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These boots are made for walking: A reflexive analysis of negotiating unavoidable risks during fieldwork as a woman

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Abstract

In the summer of 2023, I (Author 1, lead researcher, young adult, cis female, Mexican) began fieldwork in Saltillo, Mexico, researching the public transport infrastructure in relation to women's differentiated mobility and their perception of safety from gender-based violence. During fieldwork, I was catcalled, followed, and harassed on multiple occasions. In this paper, Author 2 (research assistant, young adult, cis male, Mexican) and I explore issues of researcher's positionality and vulnerability. We engage in a dialogue to provide a retelling of events, and we reflect on our differentiated experiences of fieldwork due to gender-based violence and the aftermath of being harassed while conducting research. We reflect on our differentiated degrees of vulnerability and perceptions of the city while walking the streets of Saltillo and how that reshaped our understanding of the research process. I highlight the importance of talking about these types of experiences openly in academia and queer/feminist activism, especially so when combined methodologies reformulate the relationship of the researcher with the research(ed). In this paper we critique the current fieldwork preparation processes in place at higher education institutions that focus mostly on safeguarding participants, arguing that current ethical approval forms and travel risk assessments do not provide a space where true reflection on risks and vulnerabilities can occur, therefore failing to prepare researchers for the impact that fieldwork can have on us. We conclude that academia should foster and incentivise spaces where real reflection on the researcher's positionality can occur without the limitations of administrative processes.

Keywords

Fieldwork, gender-based violence, positionality, reflexivity, walking

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Introduction

In the summer of 2023, I (Author 1) began conducting fieldwork in Northern Mexico as part of my doctoral studies in the UK. Overall, my research explores the relationship between gender and mobility; how gender-based violence can modify women's patterns of mobility across the public transport infrastructure of Saltillo, Mexico. During fieldwork, I carried out a mix-method approach combining qualitative methods like ethnographic shadowing and participatory transect walks, and urban audits of bus stops as a quantitative method. During 6 months of fieldwork in Saltillo, I was catcalled and harassed while carrying out all of these methods, nevertheless, the most harrowing experiences happened during the data collection process for the quantitative component of this project, where we used walking as research method. In this paper, we explore the differentiated experiences we had of fieldwork due to gender-based violence and the aftermath of being harassed, catcalled, followed, and nearly abducted while carrying out the research methods—we reflect on how that affected me and Óscar in differentiated ways and how that, in turn, also impacted the research. I was harassed while walking the city, yet these boots are made for walking, and that's just what they did.[1] What follows is a retelling of the events and an exploration of the aftermath through a reflexive, feminist scholarship lens.

Over the last two decades, scholars have called on other researchers to share their practical experiences of fieldwork in an attempt to broader the conversation around the place of emotions in academic research (Hill, 2004; Hubbard et al., 2001; Khalid, 2014; Kwak, 2019; Pasquini and Olaniyan, 2004; Widdowfield, 2000) and many have reflected on the shock of confronting how unprepared they were for the degree of professional vulnerability they experienced during fieldwork (Ballamingie and Johnson, 2011; Gurney, 1985). This paper also brings an important topic of conversation to the table: the emotional work of doing fieldwork as a woman and how significant it is to integrate these narratives of our reflexive methodology approaches. I write about my experiences of self-blame, shame, and guilt following the events, and reflect on the differentiated experiences that I (Author 1, female, Mexican, late 20s) had compared to Óscar (male, Mexican, late 20s), who worked as a research assistant during data collection, and how that played a key role in how fieldwork played out.

We explore issues of researchers' vulnerability during fieldwork and how it impacts the work and the researcher while critiquing the current ethics and safety procedures in place at research institutions (namely higher education institutions). We argue that when conversations around the risks and vulnerabilities of fieldwork revolve only around ethics and safety clearance processes within institutions, these dialogues can turn into a tick-box exercise that can further expose researchers by implicitly incentivising them to ignore or brush off potential harms.

This paper is a co-authored work that explores our accounts of the fieldwork, but we have chosen to adopt a first-person narrative that centres on my (Diana's) lived experiences of fieldwork and the aftermath both as a political and personal decision. Drawing from what other feminists have already voiced, first-person narratives are necessary to expose previously hidden biases, to facilitate understanding of (or empathy with) those different from ourselves, and to lay on the table our own biases as scholars (Brison, 2002). Moreover, our own anecdotes and lived experiences are political, and writing from an "I" perspective directly confronts the notion of objective, neutral, dispassionate researcher (Ballamingie and Johnson, 2011). As Gómez (2023) argued, it is crucial to write from our place of resistance—from the toilet seat; when we are doing laundry; on our commute to work; from painful memories. What follows may seem anecdotical at times, however, it is a political account that reflects my experience of the city as a woman (De la Cerda, 2020), and writing from this perspective allows for a richer, broader analysis of how women researchers experience fieldwork. I see this opportunity to write in first-person as a way to confront and re-signify my lived experience of fieldwork; I write my own story from a place of resistance against the neutral, "objective" and

impersonal academic discourse, and against the general tendency to ignore and brush off women's experiences of everyday gender-based violence.

A bit of context

Being a Mexican citizen and native to the city I was researching, I felt extremely familiar with the environment I was re-entering. At this point, while I was living full-time in the UK for my program, I had been a user of Saltillo's public transport for almost 15 years. I had experienced episodes of mild sexual harassment like catcalling and inappropriate ogling from bus drivers and other passengers to more severe episodes of sexual assault while in public transport. My relationship with the topic I research is one that has been evolving since I started using public transport and wandering the city over the years. Similar to me, many women develop mental maps as they navigate their cities and transport systems (England and Simon, 2010; Fenster, 2005; Kern, 2020; Pain, 1991), and my informal knowledge of the city, and its public transport system informed my choices and decisions, as well as the way I perceive Saltillo and other cities. My context and my experiences as a young woman from Saltillo have shaped me and in turn, they have shaped my research interests.

As a researcher and a woman who grew up using the public transport of Saltillo, I was aware that my position was both of an insider and outsider; I saw myself as an insider because of my particular informal knowledge of the environment, but an outsider as well, as an academic with greater epistemological influences that had not lived in the city (full-time) for a few years—my development as a researcher over the years has expanded my understanding of issues like transport planning, urban design, geographical concepts of space and territory, gender issues, and multiple other social inequalities and concerns over social justice. Importantly, there is a class dimension that filters my urban understandings—while I am a researcher that focuses on sustainable mobility, my socioeconomic background in Mexico is privileged middle class,[2] and this shapes my experiences in public transportation and the city. My destinations are usually around the city centre or the north part of the city in wealthier neighbourhoods; these areas still report cases of gender-based violence in public transportation but less so than the south, east, and west of Saltillo (Infante-Vargas and Boyer, 2021). My reliance in public transport evolved from being the only choice I had available to me as a teenager needing to commute to school, to a political, intentional decision to actively reject car culture and remain exposed to the experience, and often perils, of being a woman using Saltillo's transport system (Infante-Vargas and Boyer, 2022), and still, my experiences of urban transport contrast with those of users whose relationship with public transportation in Saltillo is not optional, who live in marginalised neighbourhoods serviced by infrequent, unreliable bus routes. My positionality as an insider/outsider to the subject I research is dynamic, and this has allowed me to create meaningful connections with participants who are also users of public transportation.

I began fieldwork with a cautious level of excitement, aware of the responsibility and seriousness of the issue at hand. I teamed up with multiple researchers and activists to be able to carry out my methods smoothly and in a way that felt like it would genuinely convey the experiences and challenges of the women who use Saltillo's public transport on a daily basis. I had the opportunity to work alongside researcher Óscar, a keen activist for pedestrian and cyclists' rights who also has a background in urban planning and understands the urban challenges that face Saltillo in terms of mobility. I asked Óscar if he would be interested in working with me to carry out quantitative urban audits of public transport bus stops across Saltillo but the offer had many challenges; to begin with, there was no publicly available data regarding the location or current state of bus stops across the city, so in order to carry out the urban audits we would need to first conduct an extensive recognition process to determine what we were going to be working with and set the sample size. Second, this would need to be carried out during the summer, which in northern Mexico can reach temperatures of over 42°C. And third, perhaps most importantly, I could not offer proper economic compensation

for Óscar's labour as I also found myself in a precarious financial situation making ends meet with a small postgrad scholarship and part-time gigs as a barista.[3]

For the audits of bus stops, we chose to walk from one stop to another in order to carry out the work efficiently and sustainably; in total, we walked almost 200 km in the span of 2 weeks auditing almost 350 bus stops. Our decision to walk was a conscious one from the beginning—using a private vehicle for this exercise would have been a faster, easier process for us as researchers, but it would have defeated the purpose of auditing bus stops as a methodology to assess transport infrastructure in terms of comfort, accessibility, road safety, and walkability. Bicycles would have been an efficient, sustainable option, but seeing a street from a cycling perspective would have shielded us from challenges that 'can only be felt on foot' in contrast with the alternative experience of travel by car, bicycle, or bus (Middleton, 2010: 582). We intentionally used walking as a methodology *because* of the inconvenience it represented; walking in between auditing points gave us a deeper understanding of the environment in which the stops were located, and we were able to recognise physical characteristics that otherwise would have remained hidden.

Walking as a method can unearth intimate and embodied accounts of territory (Mason, 2021), and offers an opportunity to develop 'local literacy' through the identification and delineation of important sites, processes and questions for examination (Pierce and Lawhon, 2015: 657). Moreover, walking is a way of exploring everyday political geographies of conflict and is significantly shaped by social markers like class, race, disability, and gender (Mason, 2021). As Pierce and Lawhon (2015) highlighted, not all walking practices are equal; for instance, if researchers walk exclusively in spaces of consumption, or if they avoid areas of low density for reasons of aesthetics or convenience, those practices will shape the scope of potential insights, so we navigated neighbourhoods we had never been in before. While Óscar and I are both from Saltillo and had a significant understanding of how the transport system operates—along with the limitations it faces—it was important for us to explore the urban areas of the city that were not part of our usual routines due to our class privilege. In a similar way to me, Óscar's socioeconomic background is also privileged middle class,[4] and while he has chosen to navigate the city through cycling and walking as a political decision, his urban understandings are still filtered through his positionality. Walking as a methodology was also a deliberate decision to break out of the bubble we live in in Saltillo and stemmed from the acknowledgment that walking experiences—even within the same city—can be vastly different depending on the characterisation of a given neighbourhood. In sum, I chose to walk the city I research because that is what my boots are made for; it was an informed political and personal decision that related to my agency not only as a researcher but as a woman walking the city, taking up public space.

Throughout the weeks of auditing bus stops I had been catcalled and ogled; we tried to remain together most of the time mainly in case we needed each other's opinion while grading a bus stop, but it quickly became evident that being out on the street was not entirely safe, not only due to harassment, also due to hostile urban conditions that put pedestrians in risky situations. Overall, through the auditing process, the urban conditions heightened our sense of discomfort—cars would speed past at over 60 km/h, sometimes even cargo trucks and lorries too; the pavements were in poor conditions at best, and non-existent at worst; and crossing streets represented a major challenge at main roads.

By the last week of audits, the urban conditions alongside the scorching summer sun had taken a toll on us and we wanted to get it over with as smoothly, and as soon, as possible. On one of our last auditing sessions, an unknown man followed me on their car for a few blocks, and later tried to drag me into it. Startled and scared, I was only able to scream Óscar's name for help and wave my arms but to almost no avail since the street was so wide and full of heavy (and loud) traffic. A few seconds later, the driver of the car noticed Óscar looking at me and trying to cross the street to help me; then the car sped off.

Many factors were at play when this happened; our working day had begun at 7:00 a.m. (6:00 a.m. when accounting for commuting time), and upon reflection, both of us had felt tense in the area prior to the event—the neighbourhood we were auditing has a significant amount of heavy traffic—namely private hire coaches, cargo vans, lorries, and public transport buses—and this shaped how comfortable we felt when walking. We were mentally and physically tired at that point of fieldwork but needed to continue on a tight schedule in order to complete the work on time. Óscar recalls noticing the type of street we would be working with—a two-way arterial road with considerable heavy traffic—and we both decided it was best to split up so we could audit bus stops in parallel and advance faster. At the time it made sense to split, and in a way, it still does; it streamlined the process and would get us out of the unsafe environment faster. There were no pedestrian crossings at any point in the street, and the safest bet was to try and cross the street at the nearest intersection with a traffic light. The intersection did not have a pedestrian crossing phase or a full-stop of traffic at any point – a common characteristic of intersections in Saltillo—but this was still the safest way to navigate the busy street we would be walking. The pavement on both sides of the road was gravel and it was clear that cars would frequently obstruct the gravel road to park off-side to the street. When Óscar crossed to the other side of the road we both began walking almost in parallel, the bus stops we had to audit were almost in front of each other, but the type of traffic, the speed of the road, and the lack of pedestrian infrastructure altered our perceptions of safety in the space. Shortly after we began walking down the road, I noticed a silver car driving slowly behind me, a person began shouting lascivious words at me, and I decided to ignore them in the hopes that they would get bored and drive away. The car eventually took a right at the next block and went away, but a couple of blocks later they showed up again. I was feeling angry and frustrated about it; women face catcalling every day while navigating their cities and adopt strategies to feel safer or mitigate the risks, this was no different (England and Simon, 2010; Infante-Vargas and Boyer, 2021; Pain, 1991). In this case, I opted for displaying that I was not alone by calling out Óscar name in a calm way, just as a way to get his attention and highlight that I was not alone. The car immediately took a right at the next block and went away only to come back a few minutes later after seeing that no one came when I called. The car cut me off at the pavement and I began screaming and waving my arms so Óscar could see me, but the road was so busy he struggled to cross immediately. The car sped off as soon as they saw Óscar. We both recall feeling anxious and overwhelmed, the event shook us and impacted how confident we felt on the street doing our work, but it still felt different for me.

Differentiated experiences of fieldwork

After the event, Óscar and I began having conversations around our own comfort levels while carrying out research; overall we had tried to keep an open line of communication and had a collaborative approach to the work. We were comfortable working together and excited about the work we were carrying out, but it was only after the event that we began talking about how different our experiences had felt thus far. My experience of fieldwork was significantly different from Óscar's in many ways; for instance, he was mindful of how he presented himself in the sense of not wanting to be perceived as an academic, a council inspector, or a reporter, his goal was to blend in with the everyday crowd and not stand out. He was mindful of his attire in this sense and did not want to dress too formally, but he was not concerned with how he was perceived in terms of being sexualised depending on his clothing or how his interactions could be (mis)interpreted. On the other hand, I was mindful of how others (namely participants and bus drivers) perceived me while I interacted with them during research— I monitored my appearance and clothing and, similarly to what Kwak (2019) experienced, I had inadvertently developed strategies and tactics that I kept all

along fieldwork. I was careful not to wear strappy tops, shorts, skirts, or anything form-fitting, even though it was the height of the summer in northern Mexico.

I was keenly aware of my position as a young female researcher whenever we engaged in conversation with bus drivers and was mindful of using the appropriate words, tone, and even body language to convey my professionalism. These interactions with the bus drivers were not part of the official research process, but they helped us gain a better understanding of how the transport system works and the drivers' working conditions. It was important that we did not present ourselves as "too official" or we ran the risk of the drivers not wanting to engage with us out of fear of being assessed by either a local authority representative or a reporter. In addition, in my mind, I felt the need to draw a subtle but clear line so my interest in the bus drivers' experiences could not be misinterpreted as any other type of interest (i.e., flirting) while also remaining approachable and building rapport with them. Professional enough to be taken seriously as a female researcher, but not too professional that they would not want to speak with us (Gurney, 1985; Khalid, 2014; Kosygina, 2005). A thin line to walk.

For Óscar—whenever we engaged with bus drivers—his main concern was slowly building up to more difficult questions like "have you ever heard of anyone being sexually assaulted while on the bus?." I certainly could have asked the question myself, and even tried to once or twice, but we quickly realised that the tone of the interaction would change if I asked the question rather than him. Almost all[5] bus drivers said they had never heard or seen anything related to that regardless of who asked the question, but our interaction following that question would change depending on *who* had asked it. For instance, if I had asked him about it, the driver would get tight-lipped, and his following answers would become less elaborate or detailed regardless of whether the following questions were related to sexual assaults while on transportation or not. Almost as if all rapport built thus far had been severed in a way and needed to be rebuilt again. However, whenever Óscar asked the question, the drivers would still brush it off and say they had never heard or seen anything, but the interaction would continue as casually as before.

While on the streets auditing bus stops, I was catcalled, ogled, and briefly followed and harassed by a moped driver during the audit process of other neighbourhoods, but had brushed those instances off as the "everyday" harassment of walking the city as a woman. In many of those cases, Óscar was just a few meters ahead of me and I had a false sense of security in that. For the most part, my strategy to this everyday harassment was to ignore it, as that has been my strategy for the last few years whenever I am out in the city anyway, but in a way, I inadvertently relied on having a male research companion with me while out in the streets—particularly around empty neighbourhoods. After the most severe event of harassment, with the driver in the silver car, we began analysing our own fieldwork experiences and talking through the less-threatening instances that had not escalated as far—the ones we had brushed off as the norm—and how that had shaped our approach to fieldwork. Until then, Óscar had not thought about the small strategies and tactics I had considered every day. For him, the challenges of fieldwork mainly stemmed from the conditions under which we worked: the weather, the hours, how much we would walk on a given day, and most importantly, financial constraints. For me, all of these challenges applied in equal measure, but I also had to juggle the burden of navigating the city in an environment that sexualised and harassed me while attempting to conduct research.

Our motivation to pursue this manuscript also comes from a differentiated point of view. For Óscar, what we experienced while collecting data and what we have learned since the events could potentially make an important contribution to the field for current and future researchers and activists. I share that motivation, but for me this paper primarily stems from deep feelings of frustration and anger, and that it is an attempt to understand and contextualise what happened to me/us in order to understand where to go from here. As Brison (2002) argued, it is crucial for trauma survivors to attempt to reconstruct a coherent narrative of the self that allows them to rebuild the

events and the self in order to re externalise the event. She writes, 'Just as one can be reduced to an object through torture, one can become human subject again through telling one's narrative to caring others who are able to listen' (p. 57). In the months following the event, most of my frustration laid in the fact that I felt like any conversation about it and the emotions it brought me had no place in academia or in any discussion of my fieldwork experience when, in fact, those emotions were an intrinsic part of fieldwork that shaped us as researchers and the way we view the research. As I began reading other researchers' experiences of fieldwork, I realised the importance of making room to have conversations around the emotions of fieldwork, especially so when combined methodologies reformulate the relationship of the researcher with the research(ed). An important contribution of this manuscript lies in its capacity to provide a space to reconceptualise my/our experiences of fieldwork, ultimately allowing me to reconstruct my narrative-self as a researcher and an activist.

Lastly, Óscar and I also experienced the aftermath of the event in differentiated ways although with key similarities. We both experienced guilt and shame—Óscar regretted our decision of splitting up at the beginning of the auditing process and wearing his noise-cancelling headphones to block some of the noise from the heavy traffic. In a way, he had felt responsible for looking after me (as a friend and a co-worker rather than from a paternalistic point of view) and the events triggered feelings of shame. While he struggled with these feelings for a short time, he quickly came to the realisation that the only person responsible for this had been the harasser—not him, not us—and he was able to see how the conditions of the environment had heightened the risks. He had been shocked, angry, and frustrated by the events, and it led him to think more consciously about the safety and wellbeing of the women around him. He was already mindful of how women experience the city differently because of gender-based violence, but witnessing it first-hand reformulated his understandings. However, for me, the events shook my self-narrative of a (neutral, objective) researcher and reduced me to a woman with no control over her safety while in the city, an object, even. In a similar way to what Brison (2002) experienced after her assault, my autonomous-self had been undone by the levels of violence I experienced. As Gurney (1985) had argued, there is an added embarrassment of acknowledging that one's status as a female overshadows one's identity as a researcher.

Directly after the attempted abduction occurred, I was reluctant to bring it up with my supervisors out of fear of being questioned for not having "foreseen" or prevented the situation. After all, the university had asked us (me and my supervisors) to go through multiple clearance processes prior to fieldwork, so in the first few days after it happened, —in my mind at least—it had been my fault. I had to deal with an immense sense of dread and shame that was rooted in my failure as a 'thorough' researcher, and these feelings were reinforced by having to be accompanied by a man for the rest of the audits for safety purposes—Óscar's working schedule and mine were conflicting too much but had agreed that it was not safe for me to venture by myself and so I arranged for a (male) friend to accompany me while I audited the last bus stops. The irony of it all is not lost on me: I began this research project to understand how gender-based violence shapes women's mobility in Saltillo and ended up having to modify my mobility patterns and strategies because I had been harassed while walking the city.

My shame and guilt opened the way for severe self-doubt in my abilities to conduct research (and later on, interpreting the data), and these feelings were reinforced whenever I had to share my account of fieldwork with other colleagues. It seemed like there was no room for a conversation on emotions, risks, and vulnerabilities of fieldwork as a female researcher. Equally, the amount of ethics and safety clearance forms I had to hand in prior to beginning fieldwork made me hesitate to recognise the validity of my experiences. Before beginning data collection, those procedures gave me a false sense of confidence in my ability to separate myself from the research and to control my fieldwork environments along with the vulnerabilities and risks that I would be exposed to. After the events had unfolded, those same procedures felt like a testimony of how unprepared and naïve *I* had

been as a researcher. After all, the university had told me to be careful, right? And if this happened to me, then I had failed to prevent and foresee this. In reality, there is no way I (or anyone, for that matter) could have prevented the events, and even if they could have foreseen them as a possible risk of fieldwork, researchers are still humans that follow instinctive reactions—not predesigned university safety protocols—whenever facing dangerous scenarios.

You're not really asking, and I'm not really answering; ethics and risk assessments

Straight after the events unfolded, I had to confront reality and deal with how unprepared I was to face my own vulnerability as a young female researcher; I felt guilty and ashamed in a way I had no words for, as if somehow it had all been my fault for not planning measures to protect myself against someone trying to abduct me. As a feminist scholar and activist, I know that none of what happened is my fault and that I could not have prevented it, yet I somehow felt like a piece of the puzzle was missing, suddenly even the thought of opening my computer to look at my fieldwork data would fill me with anxiety and stress.

My methodology involved a mixed-method approach and in my mind, I had seen the "quantitative" component of my mixed-method approach as the most straight-forward step, the one that required the least safeguarding measures since I would not be interacting with participants; it was us (researchers) and the field (the city). We had taken sensible precautions into consideration; Óscar and I were aware of the risks of navigating the city on public transport and by foot and had unspoken agreements we followed to stay safe and look out for one another: we would identify neighbourhoods that felt rougher than others and avoid taking our phones out too much; we avoided carrying valuables and dressed casually to blend in as opposed to hi-vis vests that would have made us look too official and out of place; whenever walking next to an urban highway, we would take as much distance as possible from the cars and trucks speeding past us; and for the most part (perhaps most importantly) we would remain together while auditing the bus stops. In this sense, our positionality with the field mattered just as much as my positionality with the women I worked with during my qualitative methods.

My positionality and life experiences had led me to research gender-based violence in the urban context of Northern Mexico, and it affected the way I shaped my research, but I had conceptualised the quantitative component as a detached, objective process. As Widdowfield (2000) argued , there is less appreciation that this is often a two-way relationship; not only does the researcher affect the research process, but they themselves are affected by this process (Heller et al., 2011; Okely and Callaway, 1992; Pasquini and Olaniyan, 2004) and discussions and critiques of the research process rarely involved any articulation of feeling from the researcher (England, 1994; Kwak, 2019). There is an intense focus on protecting the participants from emotional threat, and it is continuously addressed in methodological text particularly in those that adopt a reflexive starting point—and rightly so. Whenever working with participants, researchers should be careful of treating them like people and invest in building rapport to understand their context, instead of seeing them as mere mines of information to be exploited by researchers (England, 1994). However, in a similar vein, researchers are not merely instruments that facilitate data collection. As Hubbard et al. (2001) argued we can and do react (England, 1994), yet this is rarely acknowledged when preparing researchers beginning field work. My experience was similar to Heller et al. (2011):

> Fresh from our qualitative methods course, many of us went to the fieldwork preoccupied with concerns related to ethics, positionality, power dynamics and so on. However, we were less aware of the potential changes in our lives that would accompany fieldwork. (p. 79)

Prior to fieldwork, I had spent weeks carefully crafting safeguarding measures for participants and contingency plans for each method. I was aware of the risks and dangers of researching GBV, had completed all ethics and risk assessments thoroughly and developed a methodological approach that was reflexive and mindful of the various ways in which the participants may be impacted; from the tone of the questions I would be asking, to the multiple barriers I would have to navigate to welcome a broader profile of participants. I was concerned about the wellbeing of all participants as I implemented participatory qualitative methods that more often than not included women who had been harassed while out in the city or had personal backgrounds of GBV in their own homes. I carefully crafted contingency plans and safeguarding measures for all participants, mainly out of my own sense of obligation to them, but also importantly in compliance with ethical research guidelines—however my reflexive approach to positionality began and ended with my relationship to the participants. I had considered my own positionality in relation to the women I worked with on the ethnographic shadowing and the hybrid transect walks but did not to reflect on my own positionality in the field in relation to the urban violence women face every day in the city. I had not been exposed to concepts like researchers' vulnerability or researchers' fatigue. While the university protocols had certainly asked me to pre-empt potential distressing scenarios for the participants I wanted to work with, it also had little to no room available to reflect on own safety in a way that felt genuine and not just a tick-box exercise.

Prior to fieldwork, the university ethics approval form had asked me to reflect on the risk of harm for participants. Although the form asked about significant risks of physical harm to participants or researchers, it did not consider potential psychological or emotional distress to researchers, only participants. My supervisors were aware of my research background and the personal motivation to pursue this project and had expressed concern about my wellbeing while on fieldwork; at the time, I appreciated their input and wrote a small paragraph in the 'other ethical risks' section reflecting on my positionality in relation to the research environment I would be re-entering. I was aware of the risks of researching GBV on public transport *while* using public transport in Saltillo but felt like I had to either underplay the risks or generalise them in a way that would not negatively impact the possibility of obtaining approval from the research ethics panel in order to conduct fieldwork. There was no malice or intent to misrepresent the research environment to the panel, but it felt redundant as most of the GBV women are exposed to while in the city happens while carrying out normal, everyday activities. In a way, disclosing those risks would have raised concerns that could not realistically be mitigated without seriously impacting my research or curtailed my mobility. The structure of the current ethics approval form does not prompt researchers to reflect on the risks they will face during fieldwork outside of ethical considerations around interactions with participants.

On the other hand, the travel risk assessment (TRA) form focused entirely on the researcher and asked me to consider safeguarding measures for hazards like political instability, extreme weather, transport problems, cultural differences, security, emergency procedures and many others. Specifically, I was asked about the risk of abduction within the crime section, and I declared I would avoid walking alone around quiet areas, especially after dark, but does this answer mean I truly reflected on this risk? I ticked a box and wrote what I needed to move forward with fieldwork—the TRA form was not really asking me to reflect on the possibility of being abducted, and I was not really answering and therein lies our argument. The ethical approval form does not provide a space to reflect on the ethical considerations and risks that may impact the researcher, and neither does the TRA, specially so when a researcher truly reflecting on risks such as gender-based violence can signify getting significantly delayed or rejected for fieldwork. I did not reflect on my positionality in the field (the city) because doing so could have resulted in more obstacles.

Let's run a case scenario: In Saltillo, 9 out of 10 women have been sexually harassed or assaulted in some degree while on public transportation, some of the most gruesome cases including rape and kidnapping (Infante-Vargas and Boyer, 2021); this implies a high-risk vulnerability and the

university would have asked me why I needed to incur in these risks and how I would approach them—and reasonably so. But not using public transportation is not realistic given that my research focuses *on* public transportation and even if it didn't, it would have represented a severe restriction on my mobility because of my gender. In many ways, while I was keenly aware of the reality of being a woman trying to use public transportation in Saltillo, I did not feel like I could fully disclose this, or rather, I could, but to the detriment of my research. And this case scenario applies in many other instances of normal, everyday violence for researchers across multiple disciplines. Women navigate risks while walking down the street in their everyday lives, and it is only common to assume that they will encounter gender-related risks at some point while conducting fieldwork too. If we were to disclose all of these 'small' but consistent risks, would we even be cleared to conduct research in person? Perhaps I would have been asked to not use walking as a methodology for the audit process; maybe they would have asked me to have a companion (namely male) to keep safe while working in the city, and would those measures not have defeated the purpose and reliability of my research, too? The ethical approval protocol was concerned with safeguarding participants—and rightly so— but when it came to safeguarding measures for the researcher, the ethics approval form and the TRA were shaped in a way that did not *truly* encourage a reflexive process of the risks and harms associated with fieldwork lest we (female, queer, or marginalised researchers) severely modify our methodology or refrain from travelling altogether.

In 2001, Hubbard et al. highlighted the importance of understanding emotion as a crucial part of the research experience. As such, there is an inherent need to develop strategies to manage the emotions of the researchers for the duration of the project. One of the objectives of this paper is to echo the reflection of other researchers that have found ways to navigate the emotions of fieldwork. Firstly, it is important to stimulate conversations about the emotional difficulties of fieldwork in academia and activism amongst peers, and particularly between supervisors and students when on postgraduate level. The process of conceptualising and writing this paper has served as a reflexive exercise in and of itself, but it has also had positive effects on my mental health; similarly to what Brison (2002) argued, narrating one's experiences of traumatic events plays a significant role in the recovery from trauma; it allows to establish greater control over traumatic memories and intrusive thoughts. I have developed a deeper understanding of the underlying issue that triggered my post-traumatic symptoms, and I am now able to incorporate these experiences as valuable knowledge that informs my interpretation of the research I conduct. While working on this manuscript, I also reframed my relationship with my supervisors as a doctoral researcher. They allowed me the agency, time, and space to process all the messy thoughts and emotions and put them into paper; their understanding of how critical it was for me to not brush this off or leave it as a footnote in my dissertation validated my experience and encouraged me to dig deeper to try and understand why the experience had affected me so deeply. Through this process I was able to identify similitudes in my situation with that of other researchers and draw strategies on how to cope going forward, I strengthened my understanding of the implications of fieldwork on a given research process and have a broader view on my role in relation to my research. In this sense, we need to encourage researchers and graduate students to participate in discussions around the emotions of fieldwork throughout all stages of it. For instance, Heller et al. (2011) suggested incorporating journaling as a way to cope with fatigue and the broader implications of fieldwork. For them, reflecting on their challenges and being able to look back on them during a short-time period, allowed them to identify how their feelings were linked to research challenges, embrace the process, and establish positive coping strategies.

Researchers can also find resources for support in coping with fieldwork through counselling. For example, in the aftermath of her data collection experience, Kwak (2019) attended several counselling sessions after her supervisors arranged for it. She advocates for universities to offer professional training, support, and protection before and after research fieldwork takes place.

Indeed, we argue this should be incorporated as a strategy for researchers undertaking fieldwork, particularly those whose research topic is associated with sensitive issues. In particular, we argue this resource for help should be put in place before fieldwork takes place as a safeguarding measure and should last throughout the duration and the period after fieldwork given how dynamic this stage can be and how much impact it can have on the researcher. Conversations around risks and vulnerabilities should take place prior to doing fieldwork, and these should be fostered in environments that are not tied to university assessment forms—while these processes have a defined purpose and goal, and they are valuable tools within higher education institutions, they do not offer a truly reflective space where researchers can engage with potential risks and challenges, they could encounter while collecting data.

Where do we go from here?

As I began reading other researchers experiences of fieldwork, I felt less lonely, less guilty and ashamed, but the frustration somewhat persisted. Could this have been prevented? Not the event of harassment itself, instead, the intricate, painful aftermath that followed. While it is particularly complex to try and anticipate emotional challenges, especially if they arise as a byproduct of conducting fieldwork (Hubbard et al., 2001), it still felt like the shock of the aftermath could have been mitigated. Once I began reading and talking openly about my fieldwork experience, other researchers slowly began sharing theirs, and that helped me ground the source of my frustration. The level of risk I was exposed to was not a reflection on my shortcomings as a researcher—in fact, many researchers had faced similar or worse scenarios while collecting data. Instead, it is a reflection on how ethics and safety protocols can narrow our understanding and approach to fieldwork—effectively developing tunnel vision—with no consideration for our role in the research. This is not to say that ethics forms and risks assessments are inherently flawed, but to argue that we should recognise these processes for what they are—administrative paperwork—and advocate for spaces where researchers can engage with issues of risks and vulnerabilities in a way that is not tied to their ability to conduct research. Acknowledging how researchers will have different experiences and obstacles during fieldwork adds much needed nuance to our interpretation of the data; it invites researchers to consciously reflect on their own positionality and how they may be exposed to different vulnerabilities because of their identity and shifting positionality, thus, grounding their research experience.

And so, where do we go from here? Researching institutions, namely higher education institutions , should switch from reactive to proactive measures when it comes to safeguarding their researchers. For this we suggest carrying out workshops and seminars that touch on vulnerabilities during fieldwork, however it is crucial that these sessions are not tied to any mandatory administrative paperwork that could impact the researcher's ability to conduct fieldwork. Particularly, women and queer researchers would specifically benefit from round table discussions where researchers with fieldwork experience can candidly reflect on the challenges they faced and share their stories and lessons learned with younger researchers in a safe space. At a graduate level, students would benefit from peer-to-peer semi-structured discussion sessions led by students with fieldwork experience, where they can reflect on their concerns prior to fieldwork and share their experiences after completion. We suggest that these measures would be beneficial for researchers who have not yet undertaken fieldwork and for researchers who have completed their research work and may feel at odds with how the experience unfolded but are unsure of where or how to raise this to colleagues, supervisors, or peers. In all cases, universities should continue to invest in safeguarding researcher's well-being by providing one-on-one counselling services as needed.

Admittedly, these tools alone would not prevent cases of gender-based violence or harassment during fieldwork. That is not their purpose or objective because individual efforts cannot alleviate

systemic violence. Women *will* face risky scenarios when researching because to be a woman is to be exposed to constant levels of gender-based violence in many facets of our lives. Hence, it is important to foster these conversations in a proactive manner with the aim to create safe spaces, to allow women to navigate and negotiate the risks of fieldwork as an act of self-determination, instead of cutting their agency at the knees in the name of risk assessment protocols.

In this paper, I have exposed the different ways in which my positionality as a researcher affected my lived experience of fieldwork—Óscar and I engaged in a reflective and emotional conversation about the various challenges I had to navigate. Still, in a similar manner, his positionality as an academic with precarious funding also significantly shaped his experience of doing research together. With this paper, we argue that these conversations about positionality should be stimulated in academia from an early stage in the research process—well before beginning fieldwork—and that these should be critical, reflexive, and not just part of university ethics applications and travel risk assessment procedures.

In reality, when conversations about risks and harms during fieldwork revolve only around ethics and safety clearance processes from institutions, these dialogues can turn into a performative tick-box exercise and may fail to invite the researcher to reflect on the implications of fieldwork truly. If the outcome of a researcher mindfully reflecting on their positionality—and the associated risks and vulnerabilities they will be exposed to during fieldwork—results in a significant constraint on their research methods or their ability to conduct research at all, then researchers are implicitly incentivised to ignore or brush off potential harms and the way fieldwork can impact them; therefore, exposing them even further. Additionally, these conversations need to be complemented by a supportive well-being department that allows researchers to share their experiences and equips them with coping mechanisms before (instead of when) conflict arises. Fieldwork is an intense, messy, personal journey, and researchers should engage in conversations about the nuances and complexities of data collection without the limitations that ethics and safety protocols can represent. More so, as academics, we should not rely on these protocols as the only sphere where we discuss the emotions and risks of fieldwork because by design, as we have argued, these processes do not have the capacity to prepare us for the vulnerability we will face on the field.

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Ethical statement

Ethical approval

The project from where this paper stems from received ethical approval by the Ethics Committee at the Department of Environment and Geography, at the University of York.

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Notes

1. We reference the chorus line of the 1966 hit song by Nancy Sinatra and interpret walking as a metaphor for personal agency.
2. We use the term "privileged middle class" to convey the nuance of our position. While we earn the average income considered by INEGI (2021: 53) for the middle class in Mexico, we are both professionals who have had access to higher education and have obtained postgraduate degrees. In many ways, we are middle class, but our experiences are vastly different from other people with different cultural and social capital who are also considered middle class in Mexico.
3. There is an important conversation around academia, privilege, and precariousness, and how that can affect researchers mental health (see Butler-Rees and Robinson, 2020). While we cannot engage with this issue at this point in time, it is still worth acknowledging and recognising that precariousness affected us and shaped our work plan.
4. See footnote [2].
5. One bus driver initially said he had never heard anything related to gender-based violence on the bus when we first asked. Later on, when we arrived at the bus terminal, he brought it up again and said he had heard of a woman that had been molested while on the bus, and that a colleague of him had to kick the guy off. The interaction felt secretive in a way—like he was confiding in us, and when we asked what happened after he said no one followed up with a report or any official type of record.

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