<title>**Theorizing Risk and Research:**

Methodological Constraints and Their Consequences

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<header>**ABSTRACT**

Conflict, postconflict settings, and other risky research sites are important with wide-ranging policy implications. Microlevel, field-based research lends critical insights to how conflicts work and the mechanisms behind macrolevel correlations that underpin quantitative political science. This article identifies how the risks associated with conflict and postconflict contexts influence researchers' choices by theorizing the existence of distinct adaptive strategies. Specifically, researchers facing elevated risk generally manage it through three main strategies:

outsourcing risk, avoiding risk, and internalizing risk. We argue that these strategies systematically shape and circumscribe outputs. We conclude by discussing how the relationship between risky fieldwork and what we know about conflict is poorly acknowledged. Thinking about how we manage risk should play a larger role in both our preparation for and interpretation of research, particularly in conflict and postconflict contexts.<end abstract text>

<5-line drop cap><start text>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 (IRBs) in particular, have become ever more concerned with risk and the possibility of litigation (Librett and Perrone 2010).[1] Risk society (Beck 1992) and risk management across all types of research appear to be here to stay. In this environment, what is the connection among risk mitigation, ethics, and knowledge production?

Conflict and postconflict 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 (Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay 2016; Sriram et al. 2009). 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. Although this article primarily reflects our experience working in postconflict settings, the techniques discussed and the tradeoffs are broadly relevant.

Despite their challenges, areas of risk remain vitally important research sites. For scholars of conflict and postconflict transitions, for example, grounded research is essential for understanding how conflicts unfold and the dynamics that drive change. Microlevel 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, Justino, and Bruck 2009, 308). More so than macrolevel studies, field research offers the granularity to both understand the specific dimensions of a given conflict and potentially "assist in the process of recovery and reconstruction following war" (Barakat and Ellis 1996, 149). The value of field-based research cannot be replaced easily by "remote methodologies" (Duffield 2014, S75) such as aerial photographs and data mining, despite their utility.

We argue that researchers' concern for risk and a risk-management approach restricts and shapes the methodological tools, locations, and types of information on which they focus. These choices about what and where to research ultimately influence what appears in authoritative reports or articles. As Carpenter (2012, 367) observed, there is a direct connection between methodologies and findings:

> <ext>[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.<end ext>

<text>Thus, in producing knowledge, research has the potential to shape conduct at both individual and organizational levels (Campbell 2008).

The idea of risky environments shaping research gains greater complexity through recognition of the philosphy, social history,[2] and social psychology of risk. Social scientists increasingly view risk not as an objective probability but rather as a heuristic tool and a product of social and institutional processes (Wilkinson 2001, n1). Cultural, historical, and socioeconomic factors frame and define risk. Because risk perception involves imagining the future, it becomes a mirror for how we think society works (Douglas 1986). Flynn, Slovic, and Mertz (1994), for example, argued that poor people 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 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 their decisions. <text and PULL QUOTE 1>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.<end PULL QUOTE 1><text> The next section explores 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. We nextdiscuss 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 actions expose an agent to greater risk. We illustrate each strategy through reference

to our own research in Afghanistan (Swenson 2017, 2018a) and Timor-Leste (Roll 2014, 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 use various 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, which methodologies to use—and demands certain tradeoffs.

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 a researcher to use different methods and ask different questions about the world that remains within the (sampling) frame. When 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 and metropolitan areas often are considered safer (Baird 2018; Chambers 1979). Avoidance approaches can perpetuate

an "urban bias" leading 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, although 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 that 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, which raises 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 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), development agencies, military organizations, or the United Nations. These external organizations often possess the vehicles, contacts, security protocols, and local knowledge to facilitate research in more remote or dangerous areas. As Duffield (2014, S86) noted, university IRBs may push this because "gaining consent often involves demonstrating researcher inclusion within the inhibiting security and logistical systems of a collaborating aid agency." Yet, collaboration may involve significant tradeoffs because 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 becomes even more fraught (Carpenter 2012).

<heading level 2>**Internalizing Risk**

<text>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 a strategy whereby researchers make decisions that deprioritize their well-being 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 the techniques to manage these issues (Sluka 1990). We further identify internalization—that is, 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 strong professional incentives to produce novel research but 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 one end of the spectrum, harm can take the form of anxiety and post-traumatic stress.[3] Even in less extreme cases, researchers can experience feelings of isolation, including when they return, finding it difficult to share their experiences with colleagues and loved ones. These strained feelings can be further complicated by guilt. Green (1999, 19–22) described the fear she endured while living in rural Guatemala despite the fact that she could leave if the situation required, which she noted with discomfort is unlike the population she was studying. How researchers respond to the risks they internalize subsequently influences the research product. As

Shesterinina (2019, 191) explained, both empathy and fear experienced by research participants "affect the dynamics of interaction, accounts of research participants, and ability of researchers to probe and interpret the accounts."

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, Fincham, and Sampson 2010). This also has 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 a reduction in performance (Hockey 1997). What this dynamic looks like in a high-risk research setting merits further investigation. Beyond requiring researchers to avoid certain areas or activities, we see a need for more acknowledgment of the consequences and implications of risk internalization for both researchers and their work as well as openness to mitigating strategies such as team-based work.

<heading level 1>**OUTSOURCING RISK**

<text>Outsourcing is a third strategy used by researchers to gather new data while also mitigating personal risk. This entails paying research organizations or research assistants to collect data in areas where the principal researcher is unwilling or unable to personally supervise (see, e.g., Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2013; Blair et al. 2013). Contract researchers may be hired for numerous reasons including cultural competencies, gender, language, and simple efficiency; these are common research practices across contexts. However, we are specifically

interested in two areas. Firstly, there is the practice of engaging research assistants to work independently in areas perceived to be too high risk for the principal researcher to access. Secondly, there is 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 nowhave the ability to globalize data collection—that is, to direct multiple projects in risky contexts from anywhere, even the comfort of campus. Moreover, as in business processing outsourcing, we observe that the relationship is fundamentally one of employer–employee. As Middleton and Cons (2014, 284) usefully reminded 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."

<heading level 2>**Risk Imposition and the Ethics of Outsourcing**

<text and PULL QUOTE 2>A core, starting observation is that outsourcing risk does not remove the risks of conducting research in dangerous settings.<end PULL QUOTE 2><text> Although the risk is "managed" by the researcher, it may be shifted to the research assistants. Writing about her fieldwork in Burma with local research assistants, Boyden (2004, 240) reflected 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." She expressed the conflicted position of being both powerful and vulnerable.

However, the fact 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 (2012). As Teuber (1990, 236) noted, we care if harm is due to natural causes or the actions of a person and, if so, whether 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?'" 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.

Another ethical issue that arises concerns who benefits from the research. Hayenhjelm and Wolff (2012, 26) argued 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 researchers and their university (Hayenhjelm and Wolff 2012, 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, Blair, and Imai 2013, 8). Although 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). Again, we see the limitations of informed consent in risk imposition. Whereas the impact of research practices on subjects is a clear concern of research ethics review boards and fieldwork training, attention to the impact of research practices on hired assistants appears to be limited.

<heading level 2>**Knowledge Production and Bias**

<text>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 therefore are concentrated within institutions able to underwrite such studies or secure funding from entities such as the National Science Foundation, the US Department of Defense, and Homeland Security. Given the immense cost of undertaking this type of research, US government funding also tends to be concentrated in places viewed as high strategic priorities (e.g., Afghanistan and Pakistan). This raises questions about the role of these actors in shaping research agendas in

areas of strategic importance as well as concerns about the deprioritization of important research on areas of less political interest.

Even projects that have ample funding and employ local emulators may be restricted by ground conditions, which produces sampling bias. Lyall, Blair, and Imai (2013, 7), for instance, noted that in their survey research, "[f]our [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." In another example of such research, Fair, Malhotra, and Shapiro (2014, 745) discussed 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." They stressed that "[g]iven the prevailing conditions in Pakistan," the use of an endorsement experiment methodology was a necessary "tradeoff that must be made in order to study specific militant organizations, particularly in rural and economically underdeveloped areas" (Fair, Malhotra, and Shapiro 2014, 745).

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 such as hiring local researchers also may cause or compound data-collection and quality issues. 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 postconflict trajectories. One researcher, however, falsified survey results—an effect that became clear through comparison with other sites. Discouraging data falsification and also identifying falsified results requires researchers to invest in time-consuming monitoring and data-checking procedures. Thus, survey outsourcing in difficult settings 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.

<heading level 1>**CONCLUSION**

<text>Fieldwork is important, including in areas that are difficult or dangerous to access. Without microlevel research, scholars are severely limited in their ability to address subnational or internal dynamics. In the absence of academic fieldwork on conflict and postconflict contexts, simplistic or erroneous narratives may dominate. These concerns are not merely abstract. Autesserre (2012) demonstrated how the dominance of simplistic narratives regarding the cause of violence in the Congo, and policy makers' reliance on them, increased human rights abuses. Furthermore, insufficient or low-quality research may impinge on the quality of the large datasets that facilitate large-N research. All research models, regardless of how well designed, depend on the quality of the data used.

This article identifies three dominant strategies used by researchers to address risk—avoidance, internalization, and outsourcing—and their consequences. It seeks to demonstrate how, on aggregate, these coping strategies shape the literature, produce missed voices, and raise ethical questions. This article is not a call to fill these gaps, although that may be useful. Instead, it returns the very human concern and construction of risk to 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 even whether the inquiry will involve a fieldwork component. In making these decisions, field researchers necessarily balance their willingness (and ability) to take risks or expose others, ethical considerations, available resources, and the demands of conducting robust research.

This article devotes particular attention to the risk-mitigation strategy of outsourcing. We find significant and underexamined ethical concerns around risk imposition and power along with more conventional challenges related to research quality. <text and PULL QUOTE 3>This work raises questions about the responsibility of universities for the health and safety of not only their researchers but also research assistants in the field.<end PULL QUOTE 3><text> How would helping to manage their risk through insurance, for example, look?How could that be balanced against the bureaucratization of field research and the rise of risk culture, which we identify as a driver of avoidance strategies? The broader challenge is to make extant strategies for addressing 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 addressing risk, this article provides a pathway for researchers to examine more systematically their approaches and the associated tradeoffs and concerns. Institutions also should 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 benefit ethically from research support, and understands the risks of working in certain areas would help researchers better engage with the realities of risk on the ground.

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<header>**NOTES**

<endnotes>[1]IRBs seek to "protect the rights and welfare of subjects" (Amdur and Bankert 2010, 5). This role is undeniably important, although 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 toward 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 (Fujii 2012, 718).

[2]The idea of "risk" as distinct from a danger or hazard is a modern innovation. "Risk" first emerged in maritime insurance, which enclosed **[AU: OK as written?]** and financialized the vagaries of weather, mutinies, and piracy (see Levy 2012, ch. 3). Therefore, risk management is inherent in the idea of risk.

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