

# Training Fieldworkers to Research Sensitive Subjects: What Are We Really Doing to Minimize Interviewer Bias?

Ann M. Moore, Guttmacher Institute, USA; Karin Båge, Karolinska Institute, Sweden; Signe Svallfors, Stanford University, USA

## Why is interviewer bias important to address?

Many experiences, behaviors, and populations of interest in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) research are stigmatized: abortion, gender-based violence, sex work, HIV, sexually diverse identities, etc. Fieldworkers hired to collect primary data have often never collected data on these subjects as language ability and geographic location are often prioritized when hiring. Interviewers may hold stigmatizing attitudes, perhaps because they have never engaged with the subjects or populations before. Negative reactions from interviewers may harm respondents and impede the quality of the data collected, which in turn can impact the effectiveness of policies and programs based on such data.

**Objective:** Capture how fieldworkers are being trained to minimize bias in SRHR primary data collection.

**Strategy:** We solicited and subsequently compiled training materials for fieldworkers collecting data on stigmatized topics and/or populations from demography, public health, sociology, anthropology, and adjacent fields engaged in primary data collection on SRHR. We contacted 43 researchers/research teams to solicit materials. We then reviewed the materials to identify best practices and gaps in training, focusing on how the fieldworkers were trained on how to “be a good interviewer”.

**Materials:** 13 sets of fieldwork training materials + two video calls with colleagues who shared their experiences and strategies in training and supporting fieldworkers on topics including abortion, gender-based violence, and sexuality with key populations such as abortion seekers and young adolescents, from both large-scale, multi-country survey programs as well as small-*n* qualitative studies.

**Contribution:** Our project speaks to ongoing discussions on data quality and ethical conduct in field research.



**Initial findings:** While training materials often serve to increase awareness of fieldworkers’ personal opinions and biases regarding sensitive topics, there is little attention paid to how to mask attitudes and reactions when interacting with research participants. Apparently some of what is taught is not written down, i.e. not visible in printed materials. When it is, the principles of high quality data collection (neutrality, nonjudgment, open-mindedness, etc.) are often covered as bullet point lists in a slideshow, but there are few to no exercises where data collectors are trained to maintain neutrality, reflect on what it means to exhibit neutrality (body language, facial expressions, verbal communication, especially in that specific context), and how lack of neutral could affect data quality.

## Discussion:

- There seems to be an assumption that as long as data collectors are made aware of their own biases and trained on the SRHR topic under study (what it is, how it is connected to power dynamics and gender norms), they will be able to change their attitudes or perspectives, or at least mask them in contact with participants.

## Conclusions:

- Greater attention to interviewer behaviors is needed to avoid stigmatization, minimize harm, and reduce interviewer effects on SRHR data.
- Little to no attention is being paid to who the trainers are and the kind of training they receive to sensitize their fieldworkers to collecting unbiased data.
- Fieldworkers are not treated or remunerated as the professionals that we expect them to be when conducting fieldwork.

## Questions for you:

- Do you know of good examples of training materials to minimize interviewer bias? Please share!
- What kind of training did the people training fieldworkers receive before teaching this material? We are eager to learn from you.