

# The reflective research diary: a tool for more ethical and engaged disaster research

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to highlight how keeping a reflective research journal can help disaster researchers to work in a more ethical and engaged way.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The author analyses the reflective research diary to illustrate how keeping it has helped the author, a white, non-Indigenous researcher, navigate British academia whilst trying to plan a collaborative project with Indigenous peoples during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

**Findings** – The author draws out some of the ways that academic institutions can undermine ethical research practice through opaque structures and by incentivising pressuring early-career researchers (ECRs) to conduct fieldwork in dangerous times. The author demonstrates ways the peers and author have tried to push against these structures, noting that this is not always possible and that their efforts are always limited without institutional support or change.

**Originality/value** – Many ECRs and PhD students have written reflective accounts about the ethical challenges they have faced during fieldwork. In this article, the author adds to this by building on literature in disaster studies and positing how ethical and engaged research can be conducted within British (colonial) institutions.

**Keywords** Fieldwork, Qualitative research, Reflection, Pandemic, British higher education

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Who we are impacts the research we do. That is, knowledge is partial, situated and political (Haraway, 1988). Awareness of the standpoint from which we conduct research is, therefore, important in order for insightful analysis to reach rigorous conclusions (Harding, 1987). One strategy for assisting with this process is to keep a research diary for “wading into the embodied messiness” of research (Sharma *et al.*, 2009, p. 1,649). Here, researchers can record thoughts, emotions, decisions and discussions between the self and others (Li, 2018). In doing so, critical analysis of thinking and feelings concerning all aspects of research is facilitated (Brear and Gordon, 2020). There are no rules to keeping a research diary, but for those unsure of how to start, there are numerous guides with prompts and ideas (e.g. Taylor, 2020). Research diaries are also a means for practising self-reflexivity (Li, 2018), so interrogating how background, personal involvement, sympathies, prejudices, fears and emotional and physical reactions influence research (Kuehner *et al.*, 2016). Thus, research diaries play a role in social research in cross-cultural contexts.

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Researchers are often touched by research encounters. This can be especially so in disaster studies, where participants and/or researchers live with the effects of disaster (Barber and Haney, 2016). Whether speaking with disaster survivors or discussing potential future events, researching disaster is often emotional and can lead to vicarious trauma for researchers (Dominey-Howes, 2015). It is also riddled with ethical complexities, which fall outside of Institutional Review Boards (Gaillard and Gomez, 2015). This means that researchers often take responsibility for deciding what is ethical, sometimes in real time, which can in itself be an emotional process (Browne and Peek, 2014). Research diaries can be useful in analysing and dealing with emotions that arise, with some regarding reflective writing as a form of self-care (Rager, 2005). Here, I illustrate how I, a white, British PhD student, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) – a part of the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) – used my research diary during the COVID-19 pandemic to re-orientate my research about disasters in Indigenous settings. Specifically, I highlight the challenges of doing so within British academia and the ways I, together with my peers, sought to overcome these challenges.

### Methodology

The data for this paper comprise my reflective research diary (Plate 1). I focus on the period from March 2020 to October 2020, when a disruption to my research led me to rapidly adjust my plans in the face of uncertainty. This prompted reflection on how I was embedded within my work revealing political and ethical challenges that I tried to overcome.

When writing my diary, I initially had no intention to analyse it. Therefore, accounts are honest and not self-censored. However, the COVID-19 pandemic meant that I (and other PhD students) had to shift to desk-based research with no extension of funding from. This prompted reflection in my diary about how funders, such as UKRI, undermined ethical and engaged research. To analyse my diary, I paid attention to critical moments of reflexivity and emotional reactions (Li, 2018). Alongside this, I followed suggestions by Emerson *et al.* (2011), Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2011) and Saldaña (2015) by considering what surprised me (to track assumptions), what intrigued me (to track positionality) and what disturbed me (to track tensions with my values, attitudes and belief systems), which were facilitated by the qualitative data analysis software programme, NVivo.

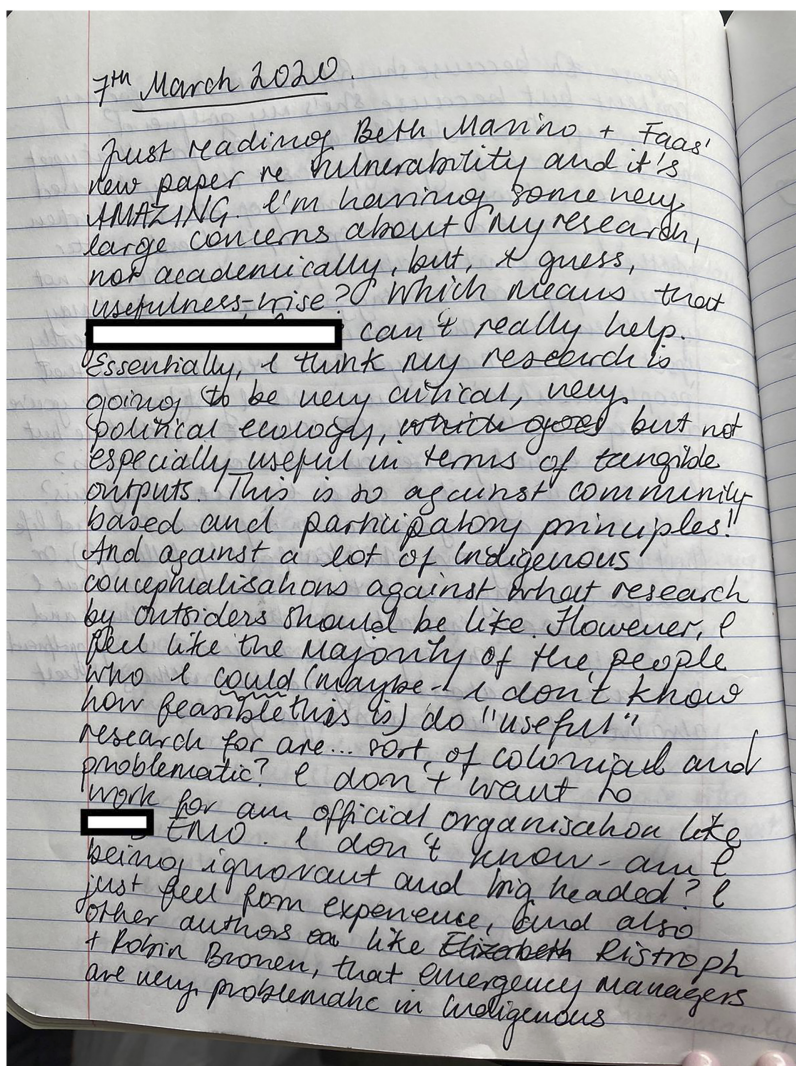
### Results and discussion

#### *What surprised me (assumptions)*

Having been to Utqiagvik, Alaska, twice before I commenced my PhD in 2019, I planned to conduct some of my work here. As the COVID-19 pandemic spread, my supervisors suggested I employ a co-researcher to conduct data collection. In preparation for this, I emailed my funders to ask to use my fieldwork funding to pay a co-researcher. In their response,

They said that the funding was only for my travel and if I did not use it, they would take it away. I do not understand the logic behind this decision. Surely, it's safer for everyone for me to employ a co-researcher? With or without COVID-19, employing a co-researcher can transfer power to the researched and make for more rigorous research. (personal diary entry, 24/05/2020)

The response of my funders surprised me, as much of my postgraduate application had centred ethical and political elements of my proposed work, for instance by drawing Alaska Native scholars who endorsed participatory approaches to research (e.g. Erickson, 2020). As such, I assumed this had been an element that funders valued, particularly as collaboration with disaster-affected people is needed for ethical disaster research (Gaillard and Peek, 2019). This experience challenged that assumption and highlighted that rigorous research and ethics are not always at the centre of funding decisions amongst British funding bodies.



**Plate 1.**  
An example of a  
reflective  
research diary

Here, despite attempting to include Indigenous peoples more closely with my research, opaque structures within UKRI prevented such engagement. Structures such as these have been critiqued by [Esson et al. \(2017\)](#) and [Noxolo \(2017\)](#), who argue they should be dismantled to uphold ethical and socially just research practice.

*What disturbed me (tensions with attitudes, values and belief systems)*

With most UK funders not extending PhD funding, I felt pressured to make decisions about how to engage with potential collaborators. In doing so, I felt I had crossed the line of what I believed was respectful, as I knew the community was dealing with their own COVID-19

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response and likely did not have the time to offer research assistance. When I did not receive a response from potential collaborators, I wrote that I was “*relieved*” as follows:

I do not have the time or the funds. The reality is that everyone who I know who has a co-researcher is part of larger, long-term project with wider networks. (personal diary entry, 27/09/2020)

Gaillard and Peek (2019) argue that ethical concerns should have the same primacy as research questions in disaster research. Yet, I did not have the resources required (e.g. funds to pay or, at least, reimburse research participants and coordinators) to conduct research to the ethical standard I believed in. Whilst I had personal ties to people living in Utqiagvik, being a co-researcher was neither useful nor interesting to them, so I was eager to employ someone who would find involvement valuable. To a degree, this revealed how underprepared I was during my initial visits to Utqiagvik: I had built strong friendships, but I had completely neglected the importance of gatekeepers, professional relationships and more formal processes that I should have been engaging with (Erickson, 2020). These challenges, in the context of the pandemic, combined with my knowledge that Utqiagvik was dealing with a lot of research requests, led me to decide not to continue with my search for a co-researcher.

This decision meant that it was unlikely I would conduct fieldwork. Other ECRs and I continued to feel pressured to conduct international fieldwork. Some staff (e.g. those who oversaw PhD students’ study, supervisors and others) encouraged students to demonstrate in risk assessments and to ethics committees that it was crucial to conduct research at this time. This disturbed me in a time where many of us were separated from our families and were taking every precaution to prevent the spread of COVID-19; individuals within our institutions were pressing us to conduct international fieldwork in places that could be more vulnerable due to unequal access to health insurance and medical supplies. Whilst Marino *et al.* (2020) argue for fieldwork conducted during COVID-19 as necessary and beneficial to those we work with (alongside the deprioritisation of professional needs where research may be inappropriate), our institutions encouraged (and, without providing paid extensions to our PhDs, pressured) us to conduct fieldwork in situations where it was unnecessary and inappropriate. This meant shifting my unit analysis to be emergency management in Alaska, rather than Indigenous peoples who experience disaster.

#### *What intrigued me (positionality)*

Studying up involves looking at the culture of the powerful rather than the culture of the “powerless” (Nader, 1972); after reading Marino and Faas’s (2020) article about studying up in disaster research, I was intrigued to explore the possibility of doing this, especially as colleagues had advised forming academic arguments to convince directors of postgraduate study that fieldwork was unnecessary. In the context of my research, studying up could be an important means of addressing disaster management in Alaska, as my experiences showed root causes of vulnerability (e.g. colonisation) and issues such as racism that were not usually acknowledged. Therefore, I shifted my focus from community-based work and decided to look at emergency management systems at the state level. In doing so, I let go of my long-held expectation of doing fieldwork in one community and felt freer to interrogate whether I really should have been doing such work in the first place:

My fear is that my research will be co-opted. I do not think that risk can be eliminated, it’s just what happens when you put something out into the world. But I think that my previous idea was quite susceptible to this in ways that I may not even know. When reporting our work, whether that is in a conference, to the press, or as a manuscript, we can stress and stress that we are not experts, but the fact is that, whether we like it or not, we are viewed as such. Therefore, how we represent peoples and places has big consequences. Researching disaster in Utqiagvik in the very constructivist way that I

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wanted (e.g. having people decide what a disaster was) could have had unintended and unforeseen consequences, especially with Utqiagvik proximity to the [Arctic National Wildlife Refuge]. At least if I am not studying at the community level, I do not open up the community to this unnecessary risk. (Personal diary entry, 12/10/2020)

Studying in cross-cultural contexts, I was apprehensive about working in a culture that was not my own and, potentially, opening up the community to risk. Again, despite being aware of the colonial underpinnings of fieldwork, when I raised these concerns with senior colleagues in the UK, I felt dismissed and that abandoning fieldwork would make my work not enough for a PhD. These worries are in conflict with numerous Indigenous scholars' work about fieldwork (e.g. [Smith, 1999](#)), yet were very real for some of my peers and me. This was not because we did not take seriously the work of those writing about such issues, but rather because of the views of more senior individuals who repeatedly dismissed our concerns. Reflecting, taking on the call to study up by [Marino and Faas \(2020\)](#), and leveraging this work aided in pushing back against some of the pressure to do fieldwork. Here, my research diary aided in unpacking the anxiety around what I initially felt uncomfortable with and helped to provide a way to continue working in a way that was more appropriate. This meant focussing on how emergency management and disaster-risk-reduction practices perpetuated (or pushed back against) structures of oppression rather than relying on Indigenous peoples to recount their experiences.

## Conclusions

In this short piece, I have used my research diary to illustrate some of the ways I tried to push back against processes that prevented ethical, cross-cultural disaster research during the COVID-19 pandemic within British institutions. Many of us genuinely tried to engage with international partners in ways that did not compromise safety whilst producing research. However, without institutional support, this proved to be difficult. This echoes [Radcliffe's \(2017\)](#) work, also in the context of British academia, who encourages collaborative forms of research but recognises that doing so as an ECR is taxing within the neoliberal academy. Thus, they argue that it is imperative to look within institutions and challenge practices here rather than within "field sites". This includes not only dismantling structures that prevent ethical engagement with collaborators (e.g. opaque funding decisions) ([Noxolo, 2017](#)) but also ensuring that ECRs (especially those who are Indigenous and/or racialised) are not tasked with the continuous and exhausting work of addressing colonial praxis within academia (e.g. [Todd, 2016](#); [Mahtani, 2014](#), in the context of British anthropology and geography, respectively).

My research diary helped me to navigate some of the ethical dilemmas I came up against, for instance through carefully thinking and leveraging academic literature to support my decision not to do fieldwork. However, it also illuminated some key areas that prevented ethical engagement in disaster research in the UK. In particular, the limited time available to do research created a sense of urgency amongst PhD students to either press on with fieldwork or to re-hash projects quickly, sometimes without the support required to fully consider the ethics, politics or repercussions of and for our work. Reflecting on such issues in a research diary can be important for sense-making and record-taking purposes but also requires time – a limited resource.

So how can ECRs situated in British institutions founded on colonial practices, conduct ethical and engaged disaster research? The problem is deep-rooted and pushing back against institutionalised and unethical practices, some of which I have described here should be the responsibility of everyone regardless of career stage. However, as an ECR,

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I have found the strategies as follows useful in mitigating against potentially unethical research:

- (1) Finding individuals and groups of people who are committed to ethical, engaged and socially just research approaches meant that when I were pressured to do fieldwork or engage in ethically dubious practices, I had peers and senior academics to discuss these issues with. In particular, having connections with trusted and more senior researchers outside of the UK laid bare the institutional conditions (e.g. lack of engagement with Indigenous scholars and shorter PhD timelines) that undermined ethical research.
- (2) Where more senior colleagues (e.g. those overseeing postgraduate research and, in some cases, supervisors) are not receptive to ethical concerns in research, they build on heavily cited academic arguments to counteract this. These do not have to pertain to a specific discipline. Whilst [Todd's \(2016\)](#) article detailing the colonial and racist nature of British anthropology was a great starting point, reading the works of Black British scholars (e.g. [Esson \*et al.\*, 2017](#); [Noxolo, 2017](#)) helped us to develop arguments to senior academic who may not otherwise be convinced of the problems within British academia. When doing so, however, it is important to engage deeply with these works and keep their arguments front and centre.
- (3) Who we cite matters ([Smith and Garrett-Scott, 2021](#)). This is not new, but as we shift how we do research in response to COVID-19, we can expand the types of sources we cite to better include the perspectives of those in places we would otherwise be conducting fieldwork (e.g. through media and art as well as narrative).

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## Annex

### Comment by ECR peer

The ECR peer found the paper very interesting and quite consistent with interest as an ethnographer. The ECR peer particularly liked the way the arguments are grouped within three analytical categories: "what surprised me", "what disturbed me" and "what intrigued me". Whilst diary-writing is not uncommon in qualitative and interpretative research, the ECR peer understands that it is often deployed as a mere data collection technique, involving research participants and less as a reflexive tool by researchers. It is also commonly used as a way of giving research participants more control and freedom over what they want to say or record. But it is rare to read discussions about diaries from the perspective of researchers themselves. Hence, it was very heartening to see this coming from a researcher and to read some concrete ways of operationalising diaries.

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The ECR peer had few immediate thoughts though:

- (1) First, diary-writing, as we know, is a private affair. It involves “honest” disclosure of one’s feelings and discomforts, as the author also concedes. The ECR peer supposes this can get ethically tricky when diary becomes a public disclosure document. For example, in the paper, the author discloses the role of the funder/UKRI in subverting the possibility for an engaged research despite the rhetoric for partnership etc. The ECR peer guesses in this particular case this disclosure does not pose major ethical challenge, as the author is talking about a powerful agency and hence consistent with the author’s aim at “looking up”. But, in general, with diaries, is there a risk of over-disclosure that can lead to potential harm (e.g. reputational harm and risk of discrimination) to our research participants, stakeholders and gatekeepers, whose trust and privacy researchers are expected to respect? In general, potentially, there are limitations to using diary as an interpretive tool and it would have been interesting to read some of those dilemmas.
- (2) Second, although the author talks about the duration of diary-writing that culminated in this paper, it would have been interesting to read how frequently the diaries was maintained, what was the typical length etc. The ECR peer thinks that would have also provided more backing to the interpretation that is being made. Did the evidence that “disturbed” the author, for example, come from one diary entry or was there a pattern to it? Further information on that would have also given the readers more clues about the practicalities as well as scientific relevance of diary-writing.
- (3) Third, the ECR peer thought the last three recommendations were interesting but found them to be slightly generic and somewhat removed from the core topic of research diary as a tool for ethical and engaged research. Perhaps, there is a room to think about more specific recommendations/tips about the potentials and pitfalls of using diary, under what conditions they are useful and particularly their relevance in disaster research.

Nimesh Dhungana

### **Response by author**

The author thanks the ECR peer so much for thoughtful comments and reflections. The author found the process of writing this manuscript really difficult and riddled with anxiety around what the author really had to offer by laying bear some of these quite personal experiences, so the author is relieved to hear that you found it heartening. The author has made the notes as follows in response to your reflections:

- (1) The author completely agrees that the appropriateness of when to publish reflections is very context dependent and a crucial part of that context is the relative power of institutions and other actors mentioned in a diary. After all, as a form of autoethnography, the research diary only elevates the author’s voice and not those of research participants, for example. When it came to deciding whether to write this article, the author had to really question for what purpose the author was analysing and publishing parts of the author’s research diary. For the author, it was important to shed light on the frustrations many of the author’s peers and the author were experiencing in trying to ensure the research was ethical and engaged but feeling constrained by institutions to do so. In this context, the author feels like publishing could be a form of activism but also do not think it would be appropriate to always publish reflections from research diaries.
- (2) How often the author recorded reflections and the length of those reflections really varied. Generally, the author tended to write whenever there were major changes to the research or if felt especially emotional at stages of the research, reflecting what others have said about journaling as therapeutic. From the start of the pandemic, then, the entries were especially frequent (roughly three times a week), and because of this, the author found numerous examples of instances where the author had been surprised, intrigued and disturbed. That said, I did also attend a reflective journaling club, which was organised by PhD students. Here,



we spent a few minutes at the beginning of a session to just have a “brain dumping” session, writing whatever came naturally. After this, the author and peers took prompts from Jessica Taylor’s *“The Reflective Research Diary for Researchers and Academics”* and spent more time working through these individually before feeding back to the group.

The author agrees that the recommendations are fairly generic but also thinks the ways we can use research diaries in research are so varied that it is difficult to make any specific recommendations. The author thinks the ECR peer raised one of the key pitfalls around publishing parts of research diaries in ECR peer’s first point though and thinks that is very pertinent for anyone wanting to use their research diary as a form of data collection.

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