
CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

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In order for researchers to effectively engage with communities, design valid studies, and accurately interpret results, they must understand the cultural context in which they are working. Doing so also requires them to clearly understand their own, often unexamined, assumptions about the nature of disaster, tragedy, and recovery. Or, as described by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall:

Culture hides much more than it reveals and strangely enough what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants. Years of study have convinced me that the real job is not to understand foreign cultures, but to understand our own (Hall, 1959, p. 30).

This check sheet summarizes key cultural constructs that shape how individuals and communities understand and respond to disasters. The following constructs and related guiding questions, while not an exclusive list, offer a framework to help researchers carefully consider their own understanding of disasters, tragedy, and recovery and that of those whom they study and serve in the field.

1. Worldview: The worldview of a group of people shapes how they make meaning of their experiences and conceptualize and solve their problems. Within the *individualist worldview* associated with many Western cultures, the psychosocial unit of operation is the individual. Individuation, autonomy, and individual achievement are emphasized, and ways of thinking and knowing are often linear and largely based in objectivity and rationalism. A majority of the world's people, however, live in *collectivist cultures* where the psychosocial unit of operation is the group (i.e., family, tribe, or community). From within this framework, the wellbeing of the group is prioritized over that of the individual, and interconnectedness and the obligation to one's group is highly valued. Ways of thinking and knowing in collectivist cultures are largely intuitive, nonlinear, and holistic.

Guiding Questions:

- How are tragedy and loss understood?
- How are risk and adversity managed by individuals and/or groups?
- What allows people to feel hopeful?

2. Communication: A culture's communication patterns shape how people behave, relate to, and interact with each other, as well as with those from outside their culture. Hall's (1976) concept of *high- and low-context communication* is particularly relevant for understanding how people express their distress and give and receive help. In the *low-context communication style* of many Western cultures, the verbal code is the primary source of information; there is a reliance on words to convey messages that tend to be direct and explicit. This communication style thus emphasizes verbal expression and self-disclosure, and the exchange of direct feedback. This stands in contrast to the *high-context communication style* of many cultures (often those with a collectivist worldview) in which the verbal code is restricted and words are less necessary to convey meaning. Members of cultural groups using high-context communication styles look to other cues for meaning, and messages are often interpreted based on accumulation

of shared experiences and shared expectations. The words that are exchanged are interpreted through the lens of the context, which can alter their meaning significantly. Notably, within a high-context communication culture, putting feelings into words is often seen as lowering or spoiling their value.

Guiding Questions:

- What are acceptable reactions after a tragedy?
- What are acceptable ways to express distress?

3. Sociopolitical History and Climate: Community reactions to tragedy are both shaped by and reflect the social and political forces around them. Sociopolitical history and climate are underlying forces that shape individuals' and communities' understanding of and response to any disaster. Social inequalities, issues of power, privilege, and oppression, and in-group out-group dynamics that existed in a community before a disaster will shape all aspects of that community's reaction to the disaster. An additional consideration of particular importance in international work is understanding the country's history of colonialism or occupation in any form. Working in colonial, post-colonial, or any setting with a history of occupation requires a particular sensitivity on the part of the researcher about how they, and their work, will be perceived by those with whom they seek to work.

Guiding Questions:

- What is the history of colonization or occupation?
- What issues of inequality, privilege, and oppression exist?
- How are status differentials expressed?
- How are 'outsiders' viewed?

4. Traditional and Indigenous Healing Practices: Western concepts of support, recovery, and healing from disasters may be inconsistent with the traditional and indigenous healing practices of many settings. Failing to take these beliefs and practices into account risks misunderstanding, misrepresenting, or delegitimizing natural networks of help and recovery. In its extreme form, overlooking or neglecting these natural networks risks the imposition of a form of cultural imperialism by researchers onto the people they seek to understand.

Guiding Questions:

- What are acceptable forms of help-seeking?
- How and from whom is help typically sought?
- What serves as just compensation?

For those interested in learning more about this topic, please visit the [CONVERGE Cultural Competence in Hazards and Disaster Research Training Module](#).

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Suggested Citation: Nitza, A. (2020). Cultural Considerations—CONVERGE Extreme Events Research Check Sheets Series. DesignSafe-CI. <https://doi.org/10.17603/ds2-5hnq-vg22>.

