'Fluid fields' and the dynamics of risk in social research

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Abstract
In recent decades social scientists have expanded their understanding of risk in the field to extend from concern with participants to awareness of how researchers themselves may be exposed to a variety of physical, emotional, ethical and professional 'dangers'. A variety of accounts have exposed the kinds of risks concerned with fieldwork, many of which are difficult to anticipate. However, this article takes a further step forward in considering the ways in which risks combine in the field, the coalescence of risk in particular circumstances, and the ways in which risk should be understood as dynamic and unpredictable. The article concludes that these considerations require researchers to take a leading role in assessing the risks that they face, that risks should not be considered as uniform for all team members in conjunction with projects involving multiple researchers, and that researchers should receive greater training on appropriate risk management in an effort to change the prevailing research culture in many institutions.

A degree of risk may reasonably be considered to be associated with most disciplinary areas of academic work. The laboratories of natural scientists engaged in work with chemicals, pathogens, lasers, and radio-active particles readily spring to mind as potential sites of physical risk. However, qualitative social science research is relatively unique in combining a variety of risks that have only come to be better appreciated in recent years. As such we now have a body of literature that considers risks of a physical (Lee-Treweek and Linkogle, 2000; Jacques and Wright, 2010; Barr and Welch, 2012), emotional (Burr, 1996; Etherington, 1996; Sampson et al., 2008; Bloor et al., 2008; Coles and Mudaly, 2010; Benoot and Bilsen, 2016), ethical (Pearson, 2009; Palmer 2010), and professional nature (Possick, 2009). We have also seen concerns being picked up in a variety of national contexts with risk now achieving greater attention in countries where

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it was hitherto under-explored (Benoot and Bilsen, 2016; Bahn, 2012; Bahn and Weatherill, 2012; Fahie, 2014).

Some accounts have helpfully differentiated between different kinds of risk with ambient risk being identified as attached to particular settings and situational risks being carried by researchers into the field by virtue of their own identities and actions (Lee, 1995). This has led to the development of an understanding of the ways in which risks might combine with ambient risk acting to 'amplify' situational risk in specific settings (Sampson and Thomas, 2003). For example, the risks of being a female researcher in an all-male institutionalised setting are amplified on a cargo ship at sea given that this represents a research site which is impossible to leave (Sampson and Thomas, 2003).

There is a considerable body of literature that has developed in relation to research in settings which are known to be high risk (for a recent review see Sluka, 2015). Many authors have offered insightful accounts of research in settings which are known to be violent and where conflict and violence may be the focus for their research. Most recently, for example, work has elaborated on research undertaken within conflict zones (for example, Browne, 2013), on the trauma that might be associated with undertaking work with secondary sources (Kiyimba and O'Reilly, 2016; Jackson et al., 2013; Etherington, 2007), and importantly on the long term impact that research in high risk contexts may have on researchers in the field. As such, in a powerful account of the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in a violent field setting, and the failure to rapidly understand and recognise this, Tara Warden reminds us that the impact of danger in the field can be life changing. She explains:

> I began to realize why, when I looked in the mirror, I did not recognize the person looking back at me. These actual neurological changes in cases of PTSD mean that I am not the same person I was when I embarked on the ethnography and never will be again. Trying to return to being that person again was an unrealistic expectation and that this is the person I am now (Warden, 2013:167).

Many accounts have offered guidance relating to the protection of researchers in the field. This advice has broadly focused on making proper preparations for fieldwork where risks can be anticipated as a result of the location of the research (Williams et al., 1992; Nordstrom and Robben, 1995; Lee, 1995) and/or the focus of the research (Lee and Stanko 2003; Porter et al., 2005; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008) but it has also included practical strategies that might be adopted as a component of fieldcraft to mitigate risk (Sluka, 2015; Lee, 1995; Sampson and Thomas, 2003; Fahie, 2014). Researchers have also devoted some attention to risks that are usually less well-anticipated such as emotional and professional risks and a recent 'inquiry' into researcher risk highlighted the extent to which emotional risk is increasingly acknowledged in unanticipated settings (Bloor et al 2008). This article seeks to build upon such understandings of risk by considering unanticipated risks arising in the more prosaic setting of a 'workplace'. The article incorporates a discussion of how risk varies, combines, and changes as researchers become established fieldworkers highlighting the ways in which knowledge of a field setting and experience of fieldcraft cannot be presumed to be sufficient in guarding against risk. As such, risks are not considered individually, in metaphoric silos, but with their fluidity and dynamics

(Peterson, 2000) at a micro level given clearer focus than has been the case, hitherto[1]. For this reason, the article will incorporate the argument that it is important that risk is not conceived of as static, as discrete, or as predictable. Where risks are 'fluid', researchers need to be particularly well-equipped to assess danger *in the field* and to know how to mitigate it. This requires more than preparation and anticipation prior to fieldsite entry and it requires an understanding that experienced researchers conducting work in a familiar field need to attend to risk mitigation as carefully as 'novices' who have been noted in the literature as potentially most vulnerable when entering the field (Rogers-Dillon, 2005; Benoot and Bilsen, 2016). The article ends with a consideration of some of the ways in which organisations engaged in social research, such as universities, could and should improve their approaches to risk management and risk reduction. This can be achieved, in part, by moving away from a reliance on formal approaches to 'risk management' (which may permit/create undesirable barriers to research) and towards strategies which aim to create more pervasive changes in attitudes and research culture.

Methods

The article draws upon experiences of risk in the field whilst undertaking shipboard fieldwork over a period of 17 years. This has been largely qualitative in nature and a considerable amount of it has been ethnographic. Here specific experiences in the course of two voyages are drawn upon.[2] These were undertaken twelve years apart, as part of different studies. The voyage aboard *Qui Auora* took place as one of five ethnographic voyages personally undertaken in conjunction with a study of transnationalism that was funded by the ESRC (project reference L214252036). The later voyage aboard the vessel *Pollyanna* (which features first in this account) took place in the introductory phase of two studies funded by the Lloyd's Register Foundation,[3] The TK Foundation, and Cardiff University, in combination. The projects involved ethnographic work in exploring seafarers' experiences of both the use of mandatory equipment on board and (in parallel) seafarers' interaction with shore-side personnel. This opportunity to engage in shipboard research over a sustained period is particularly relevant, as conducting fieldwork in a variety of different, but very similar, physical settings has provided the occasion to reflect on how risk can vary depending on a variety of factors including changes associated with fieldworkers themselves.

The article incorporates a discussion of two extended examples of risk drawn from voyages on two different ships. These examples will be used to draw out some of the aspects of researcher risk which are not effectively addressed in current approaches to risk management as practiced in most UK Universities (Bloor et al., 2008; Bloor et al., 2010). The article presents the argument that rather than pursuing bureaucratized approaches to risk assessment, and management, greater attention should be paid within universities to efforts to change research and organizational cultures via training and targeted awareness raising.

In the first illustration of risk described here, fieldnotes accompany the text and these are presented in the first person. The account offered in the second example also makes use of the first person but does not draw upon fieldnotes. The presentation of the subsequent analysis and discussion returns to a more conventional style.

Unanticipated risks in familiar settings: fieldwork illustrations

Boarding by moonlight. In 2013, I travelled to Panama, to join a product tanker[4] which was due to transit the Panama Canal before continuing her voyage to destinations that, at the time of embarkation, were unknown. When joining a cargo vessel researchers are generally in possession of a very limited amount of information, as in this industry, situations, schedules, and on board personnel are constantly changing. Up to date crew lists, schedules of port calls, and likely time of boarding, for example, are rarely available and to some extent a researcher simply has to wait and see how things 'pan out'. Having boarded eight previous ships at various ports around the world I had come to appreciate this and was used to the associated uncertainty. I was nevertheless taken by surprise when I came to board the vessel *Pollyanna* as I had not been given any indication by the company, or agent, that she would not actually be berthed in the port of Colon but would simply be 'passing by'. The following retrospective notes describe the situation that emerged on arrival:

> *The flight arrived in Panama City late at night and I was met at the airport and driven for a couple of hours to a small hotel in Colon where I was instructed to wait for further information about when, and where, I would be embarking. When this came, it transpired that the vessel would be arriving in the early hours of the morning. I was told to be ready for the agent at 2.00am and I was driven through the darkness to a deserted quayside.*

> *The agent who drove me was a young man with a military style of appearance, language, and approach. I was extremely tired after travelling and it was with some trepidation, therefore, that I learned that the vessel was not alongside as I had understood but that I would be joining her in transit…on the move. Ordinarily, for seafarers, agents, and pilots, this involves climbing what is termed a 'pilot ladder' which is essentially a long rope ladder that is dangled from the ship's weather deck down to the launch below from which people climb up a distance of perhaps thirty, or forty, feet.*

To fall from a pilot ladder is frequently fatal. It can result in being crushed between the large ship and the tiny launch or being caught by the vessel propeller and rapidly reduced to 'minced meat'. This awareness has triggered the issue of the following marine guidance note from the UK maritime Coastguard Agency:

> There have been accidents, some fatal, whilst transferring persons between vessels making way. A fatal accident occurred on the River Humber when a mooring assistant fell whilst transferring between a tug and tanker after losing his footing and grip on a ladder. More recently a naval officer fell into the River Thames when transferring by ladder from a frigate to a Class V passenger vessel. With the smaller vessel secured forward, the painter parted and, as the two vessels separated, the ladder spreader became trapped in the bulwark of the smaller vessel.

> The key lessons from such incidents are that trained and fully briefed persons should be used to conduct transfers with appropriate risk assessments carried out and strict operational procedures followed – particularly in cold, wet and adverse sea conditions. These measures will assist in preventing accidents and ensure a rapid recovery from the sea should this occur. (Maritime Coastguard Agency, 2011)

Notwithstanding such awareness, accidents involving personnel boarding via pilot ladders continue to occur. In an accident that happened at anchorage (i.e. on a stationary vessel) a few months after I boarded *Pollyanna* the following pertinent case was reported by the *Australian Transport Safety Bureau*:

> On 3 July 2013, a company representative was boarding the bulk carrier *Atlantic Princess* via the ship's pilot ladder when he fell and landed on the deck of the pilot launch below. At the time, the ship was at anchor off Whyalla, South Australia, loading iron ore from an offshore transhipment barge.

> The injured man was provided with immediate first aid and transported to the local hospital. However, he died later that day as a result of his injuries.

> The ATSB found that while *Atlantic Princess*'s pilot ladder had been rigged in accordance with the relevant international requirements, no further risk assessment was carried out for the personnel transfer. The investigation also found that the company's safety management system provided no guidance relating to actions that should be taken when less experienced personnel were to use a pilot ladder to board or disembark the ship. (Australian Transport Safety Bureau, 2014)

The ATSB go on to note that:

> This accident highlights the fact that while pilots may be competent in the use of pilot ladders, it should not be assumed that other personnel are proficient in climbing or descending a pilot ladder, or fit to do so. (Australian Transport Safety Bureau, 2014)

At the time that I joined *Pollyanna*, I had already joined and left several vessels, on the move, over a period of fourteen years undertaking research at sea. However, this had never been via a pilot ladder and most companies participating in the research would not have permitted me to board or depart in this way. In all previous cases captains had established conditions where it was safe to lower the gangway (metal steps also known as the 'accommodation ladder') rather than the more precarious rope ladder used by pilots. As such, I was ill-prepared for the news that I needed to use the pilot ladder to board *Pollyanna* and was not particularly re-assured by the agent showing me a short film clip on his mobile phone of the 'proper' way to climb up and then to cross from the ladder on to a partially lowered gangway upon which to complete the ascent (this kind of arrangement, referred to as a 'combination ladder', involves the pilot ladder being tied to the gangway some distance above the sea level). The fieldnotes continue as follows:

> *The video clip showed a young tall well-muscled man climbing the rungs of the rope ladder with ease, arriving at the junction between the rope ladder and the accommodation ladder which was positioned to his right, leaning over to it and stamping one foot on the lowest rung to check its stability before transferring his hold from the rope [pilot] ladder to the rigging of the gangway. Aware of my own physical limitations, I was not convinced that I was fit to undertake this task. I expressed my concerns to the agent and asked if it might be possible for the ship to lower the accommodation ladder instead. He was dismissive of both my worries*

'sure you can do it! I can see you have got it in you!' and of my request 'the pilot has requested a combination ladder, and what the pilot asks for goes!'.

The situation presented me with a dilemma. My assessment was that this was an unsafe exercise and yet as we made our way towards the vessel my only clear options seemed to be to either take the risk or abandon the voyage. I was not keen on either course of action[5] and therefore maintained pressure on the agent eventually persuading him to discuss the matter via VHF radio with the vessel captain. He did this once the launch was underway, and eventually relayed to me, over the noise of the engine, that the captain was willing to use the accommodation ladder. The following notes describe the outcome as follows:

The launch manoeuvred alongside the giant towering shape of Pollyanna. In the moonlight she cut a sharp dark 'stencil' against the sky. The pilot and two young men set about boarding via the combination ladder. I noted the distance between the rungs on the pilot ladder and how even with their long legs the effort to swing from one [rung] to another was testing. Their breathing became audible and was accompanied by grunts of exertion. Finally I was the last passenger on the launch. Pollyanna's crew set about untying the pilot ladder from the gangway in order to lower this to a height just above the deck of the little boat. All the time the vessels steadily ploughed forwards in tandem, our launch attempting to 'stand off' at a distance which was just safe enough to avoid collision. The gangway was lowered and one of the two boatman on the little launch indicated that I should step onto the edge of the boat where the deck was raised and where there were no railings. The launch pitched and rolled as we approached the ship. The ocean frothed and somersaulted beneath us and I clung [with one hand] to the roof of the cabin behind me whilst waiting for us to arrive in position. Once there, I could see that the gangway remained rigged for embarkation from the side. Our launch could not be positioned in that way and instead she lined up parallel to the opening. This required a decisive movement, from any embarking passenger, from the launch to the gangway. It involved stepping over a four-foot gap beneath which rushed the turbulent open water and grasping for the innermost handrail which was a slightly uncomfortable distance away . . . about a foot beyond the reach of my outstretched hand. I knew that hesitation posed the greatest risk and seized the moment when we arrived at what I judged to be our closest point of approach. I lunged forwards, grasped the handrail, kept my balance and my footing and found myself on the bottom rung of the accommodation ladder. The relief I sensed in the boatman and in the crew who were observing from their vantage point, forty feet above, was palpable as I began the long climb to the safety of the deck.

As this scene played out, I was conscious that if it 'came to it' and if the conditions, or the captain, demanded I would climb the combination ladder notwithstanding my reservations. Ignoring all of my instincts and my own personal risk assessment I knew with certainty that at this stage in the trip, after all the investment of time and money, I would not abandon the research opportunity. It was fortunate that previous experience and confidence (as an older researcher) knowledge of ships and shipping companies - their procedures and their safety policies - provided me with the wherewithal to resist the agent's attempts to get me to do something which I felt was probably [but not certainly] beyond my capability.

This 'tale from the field' is illustrative of several issues. Firstly, despite my experience of shipboard research, the risks that arose were unanticipated. Previous experience indicated that shipping companies, ship captains, and senior personnel are generally reluctant to allow researchers and visitors to take risks whilst on board or whilst boarding or disembarking. Once on board it became clear that the inexperienced captain of *Pollyanna* had been sufficiently concerned to make an attempt to get in touch with me by telephone prior to my arrival. Such attempted contact is unprecedented and reflected the extent of his anxiety. He told me later that he was very relieved that I had made the request to board using the gangway. Yet a younger, less experienced version of 'me' would not have done so. As a novice to the field I would have taken my cue from the agent and trusted in his confidence that climbing the ladder would pose no danger. Furthermore I would have been too embarrassed about my fears to share them and too concerned to appear undaunted and confident.

The second revealing element of the situation relates to the way in which the encountered risk was a result of a variety of factors that related both to the conditions in the fieldsite and to researcher characteristics. Physical stature, age, a previous injury, and level of [un]fitness, combined to make this particularly hazardous in a way that it might not have been to another younger/fitter colleague (although it should be acknowledged that boarding vessels in this manner is inherently risky). In this situation only the researcher concerned could be aware of all the relevant factors and be in a position to properly assess the risk.

The third thing to note, is the way in which, were these events to be repeated on another vessel at another time, the risks would nevertheless be different. If it were wet this would add to the risk associated with the manoeuvre, if it were light then it might have diminished the risk. If the captain had been more assertive in pursuing his concerns, and the agent less pushy in seeking to impose his will, all of these considerations would have made the degree of risk different. This highlights the extent to which risk assessments need to be constantly tailored to particular circumstances and how they often need to be initiated, or re-evaluated, once in the field. In some respects the example highlights the inadequacy of institutional efforts to manage such risk via formal assessments made by groups of people who are largely ignorant of the *details* of any associated research setting. A greater part of the risks that are faced in the field cannot be properly anticipated or 'weighed' and part of the skill in undertaking research relates to the ability to effectively 'measure' and mitigate risk.

The second illustration of risk in the field that I draw upon here emphasises once again the unpredictable nature of such risk. However it serves to demonstrate how planning, good fortune, and resilience may protect a researcher in a dangerous setting. Twelve years *before* joining *Pollyanna* I boarded the fruit juice vessel *Qui Auora* as a contract researcher taking part in a study of transnational communities at sea.

It is ironic and cautionary that in organising the research on this vessel I was, for the first time, joining a ship that was operated by a firm that employed somebody I had previously met. It was also the first time that I had visited one of the company's vessels prior to asking for permission to undertake research with them.

The negotiations for access took place at a high level in the company. An agreement was reached and I was informed which of the four vessels, in the (small) fleet, I was to

join. This was only my fourth experience of undertaking shipboard fieldwork, neverthe-less, when I joined the vessel in Ghent, I quickly picked up the signs that something was amiss. Despite the early indications that this was going to be a challenging research journey, I made the decision to stay on board and try to iron out the problems that had immediately surfaced. These took the form of the captain accusing me of being a 'com-mercial spy' *within less than an hour* of meeting him and banning me from the cargo control room where I had been beginning to chat with some of the officers[6]. I was suffi-ciently experienced to understand that port stays are a busy and stressful time for cap-tains and thinking that this might explain the situation I made the decision not to abandon the research despite the inauspicious start. This proved to be a grave error.

The vessel sailed from Ghent and I followed my usual routine of trying to get to know the seafarers with whom I had some opportunity to have contact whilst awaiting a suit-able time to discuss a research plan with the captain. The seafarers were friendly, if not expansive, and there was no indication from them of the problems to come. However, from the outset, the captain was uncooperative and reluctant to allow the research to commence. At our first 'formal' meeting he told me that I could not go to the bridge (an important site for the research) until we were 'deep sea' which would be about a week into the voyage. My only permitted contact with the seafarers, in this period, was to be with the ratings who I could only meet during their two fifteen minute coffee breaks. He explained dismissively that I would not be able to communicate with them 'anyway' as their English was very poor. This was a daunting start to fieldwork that was largely observational and required the establishment of rapport via a great deal of 'hanging out' and 'working' with seafarers. Additionally I discovered that the captain had placed me at a table, alone, in the officers' mess which made conversation during meals a challenge. I persevered and tried to remain patient attending the coffee breaks in the ratings' mess and soon establishing some rapport there via a combination of pigeon Spanish, sign lan-guage, ready smiles and humour. However, the peals of laughter floating down the alley to the officers' mess did not go un-noticed and the captain took further action. After one coffee break he approached me in the mess room. He started to pace around the room and shout at me. He accused me of being a spy again but this time he said I was from the ITF (the International Transport Workers Federation) and was spying on the crew[7]. He said they all 'knew' that I could speak 'five languages' and that they had set a trap for me that I had 'fallen into' (I have no such linguistic facility). He lied that the ratings no longer wanted me to join them for coffee[8] and directed that I was not to go to the mess. This was a severe blow but things deteriorated further over the coming days as in my isolation the captain refused to allow me use the ship's satellite phone (a routine practice which is cost neutral[9]) and generally took every opportunity to harass and bully me. Finally, at the end of the first week when a pre-arranged call from my husband to the vessel was not put though to me I began to be seriously concerned for my safe arrival in our destination port of Santos.

In this situation the captain's behaviour was unprecedented and unpredictable. However, at that time mobile satellite phones were available and had I had such inde-pendent means of communication it would have gone a long way in both assisting me in dealing, psychologically, with the situation and in supporting my safety. I became acutely aware of how the 'orchestrated' estrangement from the crew had made me more

vulnerable. Nobody had really had the opportunity to get to know me on board and it would be unrealistic to imagine that I could turn to them for any kind of protection. I had already observed, and had been told, that the crew were afraid of the captain as I was not the only recipient of his bullying. Furthermore, there is a strong and sometimes documented tradition of seafarers not reporting issues on board (including violence) to managers or other personnel ashore. These contextual features and my inability to leave the field, or even to locate myself beyond the captain's reach, made the situation challenging and ultimately frightening (a captain has keys to every part of 'his' vessel including all cabins). I felt it was beyond my control and that it was beyond my understanding as for some reason social norms relating to interaction were not being applied. As a 'guest' of the company on board the captain would normally 'look after' a researcher even where he might initially be suspicious of his/her intentions or actions.[10] This was not a case of entering a violent field setting or undertaking research on sensitive issues. It was a case of officially recognized, overt, research on a relatively prosaic topic which had been negotiated and agreed with a multinational corporation.

Having abandoned all attempts at 'winning the captain over', I focussed on coping with the monotony of the voyage and the hostile atmosphere he generated. Eventually I forged some closer links with the galley staff and a second officer who sought me out and provided me with a few (English language) novels he had found on board to read. Initially, however, I spent many hours sitting on a bench that was located on the deck just outside my cabin watching the ocean and hoping for signs of wildlife to provide a momentary distraction. It was here that chance favoured me with a glimpse of land as we passed the Cape Verde islands. I was suddenly able to get a signal on my mobile phone and alert people at home, and in my office, to my predicament.

This contact gave me a new sense of security on board. I felt protected by the fact that outsiders were now aware of the bizarre situation. There was no possibility that I could simply 'disappear' as a number of seafarers and stowaways have done previously without a lot of questions being asked and this was something that I had not felt so certain of before.[11] The security became all the more important as the voyage unfolded and a picture began to emerge as to the possible motivation of the captain on board. From the outset it was apparent that he wished to keep me at some distance from the crew. The steward confirmed this impression in no uncertain terms when he told me the captain had told them all that if they talked to me they could be arrested and go to prison. He accompanied his account with a gesture of being handcuffed.[12] Subsequently the steward volunteered that vessels in the fleet were engaged in regularly transporting cocaine. The captain had settled in Brazil, had married there, and spoke Portuguese. His vessel was on a regular run from Santos (Brazil) to Ghent. He had taken steps to delay my arrival on board when the vessel docked in Ghent and was subsequently in a great hurry for me to be taken ashore once we arrived in Santos - despite the fact that this put the company agent to a great deal of trouble as we arrived outside of normal office hours. The 'jigsaw pieces' began to fall into place.

This experience taught me a great deal about risk, its anticipation, and its management. It was not to be expected that a researcher would be unfortunate enough to end up in such circumstances and yet it was not inconceivable either. Illegal trafficking of people and of prohibited goods is known to take place at sea and captains are rarely in a

position to resist instructions, from their office, to take a visitor on board however unwelcome or threatening this might be to them. Most significantly, I learned how being isolated from the rest of the world adds to researcher vulnerability. This led me to subsequently insist (once I was no longer a contract researcher) that all shipboard fieldworkers based within the Seafarers International Research Centre would have to carry a mobile satellite phone with them in case of emergency.

I remain uncertain of the extent to which being female helped or hindered my relationship with the captain on board *Qui Auora*. I am also uncertain about the extent to which my nascent skills as an ethnographer were of benefit. Certainly emerging rapport, with the ratings, resulted in the imposition of further restrictions by the captain rather than fewer. On the other hand I was invited 'in secret' to meet with the steward, my presence in the crew lounge was kept from the captain, and my efforts to keep smiling and attempting to be friendly did result in hidden conversations with the chief cook and second officer which kept me more informed than I would otherwise have been, contributing to my safety. They also contributed to the preservation of my mental health as being ostracized in an institutional environment with no possibility of escape was something that I experienced as quite traumatic. Ultimately, it is evident that individual characteristics played some part in the situation that emerged. Whatever the risk was, in different ways my identity, my behaviour, and my previous experiences on board could all have contributed to both its amplification and mitigation.

Reflecting on risk

These two selected experiences of risk occurred twelve years apart. In both cases the risks were unanticipated and in some senses impossible to anticipate.[13] They are drawn upon here as they are illustrative, in different ways, of the extent to which risk is fluid, unpredictable, and context specific. As such, the examples illustrate how we should not take a 'silo' or 'containerised' approach to risk and its assessment. It is not enough to consider the general risks of physical harm associated with undertaking interviews in participant homes, for example. We must instead consider the particular risks associated with particular researchers undertaking interviews in particular participants' homes. In doing so we need to go beyond superficial understandings of the ways in which identity and visible characteristics might impact on risk and consider, in addition, 'invisibles' such as researcher experience of a particular field, researcher knowledge, researcher skills, and issues such as job security which can exercise an influence over decision-making 'on the hoof'. Today employed with a certain degree of security, and with a certain amount of knowledge of the field, it is unlikely that I would make the decision to remain aboard *Qui Auora* that I did in 2001.

It may seem self-evident that risk is not static (Peterson, 2000) in the sense that it can be anticipated, planned for, and mitigated in straightforward ways. However the literature to date has tended to emphasize the extent to which researchers can and should take steps to *prepare* for the known risks associated with fieldwork (see for example Sluka, 2015; Bloor et al., 2010; Fahie, 2014). Furthermore institutions have sought to manage risks using committees with little detailed knowledge of fieldsites or researchers. These approaches are laudable, to some extent, and may limit organizational liability but they

are rather a 'blunt instrument' in the actual mitigation of 'lived' risk. In approaching risk management it is important to acknowledge that not only do social relations alter over time in ways that might allow risks to emerge, or conversely recede, but actors also change in response to the risks they meet. This might produce new risks or mitigate existing ones. For example, at a recent conference I listened to one speaker talk about the unanticipated emotional risk he encountered undertaking geographic work in Congo. He described unsolicited harrowing accounts (which had no relevance to his research activities) given to him by local refugees/survivors and how these had a profoundly negative impact on his decision making, and actions, in the field. Ultimately he had been left disturbed not only by the ways in which the war had destroyed people and their lives locally but also by the ways in which the impact of their stories had altered his own subsequent behaviour. Thus his experience illustrated the ways in which exposure to one risk (in this case graphic and harrowing accounts) can alter 'players' in the field such that new risks (loss of self-esteem) may be produced. This is illustrative of the tangible ways in which risk associated with social research, in any setting (any landscape), is 'fluid' and dynamic rather than static. The ambient risks associated with particular 'landscapes' such as a war zone, a police patrol, or a vessel have readily been acknowledged as dynamic by researchers but the fluid nature of the risks that are associated with interaction at the micro level in the most prosaic of research settings have been less well-considered.

Finally, these experiences have given me cause to reflect on our capacity as field-workers to mitigate emergent risks. In boarding *Pollyanna* I found myself in a situation where I was able to exert very limited influence. This was challenging enough. However, had I been in the same context fourteen years earlier I would have felt that my choices were limited to either boarding by the means provided or refusing to do so and abandoning the field in embarrassment and at significant cost. Experience of shipboard fieldwork and knowledge of the industry, combined in this situation and allowed me to pursue an alternative course of action. As a novice in the field, I would not have known that the agent was *not* the key decision maker with regard to the safety of those boarding the vessel and I would not have known that it would be difficult for him to refuse to make the captain aware of my concerns. In seeking to influence the situation, I was sufficiently familiar with the industry to understand the additional leverage that I could generate with the use of language heavily peppered with the terms 'safety', 'accident', and 'risk assessment'. In the darkness, on the water, and faced with an individual determined to overrule my concerns I was able to mobilise these resources to mitigate the associated risk. This supports existing accounts which emphasise the particular vulnerability of neophyte researchers in the field (Fahie, 2014; Benoot and Bilsen, 2016).

Conclusions

Whilst ethnographic fieldwork would not be immediately recognized by the public as a high risk occupation it is not unknown for researchers to be killed 'in the field' (Bloor et al., 2008; Sluka, 2015). In early 2016, newspapers reported the death of Giulio Regeni who was undertaking a PhD at Cambridge. The *Guardian* reported that he was 'burned, beaten and mutilated in a murder that bears all the hallmarks of Egypt's security forces' (*The Guardian*, 2016). The 28 year-old student was in Egypt researching trade union

activities and it is likely that his fieldwork led to his identification and targeting. His death is a reminder that researcher risk remains, notwithstanding the development of a significant body of literature relating to the subject.

Risk in ethnographic research is complex and multifaceted. As such it is difficult to accurately assess the risk associated with a particular activity in isolation from a nuanced understanding of the researchers involved. This can rarely be achieved by a committee. Risks in different research settings combine in a variety of ways and depend on the researcher, the researched, and the broader context of the fieldsite. These risks may simply combine but they also have the potential to 'amplify' one and other (Sampson and Thomas, 2003) which needs careful consideration. As such, it is likely to be researchers themselves who are best placed to examine and consider such risks. This suggests that risk assessment should not be reduced (as it frequently is) to a paper-based activity which is overseen by an ethics, or similarly research-related, committee within research-orientated institutions. Rather it seems sensible to advocate that regular assessments of risk are incorporated into good project management and are undertaken regularly by research teams[14] themselves, collectively, prior to (and during) engagements with the field. Such risk assessments need not involve formal written documents. They could be the equivalent of 'tool box talks' as undertaken in other workplace settings. In the case of researchers, conversations at regular meetings about the next stages of the research, and the risks that might unfold, would be very valuable if integrated into standard practice. To support this process guidelines to this effect could be issued by ethics committees or university management. However the purpose should not be to merely 'cover the backs' of university management but to attempt to constructively impact upon research culture and practice.

However, this article also incorporates the argument that research risks are frequently completely unpredictable (see also for example Parker and O'Reilly, 2013; Fahie, 2014) and that they change as fieldwork unfolds (Peterson 2000). This fluidity is not limited to changes in the research setting or context (for example, a conflict zone), it also depends on changes in the researcher and research participants. In this context, the capacity of fieldworkers to undertake both reflexive and effective risk assessments in the field, and at unexpected moments, plays a vital role in the safe conduct of research (Sluka, 2015). Prior to any forays into the field it would be advisable for researchers to receive effective training in risk management and where possible to benefit from thorough briefings from others to whom the field is already known. These might be provided by other researchers but there is also scope to involve a range of professionals with relevant expertise such as public sector and voluntary workers. Such benefits of more general training relating to research risk have previously been effectively outlined elsewhere (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Bloor et al., 2008) but here the recommendation relates specifically to training relating to the need for ongoing risk assessment in the field (see also Peterson, 2000). Moreover, and most significantly, it is argued that such training should seek to raise the 'safety bar' in research settings. In this sense training should be designed to empower researchers so that, whatever their contract status and career-stage, they find it easier to make decisions that limit their exposure to risk, rather than feeling under pressure to forge on regardless for the sake of 'success'. To some extent, such empowerment depends on generating a cultural shift within research institutions (which can, in part, be achieved through appropriately designed training) such that individual researchers come to be

valued far more highly than the product of their activity. Training could also address the emergence of a 'macho' research culture where this has insidiously come to dominate areas of social science research. Such 'macho' values place a premium on work which exposes researchers to danger, privation, and discomfort. Research relating to violence and taking place in dangerous settings has been acknowledged as particularly attractive to some researchers (Westmarland, 2001) and it may appear particularly prized. Appropriate training can go some way to redress this imbalance (in terms of the relative value of different research endeavours) and while it is important to allow research to thrive in relation to both sensitive topics and dangerous fieldsites it is inadvisable to present this as more important than research which exposes students and staff to less danger and risk. It is also important for debates on research risk to encompass, more comprehensively, those accounts which deal with risk in more prosaic research settings. To some extent risks in relation to violent contexts, violent groups/individuals, and sensitive topics (Sluka, 2015; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008) are easier to anticipate (if not to deal with) and more likely to be actively managed than risks in more 'everyday' settings. Emotional risks are similarly predictable in particular settings and in relation to particular topics (for example, medical settings such as hospices and child abuse). Researchers who write about risk in such settings are likely to feel less vulnerable to accusations of incompetently managing a situation or contributing to their own risk than others who write about more mundane situations where it may be impossible to fully explain complex research interactions/contexts in relatively short accounts from the field. As such it is currently research in 'exotic' settings which inevitably receives the most attention from both committees and individuals and this situation should be re-balanced.

Despite the many lessons that we have been encouraged to learn from accounts of risk in the field, there is still some way to go before we effectively assess and mitigate danger in social research. In many institutions risks associated with ethnography and qualitative methods of inquiry remain under-considered. In some, risk management has been embedded in bureaucratic practices incorporated in broader measures for institutional research governance. Whilst this is usually (but not always) helpful, it is nevertheless insufficient. The emergence of greater numbers of accounts of long-term damage sustained by researchers in the field[15] remind us of just how important this issue remains (Coles et al., 2014; Warden, 2013; Bloor et al., 2008; Bloor et al., 2010). The account presented here suggests that, notwithstanding the progress that has been made in many universities following earlier recommendations relating to researcher risk (for example, Bloor et al., 2008, Peterson, 2000; Lee, 1995; Sluka, 2015), contemporary risk management requires a different approach within many institutions. Here I suggest that this is one which is primarily rooted in training, and the 'management' practices of individual researchers and research-team leaders. It is a change of culture that is advocated not a new set of bureaucratic procedures, a more controlling research environment, a more comprehensive checklist produced by experienced researchers, or the re-design of forms.

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Notes

1. It is helpful to distinguish here between risks associated with a setting i.e. risks associated with a research 'landscape' such as a war zone and risks relating to interactions between individuals and not arising from the research 'landscape' as such. Risks associated with the research landscape are generally understood to fluctuate (and have been regarded as dynamic in the literature) but in ways that might be generally anticipated in advance i.e. a 'front line' may move and shelling commence, or a cargo ship may enter the 'teeth' of a typhoon. Researchers cannot know the timing of such events or whether they will happen at all but they can prepare in general terms for what they should do if the events occur. Micro level events and 'situational risk' is much less predictable and the highly fluid nature of this risk has been under-considered in the broad literature on research risk.
2. Pseudonyms are used for ships, personnel and companies.
3. This research was generously supported by the Lloyd's Register Foundation. Lloyd's Register Foundation helps to protect life and property by supporting engineering-related education, public engagement and the application of research.
4. A product tanker carries oil products.
5. The costs of organising the trip in relation to time and money were considerable.
6. Being accused of 'spying' is not uncommon in the field but as the account will demonstrate this was not the captain's real concern. The accusation was from the outset bizarre as industrial espionage in the fruit juice transport industry is entirely unknown. Even as it was made I was aware that this accusation did not reflect the real cause of the captain's anxiety or antipathy.
7. Once again the accusation that the global trade union federation would send 'spies' on ships was preposterous and the captain was also fully aware that the research venture had been vetted by the company operating the vessel. The ITF might pose some threat to companies not complying with wage agreements etc but seafarers themselves would not be threatened by ITF representatives and there have been no known cases of ITF staff sailing on vessels to 'spy' on seafarers. This was another 'red herring' from the captain and therefore while I describe it here I do not intend to focus on accounts of 'spying' in the field.
8. This was later revealed to be untrue by ratings who invited me to join them in private and who had also welcomed my presence in their communal lounge without the captain's knowledge. Rapport was difficult to build in these settings however as German language action films were usually being watched and communication was limited. I was also nervous about the consequences of the captain finding out and I did not make regular visits once I judged that the situation had deteriorated beyond retrieval.
9. Satellite phone usage can be monitored and paid for by users including researchers
10. Such suspicion is relatively commonplace but normally relates to fears about feedback to the shore-side management.

11. 'Murders regularly occur offshore – thousands of seafarers, fishermen or sea migrants die under suspicious circumstances annually, maritime officials say – but culprits are rarely held accountable. No one is required to report violent crimes committed in international waters'. (Urbina, 2015).
12. The telling thing here is that the crew completely accepted the truth in this.
13. It was the case that inability to leave the field was a known risk but this was a workplace setting where the need to leave the field urgently was not properly anticipated. Unwanted behaviours such as sexual harassment by individuals had been anticipated and researchers did make use of strategies to mitigate associated risks. Leaving the setting because of a threat of violence was not regarded as a predictable risk.
14. A research team may connote a Principal Investigator (PI), Co-Investigators (Co-Is) and Research Assistants (RAs) or it may be a PhD candidate and their supervisor/s. It describes the individuals directly connected to a research study – those who are directly engaged with undertaking, or supervising, the research project.
15. These are quite likely to represent the 'tip of the iceberg' given that the construction of such accounts generally involves the unwelcome process of 're-visiting' painful experiences

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