

### Book review: Philip Wadds, Nicolas Apofis, Susanne Schmeidl, Kim Spurway (eds): Navigating Fieldwork in the Social Sciences - Stories of Danger, Risk, and Reward

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## Book Reviews

PHILIP WADDS / NICOLAS APOFIS / SUSANNE SCHMEIDL / KIM SPURWAY (EDS), *Navigating Fieldwork in the Social Sciences: Stories of Danger, Risk, and Reward*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 223 pages, €32.99. ISBN 978-3-030-46854-5

All fieldwork has risks. But fieldwork that democratises knowledge production has significantly more risk. *Navigating Fieldwork in the Social Sciences* is one of the most honest and courageous books on fieldwork I have read. Drawing from a wide range of expertise, the authors reveal the risks and rewards of partnering with marginalised people. This partnership allows a better epistemological understanding of and politically contributes to existing subaltern struggles. Indeed, risk is “generative” (p. v). The authors maintain that it is best mitigated by involving participants who overcome it every day – risk mitigation must be a collective act. This embeddedness of research in politics and in risk challenges the ethics review boards that promote objectivity and attempt to eliminate risk naively via formal and rigid protocols.

The book creation was democratic – authors were encouraged to speak freely of the risks they faced within their academic histories and universities and to present the transcripts in a conversational and embodied manner to allow their readers to “witness” these struggles. This method of collecting the authors’ narratives following democratically constructed themes is described in Chapter 1. In the succeeding chapters, the authors reflect on how their ethics, politics and social positions – gender, race, age, affiliations – play out and are affected by fieldwork even as they recognise that they “benefit from privilege in myriad ways” (p. 2), notably as scholars affiliated with Australian academic institutions.

Set locally in Australia, Chapter 2 reflects on auto-ethnography among sex workers, Chapter 3 on scholar-migrants’ collaboration in trauma research, Chapter 4 on nightlife research on alcohol and drug use and policing, where risk can escalate at any time, and Chapter 5 on work with persons who use drugs and on drug policy reform. Except for Chapter 7, which draws from feminist research experiences using elite interviews in male-dominated spaces, including the International Criminal Court, the remaining chapters all draw on fieldwork experiences worldwide. Chapter 6 shares stories of militant ethnography with anti-fascist anarchist activists. Chapter 8 is on engaged ethnography in rural community-driven development and grassroots women in local politics in India; Chapter 9 investigates development and peacebuilding research in a highly militarised situation. Chapter 10 tells of struggles researching landmine identification and removal in post-conflict situations. The final chapter reveals

the authors' writing difficulties, reflecting on their efforts against the creeping logic of neoliberal publication processes.

The authors' honesty and courage make this publication a provocative and productive read. Offering rich accounts, it enriches debates about the "dark side" and empowering potential of egalitarian knowledge production (Oli Williams et al., *Lost in the Shadows: Reflections on the Dark Side of Co-production*. *Health Research Policy and Systems* 18(43), 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12961-020-00558-0>). The book describes how physical, emotional, moral and career-related risks manifest in different situations. It offers grounded risk management strategies – highlighting the need to "over-prepare" (p. 114), collectively reflect on risks and listen to communities. The contributors also mark how risk and effort permeate the knowledge production process, and advise self-care and care for the research team.

Central in all the stories is building long-term partnerships with participants. Many authors crossed traditional researcher-participant boundaries by becoming friends and offering care to participants in need. As one author admitted, without her local research partners she "would have been lost" (p. 175). This commitment to participants' welfare haunts the authors' publication labours. In addition to leaving out identifying and sensitive information, they agonise about misrepresentation, flawed insights and silencing, given the required brevity in publication. They worry about how the output is publicly used: Will it bear witness to hold people in power accountable (p. 182)? Continuous consultation and reflection post-fieldwork allow participants to challenge findings and enable collective knowledge production and risk-sharing that dislodges the scholar-as-expert.

Given the rich individual contributions, I would have liked to see a collective discussion of the co-constitution of positionalities, engagement and risk-taking, research care work and egalitarian knowledge co-production. Engaged fieldwork ranges from immersed scholars withdrawing from risky fieldwork situations to where the boundaries of research, advocacy and personal lives blur as the researcher is a member of the participants' community. Such discussion needs not be evaluative of the author's contributions, for engaged fieldworkers and their participants better understand the risks, but should be viewed as a distillation of learnings from the rare reflections that this book offers. An important question to be answered collectively is whether other risk-averse approaches could not have produced the knowledges generated in such engaged fieldwork?

A collective reflection could also better examine how the authors' social positions allowed such engagements and sharing of fieldwork narratives within neoliberalising universities. Indeed, we must fight for universities that better recognise embodied research based on extensive experiences and help researchers to overcome the career risks associated with engaged research. This struggle is heightened by hegemonic tendencies of participation that offer illusions of

engagement in order to depoliticise struggles against contemporary exclusion, even in academia (cf. Gulio Moini, How Participation Has Become a Hegemonic Discursive Resource: Towards an Interpretivist Research Agenda. *Critical Policy Studies* 5(2), 2011, pp. 149–168). I re-echo the authors' voices amplifying calls for caring universities that must share care work in knowledge co-production. This responsibility is now disproportionately shouldered by engaged researchers.

The book calls for deeper conversations among activist scholars. Should we talk more about when risk is debilitating? When or *should* we pry open the imagined veil of privacy and better talk about how risks enter our homes? When does politically-engaged research unintentionally results in legitimacy contestation and conflict in communities (as subaltern groups are embedded within differentiated power relations and can contribute to each other's oppression)?

Global South scholar-activists must be included in these conversations. The risks they endure are often more significant, the safe spaces available to them shrinking and the privilege of sharing their struggles absent. Amid the globally rise of neoliberal fascism, engaged researchers in these spaces often continue their work without university protection and funding. Like the field researchers whose participants are their communities, they remain on the frontlines: their own homes and universities.

More than a must-read for field researchers, I hope these contributions beget more honesty and courage from similarly situated scholars, and in this way ease the sufferings and help in the struggle toward egalitarian knowledge production.

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BERIT BLIESEMANN DE GUEVARA / MORTEN BØÅS (EDS), *Doing Fieldwork in Areas of International Intervention: A Guide to Research in Violent and Closed Contexts*. (Spaces of Peace, Security and Development). Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020. 308 pages, €94.97. ISBN 978-1-5292-0688-3 (hb)

In contexts where there is a need for development-oriented international engagement, there is an increasing demand for complex, inter- and transdisciplinary research. The conducting of such research is frequently hampered by complicated and unexpected challenges and impediments, which are caused by differences in social, political, religious and language settings, among others (Charles et al. 2021). Fieldwork aimed at researching and diagnosing the actual bottlenecks where interventions are required is often expensive and takes longer to be completed, especially when it is necessary to collect biophysical data or carry out field experiments. There has long been a need for a publication that highlights