REFLEXIVITY FOR ETHICAL RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIALLY VULNERABLE GROUPS

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This check sheet builds off the "**Positionality for Ethical Research Engagement with Socially Vulnerable Groups**" check sheet. Specifically, this check sheet provides a definition of reflexivity, tips for how to engage in reflexivity, and examples of activities and relevant case studies. This check sheet is for researchers and practitioners who are developing collaborations or are interested in working with socially vulnerable groups.

Readers should note that much of the information in this brief check sheet was adapted from the following article, which examines reflexivity in depth: Olmos-Vega, Francisco M., Renée E. Stalmeijer, Lara Varpio & Renate Kahlke (2023) A practical guide to reflexivity in qualitative research: AMEE Guide No. 149, Medical Teacher, 45(3), 241-251, DOI: 10.1080/0142159X.2022.2057287. For more information, we encourage you to review the article and their thoughtful guide to reflexivity.

DEFINING REFLEXIVITY

There are several definitions and ways to think about reflexivity. Olmos-Vega et al. (2023:242) critically examined existing descriptions and provided one synthesized definition, which we utilize in this check sheet:

> *Reflexivity is a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes.*

Reflexivity, particularly in qualitative research, helps to address unequal power dynamics between researchers and participants by bringing awareness to social, political, and cultural influences on the research. These influences may impact whether a researcher is granted access to a field site, how they collect and interpret data, and how they disseminate findings (Evans et al. 2023). This is especially important for those engaged in research in hazard and disaster contexts, where historical and contemporary dynamics of inequality and oppression are amplified.

» *Personal Reflexivity*

- ☐ Explore and reflect on your own expectations and assumptions about your research design, participants, and the data you collect (Jacobson and Mustafa 2019).
- ☐ Ask yourself: *How are my unique perspectives influencing the research?*

» *Interpersonal Reflexivity*

- ☐ Consider how power dynamics between yourself and other researchers, gatekeepers, or participants, for example, may be influencing the research, particularly if the work involves socially vulnerable groups (Muhammad et al. 2014).
- ☐ Ask yourself: *What relationships exist, and how do they influence the research and the people involved? What power dynamics are at play?*

- » *Methodological Reflexivity*
  - ☐ Examine how your methodological decisions impact your research. This approach leads to more rigorous and reliable data (Darawsheh 2014) and helps to identify ways to build rapport with research participants, leading to more trusting relationships between researchers and participants.
  - ☐ Ask yourself: *How am I making methodological decisions and what are their implications for the research and the research participants?*
- » *Contextual Reflexivity*
  - ☐ Consider the cultural and historical context of the study site and how it impacts your personal bias, interpersonal dynamics, and methodological decisions. Cultural and historical context informs every aspect of the research (Gibbs et al. 2013). Ethical research, particularly with socially vulnerable groups and communities in disaster-affected settings, requires that researchers consider and reflect on this context.
  - ☐ Ask yourself: *How is the cultural and historical context of my field site influencing my research and the people involved?*

ACTIVITIES FOR REFLEXIVITY

Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) suggest a variety of activities for engaging in reflexivity, including self-interviewing and autoethnography, structured team-reflexive discussion, and member reflection.

- » *Self-Interviewing and Autoethnography*
  - ☐ The self-interview involves researchers answering their own interview guide questions and reflecting on their responses if they are an "insider" in the field. You can complete the interview with written responses or with the help of another professional interviewer. Narrative autoethnography involves researchers engaging in reflective writing on specific life experiences. These activities can expose how your personal experience informs your research design, data collection, and data analysis (Olmos-Vega et al. 2023:246).
    - * Lida (2017) explored the traumatic life experiences of their students after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 by collecting their poetic expressions about the disaster. The researcher then added written narrative reflections to the students' poems to understand their own emotional responses to the data. This allowed the researcher to reflect on and process their own personal experience during the earthquake and the research itself. It also provided insight into the cultural trauma of the earthquake as experienced by their students.
- » *Structured Team-Reflexive Discussion*
  - ☐ For researchers working in teams, the team-reflexive discussion activity helps spark important conversations related to each team member's positionality and how personal backgrounds may converge and influence the research (Olmos-Vega et al. 2023:246).
    - * Rankl, Johnson, and Vindrola-Padros (2021) presented a reflexivity model for teams working in rapid qualitative health research. The model has three stages: (1) group discussions in all meetings to reflect on personal backgrounds and emergent concerns, (2) informal conversations with team members throughout the research to construct shared understandings of methodological practices, and (3) engagement with practices for teamwork in rapid qualitative research. The researchers found this collaborative model "improved the rigor and quality of [the] research" (1366).
- » *Member Reflection*
  - ☐ Also known as "member checks," this activity involves checking in with participants throughout the research process to receive feedback about researchers' interpretations (Olmos-Vega et al. 2023:246-247).
    - * After collecting perishable data in the aftermath of a catastrophe, disaster researchers may consider checking in with participants to gain their perspectives after the immediate crisis has passed. You can do this by sending participants their interview transcripts and/or interpretations of their responses. Member checks can help validate the data and allow participants to share their evolving perspectives (Koelsch 2013).

IMPORTANCE OF REFLEXIVITY

Without reflexivity, participants–especially those from socially vulnerable groups–may feel uncertain, uncomfortable, or even unwelcome in the research environment. This can lead participants to edit or avoid sharing certain details of their stories. This not only harms the participants but also the quality of the research. Researchers who understand their positionality (see Evans et al. 2023) and engage in reflexivity are better able to make participants feel comfortable, bring in local research partners, and reduce harm. These efforts can ultimately lead to more ethical hazards and disaster research through encouraging a regular practice of reciprocity.

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