
TIPS FOR EMPATHY, UNDERSTANDING, AND ETHICAL RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT

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This check sheet provides advice for displaying empathy, respect, and understanding when entering a disaster-affected community. The best practices offered can help researchers to be mindful of participants' emotional well-being while developing more caring interactions in the context of research. These efforts can ultimately help to improve relationships with respondents and enhance the quality of data that is collected.

Be Sensitive: In the immediate aftermath of an event, researchers are often entering communities where lives were lost, people were injured, and many parts of the community were damaged or destroyed. Disaster survivors often report that it is “therapeutic” to have the opportunity to tell their story to an outside researcher. At the same time, asking questions can bring up difficult or negative emotions among survivors as well. Researchers need to be aware of these complex emotional dynamics and to remember that anniversaries of disasters can also be “triggering events” for bringing up past difficult emotions. Always remember to be sensitive to and respectful of these dynamics.

Don't Assume: We know that disasters often bring people together, but they can also open up and deepen existing fractures in communities. Don't make assumptions about whether a community is more or less cohesive following an event. As such, don't assume that someone thinks, feels, or acts in a particular way. Instead, try to be sensitive to diverse perspectives. When in doubt, listen, observe, and always remember to ask rather than to assume.

Do Homework in Advance: Following a major disaster, it is typical for thousands of volunteers, hundreds of media professionals, and dozens of researchers to visit the affected location. Residents and leaders are very generous to give their time and perspectives to these individuals, and researchers should be aware of what has been published to avoid “reinventing the wheel” and asking questions that have already been answered. Do your homework in advance.

Disasters and Collective Impacts: If you are studying a large-scale event, please be aware that even if a person did not lose their own home, job, or place of worship, they probably know someone who did. Every person in a community struck by disaster is often deeply and intimately impacted. Please be sensitive to this and acknowledge that even if you are speaking to a person about their field or professional role, it is very likely that they may have been personally affected.

Consent: Make sure to verbally explain the project to each participant clearly and have them sign a written consent form when applicable (keeping the signed copy and giving another copy to the interviewee to keep). Always ask if they have any questions before beginning the interview and remind them that they are not required to answer any questions they are not comfortable with and that they can stop the interview at any time.

Be Clear About Your Role: It is important to ensure that any potential participant is clear about your role as a researcher. Sometimes disaster survivors may think that researchers—especially those doing in-depth interviews—are journalists, aid providers, or even counselors. Researchers should always be empathetic, but they should also not make promises they cannot keep. It is important that respondents understand that participation in the research is not linked to receiving disaster-related assistance. It is useful to have a resource or agency contact list for those interested in mental health, recovery programs, or other forms of local support.

Less is More: When doing qualitative interviews, it is important to ask clear and direct questions and patiently wait for a response. Although interviews should flow like a conversation, it is important to be mindful of how much you are speaking. Sometimes awkward silences are necessary and actually allow the other person to think through the question and provide a detailed response. Remember, they are the expert on their own experiences and we are there to learn from them, not the other way around. Probes and follow-up questions can help guide the conversation and get the interviewee to speak in more depth about a topic.

Confidentiality: It is important to not share anyone’s personal information with people outside of the research team. It can be very tempting to tell a participant something that a previous participant commented on, but please be mindful and refrain from saying things like, “I spoke to Mary from X Hospital yesterday and she said...” Even if you don’t use a person’s name, their role, occupation, or organizational affiliation could expose their identity. We do not know their relationships with other people in the community and this is a serious breach of confidentiality that could have personal, professional, or political ramifications that we are unaware of.

Kindness, Humility, and Gratitude Go a Long Way: It is important to remember that we are asking people to take time out of their busy schedules to speak to us for the benefit of our research agenda. Honor the agreed upon timeline for the interview and only go longer if the participant offers to keep going. Make sure to say “thank you” at the beginning and the end of the research exchange, and let participants know how grateful you are. Participants are much more likely to spend time speaking with you and offering details about their experience if you are kind and appreciative. In some cases, it is appropriate and encouraged to offer various forms of participant support, but this will depend on your research design and population under study.

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