



# If you are vulnerable and you know it raise your hand: Experiences from working in post-tsunami Thailand



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## ABSTRACT

Scientific validity has historically been measured against notions of objectivity. However, try as we might, we cannot divorce ourselves from our own personal interests and perceptions that shape the questions we ask, the theoretical filters and methods we choose, and the conclusions we make. We are all human and it is this humanness that is tested and shaped by disasters. Embracing this humanness, this paper reflects upon the experiences and challenges of undertaking longitudinal research in Thailand following the 2004 Tsunami from the perspective of a research student. These include: common logistical and planning challenges in undertaking disaster research in a cross-cultural setting and how positionality, reflexivity, reciprocity and the differing needs of the researcher and participants influence research outcomes. Particular focus is placed on the emotional toll working in unique trauma landscapes has on researchers and the associated threat of secondary trauma stress and vicarious trauma, how this influences a researcher's relationship to *place* and the ramifications this exchange has on the researcher as a person and their findings. I conclude by offering recommendations on how early career researchers can better prepare for and navigate the disaster landscape and adjustments their mentors and institutions can make to support them.

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## 1. Introduction

The process of fieldwork as a human geography PhD student, who is learning the ropes, cannot be more humanising. Awareness of ethics, research rigour, and positionality are heightened when undertaking research in a new cultural setting, where unfamiliar social norms, interactions, and meaning causes a fundamental shift in the perceptions of the issue, the participants, and self (Murray and Overton, 2003). Before entering the field, the ethical teaching of 'do no harm' to research participants is drilled into PhD and early career researchers via supervisors and university ethics requirements. Recommended texts on how to successfully prepare for and navigate the development and cross-cultural fieldwork minefield offer more advice. Subjects include: applying for research visas; adhering to codes of conduct; wellbeing considerations for researchers and participants; negotiating relationships with host institutions and 'gatekeepers'; in-field logistics; language barriers; the art of creating and maintaining good impressions; and culture shock (Dowling, 2005; Howitt and Stevens, 2005; Scheyvens and

Storey, 2003).

These common challenges are amplified in the unique post-disaster setting where researchers are faced with highly stressful, uncertain, and sometimes-dangerous situations (Dennis et al., 2006; Hilhorst and Jansen, 2005; Stallings, 2002). For example (Mukherji et al., 2014):

- i. Skilled interpreters with experience in working with traumatised populations can be difficult to find;
- ii. Accommodation and reliable transport might be scarce;
- iii. Finding participants willing to speak about their trauma is difficult, particularly when gatekeepers and participants have been jilted by researchers that promise benefits to communities but don't honour them (a highly unethical but common practice); whilst
- iv. Interviewing traumatised individuals presents physical and emotional challenges for both the participants and researchers.

There are numerous reflective accounts that examine the research experiences in different environs i.e. different countries and cultural contexts (DeVita, 1990; Scott et al., 2006), in traumatic

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settings (Campesino, 2007; Silver, 2004) or both (Ryzewski and Cherry, 2012; Pomponio, 1990). However, there are few accounts of what its like to work as a researcher in the post-disaster settings that could help students imagine and prepare for the lived in field reality (Connolly and Reilly, 2007; Mukherji et al., 2014). This includes the emotional toll working in trauma landscapes has on researchers and the potential danger of developing Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) or Vicarious Trauma (VT),<sup>1</sup> how this exchange influences a researcher's relationship to *place* and the ramifications this exchange has on the researcher as a person and their findings.

To rectify this gap, this paper reflects on the range of experiences and challenges I faced as a PhD student whilst undertaking longitudinal research in the post-disaster setting of southern Thailand following the 2004 Tsunami. My reflections derive from multiple interactions I had with three disaster-affected Thai tourist destinations over the space of 2.5 years: Khao Lak; Patong Beach; and Phi Phi Don. I begin by unpacking layers of *place* and examining how places and people interacting with places are altered by disasters. Next I provide a brief overview of the context of my research, where the work took place and the methods I used before examining my experiences in undertaking longitudinal research in three tsunami-affected Thai tourism destinations following the 2004 Tsunami. Here, I concentrate on the experiences and perspective of the early career researcher who often has little or no prior experience in undertaking rigorous field-based research, let alone in a cross-cultural and post-disaster context. I also reflect on how this disaster landscape changed me as a researcher, my conceptualisations of the places I was working in, and the emotional exchanges between myself and others operating in the new *traumascape* that contributed to this transformation. I conclude by providing suggestions on how early career disaster researchers can better navigate the disaster landscape along with ways their mentors and institutions can support them.

## 2. Place, disasters and undertaking research in disaster landscapes

### 2.1. *Place: expressions of multiple identities and self-understanding anchored in space*

In human geography, places are viewed as more than physical locations and politically demarcated spaces. They are dynamic, elastic, and contested landscapes that have multiple identities, meanings, and interpretations dependent upon multiple viewpoints and social–ecological interactions that evolve over space and time (Agnew, 1997; Massey, 1993). The constant in-and-outflows of people create multiple layerings of experience, events and memories over time that culminate in a *sense of place* (Cox and Perry, 2011). The resultant landscapes reflect self-understanding and self-identity, anchoring people to larger socio-cultural contexts (Whitehead, 2003). Markers underpinning these individual and collective orientations include: relationships and social connections, memories, narratives of every-day life, personal symbols

of belonging and expressions of what we call *home* (Cox and Perry, 2011).

### 2.2. *Influence of disasters on place, belonging and connections to place*

Disasters change places. They can dramatically alter the physical and social landscape and, as a consequence, can prompt a disconnect between people and their surroundings, provoking disorientation and a *loss of place* when homes, possessions, family memories, inter-generational continuity and personal investment are abruptly lost (Carballo, 2006; Cox and Perry, 2011; Fullilove, 1996). These events disrupt the narrative of who and what we are, much of which is tied to place (Cox and Perry, 2011). Individuals and communities often feel disorientated and *lost* as the familiar individual and collective place-based markers are dramatically altered or completely destroyed by the event. This forces people to either alter or reassert their *sense of place* and re-evaluate (consciously or not) how they interact with the new environment (Chamlee-Wright and Storr, 2009). The resultant *traumascape* becomes the embodiment of tragedy as well as hope, coping and resilience (Tumarkin, 2005).

Some populations derive pride, dignity and identity from their altered landscapes and erect monuments to mark trauma events (Tumarkin, 2005). Other populations try to regain the images of the past and escape the taint of death and destruction (Calgaro et al., 2014a). This often happens in tourist destinations. Governments and national tourism bodies can downplay risks or shift attention away from newly affected destinations who need return business the most to survive because they fear that the negative images will cause tourist numbers to drop (Calgaro et al., 2014a). Yet each person's reaction to the newly created *traumascape* will be different due to:

- Differences in personal traits and levels of change to their circumstances;
- The nature of the relationships people have with the landscape within which they inhabit and the narratives and meaning people attributed to a particular place before the disruptive event occurred;
- The level of attachment individuals have to original place-based markers that influence self-identity, self-understanding and wider socio-cultural connections (some have stronger ties or emotional reactions to place than others); and
- The ease in which people let go of old markers and new markers and narratives are created and accepted.

This paper explores what it is like to work within this place-based altered reality. It examines how my interpretations or readings of the disaster-affected Thai tourist destinations and the orientating place-based markers that anchored my experiences of place dramatically shifted throughout my fieldwork, the impact this had on me as a researcher and ultimately highlights the difficulty in ascribing singular and fixed identifiers of place in dynamic research locations.

## 3. Setting the stage: the research purpose, the case study sites and methods used

The reflections presented here derive from my experiences in undertaking longitudinal vulnerability research in Thailand following the 2004 Tsunami as an Honours (2005) and PhD student (2006–2010). The research explored the multiple causal factors that influenced differential levels of vulnerability experienced in three Thai tourism destinations communities following

<sup>1</sup> STS and VT are real yet oft overlooked threats to the well-being of disaster researchers. STS (or compassion fatigue) refers to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms resulting from exposure to traumatized victims or traumatic material (Figley, 1995). VT is defined as the transformation of the helper's inner experience as a result of empathetic engagement with traumatised people and material (Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995) This may result in shifts in their self identity, sense of meaning, perceptions of personal safety, spiritual beliefs, interpersonal relationships and trust in themselves and others (Naturale, 2007).

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