QMMR Qualitative & Multi-Method Research

Original Article

Qualitative and Multi-Method Research Spring 2023, Volume 21.1 https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7921273

Ill-Prepared: International Fieldwork Methods

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Introduction

The current culture in American political science incentivizes scholars to conduct research abroad, particularly in volatile contexts and increasingly through social experimentation (Mitchell 2013; Humphreys 2015; Desposato 2016; Driscoll and Schuster 2018; Eck and Cohen 2021). These practices reflect the discipline's emphasis on "fieldwork" as a source of academic credibility, particularly for scholars who study violence, international development, and related topics. Ethical and safety issues involved in all types of human subjects research—whether qualitative or quantitative, observational, participatory or experimental—are compounded in fragile contexts. Yet training for political scientists conducting research abroad remains piecemeal and unstandardized.

In practice, this means many graduate students often enter the field feeling anxious and unprepared, with limited advance consideration of the types of ethical issues likely to emerge through their work or how to manage them as they arise. At best, successive cohorts of junior scholars perpetually reinvent the wheel as they learn on their own through trial and error and peer advice how to best manage their safety and the safety of others while conducting research in volatile areas. At worst, they flounder in the face of challenges encountered in the field, risking their own safety, and causing harm to research participants.

Research ethics and the practicalities of conducting field research are increasingly subjects of discussion within the discipline, prompting conference panels, working groups, and publications (see e.g., Wood 2006; Thomson, Ansoms, and Murison 2012; Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016; Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015; Campbell 2017; Bond 2018; Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Thaler 2019; Curtis 2019; Knott 2019; Ansoms, Bisoka, and Thomson 2021; Parkinson 2021; Kapiszewski and Wood 2022). However, for individual graduate students, awareness of and access to these conversations is network-dependent, and advance preparation for fieldwork largely depends on the goodwill (and extent of relevant experience) of mentors within their home departments.

In this paper, we present descriptive results from a targeted survey of international relations (IR) and comparative politics (CP) faculty and PhD students on their attitudes towards, and preparation for, international field research. Our results demonstrate a discipline-wide reliance on ad hoc solutions for field research training that both reflects and furthers inequalities within the discipline. Drawing on these findings, we argue that formal fieldwork training and research design should be incorporated into graduate methodology sequences.

The unequal distribution of informal training and resources perpetuates existing advantages for those at elite institutions. Moreover, because the invisible labor of mentoring in fieldwork methods often falls on women, the reliance on informal training perpetuates gender inequalities along the tenure-track as women scholars dedicate time to service not recognized in tenure files. We argue, therefore, that formal fieldwork training and research design should be incorporated into graduate methodology sequences. Treating fieldwork preparation as methodology will improve individual scholars' experiences and research and have distributional benefits through promoting consistency in access to training and valuing the work that goes into providing it.

The Survey

This article draws on data from a targeted online survey of 292[1] US-based political scientists conducted in July and August 2018 to explore two research questions:

- To what extent do political scientists believe international fieldwork is critical for career success?

1 We received 227 completed surveys and 65 partially completed. We include partially completed answers in the analysis below.

- What training do political scientists receive before conducting international fieldwork?

We chose the sample with the goal of collecting reflections on these questions from scholars at institutions that would reasonably be expected to have the best resources to prepare graduate students for conducting research abroad. If scholars at departments with the largest number of students able to undertake costly fieldwork trips do not feel there is adequate training on conducting research abroad, we can plausibly assert that there is a dearth of formal training. If these scholars also feel that the discipline values and rewards conducting such research despite the lack of training on how to do so safely and ethically, we are comfortable concluding that there is an ethical problem in the discipline.

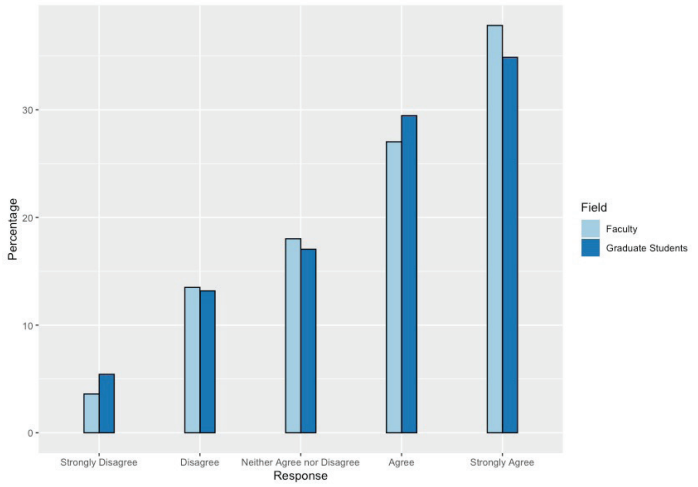
We recruited participants through posts on American Political Science Association section message boards, Facebook, and Twitter, and through email invitations to faculty and graduate students and department listservs at the top-ten-ranked US programs in CP and IR (totaling 15 universities).[2] Our respondents comprise 174 current graduate students, 108 faculty members and postdocs, and 10 researchers working outside of academic hierarchies. Roughly two thirds (68%) were affiliated with the top ranked IR and CP departments, and one third (32%) from other institutions. The majority of respondents identified their primary specialty as either CP (64%) or IR (26%). Three quarters (75%) of the respondents had already conducted international fieldwork. An additional 7% planned to conduct international fieldwork in the future but had not yet done so. Forty nine percent of respondents identified as women, 45% as men, 1% as other and 5% gave no response.

Importance of Fieldwork for a Career in Political Science

From the subset of respondents who identified as faculty, 80% agreed or strongly agreed that conducting fieldwork enhanced their own academic career, while 65% felt that conducting international fieldwork is necessary for scholars in their field. Similar patterns existed among PhD students: 78% believed conducting international fieldwork would enhance their academic career prospects. 65% believed conducting international fieldwork is necessary for scholars who study their topics of interest.

Among scholars studying violence, civil war, and peacebuilding, 87% of faculty and 85% of PhD students felt that conducting international fieldwork was a career asset. And across all specialties, 71% of faculty believed conducting international fieldwork enhances career prospects for their students who study topics like violence, peacebuilding, and human rights.

Figure 1: Importance of Conducting International Fieldwork in Respondent's Field



We expected that scholars who study civil war, violence, peacebuilding, or similar topics would get a reputational boost from conducting fieldwork in volatile environments. And, indeed, 76% of faculty who study these topics agreed or strongly agreed that fieldwork in "dangerous" contexts earns credibility.

When we asked our survey respondents to consider the importance of conducting field research for career success among a list of qualifications relevant to academic job market performance, "substantial international fieldwork" did not rank as highly as publications or quantitative analysis skills. However, a majority of respondents (71%) rated substantial international fieldwork as either moderately or extremely important for advancing the careers of scholars in their specialty, while even more (86%) rated it as either moderately or extremely important for scholars of violence, civil war and similar topics.

2 We used the US News and World Report rankings (2017) of the top ten programs in Comparative Politics and International Relations. The institutions were: Harvard University; Stanford University; Princeton University; University of California, Berkeley; University of Michigan; Yale University; Columbia University; Massachusetts Institute of Technology; University of California, San Diego; University of North Carolina; Duke University; New York University; University of California Los Angeles; University of Chicago; Ohio State University; and the University of Wisconsin Madison (US News & World Report 2017).

Figure 2: Importance of International Fieldwork to Enhance Career in Respondent's Field

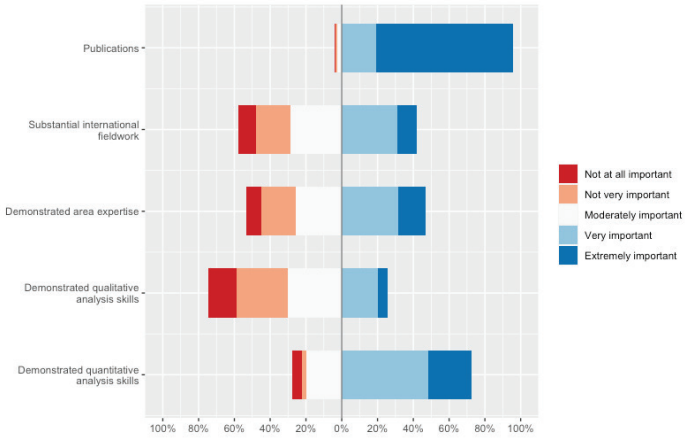
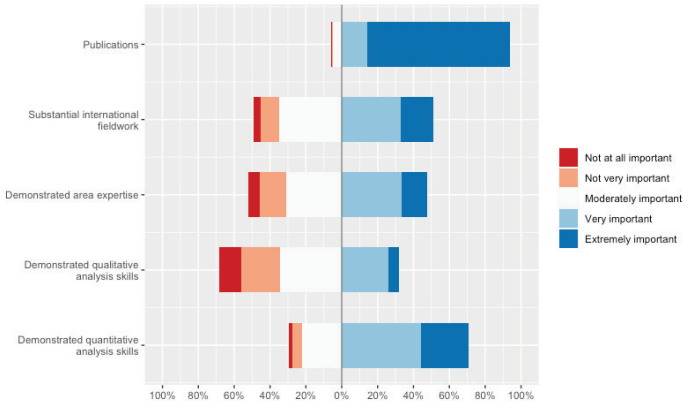


Figure 3: Importance of International Fieldwork to Enhance Career; Conflict Studies



Prevalence of Field Research

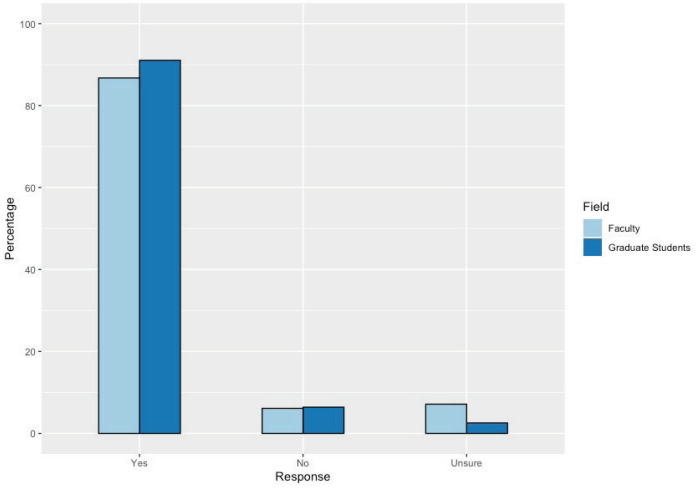
Conducting human subjects research abroad is common in political science generally and in the conflict studies sub-field specifically. For example, between 2014 and 2019, 36% of articles published in the *American Political Science Review,* 39% of articles in *World Politics*, 25% of articles in *International Security*, 23% of articles in *Comparative Political Studies* and 16% of articles in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* relied on human subjects data gathered abroad.[3] Among scholars in our sample, international fieldwork was most common among scholars of comparative politics, with 80% of faculty and 72% of PhD students reporting they had conducted international fieldwork. In international relations, 74% of faculty and 37% of PhD students had conducted fieldwork (an additional 23% of IR PhD students said they planned to in future).

A significant proportion of our respondents (50% of faculty and 48% of graduate students) had conducted field research in volatile environments. Unsurprisingly, this was most common among those who specialize in topics like violence, civil war, and peacebuilding, with 67% of faculty and 73% of graduate students in these subfields reporting they had conducted fieldwork in an unstable or conflict affected environment.

Training Received

Despite the perceived importance of conducting international fieldwork, the majority of survey respondents (66% of faculty and 62% of grad students) reported that they had been given no formal training on how to do it. Only a third of graduate students and 24% of faculty reported that their department offered a fieldwork methods course as part of their curriculum.[4]

Figure 4: Formal Fieldwork Training



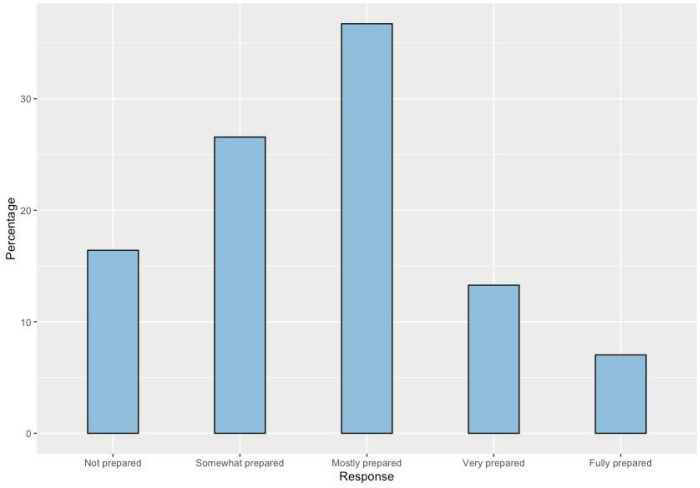
Perceptions of Preparedness

Only 20% of the graduate students in our sample reported feeling "very" or "fully" prepared to conduct international fieldwork—even if they had already done so.

3 These data were compiled by Stephanie Schwartz and Sarah Cueva Egan and includes articles in the above journals published between 2014 and 2019, totaling 1318 articles. Articles are coded as relying on international field research if there was a research intervention in an international environment (outside the author's home institution's country) with human subjects.

4 Of the fifteen top-ranked departments surveyed, four offer a formal course at the graduate level on conducting fieldwork. However, only two of these programs offer this course regularly. The other two programs have only offered the fieldwork training course two or three times in the past ten years.

Figure 5: Graduate Students Perception of Preparedness for International Fieldwork



Few respondents believed that their departments prepare scholars to safely conduct fieldwork.[5] Moreover, 46% percent of faculty respondents reported that they or their advisees had encountered safety issues while conducting fieldwork, with a higher incidence of reported safety issues among female faculty (58%) than male (31%). Roughly half of the graduate student respondents who had conducted some fieldwork reported they had experienced a safety issue in the field, again with slightly higher rates among women (54%) than men (47%).

Figure 6: Faculty or Advisee Encountered Safety Issues

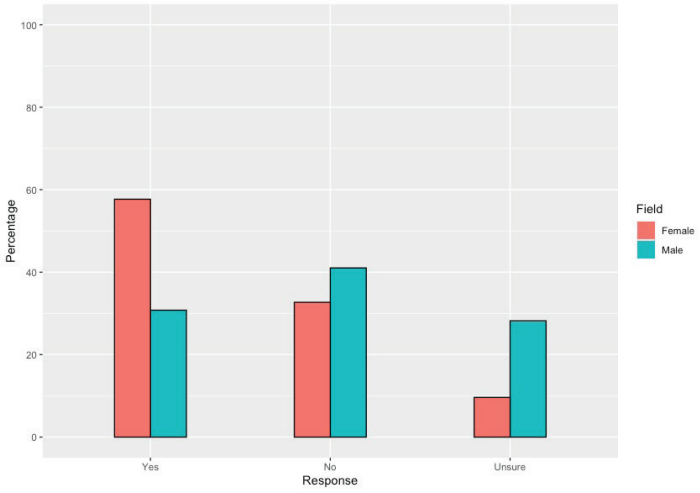


Figure 7: Felt Unsafe Conducting International Fieldwork; Graduate Students

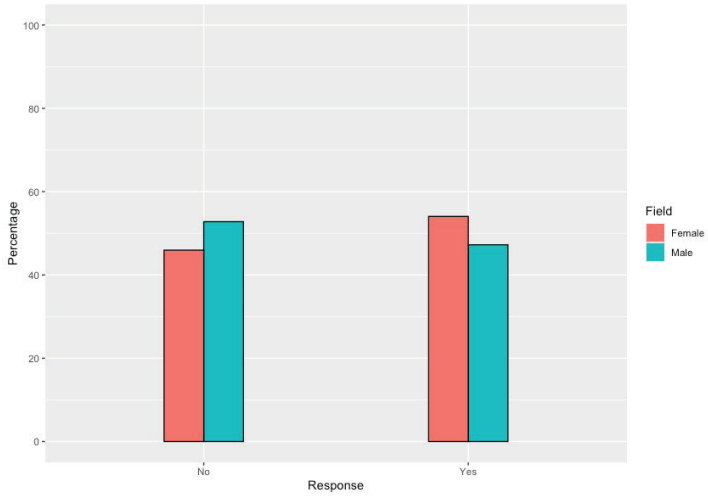
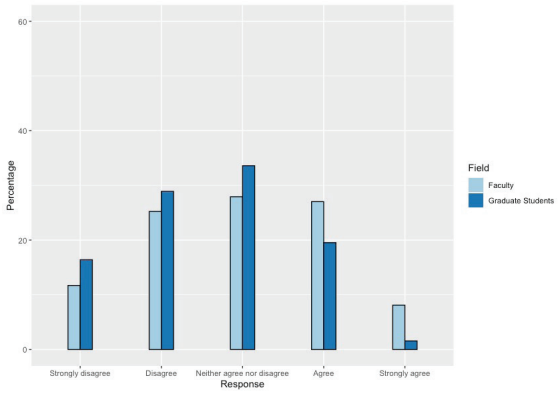


Figure 8: PhD Program Prepares Scholars to Safely Conduct Fieldwork



Compensating for the Absence of Training

In the absence of formal training, nearly all respondents (over 90%) reported that they had used informal mechanisms to learn how to conduct fieldwork. The most common informal mechanism cited was peer-to-peer mentorship. For example, one PhD student respondent stated that she or he "just asked for advice from tons of friends." Both PhD students and faculty mentioned reaching out to colleagues, journalists, or area experts, and drawing on professional experiences prior to graduate school.

Some respondents (more faculty than students) mentioned consulting academic scholarship, but many emphasized that most of their fieldwork know-how had been picked up on the fly. As one faculty member put it, "I have talked to colleagues that have done field work in the same country. Their experiences helped me prepare for my work. That being said, I mostly learned on my own by doing it."

5 Only 21.7% of graduate students who had conducted or planned to conduct international fieldwork, and 35% of faculty respondents reported this.

The Costs of the Absence of Formal Training

This lack of formal training has serious consequences for the discipline. Most obviously, it implicates individual researchers' safety and wellbeing. But a discipline-wide norm of sending underprepared researchers to conflict-affected environments also poses systematic risks to research subjects, undermines the quality of research produced (see, for example, Bell-Martin and Marston Jr. 2021), and contributes to existing inequalities within the discipline. We discuss each of these issues in turn below.

Researcher Wellbeing

The absence of standardized training for fieldwork contributes to a practice of treating the logistics of field research as something scholars should figure out on their own without guidance. Nearly three-quarters (72.6%) of our graduate student respondents who had conducted fieldwork reported that their advisor had not asked them what kind of health and safety measures they had put in place.

Once in the field, 76% of our graduate student respondents who had felt unsafe did not reach out to their advisors to discuss these safety issues. Several cited embarrassment, insecurity in their relationship with their advisor, or the potential for reputation costs as obstacles to seeking advice. In the words of one: "Honestly, I feel that I have an incentive to protect my reputation as a resourceful and independent scholar and reaching out to my advisor for minor safety concerns could damage that reputation." Even more troublingly, another reported that they *had* contacted their advisor about a safety issue but would not do so in the future, "because my concerns were dismissed as over-reactions."

Our survey responses suggest that junior scholars tend to engage their advisors only on what they see as "substantive" issues in which their advisors have specific expertise. Of the respondents who had reached out to their advisors on safety issues, or said they would be willing to, many indicated their willingness was related to their advisor's regional expertise or experience conducting fieldwork. On the other hand, many of the respondents who did not report safety issues to their advisors, or said they would not do so in future, said that their advisors lacked expertise in conducting fieldwork, were not familiar with the local context, or simply could not help from afar.

The survey also suggests that graduate students felt reluctant to engage their advisors on issues related to safety based on a perception that safety issues are separate from substantive issues. For example, one respondent indicated they would consider reaching out to their advisor, "depend[ing] on the nature of the concerns—if not directly related to my academic work, I would likely contact someone else." Another respondent noted that "practical and ethical issues felt like personal problems." In many cases, respondents indicated they felt it was inappropriate to consult their advisors when there was a general sense of insecurity, but not a specific issue in which they felt they were in danger, or which could "directly" affect their research. For example, one respondent who conducts research in countries with high levels of criminal violence reported having been in situations where they were susceptible to hijacking, where small bombs had been detonated near their field residence, and where they had been followed by an individual seeking money. However, this respondent felt that "none of these incidents directly impacted my work." They did not report the incidents to their advisors because they "didn't seem professionally relevant."

The absence of a routinized channel for considering health and safety risks reinforces a culture in which these issues are not anticipated or prepared for in advance, scholars feel unsupported when they do face them, and may understandably draw the conclusion that cavalier attitudes towards their own security will be rewarded (Douglas-Jones et al. 2020). It is worth noting that we only asked our respondents about their experience of physical health and safety issues. Emotional wellbeing problems are common among researchers, humanitarian and aid workers, and journalists who operate volatile contexts (Hummel and El Kurd 2021; Markowitz 2021; Young 2015). The stigma of discussing mental health issues is likely to leave researchers even more isolated dealing with these concerns.

Ethical Consequences of the Lack of Preparedness

Field research conducted in fragile and violent contexts also raises complicated ethical questions around protecting research subjects and partners from risks incurred through participation (see e.g., Goodhand 2000; Brewer 2016; Campbell 2017; Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Shesterinina 2019). IRBs and similar institutional ethical review bodies are not designed for social science research and often make incorrect assumptions about the sources of risk to human subjects during field research (Guillemin and Gillam 2004; Blee and Currier 2011; Fujii 2012; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2016). IRB review processes may therefore steer students towards fixating on subjects of IRB concern—namely, procedural ethics—rather than considering the true ethical implications of their projects. Fewer than half of the PhD students we surveyed (47%), and even fewer faculty (39%) agreed or strongly agreed that their department's PhD program prepared scholars to consider the ethical issues that may

arise during fieldwork.

In their comments, respondents noted that they felt the discipline explicitly deprioritized ethical considerations when evaluating field research or training scholars in research methods. As one person explained: "[I]t's hard not to consider job market aspects when deciding to pass on data that might be unethical or dangerous to get." Another respondent commented: "Ethics are emphasized in qualitative methods courses, but not in quantitative courses, even though quantitative methods require ethics choices."

Yet practically speaking, security, ethics, and methodological rigor are not separable. Without an understanding of the ethical and security risks at play in the field, researchers cannot guard against or analyze biases in data collected. For example, if researchers do not know why it is unsafe for respondents to be seen speaking with outsiders, they will not be able to interpret non-response or social desirability biases in their data. Discussion of potential risks to the researcher and research subjects is therefore essential to substantive design, analysis, and knowledge produced as well as participant protection.

Inequalities Within the Discipline

Our survey revealed two dynamics resulting from the ad hoc approach to fieldwork training that reinforce structural inequalities within the discipline. First, the ability to access training resources tracks existing privilege. Without access to formal training within regular curricula, most junior scholars rely on their immediate peer circles for guidance on how to conduct international fieldwork. Because of existing biases in the discipline, elite institutions tend to have a larger pool of junior faculty and graduate students who regularly obtain external funding for and conduct international fieldwork. As such, informal mentoring is often insulated within networks at these institutions. Elite institutions also tend to provide more opportunities to access formal training through summer programs, which require tuition or fees, or through research assistantships in the field.

Second, the weight of informally advising students who lack formal fieldwork training appears to be falling disproportionately on female faculty.[6] These results mirror our own observations that women are not only more likely to commit time to preparing for their own safety in the field,[7] but often take on the additional time burden of supporting their students and female colleagues when they go abroad. In fact, 28% of our male faculty respondents were unsure if they or their students had encountered safety issues while conducting international fieldwork compared to only 9.6% of women faculty. This suggests that women at the faculty level are investing more time discussing graduate students' fieldwork experiences. This may be driving the disparity between female faculty and male faculty's perceptions of the insufficiencies in training; only 29% of female faculty believe that their departments adequately prepare students to safely conduct fieldwork, compared to 42% of their male counterparts.

How to Formalize Fieldwork Methods Training

Treating the logistics, ethics, and safety considerations implicit in international field research as methodological concerns would go a long way towards remedying these issues. In quantitative methods training, seminar reading, problem sets, and replication exercises are all designed to lead graduate students through the process of first evaluating and critiquing, then performing, and finally adapting the research methodologies under study. Likewise, scholars should not be expected to develop effective, safe, and ethical field research designs without training.

Formalizing methods training in international fieldwork would provide both an opportunity to communicate current best practices to students as well as a venue for the open discussion of mistakes. Moreover, the recognition of field research as a method would grant legitimacy to these subjects, helping to dispel the impression that topics like safety and logistics in the field are tangential to substantive research. Acknowledging that conducting fieldwork is a learned, never really perfected skill that requires updating and refining (just like any other methodological approach) should help junior scholars to feel more comfortable asking the questions necessary to keep themselves and their research participants safe.

Over-reliance on informal training can be dangerous when unethical or dangerous practices are reproduced and best-practices are learned by trial and error in high stakes environments, rather than in the classroom (Wood 2009). Providing the opportunity to discuss common mistakes through formalized methods classes could help scholars avoid some of the most common issues, rather than repeating them. It would also enable conversations about when and why it may be prudent to choose *not* to conduct fieldwork in a certain area, or to pause fieldwork efforts, alleviating some of the pressure to conduct

6 We anticipate that this dynamic is not only gendered but racialized, tracking general trends regarding who is doing the work of informal advising in the academy, but we did not collect demographic data aside from respondents' gender identity.

7 This is clear in the survey results: When asked if they use a formal or informal mechanism to check in with someone about their safety while in the field 74% of female faculty answered yes, compared to 43% of male faculty.

fieldwork, particularly for scholars of violence. Similarly, formalizing classroom discussions of best fieldwork practices would offer an opportunity to acknowledge how fieldwork can affect researchers' mental health and reduce the stigma of seeking appropriate support upon return.

Moreover, formalizing field research methods training could combat the perpetuation of inequalities. The survey provides preliminary evidence that female scholars are providing the majority of support for scholars preparing to conduct fieldwork, and that support is largely happening in informal environments. This work remains largely invisible and unrewarded and can take time away from the research necessary for advancing in the field. Formalizing methods training would render this work visible and provide an opportunity for these scholars to incorporate it into their regular teaching and mentoring duties.

The need for specialized information on the considerations for conducting research in specific contexts does not contravene the recommendation to formalize international fieldwork methods training. In fact, the practice of engaging external networks to develop context-specific knowledge is itself a skill that can be taught, practiced, and critiqued.

A more formalized approach to training could be implemented via multiple avenues. Many PhD programs already sponsor junior scholars to attend additional summer training on specialized methodologies or interest areas.[8] In the same vein, they can set aside dedicated funding to sponsor students interested in conducting fieldwork in conflict-affected contexts to attend summer training courses focused on safety and ethics, like the annual Advancing Research on Conflict (ARC) summer program, or Hostile Environment and First Aid Training (HEFAT) courses like the ones which many NGOs and journalistic outlets require their staff to attend before traveling to volatile environments.

However, summer programs may have limited availability or attendance may be impractical for many students. We therefore think it is important that PhD programs move towards offering courses on fieldwork design and practice as a part of their standard methods sequences. Dedicated field research courses can offer students the space to think about ethical issues beyond the IRB and to practice skills like getting informed consent, training enumerators, interviewing, and observation in environments that are designed to be low stakes. Where such additions to the curriculum take time to implement or are otherwise infeasible, research design courses that already exist can be updated to emphasize logistical and safety considerations more strongly and to integrate scholarship on field research ethics into their syllabi. This will better prepare junior scholars to understand research ethics as an integral component of methodological rigor.

These changes to the discipline, however, are unlikely to happen unless there is an incentive for scholars to invest in these skills. In a system that evaluates research quality separately from the ethics of the approach, there is little external motivation for researchers to develop their skillset regarding ethical and safe design. Instituting an expectation that peer review of journal articles and academic press manuscript submissions consider the ethical design of the research in addition to the theoretical and empirical contributions would go a long way towards shifting these incentive structures (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018; Jacobs et al. 2019; MacLean et al. 2019). The logistics and ethics of research interventions are directly linked to the quality of the knowledge produced (Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016; Parkinson 2021) and should inform our understanding of rigor in our evaluations of others' research as well as in our training of graduate students.

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8 Examples include the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICSPR) Summer Program in Quantitative Methods, the Institute for Qualitative and Multi-methods Research (IQMR), and the Summer Workshop on the Analysis of Military Operations and Strategy (SWAMOS).

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