

Indiana Jones and the Data-Gathering Robot: Solitary Decision-Making and Fieldwork Safety

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In the past decade, an increasing administrative interest in safety and ethics in qualitative research has drawn a range of new actors into decision-making processes around risks during fieldwork, generating a growing number of administrative procedures, forms and guidelines. This chapter argues that despite these processes, and unacknowledged by them, researchers are still fundamentally alone in most security-relevant decisions. This is neither surprising nor necessarily a bad thing. Many decisions – whether to get into a certain car or not, whether to go to a meeting you have a bad feeling about – need to be made at a moment’s notice. As researchers we are frequently better placed than our supervisors or insurance providers to judge the situation that we are in. And in the end, it is our own bodies and our own health that we are considering.

Starting from the acknowledgement that solitary decision-making by researchers is still central to safety in the field, however, provides an important corrective to contemporary discussion on risk and research, which tends to over-emphasise regulation over empowering researchers. Recognising solitariness stresses the need to identify the biases, pressures and expectations that affect researchers, and especially junior scholars, as we make decisions about our health and safety. And, as a result, it asks what changes in how we conduct, monitor and administer fieldwork are necessary in order to curb toxic discourses and reduce structural pressures that may lead researchers to make decisions that put us into danger.

In order to illustrate these arguments, I am drawing on experiences from my own fieldwork. For a project on the political economy of smuggling in North Africa I conducted about 14 months of fieldwork between 2014 and 2017 in the borderlands of Southern Tunisia and Northern Morocco (Gallien 2019), conducting interviews with smugglers, street-level

bureaucrats, civil society activists and politicians, and supplementing these with ethnographic observations of border crossings, city markets and community meetings. I was interested in the relationship between smuggling and state-building, in how informal cross-border trade was organised and regulated, how rents were distributed, and how the relationship between states and smugglers in the region had changed in the past years.

My fieldwork was by no means exceptionally risky, and in no way represented a comprehensive education in research risk. At no point during my research was I physically harmed, detained by non-state actors or explicitly threatened. However, I think my fieldwork and both its preparation and aftermath present a fitting case of a research project that was feasible to conduct, but involved some forms of safety concerns, some decision-making in the field, and fell under university regulatory processes around health and safety. Both the security situation on Tunisia's border with Libya and the fact that I was researching actors engaged in illegal activities warranted some caution, some additional procedures, and brought me into contact with the world of academic risk assessment. Coming back from the field, I was increasingly interested in these procedures, and sought out workshops, discussions and conversations particularly with other junior researchers doing fieldwork in environments commonly associated with risk.

While this chapter is informed by these conversations, particularly with other PhD students, and aims to speak beyond my own experience, it is also shaped by the context of my own research and institutional home. I am writing from the perspective of a political scientist working on a qualitative project, and based in an interdisciplinary department. I cannot claim that my institutional context is entirely representative for how other universities engage with risk assessment processes, but I think that there are patterns here which are increasingly relevant beyond my institutional context. Finally, I focus in this chapter on the situation of early career researchers, and particularly PhD students. This is not to imply that more senior scholars don't face risks, are not influenced in their decision-making by discourses and professional pressures, or that they are generally part of the 'problem'. I focus on early career researchers because they face a situation that is worth discussing in itself, and because it is this situation that my own experience speaks to.

The remainder of this chapter is made up of three sections. The first section recalls some of my own experiences in the field and reflects on my decision-making around risk. The second tries to examine and categorise different pressures and discourses that are currently prominent

in academia or affected either my decision-making or that of friends and colleagues. In particular, it names four archetypes – “Indiana Jones Researchers”, “Suffering Researchers”, “Data-Gathering Robots” and “Career Risk-takers” – that exemplify ways of approaching safety and fieldwork. The final section asks what can be done against the more toxic of these influences, and how processes around risk and fieldwork in academia need to change in order to not just bring in more actors, but to strengthen those who are ultimately left with both decisions and consequences: researchers.

In the Cracks of Risk Assessments

With one of my field sites bordering Libya and containing a part of Tunisia that had generally been flagged as ‘risky’ by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, I was advised to think about safety early on as a PhD student. This was shortly after the 2016 murder of Cambridge University PhD student Giulio Regeni in Egypt, and safety, particularly in North Africa, had suddenly become an ever-present conversation. This was exacerbated when in early 2016, Islamic State fighters crossing the border from Libya attacked one of my field sites, again raising the threat perception of outside observers. From the very start, that conversation felt like it primarily revolved around institutions: around health and safety administrations, insurances, forms and committees. At that point, my primary concern was that my university or my funding body would not allow me to go to my field site – I had made some attempts at identifying alternative sites, but all of them would have delayed and complicated the project. This somewhat matched a frequent discourse around these procedures on campus: risk assessments as a hoop to jump through, as a process of negotiating with an institution’s economically motivated risk aversion.

And so, out of consultations and negotiations with various institutions at my university, my supervisor, and my own eagerness to present a plan that would ensure that I would be allowed to go, emerged my security strategy. It took the form of one of those lengthy documents which have now become commonplace, outlining various risks and responses, points of contact, procedures, precautions. I think what we ended up with was a sensible strategy, probably erring somewhat on the side of caution, but most importantly not interfering too much in my research itself. I was fortunate here in multiple aspects: I had both a supportive supervisor and a university health and safety team that understood that for the type of research I was doing, keeping a low profile was important, and should not be

compromised through overly visible or heavy-handed security measures. What we agreed on was a two-tier procedure, where more extensive precautions such as tracking my phone or checking in every three hours, both precautions against kidnapping, would only be necessary in selected higher risk areas.

I remember that throughout this process, I felt that – for better or for worse – my security was not primarily going to be a result of my own decisions, but a negotiation, the result of procedures and regulations. However, once I had started my fieldwork, that quickly turned out to be a misconception – once again, for better or for worse. As comprehensive as any pre-fieldwork safety and risk assessment plan might have felt, almost every decision that I made during my research that related to my safety was outside of the plan – or perhaps more fittingly, in its cracks, in the realm of interpretation and judgement calls. Those decisions were left to me alone.

Most decisions that I more consciously weighed up were about which meetings to agree to, meeting times or meeting locations. Doing research on smuggling networks involved doing interviews with members of networks involved in illegal activities, many of which I had not met beforehand, and some of which took part in rural or secluded locations outside of the towns I was living in, occasionally at night. Again, these were decisions that largely needed to be made spontaneously and by judging things that would have been hard to evaluate for anyone from the outside – the trustworthiness of certain intermediaries, the atmosphere or tone of a meeting. Other decisions were even more quotidian – one of the provisions in my security plan included maintaining an irregular pattern of movement in certain areas so that I would not be taking the same routes or means of transport too frequently. Irregularity came with trade-offs in terms of convenience or speed – decisions that needed to be made every morning, and that would have been unhelpful and excessively onerous to clear with anyone else.

While the solitariness in which I ended up making these decisions did come as somewhat of a surprise, it was not necessarily a negative one. I was better placed than anyone outside of the project to assess the situations around me, and anything else would have been absurd. There are a range of situations, after all, which would have sounded rather terrifying from the outside – such as walking into the local Islamic State hangout – which turned out to be relatively manageable locally. At the same time, some issues that we had not foreseen in preparing the project – such as driving at night in certain areas – presented more serious

challenges. I was fortunate in that not only did none of my decisions lead me into any danger, but also that to the best of my knowledge I was always more than one bad decision away from any harm. Maintaining a low profile, communicating clearly, and moving relatively frequently between field sites all proved to be sensible strategies.

And yet, the solitariness of these decision makings was frequently on my mind – as a notable change between the discussions of risks in the lead-up to my fieldwork and its reality, as an additional piece of work and pressure during the research process, but most importantly as an opportunity to question and examine how I was thinking about risk.

On our minds: How we talk and think about risk

If we accept that it is both sensible and somewhat inevitable that we as researchers end up making the vast majority of our safety-related decisions solitarily, this should give new reason to think carefully about the context of those decisions. More specifically, it gives reason to think about what weighs on the mind of researchers as we think about our safety, our influences, the bench-marks that we measure ourselves against, the pressures that we are under. This becomes even more important if we assume that many of these decisions are made quickly or on instinct. Thinking about a particular decision in a safety context involves not only an estimation of how high the risk in a particular situation is, but also what an acceptable level of risk is in a particular situation – this is what I want to focus on here in particular.¹

This section provides a brief survey into some of the discourses around fieldwork and risk that currently exist within academia and their potential effects on our expectations and judgement of what is a reasonable level of risk. This is neither a complete nor a fair listing – there are an increasing number of healthy discussions around risk, driven particularly by junior scholars.² But with a view to changing practice, highlighting the most harmful examples appears more useful. This section highlights discourses that directly or indirectly

¹ Of course, many decisions also include questions of risks to other people, including participants and sub-contracted researchers / “fixers”. This is a crucial issue for both fieldwork safety and fieldwork ethics, that has been taken up in other sections of this book and has been addressed in a range of recent publications, such as Sukarieh and Tannock (2019) or Peter and Strazzari (2017). Within the scope of this chapter, I focus on risks to independent researcher and particularly PhD students.

² Alongside a rapidly expanding academic literature, I would recommend the discussions on the platform “The New Ethnographer”.

propagate an unhealthy or unreasonable idea of risk-taking in fieldwork. I have grouped them under four archetypal caricatures of research personas – the ‘Indiana Jones researcher’, the ‘suffering researcher’, the ‘data-gathering robot’ and the ‘career risk-taker’.

The Indiana Jones Researcher.

Naturally, fieldwork experiences aren’t just shared in seminars and lectures. As stories are exchanged in the pubs and cafes between students and researchers back from fieldwork, virtually every researcher has experienced how fieldwork experiences become social currency once they’ve returned to their universities. This arena is naturally dominated by researchers with a particularly high tolerance for risk, an inability to recognise risk, or a talent to embellish and dramatize their feats of heroism and danger. Everyone, it seems, has met some specimens of this species – they appear to be quite frequently male and found scrolling through twitter in the local expat bar. Their stories may not always be true, or represent the wisest or most ethical decisions they made in the field, but they are colourful and memorable, and are hence more likely than others to stick in the back of our minds as examples of dealing with risk. When taken at face value, the stories of the ‘Indiana Jones Researchers³’ – usually served with a dismissive attitude towards safety and research administration in general – can shape how we think about risk in the field. Through the sheer selection bias of being stories worth telling, they normalise higher levels of risk-taking. In addition, they may even create a pressure for researchers to come back from the field with stories of risk and daring, and make it more difficult to have an open discussion about what is an acceptable level of risk in the field. It is also worth noting as well that this is not necessarily contained to pubs and storytelling, but can also feeds into ethnographic writing, further normalising unrealistic or unreasonable levels of risk taking in the field, especially if those works feature in PhD seminars and are not accompanied by critical discussions on the risks that researchers may have encountered or managed in order to obtain certain data.

The Suffering Researcher.

³ While I wish I could take credit for this expression, it has a longer history. Lee (1995) refers to “Indiana Jones Imagery”, which is re-formulated as an “Indiana Jones class of ethnographers” by Nilan (2002), before appearing as “Indiana Jones Researcher” in Meyer (2007). I saw one of its most recent and insightful discussions by Laryssa Chomiak on a panel discussion on fieldwork and safety at the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association in San Antonio in 2018.

While the pub-based story-telling and ‘Indiana Jones researchers’ turn fieldwork risks into currency without directly connecting them to the value of the research itself, others draw this link more explicitly. Despite significant counter-movements and counterarguments, there is still a discourse that relates the value of field research to its length or intensity, and, as this is impossible to measure or observe, the physical and mental exertions of fieldwork as a proxy. This can be particularly serious in the context of fieldwork in conflict or post-conflict environments, and if harm or the proximity of harm is presented as evidence of genuine embeddedness in a difficult research context. ‘Good fieldwork needs to hurt’, the discourse goes, or ‘researching war should fuck you up’. Here, too, this discourse is not just communicated orally through supervisions or conversations in a department, but is also reinforced if ethnographies involving high levels of risk, difficulty or trauma are read and taught uncritically, or praised for this very reason.

To highlight this as a problem is not to downplay the difficult decisions that research on these topics involves, to imply that it can or should be done entirely without risk, or to uniformly critique outstanding scholarship that has been conducted under difficult circumstances. The concern here is around the normalisation, expectation or fetishization of higher levels of risks, or their equation with research quality. This then comes at the direct expense of empowering researchers to make informed and careful decisions about the risks they are taking. Even worse, researchers who opt for a lower level of risk, who choose to remove themselves from a situation that involved more risk than anticipated, or that includes risk that is not visible or obvious to some of their peers, may fear their reputation as researchers would be negatively affected when back in their department.

Similarly, the approximation of fieldwork quality through length and exertion supports the dominance of one particular conception of long-term fieldwork that is done en bloc and in one location. While this may be the best strategy for some projects, it can⁴ also directly interfere with safety strategies that necessitate a low profile or frequent movement, in a world in which the nature of risks to researchers can also change rapidly. Especially in difficult or risky research environments, this can also pose severe pressures on researchers’ mental wellbeing as well. But even without the context of a particularly hostile environment, there is a real need to contextualise risk in classical works that inform fieldwork practices. To cite a colleague in anthropology, “reading about Malinowski landing on far away beaches and

⁴ Again, the emphasis here is on the possibility of this, not its generality.

staying there with no contact with family or friends for years does not help in highlighting the small, everyday ways in which we would normally take care of our own safety.”

The Data Gathering Robot

Recent years have seen an expansion of critical discussions of fieldwork safety and risk in a variety of academic disciplines, many of which already have long-standing discussions on safety, positionality and the role of the researcher. However, it is important to note that this has been heterogeneous among disciplines. As more traditionally quantitative-minded disciplines and literatures have begun to engage more with qualitative research, mixed methods and nested analysis (Lieberman 2005; Moller and Skaaning 2015), this has brought more researchers into engagement with sometimes risky fieldwork who haven't been extensively exposed to extensive training on qualitative methods.

In some of the more technical literature on the intersection between quantitative and qualitative methods, however, the researcher is once again conceptualised somewhat as a data gathering machine without personal needs, fears, and mental or physical health and safety concerns which need to take a central place in the conception of fieldwork. This is not primarily a fault in inter-disciplinary literature, which primarily aims to establish frameworks that integrate different methodologies rather than provide a full introduction to qualitative fieldwork. Instead, it may result from a lack of qualitative training in some departments, or simple ignorance around positionality and conflict-sensitivity. On a more fundamental level, it reflects a frequent approach at qualitative training that prioritises its epistemology over its practicality, and its efficiency over its sensitivity. As discussed further below, these issues are aggravated through structural pressures on early career researchers.

What remains is a real risk that researchers who are first approaching qualitative research or are not placed in departments or supervised by scholars who don't have any experience in qualitative research, are not also being exposed to discussions on risks and fieldwork. A tendency to under-estimate risks and the importance of self-care could here be exacerbated by pressures to conduct fieldwork ‘rigorously’ enough to conform to the standards of a discipline not typically familiar with it. The challenge for furthering a discussion on fieldwork and safety that can help researchers make better decisions in the field hence does not only lie in advancing the quality of this conversation, but also in making sure that it reaches a broad audience beyond those research communities already accustomed with

ethnographic work.

The Career Risk Takers

Finally, considering the different discourses, assumptions and pressures that influence how researchers evaluate what are reasonable levels of risk while in the field, perhaps no single factor is as important to note than the career pressure that particularly PhD students are under as they conduct their fieldwork. There is a very clear expectation for PhD students and junior researchers⁵ that fieldwork time needs to result in data and observations that are interesting, novel and relevant enough not only to support articles and theses, but to make them strong enough to sustain us in an increasingly competitive job market.

At the same time, there are serious time constraints imposed through funding and submission deadlines, which can easily make fieldwork appear like a “one shot” situation, on which an entire academic career depends. Frequently, there is a natural trade-off between taking larger risks and gaining more access, more interviews or more time in an interesting environment. As a result, we become professional risk-takers, as we balance the risks that we subject ourselves to with the potential research outcomes, and the future publication or employment opportunities they may afford us. There is a direct relationship between fieldwork safety and the structural pressures on junior academics, and particularly of the academic job-market, that is woefully neglected in contemporary discussions on research and safety.

Of the pressures outlined here, this is the one that was on my mind most frequently and most forcefully as I was making decisions about my safety during my own fieldwork. While I had left for fieldwork early in my PhD, and had some time left until my funding deadline, it was constantly unclear how long Tunisia’s police would tolerate my research in the borderlands, as I had to continuously negotiate my presence. As a result, time pressures frequently felt heightened. At the same time, doing research on informal and illegal economic activities in a new environment brought with it significant uncertainty, as to what kind of access I would be able to manage, who I would be able to talk to, and if all of that would add up to support a coherent argument. And, hoping for an academic career, a coherent argument was certainly needed. As I mentioned above – I don’t think these pressures ended up leading me to make any decisions that brought me into any serious danger. But I am certain that I would have

⁵ As mentioned above, this is not limited to PhD students and junior researchers, but is particularly prevalent here.

thought about the risks that I was taking differently, and would have approached, and likely made, some decisions differently, if an academic labour market somewhere down the line hadn't been so presently on my mind.

Solidary and Solitary - Dealing with Risk in the Field

Thinking about how these issues can be addressed, and how we can support researchers making decisions about their safety in the field, this section is made of three parts. The first reflects on what helped me navigate these issues during my own fieldwork. The second asks what we as researchers can do in the current structural context of higher education and the academic job market. The third points to the relationship between fieldwork risk and wider calls for structural change in higher education, and especially PhD programmes.

In dealing with both the solitariness of decision-making about risk and the different pressures associated with it, I was, as mentioned above, in a privileged position. I was funded through a four-year research council studentship and had left for fieldwork early in the duration of my PhD programme. This gave me a time horizon that was less restrictive and stressful than many other junior researchers. Adjusting to a changing fieldwork situation, and even switching field sites would have been a cause of delay, frustration and additional work, but not necessarily thrown the project entirely off the rails. As I was doing a comparative project with multiple field-sites, it was also easier to think about alternative plans in case the trade-off between risks and relevant research would become untenable in one of my fieldwork locations. One of my central ways of dealing with this possibility, and escaping the feeling of having only 'one shot' at my fieldwork, was thinking through alternative field-sites, comparisons and scenarios. This was helped by another privilege – having the benefit of a supportive and practical supervisor, who had personal experience with fieldwork in different environments, and helped me feel that if I decided that something wasn't feasible, she would have my back. I am highly aware that these have been privileges that not all my colleagues shared, and that not having them would have likely changed both my perception of risk and my way of engaging with it.

Looking back, the most difficult part of this process for me wasn't the results of these decisions, or structural pressures to take on more risks than I wanted to, but the emotional

challenges that came with the solitariness of these considerations, and with handling risk for a long period of time. Even if no serious dangers materialised throughout my fieldwork, the precautions necessitated by my ‘safety plan’ served as a constant reminder that risks existed, and these built up as tension and exhaustion that was difficult to release, and began to affect my health towards the end of my fieldwork. It felt too subtle, quotidian, borderline embarrassing to bring up with my supervisor, and unwise to bring up with friends and family, because, unfamiliar with the local context, it would unnecessarily worry them. Working in a peripheral location without a local community of researchers or NGO workers, I was mainly surrounded by locals who made every effort to make me feel safe, and who I didn’t want to offend by noting when I didn’t.

This changed during the last weeks of my fieldwork, when I learned that another PhD student from my university had been conducting fieldwork nearby for over a year. While our university had failed to make us aware of that fact, the local police later did that job for them, when they reacted to my claims that I was working alone and was the only researcher from my university in the area. Meeting up with the other researcher locally, although late, provided an important relief, not just through exchanging information on how to navigate the local environment, but as a source of moral support, as someone to check in on decisions made, as a source of solidarity. Having known about each other’s presence earlier on in the fieldwork would have been a significant asset, both intellectually and emotionally.

Based on the experiences and dynamics discussed here, I argue that within the current structures of higher education, supporting researchers working in risk-affected contexts requires engendering more open discussions about risks, and building structures of support and solidarity. The aim of new discussions around risk-taking in research should not only be to avoid, tackle and call-out unhealthy discourses as described in the sections above, but also to critically address the way that these discourses are connected to prestige and reputation in academia. Here, the responsibility falls particularly to those already well-endowed in prestige and reputation to foster an open and inclusive discussion, and to highlight the difficulties and compromises that were a feature of their own data collection. This should include – as this volume aims to do – a more open admission of the messiness of fieldwork, and – as this chapter has aimed to do – an outing of unhealthy discourses as discourses, rather than

accepted fact or common wisdom.⁶ Not only should pre-fieldwork trainings include a discussion on the solitariness of much decision-making around risk, as well as its potential mental health dimensions, but also should be geared towards transferring skills that help researchers navigate these situations, rather than just a-priori identify risk assessments that avoid them altogether.⁷ Furthermore, connecting students, researchers and alumni who are or have been researching in similar environments, would be a relatively easy procedure for universities to adopt, but would be incredibly helpful in fostering conversations and solidarity beyond issues of risk alone.

However, beyond this, I think it is important to recognise that wider calls for structural reform in higher education are not entirely separate from concerns about field safety and risk taking. As I have argued above, there are strong reasons to suggest that both the time-pressure that can be embedded in PhD programmes and the expectations and hiring practices of the academic job-market directly incentivise PhD students and junior researchers to adopt higher levels of risk during their fieldwork. If we assume that most decisions about risk are also made outside of the formal structures and constraints of risk assessments and safety plans, that also means that this additional risk-taking by vulnerable researchers most likely cannot be contained through an additional bureaucratisation of the risk-assessment process.

Consequently, wider reforms within higher education that strengthen the independence and financial security of students and junior researchers, also directly contribute to the safety of students and researchers, by decreasing the pressures that they are subject to while conducting risky fieldwork. Revisiting PhD funding structures in order to make it easier to extend and adjust them, or even increasing the availability of writing up grants would also make it easier for students to formulate a ‘Plan B’ in case the situation in a field site changes, hence having to take on less risk. Any reduction in the vulnerability of junior researchers on the academic labour market also decreases the pressure on researchers to expose themselves to risk in order to land a job. Expanding the provision of mental health support in higher education, as has been increasingly called for in recent years⁸, would also directly increase the resources available for students struggling with experiences around risks and violence. And crucially, the facilitation of more collaborative and team-based research, and particularly

⁶ Again, this is not to imply that this does not exist at all, but to emphasise its importance. This book is an example of this type of writing, as are some of the sources quoted above.

⁷ These notes are to highlight the importance of these topics, not to imply that they don’t currently exist in a variety of departments or contexts.

⁸ Raddi 2019

collaborative ethnography, not only opens new methodological opportunities, but also reduces the feeling that the success of a project is a function of the risks taken.

As this chapter has argued, most security-relevant decisions in the field are still made by researchers, solitarily. The goal of university departments, training and supervision should be to protect researchers by preparing and empowering them to make conscious and healthy decisions that are right for them. This should include fostering a more open and honest discussion around risks in the field, countering toxic discourses, and providing points of contact, of mental health support and solidarity. However, it also needs to recognise that structural pressures on PhD students and junior researchers in higher education can directly affect the choices researchers make in the field, and, as a result, should be recognised as affecting fieldwork safety as well.⁹

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⁹ It is worth noting that there is a parallel argument to the one made in this chapter that applies to research ethics, however, discussing this in full goes beyond the scope of this contribution.

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