Input for the panel "Risk management, examples from different contexts" at the KFPE Annual Conference, 12.11.15

Sarah Byrne, Political Geography, University of Zurich

First of all, thank you for inviting me to share my risk management experiences in the context of this conference.

I never packed a go-bag.

I had known, of course, that a major earthquake was expected in Nepal. Indeed, seismologists had suggested that an earthquake was overdue. Different agencies published dire predictions of the scale of the disaster that would unfold. Needless to say, this impending event and what could be done about it was a subject of much discussion among development workers and researchers in Nepal. We were all advised to pack a so called go-bag, a backpack full of emergency provisions, and to keep it with us at all times. It would have been cumbersome, of course, but manageable.

And yet, for all the months I lived in Nepal, I didn't take any serious measures to address this huge risk. This is somewhat puzzling, when you consider that I thought a lot about risks otherwise. Working in an uncertain post-war context with multiple natural and political hazards certainly presented many opportunities for risk management in my research. I carefully analysed other risks and developed a series of hedges and mitigation measures.

What I ignored - refused to acknowledge - intentionally disregarded was the threat of a major natural disaster that we all faced – my research participants, research assistants and myself. Thus, like many people in the country, I would have been completely unprepared when disaster struck on April 25th. Unlike many, I did not suffer from a lack of information or resources to prepare. So what explains this puzzling blind spot on my part? In the rest of this presentation I would like to both share some thoughts about this puzzle and also make some more general comments about other kinds of risks inherent in conducting research in politically and ecologically unstable environments. I would like to focus on how we distinguish implicitly if not explicitly between the risks we prepare for and those we do not.

Of relevance to this distinction is a consideration of probability or likelihood and consequence or impact. Characterising risks as being of low or high probability and of low or high consequence is a standard part of risk assessment. It is important to do such an analysis not only from the point of view of oneself as researcher, but also taking into account risks and consequences for research assistants and research participants. Furthermore, Raymond Lee, in his monograph on "Dangerous Fieldwork" (1995) drew a distinction between "ambient" and "situational" dangers. Ambient dangers are those that are present in the setting for researchers and researched alike, such as tropical diseases. Situational dangers, on the other hand, are those which the presence of the researcher in the setting may call forth, for example threats of violence towards researchers or research participants who explore

politically sensitive topics. With these elements it's possible to develop a fairly elaborate risk matrix taking into account probability and impact of risks, risks of an ambient and situational nature, and risks that differently affect oneself and the other people somehow involved in the research.

In this matrix, the most difficult to address in a satisfactory way are those at the interface of low probability and high consequence. Such risks, Anthony Giddens suggested (1990), are somewhat unreal because we could only have a clear demonstration of them if events occurred that are too terrible to contemplate. These are not risks that anyone particularly chooses to run and there are both practical and psychological reasons for trying to ignore them. Invocations of fate and fatalism play a role in our response, much more so than with other kinds of risks. The greater the danger, writes Giddens, "measured not in terms of probability of occurrence but it terms of its generalised threat to human life" (1990: 134) the more difficult to deal with. Indeed "Unprepared for the Worst" is the title of a very interesting article on risk management in qualitative research (Bloor et al., 2010).

Risks are never assessed in a wholly objective manner, but are always to some degree a product of choices and decisions on the part of those producing assessments of risk. These decisions are influenced by a number of factors, including emotions, beliefs, and values. The whole process of risk assessment can never provide a neutral reading of "actual risk", as this is both value laden and differently distributed socially, spatially and temporally. Classifying risks as high or low probability and high or low consequence implies an often implicit assessment both of the knowledge that went into defining the probability as well as the tolerance for different consequences. Even having done this analysis, one may in the end act according to intuition or gut feeling, rather than what an ostensibly rational analysis of probabilities and consequences would have suggested.

In his book "The Consequences of Modernity" (1990), Anthony Giddens describes four different adaptive reactions to the risks of modernity, which I think are also relevant for our case.

The first is pragmatic acceptance. This is a concentration on "surviving", on the everyday and its problems and tasks. It is an acceptance that many things in the outside world are beyond one's control and so limited outcomes are all that can be expected. Pragmatic acceptance has a certain psychological cost as it implies numbing or hiding anxieties about the risk and its eventualities. Giddens cites an example of a typical response: "The only honest answer I can give you as to how I can manage to live with the possibility of it is that I don't think about it, because to do so is frightening". Focussing on the day-to-day issues of doing research and trying not to think about earthquakes is an example of pragmatic acceptance.

Though I haven't asked them about it, I suppose that pragmatic acceptance was the main reaction of my research respondents as well. This is summed up in the first phrase most people learn when they learn to speak Nepalese: "ke garne?" This means "what to do" and

is used when the answer is obvious or there is no answer. Pragmatism and indeed necessity would have directed focus to everyday issues of livelihood security.

The second adaptive reaction suggested by Giddens is sustained optimism, underscored by faith in science and in the finding of social and technological solutions to global problems. I cannot find much evidence of this adaptive reaction in my response to the earthquake risk.

The third set of reactions suggested by Giddens is cynical pessimism. These reactions do not ignore or hide the anxieties provoked by the presence of risk but rather engage with them. Giddens writes that cynicism "dampens the emotional impact of anxieties through either a humorous or a world-weary response to them." Cynicism is expressed, for example, in parody or "black humour". I can observe a number of instances of cynical pessimism in my response to the earthquake risk. Interestingly, black humour has also been identified as one of the coping mechanisms used during the civil war in Nepal, to deal with fear about the risk physical violence. As Pettigrew and Adhikari write "through the parodying of fear, villagers challenged the notion that fear was the dominant – and only – emotional experience in their lives. The parody, in contract, suggests that there is actually more to life" (2009). The role that fear plays in our perception of risk and risk management is an interesting one that we can maybe address in the discussion.

Radical engagement is the fourth adaptive reaction identified by Giddens. He defines this as taking an attitude of practical contestation towards perceived sources of danger. Giddens suggests that those taking an attitude of radical engagement believe that although we face major problems, we can and should mobilise either to reduce their impact or to transcend them. With regards to my own risk management, this was definitely not the case with the unimaginable low probability high impact risk of a major earthquake. Interestingly, as a major earthquake becomes more imaginable now that it has happened, there is a resurgence of radical engagement in Nepal. In reaction to the risk of another and more serious earthquake at some point in the future, people are organising, for example, to "build back better". Many researchers working in Nepal have become engaged in such initiatives.

The aforementioned four strategies are helpful in thinking through how people cope with or react to risks that are perceived to be of low probability but with very high impact and serious consequences for lives and livelihoods. In the case of post-war Nepal, which is the context in which my research is situated, the main such risk was a major earthquake. In different contexts there are other risks that fall into this category, including personal safety risks such as kidnapping or sexual violence, the outbreak or re—emergence of major conflict, other natural disasters, etc.

Lest this whole presentation focuses only on my risk management blind spot, I'd like to also share some reflections on the risks I actually did prepare for. When I did my risk assessment, my main concern was twofold: risks my research participants might face and risks that my research assistant and I might face. To simplify, I can say that the post-war temporal context

most influenced how I assessed risks to my research participants, and the remote-rural spatial context most influenced how I assessed risks to my research assistant and myself.

In the former category, my focus was on political risks my respondents could face by being part of my research. Talking about issues of violence, corruption, etc can have consequences for local political dynamics, even long after the research is finished. Here I followed common practices such as developing trust, anonymization, talking to lots of different people, etc. I was also very much concerned about the risk that evoking wartime experiences, “opening old wounds”, would have a negative effect on the wellbeing of my research participants. I even changed the main focus of my research from wartime to post-war, partly in an attempt to respond to this risk.

I also developed strategies to reduce exposure and manage potential negative outcomes for my research assistant and myself: illness, injury, personal safety, homesickness, loneliness, boredom, interpersonal conflict, etc. I had worked in Nepal before starting my PHD, and at that time had received a fairly comprehensive security briefing. In most contexts, embassies and development agencies have good and updated information about risks, and it may be useful to tap into this. In conflict contexts there are particular considerations for researchers whose country has taken a position in the conflict, which was the case for example for American researchers in Nepal. Researchers doing research in their “own” country have a whole host of other/different security considerations.

In any case, having trusted colleagues in the country before even starting the research is a huge advantage that is not replicable in every case, but that I benefitted from a lot. If this is not the case, then it is very important to establish networks at the start of the research. These may be different than the networks you would use for gathering information on your research topic. For example, it can be useful to know a relatively trustworthy pharmacist or medical practitioner in the closest town.

Concerning my research assistant and myself, here again we followed fairly standard advice: don’t drive at night, take a wilderness first aid course, dress in a locally “appropriate” way etc. I also spent some time discussing risks with my research assistant, and in one case also with her family, ensuring that we had a common understanding of how we would like to respond to different scenarios.

These are some of the measures I took to address risks at different points in the probability/impact, ambient/situational matrix. Personally, I focussed a lot of the socio-political aspects of the post-war setting and on safety and physical and psychological health risks. This risk mapping will look different from researcher to researcher depending on the context they research in and on their own positionality.

If I can be so bold as to make a recommendation based on my experience, I would suggest that researchers take less probable but high impact risks more seriously. In some situations,

there is truly nothing you can do, but in other situations being just a little bit prepared can make a massive difference. Let’s not be unprepared for the worst.

References

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