

Managing Risks in the Field: Experience and Recommendations

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Safety in the field is an important aspect of social science research that is most often discussed in terms of the research subject's safety. Questions of safety for me, however, did not have to do with the safety of subjects but rather of myself. During the course of my research I was the victim of a violent mugging that made me consider whether I should continue my research. I eventually reached the decision to abandon my research to focus on the importance of the researcher's safety, especially from ambient risks of the field setting itself as opposed to risks from research participants or other aspects of the actual fieldwork. Researchers are often told to use common sense, but in my experience, more explicit instructions and preparations are required for successful research. This article attempts to open a discussion on how researchers and their sending institutions can best manage risks in the field setting, regardless if the field is in a foreign country or within one's own community. It is my hope that my experience and research can help other researchers better prepare for a safe and productive research experience.

Background

To explore these issues of safety in the field as they related to my research, it is necessary to recount the events that led to my decision to leave the field. In January 2005 I had the opportunity to study reconciliation in South Africa for one month. Towards the end of this month-long course, I was in Durban, South Africa accompanying three female fellow students as we explored the city. We were walking back to our group when a man tried to steal the backpack from one of the girls in my group. I reached to stop him and as soon as I touched him, three men grabbed me and held me back. I swung my elbow and hit one of the men. They immediately pulled out a large machete and held it against my stomach, took my backpack, and ran away. I ran after them, but waited for the police to enter the building where they hid. I entered the building accompanied by the police who had their guns raised, causing a great commotion and provoking threats from the illegal tenants lining the building. In the end, nothing was recovered by I was quite shaken by the experience of not only being violently mugged but also forced to face the violence and racism of the police officers that were trying to trace the men who robbed me.

Reflecting on this experience, I recognized all the signs and feelings that should have warned me to get out of the situation. Ultimately, I failed to listen to my first impressions to escape the situation and was mad at myself for not listening to my "gut." These same feelings resurfaced in Nicaragua.

A Violent Encounter and a Quick Exit

I arrived in Managua, Nicaragua in June 2006 in order to conduct fieldwork for my master's thesis. I spent the first week exploring the city with my contact person. While walking with her on a beautiful Sunday, I asked three times if she thought we should take a cab from the -ironically, named- Park of Peace, to another area of town. She assured me that she had done it with over 10 groups and had never had troubles. I kept inquiring but in the end assumed that she knew best. Then, as we were walking two men were walking in the opposite direction towards us. Again I

could feel my mind telling me that this was a bad situation, but I kept walking. The men began to separate from one another and to run towards my contact, they grabbed her and pulled a machete on her. At this point I was frustrated because I could have run away myself, but instead I stood still in an eerie calm telling her that it would be ok. After taking her things they came to me and reached inside my pants, ripping away my money belt. Instead of being scared or vengeful, as I was during my experience in South Africa, I just felt calm and frustrated that it had to happen again.

After the mugging, I returned to the safety of my bed and breakfast and had time to think. I was constantly reminded of the violent situation in South Africa. I felt fed up with the situation and started asking myself why I was putting myself through this again. That evening I walked the four blocks from my bed and breakfast to where my contact was living. During that walk I was constantly looking over my shoulder and was on edge when seeing more than one male together. I made the decision that night that I could not conduct research and did not want to live for two months constantly on the edge, afraid to even walk to the church four blocks away in a relatively safe neighborhood. I felt in a way that I was giving up and was unnecessarily frightened, but still I decided to leave Managua a day later. The pastor and church members who I had met in that first week were extremely disappointed and tried to talk me out of it, assuring me that bad things and incidents like mine often occur in Managua, but that I would be safe. However, the more I thought about it, the more I felt like I had to exit that situation. Within 48 hours I was back at home, thus turning Nicaragua into a strange dream.

Since exiting the field, I have had plenty of time to reflect on my experience, and I ended up devoting my recent master's thesis to exploring the issues surrounding safety and risk (Meyer, 2007). I finally realized that risk will never be planned out of research, but it can be better managed with decision-making strategies for both lone researchers and their sending institutions. This article utilizes personal experience and substantive literature

to develop decision-making strategies that ideally will help researchers and institutions do a better job of managing risks in the fieldwork setting.

Creating Safety Strategies for Institutions and Lone Researchers

Strategy making is formulating a decision based on the existing context (Morgan, 1989: 26). However, institutions and lone researchers face very different contextual constraints, which necessitate different types of strategies. Institutions are limited by the fact that they are not in the field with the researcher. They can provide guidelines and advice before the researcher leaves, assistance and contact during fieldwork, plus debriefing and support after fieldwork. Ultimately however, the researcher leaves the protection of the institute when they enter the field (Beck, 1992), so the strategies for institutions are minimal during the fieldwork process (see Table 1.1). Researchers are forced to face situations that cannot be predicted and act in the changing context of the field. The unpredictable nature of fieldwork means that lone researchers need decision-making strategies (see Table 1.2) that are less prescriptive than the strategies that institutions should consider (see Table 1.1). The different constraints for institutions and lone researchers make it worthwhile to separate and develop strategies for the two actors.

It is important to remember that there is no checklist or one-size fits all strategy that can protect researchers, but thinking through the issues of safety before entering the field will help prepare the researcher to manage risks they may face. Thus, the strategies and ideas presented below in Tables 1.1 and 1.2 should be seen as talking points to enable discussion that can be modified, expanded, and specialized depending on the context of the institute and researcher. There are undoubtedly other strategies or techniques that could be added to help researchers, but these talking points are a good starting point for any institution or researcher.

Institutional Strategies (Table 1.1)

The protection of the institute is absent when

the researcher leaves for fieldwork, but before they embark on their research, institutions have the ability and responsibility to prepare researchers (Kenyon and Hawker, 1999: 326). Additionally, institutions have the ability to support researchers upon their return from the field. Currently institutions often leave issues of safety to the researcher's own common sense (Kenyon and Hawker, 1999: 322) or even argue that researchers need to experience "rope burns" to learn the "ropes" of research (Sanders quoted in Lee, 1993: 121). It is absurd, however, to think that researchers should endure painful memories and regrets like I experienced for the sake of learning. Instead, institutions should do all they can to help researchers manage risks in the field. This recommendation comes from my experience on having only one lecture on safety in the field before the fieldwork experience and being left to navigate issues thereafter on my own.

I had very few expectations of what the institution should have provided me with as a researcher before I entered the field. It is a reasonable expectation, however, for institutions to have internal review boards or ethics committees that help prepare researchers for the field and ensure that research designs adequately manage risks. These bodies should develop codes of practice that give researchers general guidelines on how to handle a variety of situations (Sieber, 1992 quoted in VanderStaay, 2005). Many codes of practice exist in organizations such as the British Sociological Association, the American Sociological Association, and the American Anthropological Association, but these models were developed from medical and scientific codes and focus primarily on the research participant and not the researcher (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000). In Norway for example, the national guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences neglect the matter of the researcher's safety but devote nearly one-fourth of the document to protecting research participants (NESH, 2005). Kenyon and Hawker (1999: 322) discovered a similar phenomenon when interviewing 46 experienced and professional researchers from a wide range of Western countries of

Table 1.1 : Safety Strategies for Institutions

Before Entering the Field	During Fieldwork	Exiting the Field
- Review board or ethics committee reviews research design	- Offer support and contact for researchers	-Support the researcher's decision
- Code of practice established with attention paid to researcher's safety		-Provide counseling, debriefing, and support upon return
-Provide financial support for safety items		-Allow space for the researcher's voice in the writing process
- Offer support and contact for researchers		
- De-emphasize data and "exotic" fieldwork		
-Include safety and risk management in fieldwork preparation		
-Validate emotions as legitimate knowledge		

Table 1.2 : Safety Strategies for lone travelers

Before Entering the Field	During Fieldwork	Exiting the Field
-Use detailed planning	-Trust your senses	-Weigh risks and acknowledge loyalty before exiting
- Evaluate risks	- Take necessary precautions	- Activate voice
- Plan for the worst	- Realize bad things happen	
	-Be flexible in research	

which only one had received a safety code of practice. Kovats-Bernat (2002: 2) confirms that dangerous fields are customarily approached and engaged through a broad range of improvised strategies leaving researchers to "hash out crucial matters of personal safety after already finding themselves embroiled in crisis." Research institutions should be no different than scientific institutes that have a set of standardized safety procedures (Kenyon and Hawker, 1999).

A professional code of practice for researchers entering the field would dispel the myth that common sense is enough and would remove the personal burden of developing one's own strategies. It would also provide an equal level of support and guidance for all

researchers and would allow researchers to focus more on their research instead of trying to reinvent a personal safety wheel every time they enter the field (Kenyon and Hawker, 1999). As Fielding (2004: 259) summarizes,

Working in hostile research environments requires thoughtful planning, anticipating the things that may happen on each fieldwork occasion, interpersonal sensitivity in the field, and flexibility. Above all, it demands awareness that every field decision, including the decisions not to go further must be treated by reference to the practical application of ethical principles

Ideally, institutions should create these principles as a basis for the decision-making strategies of lone researchers. In fact, the UK Council of Vice Chancellors and Principals (CVCP 1995: 1) recommendations demand that “Universities must exercise a ‘duty of care’ to employees and to those they supervise’ - a duty that is ‘recognized in both criminal and civil law’ (quoted in Kenyon and Hawker, 1999: 326). This means that safety should not be the responsibility of the researcher or their often-used informal support systems of friends and family. As Punch (1994) summarizes: “no one in his or her right mind would support a carefree, amateurship, and unduly naive approach to qualitative research” (quoted in VanderStaay, 2005: 406).

Practically, institutions should also remove any financial issues that may increase risk. Funds for safe transportation, housing, and local liaisons are important for the safety of the researcher. Other safety items such as mobile phones, official stationary, and other practical items should be provided. If institutes are trying to save money, safety items should be the last thing to cut from the budget.

Research institutions must also be more supportive of their researches and should take safety seriously in the form of support before, during, and after field activities in the form of communication, debriefing, and counseling (Kenyon and Hawker, 1999; Sampson and Thomas, 2003). Institutes should also be available for contact while the researchers are conducting fieldwork. Regular contact via e-mail or phone can help the researcher feel less alone and can provide emotional and practical support for the researcher such as I received from my advisor following my fieldwork experience. The researchers are ultimately alone in the field, but institutions should be accessible when help or advice is needed.

Legitimizing Exit, Minimizing Unhealthy Loyalty, Creating Space for Voice

Institutions can greatly relieve the external and internal pressures researchers face by concentrating on the milieu of the institution. There should be a de-emphasis by institutes on collecting extensive amount of exotic data

to be successful because this external pressure can push researchers into dangerous areas against their better judgment. It is valuable to conduct research in areas of risk (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000: 199), but not appropriate to pressure researchers into these situations against their will. These external pressures can also lead to internal pressures such as an unhealthy loyalty to the field or subject (Hirschman, 1970; Gurney, 1985; Sluka, 1995; Sampson and Thomas, 2003). Researchers may have feeling of guilt like I did and worry about failing if they take the “easy” decision and exit the field. In my experience, my self-imposed pressure to prove myself as a researcher led to an obsession with data collection and loyalty to the original research design. Although my loyalty kept me tied to the topic for a long period of time, it did not prevent my exit from the field. Other researchers, however, may feel either external or internal pressure to remain loyal to field, putting themselves in dangerous situations. Institutions can reduce this pressure and improve the safety of the researchers by de-emphasizing loyalty to data and the field setting and legitimizing exit from the field if the researcher feels the need to exit.

My inability to discuss and process my experience points to a need for institutions to create space for the voice of the researchers. Increasing the importance of safety and risk management in the research process and including discussions on decision-making strategies could create space for the researcher’s voice. It would also prepare researchers for risks they may face and legitimize discussions about safety before and during fieldwork. If safety is seen as common sense that researchers are expected to manage like it was in my experience, they are unlikely to talk about their experience due to the risk of being seen as a failure. Putting safety and risk management on the agenda of research preparation would practically prepare researchers and help to create space for them to voice their difficulties and problems. This voice can help the institutions continue to refine and improve their safety preparation and can help other researchers who may enter a similar field.

Validating emotions as knowledge would also create a forum for the voice of the researcher. Creating space for this voice would make it less likely for researchers to exit a topic because they would find academic forums an adequate mode of dealing with their experiences. Besides deepening researcher (Hubbard, et al., 2000), emotions can help researchers make decisions in the field. Often “gut feelings” like the ones I experienced are ignored because they seem illogical. However, in my experience these emotions are an important indicator of danger. Helping researchers to validate, recognize, and use this indicator could help them avoid some dangerous situations.

Strategies for Lone Researchers (Table 1.2)

The lone researcher is the researcher that enters the field without the support or protection of other colleagues. Ideally, traveling with others, working in teams, and informing people where you are going and when you expect to return can enhance greatly the safety of the research setting, but these options are often absent for the lone researcher. Thus, it is important to create practical strategies to help the lone researcher manage risks they may face from the ambient fieldwork setting.

Practical Strategies for the Lone Researcher Before Entering the Field

A research design is the beginning of the research process and should be the first step to ensure safety in the field. The research design should be meticulously planned and based on extensive research so the fieldworker knows the situation of their site and potential dangers. It should also incorporate locals as much as possible. Having local guides and informants can help steer the researcher away from dangerous situations that may not be noticed by an outsider. In South Africa, researching the area or traveling with a local would have taught me that I should have avoided the street I was on. Detailed planning can go a long way in preventing wandering into dangerous situations.

Before entering the field, it is also important to evaluate risks as realistically as possible. Almost every type of research will

have some degree of risk, and it is important to acknowledge this and ask if it is an acceptable level of danger for the researcher (Sluka, 1995: 282). Making this decision will depend on the researcher and what they are willing to do for their research. In Nicaragua, I made a detailed research design but did not consider the risks ahead of time. Considering the risks of crime in Nicaragua may have helped me to reconsider my fieldwork or to be more cautious upon arrival. Evaluating risks also will help the researcher to be more prepared to make a decision on leaving the field if necessary. Identifying an acceptable level of danger will give the researcher some idea of the threshold of risk. If this threshold were crossed, the fieldworker would know they should consider leaving the field. This strategy allows the researcher to combine their emotional knowledge in the moment with their intellectual knowledge gathered before fieldwork to make a decision on whether or not to exit the field in the case of an incident. Useful ways to evaluate the risks of the field include talking to people with direct experience in the country and discussing potential dangers with advisers and colleagues. In the best-case scenario, the researcher can take an exploratory visit to the field to see if it feels like it would be a productive and safe project (Sluka, 1995: 282). This is not always possible, but any chance to learn about potential risks will help the researcher make safe decisions on what to research, where to go, and how to conduct the research.

Finally, before entering the field, it is useful to create a plan of exit and a back-up research plan. The plan of exit should ideally offer a way to escape from a dangerous situation by for instance having the number of a taxi driver or someone who can assist the researcher exit. It is also helpful to know how to exit the field completely if necessary by knowing airplane, train, or bus times and routes. In Nicaragua I did not have a plan of exit, so when I felt in danger I was less in control and had to rely on others to help me exit the situation. After I was mugged, I had to rely on my family in the United States to do all the planning for me to exit the field. They were able to secure a ticket for me on a flight the next day. However, I

skill, and well-developed skills can go far to help overcome the effects of bad luck. But sometimes no amount of skill will save one from a gross portion of bad luck" (Sluka, 1995: 289). Planning before entering the field and being prepared to handle dangerous situations in the field can help improve safety, but ultimately, "danger is not a purely 'technical' problem and is never totally manageable" (Sluka, 1995: 289).

Flexibility is also important for danger management. The researcher may realize once in the field that the planned methods and goals may not be done safely. Thus, researchers must be prepared to modify or even exit their work (Sluka, 1995: 285). As Polsky (1967) notes, the "final rule is to have few unbreakable rules" (quoted in Sluka, 1995: 285). He notes that unanticipated and ambiguous situations will arise for which one has no clear behavioral plan at all, and the researcher should be ready to revise plans accordingly (Sluka, 1995: 285). Sometimes however, like in my experience, there is not time to modify how the researcher acts in the field before an incident occurs.

Considering Exit

Besides planning ahead of time and during fieldwork, it is also important for researchers to think about what they would do if something should happen in the field. No set of standards can tell lone researchers when or if they should exit the field. Instead researchers should do their best to accurately measure the level of danger and decide if it is too great to continue. In doing so, both intellectual knowledge and emotional knowledge are important to consider. In my experience emotions greatly influenced my decisions, as the overarching theme in my journal of "I don't feel safe" acknowledges. Even though I did a poor job of combining my emotions with intellectual knowledge, my journal entry shows that I did attempt to base my exit in part on a more intellectual basis, even though it was still shaped by emotions: "I'm feeling very alone and frustrated that my research will not really amount to anything, especially if I can't get to know the people the programs are supposed to help." This statement seems to recognize some desire to make the decision

based on reason as well as emotion.

Based on my experience, adequate preparation for researchers should include thinking about "what if" scenario because it is difficult to clearly weigh options and assess the situation after having experienced a violent encounter. Preparing the intellectual knowledge before entering the field will allow it to be better combined with the emotions a researcher may feel after an incident occurs. It is difficult to not let emotions take over after a frightening incident in the field. In my case, I made my decision to exit the field very quickly based largely on my emotions. However, based on my experience I would recommend that researchers take a short amount of time, if it is physically safe, to consider whether or not to exit the field. If I could do redo my decision-making process again, I would spend more time in the safe confines of my bed and breakfast room to process the experience and combine it more with intellectual knowledge before making a decision to exit the field. In the end, I think I would have arrived at the same decision, but I would have doubted my decision less if I had taken more time in making it. It is quite possible however that the emotional danger or loss of safety that researchers feel may be too great to stay in the field. Sometimes, it is necessary for the researcher's emotional or physical health to immediately exit.

Activating Voice

If a violent event does occur, it is important to voice the experience. There is a natural tendency to want to forget what happened and to be hesitant to tell the story as I was after my experience in South Africa, but it is important that the researcher uses their voice to discuss the incident. Based on my experience, using voice helps the researcher to begin to process and deal with emotions attached to the experience. This can help them begin to address their emotional health, ideally with the support of their institution.

Talking or writing about the event also helps to place violence in a context. It is possible that what the researcher perceives as an isolated, random act of violence can tell something of the context of the culture or

should have planned beforehand and should have had the number of the airline company as well as the departure times so I would have been able to make arrangements if my parents were not able to help me.

The back-up research plan is useful for academic purposes. When I was debating whether or not to leave the field, the loyalty to my research weighed on my mind. Although it was not enough of a reason for me to stay, it is very possible that as a researcher gets attached to their work and pressures themselves to succeed; they may become overly loyal and unwilling to exit, even if safety demands that they leave. Thus, researchers should create a back-up research plan looking at ways they could use their preparation and perhaps some of their fieldwork in a different way than originally expected if they decide to exit the field. I did not plan ahead in my case, but I attempted unsuccessfully to salvage some of my research after exiting the field. If I had a backup plan before going to Nicaragua I could have more easily changed my research design.

Practical Strategies for the Lone Researcher During Fieldwork

Although common sense is not enough preparation for fieldwork (Kenyon and Hawker, 1999: 314), it is one of the most important tools a researcher has in the field. It is important to listen to advice from locals, but ultimately researchers are left to defend themselves in the “risk society” based on their own senses (Beck, 1992). Both times I have been in unsafe situations I have recognized it. However, it is easy to cast off these premonitions and ignore what your body is telling you, especially when if taught to exclusively use your mind and ignore emotions. It is when I ignored these feelings that something bad happened. As Sluka (1995: 285) warns, “while you are in the field, do not grow complacent about the dangers you face, and do not treat the situation as a game or adventure. Do not ignore potential threats when they arise: they rarely just “go away” if you ignore them.” Ideally, researchers can learn to cope with ambient dangers in the field by “developing a sensitivity to potentially hazardous situations informed by an acquired knowledge and

awareness of what constitutes danger in the context of a specific field” (Kovats-Bernat, 2002: 5). Researchers should strive to supplement their intellectual knowledge with their feelings or sensory knowledge, although that may seem extremely precautionous from an intellectual point of view, because it truly is better to be safe than sorry.

Along with trusting one’s senses, researchers need to be willing to take necessary precautions while within situations that feel dangerous and also before entering areas that could plausibly be dangerous. This is difficult at times because researchers in the field often want to be a part of the culture as much as possible. They want to relate to their research subjects and live like them as I tried to do in my research experience. There are times however when the researcher needs to be willing to act as the outsider they actually are. This often takes the form of spending a little bit more money. Before being mugged in both Nicaragua and South Africa, I had considered that I should take a taxi to exit what I felt was a dangerous situation but ignored the feelings or was talked out of it. Taking a taxi instead of walking or accepting the fact that it is necessary to walk with a group of people are concessions that may have to be made for safety’s sake. It is important to accept that even though the researcher may want to be a part of the culture, they will most often look and act like a foreigner. It is important to be culturally sensitive, but it is equally important to acknowledge that as a foreigner extra precautions must be taken.

The researcher should also acknowledge that bad things do happen, despite preparations and precautions. In hindsight it is easy to dwell on all the things I could have done differently, but it is not possible to prevent or plan for every situation. As Sluka (1995: 289) argues somewhat morbidly, “some dangers may be beyond management. Despite your best efforts at danger management, simple bad luck can sometimes result in the termination of the research or worse yet the termination of the researcher.” Conducting fieldwork in dangerous environments is a combination of both skill and luck. “Good luck can sometimes help overcome a lack of

people when considered with the experience of other researchers. As Pieke (1995: 76-77) notes, incidents in the field:

[..] are related because they take place in the same social and cultural setting and may even be causally connected. More important, subsequent...accidents may be experienced by the same field-worker. The efforts of the ethnographer to make sense of what seem to be random accidents at first sight are similar to the creative interpretive work native actors engage in to make sense of their world. Earlier events provide (part of) the interpretation of later ones and take on new meaning in the light of later experiences.

Telling about the experience can be important for future researchers to prepare them for the risks they face and to help them learn what to do and what not to do. The information from researchers can also improve the safety preparation institutions provide and remind them about the importance of managing risk. This article is one example of attempting to use voice to draw attention to the need to take safety seriously in my own institute. If researchers share the challenges they face in the field, institutions could feel more pressure to give more attention to preparing researchers for managing the risks they could face.

Voice is also important for the methodological aspect of research. Incidents in the field can change the methodology and maybe even the topic of research. These field experiences should be explained because they "are likely to influence and inform our understandings of the topic" (Hubbard, et al., 2000: 121). Using voice to express emotions from the field can also enhance the research because emotions are a vital part of research. Voicing these emotions could offer a new and valuable perspective on the field and the data.

Voice also helps researchers to use incidents from the field positively. These experiences may provide an opportunity for interesting research and reflection (Peterson, 2000: 195). In my case, the incident in Nicaragua provided incentive to look into the issue of safety in the field. Had I chosen

to remain loyal to my original topic, I would have relegated my experience to a single paragraph in the methodology or forgotten it altogether. Pieke (1995: 65) calls this process of using one's experience evolving fieldwork: "Evolving fieldwork means that the "ordinary" fieldwork can prepare for a change and inform different research." As my experience shows, an incident in the field may point the researcher to a more interesting or important area of research or an aspect of research that was not considered. This is how violent events can be used positively in research to inform and expand on concepts that may not have seemed important or present in the field, once voiced.

Conclusion

Risks are inherent in the field, so managing risks should be the goal of both institutions and researchers. Peace researchers especially have a need to manage risks, as the fields they enter are often areas of conflict with a heightened level of risk. Risks are not limited to peace researchers, however, and regardless of the academic field or the location of fieldwork, all researchers should consider how to best manage risks. Both institutions and researchers have a role to play in managing risk, each with different constraints that necessitate different strategies. These strategies aim to not only help manage risk but also to open a discussion within peace research on new methodologies and ways to improve the conventional research process. Utilizing both substantive and experiential data, this article has shown that safety and risk should be an important part of any research process.

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