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# **Safety, ethics and trust: reflecting on methodological challenges in fisheries research**

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## **Abstract**

This chapter reflects on a set of methodological considerations that can arise when undertaking fisheries social science research, specifically when engaging face-to-face with fishers and the wider fishing community. Challenges include, the (often) geographical remoteness of fisheries fieldwork, the dangers of a busy harbourside, the male-dominated nature of the industry and the discontent of fishers with policy. We reflect on the challenges faced in conducting this work to prompt constructive dialogue and practical suggestions to inform methodological practice for those working in this area.

## **1. Introduction**

In response to what many commentators and policy makers refer to as a ‘crisis’ in fisheries, much fisheries research has focused on providing ecological data and recommendations to address the problem of depleted and overfished stocks (Urquhart *et al.* 2011). Policy, including the European Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), has therefore focussed on biological and environmental sustainability, with social objectives largely taking a back seat (Jentoft, 1998; Symes and Phillipson, 2009; Urquhart *et al.*, 2014). As a consequence, fisheries policy has faced significant criticism for being “distant, centralised, unresponsive and discredited” (Scottish Government, 2009), with fishers feeling that it has failed to listen to and consider the needs of those in the industry and living within fishing communities (see Kirwan *et al.*, 2018). In response, there has been increasing recognition in recent decades in the UK, and elsewhere in Europe, of the need to better understand the social and cultural processes that occur in fishing communities (Urquhart *et al.*, 2011). As Jentoft (1998: 178) claims, “to manage [fisheries] well, you need to know not only fish, but also fishers and fishing”. Thus, there is a need for a robust evidence base on fishers’ socio-demographic characteristics, on their operations, attitudes, knowledge and behaviours, as well as on the role of fishing in community identity and wellbeing

(Urquhart *et al.*, 2014; 2019). This calls for the engagement of researchers from across the social sciences in what has become a growing research field involving sociologists, human geographers, social anthropologists, social economists and political scientists. Much of this work involves engaging directly with fishers and other fishing stakeholders, in fishing ports and fishing communities, using a range of research methods such as interviews, observations, surveys and focus groups.

This chapter reflects on the particularities of researching fishers, and draws on the experience of the authors over the past 15 years in conducting fisheries social science research in England. In particular we draw on three social science fisheries projects that we have undertaken in the past 12 months, all commissioned by the UK government to inform the development of new post-Brexit fisheries policies, and all united by a common goal to include fishers in the co-production of new approaches to fisheries governance. Whilst growing interest in the contribution of social science in fisheries management and associated policy design is to be welcomed, our fieldwork has, nonetheless, presented a range of unique methodological challenges. For example, the (often) geographical remoteness of fisheries fieldwork, the dangers of a busy harbourside, the male-dominated nature of the industry and the obvious discontent of fishers with policy, can present even the most experienced of researchers with difficulties. We, therefore, use this chapter to highlight and reflect on our experiences of conducting fieldwork in this challenging but much needed context. We do so not to bemoan our experiences or deter other researchers, but to open up a constructive dialogue and inform methodological practice in this area. This chapter is inspired by, and a response to, Chiswell and Wheeler's (2016) call for more engagement with issues of positionality, gender and interviewer safety in the social sciences.

The chapter starts with a review of relevant work in seeking to answer the question: what is unique about conducting social science research in the fisheries context? Following this we present our reflections on the threats to physical safety specific to interviewing and surveying fishers, including a discussion of gender-based safety for researchers. Lastly, we reflect on the ethical challenges we each faced with regards to recruitment and participation – particularly the difficulty of transparently conveying to fishers the benefit or outcome of participation in research. As well as an honest account of our experiences, we consider some practical strategies that may be of use to others conducting similar

research to ensure that fieldwork is enjoyable, ethical, methodologically robust and safe for all those involved.

## **2. Social science research in the fisheries context**

Whilst many methodological challenges are common to all social science research, we feel the fisheries context confers a number of specific risks and unique socio-cultural subjectivities that can make deploying social science research methods, particularly face-to-face methods, difficult.

It is pertinent to note, “commercial fishing is, without doubt, one of the most dangerous occupations in the world” (Seafish, 2019). As a consequence, researchers face an increased risk to their physical safety by simply interviewing or canvassing on vessels or harboursides (Sumner *et al.*, 2002). These concerns are amplified by the fact that many research locations are remote (see Lee, 1995) and experience poor, or even non-existent, mobile phone signal. Incidences of accidental physical harm (e.g. a trip or fall on the harbourside) or deliberate harm (e.g. physical assault), could, therefore, go unnoticed or prove difficult to get necessary and immediate help. As well as dangers that are inherent to simply ‘being’ in the fisheries environment, or what Lee (1995) describes as *ambient* dangers, there are *situational* dangers too, i.e. dangers that arise from simply the presence of a researcher provoking aggression (see Wilson, 2012). As Sampson and Thomas (2003: 170) note in their research into transnational seafarer communities, a key threat to their personal safety on deep sea voyages came in the most part from engagement with antagonistic crew members.

The risk of situational danger is potentially amplified by the recent, turbulent political context, with Brexit posing a significant threat to the stability of European fisheries management (Phillipson and Symes, 2018), and bringing to the fore tensions over access to waters and markets and allocation of fishing quotas (LeGallic, Mardle and Metz, 2018). As a consequence, social science research into fisheries policy and management has the potential to be contentious and divisive, with industry sub-groups having strong feelings on how best to proceed in order to protect their own interests. Navigating engagement where participants are angry or disenchanted can provide even the most skilled researcher with a challenge and needs to be carefully considered to minimise distress for both the interviewer and the interviewee. Although the threat of physical violence to the social science researcher is low (Bloor

*et al.*, 2007), it can be difficult to deal with respondents who see the researcher as an opportunity to offload their frustrations and anger over fisheries management and policy. Jentoft (2000: 141) recognises this response of ‘frustrated and disappointed fishers’ to regulatory regimes, as a ‘voice’ response, where they “carry their disappointments to the forum”. Another challenge for the researcher associated with perceived policy failure is simply the reluctance of fishers to take part in research. Feelings of not being listened to have emerged strongly in previous research (Reed *et al.*, 2019) resulting in apathy amongst potential participants, who are left wondering ‘what’s the point?’, and pressure on the researcher to ‘sell’ the research and achieve the desired response rate.

A further consideration is the fact that social demographics and cultural characteristics of the fishing industry have a notable effect on researcher-participant power dynamics. As has been widely recognised across the social sciences, interview data is the *product* of the interaction between the researcher and the participant (see Cloke *et al.*, 2008), and as researchers our positionalities as male/female, young/old, local/not local (etc.) can have an impact on how fishers respond to us as researchers, and vice versa. Firstly, and perhaps the most obvious consideration here (particularly for the female researcher), is the male-dominated nature of the fisheries industry (EC, 2010; Zhao *et al.*, 2014; Kleiber *et al.*, 2015; Gustavsson and Riley, 2018). Gender is understood by many as a critical factor in shaping power dynamics of any research encounter (Padfield and Proctor, 1996; Chiswell and Wheeler, 2016), particularly given the persistence of the traditional gendered division of labour in fisheries (Zhao *et al.*, 2014). Despite a widespread recognition of the impact of gender dynamics in everyday life, social scientists have often neglected how these dynamics can shape their interactions when conducting fieldwork (Sharp and Kremer, 2006). As well as shaping any interaction, the male-dominated nature of the industry may also present a safety consideration for the lone female researcher (Sharp and Kremer, 2006; Kenyon and Hawker, 1999).

Secondly, whilst having a familial or geographical connection to the industry is seen by some researchers as advantageous (see Pini’s (2004) experiences of research with farmers), others have equally felt that having no connections to the industry can help in allowing them “to encourage dialogue and innocently pose questions in a way that a traditional authority figure may not be able to do” (Chiswell and Wheeler, 2016: 233, also with reference to their experience of interviewing farmers).

Whether it is a familial or geographical connection to the industry, or a complete distance from it, an understanding of how this positionality may impact interactions with participants is important. Pini (2004) reflexively acknowledges and unpacks her position as an Italian-Australian farmers' daughter in her work with Australian farmers. Specifically, she notes how her reflections have demonstrated that the data she collected was not simply collected by or analysed by a 'researcher', but were obtained by 'a country girl' and a 'farmers' daughter' (Pini, 2004: 176).

Thirdly, being a fisher is also strongly rooted in particular values and practices that construct and enable their 'good fisher' identity (Gustavsson *et al.*, 2017). It is important to understand how these values and practices are likely to shape their 'performance' in an interview, i.e. the way they choose to respond to questioning, particularly in response to managing territories, catch levels and safety at sea (the so called 'rules of the game' according to Gustavsson *et al.*, 2017). This is particularly pertinent in the fisheries context, which is understood to be a 'low trust' environment (Reed *et al.*, 2019). Thus, the strength of the fishery's cultural context – and our positionality as researchers in relation to it – undoubtedly shapes the research process (for better or worse).

These context-specific factors make social science research with fishers a unique endeavour. In what follows in this chapter, we reflect on our own experiences of conducting face-to-face interviews or surveys with fishers and industry stakeholders. By way of context, our reflections emerge from a number of research commissions mainly undertaken between September 2018 and October 2019, but drawing on over 10 years' experience of social research with fisheries stakeholders. The projects all sought input from fishers – both commercial and recreational – on various topics relating to fisheries policy and management and were conducted at different ports across England. In the most part our reflections relate to conducting convenience sampling and subsequent interviews on the harbourside, whilst working alone or in pairs. The research teams were made up of a core of six Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI) research staff of various academic grades/positions (from Research Assistant to Professor), and included both male and female researchers. None of the research team had any connection to the fisheries industry (familial or otherwise). All team members have contributed their reflections for the purposes of this chapter. Written reflections were sought from the team, in relation to the following three themes: researcher safety, positionalities and recruitment.

### 3. Challenges

#### 3.1 Researcher safety

As Chiswell and Wheeler (2016) note, although there is a notable body of literature relating to researcher safety, much of this has focused on obviously hazardous settings, such as research into criminal behaviours (Jamieson, 2000; Gill, 2004), gender-based violence (Sharp and Kremer, 2006; Sikweyiya and Jewkes, 2011) and physically challenging environments, such as Antarctica (see Nash *et al.*, 2019). Much less attention, however, has been given to less overtly risky settings such the harbourside. Although documents such as ‘A Code of Practice for the Safety of Social Researchers’ (SRA, 2006) provide welcome, practical suggestions for those conducting interviews in private settings or unfamiliar environments, it does not consider the many particularities of researching in the fisheries environment.

Concerns for physical safety associated with canvassing and interviewing on the harbourside, such as trips or falls on slippery surfaces, were universal throughout the team regardless of level of experience, gender or any other personal attributes. Although we all thankfully avoided any harbourside accidents, we would encourage any researcher working in this area to be aware of these kinds of risks (as per Paterson *et al.*, 1999). The following excerpts written by the research team, depict the significance of safety concerns.

*On the days I was interviewing alone, I felt quite vulnerable being stationed at the harbourside. With permission from the Deputy Harbour Master I was able to access areas that the public would not have been permitted to access; it was busy, with trucks unloading and loading, and other traffic. On the dark, rainy mornings I felt a bit vulnerable in amongst all the comings and goings (Female researcher 1)*

*I was acutely aware that the quayside environment is a dangerous one, physically, and care needs to be taken (Male researcher 1)*

*Interviewing several fishermen involved working in a fairly hazard prone area, where boats are moored and lots of ropes, crates, fishing equipment etc. are left out on slippery*

*surfaces. It was also an area locked off from the general public, which made me feel vulnerable* (Female researcher 2)

As Bloor *et al.* (2006) observe, there is a tendency amongst the research community for ‘narrow escapes’ to be accepted as part of the ‘fun’ of doing fieldwork, but in this case, we believe effort should be made to anticipate harbourside risks in order for them to be effectively managed. Stratagems for ensuring physical safety may include meeting with the Harbour Master to discuss possible risks, visiting the harbourside in advance of data collection, wearing high-visibility clothing and working in pairs to increase visibility and vigilance of risks. It may be necessary to carry out harbourside-specific risk assessments for such projects.

As previously distinguished, *ambient* dangers such as those associated with being on the harbourside are distinct from *situational* dangers which are a product of a researcher’s presence (see Lee, 1995). As we have presented above, our empirical research has been conducted against a contentious political backdrop, and any questioning related to fisheries policy and management must be considered to be potentially inflammatory. A prevailing sense of disenchantment and distrust among many fishers (reported in Reed *et al.*, 2019) typically surfaced as either a reluctance to be involved, or through ardent, sometimes off topic responses to interview questions – both of which can be difficult to navigate and manage as a researcher. Although the research team did not experience any threats of violence, some of the team were subjected to impassioned complaints or protests that did – in a minority of instances – result in a heightened awareness for personal safety.

*One potential participant, with whom I was sat, got really quite angry with me for what he described as 'sniffing around' and literally turned his back on me in some kind of protest. I sat talking to his colleague for a short time, all the while he sat with his back to me and laughed at my questions, which I found really hard to ignore. I would not have accepted someone talking to me in that way if I was there in a personal capacity and felt embarrassed and conflicted about how to handle it* (Female researcher 1)

The undertone of disenchantment and frustration with fisheries policy and management often quickly set the tone of our interactions with fishers. Indeed, Paterson *et al.* (1999) state it is important for



researchers to consider the fact that the participants tend to associate the research topic and aims with the researcher and – particularly in highly political or controversial research, such as fisheries management – they are often preconceived by participants as partisan. We, therefore, suggest that researchers develop clear strategies to emphasise independence and neutrality immediately and convincingly in order ensure we are not individually held accountable for any grievances interviewees may have with fisheries policy, and even offer an opportunity for participants to constructively air those grievances.

*I think our role as researchers is our strength, particularly when there is strong mistrust in policy makers. I always make it clear that I am an independent researcher, even if the research is being funded by [Government] or others (Female researcher 3)*

Establishing our position as impartial and independent is an important strategy to diffuse volatile situations, and also enabled us to feel assured that any impassioned responses were not a threat to *our* personal safety.

*Interviewees were often very vocal and passionate in some instances – which could be considered a little ‘aggressive’ – but I felt that in general this was more a reflection on how they felt aggrieved about their situation (Male researcher 2)*

As a male-dominated industry, conducting research with fishers presents a particular safety consideration for the lone female researcher. As Sharp and Kremer (2006: 318) note, it is critical we understand that gender (amongst other attributes) “may lead a researcher to be endangered in a situation that may not pose a risk to others” (see also, Arendell, 1997). Furthermore, as others have noted (Miller, 2006; Chiswell and Wheeler, 2016), many of the strategies proposed for ensuring gender-based safety in fieldwork – such as carrying a mobile phone, telling colleagues when to expect a call from you, or leaving them with an itinerary and details of interviewees (Lee, 1997) – may be redundant given the particularities of fisheries research, e.g. canvassing a remote harbourside and interviewing fishers ‘as and when’ the weather, tide and rhythms of the industry allow. Unsurprisingly, *all* interviews conducted as part of the research reviewed here were with male fishers. Whilst the female researchers in the team did not experience any gender-based threats to their safety, the requirement to put oneself in situations

that we could deem risky in our personal lives to ensure we secured interviews or collected quality data, warrants further consideration.

*I went onto a few boats for interviews. I felt that this was sometimes needed in order to secure the interview. The boats were moored and 2 of the 3 interviews were conducted outside of the cabin, with other people nearby. This did feel uncomfortable but all were friendly. In hindsight, I would likely not do this again (Female researcher 2)*

Interestingly, as the preceding reflection denotes, it was not until we actually experienced situations that felt potentially compromising that we actually considered how vulnerable we may be. This mirrors the observation of Sharp and Kremer (2006) who described being ‘shocked’ by how little they considered their personal safety as female researchers before interviewing men in isolated settings:

“Only *after* we both completed our research and began discussing the issues we encountered did we realize we had begun our projects as though gender dynamics surrounding power and violence were unimportant” (Sharp and Kremer, 2006: 323)

We would, therefore, encourage other female researchers working in male-dominated industries such as fishing, who may be required to interview men alone in potentially secluded or private settings, to consider gender dynamics surrounding power and their own personal safety *before* they embark on fieldwork; after all, even in our role as professional researchers – as Sharp and Kremer (2006: 320) remind us – “female researchers cannot pretend to be genderless”. We recommend these discussions, between male and female colleagues of all grades/levels, should occur as early as the research design phase, thus enabling strategies, such as working in pairs, to be clearly embedded (and where relevant, costed) into the research approach.

Whilst we have highlighted some practical approaches to manage researcher safety in the context of ambient and situational dangers, as per Chiswell and Wheeler (2016) in their discussion of safety during farmer interviews, we also acknowledge the role of instinct and intuition in ensuring personal safety out in the field. As unquantifiable as it is, a simple measure of whether something ‘feels right’, should never be discounted. The concept of ‘psychological safety’ (Williams *et al.*, 1992) is useful here. As Paterson *et al.* (1999) explain, a feeling of ‘psychological safety’ is based on comfort with another individual or

individuals, and enables researchers to sense a potential threat before it materialises. Based on this, we would encourage researchers to recurrently reflect on how comfortable they feel in any given situation and trust their judgement when something does not feel right.

*I was also aware that the perceived demeanour of some of individuals did not sit well with me, and on some occasions I didn't pursue interviewee connections as tenaciously as I might have done. My primary objective – as always – was to stay safe. Of course, an important word here is perceived, but I do consider myself to be a pretty good judge of character, and I'm not afraid to act on my instincts (Male researcher 1)*

Like Chiswell and Wheeler (2016), we appreciate the flexibility we have been granted to utilise our intuition is not always available to others, particularly when there is a pressure to meet particular interview numbers. We, therefore, encourage open dialogue between researchers and project managers or supervisors about these issues, including what should happen when something does not feel 'right'. There is also a role for training here – inhouse or external – to give researchers the confidence to remove themselves from situations in which they feel uncomfortable.

Of course, gendered safety considerations are just one of many implications of our social positionings we hold as researchers. We now 'reflexively' consider the impacts of interviewer gender and other attributes (see Pini, 2004) – or what Chiswell and Wheeler (2016) term 'interviewer positionality' – in the context of the interview performance.

### *3.2 Positionalities and the interview 'performance'*

It is widely accepted that the interview is a 'performance'. Interviewers may affect the responses they obtain, not through particular behaviours or comments, but simply as a function of our 'observable characteristics' (Davis and Scott, 1995).

The male-dominated nature of the fisheries industry (EC, 2010; Zhao *et al.*, 2014; Kleiber *et al.*, 2015; Gustavsson and Riley, 2018) plays an important role in shaping the researcher-participant interaction and interview 'performance'. Female researchers' interactions with fishers did result in occasional unwelcome comments. Like others researching in male-dominated contexts (e.g. Gurney, 1985; Horn, 1997, Chiswell and Wheeler, 2016), we were inclined to interpret these remarks and the use of terms of

endearment as ‘innocent’ and culturally acceptable, which – given our desire to secure interviews – we felt unable to challenge.

Despite these experiences, female members of the research team did collectively agree their gender was advantageous in recruiting and engaging with participants.

*I was sat with about seven or eight fishermen, trying to get them to agree to participate in an interview. They made it quite clear that they did not want me there! As I got up to leave, one fisherman called me back and said ‘if you were my daughter I’d hate to think of this lot having a go at you’ and agreed to participate in an interview. I was quite conflicted about being given an interview because I felt it meant he saw me as weak and a bit vulnerable, but carried out the interview anyway. My perception was that particular fisherman might not have extended that offer to a male member of the team (Female researcher 1)*

Whilst some commentators claim such a mismatch of genders can inhibit the openness of participants (see Pini’s (2004) reflexive examination of her experience of interviewing men in rural social research), like others (Horn, 1997; Chiswell and Wheeler, 2016), we felt being female meant we were seen as sympathetic listeners and confidantes (see also Oakley’s (1981) seminal work on the interview and subsequent reductionist critique of ‘gender matching’ in the feminist literature):

*In many ways I think my gender works in my favour when interviewing fishermen, as they don’t see a woman as a threat and seem to enjoy the opportunity of talking about their lives and experiences (Female researcher 3)*

Although in these instances gender seemed to be an effective factor in building rapport, as Thwaites (2017) contends, in instances like these, where power is not shared equally in interviews, the quest for rapport can be exploitative and overtly conflict with the researchers’ personal, feminist values and beliefs.

Of course, as Collins and Bilge (2016) remind us, identities are forged through the intersection of different social positionings which make us complex individuals – so it is not just gender that shapes interview performances. Another significant trait we consider here is the impact of our relationship with

the fisheries industry. For the most part, we felt our non-fisheries status was helpful in establishing a good relationship with fishers who consequently did not see us as ‘threatening authority figures’ or ‘insiders’ with our own agenda and opinions. It also prompted fishers to assume limited prior knowledge, which often made for more detailed responses and explanations. Although the use of ‘confessions of ignorance’ (Horn, 1997) is a recognised technique in encouraging dialogue (see also McDowell (1998) who describes deliberately drawing from a range of ‘identities’ when interviewing city elites), we fear purposefully choosing an identity, e.g. naïve or vulnerable, to shape an interview interaction is ultimately unethical (see also Chiswell and Wheeler, 2016).

Although we saw our lack of connection to the industry as advantageous, conversely one researcher felt his position as a recreational yachtsman helped him develop rapport with participants:

*My knowledge of boats and the sea probably helped in building rapport and asking the right questions, [...] On balance I would say it helped - walking on a boat, knowing port from starboard and asking an intelligent question about the chart plotter probably gave me a slight edge in rapport building (Male researcher 1)*

Of course, it would be futile to suggest researchers reduce or neutralise attributes such as gender or non-fishing status. Instead we offer these reflections to highlight the fact our positionalities *do* shape research encounters (for better or worse) and encourage researchers to be reflexive on account of these dynamics.

### *3.3 Recruitment: a challenge of transparency?*

Although low response rates are a challenge across the social sciences, recruitment of fishers can prove problematic. In the first instance, any kind of interaction with fishers (including convenience sampling) will be beholden to the fishing ‘calendar’ and the weather; neatly lining up successive interviews can be near on impossible and any research team working in this field should be prepared to make multiple trips to case study areas, and supplement face-to-face interviews with telephone interviews where methodologically feasible.

Aside from access challenges, as we have hinted at above and present in more detail elsewhere (see Reed *et al.*, 2019), an undertone of anger and frustration existed within the fishing industry, owing to

what was perceived by many as ‘pointless’ participation in previous consultations and research which did not result in any tangible positive outcomes. This disenchantment meant recruiting participants was particularly challenging:

“You say it, and nothing seems to get done or all you get is, well, like it’s ‘alright, we’ve heard you. We’ll tell you we’ll do something’ and nothing ever happens. It’s the same old story year in, year out. It’s been going on for years and nothing. It just doesn’t seem to change” (Fisher, Reed *et al.*, 2019)

In addition to concerns about lack of follow-through was a palpable fear amongst potential participants that their input to research can be utilised to shape policy or management strategies which would work against them:

“The trouble you've got with our youngsters in the harbour, I think they're just tired of being kicked all the time. They're tired of being pushed down, belittled, constantly aggrieved against by the authorities. They turn around and say, ‘Why should I?’, we say, ‘Come on to the committees?’, {they say} ‘What's the point?’. We've got one guy here, one of the nicest guys in the world, he really is. He's so placid. You can talk to him about anything. He won't get involved in surveys. He said, ‘The more you tell them, the more they use against us later on’, that's how he looks at it. ‘The more we tell them, the more they're going to stab us in the back’” (Fisher, Reed *et al.*, 2019)

This apathy and/or fear has proven difficult to navigate for all researchers in the team. With specific reference to overcoming low response rates when conducting in-person surveys with fishers, Moore *et al.* (2010) suggest two approaches: (i) highlighting how and why the research might be of interest to fishers and (ii) assuring fishers that risks from participating are low. Although well-intended these suggestions are potentially problematic; the requirement to ‘persuade’ fishers to participate or ‘sell’ the virtues of the research, was a significant concern across the research team (as described below). Were we overselling the potential benefit of participating in the research? How sure could we be that the research would not eventually culminate in a policy or management change that would have a negative

impact on participants and their fishing practices? Could we give reassurances that participating in the research would result in any policy or management changes?:

*I was mindful of trying to get a balance between providing enough reason for someone to want to take part, but not raising expectations about what will happen with the results. Fishers often seem to assume that the research will directly influence policy, whereas it is often more indirectly and subtly. This can be frustrating for them, if they feel no immediate changes have occurred after their participation (Female researcher 3)*

*I felt uncomfortable about 'selling' participation as an opportunity to inform policy; were we giving participants false hope? (Female researcher 1)*

As independent researchers, striking a balance between wanting to encourage participants to have a voice on a matter, but also being realistic about the potential for change (and the nature of said change) is difficult and something that needs careful consideration. We need to recognise fisheries as a low trust environment when conducting any kind of policy-oriented research; an environment where 'false promises' about research benefits or outcomes have the potential to irreversibly diminish interest in research/consultation participation going forward:

*I worried that making promises about representing their best interests may not come to fruition and cause further trust issues (Female researcher 2)*

Our concerns mirror that of Carruthers and Neis (2011) who sought to supplement data on bycatch estimation approaches with qualitative interviews with Canadian Atlantic pelagic longline captains. In the first instance, they recognised how the fear of detrimental changes to fisheries management meant a total of six longliner captains refused to participate owing to fears around the subsequent uses of the information they might have provided. Like us, Carruthers and Neis (2011) were required to *carefully* respond to questions concerning the outcome of the research and what it may be used to do. As they recollect: "when asked if the research would 'come back and bite us', we could not honestly assure them it would not" (Carruthers and Neis, 2011: 2295). Developing a 'script' (preferably in close collaboration with the funder or relevant policy teams), that sets out the aims and objectives of the

research, as well as its wider purpose, will engender a greater degree of trust and transparency between all stakeholders and relieve researcher concerns around maintaining informed consent.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this chapter we have taken the opportunity to reflect on some of the methodological challenges we have faced as researchers wanting to engage fishers in social science methodologies. We do so not to deter researchers from working in this important area, but to facilitate constructive dialogue amongst research teams so they feel adequately prepared. For the most part, we have found interactions with fishers interesting and highly rewarding. However, the sense of disenfranchisement amongst fishers owing to perceived policy failures, the male dominated nature of the industry and the harbourside as a research environment have all posed unique challenges for the research team. We posit how a critical appreciation of the particularities of research in the fisheries context and our positionalities in relation to this, could significantly benefit fieldwork encounters and by default, data collected.

A significant challenge for the fisheries' researcher is undoubtedly health and safety, including managing gender-based safety concerns. We posit that generic strategies proposed elsewhere in the methods literature are not entirely sufficient for the fisheries context and propose a number of suggestions to counter both ambient and situational threats, but also highlight the importance of exercising notions of intuition and 'psychological safety' in the field. Our experiences presented here also demonstrate the importance of reflexively considering our positionalities as researchers and the impacts this can have on the interview 'performance'. Although our reflections were limited to issues of gender and non-fisheries status, we understand there are many other aspects of our positionalities that we do not present here. We also raise a number of questions about the ethical responsibility we have as researchers when conducting work that could potentially shape policy or management. We highlight the need to understand fisheries as an already low trust environment, and emphasise the need for transparency in relation to research objectives and (potential) outcomes in order to build trust going forward.

We would be naive to not recognise that the suggestions we have made have resource implications that may not be feasible in all contexts. For example, working in pairs rather than individually is likely to



double the cost of fieldwork and the cost of training. The cost of high-visibility clothing or extra days on fieldwork for pre-visits to the harbourside would have to be budgeted for. Where budgets are already tight or where research teams are trying to put together competitive responses to tender, these extra budgetary considerations may be hard to accommodate. We would encourage project managers/principal investigators to build in these extra costs during the research proposals to normalise these importance practices.

In conclusion, in Box 1 we provide some suggestions for those carrying out similar work in the fisheries context. These are intended to encourage constructive dialogue between researchers, their project teams and ethics committees, and prompt action to ensure fisheries interviews remain safe, enjoyable and ethical for all those involved. By inspiring such discussions, we hope our chapter is of use to all researchers working with fishers, and elsewhere in the social sciences.

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