Empathy and Risk: A Personal Response to Managed Engagement

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Entering Pakistan

In 2015, before entering Pakistan (or any of the countries currently classified as 'high-risk') most UK academics were required by their university to comply with the travel insurance policies of the institution. It is interesting that Pakistan appears on a list which includes some of the world's most unstable countries but also countries which might not automatically be assumed to pose significant risk. At the time of writing these include Afghanistan, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Kenya, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Mexico, Nigeria (Niger Delta), North Korea, Pakistan, Philippines (Mindanao), Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Venezuela and Yemen.

Inclusion in the 'High Risk Travel' category has profound implications. The first is simply the official stamp of threat. While threats might legitimately be described, identified or anticipated in many inner-city areas of the United States or Europe, there is a difference when risk is no longer understood as personally mitigated through responsible responsive behavior but instead is something which must be fore-grounded in advance of permission being given to visit.

With the example of my own institution, the initial response was that it was impossible for an employee to be given permission to travel. This response was grounded in the fact that no representative from the University had visited Pakistan within the remembered experience of those administering the process. Despite recruiting students from the country and projecting the University's brand in international offices and literature within it, the categorization of the country within this list of dangerous places meant that institutional approval was impossible to attain.

The strange impasse of the situation of risk, once being institutionally determined, being no longer open to personal appraisal, affirmation or challenge, resonated with me.

Lengthy and patient explanations were offered in the form of 'duty of care', 'institutional responsibility', 'insurance restrictions' and 'corporate liability'. The advocates of the travel embargo spoke with authority and with a sense of personal confidence, which made me begin to question my own justification for the journey. The responsible approach to risk-management appeared to warrant profound disengagement – which reduced the possibility of review through any kind of subjective experience.

At this point, the natural course of events would have involved an acceptance of the lack of viability and a shift to desk-based research from the UK. However, I have had some prior experience with risk-management. Not as a researcher but as a subject of the restrictions and paternalism of protective systems. In two earlier visits to Afghanistan, first during 2007 attached to a field hospital regiment in Helmand Province and latterly with support of international medical charities and cultural organizations in the North, I had become aware of the widespread disparities between the nature of contact and the communication that could be engaged with by individuals working within the protocols of different organizations. I had met with the World Bank, Department for International Development (DFID) UK and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Embassy staff and with representatives of Emergency, Ibncina, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and other medical charities and had been struck by the challenges presented to both the organizational understanding of locality and to local understanding of the organizations themselves.

I have increasingly felt through subsequent communication with members of various organizations - including the World Health Organization (WHO), European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC), Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) UK and ISAF Civil-Military Co-operation (CIMIC)/Transformation groups - that the relationship between responsible risk-mitigation, its impact on the communities that were being engaged with and the success of organizational objectives could be better understood.

This relationship between empathy and risk was the subject of this research-trip to Pakistan and that agenda appeared to mandate a critical engagement with risk, rather than a passive acceptance of categorisation.

On 4th February 2015, while waiting for the connecting flight from Doha to Islamabad, I heard that the University had exceptionally approved my visit. As I stepped onto the plane, I did so, surprised by the knowledge that I still had an academic post to which to return.

Risk Assessment

The assessment and management of threat is a rational and responsible approach to uncertainty. It allows for considered preparations, relevant training, and revision of strategy and mitigation of risk. Risk assessment has become a standard feature of corporate, institutional and state systems.[1] To a lesser degree, or perhaps simply in a less formal structure, it pervades and affects the decisions and experiences of individuals. Whether inherited from an individual's parent organization or self-defined, the improvised or established methodologies for engaging with uncertainty will have some bearing on the manner in which sensory and social engagement is experienced.

Severity				
	Slight	**Minor**	**Serious**	**Major**
Most Unlikely	Low	Low	Low	Med
Unlikely	Low	Low	Med	High
Distinct Possibility	Low	Med	High	Extreme
More Likely Than Not	Med	High	Extreme	Extreme

(Probability — row axis label)

Table 1

Personal/Institutional Risk Matrix (Severity and Probability).
Source: Author

The broad subject of risk management is beyond the scope of this paper, therefore I will be focusing on one aspect, within a specific category of context. This paper will anecdotally outline research questions which primarily consider the perspectives of an external observer, within the frame of 'risk' and 'empathy' in the wider background context of a visit to Pakistan.

Pakistan has historically featured heavily in the strategic political, economic and military agendas of many countries within and beyond the region. In recent years, this has become more visible. Most obviously the war on terror, the resurgence of the Taliban in 2006-7 and the acceleration of ISAF operations in Afghanistan, has had a profound effect on the western perceptions of, and engagement with, the Middle East[2] and wider region. Travel guidance, movement restrictions and risk management first curtails tourism and then begins to mandate an adjustment in the way in which professional visitors manage their interactions with the landscape and the communities inhabiting it.

The impact of this heightened paranoia is not limited to Pakistan; however, Pakistan is of particular interest because of its strategic significance within a series of concurrent local, regional and global struggles. At the nexus of economic maneuverings between China, Russia, India and the United States, Pakistan is rendered vital through its geo-location as both a trade route and as an economic ally (or potential ally) to multiple states. Its overt, covert and potential political influence within the region has led to it being identified as one of the world's 'pivotal states'[3] within the US and elsewhere. It's historically troubled relationships with Afghanistan and India, relating to the Durand line and Kashmir as well as suspicions of broader internal political rivalries, have meant that since its creation in 1947, it has featured heavily within discussions of ethnic supranational claims and sovereign challenges to its own and neighboring countries' borders.[4] It is seen as significant within the Saudi, Iranian and wider Sunni-Shia struggle for dominance[5] and since 1999, has been widely associated with the internal and foreign rise of the Taliban[6]. Whether viewed as a strategic ally or as a threat, whether perceived as the victim or the sponsor of terror, Pakistan has occupied an ambiguous and complex place within the politics of a global ideological struggle.[7]

What needs to be communicated is that what Pakistan represents, may vary dramatically depending on the point of perspective, the focus of enquiry and the self-interest of the observer. Pakistan is too valuable as an ally, a threat, a trade route or a trading partner to ignore and international organizations will not readily lose their agenda to observe or influence it. However, the manner in which organizations choose to monitor, communicate, collaborate or persuade may change radically

as the level of perceived threat is re-assessed. The question that is to be raised here, is then, what, if anything, is the cost of a corresponding shift of risk mitigation?

This paper will focus on the potential implication for history, policy and analysis in circumstances where the choice of vantage points become more limited and when barriers to communication have the potential to challenge empathetic engagement. Specifically, this paper seeks to consider the staged challenges to pluralism within contemporary histories that occur prior to the descent into the polarized engagement of military forces. Where risk has been identified and measures are variably employed as responsive protocols, a situation of distancing occurs – most obviously between the observer and the subject but also between the perceptions of different observers.

This paper will seek to explore the contradictory nature of mutually exclusive versions of truth, the way in which risk can be a catalyst to the creation of partial truths and the possibility of the loss of pluralist narratives as communities and individuals are denied access to each other's' vantage points.

The Legacy of Fear

On arriving in Islamabad, buoyed by the triumph of my bravado over bureaucracy, I realized that perhaps the preliminary experience had left a deeper mark on me than I had imagined. The 'High-Risk-Travel' form had not only necessitated convincing the insurance under-writers of my responsible approach to threats but also required a detailed itinerary. With help from the British Council, I reassured the University and their consultants of my responsible behavior, through the promise of an armored car collection from airports, accommodation within secure hotels and scheduled meetings only with known contacts.

While I thought I was articulating these precautions as a purely pragmatic response to an unfamiliar landscape, I realized, as I left the airport that I had also unwittingly engaged with the protocols on an emotional level. My plan was to telephone a nominated driver as I left security. He would then greet me with a pre-arranged signal and I would be ushered away in the safety of a government car. Unfortunately, as I reached for my phone, I realized that the battery was dead. Instead

of the efficient extraction that I had expected, I found myself facing a crowd of strangers with no means of communication.

As I dropped my camera bag to the floor and cabled up an emergency battery pack, I looked around. It would take about seven minutes for the phone to charge enough to make the call. I had seven minutes to assess what exactly was the danger that I was about to be ushered away from. I had been warned about kidnap and assassination. I had even paid extortionate premiums to insure myself against these risks.

The men standing in front of me were clothed in *Shalwar Kameez* and blankets protected them against the cool of the night air. I was wearing a fleece jacket and jeans. I felt incongruous, conspicuous and, to my shame, nervous. I could not help but wonder which of these strangers, all who looked tired but not aggressive, was a threat. I realized, I was seeing them as the other – as part of the landscape that the complex structures of risk mitigation was crafted to protect me from. In reality, my seven minutes were quite uneventful. The only challenge to my personal space was through constant offers of taxi-rides and kind questions about my wellbeing. As my phone finally crackled into life, I looked up the number of my contact, dialed and he immediately stepped from the darkness of the car-park to welcome me into the cocoon of the waiting armored vehicle.

I was driven through the empty streets of Islamabad. Signs proclaiming 'Kashmir Day' reminded me of the continuous cold-war with India. The driver patiently answered my jet-lagged questions and finally escorted me to the discreet guest house. He insisted he should step out to check first – I presume to check that all was safe, before allowing me to exit the vehicle. He then drove through the gates of the compound and only when they were secured behind me did he allow me to walk to the entrance. As he drove away and I sat in my room, marveling at the luggage that I had dragged from the UK, I realized that I was now profoundly disengaged from the landscape that I had entered.

It was defined, entirely through the risk assessment preamble that I had been so entangled in up to now. If I now continued to follow the itinerary that I had submitted, I might well never have to (or have the opportunity to) test the reality of the threat that I was avoiding. Potentially, I might return to the UK in the way that I arrived to

Pakistan, escorted, shielded, blinkered, protected and with nothing more insightful than a sanctioned and borrowed understanding of this country, its people and the risk it was guaranteed to pose.

I wrapped myself up in a blanket and went out for a walk in the night.

Risk Assessment and Reality

There is a fundamental problem with security protocols. The problem is that the risk assessment (assumed to be well-informed, accurate and prudent) not only describes possible threats but also eats into - shifts, defines and challenges perceptions I would make more naturally on my own.

In all unfamiliar environments we gradually refine our perception. The exotic becomes normalized. Barriers of culture become less pronounced and as words are identified within the melody of an unfamiliar language, so individuals are distinguished within the mass of a crowd. The stereotypes that we may create from a distance are overshadowed by the diversity of lived experience. Gradually, through proximity, empathy overtakes objectification. The experience of normal urban existence is inherently complex and negotiated. The experience of risk-averse urban existence is more simple and prescribed.

However, as an individual, I was constantly conscious of the general and authoritative statements that had so strongly framed my entrance into this world and which re-emerged again and again at constant intervals. I was here to observe and learn but I was concerned that potentially the frame by which I viewed the landscape would carry more meaning than the filtered content that I was able to witness through it. The nature of the frame appeared neither universal nor neutral.

In my brief journeys to Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad, I witnessed a range of approaches defined by institutional or national allegiance. I saw that areas of the cities that the British were not advised to visit were widely used by other nationals. I realized that representatives from some countries appeared entirely absent from the landscape and came to understand that they were essentially confined to their embassies or the diplomatic enclaves. Others would walk freely around the markets, travel by private vehicle and have local friends.

Within the Islamabad Serena Hotel, a community existed that had transcended the external exposure to risk. The faded luxury of this well-defended palace offered a place to concentrate on work without the distraction of threats. Razor-wire, armed security guards, vehicular chicanes and pedestrian metal detectors, insured that the individuals entering the complex were screened from the unknown complexity of those beyond. The over-priced fruit-juices, souvenirs and postcards referenced Pakistan but did not entirely divert from the peripheral vision of the ever-vigilant, Kalashnikov carrying sentries.

In Karachi, the gardens around the Avari Towers hotel pool were populated by middle-aged men, struggling with the heat in striped short-sleeved shirts. The ten-foot wall ensured that their interaction with the landscape beyond was more through email than sensory experience.

The majority of these aid-workers, UN officials, government employees and others, would complement and contradict the insularity of their hotel-bound offices and accommodation with more diverse travel beyond the secure perimeter. The situation in Pakistan is fluid and diverse. It is not war, it is not simply polarized and it is not standardized. However, there were signs of withdrawal from normality and suggestions that risk-management was no longer a discreet background concern. The visibility of security ensured that the existence of threats could not be discounted. The separation from the landscape seemed to suggest that the nature of these threats could not be verified.

Distancing of the Gaze

Aversion to risk can offer a justification for distance. The likelihood of direct damage from a perceived threat is reduced when a physical barrier or space is maintained. The most obvious shift in behavior is withdrawal. Defensive positioning can begin in subtle ways but can also escalate to very profound levels of disengagement. In other words - what may begin with simple scheduling of travel can progress quite rapidly and quite naturally to travelling by car, travelling with escort, being accompanied by security, travelling in only an armored vehicle, restriction of movement, military escort, confinement to compound and culminate in the engagement only through intermediaries.[8]

Distance				
		Offshore Surveillance	**Secure Compound**	**Security Escorted**	**Direct Contact**
Low	Low	Low	Low	Med
Guarded	Low	Low	Med	High
Elevated	Low	Med	High	Extreme
Severe	Med	High	Extreme	Extreme

(Row header: Personal/Institutional Risk)

Table 2

Personal/Institutional Risk Matrix (Threat and Distance). Source: Author

At each stage of retreat, dangers are acknowledged in order that dangers can be reduced. As threats and precautions feed each other and together grow to be more significant than it seems possible to either question, challenge or avoid, the sense, the intuition and the experience of the person at the center of all of this is greatly reduced.

Distance				
		Offshore Surveillance	**Secure Compound**	**Security Escorted**	**Direct Contact**
Low	Extreme	High	Med	Low
Guarded	Extreme	High	Med	Low
Elevated	Extreme	High	Med	Low
Severe	Extreme	High	Med	Low

(Row header: Personal/Institutional Risk)

Table 3

Personal/Institutional Risk Matrix (Disengagement and Distance). Source: Author

As an outsider, there appeared to be two key factors influencing my perception of the country that I had come to visit. The first was the potential simplicity of the narrative that I was absorbing. My understanding was, at least partially, informed by the advice and

judgment of others – presumably others who had already visited the F-8 area of Islamabad, hailed Karachi taxis by night and walked the streets of Peshawar. Their experience, although unsettling, was clearly not fatal as the advice was passed on to ensure that I did not make the same mistake. The second was that the risk-management protocols appeared to also involve a high level of isolation – and interestingly, these protocols erected barriers of isolation not only between these organizations and the perceived outside risk but also between these organizations and indeed, within these very organizations themselves.

For obvious reasons, the restrictions and advice offered through organizations to their employees is not commonly published. Even access to employees' own risk management strategy cannot be accessed easily. Furthermore, access to the risk prevention protocols of other organizations are not readily offered.

Not knowing the level of others' access or disengagement, challenges the normal desire to compare knowledge. While pluralism of narratives was embedded within this expanded community of discreet perspectives, the mechanism for concatenation of these narratives into a broader holistic vision appeared less well-defined. The difficulty in challenging an institutional perspective, by adopting that of another, suggested that the weaknesses in institutional vantage points could potentially remain undiscovered, unchallenged or tolerated. The choice of which views are represented offers an implied value judgement, suggesting that those not represented are less important. Yet, if an attempt was made to document all possible perceptions, the archive would become near-infinite, impenetrable and, therefore, unusable.

Digestible summative narratives are helpful in sharing experiences, reporting back to political sponsors, rallying donor organizations and constructing public campaigns. However, they can only offer a partial version of truth and in conflicted landscapes, the requirement to represent complexity and diversity could be argued to be even more prescient than in stable situations.

The aspiration toward pluralism and contradictory histories leads to its own risks. Research can be open-ended. Conclusions may be hard to reach. Policy may not be confidently developed to respond to the needs and circumstances of all respondents. The choice of summative or

encyclopedic collation of narratives does not offer a simple satisfactory conclusion.

As I watched Non-Government Organization (NGO) workers accepting their varying corporate restrictions, I wondered if the claustrophobia and frustration of this security bubble could offer some solace through the limitation of their engagement with the vast and contradictory complexities of their wider backdrop. Perhaps the enforced reduction of pluralism, necessitated through distance, is one of the convenient (if undesirable) by-products of analysis in conflicted environments.

The Mandate for Retreat

The management of risk is not merely incentivized through compassion for the potential victim(s) of the threat. Risks are borne by individuals but then they also become reputational, institutional and national – and as they move into each of these arenas they grow in degree and also in rigidity – further away from the specific experience and into a more standardized response to circumstance.

In Afghanistan, while feeling particularly frustrated at being unable to leave a base within the South of the country, it was explained to me that there was a term, 'High Value'. We hear this when journalists and politicians adopt the military jargon of 'High Value Targets'. It is also relevant in terms of potential victims. It was explained to me that I could be considered high-value. This was clearly not in terms of my utility but it did reference the 'cost' should I be lost.

It was seen as unpalatable, but possible, to explain the loss of an individual that was identified as an infantry soldier. However, it would be nationally embarrassing to lose an affiliated politician, an observer or even an artist. While being imbued with value was touching, it was clear that the personal benefit to me was only part of the mandate for safety. The issue of maintenance of mission and aversion to corporate damage was potentially a more dominant issue.

It is interesting that seven years later, when reflecting on the paternalistic explanations given to me by my University travel advisers, that the terms referenced could be seen to be focusing on elements of institutional liability rather than personal survival.

Perhaps this was not surprising. Within contemporary western military and civilian policy, there are well-rehearsed arguments to be made for reduction in risk through increasingly remote interventions. The notion of 'consent' is frequently considered. The term 'consent' as used in this context, is the tolerance by the civilian population of the activities of the (military or civilian) external body.

In contemporary western campaigns, frequently a smaller force relies on the passive or active acceptance of a larger local community to enable it to function. This maintenance of consent may be achieved through a shared agenda, through attempts to avoid disruption, or through threat, incentive or mitigation. While attempts to foster local consent are actively pursued through civil-military coordination, aid and compensation, I came to understand that beyond the immediate mission concerns, the tacit consent of another, less discussed, population was potentially more influential in the maintenance of any mission.

The death or injury of infantry soldiers, government officials or aid workers, however much reduced through technological advancement, informed intelligence and local cooperation will inevitably be a risk for any foreign campaign.

The public view of domestic repatriation of bodies or the enhanced awareness of the long-term implications of battlefield injury have proved to be challenging for any government or organization seeking to engage in foreign landscapes, militarily or through humanitarian means. While other factors may dominate in some circumstances, the public consent for risk is supported by the level of consensus for the moral defensibility of the intervention and reduced through the awareness of the human cost. It could be argued that a greater moral justification creates tolerance for a greater level of risk. However, the level of sustainable public acceptance is the subject of internal debate within military and civilian agencies.[9] If this statement is accepted, then there is one or two ways to improve the viability of sustaining public consent for an action. One is to develop more compelling ways to explain the moral imperative leaving engagement as the only justifiable option. The second is to reduce the risk to personnel of serious injury or death. Ideally, enhancements in both would contribute to an increased probability of popular consent; however, without extraordinary organizational confidence, the mandate for increasingly remote engagement appears inexorable.

Potentially, the problem is that it is much harder to argue conclusively for the reduction in threat than to argue for the potential risks that may exist. It is not necessarily a career damaging or mission threatening problem if high walls protect you against an attack that never comes. However, the failure to protect against an isolated incident of violence may have devastating corporate and personal consequences.

Pakistan and Empathetic Distance

As I visited universities in Lahore and Karachi, I was struck by the recently constructed high walls that blocked views of the architecture, landscape and communities beyond. Mandated by the terrible recent school massacre in Peshawar[10], these government guidelines are entirely justifiable[11]. However, it occurred to me that it would take enormous courage for a future elected official to accept the risk of advising that the walls be reduced in scale – so that once again the universities might engage with the environments from which they originated.

While the inconvenience and compromise of increasingly rigid precautions and restrictions may be tolerated as they incrementally increase, there is the risk of a tipping point being reached without a conscious decision being made. The inherent danger in this intensifying mitigation of danger is that it can ultimately and quite discretely, (indeed mostly invisibly) lead to a profound disconnection with the very context that it defines itself against. As such, as the precautions increase in severity, the clauses increase in length and the walls increase in height – each justifying the growth of each other – there must come a time when we lose a sense of our (once shared) context. This risk of progressive irrelevance, indeed, imbalance, has been recognized by insightful reports and papers commissioned by agencies including the Overseas Development Institute (ODI)[12] and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA)[13].

The difficulty is that existing mechanisms for engagement economically and politically prioritize the management of institutional and personal risk over the risk of self-scrutiny. Once the tracks have been laid and the machines built, it is easier to jump on the band wagon than to question if the journey is more sensible to take on foot. There are industries and knowledge-bases that have developed in tandem around the concept of 'risk'. Security consultancies, training providers, high-risk insurance

brokers, logistics contractors, local support systems and sophisticated bureaucracies have developed to facilitate and maintain engagement while mitigating risk. This is not only a political necessity, it is a large and complex economic business model.

I met with research think tanks, community oral history projects[14], university Defence and conflict studies departments and found myself sharing ideas with some extraordinary artists, performers and writers. In Karachi, I met an extraordinary veteran of dance and theatre called Sheema Kermani[15]. She and her partner were working on projects that somehow took place in parts of the city that the police and army had long-since found too dangerous to enter. In a calm and considered way she explained over cups of tea how they managed to negotiate apparently impossible restrictions and survive uninsurable risks. In this living room, with no armed guards, cameras or defensive barriers, we discussed prioritizing the representation of subjectivity in an attempt to say something that was more resonant than illustrative and help avoid the terrible risk of offering an overly extrapolated summative view.

The complexity of social narratives and the vast gulf between their portrayal at UN and local level seemed too great for any individual project to engage with. I started to imagine a place within a broader dialogue as a way to consider ideas in a more considered way. While travelling around Pakistan, I became frustrated by the contradiction between the first-person kindness that I experienced and the institutional security protocols which made all casual and unapproved conversation appear to be an act of audacious risk.

As I explored the contradictory worlds' of street vendors and UN diplomats in Islamabad, I tried to think how I might address my sense of unease at the partial views we so easily accept. In the last few weeks of my visit, I began to be aware of factional fear and threats attributed variably to local, tribal, religious and criminal allegiance fostered by local stereotyping, regional power struggles and global economic empire building. I found myself continually returning to the sense that alternate methodologies might offer the more dynamic and powerful cultural languages needed to challenge some of the tragic perceptual untruths that dominate a mesmerizing landscape.

Postscript

On the last day of my first visit to Pakistan, in February of 2015, I walked for hours across Islamabad through the slums of the Christian colony, past the luxury villas of the elite and through parks with children playing cricket or dueling kites. It seemed a benign enough place, calm but complex – and not without its fair share of inequality, suspicion and ambiguous threats.

As my time came to an end, I believed that I had inadvertently breached most of the British Council's advice. Returning to my hotel, I had just enough time to shake the incriminating dust off my boots before finally returning to the bubble of the armored car for the slightly melodramatic escort to the airport. As I was hurriedly ferried past the landscape that, hours before, I had leisurely explored, the strangeness of the shift in paranoia within a single day appeared both profound and irreconcilable.

I left Pakistan as I had entered but with a perspective which now offered a level of subjective doubt to complement the objective certainty of my carefully constructed and quietly abandoned plans.

Endnotes

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