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Research Article

Reducing the Risk of Sexual Misconduct during Field Research with Students

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ABSTRACT

Many research teams that work at remote field sites include undergraduate and graduate students. It is the responsibility of project directors to be informed about the frequency of sexual misconduct among research teams and to implement best practices and policies to reduce the risk of sexual misconduct. Students and other individuals from lower positions of power experience higher rates of sexual misconduct when participating in research at remote locations. Our research group hosted a two-day focus group with experienced researchers and administrators from academia, government agencies, and biological field stations to identify best practices and policies that reduce the risk of sexual misconduct for members of research teams working at remote locations. The participants identified 43 best practices and policies with 15 items rated as "essential," 27 items rated as "very important," and one item rated as "somewhat important." The focus group participants identified codes of conduct as an essential tool for defining sexual misconduct, clearly stating behavioral expectations, establishing a review process for potential violations, and enforcing penalties for violators. The code of conduct must be shared with research team members prior to departure to the field site and be revisited multiple times throughout the research experience. All members of the research team must be able to trust that reports of sexual misconduct will be fairly evaluated by leadership and violations will result in consequences for the responsible individuals. Reducing the risk of sexual misconduct among remote research teams requires conscious effort and actions from administrators and research directors.

Index terms: remote field locations; sexual assault; sexual harassment; Title IX

INTRODUCTION

Many undergraduate and graduate students participate in field-based research projects because these experiences provide opportunities to apply disciplinary knowledge, gain professional skills, and contribute to the scientific understanding of our natural world (Fleischner et al. 2017). Unfortunately, field-based research sometimes has an ugly tradition of "inappropriate and unwanted sexual behavior" among research team members (Nash et al. 2019). Sexual misconduct is often directed toward individuals in lower positions of power, either within the workplace hierarchy or in social status (e.g., team leader versus team members, majority racial group versus minority racial group), which inherently makes students particularly vulnerable members of research teams (Tinkler and Zhao 2020). Surveys of students working at remote sites found that 70% of females and 41% of males have been sexually harassed during academic field work, and 26% of women and 6% of men have been sexually assaulted (Clancy et al. 2014). Victims of sexual misconduct describe having to decide how much abuse they are willing to tolerate just so they can collect their research data (Schneider et al. 2020).

Students who have been sexually harassed often experience higher levels of absenteeism, produce lower-quality work, and are unlikely to report the violation (Witze 2018; Aguilar and Baek 2020). Students who do report sexual misconduct to leadership commonly experience retaliation, including bullying and threats from high-powered individuals (Karami et al. 2020). Given the connection between power and sexual misconduct, creating a workplace environment with a low risk of sexual misconduct requires changes in institutional policies, which must be implemented from an administrative level (Rinkus et al. 2018).

Females experience the highest rates of sexual harassment (Klein and Martin 2019) and many female students learn and work in environments where male sexual aggression is normalized (Pitchford et al. 2021). Sexual misconduct is clearly a problem within field-based research (Johansson et al. 2018; Grubbstrom and Powell 2020); however, most research leaders are uncomfortable speaking about sexual misconduct and unaware of policies for reducing the risk of sexual misconduct. Therefore, we organized a focus group of experienced researchers and administrators from academia, government agencies, and biological field stations to identify policies and best practices that are effective in reducing the risk of sexual misconduct during research at remote locations. We defined sexual misconduct as sexual harassment, any unwanted sexual advances, and sexual assault. Our objective was to share these findings so that research leaders have the information and tools to create a culture where all team members can work and learn without fear of sexual misconduct. The theoretical foundation for our discovery process was Nash and Nielsen's (2020) concept that although the interrelationships among a small group of field researchers are spatially separated from their larger institution's

infrastructure, they are intimately connected with the power structures within their institutions. We focused our objective on remote field sites because the lack of infrastructural support in these locations (e.g., limited or no access to telephone and internet service, inability to quickly communicate with supervisors at higher levels within the organization, limited transportation options) creates a higher risk environment for sexual misconduct and requires intentional actions on the part of leaders to provide safe working conditions for student researchers (Clancy et al. 2014). Even when universities and other organizations have policies related to sexual misconduct, they may not "trickle down" or be a suitable fit for research conducted at remote field sites.

METHODS

Recruitment of Participants

We identified 17 individuals from the United States with administrative responsibilities and/or experience supervising research teams at remote field sites. Potential participants were sent a recruitment email explaining the purpose of the study and the time requirement of the focus group. Ten individuals agreed to participate; two individuals declined because of time conflicts; one individual declined because their new position no longer involved work with remote field teams; and four individuals did not respond to the initial or follow-up emails. The focus group participants provided informed consent to the researchers. The focus group was held in August 2020, using a videoconference format, which required all participants to have stable internet for the duration of the focus group (Bloor et al. 2001). Two female participants withdrew from the focus group the morning of the event because of an unexpected lack of internet access. With the loss of these two participants, the total number of participants dropped to eight (five males and three females). This is slightly below the median ($n = 10$) number of participants identified as ideal for a focus group within our discipline, but is within the acceptable range if participants have been selectively targeted because of their expertise (Nyumba et al. 2018). One participant had less than 10 years of work experience; six participants had 10–20 years; and one participant had more than 20 years of work experience. Three participants had earned master's degrees and five had earned doctorates.

Format of Focus Group

The format of the focus group was reviewed by the researchers' Institutional Review Board and the study was deemed exempt under U.S. federal regulation 45 CFR 46.104(d) category 2(ii). The focus group was held during two consecutive afternoons and participants attended both sessions. The first afternoon opened with a presentation by one of the researchers on the frequency of sexual misconduct among research teams working at remote locations. Another researcher led the participants through a self-reflection exercise to create rapport among participants and establish trust between focus group coordinators and participants to facilitate subsequent discussion (Kamberelis and Dimitriais 2013). Two researchers facilitated the process of having participants share best practices or policies to reduce the risk of sexual misconduct among research teams working at remote locations. During this phase of the focus group, participants were instructed to avoid commenting upon or criticizing the contributions of other participants. At the close of the first afternoon, participants had contributed 41 best practices or policies for reducing the risk of sexual misconduct, and these items were entered into an online survey tool. Participants were asked to rate contributed items as: 5 (essential), 4 (very important), 3 (somewhat important), 2 (optional), and 1 (not needed). Participants rated all survey items by 9:00 AM the following day.

The second afternoon of the focus group began with a researcher providing a summary of the survey results. Two researchers facilitated an interactive discussion in which participants were charged to either (1) add a new item, (2) combine two existing items, (3) reword an item, or (4) delete an item. To guide the discussion toward uncovering relevant information (Morgan 1997), the researchers periodically reminded participants of the overall research question, "What policies and best practices reduce the risk of sexual misconduct during research at remote field sites?" The discussion among the participants was quite fluid and participants were clearly engaged in working as a group to share information. Modification or deletion of items required focus group consensus, which was evaluated with open voting. At the close of the second afternoon, the participants had developed a list of 43 best practices or policies to reduce the risk of sexual misconduct during research at remote field sites. Participants again used an online survey tool to rate each item in this new list using the same 5-to-1 scale. The results of the second survey were not shared with participants, but served as the foundation for this study.

Data Analysis

The average ratings of each of the 43 best practices and policies identified by the focus group participants as useful in reducing the risk of sexual misconduct were separated into "essential" (rated by the participants as $\geq$4.5; 15 items), "very important" (rated by the participants as $\leq$4.4 and $\geq$3.5; 27 items), and "somewhat important" (rated by the participants as $\leq$3.4 and $\geq$2.5; 1 item). We defined the "essential" category as $\geq$4.5 to limit this category to items where a majority of the participants had rated the item as "essential." If the category had extended to an average rating of $\geq$4.1, then a majority of the participants would have rated the items as "very important." The single item classified as "somewhat important" received an average rating of 2.6, which we deemed to be sufficiently separated from the other more highly rated items to justify its removal from further analysis. Remaining items were examined for common themes and researchers used a structural coding approach (Saldaña 2013) whereby the ratings and the frequency of themes served as a quantitative foundation for prioritizing identified themes.

RESULTS

Codes of Conduct

One primary theme identified from the list of best practices and policies generated during the focus group (Tables 1 and 2)

Table 1.—Fifteen "essential" policies and best practices university faculty and administrators should consider implementing to reduce the risk of sexual misconduct during field-based research. These items were rated by focus group participants as "essential" ($\geq$4.5) on a scale of 1 to 5. Average ratings provided by the focus group participants are listed in parentheses.

Essential items to reduce the risk of sexual misconduct during field-based research
• Conduct leader training on identifying and responding to sexual harassment to make sure institution's polices are followed (5.0).
• Set expectations for appropriate behavior up front by developing a code of conduct to address sexual harassment in field settings with realistic consequences for breaking codes (4.9).
• Leaders need to respond, in the moment, to the situation, as best they can (4.9).
• Leaders need to share information through proper channels (4.9).
• Develop protocol and training for responding to reports of incidents (4.9).
• Hold everyone (students, staff, instructors) to the same standards (4.9).
• Setting a culture for acceptable behavior must happen early in the session and be maintained throughout the session (4.7).
• When you have a group working in the field, give a formal presentation to the entire group to make sure that everyone is on the same page. During the orientation, alert participants that the field is still a classroom and that field work is still work. [Explain] what will happen when someone's behavior is inappropriate. "What happens in the field, stays in the field" is not acceptable (4.6).
• Timely response to a complaint, even if you fear that will hurt someone's career. For example, if the complaint takes months to settle, a short-term field experience may end before action is taken (4.6).
• Conduct bystander intervention training for participants, staff, and leaders (4.5).
• Implement anonymous reporting (4.5).
• If there are no consequences for bad actions, this erodes the policy (4.5).
• Code of conduct: Treat the field as a classroom. Make the field location regulations the same as for an on-campus site (4.5).
• If you see someone behaving inappropriately, have a conversation with that individual to make this a learning opportunity. Help them improve their professionalism. "Ouch and educate." Look for teachable moments in response to inappropriate behavior (4.5).
• Create an environment where speaking about sexual misconduct is not taboo (4.5).

Table 2.—Twenty-seven "very important" policies and best practices university faculty and administrators should consider implementing to reduce the risk of sexual misconduct during field-based research. These items were rated by focus group participants as "very important" ($\leq$4.4 and $\geq$3.5) on a scale of 1 to 5. Average ratings provided by the focus group participants are shown in parentheses.

Very important items to reduce the risk of sexual misconduct during field-based research
• Be willing to name and address long-term issues that everyone knows about, but no one is willing to address (4.4).
• Students must sign a code of conduct and if they act unprofessionally the instructors may remove them [from the research team] (4.4).
• Be sensitive to gender identity when assigning housing (4.4).
• A situation should not be only the responsibility of the victim – it is the responsibility of all members of the community (4.3).
• Need to do multiple check-ins with students; do not just mention at the introduction (4.3).
• Create a culture where people can freely ask questions about what is appropriate or inappropriate without fearing judgement (4.3).
• If there is not formal documentation of inappropriate behavior, create a structure in which you remove the opportunities for said behavior (4.1).
• Ensure you have good gatekeepers for reporting; much responsibility lies with their judgement (4.1).
• Gather all information from both parties about a complaint prior to making a decision (4.0).
• [A faculty member's] responsibility is more than to teach technical content; it is also to teach professionalism and appropriate behavior (4.0).
• Show students that their job performance evaluation will include professional behavior (4.0).
• Be over-assertive rather than lenient to a complaint: provide a rapid and strong response (4.0).
• Leaders must respond to inappropriate comments both formally (written) and informally (4.0).
• There needs to be a person external to the field site as part of the reporting structure (4.0).
• Be aware of the correlation between alcohol and inappropriate behavior (4.0).
• Send student applications to the [university administration] to flag any students who have had conduct issues. If someone is flagged, have a conversation with that student.
• People in positions of power should not be housed in the same room with subordinates (3.9).
• Have multiple reporting structures, and have both males and females in the reporting structures (3.9).
• Be aware that a zero-tolerance policy can sometimes undermine the likelihood of reporting an incident (3.9).
• Present [university's sexual misconduct data reports] to students: they need to be aware of the statistics of inappropriate behavior (3.9).
• If alcohol is banned on-site, have off-site policies in place (3.9).
• Create an official, trained ombudsperson or professional contact who could be an intermediary contact for reporting (3.6).
• Utilize a "two-deep" concept in the field (redundancy to insure personal safety) (3.6).
• An alcohol ban should be enforced. Alcohol may exacerbate issues of sexual misconduct (3.6).
• Identify students who are supportive allies and know which students may potentially need more guidance (3.6).
• Move away from a single-mentor format: have a faculty member, field work director, field-based staff, and structures for complaints to travel to the university through multiple concurrent pathways (3.5).
• When meeting with individuals, always leave office doors open unless they specifically request otherwise (3.5).

Table 3.—Themes and subthemes (italicized) with paired example excerpts from 42 "essential" and "very important" best practices and policies to reduce the risk of sexual misconduct during field-based research when working with research teams which include students.

Theme: Codes of conduct
• Set expectations for appropriate behavior. . . by developing a code of conduct to address sexual harassment in field settings with realistic consequences for breaking code
Subtheme: define sexual misconduct
• Training on identifying and responding to sexual harassment
Subtheme: communicate expectations regarding professional behavior of all team members
• Conduct bystander intervention training for participants, staff, and leaders
Subtheme: include the process for reporting violations
• Gather all information from both parties about a complaint
Subtheme: identify potential penalties for violators
• Students must sign a code of conduct and [violators may be removed from the team]
Theme: Reporting and responding to violations
• Timely response to a complaint, even if [it may] . . . hurt someone's career
Subtheme: provide an option for anonymous reporting
• Implement anonymous reporting
Subtheme: have multiple pathways for reporting violations
• Have multiple reporting structures [with] males and females in the reporting structures
Subtheme: place trustworthy individuals as members of the reporting system
• Ensure you have good gatekeepers for reporting

was for research leaders to develop a code of conduct for their research team as a method of reducing the risk of sexual misconduct among their research team members (Table 3). There were four code of conduct subthemes: (1) define sexual misconduct, (2) communicate expectations regarding professional behavior of all team members, (3) include the process for reporting violations, and (4) identify potential penalties for violators (Tables 1 and 2). The focus group participants noted that sexual misconduct may already be covered by existing organizational policies; however, the unique situation of working with students at remote field locations necessitates that the research leader must evaluate the additional risks specific to the remoteness of the research location and the group of students, staff, and other researchers who compose the team. Although the code of conduct should be written by the research leader, it should be reviewed and approved by the institution's administration.

Focus group participants provided high ratings to items that recommended hosting an orientation for all members of the research team prior to departure to the field location during which the code of conduct is reviewed, reporting procedures are outlined, and consequences for sexual misconduct are clearly delineated (Tables 1–3). This orientation may include (1) bystander training, (2) additional training for team leaders on recognizing sexual harassment, (3) sharing data on the frequency of sexual misconduct violations within field research teams, and (4) a formal signing of the code of conduct by members of the research team. The focus group emphasized the importance of revisiting the code of conduct and discussing sexual misconduct multiple times throughout the field work experience.

Two issues unique to field research teams, which may need to be specifically referenced within a code of conduct, are alcohol consumption and housing arrangements (Table 2). The focus group participants noted that alcohol has the potential to increase the risk of sexual misconduct and suggested that additional thought and care be put toward alcohol policies for field research teams. Some research teams will stay at a remote site for days, weeks, or months. This creates housing policies that need to be incorporated into the code of conduct. The focus group participants recommended that individuals in positions of power not be housed with subordinates and that gender identity be considered when assigning housing.

Reporting and Responding to Violations

The focus group had several recommendations for reporting and evaluating potential code of conduct violations (Tables 1 and 2). These included (1) provide an option for anonymous reporting; (2) have multiple pathways for reporting violations that include males, females, and individuals external to the research team; and (3) place trustworthy individuals with strong communication skills as members of the reporting system. They also recommended having a system in place that details how information would be gathered from both parties (accuser and accused). The system for reporting, evaluation, and penalties must be included in the code of conduct and shared with the research team before the field-based research begins.

The focus group was divided over how research leaders should address minor violations among research team members. Some participants advocated an "ouch-and-educate approach" (Social Transformation Project 2021) whereby the violator is corrected for their misbehavior and information is provided about how their behavior was a violation of the code of conduct. These focus group participants felt that zero-tolerance policies on sexual misconduct resulted in underreporting of violations (Tables 1 and 2) and noted the importance of creating an environment where individuals are able to ask questions about sexual misconduct without fearing judgment. This approach would allow research leaders to respond to minor violations as teachable moments and review the code of conduct with the entire research team. However, other focus group participants recommended being over-assertive, rather than lenient, in enforcing the code of conduct. They expressed concern that a failure to respond to a violation through the formal process would be likely to result in research team members losing trust in the leadership's commitment to creating a workplace free from sexual misconduct. Although there was informal disagreement about the appropriate response to minor violations, all participants agreed that for severe violations, responses must be timely, even if the outcome is the loss of employment for the individual responsible for the violation.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of a code of conduct is to communicate effectively to all research team members the leader's expectations for professional behavior among researchers. It is important to communicate this information to the team in advance, because students from underrepresented groups are often afraid to work in remote locations where their minority status may increase their vulnerability and individuals may opt out of a field

experience because of the perceived risk (Lawrence and Dowey 2021). The first objective of a code of conduct is to adequately define sexual misconduct so that all members of the research team start from a common understanding of appropriate and inappropriate verbal, electronic, and physical communication among team members. This can be best achieved by supplementing university sexual misconduct polices with examples specific to the upcoming field experience (Colaninno et al. 2021). The language of sexual misconduct polices is often formalized to the point of inaccessibility for students. The research leader should craft specific examples of sexual misconduct to be included in the code of conduct. This may be an uncomfortable experience for faculty members and the administrators, who approve these statements, because writing about sexual misconduct requires explicit language and an open acknowledgement that there are gender, sexuality, and power differences among the various members of the field research team (Nash 2021). Researchers' reticence to use sexually explicit language could be easily seen within our focus group results, where participants used numerous euphemisms for sexual misconduct, e.g., "professionalism," "appropriate behavior," "standards," "acceptable behavior," "incidents," "a situation," and "bad actions" (Tables 1 and 2). An effective code of conduct must include a specific and accessible definition of sexual misconduct which is shared with the entire research team prior to departure to the remote field location.

Another essential element for reducing the risk of sexual misconduct is the development of a reporting structure for suspected violations. This must include information about how to file a report; privacy and confidentiality policies for the accuser and the accused; accessibility of the misconduct report; and whether the individual(s) with access to the report will also have access to previous records of misconduct (Hardy 2016). This last item was discussed extensively by the focus group participants because of its importance in identifying serial offenders within academia, i.e., "long-term issues that everyone knows about, but no one is willing to address" (Table 2). Although a research leader may be one of several possible reporting pathways for suspected violations, it is important to remember that the decision of whether a violation has occurred is not the responsibility of any members of the research team. Instead, the violation needs to be evaluated and decided by the organization's sexual misconduct reporting system; e.g., in an American university this would be the Title IX office (McGill et al. 2021).

One of the most substantial challenges in establishing a pathway for reporting sexual misconduct violations within field-based research teams is that members of the team may represent several different organizations. The clearest situation is when all members of a team are from the same American university because then suspected sexual misconduct violations must be reported to the university's Title IX office. This legal requirement is well understood by American faculty members and administrators (Copenheaver et al. 2020). However, many of our focus group participants described situations where research teams included members from governmental agencies, conservation organizations, and academic institutions. In these situations, the reporting and evaluation pathway for violations becomes more complicated. One option in these situations would be to use a reporting system through a professional society, an approach that has been used during scientific conferences, where attendees also represent many different organizations (Favaro et al. 2016). However, not all professional societies have policies or adequate procedures for evaluating suspected sexual misconduct violations (Copenheaver et al. 2022). The lack of a clear pathway for reporting and evaluating suspected sexual misconduct was reflected in the focus group participants placing this responsibility on the research team leaders, e.g., "If you [the research leader] see someone behaving inappropriately, have a conversation with that individual." This made several focus participants uncomfortable because it creates a conflict of interest when the research leader creates the code of conduct, determines when the code has been violated, and assigns penalties for violations. These participants strongly advocated that research teams identify an external evaluation system to remove this potential source of internal conflict. One of the risks of having the research leader serve as the sole reporting and evaluation system it is disincentivizes victims, who may choose to remain silent for fear of risking their own career advancement (Hunt 2022).

Given the connection between alcohol and sexual misconduct, a code of conduct must include an explicit statement about the research team's alcohol policy and penalties for violations. Research at remote locations removes spatial and temporal boundaries among team members because field crews eat, sleep, bathe, and conduct research with no separation between personal and professional space and time (Posselt and Nuñez 2021). Heavy alcohol consumption increases the risk for sexual misconduct and decreases the likelihood of bystander intervention (Leone and Parrott 2019). Therefore, researchers must make decisions about how to codify the use of alcohol. Focus group participants noted that a total ban on alcohol may simply shift potential problems toward local bars and restaurants, without reducing the risk of sexual misconduct (Table 2).

Potential consequences for violations of a research team's code of conduct must be included within the document itself. One common misstep is including a blanket statement that the research team has "a zero-tolerance policy for sexual harassment and assault" without providing additional information. Although this phrase is commonly used, it is not understood by students, and codes of conduct must include specific consequences (Colaninno et al. 2021). A research leader may need to communicate with their organization's sexual misconduct office to learn about specific consequences associated with violations for their institution.

Reducing the risk of sexual misconduct among field-based research teams results from intentional actions on the part of the lead researchers and administrators. The process of developing a code of conduct for a research team allows the lead researcher to thoroughly examine existing practices and identify opportunities for improvement. Field research is such a valuable experience for undergraduate and graduate students that we must commit to changing how we organize and coordinate research at remote locations to allow all students to benefit from the hands-on experience of data collection.

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