

**Mental Health and Fieldwork**  
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**Abstract**

Researchers discuss the logistics of successful fieldwork but not the mental health considerations that fieldwork and the research process introduce. Successful fieldwork and fruitful academic careers hinge on acknowledging and managing our mental health. We discuss peer support networks, secondary trauma, coping skills, therapy, and researchers' mental health options before, during, and after fieldwork.

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## **Introduction**

Fieldwork – leaving your home institution to acquire data as part of a research project (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015, p.8) – can bring new stressors, as it involves physically leaving daily support structures and entering unfamiliar situations (ibid). We argue that political scientists should discuss and include their mental health concerns in their fieldwork preparations. Where fieldwork removes researchers from their support structures, we posit that the field research process can introduce isolation and stress that may exacerbate pre-existing mental health conditions (Kapiszewski et al 2015). Where fieldwork involves violent situations or topics, researchers may experience trauma (Loyle and Simoni 2017, Nordstrom and Robben 1995). We use research from anthropology, psychology, and political science to suggest that researchers can manage these stressors by setting up support structures and coping skills before, during, and after fieldwork.

The structures and skills that support mental health during fieldwork can support mental health during an academic career (Loyle and Simoni 2017). We suggest that healthy fieldwork practices can spill over to other parts of our professional lives, particularly in situations where we leave support structures and enter potentially isolating or traumatic environments, like starting a graduate program or moving for academic jobs (Dutt-Ballerastadt 2020, Grollman 2015).

Political science publications cover research design and logistics, such as Kapiszewski et al's (2015) thorough guide to implementing field research and Gerber and Green's (2012) handbook on field experiments. Kapiszewski et al include survey questions and discussions about common hardships and researchers' emotional experiences (2015, p. 57-59). Moreover, Loyle and Simoni (2017), directly addresses mental health and fieldwork by discussing how fieldwork can expose researchers to secondary trauma and what researchers can do. Psychologists and anthropologists have incorporated these concerns into research design and training (Nordstrom and Robben 1995, van der Merwe and Hunt 2019). This article is an extension of work on research design and implementation to encourage discussions about mental health in graduate training and between fieldworkers.

## **Mental Health and Academia**

Academics, universities, and professional associations have discussed “a mental health crisis” (Evans et al 2018 p. 282) in academia. Mental health issues disproportionately affect academics who are untenured, in training, and/or minorities in their fields (Evans et al 2018, Levecque et al 2017, Smith et al 2007). Evans et al (2018) surveyed graduate students around the world and documented mental health issues at rates more than six times the overall population. About 40% of graduate students reported anxiety and 40% reported depression. Evans et al's (2018) findings corroborate individual university surveys which find that roughly 50% of graduate students suffer from anxiety, depression, stress, and other mental health issues (Evans et al 2018, Levecque et al 2017). Evans et al (2018) and Levecque et al (2017) conclude that academia's professional pressures lead to a high incidence of mental health issues.

Despite more sector-wide conversations about mental health and more institutional resources for treatment (Woolston 2018), few political science venues discuss the mental health challenges of conducting research. Fieldwork deserves its own discussion because most political scientists conduct fieldwork away from the networks of family, friends, and medical providers that support their mental health (Kapiszewski et al 2015). Some

fieldwork topics – such as civil war, gendered and racist oppression, or state repression – are particularly likely to expose researchers to violence and incidents of death, putting them at risk for trauma (Loyle and Simoni 2017, Nordstrom and Robben 1995).

Psychologists incorporate mental health, self-care, and traumatology into academic and practitioner training (Knight 2013, Stamm 1995). Anthropologists discuss risks and mental health in ethnographic training (e.g. Nordstrom and Robben 1995) and some sociologists include their struggles and trauma in methodological discussions and appendices (e.g. Contreras 2013). Political science trails behind, even as we encourage and reward risky fieldwork (Driscoll and Schuster 2017). For example, Cronin-Furman and Lake (2018) note that weak state capacity and crises in conflict zones enable researchers to gain access in ways which would be frowned upon (at best) in other contexts. Access to vulnerable populations, including children, can add a new angle to a researcher's project, while exploiting subjects (Sukarieh & Tannock 2012). Yet such behavior is often rewarded, since it results in novel data.

When political scientists address mental health and fieldwork, it is often tangential. Sriram et al (2009), for instance, have a section on surviving research and the impact of fieldwork on researcher behavior, but they do not directly address mental health. When researchers discuss mental health, as in Wood (2006), they focus on how the stress of fieldwork environments inhibits research, with less on how the environment impacts the researcher. An exception is Loyle and Simoni's (2017) *PS* article, which identifies research-related trauma and discusses how to manage it. We argue that political science training and institutions need to engage the connections between trauma, fieldwork, and existing mental health concerns.

### **Mental Health and Fieldwork**

Many of us come to fieldwork with chronic mental health conditions (Evans et al 2018, Smith et al 2007). Academic pressure can exacerbate these conditions and fieldwork includes the pressure of implementing a large project with little external structure (Kapiszewski et al 2015). We use existing research to suggest that research questions, research designs, and social identities influence our mental health during fieldwork.

#### *Managing Existing Mental Health Conditions*

If a researcher has existing mental health treatment protocols at their home institution, they have options for continuing medication, therapy, and other treatments at their field site. For example, one of the authors manages chronic anxiety and addiction. She brings medications with her and checks that she can bring them through customs when leaving the U.S. She has video appointments with her therapist and sends her family information about where she will be, what she is doing, and emergency contacts. We have condensed the author's planning into Safety Card #1 (Table 1). Safety Card #1 helps the author think through health logistics before research. It also centralizes information for support people. Another affordable and portable option for fieldworkers are mental health workbooks. Workbooks contain exercises for managing conditions like depression and anxiety. One author uses *Mind Over Mood* (Greenberger and Padesky 2015), which includes guided journaling, charts for tracking emotions, and exercises like developing an exposure plan for anxiety.

This author works with a therapist and her support network to prevent relapse into addiction when she is overwhelmed or isolated. She feels overwhelmed and isolated when she moves for work, has a large project to complete alone, or starts fieldwork. Before starting a fieldwork project, she sets out activities ahead of time that she can do to stay healthy and prevent relapse. Her planning is condensed in Safety Card #2 (Table 2).

We recommend that researchers have discussions with their support people about how they can support the researcher before giving them information in this cheat sheet form. We are political scientists and we base these suggestions on our experiences. Our experience and the options we outline are not substitutes for medical assistance. We recommend that researchers seek assistance from more sources and medical professionals.

### *Therapy*

Being proactive about mental health can protect us from further stress, and one established option is therapy (Hargrave et al 2006). Therapists teach evidence-based tools for managing anxiety, depression, and other issues. They are professionals who can confidentially monitor our mental health throughout our careers.

Many therapists offer video sessions for traveling clients, which is helpful when we do fieldwork away from home. Moreover, a growing number of apps offer therapy through a client's phone or over text, which could be useful during fieldwork (Firth et al 2017a). Such apps have proven effective in managing depression, anxiety, and developing healthy mental habits (Firth et al 2017b, Chandrashekar 2018).

### *Peer Support Networks*

Work on fieldwork in authoritarian contexts notes the importance of formal support networks in maintaining researcher safety and security, as well as that of their interlocutors (Lake & Parkinson 2017). However, this literature has not emphasized building networks for maintaining mental health and this strategy can apply to fieldworkers in all contexts. This option is corroborated by research on the benefits of peer support groups (Cassese and Holman 2018, Trippany, White Kress, and Wilcoxon 2004).

We find that there are two components to our peer support networks: field site peers and peers who know our regular routines. Researchers can build a group of friends and contacts, local academics, and other researchers at a field site, whether the site is home for the researcher or new. Researchers can reach out to organizations, research centers, or university departments before fieldwork and affiliate with them, or ask their academic networks for contacts that live and/or conduct research in the area. These networks enrich research and build academic support networks once fieldwork starts. They are crucial to maintaining the wellbeing of the researcher, particularly in authoritarian or violent environments (Parkinson 2018).

Researchers can build a routine with their field peers through coffee, calls, writing groups, and events. Vital in this is at least one person whom researchers can ask about informal rules and important logistics like doctor recommendations or bureaucratic issues. This group is the core of a fieldwork support structure. Their friendship and advice on rules and behavior are important resources, and help us process our experiences (Trippany, White Kress, and Wilcoxon 2004).

For example, one author experienced sexual harassment from the leaders of an organization she was working with during field research. She reported the harassment to

her advisor and friends at her home institution and her field site. Her advisor and friends at her home institution tried to help but were unsure what to do. Her local peers, on the other hand, had useful and concrete advice about addressing sexual harassment, managing it, and when to leave. The advice helped her take better precautions, address some behaviors directly, and redirect other parts of her fieldwork. The other author experienced politically-motivated legal issues regarding her entry to the field site. Her fieldwork took place in an environment with rampant repression. Without her local support structure and their ability to safely intervene on her behalf, it would have been impossible to navigate the state's coercive apparatus or the local bureaucracy. The local support structure also helped alleviate the stress and fear arising from fieldwork under a repressive, authoritarian regime and military occupation.

Field researchers can cultivate a group of people who do fieldwork and are familiar with their usual routines, institution, or support structure. Vital in this is at least one person whom the researcher trusts enough to call or text to process hard experiences. Our peer network, plus our therapists, is how the authors process secondary trauma from hearing about other people's trauma as part of our research. This mutual support group helps researchers maintain a connection to their usual support structure, which also helps researchers understand and process challenges that arise during fieldwork.

### *Secondary Trauma*

Fieldwork may expose researchers to secondary trauma. People whose jobs expose them to trauma—including researchers—can experience traumatic stress (Cieslak et al 2014; Browne, Evangelini and Greenberg 2012). Van der Merwe and Hunt (2019) and Goldenberg (2002) found that field researchers who listen to research participants' stories of trauma can develop secondary traumatic stress, i.e. when people develop traumatic stress symptoms after working with people who have experienced violence or death (Cieslak et al 2014, Stamm 1995). Loyle and Simoni (2017, p. 141) call this "research-related trauma" and extend this work to political scientists.

Witnessing or listening to experiences of injustice can lead to secondary trauma (Goldberg 2002, van der Merwe and Hunt 2019). Even in safe environments, many of the questions that we ask can elicit hard answers, and researchers should process traumatic stories, experiences, and conditions that the people we work with share with us (Scheper-Hughes 1992, Trippany, White Kress, and Wilcox 2004). For example, when one author interviewed street vendors about their lives and choices, her questions elicited stories of slavery, assault, police brutality, and domestic violence. She experienced fatigue, anxiety, reduced trust, and fear, and took frequent breaks from research. The other author's research on repression in Palestine involved interviews with Palestinians who had suffered jail time, physical abuse, and political repression for their views and activities. One interviewee detailed how his 15 year old son had been burned to death by Israeli settlers two houses down from where the author was staying. Israeli forces physically abused and arrested people she interviewed during her stay, and she witnessed their families' hardship as they fought charges. These experiences induced secondary trauma that we then needed to treat and resolve through therapy, journaling, and peer support networks.

Psychologists and others who research trauma find that training, preparing for, and treating that stress as it happens alleviates the impact (Loyle and Simoni 2017, Knight 2013, Stamm 1995). Field researchers report more positive than negative effects of

working with trauma, particularly where institutions and researchers take steps to alleviate negative effects (Goldenberg 2002, van der Merwe and Hunt 2019).

Research supports actively processing feelings and experiences through journaling (Goldberg 2002, Trippany, White Kress, and Wilcoxon 2004, Ullrich and Lutgendorf 2002). Journaling is a low-cost option: a few minutes of unstructured writing in any format can have major benefits (Ullrich and Lutgendorf 2002). Additionally, many field research methods, like ethnography and interviewing, encourage the researcher to take notes about their feelings, impressions, and experiences (Nordstrom and Robben 1995). Researchers can build journaling into their existing habits and protocols.

### *Managing Expectations and Preventing Burnout*

Clear goals and plans prior to fieldwork set manageable expectations; we follow Kapiszewski et al's (2015) guidelines on planning and implementing fieldwork. Their guide has a checklist of tasks to set up fieldwork and a spreadsheet to break data collection into manageable tasks at the field site. No matter how organized a researcher may be, fieldwork may not pan out as productively as intended. In our experience, field researchers overestimate how much they can accomplish. Peer support networks can help researchers establish reasonable goals, recalibrate plans, and address feelings of stress, anxiety, or failure if the researcher falls short of initial fieldwork goals.

Fieldwork takes time and energy. Researchers can supplement work with leisure and rest in order to prevent burnout (Trippany, White Kress, and Wilcoxon 2004). Cieslak et al (2014) found a large and positive association between secondary trauma and burnout across 41 studies, and that the association is particularly strong for people working in the U.S. and for women. Researchers can plan to take regular and substantial breaks before, during, and after fieldwork.

One option is the revolutionary 19<sup>th</sup> century idea of taking two days off a week and establishing a regular workday. One author takes two days off a week and started this practice during dissertation fieldwork. She finds that she is consistently more productive and creative when she schedules breaks throughout the day and downtime throughout the week. Another option is to take time off after fieldwork, resources permitting. We both take breaks or vacations, by which we mean at least 48 hours away from work to do something for fun or relaxation, before diving into analysis after fieldwork. Trippany, White Kress, and Wilcoxon (2004) recommend that institutions give people who work with trauma regular paid vacations.

### **Conclusion**

Fieldwork is integral to political science research. Researchers answer pressing questions about politics by collecting original data through field experiments, ethnographic projects, surveys, and interviews with experts, politicians, and voters. Political scientists report that fieldwork is a professionally and personally rewarding experience (Kapiszewski et al 2015), and although political scientists discuss the logistics of doing fieldwork well (Gerber and Green 2012, Kapiszewski et al 2015), they rarely address the particular challenges of mental health during its process. Anthropologists and psychologists build mental health plans into research designs, protocols, and academic training, and we suggest that political scientists follow suit.

Adding mental health discussions into fieldwork planning could have a positive impact on the day-to-day work of political scientists more generally. Specifically, political scientists report feeling overwhelmed, isolated, and traumatized by rejection, racism, sexism, classism, ableism, the job market, dissertations, and advisors (Cassese and Holman 2018, Dutt-Ballerstadt 2020, Kapiszewski et al 2015). These stressors are doubly intense for women and people of color (Niemann 2012). The options we discuss here could help political scientists process the stress of our daily activities, particularly those which can induce trauma and trigger depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues. Planning for mental health wellness is thus essential to healthier fieldwork experiences, and can have positive spillover effects on other aspects of our work.

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**Tables**

*Table 1: Safety Card #1 - Basics*

<b>Diagnoses/Conditions:</b>
<b>Medications:</b>
<b>Field site medication plan:</b>
<b>Primary care doctor:</b>
<b>Field site doctor or hospital:</b>
<b>Therapist name and contact info:</b>
<b>Emergency contact (university):</b>
<b>Emergency contact (field site):</b>

*Table 2: Safety Card #2 - Info for Support People*

<b>I manage:</b>
<b>My coping strategies are:</b>
<b>My symptoms are:</b>
<b>If you are worried about me, ask me:</b>
<b>If I am struggling, it helps if you:</b>
<b>If I am struggling, remind me to:</b>
<b>Please do not:</b>
<b>If you cannot contact me:</b>