# How to Deal with Researcher Harassment in the Social Sciences

**Jan-Philipp Stein***

Psychology of Communication and New Media, University of Würzburg, Würzburg, Germany

jan-philipp.stein@uni-wuerzburg.de  (*corresponding author)

**Markus Appel**

Psychology of Communication and New Media, University of Würzburg, Würzburg, Germany

markus.appel@uni-wuerzburg.de

## Standfirst

The harassment of researchers working in the social sciences—not rarely an organized effort targeting members of marginalized groups—is most alarming. Its implications reach from severe personal consequences to the risk of scientific self-censorship. We invite readers to engage in a much-needed discourse about this worrisome phenomenon.

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When engaging controversial research topics—such as racism, extremist movements, gender identity, or other politically charged issues—social scientists may sometimes find themselves thrust into the very conflicts they were hoping to examine from a neutral perspective. Problems might start with verbal confrontations during a field study or outraged e-mails after an online survey, but this is not where the pushback necessarily ends. As our own experiences from the recent past illustrate, even innocuous, small-scale research projects may evoke coordinated efforts by opposing forces, resulting in the tainting of data as well as a lost sense of security among empirical investigators. We believe that the phenomenon of researcher harassment carries heavy implications for many disciplines, not least in psychology and related areas—and that an informed meta-discourse is needed to prevent an exclusionary, self-censoring approach to social science.

### Assigned Sex: Combat Tank

While supervising a psychology master thesis on the cyberbullying experiences of LGBTQ youth in Germany, we were recently familiarized with the diligence of a right-wing activist group, who had deemed our project a societal, maybe even personal, affront. (Note: The described incident during the previous affiliation with another university.) After two days of moderate recruitment success, the number of obtained datasets in our online survey suddenly skyrocketed, with nearly five-hundred new entries generated on a single afternoon. The initial assumption of having gone "viral" in a positive sense, however, was thwarted by an e-mail arriving the next morning, in which an anonymous informant provided us with insider information about the activities of a non-public Facebook group. In a screenshot attached to this e-mail, we not only encountered a group name rooted in neo-Nazi terminology, but also found out about the explicit call to "attack [and] ruin" our study. Bitter realization followed as we examined the collected data: Nearly every new dataset contained expletives, hate speech, or intentionally nonsensical answers. Some hate comments even

addressed team members by name. On top of all, our cyberattackers had made sure to highlight their passion for analogue warfare, complementing their homophobic slurs and death wishes with militaristic jargon; a particularly popular answer to the open-format question on assigned sex was "Panzerkampfwagen Panther," a specific type of Nazi-German combat tank.

## The Need for Retreat

Although it remained strictly virtual in nature, our encounter with targeted harassment by a political group left us quite overwhelmed—especially the young, female master's student who had been personally attacked by the Nazi group. Now that the experience of cyberhate had become firsthand, we found the coordinated attack to be in stark contrast to the lack of solutions available to us, bar the decision to retreat to subcultural niches or yield altogether. Eventually, following the cancellation of our ruined survey, we decided to create a password-protected version and to distribute it exclusively among LGBTQ-centered interest groups. With the prospect of a safe space, however, came the realization that we were bleeding ecological validity: This time around, we were assessing a mere fraction—in terms of both quantity and heterogeneity—of the population addressed by our initial Facebook recruitment procedure. As researchers, we had been forced into a tradeoff between tainted and selective data; worse still, we suddenly felt the need to adapt our research design in order to minimize the likelihood of future harassment. Although our second survey ultimately sufficed to answer *some* of our research questions, the right-wing group had still succeeded in clipping the contribution of our work—and our sense of security on top of it.

## A Broader Phenomenon

While we initially assumed that the described events were just a case of very bad luck, reports of similar cases demonstrate that our experiences hardly constitute an isolated incident.[1,2] In fact, some social scientific areas—especially those focusing on qualitative methods, such as anthropology—have been acknowledging the issue of researcher harassment

for quite some time.[3,4,5] The respective work shows that scholars working in the field may be exposed to both psychological and physical harm, ranging from sexist or racist comments by participants to inappropriate bodily contact or violent threats—essentially all kinds of harassment, which may be defined as "coercive behavior [intended to] intimidate, humiliate, and exercise power over another person".[3]

In contrast to the ongoing discourse in the qualitative literature, however, scholars invested in quantitative social research are still much less familiar with the phenomenon of researcher harassment and its severity. In turn, a notable lack of awareness persists not only among many scientists, but also throughout the academic institutions employing them. In our opinion, this constitutes a worrisome problem, not least considering the growing interdependency of quantitative studies and the online world—which has made it easier than ever to execute coordinated attacks on researchers. After all, the well-established *online disinhibition effect*[6] suggests that under the veil of anonymity, people feel more inclined to behave aggressively towards others, as actions appear to be decoupled from personal consequence. Taken together with the fact that social media use has been linked to the polarization of public opinion,[7] even marginally sensitive research endeavors may suddenly turn into red flags for some members of the virtual discourse, inviting earnest adversity.

At the same time, it is hardly a coincidence that it was a study on LGBTQ issues which led to our first encounter with researcher harassment. In fact, numerous reports—again mostly from qualitative research fields—highlight that scholars belonging to (or interested in) marginalized groups are particularly at risk to be targeted, resulting in additional challenges for women, ethnic minorities, or people identifying with the LGBTQ spectrum.[8,9] Most alarmingly, this circumstance carries both personal and systemic implications. First, the targeted harassment obviously makes it even more difficult for people from marginalized groups to engage with science, as they might shy away from the personal risks involved.[10] Second, a vicious circle of selective research may ensue: Once scholars start to avoid certain

topics or methods out of fear of harassment, society loses one of its most crucial

countermeasures against the process of marginalization itself.

**Preventing Academic Self-Censorship**

Apart from negligible differences, most scientific areas in the 21st century share the

same vision: To generate knowledge that benefits all humans regardless of their social

background, culture, or economic status (e.g., https://www.aaas.org/mission). In the realm of

the social sciences, this means that researchers are supposed to pursue a holistic exploration of

human life—and not only of those areas that promise the least resistance. In practice,

however, this goal is often missed, as the international discourse still focuses predominantly

on the experiences of white people from wealthy, heteronormative social backgrounds.[11] On

the other hand, the experiences of marginalized groups are acknowledged much less

frequently in psychological research, or, if so, often in a shallow or downright problematic

manner.[12,13] The resulting invisibility, in turn, not only fosters the perception of science as an

elitist occupation among the respective groups,[10] but also plays into the hands of the political

forces that oppose the empowerment of said minorities; ultimately, little impedes societal

change as effectively as keeping marginalized experiences out of the public eye.

So, what can be done, when destructive entities try to deter researchers from engaging

these experiences in the first place? To prevent a social scientific approach that becomes

increasingly self-censored and elitist, we suggest a combination of individual and institutional

measures in order to protect scientists from targeted harassment and provide essential

resources whenever harassment occurs during empirical efforts (Fig. 1). First and foremost,

we suggest that an increased awareness about the reality of researcher harassment needs to be

established throughout all academic ranks (recommendations A and B), as young researchers

still face considerable barriers when trying to address negative experiences at their workplace.

For this purpose, concise information materials—such as the Rutgers University guide on

offline harassment (https://uhr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/HarassmentBrochureFaculty.pdf)

or the researcher protection guidelines assembled by the Association of Internet Researchers (https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf)—should be provided to both students *and* faculty, ensuring a better understanding of the problems at hand. Similarly, we urge principal investigators and supervisors to remain alert not only to potential researcher–participant issues, but also to the harassment occurring among research team members—which constitutes yet another substantial problem, especially for women and people of color.[14] Moreover, basic steps should include the coaching of young academics before involving them in field work (recommendation C), as well as the swift provision of legal assistance and professional counselling by employing institutions in case harassment is reported (recommendation D).

## Personal Safety and Open Science

Offering a potentially divisive suggestion, researchers might also consider limiting the dissemination of their contact information during studies, at least whenever a research project touches upon politically charged subject matter. Arguably, this might not be in complete accordance with the contemporary understanding of good scientific practice: Ever since critical analyses have hinted towards a reproducibility crisis in psychology and other social sciences,[15] full transparency about researcher involvement has turned into a gold standard. As such, academic investigators are advised to provide participants with easily accessible contact information for any problems or questions that might arise (e.g., https://www.apa.org/ethics/code/ethics-code-2017.pdf). By no means do we want to undermine the value of these principles. However, incidents such as our brush with cyberhate raise the question whether certain compromises in terms of data protection constitute the preferable option—not despite the vision of open science, but for the sake of it. At the very least, we propose that in projects involving students, supervisors should protect their mentees by providing them with institutional aliases and non-personal e-mail addresses for any public correspondence (recommendation E). Of course, not all research efforts can be conducted in a

manner that protects the identity of the researcher, so academic institutions still need to prepare supportive measures to assist their scientific staff in case of harassment, both on- and offline. Initiatives such as the MIT-founded Union of Concerned Scientists, which supports researchers against large-scale corporate or government harassment, could set an example for similar forms of institutionalized assistance worldwide—i.e., local anti-harassment committees that provide information, as well as social media expertise and legal assistance to academic personnel. Considering the fact that researchers might also face harassment from colleagues and superiors at their workplace,[14] the potential value of such measures cannot be stressed enough. As another meaningful starting point, we suggest that principal investigators dealing with sensitive topics (e.g., political extremism, racism, feminism) prepare mandatory workshops for their team members, educating them about possible problems and coping strategies prior to any contact with participants or social media audiences. Clearly, this will be particularly helpful for early career researchers and students, who often have to collect data as part of lab work or graduation theses, yet might not know of researcher harassment—or how to deal with it during this stressful time in their lives. In the same vein, we believe that researchers looking into controversial subject matter might benefit greatly from pooling their insight and resources with other research teams. This approach may be facilitated using social media and other networking tools (recommendation F). Lastly, it should be made sure that no additional risk emerges from the communication of scientific results to the public; as such, we emphasize the particular importance of independent science communication institutions (recommendation G), as well the respectful treatment of researcher information on academic conferences (recommendation H). Again, we would like to emphasize that our suggestions not only apply to the realm of qualitative social research, but should also be acknowledged in quantitative disciplines.

**Minimizing Risk of Harassment**

Researcher harassment causes serious damage to the health of individual researchers and the careers of young scholars. Moreover, the fear of being harassed can lead to the suspension of controversial research topics, the selection of safer participant groups, and a more sporadic communication of scientific results to the general public. To counteract these fundamental problems—and to ensure the scholarly rigor and academic freedom of empirical investigators—institutions and senior scholars need to introduce specific measures to reduce the negative impact of researcher harassment.

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**Competing Interests**

The authors declare no competing interests.

**Figure 1.**

*Researcher harassment during empirical research: Risks and countermeasures.*

| | PLANNING | EXECUTION | PUBLICATION |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Risks** | Researchers shy away from controversial research questions and topics | Researchers focus on „safe" samples only<br><br>Studies are cancelled in case of pushback | Research results are disseminated only in the academic context |
| **Measures** | (A) The social scientific scholarship (qualitative and quantitative!) acknowledges researcher harassment as a real, significant problem<br><br>(B) Supervisors and other decision makers are familiarized with the challenges surrounding controversial research topics<br><br>(C) Institutions educate researchers about harassment (both on- and offline), as well as protective resources | (D) Institutions provide legal assistance and psychological support in case of harassment<br><br>(E) Institutions provide abstract pseudonyms and mail addresses to shield the personal identity of researchers, especially students<br><br>(F) Researchers loking into controversial topics form networks to share insight, experiences, and resources | (G) Science communication ensures the honest and public dissemination of scientific evidence<br><br>(H) Respectful treatment of researchers' personal information (e.g., photography preferences on conferences) |