	2%	8	5%	8	5%	8	5%	165
Lincoln University	15	26%	17	29%	25	43%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	2%	58
Massey University	16	14%	29	25%	47	40%	3	3%	5	4%	9	8%	8	7%	117
Otago University	12	28%	9	21%	21	49%	0	0%	1	2%	0	0%	0	0%	43
University of Canterbury	9	17%	15	28%	28	52%	0	0%	1	2%	1	2%	0	0%	54
Victoria University of Wellington	14	33%	6	14%	22	52%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	42
Waikato University	5	19%	8	30%	14	52%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	27

Of the three ethics committees that included a researcher safety-focused question, only one committee framed researcher safety as an assumed degree of risk to the researcher (see Massey University in Table 2 below). Further, researcher safety was phrased in a general manner. The questions lack prompts that might guide the applicant to consider the breadth of risk; specifically the identification of risks in relation to location, participants, psychological and physical considerations or in terms of the different phases of the research (for instance, risks associated with the data collection process, albeit physical,

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[1] The authors coded each ethics application independently; codes were then compared and points of difference were noted and were reviewed for consensus.

biological and/or psychological or possible risks that might occur post-data collection such as stress, emotional trauma and possible post-data collection impacts such as the emotional/psychological impact transcribers or other members of the team). Notably, the general nature in which researcher safety questions are phrased stands in stark contrast to myriad questions focusing on the multidimensional nature of participant risk.

Table 2: Researcher Safety Questions Obtained from Human Ethics Committee Applications

University	Researcher Safety-Focused Questions
Auckland University	Is the research likely to place the researcher at risk of harm? Yes/No If "yes", please clearly identify/explain these risks here and in the participant information sheet (sic) and the consent form (sic)
AUT	Are the researchers likely to be at risk? Yes/No In what ways might the researchers be at risk and how will this be managed? Are AUT staff and/or students likely to encounter physical hazards during this project?
Massey University	What is the risk of harm (if any) of the project to the researcher? Describe the strategies you will use to deal with any of the situations identified (sic) Describe the material to be taken and the method used to obtain it. Include information about the training of those taking the samples and the safety of all persons involved. If blood is taken, specify the volume and number of collections

Rather than framing questions in terms of "likelihood" we argue that applicants should be encouraged to in-depthly assess the various risks pertinent to their studies and discuss possible mitigation strategies. Otherwise the emergence of stress, fatigue, depression and possible impacts on the wider research team are positioned as being outside the scope of the research endeavour.

The prominence of participant safety, as reflected in the ethics application processes and noted by other commentators (see Hughes, 2004; Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000; Sharp & Kremer, 2006), risks relegating researcher safety to a secondary consideration. Rather, we argue the need to *stress the dual importance of* researcher and participant safety; a stress informed by the complex social context within which field work takes place**.**

Tension 4: Rapport

Developing rapport with participants is a vital prerequisite to interviewees' deciding to unabashedly share their most intimate details. However, a tension exists between maintaining safety and the need to gain rapport; that safety

precautions may be relaxed in an effort to establish a connection. For example, in his discussion of his prison-based research, Waldram (1998) described the need to minimise participants' perceptions of him as an outsider and as someone potentially aligned with correctional authorities. Accordingly, Waldram adopted behaviours that contrasted sharply with the expected behaviours and attitudes of prison staff, as well as consciously endeavouring to make a number of symbolic gestures to indicate his allegiance with inmates. However, in doing so, Waldram's efforts resulted in explicit decision to reduce safety precautions.

> In this spirit, I declined to wear a personal security device that allows security to locate and help staff members in an emergency. These devices exist as very obvious symbols of distrust. . . In some institutions I was forced to use formal interview rooms. These rooms have large windows and occupants are in clear sight of security officers and other inmates. This was hardly ideal. In these instances I situated myself so that the inmate's back was to the windows, so he could not observe those passing by. In doing so, however, the inmate was sitting between me and the door, and I was frequently chastised by security for this. However, by once again bending the rules I was able to demonstrate my outsider status and my trust for the inmates (Waldram, 1999: 241 – 242).

A second rapport-focused consideration is whether or not interviews should be conducted in pairs. Some safety-related comment has suggested that there are situations in which paired or tandem interviewers can increase safety however, these situations have been generally relegated to high risk scenarios (Borbasi et al., 2002; Monahan et al., 1993; Paterson et al., 1993). However, if tandem interviewing can result in an added degree of safety then we must not be too hasty in dismissing it as a valid option. After all, resistance to paired interviewing is based on an unqualified assertion that rapport is more likely to be heightened in one interviewer situations, an assertion that unnecessarily confines our ability to a) respond to the needs of a diverse range of potential research communities and b) engage with a range of safety (practice) options.

Of interest, there appear to be three drivers for individual interviewer/participant interviewing. First, mainstream interviewing approaches reflect a clinical experience with prompts and appropriately adopted clinical distance between interviewer and participant. This is now so commonplace that alternative models appear subordinate. Unfortunately, there is an insufficient evidence to suggest that rapport is more likely to be achieved within a single interviewer/participant context (cf. Kincaid & Bright, 1957). A second driver is

the cost-prohibitive nature of paired interviewing. It is common for researchers to reject the notion of paired interviewing because of the increased cost associated with the approach. Similar to the intrepid researcher, we need to discuss, as a community, the extent to which it is appropriate to compromise safety because of cost. This is especially a challenge to those in the research community who contract research services. Declining a tandem interviewer approach in an effort to maximise profit raises serious ethical issues if researchers are required to undertake fieldwork without optimal protection. Finally, the student research project, traditionally a lone enterprise, would require changes to the way graduate data collection is carried out if a tandem interview model is adopted.

Tension 5: Marginalised status

The degree to which key demographic characteristics, such gender and age, may or may not impact on an interview, have been discussed widely in the literature. Some commentators have stressed the risk that the interviewee will experience discomfort when there are differences between social locations of the researchers and the researched (Reinharz & Chase, 2002). This has most notably been discussed in terms of race and ethnicity (such as Huisman, 1997; Yow, 2005), gender (Anderson & Umberson, 2004; Padfield & Procter, 1996; Sampson & Thomas, 2003) and differences in socio-economic status (Madriz, 1998). In contrast, others have discussed the facilitative effects of such differences (Phoenix, 1994).

More pertinent to a discussion on field safety is the degree to which the researcher's marginalised status may compromise the researcher's safety. Many researchers mistakenly assume that their professional status, such as sociologist, not only legitimises their role in the field setting but acts to neutralise any personal characteristics:

> In some cases the characteristics of the researcher with respect to participants may create the conditions for harassment or violence in the field. Race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability status are just some of the factors that may lead a researcher to be endangered in a situation that may not pose a risk to others (Sharp & Kremer, 2006: 318).

Significant tensions exist between gender and field research safety. Paterson et al. (1999) point out that bias often exists that assumes female researchers are more at risk than their male counterparts. However, researchers

assume risk when they fail to take into consideration the impact of their gender status on the research endeavour (Hughes, 2004; Sharp & Kremer, 2006; Social Research Association, 2001), an issue pointedly represented in the following quote from Sharp and Kremer (2006: 317).

> [As] researchers, our concerns were for the quality of our data. In our roles as professional sociologists, we were blinded to the fact that we remained female, and therefore open to sexual advances and even violence [. . .] we had begun our projects as though gender dynamics surrounding power and violence were unimportant.

Marginalised status extends well beyond gender considerations. For instance, in some research situations marginalised sexual orientation can place the field researcher at risk. This has most notably occurred for one of the authors in his work with male prison inmates and adult patched members (Roguski & Chauvel, 2010). Because gay identity was an anathema to the groups in question Roguski masked his sexual orientation in a dual effort to gain and maintain rapport and as a protective mechanism. The issue is not whether we are gay or straight, male or female or whether we possess some other marginalised status. The issue is that in some fieldwork contexts our various identities can place us at risk. A challenge to the research community is to move beyond assumptions that our professional status acts to protect us. While we may adopt a certain role as enquirer we have no control over how those we interact view us. Safety, in this sense, would be evidenced in open dialogue about the way in which our identities, and the way in which participants may perceive us, may actually compromise our safety.

Tension 6: Risk averse – protecting the organisation
A final discursive tension is located within institutional and/or workplace practices that relegate safety considerations to a series of static processes. Unfortunately, many of these processes can be interpreted as administrative (tick the box processes) and provide a guise of safety only. For instance, the institutionalisation of ethics risk applications has been criticised as providing a guise of ethical concern and oversight only. The perception has been that ethics applications may be an administrative requirement and not as an opportunity to engage in a dynamic and thorough ethical inquiry (Ellis & Earley, 2006).

This has been especially noted as a concern in regards to how some employers' treat research safety issues as an administrative process in an effort to avoid culpability in the event that a researcher's safety is compromised. For

instance, the authors' experience of an organisation's requirement for a field research safety protocols has generally filled an employer's administrative need; the existence of a safety protocol absolving the employer from accusations of improperly safe guarding staff while undertaking field activities.

The authors' identified multiple examples where a true expression of safety had been nullified because the provision of safety would have cost implications or exceed what management viewed as a necessary precaution. Most notable are a research manager's reluctance to release funds for supportive counselling for a team of researchers carrying out a particularly stressful piece of research. On another occasion, a university human resources department quashed efforts for the research centre to use its funds to provide health insurance for field researchers because of a concern that: "How will the burden of proof be managed. They [the research team] might use the health insurance for non-field work related illnesses".

A final example involved a research manager insisting, on the basis of increased profits, that a safety protocol be amended from a tandem to a single interviewer arrangement; a decision counter to the client's request and despite that the study in question involved violent inmates.

In organisational environments that nullify the actualisation of researcher safety, field safety is reflected as an administrative task and the field researcher is positioned as individually responsible for their own safety. Efforts to increase safety, such as through the provision of counselling, medical expenses and tandem interviewing, are often countered with arguments about financial cost. In this sense, 'safety' becomes a standardised, often meaningless set of paper-based procedures that deny the messy reality of the social context within which research takes place, with the 'bottom-line' and covering the institution being the primary aims of ethics procedures.

Conclusion

This discussion has raised a number of concerns about the obscure position field researcher safety holds in academic institutions and our research communities in general. While other commentators have attempted to ameliorate the lack of attention to field safety by implementing a variety of prescriptive safety behaviours, we argue that the application of piecemeal and ad hoc safety considerations provide little protection. Rather, before project specific safety

issues can be considered we must first address a variety of tensions which preclude the true and full realisation of researcher safety.

First, any attempts to conceptualise field researcher safety need to do so within a multidimensional model of practice. Definitions need to include physical, health, emotional and psychological dimensions of wellbeing and extend beyond the physical field setting and embrace the whole research team. The multidimensional nature of safety needs to emphasise that safety concerns are relevant to each research topic and all populations. Further, it is incorrect to emphasise safety only in potentially violent situations as risks exist outside of prescriptive scenarios.

While a dynamic conceptualisation of safety will provide a guiding framework there is a need to discuss the various tensions that act to continually isolate us in our fieldwork. Most notably, within the context of the intrepid sojourner the researcher is positioned as being responsible for their own safety. This is reinforced when researchers are positioned as being responsible for decisions of whether or not the research can be undertaken in a safe manner or, ultimately, whether the physical and/or psychological risk is worth taking (Paterson et al., 1999). However, a tension exists between the locus of control (burden of decision-making) being placed on the researcher and the archetypal intrepid field researcher. First, the researcher is generally positioned as being isolated from a wider research community, and, often has to learn about safety through their own mistakes and/or challenges in the field (Adrendell, 1997; Paterson et al., 1999). It is not realistic to expect students or researchers with limited field experience to be able to anticipate and navigate risk as this is learned and developed through exposure to the field. It is also unreasonable to expect researchers with extensive field experience in Western urban centres to be cognisant of risk when working in under developed nations. It is unacceptable that acquisition of safety skills continues to rely on some form of self-enlightenment. Such a practice is seriously unethical and needs to be urgently addressed.

Next, the way in which the researcher and the research endeavour are constructed can create an imperative for the study to continue despite the existence of safety concerns. For instance, Sharp & Kremer (2006) provide an account of Kremer being sexually harassed during one of her doctoral research interviews. In this situation, the brave and capable researcher continued the

interview out of a sense of obligation to the data and the research project in general.

A tension also exists between the portrayal of the lone field researcher and the contemporary manifestations of field research. Rather than field research being restricted to academic pursuits, a host of organisations now engage in field research. As such, safety considerations no longer fall within the confines of an individual pursuit and there is a need for agreed definitions, protocols and ways of responding to risk. In addition, the degree to which safety is the concern of the researcher and/or that of supervisors, employers or an academic body need to be discussed.

Linked to the intrepid archetype is the tension between marginalised status and assumptions that our professional status will protect us. There is an urgent need, for us as a community, to engage in dialogue around this issue. While we do not want to limit which researchers are able to carry out research with specific populations, there is a need to be mindful of what we bring to the research and how our various marginalised characteristics might place us at risk and how these risks can best be tempered.

Next, educational institutions have a responsibility to ensure that their students are appropriately trained (Hughes, 2004). It is no longer sufficient to treat methods as discipline specific. Rather, students need to be exposed to a diverse array of methodologies and research settings. If not, we are doing a huge injustice to our students as career trajectories and a growing emphasis on mixed-methods means that all students need to be exposed to field research.

Finally, there is a burden of responsibility on senior researchers and employers to ensure that researchers new to fieldwork are sufficiently prepared (Craig, Corden & Thornton, 2000; Paterson et al., 1999; Hughes, 2004). This raises a number of challenges. If it can be assumed that the physical and psychological wellbeing of field researcher(s) is ultimately the responsibility of the employer or university then there are a number of measures that need to be implemented. First, we would argue that all field researchers should be given the opportunity to professionally debrief during and after fieldwork. This should be part and parcel of our work and needs to include the whole research team (including transcribers). Next, researchers' medical expenses should be covered. It is unreasonable to expect researchers to meet expenses arising from ill-health related to field work. Of course this will require a shift in expectations of those who either design or contract research as increased costs associated with

medical insurance; counselling and tandem interviewing will need to be included in the research budget.

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