

Power hierarchies during “field” visits: recommendations for researchers



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OVERVIEW

This project examines how power hierarchies affect research visits conducted by staff and students at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and outlines practical recommendations to help researchers navigate these dynamics.

While efforts to promote equitable research partnerships and decolonise research have resulted in guidance about shifting decision-making from "Northern" (e.g., UK) to "Southern" (Global South) institutions more broadly, there is less practical guidance on how to identify and navigate complex power dynamics (especially those related to gender, race, age, and expertise) during "field" visits, when data collection, training or meetings occur.

These power dynamics exist not only between Northern/Southern actors but also within research teams themselves and can manifest in many ways, including as sexism, racism, White Saviourism, microaggressions, cultural insensitivity, and assumptions about expertise. However, there are many promising practices being implemented to promote equitable research and change these dynamics.

The project aims to develop practical recommendations for researchers to address these micro- and macro-level power hierarchies during overseas visits, through: a) a rapid review of literature; b) interviews with LSHTM staff, Research Degree students, and research partners, and c) feedback workshops with research participants, as well as other interested staff, students and research partners, filling gaps in existing global health research guidance and LSHTM's own resources.

BACKGROUND

Within research, the concept of travelling to “the field” is often used colloquially to describe any kind of movement closer to where a project/community are located. For researchers, going to the “field” may occur for a range of reasons, including data collection, training, meetings, identifying research partners (e.g. NGOs, local universities, research institutes), building relationships with research partners, confirming contextual appropriateness, research design and analysis. During these visits, it is important for researchers to reflect on different types of “power hierarchies” that might be present in their interactions with research partners, other stakeholders, research participants, within the research team itself and within the research partner organisation. In this study, we understand power hierarchies broadly as systems (such as gender, race, class, age, education, expertise) shaping how people are organised and affecting dynamics between them.

Within the literature, there is recognition that being in “the field” can be a way of researchers signalling their professional status and prestige as researchers (Kloß, 2017). Spending time in the field – especially for extensive periods – is often seen as a rite of passage, something important that gives researchers legitimacy and authority (Pollard, 2009; Lecocq, 2002). However, there are also critiques of the concept of “the field”, recognising this term has colonial roots and reinforces the idea of communities being in place for others to study or observe (Bilgen & Fábos, 2023).

Much of the existing literature outlining the complexities of understanding power hierarchies in the “field” comes from the discipline of anthropology. Within this literature, there is an emphasis on challenging assumptions that being an “outsider” means someone is more objective, or conversely that being an “insider” means someone automatically has unique knowledge, because positionality on issues like class and ethnicity is constantly shifting (Baser & Toivanen, 2018). Researchers also continually make active decisions about how to position themselves, including as “learners” or displaying “performed approachability” to be more accepted (Kaaristo, 2022).



There is also significant documentation on how being “White” or a “foreigner” provides researchers with power and privilege when they travel for work, because of the assumption that being an outsider means they have specific expertise or knowledge (Britton, 2019; Harrigan, 2023). Being a researcher who is not White, on the other hand, can result in different experiences and mixed perceptions by others about credibility and approachability (Lokot, 2022).

There is also a growing recognition of the particular burdens placed on women during travel, because of gendered expectations of behaviour (Ambujam, 2021). Additionally, women who experience sexual harassment or other forms of violence during travel may avoid disclosing these incidents due to the pressure to be seen as professional and competent (Hanson & Richards, 2017), as well as a desire to not stereotype communities (Ambujam, 2021).



The literature suggests the importance of not analysing power hierarchies in isolation but recognising how the intersections of different hierarchies (e.g. how gender and race intersect) complicate the power researchers hold. This includes recognition of how nationality and class – and having the right visa – shape travel experiences (Harrigan, 2023), and how being Western-educated might hold lesser power when someone is from a particular ethnic background, female and young (Lokot, 2022).

Researchers also urge the importance of documenting and discussing difficult experiences during travel – especially for women, racialised minorities and LGBTQIA+ individuals – to avoid the risk of downplaying the difficult aspects or “sanitizing” fieldwork (Ambujam, 2021).

While there is a growing body of literature about the complexities of analysing power and the efforts researchers make to reduce the impact of power hierarchies, there is also the realisation that even the most decolonial and anti-racist research intentions are constrained by the institutional structures that projects are situated within, and the identities and power hierarchies researchers are situated within (Fertaly & Fluri, 2018). This study seeks to apply an intersectional lens to explore how to tackle power hierarchies (including race, gender, age, education/expertise) during “field” visits to the Global South, while recognising the institutional dynamics that shape how power operates.

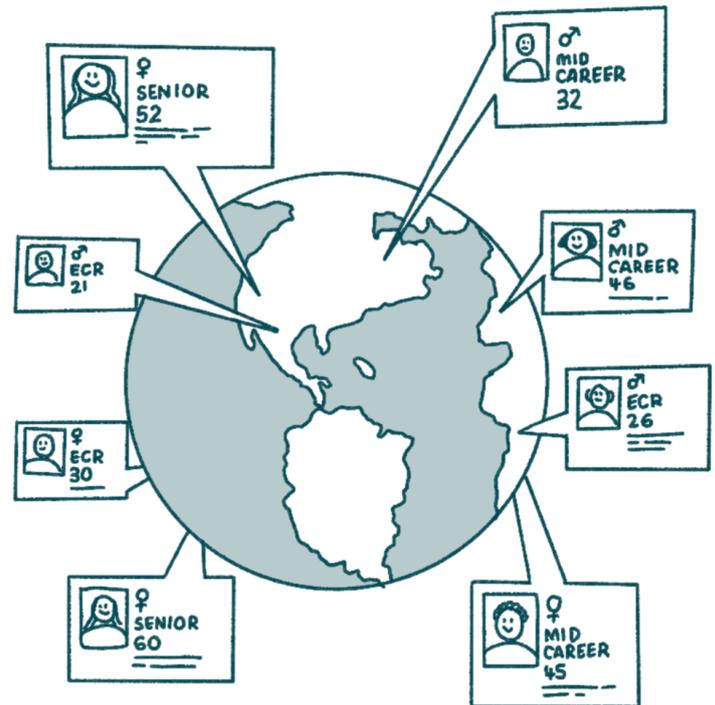
METHODS

This guidance document is informed by a rapid literature review (summarised above), semi-structured interviews and feedback sessions.

A total of 36 individuals participated in the study consisting of 20 interview participants and 16 who only joined feedback sessions.

Overall, the 20 interview participants consisted of: 9 LSHTM staff members, 5 PhD/DrPH students, and 6 research partner staff. LSHTM staff/students were invited to participate through open recruitment calls advertised in faculty newsletters and mailing lists of different Centres. Staff were encouraged to suggest partners who might be interested in participating and these individuals were invited by email.

The table below summarises the interview participants:



Type of Actor	Career level	Gender	Self-identified ethnicity/ geographical region
LSHTM: 14 Participants	Early career: 7 Mid-career: 2 Senior: 5	11 women 3 men	White: 10 African: 2 Asian: 1 Black and Minority Ethnic: 1
Research partners: 6 Participants	Senior: 5 Mid-career: 1	4 women 2 men	Africa: 3 Middle East and North Africa: 2 Asia: 1

Interview participants were provided with Participant Information Sheets and asked to provide written consent. Interviews were conducted in English by ML, audio recorded on Zoom and transcribed, then analysed using inductive coding in Nvivo by ML.

Following analysis, feedback sessions were held with 10 interview participants and 16 additional participants to sense-check initial findings and gather further input. Additional participants were invited to join by email if they had previously expressed interest in the study but did not participate in interviews or had responded to requests for feedback session participants from internal newsletters.

All additional participants provided written consent. Overall, 3 feedback sessions were held with LSHTM staff/students and 2 feedback sessions were held with research partners. Feedback sessions were not recorded, but the lead researcher took notes and the key inputs from feedback sessions were incorporated into analysis.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Power

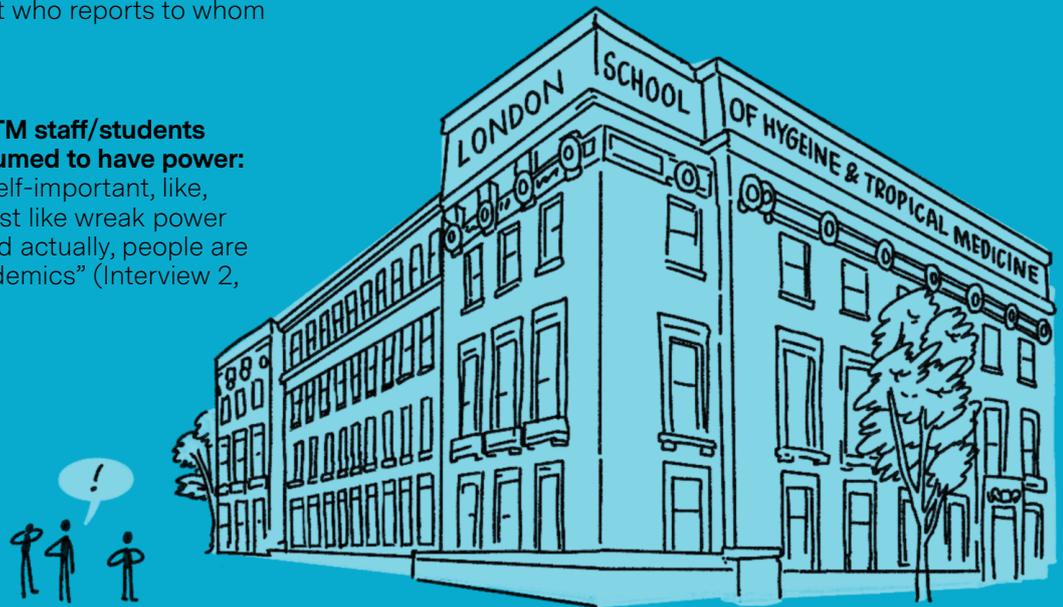
Participants had varied perspectives on what power is and what it meant for research, with senior staff more likely to indicate that power hierarchies were not always harmful and early career and especially staff/students from racialised minorities more likely to point out the harms.

LSHTM's institutional power was described as an overarching force, shaped by holding funding, being Principal Investigator on a grant, and requiring research partners fulfil bureaucratic and administrative regulations.

Power dynamics were recognised as becoming even more complex when more than two organisations were involved, for example if a local NGO and international NGO were also part of a research partnership with LSHTM, creating questions about who reports to whom and how relationships are set up.

There was recognition that LSHTM staff/students should not be automatically assumed to have power:

"I think sometimes we're a little self-important, like, oh, we're so amazing. We must just like wreak power dynamics all over the world... And actually, people are not that fussed about White academics" (Interview 2, woman, senior).

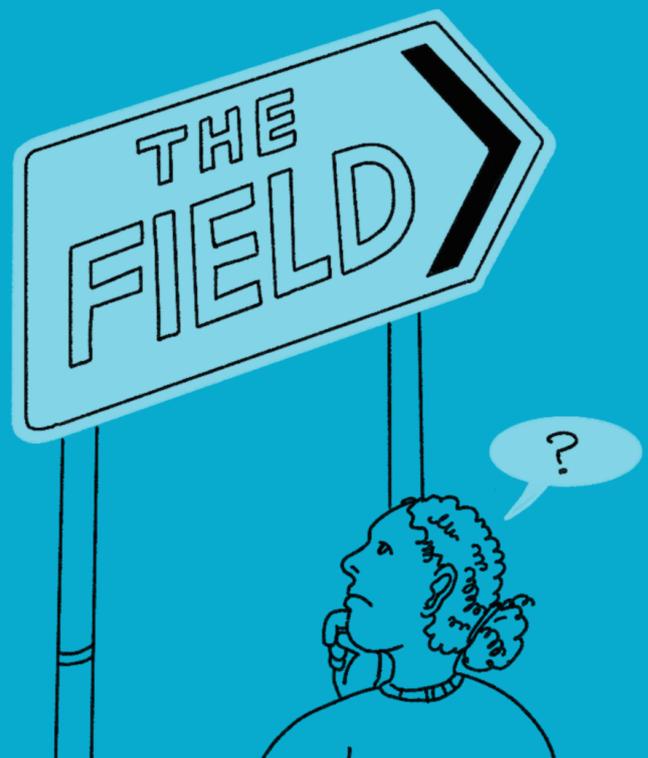


'The Field'

Using the term "the field" was generally seen as unhelpful and possibly "dehumanising" (Feedback Session, research partner).

There were mixed perspectives on who should travel, with a few feeling it was less helpful for early career "clever young things" with "no experience" to travel (Interview 13, woman, mid-career), while others felt it was an important part of onboarding and learning for an early career researcher to travel.

Reactions during feedback sessions suggested that travelling to "the field" is now viewed as something complex and difficult, and this has made people afraid of how they interact with others: "In bringing power to the fore we need to be careful not to scare people so they feel that you can't be communicating with people from other cultures"(Feedback session, LSHTM staff/student).



Layers of Power Hierarchies

LSHTM-LSHTM

Seniority shaped some (but not all) LSHTM-LSHTM interactions, with examples of junior staff tending to engage in administrative or helping roles while being excluded from learning to navigate the politics of the research. Some junior staff questioned whether senior staff wanted power hierarchies to shift.

Race and nationality complicated experiences of travel, affecting access and ability to acquire a visa to some settings and maintain residency status in the UK.

Race, gender and immigration status meant that those on precarious contracts may feel the need to over-perform while travelling: “I need to almost prove myself... so that when my contract comes up for renewal my boss or the PI will fight for me so that I can get another...” (Interview 12, woman, mid-career).



LSHTM - research partner

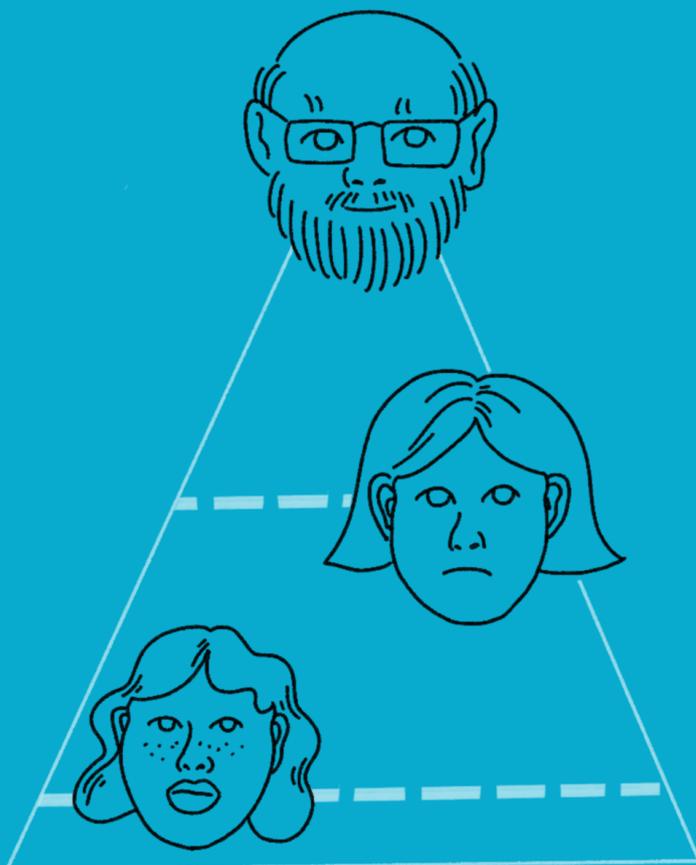
There was recognition that a hierarchy shapes interactions between LSHTM and research partners because of LSHTM holding the money and status.

Junior LSHTM staff found it easier to engage with junior partner staff; partner staff found it easier to engage with junior compared to senior LSHTM staff.

Junior LSHTM staff acted as go-betweens to explain the poor behaviour of senior LSHTM staff, but junior staff also sometimes couldn't raise their questions directly with research partners and had to go through the senior LSHTM staff member.

Senior LSHTM staff felt less pressure to prove their competence to research partners compared to junior staff, but also observed their seniority means “you can often get your way” with partners (Interview 18, man, senior).

The intersection between gender and age/seniority might mean it is disrespectful for a young woman to visit a research partner alone when someone more senior (and male) is expected. Gendered expectations for behaviour in particular settings meant needing to “swallow your pride” and not interrupt (Interview 2, woman, senior).



LSHTM - research partner

Assumptions of LSHTM staff expertise were noted by research partners: “We think that they are correct anytime... We are not happy to provide our actual ideas and views... then, second thing, our language it’s a very difficult to say our ideas” (Interview 19, man, partner), however, there was also recognition that LSHTM’s expertise shouldn’t be hidden: “You cannot hide that it’s a top school” (Feedback session, research partner).

There was recognition from LSHTM staff that they experience advantages because of being perceived as experts.

LSHTM staff sometimes held back from giving feedback or sharing views with research partners because they didn’t want to be seen as supervising/ assessing the partner or be called “colonial” for raising something: “[There is a] subconscious feeling of not being able to just say and contribute what you think” (Interview 15, woman, ECR).

There was recognition that reflecting on power is essential, but may be difficult and uncomfortable, especially with new research partners.

Some efforts to “shift power” are not straightforward, i.e. because research partners may not be used to being asked for their views or may not want to be co-authors.



Research partners indicated visits occur on LSHTM terms, without partners having much say in the timing and scope of visits: “[T]hey don’t ask you when to come... they don’t think about if there’s any holiday, any cultural event” (Interview 11, man, partner).

Examples of poor behaviours by LSHTM staff included: badmouthing other LSHTM staff, raising voices, and allocating the research partner’s work while they were on maternity leave without communicating.

Partners and LSHTM staff/students discussed the importance of informal social activities and out-of-hours events in building relationships between LSHTM and research partners.

There was recognition from LSHTM staff/students that there was poor logistics support (for accommodation, visas etc) within LSHTM to enable hosting research partners in London.



Research participants (including government stakeholders)

There were mixed perceptions about the value of LSHTM staff being directly involved in data collection, with some feeling it could be disruptive and others feeling it was vital to ensure LSHTM staff had ownership and research partners weren't seen as just data collectors.

It is sometimes hard for LSHTM researchers to know how to respond to requests from research participants, e.g. requests for visa sponsorship, money, CV review.

Government stakeholders in some settings were difficult to access and required LSHTM staff to downplay race and "lean in" or emphasise stereotypical gender norms that as women they needed help, to get stakeholder buy-in (Interview 6, woman, ECR).

Within partner institutions

Gender and seniority intersections meant that often senior partner staff were male and junior staff were female.

LSHTM staff recounted examples of poor treatment of research participants by partners resulting in tension about whether to intervene or not.

LSHTM staff acknowledged that partner staff were often an elite group in their setting, with higher access to education and social status.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations came from the rapid literature review, interviews, feedback sessions, as well as from co-authors/reviewers.

Conduct more focused pre-travel training and strengthen LSHTM support structures and guidance for researchers:

Assess existing and needed capacity for LSHTM researchers during the LSHTM ethics approval process.

Conduct mandatory training on: equitable partnerships; respectful engagement and decision-making; how to defuse situations, negotiate partnerships, conduct stakeholder mapping and navigate political complexity; what to do if you observe harmful behaviours; and vicarious trauma. Such training should focus on guidance on how to react to scenarios and might be better as live training rather than being online.

Create networks of LSHTM staff who have already travelled to particular settings or worked with specific partners, so that they can discuss previous experiences and share advice.

Review literature/documents about the context that was produced in the context/provided by partners before travelling.

Reflect on who travels, why they are travelling and when travel occurs more critically:

LSHTM could consider at the recruitment stage if someone already has experience in that context/culture, or what kind of learning/support is needed if they don't have experience.



Consider asking for a pre-travel formal security and context briefing from partner staff.



Consider sending a senior experienced staff member with a junior team member to enable skill-exchange, mentorship and learning from experiences of senior staff.

Identify the trip scope: is it to build relationships, to help/support a partner, to understand a situation/project, to plan for data collection, or something else?

Ask partners to indicate when suits best for a visit, keeping in mind public holidays, community celebrations, school holidays, etc and how these affect those receiving LSHTM visitors as well as those travelling.

Ensure clear discussions occur on how time will be used during the visit, ensuring this is a joint discussion rather than LSHTM solely setting the agenda.

Use words like "in-country travel", "new project", "new city/town" instead of "the field".

Invest in understanding the context:

Invest in design trips before proposal submission and planning trips before data collection.

Create an advisory group to oversee research which has multiple stakeholders from the country where research will occur, ensuring, where possible, that there is compensation or some form of reciprocity for their time.

Do a stakeholder mapping before data collection (including with partners) to know where/whom to get buy-in from, guided by tools such as:

‘Tools for Analysing Power in Multi-stakeholder Processes – A Menu’ (note: there are multiple tools in this resource)

‘Stakeholder Influence Mapping’

‘Mapping Power and Money’

‘A Guide to Power Analysis in Community Organising

Develop lists of questions about the context/issue to give to the research partner(s), as a way of centering their expertise and learning from them.



Positionality is the social location of an individual that is shaped by power hierarchies and identities they hold.

Consider power more intentionally and directly when engaging with partners:

Consider how grants and contracting processes within LSHTM can be less hierarchical, including allowing advance payments to partners, and being flexible about documentation and insurance.

Ask others who have travelled there previously or worked with this partner about power dynamics in the country and in that organisation. Ask questions about who has what type of power and try to understand what hierarchies are like and how decisions are made. However, also exercise care in this process to ensure this form of learning doesn't deepen assumptions or biases.

Discuss power hierarchies with partners at the beginning as well as at key “moments” during the research (Baser & Toivanen, 2018). This includes paying attention to “Whiteness” and how it affects research processes (Britton, 2019), and not just seeing gender, race and sexuality as aspects to be set aside during research but to consider how these identities shape the research process (Hanson & Richards, 2017). It also includes discussing motivations for research beyond “intellectual curiosity” (Baser & Toivanen, 2018). This can be an uncomfortable process, requiring openness and trust between partners, and require additional senior support and funding to carry out the process.

Consider these possible actions to help with the process of discussing power:

Use group exercises like ‘The space between us’ in the Raising Voices ‘Get Moving’ Facilitator Guide or the ‘Power Flower Tool’ to discuss privilege and power.

Engage an external facilitator to guide the group through discussions about power.

Identify your positionality with tools like the ‘Wheel of Privilege and Power’.

Use tools like the ‘Authorial Reflexivity Matrix’ which, although intended to assess the value of local versus foreign inputs into authorship, can also be used broadly to consider value during the research partnership.

Reflect on questions to identify your positionality like:

What are your beliefs about this topic?

Do you have a history or personal connection to this topic?

What are your understandings of systems of oppression and their influence on your research?

What systems of oppression or identities are you located within (e.g. gender, race, age, religion, education)?

How might these affect your decision-making about the research or how you are viewed by the research team or by research participants?

What is your connection to your participants?

Do you share any commonalities, identities, or experiences with your participants? What are your hopes for this study?

Why do you want to conduct this study – how do you benefit?

(Adapted from [Lacy, 2017](#))



Consider power more intentionally and directly when engaging with partners:

Consider putting in place broader strategies at the start of a project to lay the foundation for more equitable engagement during visits. This means drawing on guidance for partnership such as LSHTM's 'Equipar Tool' and 'Co-Production Practice Guide', and broadly implementing the following strategies:

- Choose partners carefully, ensuring LSHTM doesn't just partner with solely the most known actors, but identifies partners who are invested in and care about the topics being researched.
- Ask partners what their last partnership experience was like, what went well and what didn't, and how they want this one to be different.
- Consider having a Principal Investigator (or joint PI) who is based in the country, or identify how to intentionally move towards a joint PI future partnership by intentionally sharing roles and capacity in this current project.
- Be upfront about the budget and how much LSHTM and partners are getting.
- Enable power-sharing and equitable decision-making within the governance structure of the research partnership, e.g. through rotating consortium leadership among partners.
- Share values of each organisation and use these to identify actionable, unified values (e.g. "We will be flexible") and agreed ways of working within the partnership (e.g. "Use WhatsApp instead of email", "Meet on a weekly basis to discuss project progress").
- Ask each actor in the partnership to identify what each actor wants to get out of the partnership (e.g. for LSHTM it might be publications, or for partners it might be using evidence to fundraise for new interventions).
- Intentionally seek to identify each actor's capacity and opportunities for bi-directional capacity-sharing.
- Ensure collaboration agreements clearly document agreed timelines, shared data ownership and authorship expectations.
- Agree on joint expectations for behaviour or a Code of Conduct for everyone involved in the partnership and steps for LSHTM and partners to take if these are not followed, using guidance like '10 Steps for Establishing Team Norms' or the 'Rethinking Comms Toolkit'.

Importantly, simply asking one organisation to adopt another's bullying/harassment policies are unlikely to be enough and could be viewed as top-down, so it is important these shared expectations are discussed together, keeping in mind the following:

- LSHTM should carefully consider when and how to intervene (if at all), keeping in mind the tensions between White Saviourism and implicitly condoning bullying or other harmful behaviours.
- Partners should have a clear, trusted mechanism for discussing challenges they have faced with LSHTM actors transparently, including bullying or other harmful behaviours. Work needs to be done about how to ensure anonymous mechanisms for feedback as well as opportunities for confidential, off-the-record advice.
- Principal Investigators should emphasise the importance of raising issues swiftly.
- Discuss authorship plans, including discussing what authorship involves (e.g. with guidelines like the CRediT guidelines) and what capacity is needed to help people take on authorship roles.
- Budget for time to build relationships with partners, including through informal social activities and hosting partners in London for conferences, events for joint analysis workshops.
- Switch from rigidly setting next steps to "pitching" actions as suggestions or drafts.
- Ask partners questions like:
 - How do you think we should go about this?
 - Who do you think should lead this?
 - Who should we collaborate with?
 - What will collaboration involve?
- Introduce debating issues as a team as a regular practice and be willing to change views through that process.
- Decide pragmatically that maintaining a good relationship is more important than perfection and make decisions to let go of non-essentials.
- Invest in improving mechanisms within LSHTM to support partner staff who visit London, e.g. streamlined process for organising visa, transport, SIM card, accommodation, access to funds.



Intentionally consider how to address power hierarchies that might be present with research participants, including stakeholders like government agencies:

Reflect on whether LSHTM's presence during data collection is appropriate, weighing up the importance of LSHTM buy-in and understanding of context, versus being disruptive to data collection.

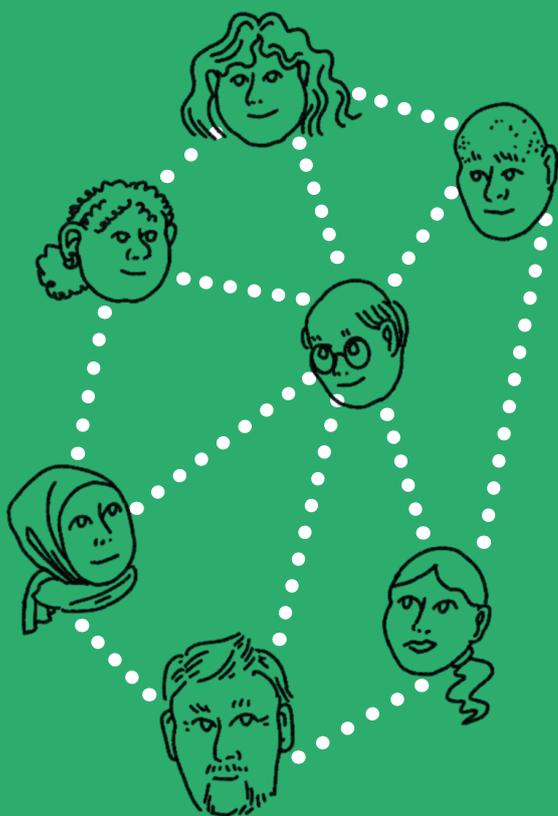
Ask partners for guidance on how to manage requests for assistance from research participants, and engage with participants only after having access to options for referrals to other services/organisations.

Recognise and build in time needed to get approvals from stakeholders and key gatekeepers.

Know some basics of the language if planning to meet community members.

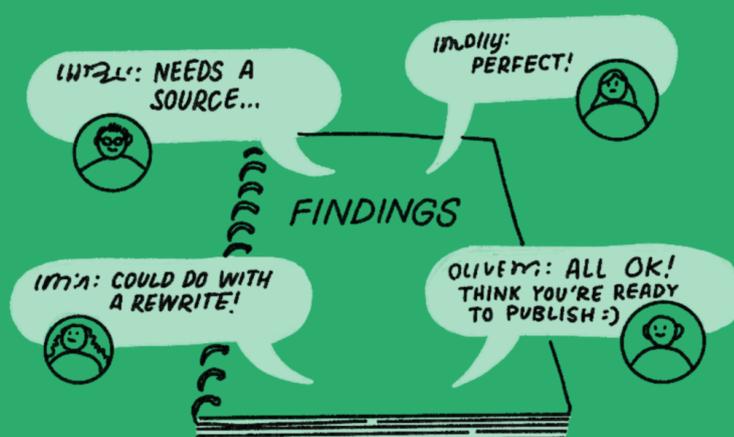
Consider opportunities to shift power to participants, e.g. providing them with multiple options for locations of data collection, letting them know that audio recording is optional, and ensuring that all data collection (including surveys) allow a "skip question" option.

Discuss with research partners if financial compensation for participants' time is appropriate, or use other in-kind compensation such as providing refreshments/snacks, small gifts, phone data, childcare while they attend an interview/focus group etc.



Build in strong group debrief processes for the research team during data collection, which includes discussion of evolving positionalities. Debrief processes should include translators/interpreters.

Provide feedback to research participants about the main findings and invite them to share further ideas including their own recommendations that can be fed back into the analysis. This is an important part of closing the loop with research participants and should be a meaningful opportunity for their further input. Final decisions about next steps or new projects should also be communicated to participants after the research is completed.



Increase support for Research Degree students to support data collection:

Create a network of previous and current PhD/DrPH students who can provide informal peer mentoring.

Create a buddy system between researchers within their department or advisory committee, or, previous and current PhD/DrPH students so that students collecting data have another touchpoint beyond their supervisor.

Supervisors could ask research partners for informal feedback on how the PhD/DrPH student is managing, how research partners understand their role and the benefits of the research for them, involve research partners as co-supervisors, and also ask students for feedback on whether more support and engagement is needed from partners.

Supervisors should let students lead engagement with partners if they happen to be there with students.

Consider investing in more transferable skills training for PhD/DrPH researchers on topics like: how to approach having intellectual leadership, how to organise the partnership, and what questions should they ask partners when they first arrive.

Develop structured guidance for supervisors and departments to use when supporting PhD/DrPH students while they are collecting data. E.g. questions like:

“How are you looking after your mental health and wellbeing?”

How will you respond to personal questions e.g. about religion, family, relationships?

What if these are illegal or outside of the cultural norm in the host country?

How do your position and personal identity affect your interactions?

Are you allowing sufficient time to build rapport and trust?”

[from Caretta, 2023]

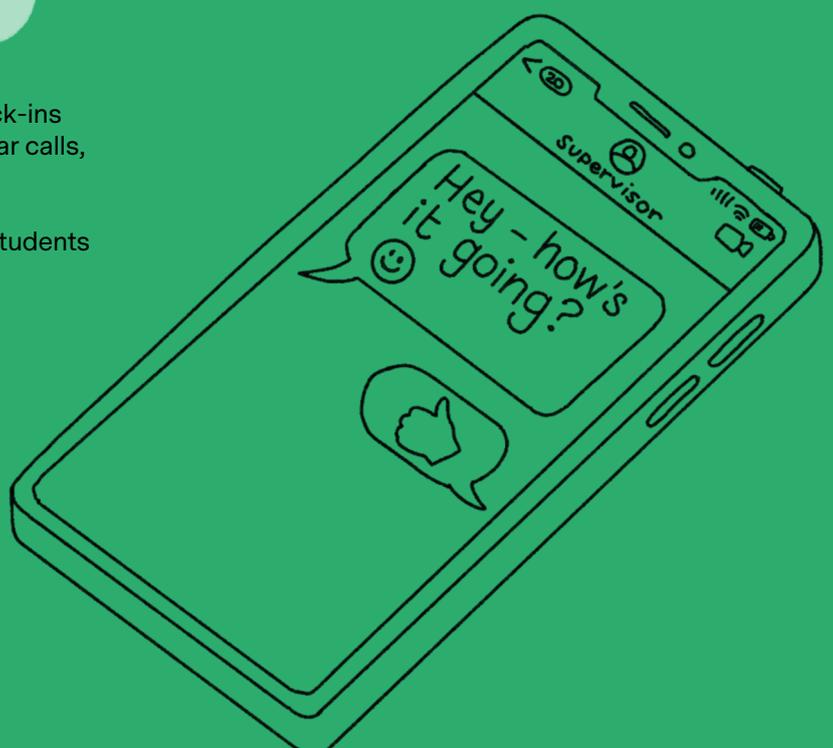
Supervisors could help students reflect on questions during upgrating and during fieldwork like:

How do you position yourself?

What is your positionality and how does it change depending on who you speak to?

Strengthen supervisor-student WhatsApp check-ins to more informally touch base, along with regular calls, where there is internet access.

Improve administrative support for PhD/DrPH students during travel.



SPECIFIC ACTIONS FOR LSHTM

(based on recommendations above that require institutional action):

1. Assess existing and needed capacity for researchers during the LSHTM ethics approval process.
2. Conduct mandatory training on: how to defuse situations, negotiating partnerships, what to do if you observe harmful behaviours, vicarious trauma and navigating political complexity.
3. Create networks of LSHTM staff who have already travelled to particular settings or worked with specific partners, so that they can discuss previous experiences and share advice.
4. Consider how grants and contracting processes within LSHTM can be less hierarchical, including allowing advance payments to partners, and being flexible about documentation and insurance.
5. Partners should have a clear, trusted mechanism for discussing challenges they have faced with LSHTM actors transparently, including bullying or other harmful behaviours.
6. Create a network of previous and current PhD/DrPH students who can provide informal peer mentoring.
7. Create a buddy system between researchers within their department or advisory committee, or, previous and current PhD/DrPH students so that students collecting data have another touchpoint beyond their supervisor.
8. Consider investing in more transferable skills training for PhD/DrPH researchers on key topics.
9. Develop structured guidance for supervisors and departments to use when supporting PhD/DrPH students while they are collecting data.
10. Improve administrative support for PhD/DrPH students during travel.

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