**Accepted Verision- Forthcoming in *PS: Politics and Political Science***

# Theorizing Risk and Research: Methodological Constraints and Their Consequences

**Geoffrey Swenson,** *City, University of London*[1]

**Kate Roll**, *University College London*[2]

## INTRODUCTION

Risk – the probability of an unwanted event occurring – is intrinsic to field research. Yet how researchers manage risk and how it affects knowledge production has not been adequately examined. In particular, we find that the strategy by which work and risk are 'outsourced' to research assistants or enumerators merits further attention. The growth of large-N experimental and survey-based research in complex settings makes questions of risk imposition and responsibility timely. More broadly, academia in general, and Institutional Review Boards in particular, have become ever more concerned with risk and the possibility of litigation (Librett and Perrone 2010).[3] Risk society (Beck 1992) and risk management in across all types of research appear here to stay. In this environment, what is the connection between risk mitigation, ethics, and knowledge production?

Conflict and post-conflict sites are particularly instructive for understanding how risk influences fieldwork and how researchers manage risk. It is well documented that research in conflict-prone settings introduces the potential for physical and psychological harm to both researchers and subjects (Sriram, et al. 2009; Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016). These sites also present substantial challenges to data access and quality (Roll and Swenson 2019) and raise significant ethical considerations (Cronin-Furman and Lake 2018). However, researchers working in areas marked by violence and insecurity or examining criminal enterprises such as gangs or the drug trade may experience similar dynamics. While this paper primarily reflects our experience working in post-conflict settings, the techniques discussed and the tradeoffs are broadly relevant.

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[1] Geoffrey Swenson is an assistant professor of International Politics at City, University of London. He can be reached at geoffrey.swenson@city.ac.uk.

[2] Kate Roll is an assistant professor in Innovation, Development and Purpose at the Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, University College London. She can be reached at k.roll@ucl.ac.uk.

[3] IRBs seek to "protect the rights and welfare of subjects" (Amdur and Bankert 2010: 5). This role is undeniably important, though the manner in which it is exercised often provokes controversy (Haggerty 2004). These processes are guided by the principles of respect for persons, benefice, and justice towards research participants (Fujii 2012, 718). The process is fundamentally centered around the role of research participants through a focus on risk assessment, informed consent, confidentiality, and privacy (Id.).

Despite their challenges, areas of risk remain vitally important research sites. For scholars of conflict and post-conflict transitions, for example, grounded research is essential for understanding how conflicts unfold and the dynamics that drive change. Micro-level studies of conflict provide an important counterpoint to "regional, national and international perspectives" that "make inadequate concession to the role of individual and group interactions" (Verwimp et al. 2009, 308). More so than macro-level studies, field research offers the granularity to both understand the specific dimensions of a given conflict as well as potentially "assist in the process of recovery and reconstruction following war" (Barakat and Ellis 1996, 149). The value of field-based research cannot be easily replaced by "remote methodologies" (Duffield 2014, S75) such as aerial photographs or data mining, despite their utility.

Here we argue that the researcher's concern for risk and risk management approach restricts and shapes the methodological tools, locations, and types of information on which she or he focuses. These choices about what to research and where to research ultimately influence what appears in authoritative reports or articles. As Carpenter observes, there is a direct connection between methodologies and findings:

> [T]he selection and implementation of a methodology … delimits the nature of the research enterprise, the types of questions that can be asked, and the findings that will emerge, and to a large extent dictates the type of written output that will result (2012, 367).

Thus, research, in producing knowledge, has the potential to shape conduct at both an individual and organization level (Campbell 2008).

The idea of risky environments shaping research gains greater complexity through recognition of the philosphy, social history[4] and social psychology of risk. Social scientists increasingly view risk not as an objective probability, but as a heuristic tool and product of social and institutional processes (Wilkinson 2001, n1). Cultural, historical and socio-economic factors all help to frame or define risk. As risk perception involves imagining the future, it becomes a mirror for how one thinks society works (Douglas 1986). Flynn *et al.* (1994), for example, argue that the poor have heightened levels of risk perception because they "have little control over their lives, and hold little power in the world" (in Fothergill and Peek 2004, 91). Efforts to 'objectively' measure and manage risk are themselves political and localized processes. Risk perception invariably differs from actuarial probabilities of harm.

To address the comparative lack of examination and theorization of risk in research, this article introduces a framework of how researchers respond to risk and the consequences of those decisions. We identify three risk mitigation strategies: avoiding, internalizing, and outsourcing risk. Each approach shapes what information is gathered and represented and what authoritative knowledge is propagated in the academic literature. In the next section, we explore two strategies: avoidance and internalization. These have been discussed in the existing literature; however, the observation that these approaches require tradeoffs has not been fully explored. Next, we turn

[4] The idea of 'risk' as distinct from a danger or hazard is a modern innovation. 'Risk' first emerged in maritime insurance, which enclosed and financialised the vagaries of weather, mutinies and piracy (see Levy, chapter 3, 2012). Therefore, risk management is inherent in the idea of risk.

our attention to outsourcing risk. Outsourcing some or all of the risk related to research to others has received little scholarly attention; this article raises particular concerns with the ethics of risk imposition, whereby the principal's action expose an agent to greater risk. We illustrate each of these strategies through reference to our own research in Afghanistan (Swenson 2017; Swenson 2018a) and Timor-Leste (Roll 2014; Roll 2018; Swenson 2018b), as well as other studies.

## AVOIDING AND INTERNALIZING RISK

Researchers conducting research in settings with elevated risk generally manage it through three main strategies: avoiding risk, internalizing risk, and outsourcing risk. Most researchers will use a variety of adaptive strategies, depending on the resources available, for example, or the perceived severity of the risks involved. Regardless, a risky environment necessarily shifts how researchers choose and engage their topic, for example what methodologies to employ, and demands certain trade-offs.

### Avoiding Risk

The first strategy is avoiding higher risk areas or subjects by adjusting the research design to "select[] themselves out" (Sluka 1990, 124). IRBs, insurance requirements, and relevant legislation, contribute to the predominance of avoidance strategies. Researchers manage risks, costs, and potential stress by designing credible research programs that can be carried out without seeking subjects in higher risk areas. This circumscription of the population under study requires the researcher to use different methods and ask different questions about the world that remains within the (sampling) frame. Where data quality is the primary issue, research is shaped to minimize this constraint. This avoidance, however, can amplify the accessible voices and neglect questions that increase risk and complexity. For example, urban or metropolitan areas are often considered safer (Chambers 1979, Baird 2018). Avoidance approaches can perpetuate an "urban bias" that leads to a "general tendency to interpret phenomena a-contextually and in an exclusively top-down manner" (Kalyvas 2004, 166).

The political and security environment constrained the voices represented in Swenson's research on reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan. In an example of shaping research questions to mitigate, though by no mean eliminate, risk in Afghanistan, Swenson, facing physical risks, visa limits, heightened scrutiny from funders and university officials, and high financial costs, chose to tackle a question that required in-country travel but could be addressed through elite interviews in Kabul. For safety reasons, the research approach largely excluded individuals opposed to international state-building or the current regime, particularly those willing to engage in violence. The difficulty of accessing some respondents, even within the capital, amplifies the voices that are accessible raising questions about researchers' participation in an "echo-chamber" (Kuus 2013, 118) whereby certain views are replicated across different research projects. This fieldwork dynamic raises concerns over researchers' roles in potentially reproducing exclusionary dynamics.

Attempts to avoid urban bias can bring their own challenges. Independent researchers may seek to maintain access while mitigating risk by linking up with NGOs, development agencies, military organizations, or the UN. These external organizations often possess the vehicles, contacts,

security protocols, and local knowledge to facilitate research in more remote or dangerous areas. As Duffield notes, university review boards may push this because "gaining consent often involves demonstrating researcher inclusion within the inhibiting security and logistical systems of a collaborating aid agency" (2014, S86). Yet collaboration may involve significant trade-offs, as logistical support or funding often implies reciprocal obligations and subsequent criticism can be seen as betrayal (Mosse 2006). When a researcher crosses the line between the academic and NGO sectors, the politics of research become even more fraught (Carpenter 2012).

**Internalizing Risk**

The second strategy is internalization – the practice of accepting higher levels of risk and assuming the personal costs of doing so. This internalization may be dismissed as a normal part of "putting up" with poor conditions; however, we instead view it as strategy whereby researchers make decisions that de-prioritize their wellbeing in favor of pursuing research that they value. The personal costs and stresses of fieldwork have been discussed in the literature on the realities of research (Nordstrom and Robben 1995) as well as techniques to manage these issues (Sluka 1990). We go further and identify internalization – personal coping – as a common and integral risk management approach in fieldwork. This is particularly true for PhD students and early career researchers who have both strong professional incentives to produce novel research and less access to the resources necessary to pursue outsourcing strategies.

The decision to spend time in hostile settings means accepting a degree of risk and assuming the personal cost, and even the 'secondary trauma,' of doing research (Wood 2006, 384). At the one end of the spectrum, harm can take the form of anxiety and post-traumatic stress.[5] Even in less extreme cases, researchers can experience feelings of isolation, including upon their return, finding it difficult to share their experiences with colleagues and loved ones. These feelings of strain can be further complicated with guilt. Green describes the fear she endured while living in rural Guatemala despite the fact that she could leave if the situation required, which she notes with some discomfort is unlike the population she is studying (1999, 19-22). How researchers respond to the risks they internalize subsequently influences the research product. As Shesterinina explains, both empathy and fear of research participants "affect the dynamics of interaction, accounts of research participants, and ability of researchers to probe and interpret the accounts" (2019, 191).

The potential for both physical – particularly in terms of health – and emotional harm to researchers in the process of fieldwork has been recorded and increasingly discussed in the context of funders' and academic institutions' responsibilities to researchers (Bloor et al. 2010). This has also been an active concern within humanitarian aid organizations, which increasingly have systems in place for 'reintegrating' workers. It is thus notable that there remains little work on the effects of stress on research activities, design, and outputs. Research on conventional workplaces suggests that working under stress requires either increased resource use or the reduction in performance (Hockey 1997). What this dynamic looks like in a high-risk research

[5] For a comprehensive description of the psychological effects of working in humanitarian disasters and associated personal coping strategies, see McCormack and Joseph (2013).

setting merits further investigation. Beyond requiring researchers to avoid certain areas or activities, we see a need for more acknowledgement of the consequences and implications of risk internalization, both for researchers and their work, as well as openness to mitigating strategies such as team-based work.

## OUTSOURCING RISK

Finally, a third strategy used by researchers is to gather new data while also mitigating personal risk is outsourcing. This entails paying research organizations or research assistants to collect data in areas where the principal researcher is unwilling or unable to personally oversee (see e.g. Beath et al. 2013; Blair et al. 2013). Contract researchers may be hired for numerous reasons including cultural competencies, gender, language or simple efficiency; these are common research practices across contexts. However, we are specifically interested in the practice of engaging research assistants to work independently in areas perceived to be too high risk for the principal researcher to access or the use of hired assistance to facilitate safer access to a risky area for the lead researcher, apart from any other benefits hiring a research assistant may offer.

We deliberately chose the term 'outsourcing' to recall business practices and concerns around the globalization of value chains. Outsourcing research raises familiar ethical questions about boundaries of responsibility, unsafe working conditions, and what voluntary and good work means in the context of poverty. Internet connectivity means academic researchers now, too, have the ability to globalize data collection – to direct multiple projects in risky contexts from anywhere, even the comfort of campus. And as in business processing outsourcing, we observe the relationship is fundamentally one of an employer and employee. As Middleton and Cons usefully reminds us, "While these fieldworkers may become key informants, cultural brokers, co-authors, and even friends, they remain employees… Ethnographic labor here cannot be divorced from the logics of capital" (2014, 284).

### Risk Imposition & The Ethics of Outsourcing

A core, starting observation regarding outsourcing risk is that it does not remove the risks of conducting research in dangerous settings. While the risk is 'managed' by the researcher, it may be shifted to the research assistants. Boyden, writing on her fieldwork in Burma with local research assistants, reflects candidly on the discomfort of being simultaneously "dependent on others for security assessments" and "responsibl[e] as lead investigator for the safety of both researchers and the researched" (2004, 240). Here she expresses the conflicted position of being both powerful and vulnerable. However, that it was her research that created that dynamic in the first place is not fully explored.

The core concern in the use of outsourcing is the *imposition* of risk by the principal researcher on the research assistant. This has been the subject of careful analysis in the ethics literature, particularly by Teuber (1990) and Hayenhjelm and Wolff (2011). As Teuber notes we care if harm is due to natural causes or the actions of a person, and, if so, if those actions are deliberate: "From a moral point of view, the key question to ask is not 'What should we do about risk?' but 'Which risks do we want to have on our conscience?'" (1990, 236). Philosophers examining the ethics of imposing risk on others have focused on the importance of informed consent and

compensation. Power asymmetries, however, can weaken these lines of reasoning (Smith 1999), because contract researchers may feel compelled to take on assignments or find the risks acceptable due to economic precariousness, for example.

A further ethical issue that arises concerns who benefits from the research. Hayenhjelm and Wolff (2011: 26) argue that risk management has evolved around a consequentialist framework that balances costs against benefits. The challenge of this approach is "that the greatest risks would fall on those least able to influence the decision procedure or protect themselves in other ways. Hence there is a worry that risk cost-benefit analysis will pile up risks for the vulnerable while the benefits accrue elsewhere" – namely to the researcher and his or her university (Hayenhjelm and Wolff, 2011: 33). This analysis, which resonates with work on participatory methodologies and who benefits from research, suggests the importance of awareness of the researcher's own positionality and the extent to which research assistants have a voice in the study's execution.

These ethical questions are not immaterial, as underscored by the wounding of an enumerator in Afghanistan due to an improvised explosive device (Lyall et al. 2013, 8). While these researchers took precautions and sought permissions from state authorities, local elders, and the Taliban, "[i]n some cases, having permission from the elders" and other authorities "did not protect the research team from threats by younger community members" (Osorio 2014, 3-4). Local researchers may experience some security advantages. At the same time, however, their participation in international research programs exposes them to increased risk, particularly of "transgressing political, social, or economic fault lines of which the researcher might not be aware" (Haer and Becher 2012, 10). Here, again, we see the limitations of informed consent in risk imposition. While the impact of research practices on subjects is a clear concern of research ethics review boards and field work training, attention to the impact of research practices on hired assistants appears to be limited.

**Knowledge Production & Bias**

Outsourcing risk affects the way that research is produced. For researchers seeking to do large-scale survey research, particularly in higher risk areas, outsourcing strategies are essential. Outsourcing reduces risk to the principal researcher while allowing the use of conventional tools; these studies can generate large datasets and engage populations outside of urban centers. These large-N studies tend to be expensive, particularly in higher risk areas, and are thus concentrated within institutions able to underwrite such studies or secure funding from entities like the National Science Foundation, the United States Department of Defense, or Homeland Security. Given the immense cost of undertaking this type of research, US government funding also tends to be concentrated in places seen as high strategic priorities such as Afghanistan or Pakistan. This raises questions about the role of these actors in both shaping research agendas in areas of strategic importance, as well as concerns over the de-prioritization of important research on areas of less political interest.

Even projects enjoying ample funding and employing local emulators may be restricted by ground conditions, which produce sampling bias. Lyall et al, for instance, note that in their survey research "four [villages] proved inaccessible due to a combination of Taliban hostility, the presence of

criminal elements and, in two cases, the inability of the enumerators to locate the selected village" (2013, 7). In another example of such research, Fair, Malhotra, and Shapiro discuss how in their endorsement experiment on militancy in Pakistan they were forced to address significant "safety and empirical issues … at the cost of precision about the variable being measured" (2014, 745). They stress "[g]iven the prevailing conditions in Pakistan" the use of an endorsement experiment methodology was a necessary "trade-off that must be made in order to study specific militant organizations, particularly in rural and economically underdeveloped areas" (Ibid).

A final consideration with outsourcing strategies on knowledge production reflects familiar principal-agent problems. Due to lead researchers' reduced ability to monitor survey results, solutions like hiring local researchers may also cause or compound issues with data collection and quality. In an example from our own work, Roll hired two research assistants to collect additional survey data on former combatants living in western Timor-Leste for a survey of ex-combatants' experiences with reintegration programs and post-conflict trajectories. One researcher, however, falsified survey results, an effect that became clear through comparison with other sites. To discourage data falsification and also identify falsified results requires researchers to invest in time-consuming monitoring and data-checking procedures. Survey outsourcing in difficult settings thus inherently involves high agency costs or increased risk of bad data. Such research is expensive and time-consuming even when the process goes well; when precautions do not work, it runs the risk of passing on invalid data as correct.

## CONCLUSION

Fieldwork is important, including in difficult or dangerous to access areas. Without micro-level research, scholars are severely limited in their ability to address sub-national or internal dynamics. In the absence of academic fieldwork on conflict and post-conflict contexts, simplistic or erroneous narratives may dominate. These concerns are not merely abstract. Autesserre has demonstrated how the dominance of simplistic narratives regarding the cause of violence in the Congo, and policymakers' reliance on them, increased human rights abuses (2012). Furthermore, insufficient or low-quality research may impinge the quality of the large data sets that facilitate large-N research. All research models, no matter how well designed, depend on the quality of the data used.

This article has identified three dominant strategies used by researchers to address risk – avoidance, internalization, and outsourcing – and their consequences. In doing so it has sought to demonstrate how, on aggregate, these coping strategies shape the literature and produce missed voices and raise ethical questions. This article is not a call to fill these gaps, although that may be of use. Instead, it puts the very human concern and construction of risk back into our analysis of research practice, design, and knowledge production. Researchers determine the study's parameters, delimiting, from the start, who and what will be represented and whether the inquiry will even involve a fieldwork component. In making these decisions, field researchers necessarily balance their willingness (and ability) to take risks or expose others to them, ethical considerations, available resources, and the demands of conducting robust research.

The article devotes particular attention to the risk mitigation strategy of outsourcing. We find significant and under-examined ethical concerns around risk imposition and power along with more conventional challenges related to research quality. This work raises questions around the responsibility of universities for the health and safety of not only their researchers, but also the research assistants in the field. What would helping to manage their risk through insurance, for example, look like? And how could that be balanced against the bureaucratization of field research and rise of risk culture, which we identify as a driver of avoidance strategies? The broader challenge is to make extant strategies for dealing with risk stronger and smarter, rather than invite box ticking or gaming approvals by applicants.

By highlighting the role of avoidance, internalization, and outsourcing as strategies for dealing with risk, this article provides a pathway for researchers to more systematically examine their approaches and the associated trade-offs and concerns. Institutions should also consider more robust ways to proactively support researchers as well as protect participants and contract researchers. A more holistic approach that seeks to address the stresses of the work, helps researchers to ethically benefit from research support, as well as understand the risks of working in certain areas, would help researchers better engage with the realities of risk on the ground.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors would like to thank Meghan Campbell, Richard Caplan, John Gledhill, and Moritz Schmoll for their feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. They also appreciate the constructive reviewer and editorial comments.

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