ADDRESSING CHALLENGING SITUATIONS IN FIELD RESEARCH

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Conducting field research—which often involves traveling to unfamiliar areas, visiting people's homes, and interacting with strangers—inevitably results in some uncertainty about how to behave or react when faced with a difficult situation. This check sheet offers guidance on how to respond to ambiguous, awkward, or challenging moments that may accompany field research. Specifically, it describes situations that we or our co-researchers have encountered in the field while conducting observational, interview-based, and survey research. The brief scenarios focus on topics related to staying safe, ensuring the well-being of participants, collecting quality data, and clarifying your role in the field. Each scenario is followed by suggestions regarding how to respond.

This check sheet is meant to serve as a guide, and not a rule book. It is critical in research that you trust your instincts, turn to mentors or colleagues for advice when you are feeling unsafe or uncertain, and remain flexible so you can think and move quickly. Further, we recommend that whenever you go into the field—either as a solo researcher or part of a team—that you let a supervisor, colleague, and/or family member know your whereabouts and timing.

STAYING SAFE

Following Institutional Travel Protocols

If you are traveling internationally or domestically for research;

Then you should be aware of any travel advisories, as you may need to reconsider traveling to specific regions or countries depending on threat assessments. Further, some countries require research visas, so you should ensure that you are in full compliance with such requirements. You should also adhere to all institutional travel authorization procedures at your place of employment. If such procedures are not properly followed, a researcher may not be able to count on the support of their institution for financial reimbursement, legal protections, and much more.

Feeling Unsafe Outside a Home

If you arrive at a house and you feel unsafe (e.g., people are shouting, people are drinking or doing drugs, weapons are visible);

Then you should return to your car or otherwise leave the immediate vicinity. Call the person you were scheduled to interview. If you can reach the person on the phone, ask if they still plan to meet with you that day. If so, then ask if you can meet at a different location such as a coffee shop or a library with a meeting room. Depending on the geographic context and your own personal comfort, you may want to ask them if they would like to walk together to an alternate location. You may also want to consider, if the project and project budget allow for it, collecting data in pairs so that you always have a research partner with you. Also, always remember to wear practical shoes and comfortable clothes while conducting fieldwork.

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Feeling Unsafe Inside a Home

If you enter someone's home and you feel unsafe due to the conditions;

Then you should remain attentive to who is there and any unusual dynamics. Make note of all exits from the home. Do not begin formal data collection, or end data collection as soon as possible. Tell the interviewee you need to reschedule the meeting to a later time. When rescheduling, suggest an alternate location, such as a public setting.

Offering Transportation to a Participant

If someone asks you if they can have a ride to your planned meeting location;

Then you can ask them if there is another location that is within walking distance of their home or place of work. Some field researchers avoid driving research participants due to safety or liability concerns. Other times, driving in the car together may be necessary. If this is the case, however, you should ensure that everyone wears their seatbelts and that you as the driver adhere to all rules of road safety. You should also check with your Institutional Review Board (IRB) or legal counsel, as they may have liability concerns that need to be addressed. For example, if you are driving participants around as part of an audio elicitation project after a disaster, you may need to have each participant sign a waiver.

Encountering a Gated Home

If you arrive at a house and there is a gate and fence around the yard;

Then you can call or text the interviewee to let them know you are outside. If time passes and they don't answer, you may wish to open the gate—if there is no lock and there are no animals outside—and walk to the door. Use your judgment, however, about whether it feels safe or appropriate to enter someone's gated and fenced yard.

Witnessing Illegal or Risky Behavior

If a participant ingests alcohol, takes drugs, or appears to be drunk or high during an interview;

Then you should end formal data collection as quickly as possible and leave the setting. We recommend removing the participant from the study and replacing them with another informant, if possible, to avoid future risks.

Being Racially Profiled

If you or a member of your field research team are being racially profiled in the neighborhood where you are conducting research (for example, being tailed by police, asked to produce a valid form of identification);

Then you should assess the situation and remember that safety is the primary concern. Are you alone and are you the one being racially profiled? Is it a collaborator or a student on your team? Repeat acts of profiling may require that the field researcher or field team discontinue data collection in a particular area. This is difficult, however, if you have drawn a random or probability sample that requires you and your team to be in the field. As such, turning to mentors, team leaders, or others who may be able to offer support and advocate on behalf of people of color on the team may be a vital next step. Further, if the safety of a team member is compromised, they should never be asked to return to the field setting.

Being Sexually or Physically Harassed

If you or a member of your field research team are being sexually or physically harassed by a participant or someone else in the field;

Then you should end the data collection immediately and leave as soon as possible. If it was a participant engaging in this behavior, you should remove them from the study. If this person is a community gatekeeper or key informant, you may need to turn to study collaborators or others for support and advice on how to proceed. If the harassment or abuse escalates, you may need to reach out to authorities or other people in positions of power for further advice and to identify next steps for action. It is worth noting as well that sometimes researchers—and especially women—may be subject to sexist remarks or other inappropriate behavior that may not rise to the level

of harassment but may still be deeply uncomfortable and disconcerting. In these instances, it is important to use your judgment about whether to proceed with data collection, or to try to end the encounter as soon as possible. This decision may be shaped by whether you are alone in the field or working with a partner, your age and stage of career, and myriad other factors. Please, as always, trust your instincts and prioritize your own physical and emotional safety. Further, remember that at no point should a researcher be compelled to expose themselves to harassment, regardless of their gender, age, career stage, or other identity. No data are worth that, and no team should subject their members to such treatment.

ENSURING THE WELL-BEING OF PARTICIPANTS

Arriving and Finding No Adult Present

If you arrive for a scheduled interview and there is only a child or children at home;

Then you should not enter the house. You should tell the child or children that you will call their parent (or other caregiver) to reschedule the interview. Even if the child insists "it is okay" to wait in the home, we recommend never entering a home without an adult present. With this in mind, we acknowledge there are state-by-state differences in the legal minimum age at which a child can be left unattended. Even still, we would not enter a home where only a child under the age of 18 was present.

Responding to a Child Left Alone for Days

If you arrive for a scheduled interview and there is a child or children in the home who notify you that they have been home alone for multiple days;

Then you should tell the child that you have a duty to follow up. You may want to first think about how you recruited the person for the study. For example, if you recruited them through a friend, family member, or local service provider, you may want to reach out to that contact, first, to get a better assessment of the situation and seek help. If you have no further contact or think the child or children may be in imminent danger, you should call the authorities or contact child protective services immediately.

Witnessing Abuse

If you witness verbal or physical abuse against an adult or child;

Then you should end formal data collection as quickly as possible and leave the setting. Recognize that these situations can be incredibly emotionally difficult and highly uncertain; you may wish to reach out to supportive professionals who can help guide you with how to best respond for all involved. In particular, it is important to recognize that different forms of punishment are often culturally informed and may or may not be legal in different contexts. Depending on what you have witnessed, you may want to reach out to a mentor or your IRB. Depending on the severity of the situation, you may have an ethical or legal duty to report the situation to authorities (although we have found in most states, researchers are not considered mandatory reporters).

Respecting Caregiving Responsibilities

If you anticipate there being an infant or young children present during an interview;

Then allow extended time for the interview and be prepared to adapt during the interview. If the interviewee is a new parent, you may want to tell them that you are fine to pause the interview if they need to feed or change the baby. If the interviewee is caring for young children, you may want to carry items, such as coloring books, crayons, playdough, or other toys that you can share—with the permission of the parent—with children to keep them busy.

Respecting Participant Privacy

If you are collecting data in a private or semi-private space or with potentially vulnerable populations;

Then always ask permission before taking photographs or collecting other identifiable information. Once, for example, one of our research teams visited a childcare center and, unthinkingly, pulled out our cameras to document flood damage. The childcare provider had to gently ask that we put the cameras away, as no photographs were

allowed in the facility given that they were caring for young children there. Our team of course obliged to this heartfelt reminder of how important it is to always protect the confidentiality and rights of people who are in our presense while in the field.

COLLECTING QUALITY DATA

Responding to a Distracted Interviewee

If an interviewee takes out a cell phone and begins texting or talking during an interview;

Then you should pause the interview and stop the recording. Once they are done, you might want to ask "Is everything okay?" or "Do you need to attend to something else right now?" You may want to say something to the interviewee like "We only have another 20 minutes or so to go, and I just want to make sure I am able to capture your story. Please let me know if you need to pause again."

Addressing Loud Background Noise

If a television or radio is blaring in the background when you are set to begin recording an interview;

Then you should politely ask the respondent if they could turn down or turn off the source of the noise so you can "focus completely on what they are saying during the interview and ensure the recorder is capturing their words." If the person refuses, then proceed with the interview and take additional notes to augment the recording.

Focusing on Survey Questions

If an interviewee talks at length but does not answer close-ended survey questions;

Then you might say something like this: "Thank you so much for sharing your stories with me. It really means a lot, but right now, I need to ask you the pre-established questions on the survey. I have only blocked off one hour to be here today, so if you don't mind, let's move through the questions on the survey and we can use remaining time at the end to discuss."

Encountering a Room Full of People

If there are several children and/or adults in the room where you planned to conduct the interview;

Then you could gently ask the respondent if there is a quieter or more private space where you could conduct the interview. If the house is too chaotic, you can ask the interviewee if they would like to reschedule for another day when there are fewer people in the home and demands on their time.

Explaining the Need for Privacy

If an interviewee asks why it is so important to have a quiet, private space for the interview;

Then you could offer several explanations including: 1) the interview guide deals with sensitive topics related to a major disaster; 2) you want the person to be able to focus fully on you and the questions you are asking; 3) you want to protect their confidentiality; and/or 4) you find that people can move through the interview more quickly when they are completely focused on the task at hand.

Addressing Language Difference

If an interviewee speaks a language other than English;

Then you should ensure that you or a collaborator can translate the research materials into the appropriate language and provide necessary interpretations. In some instances, the participant may ask if their child or another family member can interpret on their behalf. Some researchers accommodate—and compensate—participants who make such requests. It is important, however, to account for these contingencies in your IRB protocol, research plan, research team, and project budget, as relevant.

Offering Reassurance

If an interviewee asks, "Will you share my answers?" (for example, a child asks if the responses will be shared with a parent, an undocumented immigrant asks if their responses will be shared with government officials, or someone discussing illegal activities asks if their answers will be shared with the authorities);

Then you should, depending on your IRB protocol, respond honestly to the participant. In many cases, researchers are committed to ensuring the confidentiality of interviews through taking steps such as de-identifying data and not using actual first or last names in reports or publications. With that said, if a child or other participant reports instances of abuse or neglect, you may be ethically or legally bound to report these incidents. You should inform the participant of any such obligations at the outset of the study. Further, in the case of research that may involve active or future litigation, such as in the case of an oil spill or other technological disaster, you may need to disclose if there is any chance that the data could be subject to a court subpoena.

Keeping Responses Confidential

If a parent or other person in a position of authority asks to see a child's survey responses or to remain in the room during the interview;

Then you should tell the person that the answers to the survey questionnaire are completely confidential and stored on a computer, so you cannot share them. You can reassure the person that the study team will share the de-identified data or results through other means, depending on your study dissemination protocol. You may also refer them to the consent form, where the process for interviewing the child may be described in more detail. You might also need to emphasize that all participants have a right to confidentiality, and you are not at liberty to share the responses of others without their permission.

Addressing Someone Who is Not Interested in the Study

If a participant refers you to another possible participant who seems uninterested or skeptical about participating;

Then offer to answer any questions you have with as much detail and honesty as possible. If they still seem skeptical, you may want to gently say, "Thank you so much for agreeing to speak to me. Participation in this interview is voluntary and you do not have to participate. We can also talk again later if you change your mind about doing an interview. Thank you for your time and consideration." It is then fine to end the engagement after that exchange.

CLARIFYING YOUR ROLE IN THE FIELD

Explaining What You Are Doing

If you are observing a site, taking fieldnotes, or otherwise engaged in the conduct of research, and someone asks you what you are doing;

Then you should answer briefly, clearly, and honestly. It can help, in some field settings, to wear a shirt with your professional logo or a badge with your name and affiliation.

Telling Your Story

If an interviewee asks you questions about your experiences or personal background;

Then it is completely appropriate to share information. Be careful, however, to keep your responses brief and professional, as the goal is to develop rapport but also to keep the focus on the respondent and their story. You may return to sharing more of your own experiences at the end of the interview if you have the time and desire to do so, as this can ensure you don't bias responses but also build rapport.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As we noted at the outset, this check sheet is meant to serve as a guide and not a rule book. We hope that it will prompt deeper thinking and conversation about how to handle difficult, uncomfortable, ethically complex, emotionally challenging, or dangerous situations while conducting fieldwork. There is often no clear answer, and some actions—such as calling authorities—could potentially have unintended consequences for participants and

their family members. It is therefore important that researchers talk honestly and respectfully to one another and their mentors about these issues, seek advice, and follow institutional rules as well as their own ethical mandates for action. Finally, always remember to trust your instincts; if something feels off or unsafe, it is not worth staying to collect data.

RESOURCES

For those interested in diving more deeply into these issues, we recommend reviewing the following resources:

Code of Conduct for Field Work, Department of Geological Sciences, University of Colorado Boulder: https://www.colorado.edu/geologicalsciences/resources/information-documents-and-links

CONVERGE Extreme Events Research Check Sheets: https://converge.colorado.edu/resources/check-sheets/

CONVERGE Training Modules: https://converge.colorado.edu/resources/training-modules/

U.S. Geological Survey Risk Research Community of Practice 2021 Workshop Report—Workshop on Considering Equitable Engagement in Research Design: https://doi.org/10.3133/ofr20231072

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