Field safety strategies for at-risk researchers presenter notes

Slide 2: In my short career so far, I’ve worked in some of the most remote places in the US, and some of the urban… usually staring intently at brant through a spotting scope for one reason or another. This diverse array of field experiences has led me to a few conclusions about the importance of field safety, some of which I’d like to share with you today. However, I’d like to acknowledge that I’m not a health and safety specialist, I’m not in human resources, and I’m not a social scientist. The topics I’m presenting on today are informed by my own experiences, but based primarily on work shared by others.

Slide 3: Field research is not only how we do our jobs, but often WHY we do them. I think many of us in this room today would cite days spent banding geese at field camp in the Arctic, or nest dragging with our friends in the prairies as some of our best memories. We would say they were foundational experiences that shaped who we are today, and early field experiences as what motivated us to stay in this profession when times were tough. Even though technology keeps us behind the computer more and more these days, I know the tradition and legacy of field work in waterfowl ecology will not be lost for future generations. At the same time, it is important that we change in a way that makes our field and “the field” more welcoming for everyone.

Slide 4: An article titled “Safety and Belonging in the Field: A Checklist for Educators” astutely describes a pathway by which historically excluded groups are still excluded. A common thread amongst works interrogating a lack of diversity in environmental science with field research components such as geology and biology cites experiences of discrimination or harassment, feelings of isolation, and lack of “sense of belonging” as contributors to underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in particular. Field work can already be an isolating experience, so it is important that we consider both physical and mental/emotional safety when working toward improving diversity in field-based research.

Slide 5: Though we often use terms like “minority”, “marginalized”, and “historically excluded,” for the remainder of this talk, I’d like to use the term “at-risk” with respect to field safety strategies I’ll present. To define this, at-risk individuals include, but are not limited to those expressing visible signs of their race or ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and religion. However, keep in mind that this can include any identity that is viewed as different from the local community where the research is being conducted. In this way, individuals can be a majority identity at their home institution but a minority identity at the field site, which may place them in an at-risk scenario.

Slide 6: Much of this presentation is based on a manuscript entitled “Safe fieldwork strategies for at-risk individuals, their supervisors and institutions” by Amelia Demery and Monique Pipkin. They present four vignettes to illustrate real experiences at-risk researchers have had in the field.

Slide 7: In the first vignette, a Black ornithologist is approached by law enforcement while doing bird surveys alone on public land.

Slide 8: The second vignette shows a Sikh researcher, a member of an under-represented religion, going into the field and seeing nationalist or nativist signage which makes him feel anxious about what could happen if confronted in that area.

Slide 9: Next, a bisexual fisheries biologist is accosted by hate speech from locals recreating in the area. This vignette highlights intersectional identities, and how “at-risk” is fluid with respect to your field work location. A broadly accepted identity in some areas may be at-risk in others.

Slide 10: Finally, in the fourth vignette, a deaf botanist is verbally abused due to her disability – this vignette highlights how at-risk identities are not always associated with visible differences. The first three vignettes show perpetrators as exclusive to the local environment in which field work is being conducted, but in this vignette, viewers cannot know whether the perpetrator is a stranger walking onto the field site or someone who the researcher knows. We know that in the majority of sexual harassment and assault cases, the predator is someone that the survivor knows.

Slide 11: If we want to make this field welcoming to all who love waterfowl, we need to be intentional in our approach to safety in the field. There are a variety of actionable steps we can implement, in the 6 categories listed above. Some of these steps can only be effectively done by those with seniority or influence in their institution or agency, but others can be implemented by anyone who does field work. Keep in mind that these strategies can be applicable in a variety of settings, from undergraduate field trips, graduate level field courses, urban-based field research, research vessels, or remote field camps.

Slide 12: Culture change is our first actionable step, because without adjusting our attitudes towards the importance of field safety and it’s overlap with inclusivity, we are either unmotivated to do any other actions, or unable to agree upon them. A foundational change we can make is that of our own expectations of scientific productivity, and how we communicate those expectations to field workers. We must emphasize safety as a project goal that is equivalently important (though ideally more important) than scientific output. We cannot demand or expect that field workers complete scientific objectives when doing so sacrifices safety. Not only should Pis/supervisors be responsible for emphasizing this to field staff, institutions and funders should also provide flexibility in deadlines for research objectives when safety concerns preclude accomplishing them.

Slide 13: Culture change also includes improving pathways for communication between all levels of seniority. One facet that I’d like to emphasize is normalizing the giving and receiving of constructive feedback. A few strategies to provide more constructive and effective feedback include 1) offering observations rather than judgements, 2) displaying empathy, and 3) conducting conversations in person whenever possible. Feedback often flows only in the direction of gravity with respect to internal heirachies – those in leadership should solicit feedback during these conversations to demonstrate openness to receiving feedback as well. Normalizing constructive feedback will create positive, productive conversations rather than producing negative emotions and defensiveness when minor infractions are reported, or small improvements are suggested.

Slide 14: The next actionable step is to develop policies which will guide leadership, so that the quality of everyone’s experience is more consistent, rather than entirely dependent upon the leadership philosophy of and personality of the crew lead or supervisor. Codes of conduct should acknowledge differential challenges that may be experienced by individuals with different identities, detail expected and prohibited behavior, define consequences for non-compliance with the code of conduct, and provide information on reporting pathways.

Slide 15: The Toolik Field Station provides a good example of a Code of Conduct for a remote field camp. The camp has earned a bad reputation in the past with many instances of harassment, but its leadership has clearly been working in recent years to improve its culture. The Code of Conduct is clearly a work-in-progress, but it does a few things quite well including defining expected and prohibited behavior, providing direct links to reporting and resources, and being publicly available.

Slide 16: It is important not to develop policy in a silo, because we all only can speak from our own lived experiences and are often unaware of experiences outside our own that should be considered. Involving field research participants in the development of policies and codes of conduct can better tailor them to the individual field sites, participants needs and project goals, as well as encourage broad support from the team at all levels of seniority.

Slide 17: Resource and knowledge-sharing across institutions can help to develop and disseminate best safety practices. Scientific research itself is collaborative, and this process should be no different. This is important for a few reasons, firstly because most of us are not HR professionals. As is common in field ecology, we are asked to do many things we aren’t trained to do, so gaining assistance from outside resources is extremely beneficial. Secondly, because putting together codes of conduct, safety plans, and pre-departure checklists can be a time-consuming endeavor. Sharing these policies broadly once completed reduces the overall work-load on each individual PI/institution wishing to adopt similar policies.

Slide 18: The next recommendation is to improve our training infrastructure. De-escalation training can provide knowledge of how to diffuse a tense encounter and can help prevent escalation to assault and injury of oneself and other field participants. Bystander training provides tools and confidence to intervene when they witness inappropriate or harmful behavior. This improves our ability to assist a field partner who may be targeted based on their identity. Combined, these trainings can help field staff increase their own safety and the safety of at-risk groups that they work or interact with.

Slide 19: Just as we complete MOCC, dunker training, and firearm handling training to prepare for specific scenarios we may encounter while working at a field camp in Alaska, for instance, we should also conduct scenario-based risk assessment and safety trainings based on potential risks to all researchers, but especially at-risk researchers in our group.

Slide 20: For example, the Toolik field safety plan clearly defines potential for interactions that may be experienced differently by at-risk researchers (in one example, being approached by armed caribou hunters) and provides training material, pre-planning actions, and field equipment needed to mitigate risk in each scenario. It also provides policy and norms surrounding camp-specific scenarios such as alcohol consumption, sauna use, and shared sleeping quarters.

Slide 21: Accountability must be a top down process with regards to field safety, especially in an academic setting where workers lack the protection that government agency-type bureaucracy provides. I promise you that the complaint of a handful of technicians or graduate students isn’t going to make a meaningful change when a PI is perpetuating unsafe or hostile working conditions. Institutional leadership should implement internal oversight, and a negative or positive reinforcement actions with regards to tenure, promotion, and awards. You can also hold your colleagues accountable – refuse to collaborate with co-PIs who disregard the importance of safety for their field staff. Finally, external accountability is also possible --funders should consider more than research output when awarding large grants for field-based projects.

Slide 22: Beginning in 2023, the NSF implemented a pilot program awards with field-based research where select solicitations require applicants to provide Safe and Inclusive Fieldwork Plans. I hope that applicants consider this as not just another hoop to jump through in an already-lengthy grant application process, but an opportunity to reform their approaches to field safety.

Slide 23: Clear reporting networks should be established prior to departing for field work, and as I mentioned, published in the code of conduct. It is essential to designate (and train) several people, of various genders and levels of seniority, who can serve as approachable points of contact for concerns or reporting, especially in the remote settings like research vessels and field camps. People are often more comfortable talking to people of the same gender or level of seniority, so this increases the likelihood that unsafe conditions or bad behavior will be reported.

Slide 24: Branded clothing such as safety vests, hats, and badges denoting research affiliation can improve legitimacy of field staff if questioned by the public or law-enforcement. Vehicle decals are especially useful for field staff who must drive onto private land or otherwise interact with the public in urban settings. Removable decals also allow workers to be more anonymous in areas which their affiliation may be detrimental (i.e, areas with antigovernment sentiment). Finally, racial disparities in police stops are well documented, and minority drivers may face increased risks of a hostile police response. A uniform packet of all potentially requested documentation in each field vehicle may assist in de-escalation of traffic stops for at-risk staff.

Slide 25: Workers in remote and isolated environments need unrestricted and private access to communication devices, and access to transportation when possible. At a remote field camp, for example, a satellite phone should be available to anyone who needs it, without a gatekeeper or check-out procedure. Everyone must be able to use this device in privacy, should they need to make a confidential report or request for help. Where possible, all staff should have free access to transportation or a transportation fund to get themselves to safety if necessary.

Slide 26: Finally, I have a few rapid-fire recommendations I’d like to suggest for field workers.