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Risky Research: Investigating the "Perils" of Ethnography

Karen A. Stewart
Arizona State University
480-747-8224
Karen.A.Stewart@asu.edu

Aaron Hess
Arizona State University
480-727-8541
aaron.hess@asu.edu

Sarah J. Tracy
Arizona State University
480-965-7709
Sarah.Tracy@asu.edu

H. L. Goodall, Jr.
Arizona State University
480-965-5095
Bud.Goodall@asu.edu

Risky Research: Investigating the "Perils" of Ethnography

Our chapter is a collection of stories about risks we've faced as practicing ethnographers. We wanted to tell our risky stories because, conceptually, "risk" has a distinct relationship with qualitative methods, and ethnography in particular. All ethnography is inherently risky, at least to some degree. The contingent nature of fieldwork, our primary method of inquiry, places us in dynamic, unusual, or otherwise unfamiliar social settings where we are expected to interact with new people and new ideas and ultimately make sense of our surroundings. This process, at best, is ambiguous, and situates ethnography as a less-than-predictable form of investigation. Experience, and a healthy dose of common sense, tells us this is risky work.

Historically, risk has been conceptualized as the mental and physical challenges the ethnographer faces in the field. Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* and similar early ethnographies helped establish this precedent. And this concept of risk is perpetuated by the continuing practice of presenting ethnographic research as a kind of adventure story where the "researcher/hero" marches off into some great "unknown" and through his or her physical talents, mental abilities, and amazing social skills manages to navigate the situation bravely. The "researcher/hero" then returns with an amazing story only an adventurer could tell[1].

Given the ease in which ethnographic research is linked to adventure stories, it is not surprising many people in academia and in the general public continue to conceptualize the relationship between research and risk in this manner. As practicing ethnographers, however, we are aware there are less obvious and less glamorous risks associated with the process of ethnography. We are also aware that qualitative scholars need more opportunities to identify and

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[1] See *Going Tribal* as a contemporary example of the "ethnography as adventure" research approach: http://dsc.discovery.com/fansites/goingtribal/about/about.html

discuss the types, interactions, nuances, and implications of these risks. We need to understand more fully why these kinds of risks exist and why they can be as serious and derailing to our research as actual physical harm.

Our goal with this chapter is not to discount the literal risks of ethnographic fieldwork, but to extend the concept of risk to include a wider range of considerations. With ethnography often presented as a methodological challenge to post-positivism, and as a method self-aware of its colonial legacy, the concept of risk can and should be expanded to include the ethical, institutional, paradigmatic, methodological, epistemological, and reception challenges ethnographers face throughout their entire research process. At any given point, any one of these issues can inhibit the progress of ethnographic research and potentially harm the researcher or the research subjects involved in the project.

In this expanded context, we perceive risk as a relational dynamic, operating on multiple levels, and manifesting as interrelated research considerations. We also see risk as exponential. A risky decision made early in the process can later lead to riskier consequences. This is especially true when ethnographers submit their research for publication only to find their entire study called into question over issues of scientific validity, institutional review board approval, methodological rigor, ethical reflexivity, and/or the stylized presentation of data.

By sharing our risky stories, we want to draw attention to and investigate the complexity of risk. We also want to draw attention to its fluctuating nature. By working together to produce our narratives, we have come to realize risk is as much about researcher perception as it is a real-world considerations. Each of us is at a different point in our academic career. One is a fourth-year doctoral student, one newly minted PhD. Another is a recently tenured associate professor, and the fourth is a veteran ethnographer. Risk looks and feels differently to each of us. Our

perception of risk has taken on different degrees of relevancy and urgency depending on our experience and status. We also see different risks depending on our personal, professional, and research goals.

The subjectivity of risk should not be discounted, however. We believe it serves as an effective reminder that ethnographic research is never a singular, uniform experience – a necessary reminder for fundamentally challenging the practice of reducing risk to a single, historically-limited concept. It also reminds us that no one, at any stage of his or her research or career, is immune from the implications of risk. Risk is integrated in the overall production of qualitative research. Given this continual presence, risk warrants deeper consideration.

We offer the following narratives as launching points for this discussion.

Are You Serious? Striving Toward Theoretical and Disciplinary Legitimacy – Sarah J. Tracy

I vividly remember my beloved doctoral advisor suggesting that I change the title of my first sole authored article from "Smile, You're at Sea," to "Becoming a Character for Commerce." The second title provided a cloak of authenticity around my commercial cruise ship research site – a context that my advisor correctly assumed might be judged as questionable for a young female who wanted to be taken seriously as an organizational communication scholar. Indeed, the decision of research site has crucial consequences for ethnographers, affecting our data, the theories that we might examine, and our researcher wellbeing.

Perceived Seriousness and Transferability of Research

Risk often begins with the choice of research site. Over my career, I have found myself attracted to settings quite different from the fortune 500 companies, large non-profits or social

service organizations that are common among organizational communication and emotional labor research.

My first field research experience was hanging out with 911 call-takers during the hot summer of 1995 (Tracy & Tracy, 1998). During the wee evening hours, I sat with call-takers at CityWest Emergency Communications Center, listening into calls, chatting, and socializing with them at breaks and off-hour cocktail gatherings. At the time, emotional labor was a new concept to communication scholars, and my hope was that my nontraditional site of study might help problematize and extend the scholarship.

Soon after 911, I set my sights on another research venue that seemed poised for extending emotion labor research—a commercial cruise ship. I figured the venue would be perfect for understanding the construction of employee identity in relation to panoptic and virtually inescapable discourses of control within a total institution setting (Tracy, 2000). The main challenge was entrée. Very little research is available about cruise ship organizations, largely because cruise lines are quite secretive. Furthermore, it is difficult to negotiate field research within an organization that only periodically touches on the same geographic ground and one in which lodging is an extremely scarce and valuable commodity.

I solved the entrée issue by becoming an employee for eight months. It was not until I got off the ship and began to try to write up my research that I faced judgments that such a research site may not be considered serious or important. I remember hearing comments such as, "If you are interested in organizations, you should want to be able to generalize from your own research to other organizations. Yet, here you go insisting on doing research in organizational settings like 911 and cruise ships."

My most recent in-depth ethnographic fieldwork has been with correctional officers at a prison and jail (Tracy, 2005). Very little scholarship qualitatively examines the wellbeing and dilemmas of the "watchers" and "keepers" of prisoners. The research that does exist is mostly self-reported survey data, and focuses on employees' individual aspects of burnout. Meanwhile, I desired to understand how organizational structural norms and practices affected the ways correctional officers performed the emotion work of showing respect and nurturing inmates, maintaining stoicism, and managing danger, fear and disgust.

In each of these venues, I connected research findings with extant research on emotion, stress, and burnout done in more traditional work settings. In doing research in these settings, I faced the risk that people may not take my scholarship seriously. However, the reward has been extending emotion labor theory in ways that would have been more difficult or impossible if I would have done research in a "safer" more known and common venue. Because I studied emotion labor among employee populations whose jobs were in total and closed institutions (cruise ship and prison) and employees who had to "service" lower status others (911 and prison), I was able to name a practice termed "double-faced emotion management" (Tracy & Tracy, 1998, p. 407) and argue that the difficulty of emotion labor has as much to do with enacting low-status emotional identities as it does with faking it (Tracy, 2005).

Risks associated with organizational entrée and IRB approval

Getting access has been one of the most difficult parts of doing organizational field research. I entered the cruise ship venue as a "junior assistant cruise director" without clear-cut plans for research. Once I had been on board for a month or so, I approached the cruise director who granted participant observation research permission and proceeded to have all interviewees sign informed consent forms. I thought all was fine, but when my first article was about to go to

press at *Management Communication Quarterly*, I received a note from the editor asking that I

add a footnote indicating Institutional Review Board approval. There was one catch: I did not

have IRB approval. I had not been employed by the university at the time, and as a 25 year old

with two years of graduate school behind me, had no clue that such approval was necessary.

With no IRB approval, the publisher was concerned that the article (which did not paint a

pretty picture of back stage cruise ship life) might result in a lawsuit. As a result, I edited out a

potentially damning section of the piece, and assured the publisher that even without IRB, I had

obtained signed consent forms from participants and gone through a number of steps to insure

confidentiality. Tragedy averted. They published the piece, and I made a promise to never

proceed again without the proper types of permissions in place. Unfortunately, I quickly learned

that IRB approval is not always enough.

Getting access to do research behind the locked doors of prisons and jails required lots of

cold-calling, networking, and proposal-giving. I finally received organizational access after

going through the program's volunteer training passing multiple background checks and billing

myself as a "volunteer researcher" studying the emotional highs and lows of correctional

officers. I received a letter of research permission from the prison's volunteer coordinator and

was approved to do human subjects research through my university's institutional review board.

I gave a whoop of joy, glad to have permission in hand.

Eight months into my data collection and analysis, I came home to a sinister voicemail

message, the gist of which was this:

> Hello, I'm calling for Ms. Sarah Tracy. This is the director of research for the Department
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> of Corrections. I have recently learned that you have been conducting unauthorized

research in our women's prison. This research has not been authorized or approved by our office. Please call us immediately.

Through several panic filled phone calls with the director of research, I learned that I had gone through the wrong routes in order to receive research permission. Furthermore, my participant observation research was extremely unconventional, and the department usually only allowed researchers to do one-time surveys. Furthermore, when they did allow researchers into the organization, they usually required significant experience and specific research goals. Needless to say, my open-ended ethnographic research did not fit any of these criteria. However, at this point, data collection was virtually complete and I was able to assure him that no harm had been done. Thankfully, I was able to get retroactive permission for the research and carry on with my analyses.

Several months later, I met the director and shared my research. He was especially interested with a framework I developed about correctional officer burnout and structural level contradictions – a framework that was only emergent through the process of the ethnography. I asked the director if he would have provided me access to do the research if, at the beginning, I just indicated that I wanted to examine the emotional highs and lows of correctional officers. His response came without a beat: "No way."

So, ironically, if I had actually gone through the formal correct channels for receiving research permission, I never would have received access, and none of the research would have been possible. Sometimes, following the rules may be the biggest risk of all.

The risk that sensational data can distract from theoretical contributions

Consider the following two excerpts from my 911 research. The excerpts as written below were included in an original version of the article.

One of the most revolting calls that came in during my participant observation was when I was sitting with Christy. The female caller said that her sister's baby ate some hamburger and now it's "stuck in her rear and won't come out." The call-takers also reminisced about a case where a woman had to go to the emergency room to literally get disconnected from her German Shepherd because his penis was stuck inside of her.

These excerpts clearly illustrate that call-takers need to do significant work in managing their disgust and disdain in the service of efficiently providing police assistance. However, in early internal reviews of the article, I was told by several peers and an instructor that the excerpts were so graphic that it was difficult for the reader to think about anything but visions of hamburger stuck in a baby's rear end and a woman sexually attached to her German Shepherd. (Tracy & Tracy, 1998).

In response to these critiques, I chose to keep the hamburger-baby example but delete the discussion of bestiality. I felt as though this was the best compromise. Although baby-hamburger story still risked overshadowing my theoretical contributions, it was a risk I was willing to take in order to provide clear evidence of emotion work required by 911 call-takers to accomplish neutrality – a type of emotional labor that, until that time, had not been investigated or very well understood.

Reflecting on these risks

A common (if clichéd) question about risk is: Was it worth it? I am not convinced this is the best question to ask. Instead, I wonder whether risk is even an option. My experience suggests risk is part and parcel of ethnographic methods. Creativity emerges when we let go of our grip on certainty. Furthermore, when we question and challenge the status quo, we not only learn about ourselves, but extend theory and understanding.

The Perils of (what) "I don't know": Risk and Reward in Ethnographic

Advocacy – Aaron Hess

Weekend after weekend, new recruits are found in the rave scene. On my first night working with DanceSafe, as I stood in the desert outside of Tucson, a pair of bright-eyed ravers came to the table. One, adorned in the usual beads, visor, and flashy colors, had a new friend that he had "birthed" into rave culture. Introducing a new person into the scene came with the title of rave "parents." This particular pairing came up to get some candy and check out the table. The paternal raver, according to DanceSafe members, was a usual in the scene.

"Here," he said as he handed an ecstasy information card to his newly indoctrinated recruit, "read this."

She looked at the card and flipped it over to the all-important, drug education side.

He continued, "See, this tells you what is going to happen to you and all the side effects and stuff." Looking up at the group of us behind the table, he added, "She *just took* her first hit of ecstasy."

She excitedly smiled at us, proud of her decision, and continued to read the information.

Dismayed at the order of decision making, I asked the DanceSafe members what they can do in this instance. How do you help them if they've already ingested the pills?

Lisa, the chapter co-president, replied, "You do what you can. Tell them to pay attention to their bodies and come back if they need help."

That same night, another young woman came to the table seeking assistance. She told us that she had taken two hits of ecstasy and two pills of vicodin, and asked simply, "What's going to happen to me?"

I've got a lot to learn…

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In my work with the harm reduction organization DanceSafe, I travel to local raves, all night dance parties featuring music, glowing lights, and drug-induced youth. The drug of choice is 3, 4 methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) or ecstasy, a drug known for its stimulant, empathy-producing, and hallucinogenic properties. Users of the drug often experience profound interactions with others, even complete strangers, as if they have known them for entire lives. DanceSafe is dedicated to educating youth about drugs and drug use from a harm reduction perspective, which offers neither criticism nor judgment of users. Instead, the organization provides information about safer use practices, such as testing kits to determine ecstasy pill contents. As a member of the group, I frequently interact with drug users while they are on drugs in an effort to learn and perform DanceSafe's advocacy.

Such advocacy is complicated by the nature of substance use and abuse. Young drug users would come to DanceSafe seeking information or advice about how to do drugs more safely. But there are a lot of drugs out there, with a lot of side effects. And, young drug users are experimental, often combining different substances to produce the perfect high. DanceSafe volunteers, as local experts in the scene, are supposed to be the repository of drug literature, experiences, and more importantly, *answers.* Armed with binders full of information, glossy educational cards for young drug users to take home, and personal experiences, DanceSafe members conduct a questionable health advocacy for youth. Youth come with questions Mom and Dad would refuse to answer and youth dare not ask in school; questions about combining acid and ecstasy or how to kick a heroin habit.

And I'm supposed to have the answers.

When I joined the group in 2006, I was shocked at the amount of drug use in the rave scene and the impossible task that DanceSafe volunteers had undertaken. On the one hand, ravers were remarkably dismissive of DanceSafe's purpose. Looking over our wares, they would collect the information cards, loudly proclaiming, "I've had that one and that one and that one…" Toward the end of any given night, DanceSafe members would scour the warehouse or desert to collect discarded drug information to recycle it back onto the table. On the other hand, DanceSafe members are faced with moments when their advocacy did exactly what it was supposed to do. Ravers approach the table with pertinent questions, earnestly seeking more information to make a decision about what to do *that night*. "What happens if I mix anti-depressants with ecstasy?" "Have you tried this pill?" "Does LSD make your brain bleed?" "Do you know where I can find free drug treatment? I don't have insurance."

Every answer was loaded.

"I—I don't know."

Especially that one.

As a researcher, I came to my first rave with a notebook and pens, foolishly believing that I was prepared. At the time, I didn't realize that I was expected to know which neurotransmitters are released when MDMA hits the brain or about contraindications between methamphetamine and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors. When ravers approached the table, they asked about who were and what we were doing. At first, I didn't know how to respond and just wanted to observe. But from the other side of the table, I *was* DanceSafe. Wearing my name badge, I looked as much a part of the team as any other member. But when questions surface about mixing three different drugs, I am called upon to answer. To *know*.

What if I get it wrong?

I quickly learned that much of my ethnography was learning to be a proper advocate for DanceSafe. It was learning about the different effects of drugs, learning about how ecstasy testing kits work, learning how to dispel the many urban legends about drugs. It wasn't that joining DanceSafe was risky for me, it was that me joining DanceSafe was risky for *them*. My inexperience was a liability, especially with health advocacy where a mistake in advising a curious raver could have disastrous consequences upon their body or mind. I know now, looking back, that I *did* make mistakes. I mistakenly referred to the drug 2CB as a liquid when it's actually a pill or powder. Ravers asked me on various occasions about the drug PMA, which was red-flagged on our poster as an adulterant, and I had no idea what it was. I'm not sure what the consequences of my errors are, but I do know that each one damaged the carefully built ethos of the organization.

Ethnographers that engage advocacy, that intend to actively *perform* advocacy, must understand their personal limitations before they enter the scene. Certainly, self-reflexively taking stock of our positions and identities is important. But ethnographers would be wise to also identify their *novice* status as well. Overly concerned with the *research* part of my project, it was easy to forget that I am an invited participant, a representative, and a beginner in this organization. And, my research and educational credentials don't mean much in the world of raving.

At the same time, ethnography is about *becoming*. My learning curve provided an extra set of "data" to analyze. I reflexively examined my role in the organization as I continued to grow and learn. My mistakes became personal lessons, all in an effort to gain the wisdom of being a veteran advocate. Toward the end of my project, I felt confident that I had effectively learned how to advocate as a DanceSafe volunteer, and was active in recruiting and training new

members into the organization, members that will eventually take over the volunteer program and its mission. I finished my project having given back to DanceSafe both my service and commitment, returns on the risky investment they placed in me. And, I left with a new appreciation and understanding of health advocacy, drug prevention, and the underground culture of raving.

All in all, I'm glad that DanceSafe took a risk on me.

Don't Take My Picture! Photography as Risky Data – Karen A. Stewart

I am standing in the middle of the Nevada desert, camera in hand, and I have a decision to make. *Do I take a photograph of the people camping next to me?*

Earlier in the day the answer would have been simple. *Yes. Take their photo. They're fun. They're nice. They'll consent. Document your neighbors.*

That was when they were "just" the neighbors.

But now my neighbors are rolling around naked on a tarp and drenching each other with beet juice. Apparently they have decided to dye their skin purple. I don't know why they are doing this, but now is clearly not the time to ask. I don't want to get too close and end up purple, either.

This is a strange research moment…

But isn't this what I expected? After all, I am at the annual Burning Man Festival, an event with a reputation for "radical self expression and radical self reliance[2]" and for days I've been observing and documenting a wide range of performance art. This moment shouldn't be any different. But it is different – at least to me. It's different because the scene is abruptly changing before my eyes and I no longer understand what I am seeing. My laid back neighbors

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[2] For more information about the Burning Man Festival, visit http://www.burningman.com/

are no longer laid back. They are naked and caught up in the creation of their performance – a performance I am witnessing without a context. And I don't have time to process this new scene before I must decide whether or not to photograph it. The performance is passing. My neighbors are rapidly becoming more purple than pink. It will be over soon.

Do I take a photograph of the people camping next to me? The naked, purple people camping next to me?

I tell myself to decide now – and I go with 'Yes.' Take their photo. They're fun. They're nice. Ask for consent later. Document your neighbors.

<div align="center">***</div>

When I stand behind the camera, I feel an ethical tension. The camera clearly marks me as researcher – a privileged observer, recorder, and voyeur who frames, reduces, and objectifies her research subjects. But I also know I am capturing unique moments of human expression and bearing witness to passion and play – modes of expression easily dismissed by dominant arenas of cultural production. The camera allows me to capture these moments and to share their importance with new audiences – a process made especially effective by the power of visual data.

I do not dismiss this tension. I have been trained in the practice of new ethnography, a highly reflexive approach to ethnographic research which challenges ethnographers to constantly consider their relationship to their research topic and the people it involves. As a counter argument to ethnographic methods based on positivist principles, new ethnography is also a reminder that data is never truly objective. New ethnography acknowledges the limitations and biases inherent to the process of data collection and presentation, and calls for researchers to bring these biases out in the open.

I choose to operate within this spirit of reflexivity, so I carefully contemplate each click of my camera. As the researcher, I am the one ultimately responsible for creating, interpreting, and circulating my images – and while I cannot completely control how audiences will read and perceive the images I create, I can make the effort to respectfully present the material and the people contained within.

Theoretically, methodologically, and emotionally I am invested in this approach to my work – and I can justify this approach when I write my methods sections. But underneath it all I have some doubts – not about the importance or validity of ethnography practices based in reflexivity, but in my ability to actually execute them. Reflexivity requires time to think – to process and contemplate research decisions – and as I become more and more invested in visual ethnography, the one thing I am quickly realizing is that in the field, time is a luxury I often don't have. Decisions need to be made quickly and constantly – click or don't click. Decide now. Contemplate later. The moment is passing.

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I take the photograph and instantly nine purple heads turn in my direction. One of the naked men jumps up from the tarp, points to me and roars, "DON'T TAKE OUR PICTURE!!!"

I'm in the middle of clicking off my second shot when he does this, so I capture his admonishment with my camera. I feel badly that I do. Technically this is a public performance, and although they don't mind me watching, I realize now they aren't comfortable with me taking photographs and recording them.

My actions are violating the intimacy of their performance space. *Should I have realized this before?* I stop taking pictures and return to the position of non-mediated observer.

The admonishment, though, stays with me for the remainder of my fieldwork.

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Burning Man is challenging to photograph. On the one hand, event organizers encourage photography because they recognize it as a legitimate form of self expression and social interaction, both of which are acceptable forms of festival participation. But on the other hand, participants are incredibly media savvy, and they understand all too well how easy it is for photographers to treat the event as spectacle, resulting in the taking and circulating of images without consideration for the people included in the shots.

Media Mecca, the official public relations organization for the event, requires professional photographers to register their equipment and tag their cameras. They make a valiant effort to tag *every* video camera – amateur or professional – that enters the gate as well. They also keep tabs on images from Burning Man that are put into public circulation after the event, watching for exploitive images of festival participants.

Non-official participants also work as photography gatekeepers. It is not uncommon for someone to yell at you while you are taking photos – telling you to put your camera down, stop looking and start *participating* (a festival catch-phrase reflecting a philosophy where doing and experiencing is valued over passive or voyeuristic observation.) Others, like the Bureau of Erotic Discourse (B.E.D.), find creative ways to incorporate the concept of respectful photography into their festival discourse. B.E.D is made up of a group of volunteers who educate participants on the importance of clear and respectful communication in romantic and sexual situations in an effort to increase awareness about sexual assault. Along with their educational messages about asking before touching and setting intimacy boundaries, they discuss the need to ask permission before taking photographs of people.

This layered exposure to accountability messages I experience in the field reminds me that conceptually, reflexivity is not just a methodological framework or an extension of institutional review board protocol. Audiences also understand the potentially negative consequences of becoming "subject," and they are asking for researcher accountability as well.

I think of all these arguments when I click my camera. And I recognize if I am to hold myself accountable to me, my methods, and the participants in my research, I must keep working to find ways to navigate the compression and compaction of constant decision-making fieldwork inevitably involves.

It is within this navigating process I feel my work is risky, because it matters to me that my efforts don't fall short.

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A few weeks after Burning Man ends, Beet Camp (the rather obvious name I now know my purple neighbors go by) posts a request on an online networking site asking if anyone has photographs from their performance they would be willing to share. Given their earlier admonishment, I'm surprised to see the post. But after reading the request, I realize they are asking for photos because they, too, see value in a photographic memory of their performance, and they also want something visual to share from their experience.

I email my two photos with a thank you for the opportunity to photograph them.

One of the Beets emails a reply. She is surprised and happy to receive the photographs and she also sends her thanks for sharing. Our exchange ends on a warm, positive, and reciprocal note. *I tell myself, "This is the way photographic research should be."*

Risky Business – H. L. Goodall, Jr.

One consistent literary theme in ethnography, or perhaps it is just a consistent storyline, or maybe even a consistent heroic myth, is that what we do "in the field" is risky business. I wonder about that.

From Malinowski at least through Clifford Geertz, the ethnographer at work away from home is crafted as a one part grand adventurer and one part reflective academic, and the element of risk is a built in narrative device designed to keep readers interested. For while it is true that most of us read ethnographies out of a curiosity to learn about cultures different from our own, we also read past the facts out of a different sort of curiosity to see "what happens next?" The mystery, or riddle, or question that guides field research, and the storylines that emerge from the field, therefore must be sufficiently cast with an element of uncertainty—of risk—or else we bore the reader and kill the story.

But there is Risk (capital R) and there is risk (small r).

I think a lot of what we like to frame as "risky" in fieldwork is small "r" stuff. Most of us do not put ourselves in harm's way—risking life and limb—so much as we risk putting ourselves in the path of a tenurable career. What we call "risky" could just as easily pass as "sexy" or "sensational." We go on the road with rock bands or interview celebrities or politicians or executives; we hang out with addicts of every kind; we study illegal immigrants, or street gangs, or strippers, or the police. We describe our secret longings, our sexual identities, our childhood, and our academic lives. Yes, there is an element of risk in all of these scenarios—risk to our careers—but unless we do something really boneheaded we are unlikely to die.

Of course there are exceptions. Consider the anthropologists who volunteer for the Pentagon's Human Terrain project in Afghanistan and Iraq. So far two of them, Michael Bhatia

and Nicole Suveges, have met death in bomb blasts and another one, Paula Lloyd, was set on fire by the Taliban.[3] That is Capital R risk. And really, there is nothing vaguely sexy about being seriously wounded or killed in a war zone.

Nor will that sort of funded fieldwork help an academic career, given the taint of both military and CIA involvement with the Human Terrain project or other attempts to embed social scientists and journalists with troops. The ugly spectre of one of Vietnam's darkest legacies, that of anthropologists and journalists who provided military and intelligence officials with cultural and logistical information that led to the death of civilians and destruction of villages, hangs over it.[4] Different war, similar circumstances, maybe different rules. Maybe. But Big R risk just the same.

So I make no claims about being a risky ethnographer. The risks I have taken have all been pretty small, although at the time they felt large. I once illegally entered a government facility and was apprehended. Could have gone to jail, but didn't. I played in a lot of dicey bars and clubs when my band, Whitedog, toured the Southland. In some of them fights broke out. I stayed safely away from them, observing rather than participating in them. I've hung out with some strange characters in some even stranger places, but, so far as I can tell, I am not any worse the wear for it. And I have collected a lot of stories. It's been a good life.

I imagine that all—or at least most—of you who are at this very moment reading this chapter could say the same thing. You, too, have put yourself "out there" in the field.

You've been in some odd places and you've worked with unusual people who, given the chance, could have taken the interview or the field experience in a very different direction.

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[3] See http://chronicle.com/news/index.php?id=5455&utm_source=pm&utm_medium=en
[4] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Anthropological_Association

Maybe you've traveled to exotic environments in your own hometown or abroad only to find yourself without a clue about what to do next, feeling both lost and alone.

Maybe you've looked in the mirror after a particularly telling night of fieldwork and wondered what the hell you ever thought you were doing *there*.

And no doubt you have—as we all have—had more than a few dark nights of the ethnographic soul where everything you thought you were, whatever identity you thought you had, and please God whatever you thought you were doing, came suddenly and irrevocably crashing down.

So it goes.

On the other hand, what constitutes "risk" is less about what took place in the field than what takes place on the page. How we *story* the experience. And what we decide to reveal. The risk at this level is about what we disclose to readers about ourselves and others, and how what we write about may figure into our careers.

So, for example, I know there are details I've left out of many of my accounts. Didn't want to reveal, disclose . . . didn't want to take the *risk*. Sometimes my sins of omission involved keeping things I knew about others quiet, too. Discretion is always the better part of a tenure case.

So it went. At least for me.

But years do pass and things do change after the brass ring is yours to wear. The line, if there is one, between Big R and little "r" risks become blurred. The once all-important consequences of gaining tenure and a full professorship, for me, have redefined what "risk" means. I'm still not in the "life and limb" Big R category, but my writing and teaching has

certainly taken a political turn that carries with it a risk to further career advancement that comes with public exposure.

Because I write critically about Cold War culture and its reemergence in the current Global War on Terror; because I write about the CIA, the Department of State, and the Pentagon; because I contribute white papers and posts to a widely circulated blog about counter-terrorism and public diplomacy as well as participate in seminars on countering ideological support for terrorism; and despite the fact that I have served as a funded U.S. Department of State International Speaker on those issues, I can no longer be classed along other "safer" colleagues. Particularly when it comes to being considered for a senior administrative role.

I'm the kind of academic man who now makes other kinds of academic men and women nervous. Particularly if they consider themselves politically conservative, and especially if it is their business to deal with conservative fundraisers. Certain donors, well, let's just say I'm not perceived to be the right guy to be cultivating a relationship with them.

It's not my research that is risky. It is that I am.

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