

Never mind the width, feel the quality

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“We are in danger of having a wholly disproportionate attitude to the risks we should expect to run as a normal part of life.” So said the Prime Minister in May 2005.

At the highest level those concerned with our Health and Safety are worried that we are getting things out of proportion. Bill Callaghan, chair of the Health and Safety Commission is “sick and tired of hearing that ‘health and safety’ is stopping people doing worthwhile and enjoyable things.” He urges people to “stop concentrating effort on trivial risks and petty health and safety.” This is a sentiment shared by Rick Haythornthwaite, head of the Better Regulation Commission who declares “Enough is enough – It is time to turn the tide”.

“*Field work perils mount*”, the main front-page story in the *Times Higher* on 3 August shows that the tide of risk aversion is still running strongly in the world of higher education. Between 1992 to 1998, when last I visited this subject, six people a year died while working for, or under the supervision of, educational institutions – from nursery school through university. I obtained the fatal accident reports for each of them. They were all freak “one-offs”. Not one could serve as the basis for further systematic precaution. The risk of death for those “in education” was about one in two million per year, well under the one-in-a-million threshold below which the HSE considers risks “insignificant and adequately controlled”, and far below the risks of every-day life outside these institutions. Yet since then the tide of risk assessments has reached flood level.

Have the perils mounted? Unfortunately the report on the [Inquiry into the risk to well-being of researchers in qualitative research](#), the subject of the fieldwork-perils story, does not tell us. It is an example of qualitative research into the risks of qualitative research. It contains no numbers that might help one answer the question.

The Inquiry called for evidence: “Submissions/evidence are invited as part of an inquiry into risks to the well-being of researchers in qualitative research.” The call included clues as to the sort of evidence the Inquiry was seeking: “It is not difficult to think of situations in which researchers may be at risk of violence or other physical danger. Equally, researchers may become emotionally threatened, where, for example, the data being collected are distressing or the settings emotionally taxing.”

Of the 63 respondents, the emotionally-taxed were the main witnesses: “By far the ‘busiest’ section of the website was dedicated to *emotional risk* ... this is an area that many researchers feel has been seriously overlooked.” Many researchers? 63 out of how many? The website offered a shoulder to cry on for those unhappy in their research. The evidence collected was from an entirely self-selecting sample, prompted by the challenge to think of situations that were dangerous or emotionally distressing.

The Inquiry concluded with seven expensive and labour-intensive recommendations. In brief, all qualitative researchers, and their teachers and supervisors, should be given safety training, and the ESRC, funders and ethics committees should ensure that it is put into practice.

The Inquiry provides examples of research in dangerous places and into dangerous cultures where the risks should obviously be considered. It also found instances of

psychologically fragile researchers doing research for which they were not emotionally suited. If the distress were inherent in the data rather than the researchers, then the counselors proposed for treating emotional problems would also need counselors to cope with the compound distress. And they in turn.

The Inquiry asserts that “emotional harm is a particular problem” – “one researcher never finished her PhD, having felt ‘very lonely’ and ‘very alienated’ after returning to academic and private life and leaving behind an immersive fieldwork experience”. It concedes that “such harm is not commonplace”, but presents no measures of the magnitude of the problem, no quantitative evidence of mounting danger to justify the research-inhibiting measures that it proposes. It presents no statistical evidence that the risks of qualitative research are greater than “the risks we should expect to run as a normal part of life.” It offers no reasons to suppose that most qualitative researchers need undertake risk assessments additional to those that they do on getting out of bed every morning.

The Prime Ministerial pronouncement concluded that the result of excessive risk aversion “is a plethora of rules, guidelines, responses to ‘scandals’ of one nature or another that ends up having utterly perverse consequences.” Most academics can provide numerous examples of their own but, like Canute, feel powerless to turn the tide of paranoia that is producing them. The prominent, extensive and uncritical coverage by the *Times Higher* of the *Inquiry into the risk to well-being of researchers in qualitative research* can only add to the plethora, and exacerbate this sense of powerlessness.