POSITIONALITY FOR ETHICAL RESEARCH ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIALLY VULNERABLE GROUPS

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This check sheet provides a definition of positionality, tips for how to understand it, and examples of relevant case studies. Although this is primarily for researchers preparing to do fieldwork with socially vulnerable groups, practitioners who work with these groups can also find this check sheet useful.

Readers should note that much of the information in this brief check sheet was adapted from the CONVERGE Positionality in Hazards and Disaster Research and Practice Training Module. For more information on positionality, we encourage you to complete the interactive module: **https://converge-training.colorado.edu/courses/positionality-in-hazards-and-disaster-research-and-practice/**.

DEFINING POSITIONALITY

Feminist scholars and anthropologists introduced the concept of positionality to explore how one's social, historical, economic, and political positions influence how knowledge is gained, understood, and shared (Potts et al. 2022). Subsequent discussions of positionality expanded to consider how one's social characteristics, positions, and roles shape both how people understand themselves and, in turn, are understood and perceived by others.

In the context of research, positionality refers to "**how our social roles, power, and privilege influence our perceptions and experiences in research and practice**" (Evans et al. 2023: "Defining Positionality"). When working with communities affected by extreme climate events, researchers should consider how their positionality impacts their research and their relationships with participants.

Researchers might also consider whether they are insiders or outsiders in the context of their work (Evans et al. 2023). Generally speaking, "insiders" identify as part of the community in which they are studying or working, while "outsiders" do not share key status characteristics with the community. For instance, a white researcher studying a racially marginalized community of color after a hurricane might be considered an "outsider," whereas a Black researcher who lives and works in the community might be called an "insider." While this is a helpful framework for beginning to think about positionality in the field, it is important to note that these designations are dynamic and complex (Barber and Haney 2016; Adu-Ampong and Adams 2020), especially in the context of disasters. Someone who considers themselves an insider might be perceived by members of the community as an outsider. Reflecting on and understanding your positionality in specific contexts can help mediate challenges in the field.

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UNDERSTANDING YOUR POSITIONALITY

Researchers can use self-reflection–a form of introspection–to think about their positionality and how it influences their research and interactions in the field. Consider how the following may influence your positionality:

- ☐ Your social positions and roles. Gender identity, sexuality, racial and ethnic background, and socioeconomic status all influence your positionality. This includes roles and positions you identify with, as well as those that others may attribute to you, such as presumed racial identity. The meanings attributed to these roles and positions can change as you move across different contexts and phases of life. For instance, your socioeconomic status may fluctuate throughout your life. Reflecting on these different aspects of yourself and how they shape your experiences and worldview is an important first step to understanding your positionality.
- ☐ An intersectional perspective. The complex combination of your various identities shapes your experience with privilege and oppression. For example, the positionality of a Latina woman researcher from a marginalized or underrepresented community who is also disabled and undocumented will likely be different in many ways from that of a Latina woman researcher who does not share those characteristics. Similarly, a researcher's positionality will be different from those they study and interact with in their disaster-affected field site, particularly socially vulnerable individuals. Regardless of any shared characteristics, the privilege and status associated with being a researcher introduces an unequal power dynamic.
  - Refer to the "**Privilege Wheel**," designed by York Disability Rights Forum, to learn about different identities and how they relate to power and privilege.

REFLECTING ON POSITIONALITY STRENGTHENS DISASTER RESEARCH

- ☐ Disasters exacerbate pre-existing inequalities and injustices. Consequently, privilege, identity, and power shape researchers' experiences and interactions with communities. Taking time to understand your positionality can strengthen the ethics and rigor of your work; it ensures that your research is attentive to the perspectives, needs, and experiences of the community in which you are engaged and does not inadvertently cause harm. Below are three case studies highlighting researcher's reflections on positionality.
  - Following their fieldwork in Ghana and Malawi, Adu-Ampong and Adams (2020), native Ghanaians, wrote about navigating their fluid insider-outsider status while in the field. Using the concept of positionality, they interrogated how their identities both enabled and constrained access to research participants and data collection. Acknowledging the ways in which their dynamic positionalities influenced these aspects of their research is important for understanding their findings and how their results were shaped by research participants' perceptions of them.
  - In her article, Calgaro (2015) reflected on her positionality as a student researcher during longitudinal fieldwork in Thailand following the deadly 2004 Indian Ocean Earthquake and Tsunami. Calgaro explained how her research needs differed from those of participants and how this affected the research outcomes. For instance, participants were reluctant to discuss certain topics related to governance and power for fear of self-incrimination and retaliation. Calgaro also came to understand the variety of emotions and challenges she faced while working in a cross-cultural, post-disaster context, including the emotional toll of working in a traumatic landscape and the impact this had on the interpretation of the findings. Calgaro found this process "awarded [her] a richer understanding of [the] topic area" (52).
  - Goodall, Khalid, and Del Pinto (2022) used positionality to explore their identities as researchers. They noticed how these identities fluctuated and that they influenced their interactions and field experiences. Specifically, the researchers discussed key questions that triggered reflection via email and virtual meetings after their fieldwork. They found that "the very act of 'research' renders the researchers as 'outsiders,'" which may lead to "unintended and premature assumptions about others" (16). Reflecting on positionality can help to enhance knowledge creation in disaster contexts between people with different levels of experience and from a variety of backgrounds.

TOOLS FOR CONSIDERING POSITIONALITY

The following resources provide a starting point for thinking about positionality. We encourage you to go beyond these initial activities and to revisit them based on the specific disaster-affected context or socially vulnerable community in which you work or study**:**

- ☐ ***Diversity Toolkit***: A toolkit with resources on identity and a series of activities.
- ☐ ***Social Identity Map***: An activity to help researchers and others identify and reflect on a variety of social identities.
- ☐ ***PARCEO Positionality Training***, ***Part 1*** and ***Part 2***: A training geared to be a facilitator guide and detailed curriculum with resources such as handouts and activities.

NEXT STEPS

Exploring positionality is a first step to better understanding your relationship with the communities you work in and study. It must be an iterative and ongoing process to ensure ethical hazards and disaster research and practice. Examinations of positionality are particularly important when working with socially vulnerable groups.

Another key component of ethical research practice is reflexivity—–the process by which researchers more carefully consider how their positionality influences their research activities. These include being granted access to a field site, collecting and interpreting data, and disseminating findings. Please see the "**Reflexivity for Ethical Research Engagement with Socially Vulnerable Groups**" check sheet for more information on reflexivity.

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