

ARCHEOLOGY IN NORTH AMERICA

A Can of Worms Worth Opening

Robert Muckle

Sexual Harassment and Abuse in the Field

There is an important study that all anthropologists, anthropology students, and anybody else interested in anthropology should be aware of. The results aren't a pleasant read, but they are important, especially for those involved with, or potentially will be involved with, anthropology fieldwork in group situations. The study deals with sexual harassment and abuse in field locations.

The study was undertaken by anthropologists [Kate Clancy](#), [Katie Hinde](#), [Robin Nelson](#), and [Julienne Rutherford](#) and presented by Clancy at the annual meetings of the [American Association of Physical Anthropologists](#) on April 13. On her own *Scientific American* blog, Context and Variation, Clancy provided an overview of the study the same day, with the title "[I had no power to say 'that's not okay.' Reports of harassment and abuse in the field.](#)"

The presentation and blog post garnered considerable attention in scholarly circles. For example, well known palaeoanthropologist [John Hawks blogged about it on April 13](#) and [April 16](#); the [Subversive Archaeologist blogged about it](#); the presentation was discussed in [ScienceInsider](#); [Science Daily](#) had a piece on it; and reports of the study led the American Anthropological Association to make a statement titled [Zero tolerance for sexual harassment](#).

In her April 13 blog post Clancy outlines how the study was initiated from her earlier blog posts providing examples of harassment and abuse in field settings, indicating that they "had opened a can of worms." Indeed they had. I recall fairly widespread coverage of some of those blogs from early 2012, such as this account from [January 30](#). Clancy started a collaboration with Hinde, Nelson, and Rutherford which led to the development of the [Biological Anthropology Field Experiences Web Survey](#), which began earlier this year. The results reported at the meetings and described in Clancy's blog post are preliminary. The survey remains open and the analysis is ongoing.

Despite the explicit references to biological anthropology, the relevance of the study to archaeology should be obvious. Fieldwork is very much a rite of passage in archaeology, many archaeologists spend most of their working hours in the field, and many academics spend at least part of the year in the field. Indeed, the survey asks respondents which subfield, including archaeology, they are aligned with, and in some email correspondence I had with Clancy she indicated the researchers encourage participation from archaeologists.

The preliminary results from the survey are disturbing. Some of the results outlined by Clancy include 59% of respondents experiencing sexual harassment or assault, with females having three times the risk as males. Sexual assault was reported by 19%. The study also indicates that the perpetrators were often those superior in the hierarchy, fear of retribution for speaking up were common, and in some cases field directors privilege data over student safety.

The importance of preventing sexual harassment in field locations should be obvious. As questioned by Clancy "Do we want to impoverish our discipline and push out bright, motivated young students, by continuing to allow abuse and harassment? ...Ultimately, not being able to go to certain field sites, having to change field sites, or not being able to access materials means women are denied the opportunity to ask certain questions in our field. This has the potential to limit the CVs of women and give them permanently lesser research trajectories. This can lead to not getting jobs, or getting lower-tiered jobs. It also means certain research questions may get primarily asked by one gender, and reducing the diversity of people doing the research has shown to reduce the diversity and quality of the work."

There are a number of ways to prevent, or at least reduce, sexual harassment and abuse in field locations. Since the study indicated that "having women in power helped to reduce inappropriate or sexist comments, unfair conditions, and harassment" some considerations should be given to that. Clancy also notes that it is important to implement policies with clear reporting mechanisms.

Another way is to formally incorporate issues related to sexual harassment and abuse into the curriculum of archaeology field schools. I have been directing an annual archaeology field school for the past 14 years. Occasionally I have informally covered the potential of sexual harassment in university and field locations, mostly warning females of the possibility of harassment occurring in their futures. Hearing from many of my former students with reports of harassment they

have subsequently endured, and now learning the results of this most recent study, I am inclined to now do more. Starting with the 2013 field school, my students will have a clear code of conduct regarding harassment, and a clear line of reporting. Rather than simply warning female students of the perils, it will be made clear to all what constitutes harassment and it will be ingrained upon males that any kind of harassment towards females is unacceptable. There will be zero tolerance. I hope others directing field projects will do the same.

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