This item was submitted to [Loughborough's Research Repository](#) by the author.
Items in Figshare are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated.

Disaster conversations: intersecting perspectives on cross-cultural disaster research

PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

<https://doi.org/10.1108/DPM-03-2021-0107>

PUBLISHER

Emerald

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

This paper was accepted for publication in the journal Disaster Prevention and Management: an international journal and the definitive published version is available at <https://doi.org/10.1108/DPM-03-2021-0107>

LICENCE

CC BY-NC 4.0

REPOSITORY RECORD

Goodall, Susie, Zainab Khalid, and Monia Del-Pinto. 2021. "Disaster Conversations: Intersecting Perspectives on Cross-cultural Disaster Research". Loughborough University. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/16903156.v1>.

Disaster conversations: intersecting perspectives on cross-cultural disaster research

Purpose

This paper aims to demonstrate the importance of conversation among disaster studies researchers who may be positioned at times and to varying degrees as both insiders and outsiders in relation to the contexts in which they work. Three key questions are explored: how we identify with and relate to people in our study areas, who we do research for and what this means for knowledge creation and research practice.

Design

Prompted by the Power Prestige and Forgotten Values manifesto (2019), the authors conversed with one another by email and video call, asking questions that triggered reflection. The emerging themes informed the key questions and the structure of the paper. We write with three individual voices to highlight the element of dialogue and our different experiences.

Findings

Sharing in depth with other researchers from different cultural and disciplinary backgrounds created space to both listen and find a voice. Emerging themes were positionality, how knowledge is used and implications for research practice. Researchers are part of a living system with the potential to serve, exploit or damage. Knowledge is generated at multiple scales and we can act as a bridge between people and policy makers, using networks.

Practical implications

We remain open and unbiased to 'new' local/contextual knowledge, adopting the attitude of a learner. Knowledge creation should focus on pragmatic outcomes such as informing emergency planning.

Value

We use a novel dialogical approach to demonstrate the value of conversation among researchers from different backgrounds that enables them to question and challenge each other in a supportive environment. This leads to deeper understanding of our role as cross-cultural researchers and reveals unifying questions and implications for research practice.

Keywords

Disaster studies; positionality; decolonising; cross-cultural; knowledge; dialogue; early career researcher

Introduction

The Power, Prestige and Forgotten Values manifesto for disaster studies (n.a., 2019) highlighted several concerns with how disaster studies research is carried out. It focuses on unequal relationships between “local” and “external” researchers and research being done about people, rather than by, with and for them. In addition, it highlights how research agendas can be dominated by “Enlightenment thinking” along with the drive to meet publishing and career objectives. By highlighting these challenges, the manifesto aims to inspire “respectful, reciprocal and genuine relationships” (p.1) between disaster studies researchers.

In light of this, our paper attempts to foster such genuine relationships, through dialogue, as we reflect on who we are as researchers and what this means for practically carrying out our research, in particular fieldwork. As three disaster studies doctoral students, we reflect on our identity and positionality by sharing experience, asking probing questions and delving into nuances of language and meaning. We come from different parts of the world, are studying at institutions in different countries and researching different contexts, bringing perspectives from Pakistan, Italy, China and the United Kingdom. The paper is a culmination of our conversations with each other via email and video calling over a period of six months. The three questions we pose in the paper

will help early career disaster researchers to ground their positionality and purpose in their own academic journeys.

Literature review

As early career researchers (ECRs), we learn to engage with experienced academics and past research trajectories as well as current debate in our field through literature, as well as through dialogue with each other. The hazard-vulnerability paradigm shift since the 1970s has been one major influence in disaster studies, as researchers moved away from a focus on hazards and technocratic solutions, towards a paradigm based on vulnerability generated by root causes, dynamic pressures and unsafe conditions that are embedded within a society (Blaikie *et al.*, 1994; O’Keefe *et al.*, 1976; Wisner *et al.*, 2004). Forty years later, disaster studies is once again going through a process of reflection and autocritique, as outlined by Gaillard (2019) who refers to the concept of hegemony to explain why Western¹ epistemologies still dominate the discourse of disasters.

The vulnerability shift of the 1970s can be viewed as a postcolonial challenge to neo-colonial, Western, technocratic views of disasters and rigid research methods (Gaillard, 2019). The current shift is then a decolonising challenge to the study of disasters through the lens of Western theoretical frameworks, by Western researchers and institutions, that perpetuates leaving out local voices and the contextual and historical understanding of language and events. In light of the call for these voices to be heard, how should we proceed in a research career? We read that

---

¹ We recognise the multiple overlapping meanings of the term ‘Western’, and also its use as a blunt instrument which can stifle substantive critique and perpetuate stereotypes. Nonetheless, as the term is widely used, we use it as a starting point for our conversation. Here we use it primarily to refer to the system of thought stemming from ancient Greek philosophy, European civilisation and the Enlightenment and scientific revolution of the 17th century onwards. One element of this is a modernist belief in human reason and the power of scientific knowledge and technology to improve and reshape the physical environment. Another historical element is the colonisation by European powers of large parts of the world, and the ongoing imbalances in power, control of resources and influence, for example the global use of English as the language of research.

the very nature of research propagates a mentality wherein research subjects are 'marginalised others', devoid of the power of self-definition and self-expression (Mutua and Swadener, 2004). Is there a way to avoid this and if so, how?

Of relevance here is work concerning positionality, knowledge, decolonisation and ethics in disaster research. One starting point is a critical reflection on the validity of the concept of vulnerability. From a boundary concept, functional in the first paradigm shift of the 1970s, it shifts to an overarching concept functioning to flatten contextual complexities, or 'label' underpinning power dynamics (Marino and Faas, 2020), thus motivating the need for another shift toward decolonisation. An over reliance on positivist epistemologies² in disaster research manifests as the polarisation of 'experts' and 'non-experts' that underpins power relations between 'researcher' and 'researched', 'external researcher' and 'local researcher', '(western) saviour' and 'victim' (Marino and Faas, 2020). The two logical consequences of this that emerged are the use of vulnerability as a concept functional to this polarisation, and the disengagement of the approach to ethics from the context (Gaillard and Peek, 2019).

Gaillard and Peek (2019) note the ethical issues around the involvement of external researchers in disaster areas, where researchers may put additional pressure on disaster-affected populations by requesting data. They also note that the influence of OECD countries on the funding and framing of disaster research is detrimental to local researchers and priorities. As an example of a response to this, Indonesia introduced controls such as special visas for international researchers, a government approval process and working with local partners (Gaillard and Peek 2019). Such mandatory measures can work towards power rebalance and decision making, aligning with the decolonising research movement.

---

² Positivist epistemologies are characterised by a technocratic approach and a reduced focus on the social counterpart in the investigation of phenomena

There is a balance to be found between protecting survivors and allowing data to be collected that can save lives in future, and Gaillard and Peek (2019) argue for a clear code of conduct for disaster researchers to ensure no harm is caused. Some of the key points include making sure that the needs of local people are at the centre of research priorities and are decided on collaboratively and respecting local voices, languages and practices and expanding the narrow framing of disaster research. Where local and external researchers work together, open and equal relationships can be encouraged. Thus, local researchers are able to direct and critique the approaches of their foreign colleagues and receive recognition. All of these are important for early career researchers to engage with, in thinking about implications for our research practice, particularly where we are working in countries different from our home institutions and in unfamiliar cultures³.

Regarding decolonising knowledge systems, Verran (2014) brings sharper focus to our awareness of the different 'ways of thinking' that we encounter, reframing completely what it means to critique, analyse and generalise in research. Her discussion of 'foundationism' gives us language to use as we become aware of the influences and intellectual foundations that shape us. Her proposed solution (shifting from *meta* critique (transcendent, abstract, theorising) to *infra* critique where knowing and knowledge emerge from collective practice), describes what we are doing with this dialogue. It also extends, more importantly, to our relationships with those whose lives are affected by what we research, as well as our co-researchers. There are parallels here with Santos' (2014) 'abyssal line' and his argument for an "ecology of knowledges that challenges universal and abstract hierarchies and the powers that, through them, have been naturalized by

---

³ 'Culture' is a term that is potentially problematic in leading to simplification and stereotyping of what is complex and constantly changing. In order to avoid this, we borrow the following definition of culture as "beliefs, attitudes, feelings, experiences, values and narratives, and their associated behaviours, actions and day-to-day activities that are shared by, or at least abided by, most people in respect to threats and hazards" (Bankoff et al., 2015, p.5). This acknowledges the significance of culture, while narrowing it down to practical and functional elements, both the tangible, recountable, visible aspects (behaviours, actions, experiences and observable activities) as well as intangible underlying beliefs and values.

history” (p.190). The point is not to “discard scientific knowledge and hegemonic Western culture” (p.190) but to create a new kind of pragmatic relation between different kinds of knowledge, with “equality of opportunity” (p.190). Halvorsen (2019) aligns attempts to create this ‘ecology of knowledges’ with his understanding of ‘decolonising’.

In this regard, our “intercultural epistemological dialogue” (Halvorsen, 2019, p.791) is a step towards an ‘ecology of knowledges’ so that a greater diversity of voices and knowledges can add to the ongoing work of disaster scholars. We have wrestled with how to define and use the terminology of Western and non-Western (or North and South), given the different understandings we each have of these terms, as well as their political and philosophical underpinnings. Surely, in an ecology of knowledges we should be seeking to break down such occidental/orientalist dichotomies? On one hand, these are blunt labels, too broad to be useful; on the other, the concepts are widely used and thus need engaging. Zainab points out that in her context ‘Western’ refers generally to any ideas that are not local.

We also reflect on the idea of *research as translation* put forward by Zanotti and Palomino-Schalscha (2016), who discuss their experiences of PhD research, critically reflecting on their engagement with Indigenous people, the hegemony of Western epistemologies and the questions of who the research belonged to, and who it served. The idea of *writing as dialogue* is borrowed from Howitt and Stevens (2010), who discuss the ethics and methods of cross-cultural⁴ research, allowing each writer to have their own voice and to engage in a conversation which reflects the realities of cross-cultural field-based research involving “respectful listening, difficult and challenging engagements, careful attention to nuances...and a critical long-term consideration of the implications of methods in the construction of meaning” (p.40). *Dialogue in a context of trust*

---

⁴ We use ‘cross-cultural’ here to mean research that includes institutions, researchers and participants from multiple cultures and hence has to navigate a diversity of ideas about what research is, and how culture and geography shape thinking (Howitt and Stevens, 2010).

and mutual respect is key to debate in all academia, but especially in our field, between researchers and people facing hazards and threats (Wisner, 2016). It is vital for co-creating knowledge between insiders and outsiders, that can be built upon to bring about change that reduces risk.

Where do we position ourselves/who are we?

Susie: I'm interested to know whether we view ourselves as local or external researchers, and what these terms mean? I'm from the UK, carrying out my research on debris flows and landslides in northwest China, so I would place myself and be viewed by colleagues there as external. This means I speak the language poorly, have a limited understanding of the culture and have not spent significant time there. In view of my education and cultural background, I am regarded as a "Western" researcher. Initially the label held little meaning for me personally, but it became clearer the more I considered, through dialogue and discussion, what it means to others. The process also began to reveal my previously unseen intellectual foundations. Recognising this and reflecting on why I'm doing this research in this place and how I'm viewed by non-western colleagues and research participants is a critical element of my positionality. Do I still have a role to play as an outsider? My conclusion is yes, but only as a 'learner', not as an 'expert'.

Zainab: My research deals with flood and landslide vulnerability assessment in Northern Pakistan. Being a Pakistani, I believe that I stand at a vantage point where I am considered partial insider. A former British colony turned nation-state, Pakistan has extensive use of English and Urdu in almost all parts of the country. For the most part, having a common language with the local people broke down the communication barriers and helped me in establishing trust and ties with local people. I was also familiar with the lifeways and culture of people in that region through literature, friends and colleagues (from that area) and my previous visits. However, despite having this knowledge of the socio-cultural and religious dynamics of the region, I remained oblivious to many

cultural and religious specificities which made me an outsider from the perspective of the local population. Culture, as a lived reality, is constantly changing and is difficult to comprehend especially from 'outside'. The exercise becomes particularly complicated and messy when culture is unpacked in relation to disaster and risk (Bankoff *et al.*, 2015). I realised this as I gained in depth insight into the local festivals and traditions, local perceptions, actions and decisions, which happened only after I started living among the people (also see Suwankhong and Liamputtong, 2015). Lastly, although I speak both common languages (English and Urdu), like Susie my poor understanding of the native languages (Burushiki and Wakhi) also categorised me as an outsider.

Monia: I am a doctoral researcher based in a UK university, studying urban public open spaces and urban vulnerability in the territories hit by the 2016/17 Central Italy earthquake. As a native Italian, born and raised in the city of L'Aquila, I consider myself an insider, almost local researcher, even though not all my case studies are in my home region. My attitude toward disaster research has been shaped by the contrast between my first-hand experience of the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake and the narratives built over the years around that event, from both media and scholars. As a researcher, I came across studies that were faultless in their application of quantitative methods, yet hardly rendered the actual complexity of the context I knew, with representation choices often reinforcing the narratives of failure following the earthquake— i.e. labelling territories and people as vulnerable, not resilient, or victims (Wisner, 2016). The 2009 L'Aquila earthquake has a relevance in my work also because of the precedent created by the trial of scientists – a case affecting the Italian public opinion, perception of disasters and the attitude toward the chain of risk governance (Alexander, 2014). Those considerations became self-reflection once I started my academic journey, as I realised that in the rush to generate impact, we tend to overlook the non-academic effects of our work and objectify the living systems we work with. As a researcher, I am guided by an interest in providing the best possible theoretical contribution, but I am also concerned whether we are serving, exploiting, or even damaging the

contexts we study. I am aware that the outcomes of my work, the narrative I will use to communicate them, and the platform for their dissemination, will have reverberation on those realities.

Who are we making research for?

Susie: Following on from your reflection Monia, this is a crucial question that needs to be asked much earlier in the research process than current practice allows - it is usually after a research proposal is written that there is any interaction with people it may affect, hence the disconnect. My research is about debris flows and landslides in northwest China. I'm exploring the human-environment interactions that influence these hazards, and the synergies and tensions between different perceptions of risk held by local residents, scientists and policy makers. Of course, the underlying aim is to reduce the risk of disasters but making this happen is a question of incremental steps by a large pool of researchers rather than a magic bullet from one PhD (and dependent on influencing policy which then needs to be enacted). Intertwined with this aim is the reality that I'm doing a PhD for myself - for my career and for intellectual curiosity. But I need to do so aware of the potential impacts my presence and my work may have - for example, will my interactions with people alter their perceptions of risk? I've observed that field experiments and monitoring equipment may lead to increased concern from residents but at the same time inspiring young people to study geohazards themselves. This confirms Zainab's point that we are interacting with responsive individuals and societies and can have an impact in unexpected and unpredictable ways.

Monia: I agree with Susie about the intellectual curiosity as a primary driver of our research – an aspect that in my case was reinforced by first-hand experience of disaster. I drafted my research proposal to explore the interplay of urban form and disaster risk, and ended up investigating the dimensions of planning, practices of use, and configuration of urban streets and squares, in

relation to earthquake vulnerability – mobilising more social science than I initially thought. On the spectrum between theoretical abstraction and daily practice, I depart from the conceptualization of urban space and end up on the opposite, pragmatic side, informing ordinary and emergency planning. I think my journey is a typical disaster researcher's experience because ideally we are guided by the need to understand the complexity underlying disaster risk and in the process we generate knowledge at multiple scales – part of it will feed academic debates, the other part is feeding back to the societies. This twofold contribution is the reason why I believe disaster studies can't be pure abstraction, as our very research is rooted in real world events and our work and its outcomes need to be validated by, and relevant within, the context, with academic significance descending from it. Yet, academic significance is crucial for us researchers and for the institutions sponsoring our work, with the quality of our research rated through impact metrics. Impact, however, is a word having different meanings within and outside academia: while from an academic perspective it equals recognition and prestige for us, the 'impact' of our work on the realities we study affects the context and might not be equally positive. I believe the former shouldn't be achieved at the expense of the latter.

Zainab: Personally, I find this question to be both simple and complex. Here I resonate with Monia and Susie in my answer. During the fieldwork, I internalized the fact that our workspace (field area) is a living, dynamic and ever-changing social system, and as researchers we occupy a temporary and at times superficial position. I began to comprehend in depth the varying levels on which knowledge is continuously being produced irrespective of its acknowledgment, interception or documentation. The intricate links that exist between different kinds of knowledge are laced with power dynamics that control and sometimes dominate and dictate the knowledge production. For instance, my interview with an old man rather left me speechless and wondering when he said “you will get a degree and a job based on the knowledge I provide you. You will earn money but I will be as poor as I am today.” This statement brings forth the existing hierarchy among the

actors/stakeholders as well as the question of 'knowledge ownership'. Whose knowledge was it initially and who does it belong to after it is transferred in a research setting? Are we dealing with mere transfer of knowledge or with the transfer of ownership rights of knowledge as well? These are the pressing questions that require serious pondering and reflection from scientists. For me, the sentence also conveyed the underlying frustration of the local man who saw someone else (an outsider in his eyes) benefitting from his knowledge. He later said. "You should split your money with me." Although my local guide told me that it was in good humour, this is a reality that we can no longer ignore.

As researchers, we should also be aware of the disconnects that exist between different actors in the disaster cycle i.e., academia, policy makers, implementers and managers (see Albris et al., 2020a). Therefore, for us, the challenge is not only to conduct meaningful research but also to find ways to bridge the gap between science, policy and practice. During my fieldwork, I was in contact with both communities and institutions as the two main stakeholders, and thus experienced *being the bridge* between them. People shared their grievances and views with me expecting an outcome: "Are you going to report this to higher authorities?" or "How will this benefit us?" These examples from the field show that knowledge production, assemblage, analysis and implementation is a value chain which needs better and stronger communication to assist the disaster-prone people and societies (Browne and Peek, 2013). Interestingly, as I progressed in my fieldwork, I became aware of the network I had managed to create within the boundaries of the one which I had initially entered. A researcher's network is a valuable asset which can be utilised in multiple ways to 'give back' to the society as well as to develop future collaborative research avenues with more involvement of the local people. Browne and Peek (2013) give multiple examples on how such valuable assets can be utilised diligently without compromising on ethical boundaries.

What does this mean for our research practice/fieldwork? "How do we do it?"

Monia: I tried to conduct my own research guided by the respectful awareness and integrity that I would demand in my experience “from within a case study”. During my fieldwork I interviewed local policy makers, urban planners, and rescuers, to understand how the urban public open spaces were planned and used before and during the earthquakes. Being a native researcher was supposed to be my strength, as I had no language barrier in the field, and first-hand knowledge of the earthquake contexts in that geographic region. The barrier I faced, instead, was the justifiable defensiveness toward my role, as I was perceived as an ‘expert’ investigating, potentially judging, and overall exploiting, not only *their* tragedy, but also their conduct in its management. Explaining my research, and my intention to return the knowledge after having it validated from them, in support of future planning action, was the first step to establish a dialogue. Also, positioning myself as a learner and listener, and introducing my background, seemed to remove the threat of judgement and allowed participants to start their own narration from a common ground.

The next challenge is in the future employ of my research outcomes, consisting in knowledge and methods for spatial vulnerability assessment. As researchers, we know that due to the divide between theoretical and practical dimensions of disaster governance (Albris *et al.*, 2020b) our diagnostic efforts are rarely followed by effective implementation of integrated practices – the so-called ‘*release*’, in the PAR model (Blaikie *et al.*, 1994, p.49), can feel disproportionately theoretical and unattainable. Yet, in the field, I could see potential entry points for change at the local level - for example, through the engagement of local policy makers and civil protection volunteers in rethinking some aspects of spatial planning and involving end users. This means iterative reviews of my work, and adjustments to fit the context, by resorting to a dialogue started during, but lasting beyond, the years of my PhD.

The last challenge is learning how to align academic and non-academic impact. They both require accuracy in translation and interpretation choices, to preserve information and meanings

(Chmutina *et al.*, 2020), but they also demand accuracy in representation choices, to portray the complexity of territories that can't just be reduced to earthquake sites, and to frame a single event in the broader national, even global, context. The last challenge is the choice on where and how to disseminate findings, what media platform to use, and what audience to reach to generate effective reflection and self-reflection.

Zainab: Our training as researchers is mostly dominated by Western ideologies and methodologies. I also entered my fieldwork with preconceived notions on what my research results and experiences should look like. When the responses from the respondents didn't match the expected answers, I felt confused, anxious and a little scared that there may be something wrong with my research methodology. To overcome the challenge, I reassessed the social traits of the area and decided to modify my demeanour as a researcher accordingly. The local people were closely-knit and shared a trusted bond among themselves. In order to gain access to the people, I decided to switch my residence from a guest house and to a local home. My biggest strength was my gender, purpose and my nationality. As a young female Pakistani researcher travelling for data collection, I was welcomed into people's lives and homes. I connected with the local people over cultural similarities, respect and curiosity for their local traditions and religion and immersing myself into their daily lives. Among other sources, I used my host families' social connections to move about in the community and collected authentic and good quality data over cups of *chai*. Susie's example of tea variety (see below) fits very well here. Each cup of tea brought along a different and enriching perspective to the table.

During the process, it was with deliberate effort that I rid myself of bias and tried to remain open, accepting and unbiased towards the new knowledge. The biggest learning from field experience was that knowledge is not static; it has different, diverse and dynamic forms and contextual relations with people and places. Letting my research participants take control of the narrative during data collection was instrumental in acknowledging and accepting the knowledge and

experiences of indigenous people as authentic and vital. The application of Western methodologies in indigenous research is tricky. Power, Prestige and Forgotten Values: A Disaster Studies Manifesto (n.a., 2019) provides a very concise base for the argument in favour of inclusion of indigenous people/scholars in disaster research. Currently, there is no doubt about Western domination of science and scientific methodologies which disturbs the equation of local people with research in their own domain because their understanding, methods, interpretation and conclusion varies a great deal from Western scholars. During my fieldwork, almost all my respondents believed the disaster are 'Acts of God' and thus have an element of 'naturalness' in them. It was a Muslim majority area and faith in one God with unlimited and absolute power was central to people's lives. My training as a disaster scientist has taught me otherwise. As an ECR, I wondered how should I proceed with my analysis? Should I critique the responses based on established literature? If I do so, am I bringing their voices in the discourse or am I establishing that local people, their knowledge and perceptions are flawed, thus they are in need of external saviours? Such discussions require extensive dialogue among researchers from diverse cultures and geographical locations. Lastly, it brings us to the infamous saying 'publish or perish' which is a nightmare for ECRs. I believe that the pressure of compliance and conformity with the existing literature in order to get 'published' is far too great on local scholars.

Susie: I can definitely identify with Zainab's fieldwork experience and the way she felt she needed to be consciously open to her views being moulded through the process, as well as not dismissing views that conflicted with my own or the prevailing view in the literature. My approach has been shaped by previous experience living and working in a context very different from my own. I became aware of how much of my thinking and behaviour was shaped subconsciously by the norms of the society and family I grew up in and was challenged not to assume that 'my way' was the only or the right way. As a simple example, a cup of tea to me always meant black tea, brewed with boiling water and with a dash of cold milk to give a warm golden colour. Drinking other 'cups

of tea' (green tea, masala chai etc.) has expanded my definition of tea and made the world seem much richer. But it requires 'expanding my definition of normal' and my acceptance of difference.

How does this relate to my research practice? I know and expect that many people will not share my assumptions about how human beings should relate to each other, why bad things happen, how a problem should be solved (if it is even a problem), which activities involve more risk than others etc. I'm more curious about how others think, and why, because only when we understand each other, we can have real dialogue. In my fieldwork I aim to tune in to where I notice differences, listening for explanations (without disagreeing) and clarifying my understanding.

I chose to use photo-elicitation interviews as a method for exploring the way people describe and interact with landscapes they are familiar with and the risks they present. This avoids the researcher introducing terminology or frameworks from their own worldview, as participants narrate their own perceptions of what they see in the image. Photos are able to bridge the gap between the worlds of the researcher and the researched when they "break the frame" of 'normal' views and provide a new perspective, and also cross cultural boundaries, allowing differences in perception to be "defined, compared and eventually understood to be socially constructed by both parties" (Harper, 2002, p.22). Images give concrete reference points, while allowing open expression as participants take the role of an expert guide, leading the researcher through the content (Collier and Collier, 1986). Photo elicitation methods have been used effectively to 1) deepen understanding of socio-cultural phenomena, 2) reveal perspectives of marginalised groups and 3) amplify voices for advocacy (Alburo-Cañete, 2020).

Conclusions

At the beginning of this paper we asked how we should proceed in a research career in a way that avoids marginalising non-academic voices. During the course of dialoguing with each other, we generated more questions than answers, but also enabled key ideas to emerge as we listened

and interacted, similar to what Halvorsen (2019) calls an “intercultural epistemological dialogue” (p.791). Our reflections in this paper conclude that the very act of ‘research’ renders the researchers as ‘outsiders’ to some extent, in agreement with Marino and Faas (2020). A unifying implication for disaster researchers, whether local or external, is to be very aware of our positionality and frameworks, acknowledge their influence and adopt the attitude of a learner. This includes care over using terminology such as ‘vulnerability’ and recognising the underlying meanings and power dynamics inherent in language. Thus, we minimise unintended and premature assumptions about others and build common ground for knowledge co-creation within an ecology of knowledges (Santos, 2014).

As researchers we have a privilege and obligation to acknowledge and communicate the existence of different forms of knowledge and to wisely use the power descending from our status as academics. This requires finding an ethical balance between respect for and critique of authorities. We observe a knowledge and communication gap between people, academia and policy makers, and see a role for disaster studies researchers to bridge this gap. Disaster related studies start from real problems and need to go back to real solutions as well. We generate knowledge at different levels but need to have a primary focus on being relevant for the research context with pragmatic outcomes such as informing emergency planning.

Following on from Gaillard and Peek’s (2019) practical recommendations (a code of conduct for disaster researchers) we have reflected on what this means for us and our research practice by questioning ourselves and each other (Who are we? Who are we doing research for and how?). This is an important first step for every early career researcher. We are looking forward beyond personal reflection to contribute to wider systemic change on issues that are not addressed fully here such as how to ensure research priorities are shaped collaboratively by local people and how research partnerships can function with open and equal relationships, allowing mutual respect and critique. The epistemological change we are asking for, and contributing to shape,

depends on highlighting power imbalances and allowing currently under-represented groups to speak and be heard. We consider ourselves (three female early career researchers) as part of the 'change' which acknowledges the contribution made by earlier research but challenges the current discourses and narratives and calls for a more open, accepting and inclusive realm/paradigm.

Reflection from Anuszk Maton-Mosurska

This is such a welcome piece, I learnt so much from it and many of the experiences resonated with me, also a female PhD student, and a Western outsider in relation to my research context. There are two points that I want to reflect on, especially as these are conversations that I also have with my many of my colleagues.

Firstly, Zainab's reflections on how her participants viewed disasters as Acts of God is something I have been thinking about following some reviewer comments about how, in Indigenous contexts, the social and political are not separate from the natural. This too links back to Enlightenment thinking and the separating of people and nature, but I think that some of these ideas are still quite entrenched in disaster research. It is reflections such as Zainab's I see as integral to moving away from a Western discourse of disaster by troubling the nature/culture divide and incorporating diverse worldviews, whether these align with previous literature, what we have been taught, what we think, or not.

Secondly, I really valued the conversational approach to this piece. Something that I have been reflecting on with my colleagues has been how individualised the PhD process is but, as Susie mentioned, research is always collaborative and relational. In many departments, competitiveness rather dialogue feels to be the norm, but I really question how helpful that is for ECRs and for the communities we seek to serve with our work. I think this also fits nicely with what Zainab's critique of how we are trained in very Western ways – not just in terms of content,

but also how we are assessed and what outputs are valued. I think this co-authored and conversational piece is brilliant way to push back against this.

Overall, the insights in this paper are ones I wish I had learnt much, much earlier in my career. I hope that this paper, along with aligned literature, is not just read by young researchers, but also used in training the next generation of disaster researchers.

Response

Thank you for joining our conversation and for these reflections. We're glad that our article has chimed a chord with your own discussions on incorporating diverse worldviews in disaster research through dialogue and collaboration.

I (Susie) find it really interesting that you raise the nature/culture dichotomy in relation to this, leading us back to a discussion of ontology, as this is a direction my own research has taken. Recognising the often implicit and assumed ontologies that may underlie views about disaster (both in research, in policy and in everyday life) can then pave the way for more fruitful dialogue and mutual understanding. It also allows me to incorporate my own faith perspective and explore the implications of this.

Zainab writes: It is very encouraging to see your response to our paper. The alignment of thoughts in the discourse of decolonising research and its methodologies validates the ontological and epistemological thought process(es) of ECRs. It is thrilling to see how often ECRs have similar experiences, questions and views which have potential to be developed into something concrete and authentic. I second your observation about 'competitiveness' in academia which is most often focused on individual success, overlooking the bigger picture. The frequent discussions among ECRs is key to stretching research boundaries as each case and experience brings novelty of view into the collective knowledge. I am personally thrilled to dig deeper into my research

experiences and bring forth the uncomfortable and difficult epistemological questions to make more sense of the methodological journey and its nuances.

Echoing Zainab, I (Monia) am glad that our piece is seen as an example of collaboration against the individualism and competitiveness we are trained for. During our conversations we could share views, learn from each other, and stretch disciplinary boundaries, compensating for individualised PhD journeys, so it was natural to structure our paper in a way that reflected those exchanges. We wanted our individual views and epistemologies to emerge, demonstrating the intersections, and shared questions, of our very different research paths. Yet, it was quite ‘scary’ as we knew we could not shield our statements behind ‘the authors’: the reader knows exactly who said what.

I am also glad to observe that our self-reflection resonates with other ECRs: to me it indicates that the methodological shift, the increased sensitivity, and reflexivity we advocate for, are collectively brought forward by the next generation of disaster researchers, with the support and mentoring of senior scholars.

Acknowledgements

We would not be able to reflect on our journey without the contributions of the people we met during our fieldwork, what they shared and what they made us aware of. We would also like to thank those who have mentored and dialogued with us through the writing process. Professor Ben Wisner was assigned as our mentor, generously sharing his time and insight, while technology allowed us to connect from three continents. Dr. Ksenia Chmutina encouraged us at the conceptual stage and commented on the first draft. Feedback from the anonymous reviewers, guest editors, and our ECR reviewer Sneha Krishnan have helped us make significant improvements to the paper. Our thanks to Anuszk Maton-Mosurska for providing a reflection. We are grateful to all our supervisors for their ongoing support in our academic studies – Professor

Lee Bosher, Dr. Ksenia Chmutina, Dr. Tom Dijkstra, Dr. Colm Jordan, Professor Xingmin Meng and Dr. Falli Palaiologou.

REFERENCES

- Albris, K., Laut, K.C. and Raju, E. (2020a), "Strengthening Governance for Disaster Prevention: The Enhancing Risk Management Capabilities Guidelines", *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, Elsevier Ltd, Vol. 47 No. May, p. 101647.
- Albris, K., Laut, K.C. and Raju, E. (2020b), "Disaster Knowledge Gaps: Exploring the Interface Between Science and Policy for Disaster Risk Reduction in Europe", *International Journal of Disaster Risk Science*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 1–12.
- Alburo-Cañete, K.Z. (2020), "Photo Kwento: Co-constructing Women's Narratives of Disaster Recovery", *Disasters*, pp. 1–27.
- Alexander, D.E. (2014), "Communicating earthquake risk to the public: the trial of the 'L'Aquila Seven'", *Natural Hazards*, Vol. 72, pp. 1159–1173.
- Bankoff, G., Cannon, T., Kruger, F. and Schipper, E.L.F. (2015), "Exploring the links between cultures and disasters", in Kruger, F., Bankoff, G., Cannon, T., Orlowski, B. and Schipper, E.L.F. (Eds.), *Cultures and Disasters: Understanding Cultural Framings in Disaster Risk Reduction*, Routledge, New York, pp. 1–16.
- Blaikie, P., Cannon, T., Davis, I. and Wisner, B. (1994), *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters*, Routledge, London.
- Browne, K.E. and Peek, L. (2013), "Beyond the IRB: An Ethical Toolkit for Long-Term Disaster

- Research”, *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, Vol. 31 No. 3.
- Chmutina, K., Sadler, N., von Meding, J. and Abukhalaf, A.H.I. (2020), “Lost (and found?) in translation: key terminology in disaster studies”, *Disaster Prevention and Management*, Vol. 30 No. 2, pp. 149–162.
- Collier, J. and Collier, M. (1986), *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method*, UNM Press, Albuquerque.
- Gaillard, J. and Peek, L. (2019), “Disaster-zone research needs a code of conduct”, *Nature*, Vol. 575 No. 7783, pp. 440–442.
- Gaillard, J.C. (2019), “Disaster studies inside out”, *Disasters*, Vol. 43 No. S1, pp. S7–S17.
- Halvorsen, S. (2019), “Decolonising territory: Dialogues with Latin American knowledges and grassroots strategies”, *Progress in Human Geography*, Vol. 43 No. 5, pp. 790–814.
- Harper, D. (2002), “Talking about pictures: A case for photo elicitation”, *Visual Studies*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 13–26.
- Howitt, R. and Stevens, S. (n.d.). “Cross-Cultural Research: Ethics, Methods, and Relationships”, pp. 40–68.
- Marino, E.K. and Faas, A.J. (2020), “Is Vulnerability an Outdated Concept? After Subjects and Spaces”, *Annals of Anthropological Practice*, Vol. 44 No. 1, pp. 33–46.
- Mutua, K. and Swadener, B. (Eds.). (2004), *Decolonizing Research in Cross-cultural Contexts: Critical Personal Narratives*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY.
- n.a. (2019), “Power, prestige and forgotten values: a disaster studies manifesto”.

- O'Keefe, P., Westgate, K. and Wisner, B. (1976), "Taking the naturalness out of natural disasters", *Nature*, Vol. 260 No. 5552, pp. 566–567.
- Santos, B. de S. (2014), *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide.*, Routledge, London.
- Suwankhong, D. and Liangputtong, P. (2015), "Cultural Insiders and Research Fieldwork", *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, Vol. 14 No. 5, p. 160940691562140.
- Verran, H. (2014), "Working with those who think otherwise", *Common Knowledge*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 527–539.
- Wisner, B. (2016), *Vulnerability as Concept, Model, Metric, and Tool*, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Natural Hazard Science*, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199389407.013.25>.
- Wisner, B., Blaikie, P., Cannon, T. and Davis, I. (2004), *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters*, 2nd ed., Routledge, New York.
- Zanotti, L. and Palomino-Schalscha, M. (2016), "Taking different ways of knowing seriously: cross-cultural work as translations and multiplicity", *Sustainability Science*, Springer Japan, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 139–152.