Summary SCRIPTS Roundtable "The Governance of Fieldwork – Minorities and Academic Freedom" – 19.05.2026

The roundtable explored how identity, political contexts, and institutional structures shape fieldwork and academic freedom. Both early career and senior researchers reflected on challenges related to gender, ethnicity, nationality, age, and political positioning.

- Several participants described how identity influenced access to the field:
    - A researcher working in India noted increasing bureaucratic restrictions on archival research since legal changes in 2014. Theses rules diff for Indians and foreigners. The biggest hurdle is usually the topic of research. Religious identity (Hindu)or language (hindi) sometimes facilitated access, while politically sensitive topics created obstacles.
    - A sociologist of African descent conducting research among African migrants in several countries described suspicion from participants and authorities, especially regarding his motives and national identity. His Africanness was openly challenged.
    - A researcher working in Palestine, Tunisia, and the United States explained that being perceived as a young woman could be both disadvantageous regarding power dynamics and trust but also helpful: she felt not always taken seriously, but often seen as non-threatening.
    - Another participant highlighted the constant negotiation of identity when moving between political, disciplinary, and cultural contexts. There is a significant challenge in working beyond one's community while being interdisciplinary.
    - A scholar researching religion in Russia described the severe decline in academic freedom over the past decade, eventually leading to exile.
- Senior scholars reflected on similar dynamics:
    - Being a woman of color opens a scope of marginalization once white colleagues join.
    - Gender sometimes restricted mobility but also enabled access to spaces closed to male researchers.
    - Researchers emphasized that stereotypes and social perceptions cannot be escaped in fieldwork.
    - Ageism and unequal power hierarchies were identified as important factors shaping research encounters.

- Participants discussed increasing threats to academic freedom that they encountered in fieldwork contexts, how these risks were distributed unequally between researchers and local partners, and whether minority scholars faced additional vulnerability:
    - Experiences included state surveillance, interrogations, censorship, bureaucratic obstruction, suspicion from officials, unequal passports, deportation of foreign scholars, visa problems.
    - Researchers working on politically sensitive topics reported difficulties protecting interviewees and themselves.
    - Social media exposure, conference visibility, and institutional pressure were identified as growing risks.
    - Some participants stressed that self-censorship and silencing tactics are becoming more common, even in democratic contexts. Some would never present themselves as a social scientist in their country of origin.
    - Some confirmed the statement that academic freedom is not separated from other freedoms.
- Ethical and institutional concerns were central to the discussion:
    - Anonymisation is often insufficient; in some cases, fictionalisation is necessary to protect participants.
    - Universities frequently fail to prepare researchers for dangerous field situations, especially regarding digital and personal security.
    - Participants called for stronger mentorship, informal support networks, independent reporting systems within universities (regarding bullying), and flexible support (flex funds) for scholars at risk.
    - Another duty of universities is to create safe spaces, especially for scholars from countries that are sanctioned.
    - National policies need to be changed, especially concerning how to work with universities in countries in trouble. There should be a distinction of what we can do in different countries.
    - The long bureaucratic hurdles of ethical approvals result to a loss in planned fieldwork time.
    - Consents need to be updated, what one consented to could differ at a later stage.
    - Researchers need to have some coaching on interrogation by authorities and be aware that this is a possibility due to their topics of research.

    - Not all research questions could be pursued.
    - Institutions need to allocate specific contact points at the institutions for emergencies and the researchers need to know them before starting their research.
    - Institutions should not send individual students or researchers to risky areas, they should go in groups for fieldwork.
    - Mental health is a topic that needs more attention. Researchers need to check wither their health insurance would cover this.
    - Address some nonfunctional yet existing institutional mechanisms concerning sexual harassment, bullying by senior scholars in field or in publications.
    - The new threats set by democratic decline extended self-censorship to publishing and not only fieldwork.
    - Threats to academic freedom could also be embodied in civil actors and organized crime, not only States (the case of the Balkans and Latin America).
    - Social media exposure and mandatory publications are additional issues that highlight concern for early-career researchers.
- Advice for junior researchers included:
    - Be clear about your positionality while protecting vulnerable people.
    - Maintain emotional and political distance where necessary.
    - Engage respectfully, listen carefully, and build trusted informal networks.
    - Reflect critically on which research questions can or cannot safely be pursued.

Overall, the discussion highlighted that academic freedom is increasingly fragile and highly context-dependent, requiring stronger institutional support, ethical awareness, and collective strategies of protection.