Chapter 7
Reflections of an Earthquake-Survivor Researcher

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When we first met, Manfred Zaumseil asked me what the most important event in the past 5 years of my life was. I answered, "the earthquake," and then elaborated why. It was 2008 and Manfred had come to visit the Institute for Community Behavioral Change (ICBC), the nongovernmental organization (NGO) I was working with. My colleague and friend Edward Theodorus sat next to me and interrupted, "Didn't you just get married? Wasn't that important?" Only then did I realize that I had positioned the 2006 earthquake as more important than my 2007 wedding, and I began to wonder why.

Coming from the Bantul region, when the earthquake occurred, I lived approximately 7 km from the earthquake's epicenter near Bantul city. The day had started as a bright morning, but suddenly the air filled with the dust of collapsing houses as people panicked and screamed. Later, when the rumor of a subsequent tsunami spread, we fled north. Some of my close family members, living in one of the villages included in our study, were affected too. I have first-hand experience of what it means to be an earthquake survivor. I prefer the term "survivor" over "disaster victim,"[1] because Bantul residents continued to live their lives in spite of the loss and destruction they faced. "Victim" can be used to refer to anyone struck by disaster, regardless of whether they have died or survived. I am more than just a survivor. In the immediate aftermath, I volunteered to provide first aid and to clear debris in my own community. Later, I worked for a disaster recovery program as an NGO activist, since ICBC had joined a network of 12 local NGOs that distributed additional reconstruction funds. In the context of this program, we were one of the many donor organizations that surveyed the needs and entitlements of the affected villages.

[1] The term "survivor" came to Indonesia in the context of international post-tsunami recovery programs. It then spread among activists and academics who introduced the Indonesian version of survivor: *penyintas*. This new terminology has found its way into official government language. Among villagers, this relatively new term is only beginning to spread and most still refer to themselves as "victim" (*korban*).

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When I was first approached to join the research team as a psychology graduate, my initial feeling was that I would be studying my own neighbors. Skepticism made me voice several reservations against such a research endeavor.

In 2006, the people of Bantul had already been the center of attention. Immediately after the earthquake, Bantul attracted crowds of outsiders. Within the first few days after the quake, roads in the region were jammed and the police had a difficult time managing traffic. Vehicles carried survivors' family members or friends, people bringing aid, or people who merely wanted to "look around." It was as if Bantul had become a tourist attraction, the physical destruction drawing outsiders' attention. This phenomenon has been dubbed a culture of "disaster tourism." The media coverage accentuated this effect, always in search for "a good story." Besides media professionals, citizen amateur journalists also came to the villages to interview survivors. Simultaneously, donor agencies conducted surveys in affected areas, asking people about the event, the number of casualties, the damage that occurred, and the aid needed. Working for the NGO recovery program, I had been one of the people conducting these surveys. With all of these different actors involved, Bantul residents were not always fully informed about what questions they were answering and what would happen to all the data. Some surveys had no clear follow-up. All of this attention brought relief goods and programs to the villages, which sometimes led to conflict.

7.1 Initial Skepticism

Against this background, I wondered why anyone would conduct research in the midst of such an unsettled, postdisaster situation where many aid programs were still in place, potentially causing conflicts within the community and where any "survey" would be closely associated with these aid programs. What were the research aims and topics? What was so appealing in studying a disaster from a psychological perspective? From a survivor's perspective, the main priority was to recover from the physical damage and casualties. The disaster had taught me how important it was to keep on doing things and not spend too much time thinking.

My main concern was the question of benefit and burden. I doubted that the benefit of this study would be for the communities. Instead of helping people in need, research can constitute a burden as it usually consists of many inquiries. When we first approached the village communities to introduce our research agenda, they were well aware of this aspect and critically asked about any benefits for them and the purpose of the research. I asked myself if it was appropriate to study a disaster at a moment when people were just beginning to recover. People were motivated to carry on with their lives, to go back to school, go back to work, and rebuild their homes. Slowly, they were able to forget the horrific impact of the disaster as they were faced with other challenges. Housing and social structures were being reestablished, and people's lives were returning to normal.

As the research process continued, my initial skepticism faded. The study intended to document how the community was dealing with the disaster. Their experiences and

perspectives were key to this study and they were valued as meaningful and important. I experienced a similar acknowledgment when the German research counterparts addressed me as an expert. An expert, in our society, is considered to be someone who dedicates her or his time to science and knowledge and is well educated and experienced in research. Experts are usually met with a great deal of respect for their expertise and social status, especially by villagers. Neither as a bachelor graduate of psychology nor as an earthquake survivor had I considered myself an expert. Being addressed as one was an empowering experience that changed my way of thinking. I realized that knowledge is everywhere and that everyone can be the source of it. Everyone can be an expert.

7.2 International Research Collaboration

When I was offered the opportunity to join the international research team, I was addressed not only as a survivor-expert but also as a young academic. At first, the other graduate students and I were asked to assist the German team with data collection. We were trained in qualitative interviewing techniques and then expected to conduct structured guideline interviews with respondents in the three research villages. During our first meeting, my assumptions about such a collaboration were challenged. I had expected the first meetings to be technical and educational, conveying research techniques in a top–down style to us, the Indonesian graduates. To my surprise, the German team, at that time consisting of Manfred Zaumseil, Silke Schwarz, and Jeane Indradjaja, posed questions instead. They asked about our own experiences of the earthquake, about the arrangement of our meetings, and how to approach the villagers as a stranger and how to start the study. When I asked Manfred, as the official principal investigator, what his plan was, he just answered, “I am not your boss.” But who was then, I wondered, and would there really be no boss at all? My thinking was so used to top–down team structures that this experience disturbed me deeply.

Over the 3 years of cooperation, I learned to “cope” with this kind of team structure. We all learned through cooperation, conflict, and reflection. In a process of transcultural exchange, we developed a mutual understanding for our ways of working, including suitable ways of organizing our meetings and communication. Within this process, the Indonesian team influenced the German team and vice versa. Despite nonhierarchical intentions, responsibilities, resources, and status were still unequally distributed within the international team. When I reflect back on this, my own role expectations were influenced by internalized power structures. For one, Manfred was a professor and I was only a graduate. Additionally, Manfred was a White European from Germany and I was an Indonesian. So, without doing or saying anything, Manfred had a much higher social status than I considered myself to have as an Indonesian researcher. In this respect, my mind was still enslaved by the experience of a formerly colonized person. At first, I perceived myself only as a “native” that could be asked for her opinion, and despite the fact that ICBC had delegated me to

participate in the research to learn about research through my involvement, I still felt passive within the large research team officially headed by Manfred. When I realized through our conversations and discussions that we as Indonesian team members were not expected to be rigid in fulfilling our tasks and that we could speak our minds, I began to experience a sense of self-worth (as it should be), and, for sure, I felt respected by the German team.

Our roles as Indonesian researchers changed over the 3 years of cooperation. In the first year, we were six student research assistants collecting data; four of us continued in the second year, while our status changed to junior researchers. Sidelining the overall research process, each of us developed her or his own miniresearch, according to our own interests, to be presented at the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology (IACCP) conference in Melbourne, Australia. Having the opportunity to present my own findings to an international audience was an empowering experience. We as Indonesians really could do research in our own context. In the third year, three of us remained and were responsible for the implementation of the participatory research process under the institutional roof of ICBC. Especially in the participatory research phase, we had multilevel cooperation where my two colleagues, Tiara R. Widiastuti and Lucia P. Novianti, and I were somewhere in the middle, between the German team (as leading researchers supervising the extended ICBC team), and facilitating the community researchers. The interaction between these three levels (villagers, Indonesian research team, and German research team) was a precious experience to me, although not free of conflict. When I reflect on the process, I recognize moments of empowerment on different levels.

7.3 Negotiating Closeness and Distance

Positioned in relative closeness to the field, my Indonesian colleagues and I provided important knowledge of the research context, which was very helpful in minimizing transcultural disturbances in the overall process. For example, when approaching village residents to join our study, we blended in well with the local social structures and were probably seen less as intruders than our foreign German research colleagues. Most of our respondents felt more comfortable expressing themselves in their local language, Javanese, rather than the national language, especially when sharing emotional experiences and inner thought processes. Our fluency in Javanese was therefore an important aspect in enhancing familiarity in the interview situation and promoted an understanding of the local context. My own knowledge of local meanings and traditions provided me with rich resources to interpret what the interviewees were saying. My German colleagues did not immediately understand what the locals meant, for example, when prayer was referred to as a form of "disaster preparedness" or how people, soon after the earthquake, started to accept (*nrimo*) their situation even when they had lost a loved one. As a Javanese Indonesian researcher, I could translate and mediate between the village setting and the international research perspective. However, being so close to the field also misled us to assume that we would

already know and understand it, as if there were no further questions to ask. If we asked villagers questions, they did not elaborate much because they assumed we had the same experience and could understand without the need for further explanation. In such situations, we might have gained more information if they had been interviewed by members of the German team.

Research transforms the common into the extraordinary and important. Such a transformation requires an analytical distance from the ordinary. It is like fish in an aquarium that can neither see nor appreciate their surroundings, since it is the only thing they know. Only those outside the aquarium are able to see and appreciate it. However, will those on the outside ever know what it feels like to swim in the aquarium? Or how the world looks through water and glass? I would therefore rather not privilege the position of distance over the position of closeness, because both can be a curse and a blessing. Emotional attachment to the research field means that we have a complex connection to what we study and that the connections we have include a wide range of connotations. For example, I felt ambivalent about the wider use of the term *trauma*. People in Bantul were using it so lightly, which contradicted my academic understanding of it. Our relational position to the field influences not only how we see things but also what we see. Thus, "insiders" and "outsiders" are best combined to complement each other.

7.4 Empowerment Through Research

Due to our multilevel team structure, we had various insider and outsider perspectives in the research process. In the Indonesian research team, we were positioned somewhere in between. From the German team perspective, our ICBC team was "local," with the label "local" indicating our relative closeness to the research field. From the perspective of the Indonesian team, the community researchers of our participatory research were the "local" researchers. Because of the reflective potential of research communication, both the researcher and the research subject learned from the interview process. An example of the type of insight that a research participant might gain is indicated by my previous example of when Manfred had asked me about the most important event of the past 5 years of my life. Obviously, the earthquake had had a profound effect on me, perhaps more so than the private event of my wedding, even though marriage was a much more permanent life change. It was the collective experience of the earthquake affecting the lives of our whole community that seemed most relevant to me. Reflecting on my answer, I realized how communal we, as Indonesians, are.

Throughout the research process, there were many other situations where I came to see the ordinary in a new light, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to see my own community from the inside and outside. For example, in our interviews on emotional aspects of coping with the earthquake, respondents used several Javanese concepts to describe their experience, such as acceptance (*nrimo*) or sincerity *(ikhlas)* (see Chaps. 11 and 12). By having to describe their own coping processes, which

were usually taken for granted, respondents could reflect upon their own emotions and actions. Recounting their earthquake experiences was like putting the pieces of the puzzle of their life together, a process of reframing supported by us as researchers. When discussing these findings later in the international team, our Javanese ways of coping became even more apparent. When trying to explain these Javanese concepts to our German colleagues, we as Indonesian researchers learned a lot about our culture, our nation, and ourselves. To me, this interactive learning process was empowering, as we learned about our own cultural resources in facing disasters. Similarly, the villagers reflected on their own capacities by communicating with the researchers.

Besides these important insights, the research itself was an empowering experience. In one particular situation within our participatory research phase, this aspect became particularly clear to me. I remember one meeting with the community researchers from the village youth group when we were compiling the group's interview data. Mody, one of the youth group members, had been smiling to himself; then he spoke up and shared this thoughts:

> I am so glad that we have gained input from the villagers, and that I can hear what people have to say. So, I think if I want to get some input from other villagers about our youth group activities, we could assess it through a research like this, couldn't we?

By joining our participatory research process, he felt inspired and empowered to do research on other topics more relevant to himself, namely on people's perceptions of the youth group's activities. By gaining a valuable new skill, he directly benefited from the research. Research is a key to knowledge, and Mody's experience that night shows that the experience of being able to carry out research is empowering, as it opens up new possibilities to gain knowledge. I also experienced this when conducting research in the second year of our international project. The opportunity to explore my own research questions boosted my confidence. I learned from both the content of the research and the experience of carrying out the research. That night, Mody reminded me of myself. From my perspective, it is an important capital for Indonesian people to know and realize our potentials through research, especially since it is often *bule*, White foreigners, who come to study us Indonesians. Later, we have to read about the Indonesian context in a book written in English. By learning how to carry out research, we can initiate our own projects, even with simple means.

7.5 Dealing with Closeness as a Survivor–Activist–Researcher

Becoming a survivor-expert and survivor–researcher was an empowering experience for me and an important contribution to our international research constellation. I was close to the field as a Bantulese myself, as an earthquake survivor, and as a former NGO relief worker. In comparison with my other Indonesian colleagues, I was particularly close to two of our research sites; in one of the research villages, I had close family ties, and in another one, I had been involved in a reconstruction program. In both cases, I experienced the limiting aspects of being too close to the

research. At first, interviews proved difficult. People knew me, and I could sense them feeling uncomfortable answering all the questions on my interview guideline. Even as an "outside" researcher, I was too much of a community "insider" for respondents to talk to me openly about certain village dynamics.

My role as a researcher was also complicated by the fact that people still perceived me as an aid worker. For example, when I visited a villager in Sido Kabul, he automatically assumed that I had come to monitor his spending of the reconstruction funds. I was concerned that my presence in this village would raise people's hopes about receiving further relief funds. To avoid such potential miscommunication and subsequent disappointment, I refrained from researching in this particular village and focused instead on the third village.

7.6 Concluding Remarks

Looking back on our research process, the multilevel cooperation was an invaluable experience for me, full of new insights and moments of empowerment, especially in the third participatory phase of research. By the third phase of our cooperation, our roles had changed and we explicitly clarified our understanding of our mutual roles. This whole process was an expression of our common reflection on the previous years of research. An important precondition had been to hand over the research role to members of the community. These shifting roles enhanced my whole understanding of research as an interactive process, as I have elaborated upon above. I learned how essential the reflection of one's own role in research can be and how important it is to reflect upon one's own position and closeness in respect to every party involved in the research process. I also learned that there always needs to be a certain distance between myself as a researcher and the rest of my viewpoints and roles. In order to carry out good research, it is necessary to balance my triple role as researcher, activist, and community member.

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