

Book Reviews

DEBORAH L. MULLIGAN / PATRICK ALAN DANAHER (eds), *Researchers at Risk: Precarity, Jeopardy and Uncertainty in Academia*. (Palgrave Studies in Education Research Methods). Heidelberg: Springer Nature, 348 pages, \$139.99. ISBN 978-3-0305-3859-0

Researchers at Risk is an edited volume that largely focuses on the risks arising from ethnographic research. Excluding research in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) fields as well as theoretical or quantitative research has proven to be a wise decision, allowing the volume to maintain a methodological focus. The ongoing exploration of the challenges in the complex relationships among academic institutions, researchers and research participants serves as the narrative thread connecting all chapters. Regardless of the aspect or level of risk the authors explore, most chapters invite readers to consider the researcher's position in relation to the subjects of their research. This serves as a welcome reminder of the ethical dilemmas in academia and its inherent risks, as well as those emerging from specific circumstances.

The volume is divided into four main sections. The first section focuses on the identities of researchers, while the second delves into risks related to external dimensions. The third part examines the risks associated with the research topic, and the fourth explores risks related to the research setting. This organisational structure groups disparate categories of risks together, which can be confusing, especially when some chapters stretch the definition of risk so broadly as to render every facet of academic research risky.

The term "scholar-at-risk" denotes an academic whose professional and private life is under threat. The last decade has seen an increase in the number of at-risk scholars fleeing from de-democratising and autocratic countries, and who are at risk of death, imprisonment, unemployment and other forms of persecution. Once they have been labelled "at-risk", these researchers often find themselves forever defined by this status. The number of scholars facing threats and seeking refuge has grown considerably in recent years. Yet, universities, governments and non-governmental organisations in secure countries are making efforts to accommodate fewer and fewer of these academics. In this context, academics from safer, more democratic countries have begun to interact with at-risk scholars and grapple with the concept of risk in academia in a more urgent manner than before. The outcomes of these encounters have sparked two notable reactions: immigrant scholars are seeking to move beyond

an identity rooted in risk, while scholars from host countries are contemplating their own potential vulnerabilities. This volume seems to have emerged from such contemplation.

Describing the inherent difficulties, ethical dilemmas and challenges of research as being “risky” muddies the concept to a certain extent. External risks to research and science cannot be managed in the same way as innate challenges. Research, especially with human subjects, can be challenging, painful, traumatic and sometimes fraught with insurmountable ethical dilemmas. Risk should not be a catch-all term for the trials and tribulations of academic research. If we label every researcher facing such challenges as “at-risk”, the term loses its significance and explanatory power.

Five chapters that delve into the threats academics face when researching in unsafe institutional, societal or political contexts form the core of the book. They address tangible dangers to a researcher’s safety, such as job loss, sexual and online harassment, accusations of misconduct and government surveillance – all consequences of researching topics deemed undesirable by certain institutions, groups or governments. In a particularly poignant chapter, “Dr Anonymous”, an academic who cannot disclose her identity due to her risk status, discusses the dangers she encountered researching sex work while being a sex worker. She underscores the price some academics from vulnerable communities pay when researching their own groups, especially when adhering to the activist principle of “nothing about us without us”. By keeping her identity secret, Dr Anonymous exemplifies how marginalised researchers often need to adopt protective strategies for their safety and careers in academia. Nik Taylor and Heather Fraser’s chapter also underscores survival strategies, not because of their identities but due to their positions as vegan feminists and their critical research focuses. Based on their experiences, they offer advice to critical scholars navigating inhospitable institutions and challenges in securing job stability and research freedom.

In his chapter, Jacqui Hoepner examines how researchers in Australia confront research silencing following accusations related to their doctoral research. Through his interviews with similarly situated academics, Hoepner identifies recurring patterns: conflict of interest accusations, allegations of misconduct or unethical behaviour, public criticisms and institutional reprimands. Similarly, Anne L. Macdonald shares her experiences of online harassment from the very group she intended to study: Australian veterans. These chapters remind us that threats to academic freedom don’t always stem from governments; sometimes, they arise from segments of the public whose beliefs or interests clash with a research project’s objectives. Collectively, these chapters contribute significantly to the under-explored topic of threats to academic freedom in democratic nations. Paola Colonello shares the perils of conducting research

in unfamiliar cultures and regions by recounting the risks she and her subjects faced during her ethnographic research in Iran, due to factors including government surveillance and cultural differences.

Four chapters pinpoint academic precarity as a major risk. Although academic precarity has only recently become a widely discussed topic, scholars have analysed precarity in other sectors for much longer. The academic world still needs comprehensive research into how precarity affects academics across various countries and social groups. Lokhtina and Tyler's chapter looks at individual coping tactics for precarity's systemic threats to researcher identities, prompting questions about these strategies' efficacy. The data presented in the chapter by Israel Martínez-Nicolás and Jorge García-Girón on the mental health of young Spanish researchers in precarious positions does not fully align with their assertion that precarity exacerbates mental health issues. Their observed bimodal and nonlinear distribution lacks a sufficient explanation. Jochem Kottaus, Karsten Krampe, Andrea Piontek and Gerrit Weitzel's chapter introduces an intriguing typology of the career trajectories academics pursue to handle career uncertainty, a typology that should be empirically tested. Lara McKenzie presents a thought-provoking argument, positing that precarity restricts researchers from choosing unpopular research subjects. This observation suggests that both individuals and structural elements, such as economic precarity, can limit academic freedom in countries without direct governmental oppression of researchers.

Chapters by Gerrit Weitzel, Susan Janelle Moore and Zibah Nwako centre on the challenges of research with human subjects for both researchers and participants. These chapters lean more towards the ethical and methodological issues of ethnographic research than the risks faced by researchers. Moore's chapter stands out for its candid analysis of the vulnerability and risk experienced by researchers and participants from different communities, emphasising the necessity of mutual openness, trust and patience to navigate these challenges.

Despite its occasionally overly broad definition of risk, the volume provides researchers with a wealth of insights into the challenges and risks they may face and offers strategies to manage or mitigate them. Even though most studies are from Australia, the findings and observations feel universally applicable to any country with an established university system. Hopefully, this will spark further discussion on the challenges researchers confront, prompting broader debate in academic institutions about addressing these risks' root causes rather than merely managing them individually.

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