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# A Protocol for Researcher Safety

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*Although there is an abundance of literature about how to conduct qualitative research and some consideration of possible threats to researchers' psychological well-being, there is little mention of the personal safety issues that researchers face while in the field. Few researchers have attempted to address the issue of researcher safety as a methodological concern. Consequently, there are minimal guidelines available to researchers to prevent and avoid dangerous incidents in the course of their research. The following is a discussion of the general guidelines for developing a protocol to address the issue of researcher safety in the field. These guidelines have been extrapolated from safety guidelines and policies written for students and clinicians who enter a client's home in their role as health care practitioners, relevant literature in the area of safety for researchers in violent settings, resources such as safety guidelines for employees, and the personal experiences of several researchers.*

**A**lthough there is an abundance of literature about how to conduct qualitative research and some consideration of the possible threats to researchers' psychological well-being while researching emotionally sensitive topics (e.g., Cowles, 1988; Dunn, 1991; Gregory, Russell, & Phillips, 1997), there is little mention of the personal safety issues that researchers face while in the field (Sluka, 1990). Many researchers have recounted dangerous experiences while researching in politically volatile situations (e.g., Peritore, 1990) or in research pertaining to the drug culture or criminal element (e.g., Williams, Dunlap, Johnson, & Hamid, 1992). These accounts have been largely descriptive, with minimal discussion as to how the threats to researcher safety could be prevented or managed. There is almost no consideration of the dangers that may be present to researchers in settings in which danger and violence are not the norm, despite the fact that "no neighborhood (rural, urban, or suburban) is immune to the threat of crime and violence" (Hayes, Carter, Carroll, & Morin, 1996, p. 90). Few researchers have attempted to address the issue of researcher safety as a methodological concern (Sluka, 1990). Consequently, there are minimal guidelines available to researchers to prevent and avoid dangerous incidents in the course of their research.

Arendell (1997) describes the journey of many qualitative researchers when she notes that her early research in the area of divorce and marital conflict involved "little

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thought to potential personal safety questions" (p. 349). She became aware of safety issues in research through her experiences and those of students during fieldwork in a research methods course. Like Arendell, researcher safety in the field became a personally relevant issue only when one of the authors was confronted with the following threatening event: A participant had been screened as a volunteer for a research project about living with a chronic illness. He lived in a middle-class neighborhood of a large city. When the researcher entered his apartment, he locked the door behind her. The prospective participant then announced that he had no intention of being interviewed. He had volunteered for the research project because he "wanted a woman." The researcher spent the next hour listening and talking calmly to him as she inched her way to the door. She left the apartment untouched but shaken.

In discussing this incident with colleagues, we learned that several had similar experiences in the past. They shared stories of being stalked, approached, and frightened while conducting research in the field. We heard of purses and tape recorders being stolen, cars being vandalized, participants pointing a gun at the researcher, and sexual advances by the participant's visitors or family members. Despite the traumatic effects of such encounters, we discovered that, to date, this issue has been largely neglected in research literature. Neither the possibility of researcher abuse nor guidelines to prevent such an occurrence have been given much descriptive or analytical attention other than in research pertaining to known violent settings (Arendell, 1997; Sluka, 1990). Howell (1990) states that this has arisen from the propagation by researchers that they are brave, rather than foolish, to enter research settings without consideration of the dangers that might confront them. He suggests that this is a false stance when one considers the number of dangers that a researcher might encounter in the field.

The following is a discussion of the general guidelines for developing a protocol to address the issue of researcher safety in the field. A safety protocol for researchers is intended to detail the policies and procedures for prevention, intervention, and follow-up of harmful incidents encountered by researchers in the field. Harmful events can include physical and/or verbal aggression in which the physical and/or psychological safety of the researcher is jeopardized (Greater Vancouver Mental Health Service, 1996).

During the past decade, violence has been identified as a major threat to the health of all citizens across the world (Campbell, Harris, & Lee, 1995; Moore, 1993). In response to this threat, safety guidelines and policies have been written for students and clinicians who enter a client's home in their role as a health care practitioner. These have been extrapolated in the following discussion to apply to researcher safety. Relevant literature in the area of safety for researchers in violent settings and resources such as safety guidelines for employees (e.g., Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia, 1994) have also been reflected in the discussion. The authors consulted several researchers, including members of the University of British Columbia School of Nursing Research Committee and Meg Gaily, the personal security coordinator of the University of British Columbia, when writing this article. Their advice is incorporated in the following discussion.

An assumption underlying this article is that threats to the safety of researchers are few and occur infrequently in most research projects (Arendell, 1997; Howell, 1990), but those that do occur are traumatic to those involved. Another assumption is that prevention or avoidance of dangerous incidents is the most effective strategy

to maintain researcher safety in the field (Nadwairiski, 1992). The following details what is meant by a safety protocol in research, including recommendations for the structure and development of such a protocol. This is followed by a discussion about the four components of a safety protocol: the assessment of the situation, preventative strategies, identifying and responding to a threat, and follow-up. Although there are dangers to researchers in fieldwork that are caused by environmental hazards such as precipitation, altitude, and bacteria (Howell, 1990), this article will refer to only those dangers that are caused by another individual.

## A SAFETY PROTOCOL IN RESEARCH

Perhaps the best prevention of harm during fieldwork is the readiness of researchers to anticipate and mediate danger (Hayes et al., 1996). Individuals who are equipped with strategies to diffuse threats to their safety are more confident and are better able to respond to dangerous situations in the field (George, 1996). Researchers who are strangers to the field and those with little previous field experience are more at risk than those who know the field well because they are unable to anticipate many of the dangers that might confront them. Generally, the published accounts of threats to researcher safety are those that infer that safety is only a concern of female researchers who are accosted by male perpetrators. The experience of our research colleagues, both male and female, would attest that this is not strictly a gender issue; researchers of both genders have experienced threats to their safety by persons of either sex. Some male colleagues stated that in specific circumstances (e.g., when the male researcher is perceived by another to be a romantic partner of a female participant), male researchers might be placed at greater risk than females.

Howell (1990) notes that few researchers and even fewer research assistants take the time to anticipate the dangers they may encounter and to discuss how they may respond to them. She recommends that research teams discuss and teach the management of danger in advance of data collection in the field to develop a safety protocol that is applicable to the research team's unique needs and situation. We suggest that researchers have a moral obligation to sufficiently prepare research assistants and novice researchers in this regard.

Although there are general principles and guidelines that can be applied to attain researcher safety (e.g., the researcher should identify the dangers that might exist in the setting before conducting research in the area), there are unique features of every research project and team that dictate various interpretations of those guidelines. For example, research conducted in high-crime areas may necessitate the use of escorts for a researcher conducting fieldwork (Sluka, 1990). Ultimately, it is the decisions of the researchers that determine whether the dangers of fieldwork can be effectively mediated (Howell, 1990).

One way of developing a safety protocol for research is to pose common dangerous situations (e.g., the researcher is required to use a stairwell in an apartment building to reach the participant's apartment on the third floor, and there are two people on the stairwell who watch the researcher in what appears to be a menacing way) and use them to stimulate discussion in the research team about the most effective ways to respond to these situations (Hayes et al., 1996). The written formal protocol that is the outcome of such a discussion should detail the research team's

responsibilities and response in the prevention and management of danger, including appropriate follow-up to a threatening event. It should delineate the situations in which a researcher could refuse to enter a research setting and the resources that are available if the researcher is uncertain about how to proceed when a threat to personal safety is perceived (George, 1996).

There are a number of community resources that can assist a research team or department to develop a safety protocol that is tailored to their unique needs and goals. Security departments in institutions such as hospitals and universities offer personal consultation and advice in developing such a protocol. Some universities, such as the University of Toronto, have developed policies and procedures to protect the safety of students and faculty who travel abroad as researchers (Howell, 1990). Local police stations or crime prevention associations provide information programs and brochures offering safety tips for individuals. Women's centers or sexual assault centers in the community are additional resources in this regard.

## ASSESSMENT OF THE SITUATION

A critical aspect of safety in the field is anticipating what dangers might be present to researchers so that they can ameliorate or effectively manage them. Not all dangers can be anticipated, but many can be avoided by careful reflection prior to data collection regarding the degree of danger and the potential sources of danger within the setting or research situation (Sluka, 1990). The acceptable degree of risk of any research endeavor must be determined by the researcher. The degree of risk associated with a specific research project is largely determined by the nature of the research participants, the nature of the research topic, and the nature of the environment in which the research occurs. Data pertaining to the incidents of violence that have occurred within the past year in the neighborhood in which the research activity will take place may also be used to determine the degree of risk to the researcher (Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia, 1994).

### The Research Participants

Although qualitative researchers may face safety issues at any research interview, they are particularly vulnerable when studying certain types of participants (e.g., those with a known history of aggression, persons with dementia who are violent). Safety is a critical concern when researchers are interviewing participants who hold a superordinate position in relation to a subordinate other and the research topic focuses on that relationship (Pierce, 1995). This vulnerability is accentuated if the researcher is perceived by the participant to represent the subordinate other. For example, female researchers who are interviewing men who have abused their female partners face such a risk (Arendell, 1997).

Although most research participants will not endanger a researcher, there are some areas of research in which the participants are particularly prone to such events, including research of family violence and aggression. The risk factors associated with aggression include a history of aggressive or abusive behavior, legal

charges and/or convictions related to aggression, psychotic mental illness and non-compliance with antipsychotic medications, trauma by war or persecution, affiliation with aggressive groups (e.g., gang membership), use of addictive substances, evidence of paranoia, extreme stress related to loss of employment or relationships, and borderline intellectual functioning (Greater Vancouver Mental Health Service, 1996). Monahan, Applebaum, Mulvey, Robbins, and Lidz (1993) recommend that persons with a history of drug or alcohol addiction or psychotic mental illness be telephoned immediately prior to a research interview. If the participant appears to be intoxicated or symptomatic, the research interview should be canceled.

### **Nature of Research Topic**

Some research topics are associated with a higher degree of risk to the researcher than others. In particular, interviewing potentially aggressive and volatile participants about politically or emotionally charged topics is a high-risk situation for researchers (Sluka, 1990; Williams et al., 1992). It is recommended that in these situations the researcher should be accompanied in the field by another member of the research team (Monahan et al., 1993).

Researchers may face threats to their safety due to the nature of their research topic because “people tend to associate the research that a researcher is conducting with the researcher” (Henslin, 1972, p. 55). Highly political or controversial research subjects (e.g., guerrilla warfare) may cause others who hold an opposing view to believe that the researcher is a partisan (i.e., is a guerrilla sympathizer), resulting in threats, intimidation, and/or physical assault (Sluka, 1990).

### **Nature of the Environment**

The location of the setting of data collection is significant in researcher safety. Two high-risk situations are conducting fieldwork in transient, single-room neighborhoods where drug use and criminal activity are common and in neighborhoods that are economically, culturally, or ethnically different from that of the researcher (Lewis & Hallburg, 1980). Whether these settings are threatening to researchers will depend to a large degree on their past experiences with similar surroundings and their knowledge regarding minimizing threats to their safety (George, 1996).

If the neighborhood in which data collection is to take place is unfamiliar, it is recommended that the researcher and a companion drive to the area on a day previous to conducting the research to assess the safety of the surroundings, including the existence of well-lit, accessible parking spaces, preferably visible from the location of the research. Long, poorly lit streets or hallways in apartment buildings where people linger may jeopardize the researcher's safety (Nadwairiski, 1992; Rice, 1994). A drive-through previsit gives researchers an opportunity to check the accuracy of directions to the street and building at which the data collection is to take place. Being lost or wandering without an escort in an unfamiliar neighborhood places the researcher at risk (Nadwairiski, 1992). As well, the researcher can investigate the possibility of a clear escape from the research setting if danger arises (Sluka, 1990; Williams et al., 1992).

## PREVENTION STRATEGIES

There are a number of strategies to prevent researcher harm in fieldwork. These entail equipping researchers with appropriate communication and alarm devices, maintaining a state of acute awareness, maintaining visibility, and preparing for the research venture.

### Equipping the Researcher

The purchase of certain safety equipment in preparation for research in the field enhances the researcher's safety. Personal safety alarms are inexpensive and easily activated. Their loud screeching sound will deter many would-be attackers (Nadwairiski, 1992). The alarm should be carried on a key ring, worn around the neck, or pinned to researcher's clothing (Ministry of Women's Equality & Ministry of Small Business, Tourism, and Culture, 1997). Cellular telephones are valuable accessories in fieldwork as they can be used to contact others for help when required and to convey information about the researcher's whereabouts. Researchers should preprogram cellular telephones to the local police or emergency call number (e.g., 911) so that they can access an emergency number by merely pushing a button.

### State of Awareness

The risk of personal danger increases if the individual appears unaware of what is happening in the environment, and therefore, the researcher should appear astute and aware of his or her surroundings (Ministry of Women's Equality & Ministry of Small Business, Tourism, and Culture, 1997; Williams et al., 1992). Researchers should walk confidently, keeping their heads up, looking around, and looking directly at people without staring. Digging in purses and briefcases for keys or addresses or struggling with cumbersome equipment places the researcher at risk because it diminishes the individual's ability to respond quickly to threatening situations (Ministry of Women's Equality & Ministry of Small Business, Tourism, and Culture, 1997). Bulky purses and equipment should be avoided in fieldwork (Greater Vancouver Mental Health Service, 1996).

The researcher should listen and observe carefully for signs of potential risk in the field. He or she should listen for a few minutes at the door of the participant's residence before knocking or ringing the doorbell. Yelling, excessive banging, or crashing may indicate that the researcher should not proceed (Greater Vancouver Mental Health Service, 1996).

### Maintaining Visibility

Researchers should avoid settings in which they are not easily visible to others. Generally, it is preferable to schedule research meetings as early in the day as possible (Monahan et al., 1993; Nadwairiski, 1992). If an evening visit is unavoidable, the researcher should park in a well-lit area, as close to the place where he or she will meet the participant as possible. If required to park in an underground garage, the researcher should park the car close to the attendant or exit (Ministry of Women's



Equality & Ministry of Small Business, Tourism, and Culture, 1997). If the research activity is scheduled in a housing project or in an area that requires the researcher to walk in secluded places, the researcher should alert the participant when he or she will arrive and request that the participant watch for his or her arrival (Nadwairiski, 1992).

Researchers should not volunteer any personal information about themselves that would lead another person to the researcher's home (e.g., home address, home telephone number). The research consent form to be signed by participants should not include the researcher's home address or home telephone number. Participants can be given a contact number at the researcher's workplace or the research project's office. Car keys should not be identified with the researcher's name, address, make of car, or license plate number (Ministry of Women's Equality & Ministry of Small Business, Tourism, and Culture, 1997). An additional caution is that if the researcher is meeting a participant more than once, he or she should take different routes home each time. This will help to prevent someone from being able to locate the researcher's home address.

### **Preparing for the Research**

Preparation for research to maintain researcher safety entails "foresight, planning, skilful maneuver, and a conscious effort at impression management" (Sluka, 1990, p. 115). The researcher should not dress or act in a way that is likely to provoke negative responses from people within the research setting (Carter, Carroll, & Hayes, 1993; Finney, 1988; Smith, 1988; Williams et al., 1992). Wearing expensive jewelry, carrying a briefcase, and acting in a patronizing manner toward people of the neighborhood may engender such a response and expose the researcher to risk (Hayes et al., 1996). Wearing a business suit may convey a sense of the researcher's confidence in some settings but may evoke hostility and draw undue attention to the researcher in others. In general, wearing clothes that are appropriate to the setting conveys the researcher's "sense of belonging in the setting" (Williams et al., 1992). The researcher's decisions about what is or is not appropriate may be mediated by a key informant who knows the setting well and is able to give the researcher advice about potentially dangerous participants and settings (Peritore, 1990; Williams et al., 1992).

A major component of preparation for fieldwork is to ensure that the researcher is not stranded in unfamiliar neighborhoods because of a vehicle malfunction. It is essential that prior to the research fieldwork, the researcher determine that his or her car is in good working order, that the gas tank is at least half full, and that the tires are sufficiently inflated to prevent car breakdown in an unfamiliar and risky area (Ministry of Women's Equality & Ministry of Small Business, Tourism, and Culture, 1997).

The researcher should avoid standing in the street or waiting by his or her vehicle before or after conducting the research activity. It is important that the researcher prepare to get out of the car when he or she arrives in the designated neighborhood by collecting everything he or she needs (e.g., personal alarm, tape recorder, etc.) before exiting (Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia, 1994). This will prevent the researcher from having to return to the vehicle after he or she has exited. The vehicle should be locked and the windows rolled up when it is unattended (Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia, 1994).



Where to conduct first-time research interviews is a challenge because both the setting and the participant are likely to be unfamiliar to the researcher (Arendell, 1997). If the researcher has never met the participant before, the first meeting should ideally occur in a public place (e.g., the researcher's place of work). This is not always possible because of the confidential or sensitive nature of the research topic or the participant's health status (e.g., the individual is bedridden and unable to leave the house). If possible, prior to a first-time interview, the researcher should telephone the prospective participant to provide him or her with information about the research project and to explore potential safety issues in the field setting. Researchers could use such a phone call to communicate that they would need to let their research colleagues know where they are and to discover who else might be present in the home during the interview. Often researchers' intuitive senses come into play during an initial telephone contact, and they are able to discern that the participant may present some threats to the researcher's safety. The majority of qualitative research encounters do not entail violence toward the researcher, but those known to be high risk may require that the researcher be accompanied to the field by a colleague for the first encounter.

The first face-to-face encounter with the participant will often give an indication of the individual's usual way of being and assists the researcher in determining the degree of personal risk. If the participant is known to be at risk for aggression, the researcher should avoid areas of the participant's home where there are sharp objects, such as the kitchen (Greater Vancouver Mental Health Service, 1996).

Part of the preparation for researcher safety is to inform another person (e.g., a member of the research team) of the time, date, and address of the research activity (Ministry of Women's Equality & Ministry of Small Business, Tourism, and Culture, 1997; Peritore, 1990). The expected duration of the activity should be included in this information as well as the license plate number of the researcher's vehicle. The researcher should telephone that individual when he or she reaches the research location and on arriving home. The safety protocol developed by the research team should include an expected action for the contact individual (e.g., telephone the police) if the researcher does not telephone within the expected period of time.

## **IDENTIFYING AND RESPONDING TO A THREAT**

A threat to personal safety is sensed whenever an individual's safety zone is violated. A safety zone is a physical area approximately three feet in diameter surrounding the researcher (Williams et al., 1992). It is also a feeling of "psychological safety" (Williams et al., 1992, p. 356) in which the researcher experiences a sense of mutual trust and comfort with another individual. Individuals are often able to sense a potential or actual violation of their safety zones before they have concrete evidence to support their intuitions about danger. The primary principles for identifying and managing a threat in the field are that researchers should trust their instincts and that they should leave the setting if they sense there is something unusual or they feel uncomfortable when they enter the location (Ministry of Women's Equality & Ministry of Small Business, Tourism, and Culture, 1997). The first priority is the researcher's safety. When possible, the researcher who detects a

threat to his or her safety should go to a safe location and alert the police (Greater Vancouver Mental Health Service, 1996).

Persons who might pose a threat to the researcher's safety may give cues before or during an actual interview. Physical gestures that convey familiarity despite the research context (e.g., sitting close to the researcher on a chesterfield; hugging the researcher) and sexual innuendoes are such cues. Arendell (1997) cautions that such gestures can convey messages of power and dominance that may later be translated into more extreme behaviors that violate the researcher's safety. Other cues of possible aggression include psychomotor agitation, challenging verbal behavior, swearing and violent speech, and restless pacing (Greater Vancouver Mental Health Service, 1996). The researcher may often circumvent such behaviors by remaining calm and reiterating the boundaries of the relationship and the focus of the relationship; for example, "I am here to interview you. I would rather you did not touch me." "I cannot understand what you are saying if you don't lower your voice and sit down" (Gurney, 1985; Ostrander, 1995). It is important that the researcher avoid arguing with the participant to preclude an escalation of the aggressive behaviors (Greater Vancouver Mental Health Service, 1996).

If a participant is threatening and refuses to let the researcher leave the setting, an effective strategy is to tell the individual that the researcher has to make a telephone call to cancel his or her next appointment at the researcher's place of work (personal communication, Meg Gaily, May 20, 1997). The researcher can then telephone the designated contact person and relate a code phrase (e.g., please tell Mr. Alphonse that I won't be able to see him today). The code should be one that the research team has agreed means danger and that the contact should call the police. During such a situation, the researcher should look directly at the individual and make it clear that he or she cannot be intimidated (Ministry of Women's Equality & Ministry of Small Business, Tourism, and Culture, 1997; Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia, 1994).

If the researcher is attacked on the street or away from the participant's home, the best strategy is loud noise. The personal alarm and screaming as long and as loudly as possible will often be effective in discouraging a would-be attacker (Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia, 1994). As soon as possible, the researcher should escape to a well-lit area. If an individual grabs the researcher's purse, briefcase, or equipment, he or she should not resist. Neither should he or she run after the thief (Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia, 1994).

## **FOLLOW-UP**

The written safety protocol established by the research team should detail the procedures for reporting and documenting threatening incidents that have occurred in the research setting (Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia, 1994). For example, the protocol should indicate to whom the researcher should communicate an attempted or actual assault (e.g., the principal investigator, the police). Actual or potential violent incidents should be reported to the police as soon as possible after the incident. According to the Workers' Compensation Board of British Columbia (1994), the police will require the following information about the assailant: gender; approximate age, height, and weight; ethnicity; hair (color,

texture, and style); eyes (color, size, shape, and if glasses); complexion; jewelry; scars/ marks; tattoos; hat (color and type); clothing (coat, jacket, trousers, dress, skirt, shirt, shoes, tie); and skin (color and presence of wrinkles, moles, or other facial markings). If a tool or weapon was used, a detailed description should be provided. If the assailant used a vehicle, the researcher should note the color, make, model, license plate number, and distinguishing features (e.g., damage, antenna, bumper sticker, wheel covers) of that vehicle and the direction that the vehicle was going when the assailant left the scene. As well, the police will want to know what the assailant said and did and if any witnesses were present. The researcher should write these details down as soon as possible after the incident to facilitate recall when the police investigate the incident. The research team should develop a form to record these details, and every researcher should carry copies of this form to the field.

The experience of an assault or a potential assault in the field is a traumatic one. The person who was assaulted or threatened may require critical incident stress debriefing, available at many hospitals and health care agencies, to recover effectively from the experience. The principal investigator(s) of the research project should schedule a team debriefing within 72 hours of the incident to debrief, provide support to the person who was assaulted/threatened and to each other, and to recommend future approaches to prevent such incidents (Greater Vancouver Mental Health Service, 1996).

## CONCLUSION

In the preceding discussion, we have extrapolated from a variety of resources to identify guidelines and principles that can be used by researchers to develop a safety protocol that reflects elements of safe fieldwork and the unique nature of the research project. The discussion is not intended to frighten researchers into believing that all research is hazardous and that every participant is potentially dangerous. Most researchers will never encounter an incident that threatens their safety. That does not mean, however, that the issue of researcher safety can be ignored or taken for granted. In this age of increasing violence, it no longer makes sense to wait until an incident happens before this issue is addressed. Although not all potential risks of fieldwork have been identified in this article, it has contributed to a delineation of strategies to diffuse potentially harmful situations in research should they occur. There continues to be a need, however, for the open sharing of researchers' stories of harmful incidents and their strategies to prevent and manage them (i.e., "tales of the field") (Van Maanen, 1988). This is imperative so that we may critically scrutinize our research practices to develop a greater understanding of the potential risks and how to minimize them in the research process.

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