

Reconceptualising risk in research: The call to do no harm goes far beyond the field.

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A session at the Royal Geographical Society's annual conference will explore the physical, emotional and reputational risks involved in doing research, with the hope that this will in turn, provide a starting point for a more comprehensive framework for understanding how risk operates. [Amiera Sawas](#) will be co-chairing the session and writes here on her experiences with risks in the field and beyond. She finds that protocols are undoubtedly robust on a wide range of physical threats, but more subtle threats, like sexual harassment, which cross psychological and physical lines, are not always explicitly dealt with.



Too often researchers and institutions conceptualise risk as a harness-able block of issues which appear the moment you step into 'the field' for a specific project and evaporate when you exit. Universities require rigorous risk and ethics panels for individual projects where the staff or student must imagine, with the help of often generic textbooks, the range of risks which might present in the field and then detail a protocol for mitigating them. The central focus is the physical safety of all stakeholders, any psychological impacts on participants and the reputation of the backing institution. The panel okays the fieldwork and the researcher breathes a sigh of relief and reverts attention to getting good data.

The reality is that risk is a multi-faceted, constant and changing issue facing the researched, institutions, researchers, careers and academic inquiry itself. Risks operate on multiple levels, ranging from the physical, emotional, and reputational and are present before, during and after research is conducted. Risk is a constant threat in the lifecycle of academic careers.

[Dr. Hilary Geoghegan](#) and I met at a conference where our conversations kept circling back to the risks we faced throughout our careers. We noticed that these conversations are common amongst our peers and while isolated publications like [Stewart et al \(2009\)](#) [pdf] have explored wider conceptions, a managing framework doesn't yet exist. We decided to hold a panel at the Royal Geographical Society annual conference this year ([RSG-ISG](#)) in an attempt to develop one.

The nature of my work is risky by traditional conceptions. My PhD research looked at development programmes in water, sanitation and hygiene, in some of the most vulnerable rural and urban areas of Pakistan. I knew, and was cautioned, that security was a core issue when spending long periods of time conducting qualitative research there. I worked in areas that even Pakistanis would hesitate to venture for their risky reputations in terms of environmental hazards and threats against women, the middle class, foreigners – conscious that often reputations do not reflect reality. I was also concerned about the emotional well-being of participants in areas where exclusion is common practise, and raising one's voice may have consequences.



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Clearly these risks were mitigated because the challenges I faced were of a different nature. The first was around long-term engagement with stakeholders, beyond the timeframe of the project. Relationships enable fieldwork. You develop multiple relationships with a wide range of stakeholders, from NGOs to academia, community members, drivers, politicians, translators, friends – the list goes on. Without these people, fieldwork would be impossible. Researchers need to manage these relationships more consciously. Everyone you encounter has an image of you and expectations from your interactions.

My only familiarity with the Pakistani context was through friends and colleagues, who I realised over time, ultimately came from a small ethnic and class subset of a country with rich, diverse and complex cultures. One consistency, is the hospitality of the Pakistani people, which is second to none – they go out of their way to help you, no matter what their resources. Their desire to help, to offer time and to enable my work taught me a great deal about humanity. The expectations upon me were also diverse and on occasion heavy – some I handled well, others I handled poorly due to a lack of knowledge of that specific culture. Even when people insisted they expected nothing in return, I still felt overwhelmed with being unable to offer the same amount of time or resources. After developing some of the best working relationships of my career, and some of the worst – I faced subsequent psychological impacts long after I returned related to guilt, anxiety, and the dreaded ‘[imposter syndrome](#)’. “Can I do justice to the tireless support I was given?”, “What could I have done better in this working relationship?”, “I wish I could have spent more time with them”, “What happens if people who helped me don’t agree with my findings?”, were just a few of the thoughts distracting me as I tried to write the thesis.

Sexual harassment was very pronounced in one area and completely absent in others where my treatment was nothing but fantastic. Initially very subtle and institutional in nature rather than individual, it started with a few sly comments. I decided to ignore it and continue as if it would eventually cease due to my strong attitude. I hadn’t come across any preparatory literature on the issue, or discussed with my institution what to do if this risk reared its ugly head – it simply didn’t occur to me. Let’s exclude, for a moment, the emotional and physical well being of participants and wider stakeholders, because they are dealt with at length by university protocols for research ethics and security. When it comes to researchers specifically, protocols are undoubtedly robust on a wide range of physical threats, but more subtle threats, which cross psychological and physical lines, are not always explicitly dealt with. The harassment I faced intensified, turning into serious physical and psychological threats which drove me to pull out of my case study early – with, thankfully, enough data.

Now it would be a huge misrepresentation to think this happens only in Pakistan. By telling my story, I face the risk of doing disservice to the reputation of a country which is already unfairly misrepresented by media narratives, and to a country which I love. However, I feel the story is important because sexual harassment of researchers happens all over the world, including right here in the UK. So many of us are not prepared to deal with it and don't report it. [Clancy et al. \(2014\)](#) have found in a survey of 658 researchers from 30 nations, that 64% had experienced some form of sexual harassment during fieldwork. The majority were young female trainees. As Clancy critically states, these experiences may impact upon the production of academic knowledge. Researchers are not only potentially cognitively impaired by the trauma; it may impact on their choice to continue in a fieldwork based career. I certainly pondered other options. Harassment happens in all sectors, but a distinct isolation and lack of support structures pervades academia.

Now, as a Research Associate at KCL, I face a whole new array. I am managing a team of researchers conducting ethnographic fieldwork on the links between urbanisation, vulnerability and violence in Pakistan. Their risks have become mine too. In the setting of every task we must consider the wellbeing of team members who are working in cities prone to multiple manifestations of violence. Such places are, at times, difficult to venture into – take Islamabad right now as an example – the city has been paralysed by anti-government protests. Sometimes, dedicated team members minimise their perceived risks due to their extensive experience in similar neighbourhoods and focus on getting the job done. I have the task of putting their safety before the data in all instances. It's a necessary judgement call, but risks slowing down data collection and attaining targets set at the beginning of the project.

In projects like this, which are [grant-funded \(IDRC-DFID\)](#), and conducted by stakeholders from multiple institutions such as IBA and KCL – reputational risk is massive. All institutions have their own vision, mission and values which must be carefully considered and adhered to in the conduct of research and its dissemination. At the same time, the independence and integrity of the research is central. Maintaining this balance is a constant task for the principal investigator and team.

One ever-present risk for all PhD students is making home within the discipline. While there is no doubt that doctorates drive the development of ample skills, perhaps they should not be the only ones exercised for years. The tendency of students to only pursue writing for their PhD, only publish in their discipline's popular journals and only attend within-discipline events is risky. They close themselves off to different ways of looking at the world, different challenges, networks, not to mention the diversification of their skillset. We can learn a great deal from stakeholders and experiences outside academia too. The post-PhD job hunt can be tricky due to intense competition for posts. Furthermore, by the end of the PhD, there are a number of people who decide either academia, or their PhD discipline are not for them. More foresight, planning and wider experience cannot hurt.

Whatever steps we take in our careers, we need to consider the multiple, short and long-term risks. Hopefully, through our panel session on the 28th and subsequent teamwork, we will emerge with a risk framework for which researchers can use throughout their careers. This event is open to anyone attending the RGS-IBG annual conference on Thursday 28th August and is located in the Sunley Room at 16.50.

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