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Conducting fieldwork amidst earthquakes in Nepal: insights from a tourism researcher

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This study presents a comprehensive account of the first-hand experiences encountered by a doctoral researcher during fieldwork conducted in Kathmandu, Nepal, in 2015, where two significant earthquakes struck. While existing literature extensively examines the vulnerability of participants, little attention has been given to the challenges faced by researchers themselves within such disaster settings. To address this gap, this study employs an autoethnographic approach to provide a personal and experiential narrative of the researcher's time in the field. The results of this study shed insight on the difficulties that individual researchers face when working in disaster-affected areas, which is a major contribution to the field of tourism and disaster research. Moreover, it unveils the interplay between individual experiences, logistical intricacies and psychological well-being. This study delves into the practical implications associated with conducting research amidst volatile and uncertain conditions, emphasizing the pivotal role of robust disaster preparedness and response strategies in regions affected by calamities.

Keywords: *disaster research, tourism research, fieldwork, autoethnography, Nepal*

1 INTRODUCTION

Natural disasters, such as tsunamis, earthquakes, and typhoons, have had devastating consequences, resulting in the loss of countless lives and the severe disruption of millions of others (Ferreira, Buttell and Ferreira, 2015: 30). The occurrence of these disasters, whether triggered by natural phenomena or human activities, has been on the rise in recent decades, profoundly impacting communities, households, and individuals (Sewordor et al., 2018). The effects of natural disasters extend beyond the immediate physical damage, influencing the attitudes and behaviours of tourists, leading to a decline in demand, the cancellation of reservations, and the closure of tourism-related businesses (Zhang et al., 2021).

Research has demonstrated that conducting fieldwork in disaster-affected areas presents researchers with a range of methodological and ethical challenges (Eisenman et al., 2007; Lavin, Schemmel-Rettenmeier and Frommelt-Kuhle, 2012), particularly due to the vulnerability of the affected population (Rosenstein, 2004). While existing literature extensively explores the vulnerability of participants (see Ferreira, Buttell and Ferreira, 2015; Rosenstein, 2004), little attention has been given to the challenges faced by the researchers themselves in such disaster settings. Significantly, the closeness to traumatic experiences amplifies the psychological effects on individuals

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(Ausbrooks, Barrett and Martinez-Cosio, 2008), rendering disaster researchers more susceptible to their own personal vulnerabilities. However, there remains a significant research gap concerning the experiences of researchers who encounter disasters while conducting their studies. The objective of this study is to address these research gaps through an examination of the first-hand experiences of a doctoral researcher who encountered two massive earthquakes while conducting fieldwork on the effects of the trade union movement on the tourism and hospitality industry in Kathmandu, Nepal.

The first 7.9-magnitude earthquake lasted for just a minute, but it caused unimaginable destruction. In three weeks, while people were still fighting to survive the initial earthquake's aftershocks, a second, equally powerful earthquake struck on 12 May. According to estimates that were made public a few months later, the earthquakes caused over eight million people to be affected, over 22,000 injuries, and over 9000 fatalities (Dhakal, 2017). Over 300,000 homes sustained some damage, and nearly 500,000 had destruction.

An autoethnographic approach has been used in this paper that demonstrates the lived experience of the doctoral researcher in the field. The results of this study offer insights into the individual difficulties faced by researchers working in disaster-affected areas, which advances the field of tourism and disaster research. It elucidates the interplay between personal experiences, logistical complexities, coping mechanisms, and psychological well-being. Additionally, the study explores the practical implications associated with conducting research under volatile and uncertain conditions and emphasizes the imperative role of robust disaster preparedness and response strategies in regions affected by disasters.

This paper is structured into seven distinct sections. The subsequent section presents a comprehensive overview of the research site, Kathmandu, Nepal, emphasizing the significance of tourism and the vulnerability associated with earthquake proneness. Following this, the literature review section delves into the exploration of interrelationships between disasters, tourism, and fieldwork. Subsequently, the method section outlines the meticulous procedures employed to collect and analyse data for this study. Upon thorough examination of the findings, the discussion section situates these discoveries within the existing body of literature on tourism and disaster research. Finally, the conclusion section concludes by accentuating the gaps filled by this study, emphasizing its theoretical contributions, and offering practical implications.

2 NEPAL – THE FIELDWORK SITE

Situated in South Asia, Nepal is a landlocked nation. The Himalayan region forms its boundaries with India to the east, south, and west and China's Tibet Autonomous Region to the north. Tourism is an important industry for Nepal's economy, as it contributes more than 7% of the country's gross domestic product and provides employment to over 400,000 people (Nepal, 2022). Although Nepal is popular for its tremendous natural, cultural, and historical attractions, most people visit Nepal for nature-based tourism activities such as trekking, mountaineering, and adventure tourism. Kathmandu, where the current research took place, is the capital city and one of the most popular tourist destinations in Nepal. In 2023, over one million tourists visited Nepal for various purposes (Asian Hiking Team, 2024).

Nepal has had numerous catastrophic earthquakes with magnitudes larger than Mw 7.5, making it one of the most earthquake-prone nations in the world (Ram and Wang, 2013). The geological location of the Kathmandu Valley sits on a lacustrine sediment

basin, which is also known for its lengthy history of devastating earthquakes. The previous earthquakes have caused significant structural damage, lost lives and property, and stopped social progress (Chaulagain et al., 2016). A more recent Mw 7.9 earthquake struck central Nepal on 25 April 2015, with a focal depth of 15 km and an epicentre near Barpak village, Gorkha district, about 78 km northwest of Kathmandu (Chaulagain et al., 2016) (see Figure 1). Hundreds of aftershocks were recorded for more than a year (Adhikari and D'Ayala, 2020). A second, almost similar, quake occurred on 12 May 2015. Uncontrolled development, subpar construction methods lacking earthquake safety precautions, and a lack of public and government knowledge have all contributed to a notable increase in the area's seismic danger in recent years (Chaulagain et al., 2016).

3 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

3.1 Understanding disaster and tourism research

Oliver-Smith (1996: 305) defines a disaster as '… a process/event involving a combination of a potentially destructive agent(s) from the natural and/or technological environment … produces damage or loss to the major social organizational elements and physical facilities of a community to the degree that the essential functions of the society are interrupted or destroyed …'. Mohamed Shaluf (2007) categorizes disasters into three types: natural disasters, man-made disasters, and hybrid disasters. Natural disasters are catastrophic events caused by natural causes such as volcanic eruptions,

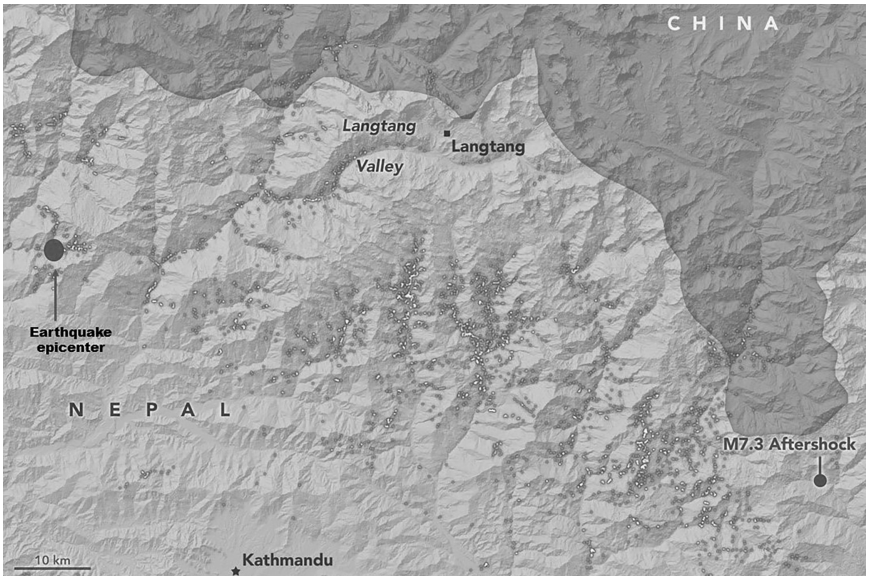

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Figure 1 2015 earthquakes and their impacts in Nepal

tornadoes, and earthquakes, while man-made disasters are caused by human actions such as accidents or production failures. Hybrid disasters, which combine natural and man-made factors, have become more common in recent times, such as Hurricane Katrina, which resulted in catastrophic flooding and loss of life and property. The occurrence of hazards at disaster sites is inherently unpredictable. For example, after a significant seismic event like a major earthquake, subsequent dangers like aftershocks tend to resurface in an unpredictable manner. These secondary perils create a great deal of uncertainty in the lives of those who live in the affected area because, among other things, they necessitate an immediate evacuation, relocation, possible health risks, restricted transit choices, and inadequate food supplies (Hu, 2015).

Natural disasters pose a significant threat to tourism destinations by causing a decrease in demand for travel, the cancellation of bookings, and the closure of the closure of tourism enterprises. For example, following the 2017 earthquake, subsequent visitation to Jiuzhaigou in China was reduced by 56% in 2017, 99% in 2018, and 93% in 2019 (Zhang et al., 2021). For the tourism and hospitality industry, these impacts can be felt in areas such as hotel pricing, occupancy rates, and revenue management, as well as in the attitudes and behaviours of tourists and other stakeholders (Leta and Chan, 2021). Tourism drives economic growth, employment, and socio-economic upliftment in many countries, leading to extensive studies on natural disaster effects on and post-disaster management of tourism destinations (Rosselló, Becken and Santana-Gallego, 2020).

3.2 Fieldwork challenges in disaster tourism research

Fieldwork is on-site research conducted by a researcher in the location of a social phenomenon, such as tourism, involving observation, analysis, and data collection through methods like interviews and participant observation, particularly in tourism research (Everett, 2010). Tourism research is a dynamic field encompassing mobility, migration, travel, self, and the other, shaping researchers' perceptions, identity, knowledge, and culture (Jamal and Hollinshead, 2001). Through tourism and travel, researchers embark on a transformative journey of seeing, experiencing, and cultural invention. It goes beyond exploration, moulding their outlook and fuelling their imagination of the world. As such, fieldwork is a common method for collecting empirical data (Everett, 2010). Many of these fieldworks are also conducted in locations other than the researcher's usual place of stay, including in different countries.

Researching in a disaster setting presents challenges for researchers, including time constraints, difficulty in contacting participants, data collection, tracking displaced populations, and lack of communication (Lavin, Schemmel-Rettenmeier and Frommelt-Kuhle, 2012). During Hurricane Katrina, Eisenman et al. (2007) faced difficulties in conducting interviews due to participant relocation and lack of information, while Flory et al. (2008) encountered obstacles due to low literacy skills and difficulty in getting individuals to participate. Researchers in disaster settings also face ethical dilemmas, including protecting participants' privacy and rights while disseminating findings (Lavin, Schemmel-Rettenmeier and Frommelt-Kuhle, 2012). Challenges include obtaining informed consent, compensating participants, and maintaining confidentiality (Ausbrooks, Barrett and Martinez-Cosio, 2008). During tourism studies, Everett (2010) encountered difficulties in negotiating power dynamics, building trust, and obtaining informed consent, whereas Hu (2015) faced ethical dilemmas due to research bias and role conflict.

Exploring the well-being of susceptible communities in regions affected by disasters poses heightened ethical dilemmas for researchers, given the necessity for support

services and the potential vulnerability to exploitation (Rosenstein, 2004). Disasters disrupt participants' ability to anticipate, cope, resist, and recover, making them vulnerable to further harm if their information is disseminated (Ferreira, Buttell and Ferreira, 2015). Amini Hosseini, Hosseinioon and Pooyan (2013) observed severe mental and psychological issues among survivors of the 2003 Bam earthquake in Iran, including disturbing thoughts, sleeplessness, aggression, family problems, fear, nightmares, and suicide. Emotional responses in earthquake survivors, such as a loss of control, pose difficulties for researchers in data collection (O'Connell, Abbott and White, 2017).

3.3 Knowledge gap: vulnerable researcher in disaster tourism research

While studies on fieldwork challenges extensively discuss the vulnerability of participants, limited research exists on the vulnerability of researchers in the field, particularly in disaster and tourism studies (Everett, 2010). While Mukherji, Ganapati and Rahill (2014) shared experiences of severe stress and collective trauma during their fieldwork following major earthquakes in Japan, India, and Haiti, Indah (2018) brought to light the challenges of adhering to safety procedures, establishing rapport, and avoiding secondary traumatic stress while researching medical education in Indonesia. The close proximity to trauma amplifies the psychological effects on individuals (Ausbrooks, Barrett and Martinez-Cosio, 2008), which also renders disaster researchers vulnerable. For instance, the profound narratives of pain and suffering shared by survivors, coupled with the first-hand exposure to their trauma, can be profoundly overwhelming and emotionally exhausting for researchers, potentially leading to burnout and fatigue (Flory et al., 2008). Surprisingly, these crucial aspects are often overlooked in the existing literature on disaster fieldwork.

Even more uncommon are the accounts of researchers who encounter disasters while conducting their research. Among the rarest studies, Richardson et al. (2009) described the challenges they faced when conducting research amid hurricanes Katrina and Rita. They faced challenges in maintaining research focus, juggling numerous research participation requests, and finding a balance between personal and professional responsibilities towards their own family and friends, who were also affected by the disasters.

Existing disaster-related fieldwork studies are primarily conducted after the disaster, indicating that researchers arrive at the sites post-disaster (e.g., Hu, 2015). This suggests that these researchers may have been mentally and physically prepared for potential challenges. Furthermore, the literature provides guidelines and ethical considerations to assist researchers in conducting studies within disaster-stricken areas (Lavin, Schemmel-Rettenmeier and Frommelt-Kuhle, 2012). Therefore, the fieldwork challenges reported in the existing post-disaster studies mainly focus on external factors and people in the sites, leaving a knowledge gap regarding the internal contexts and experiences of researchers facing disasters during their research. The unpredictable environment at disaster sites can lead to safety concerns and an emotional toll on researchers, as immediate dangers are primarily based within the crisis and following the disaster. The psychological strain endured at the location of a disaster can also result in physical trauma. Consequently, understanding the experiences of researchers is crucial not only for the success of the research but also for the overall safety of the researchers.

Moreover, the process of disaster recovery engenders substantial stress, uncertainty, and trauma for both affected communities and researchers. Scholars such as Saylor, Belter and Stokes (1997) contend that investigating the coping mechanisms employed

by well-adjusted stakeholders, including researchers, in the face of sudden and profound stressors yields invaluable insights. A handful of studies (e.g., Eisenman et al., 2007; Mukherji, Ganapati and Rahill, 2014) have indicated that researchers successfully navigate these challenges by employing proactive strategies such as anticipatory planning, collaborative efforts, and cultivating a nuanced understanding of the target community. However, a noticeable research gap exists regarding the coping mechanisms employed by researchers who encounter disaster scenarios during their fieldwork. Thus, it is essential to comprehend the specific coping strategies and challenges that researchers in the realm of disaster tourism encounter, as this knowledge is pivotal for attaining a comprehensive understanding of this field.

4 METHODS

This study uses autoethnography as an approach to examine and analyse the doctoral researcher's lived experiences amid a disaster (earthquakes). Autoethnography is defined as 'an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) to understand cultural experience (ethno)' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011: 273). Compared to other qualitative research methodologies, autoethnography places the researcher's own experiences and reflections within the framework of a specific socio-cultural phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 1991). Autoethnography explores cultural dynamics and meanings by examining the researcher's own experiences, thoughts, and feelings, in contrast to standard qualitative research methods such as ethnography, which usually entails investigating the experiences of others (Méndez, 2013). The autoethnographic approach is an appropriate methodology to delve into the personal lived experiences of researchers, recognizing that these experiences may be difficult to fully comprehend for those who have not experienced similar conditions (Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

Researchers use narrative approaches to help readers understand the human condition and the topic they are studying (Brown, 2016). By allowing readers to fully immerse themselves in the story and experience emotions, personal details, and difficulties, autoethnographic narratives facilitate a deeper understanding (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Through storytelling, readers can think with the story rather than simply analysing it. This study examines a researcher and his family's experiences during and after two earthquakes, analysing emotions, trauma, ethical dilemmas, methodological challenges, and procedural difficulties.

Autoethnographic approaches are widely employed in various fields like community and vocational psychology, linguistics, and sports studies (Kelley, 2014; Wall, 2008). They have also been utilized to explore the motivations and experiences of literary tourists (Brown, 2016), tourism research epistemologies (Botterill, 2003), and nature-based tourism applications (Rantala, 2011). Although rare, a few researchers have utilized autoethnography to examine their lived experiences in disaster studies. For instance, Iida (2017) shared his troubling experiences and challenges as a single person conducting research in Indonesia after a devastating disaster.

The autoethnographic method is not exempt from critique. Certain academics contend that it lacks rigour, theoretical foundations, and analytical elements, while others raise concerns about its ethical implications and the public nature of its written output (Delamont, 2007; Ellis, 2004). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that qualitative research does not prioritize objectivity and generalization as its primary objectives (Riessman, 2008). Similar to other qualitative research approaches, autoethnography

seeks to investigate subjective phenomena. Regarding analytic rigour, Buckley (2012) contends that the approach is analytic as long as it identifies key aspects, distils them into irreducible components, and demonstrates their relationships.

In autoethnographic studies, researchers gather information from various sources, including research diaries, participant observation field notes, letters, interviews, newspaper articles about themselves, and reflective journals (Wall, 2008). Memories play a crucial role as one of the most frequent and significant sources of data for these researchers (Wall, 2008). The researcher's memory, taking on the role of a participant in the autoethnography, becomes a valuable source of data akin to participant memory in ethnographic investigations. According to Coffey (1999), just like every other ethnographic research, autoethnography is also based on the recollection of memories, since the fieldwork process and the written narratives that follow are intimately linked to the memories that shape them.

To gather data for this study, the researcher employed various sources. Apart from personal memory, the researcher used a field note diary, which was kept in excellent condition and contained a detailed account of the researcher's experiences during the fieldwork. Supplementary data sources included (i) correspondence via email with the researcher's PhD supervisors (used with their consent) and (ii) participant observation, which provided the researcher with first-hand insights as an insider. The researcher has mentioned a few of his family members in the current study, for which he obtained their prior permission for doing so.

To ensure rigour, objectivity, and authenticity beyond the diary, email communications, and participant observation, the researcher engaged in reflective practice throughout his coping process, critically analysing his own actions, thoughts, and experiences to gain insights. The following sections present a collection of autoethnographic vignettes, derived directly from the researcher's field notes, that vividly depict his immersive encounters. Furthermore, adhering to Brown's (2016) suggestion, the researcher adopts a first-person narrative approach to uphold genuineness, integrity, and a seamless narrative flow that fosters resonance and reader engagement.

After creating a thoughtful account of his experiences, and doing a formative analysis of the daily evaluation of circumstances, situations, behaviours, and emotions, the researcher proceeded to conduct a summative analysis that revealed two overarching roles assumed by the researcher. This analytical process involves reflecting on his evolving roles and responses to the challenges faced, contributing to a deeper understanding of his coping strategies. The next section provides a brief background about the beginning of the researcher's experience and discusses these roles.

5 FINDINGS: RESEARCHER AMID A DISASTER

5.1 Shaken by earthquakes: a PhD journey interrupted

In 2014, I started my PhD journey at the University of Otago in New Zealand. I focused on studying how trade unions operate in the tourism industry. I came up with research questions, planned my methodology, and got permission to collect data in Nepal, my home country. In March 2015, I arrived in Kathmandu to begin my data collection.

I wanted to interview trade union officials and members, as well as employers from hotels and airlines. So, I went to a four-star hotel and conducted my first interview with the trade union president in Kathmandu. I located a second interviewee with the president's assistance.

On 25 April 2015, a Saturday, I took a break from work, borrowed my father's car, and went on a road trip with my wife and daughter around 11:00 AM. The road was busy, and the traffic made us drive slowly. Suddenly, I felt the car shaking like it was on a wavy sea. Unable to understand the reason, I stopped the car to look outside. I saw all the other vehicles shaking too, and a big bus was dangerously swaying next to us. I was scared, and I could hear birds chirping, dogs barking, and people panicking. Everything was chaotic. Nearby, a two-story house collapsed. I realized that a massive earthquake had hit the city. This unexpected earthquake not only disrupted the city but also impacted my PhD journey.

5.2 The researcher as a disaster victim

Following the earthquakes, I transferred my focus from doing doctorate fieldwork to managing the difficult circumstances and organizing the logistics of my family's and my daily survival for the first few months while we were living in a makeshift camp in an open field (see Figure 2). The following vignettes were extracted from my field note that I wrote on 29 April 2015 (on the third day in the makeshift camp) and summarize the conditions surrounding me at that time:

> *It seems as though our time in this temporary camp will be prolonged indefinitely. We continue to experience occasional aftershocks, and unfortunately, there is still no access to electricity or telephone services in this location. Additionally, I have been unable to use my mobile phone since yesterday as it has stopped working. Although the rain has ceased, the overall situation has not shown any signs of improvement.*

Overwhelmed by a sense of helplessness and entirely at the mercy of nature, we found ourselves enveloped in an atmosphere of uncertainty, grief, and waning strength. We finally returned to our home during the first week of June, after a difficult 1.5 months spent living in the temporary camp. But our living circumstances forced all of

Source: Author.

Figure 2 Temporary shelter in a makeshift camp after the 2015 earthquakes

our family members – my parents, my brother's family, and my cousin's family – to come together, so for several months afterward, 16 people were housed in one room.

The earthquakes exacted a profound psychological toll, leaving my family members susceptible to bouts of irritation, anxiety, and interpersonal conflicts. Distressing episodes of panic attacks were even experienced by some within our family circle. The following passage, written on 12 July 2015, in my field note, illustrates the struggle:

> *I find it very difficult to convince my sister not to read that disturbing information about the aftershocks and earthquake victims and share it with others. The more she shares, the greater the panic situation around the house. My mom shouts at her, and she shouts back to her. My father has become very silent as if he does not know what to say or do. Everyone seems to be quarrelling with each other. Life has turned into a stressful situation.*

The family faced stress due to limited resources that couldn't meet their needs. The shortage of cooking gas became a major issue, as it frequently ran out due to daily meals for 16 people. Ordering replacements every 10–12 days became difficult, as local vendors prioritized other customers. Eventually, my brother managed to collect firewood, which served as an alternative for cooking for the next several months for us during periods of gas shortage.

Being a member of my family, my main priority during that time was to address and manage our psychological well-being, while also finding ways to handle the ongoing physical and emotional challenges. This meant dedicating a considerable amount of time to providing support and guidance to my family members, ensuring their care, and occasionally accompanying them to hospitals for medical attention. Additionally, I took on the responsibility of organizing essential resources for our basic survival.

As the month of August drew to a close, we began to witness some improvement in our circumstances. Gradually, my family members were able to return to their respective homes. Although occasional aftershocks persisted, we had grown accustomed to living with this uncertainty and had learned to adapt to the situation.

5.3 Conducting research on the disaster site

Despite the ongoing challenges of living in a temporary camp, I made the decision to reach out to the participants on my previous list. As anticipated, most of my phone calls went unanswered. A couple of individuals did respond but politely declined to participate. Considering the difficult circumstances they were facing, it didn't feel ethically right to discuss my research timeline or insist on conducting interviews.

Unable to establish connections with participants until early June (after moving back home from the makeshift camp), I adjusted my strategy. I revisited union offices in hotels and airline companies, only to find that many hotels were closed or operating with minimal staff. I arranged meetings with several hotel managers to look into the situation. I found that the majority of employees, encompassing both union representatives and members, had opted to take time off from work and journey back to their ancestral residences. Their purpose was to tend to their families and address the destruction caused to their properties. On 12 June 2015, I summarized the challenges I encountered as a researcher in the disaster-affected area in a section of my field notes as follows:

> *I am getting a little worried because of the situation that is unfolding now. I have not been able to conduct interviews as I expected. I am not sure when the hotel employees will return from their ancestral homes. I have already been here for more than two and a half months, and I do not actually have data for my study. I am not sure what the future holds for me.*

After a few days of not getting any success, I made a decision to tweak my approach. I decided to start by interviewing any owners and managers who were available, and then, when the trade union members and officials came back to the city, I would speak with them. As I reached out to more owners and managers, I encountered a rather peculiar situation. While they were willing to be interviewed, they seemed reluctant to commit to a specific date and time. On 23 June 2015, I noted my dilemma on my field note as follows:

> *I do not really comprehend why the hotel owners and managers would not want to commit to the date and time for an interview. More surprisingly, they have not called me back as promised. So, my confusion is: should I continue to approach and follow them up or just wait for their calls (of which I am not sure I will get one)?*

During those days, my time was primarily occupied with two activities. First, I committed myself to reviewing the interviews I had already done. Second, establishing regular contact with at least one potential interviewee and maintaining ongoing communication became a part of my daily routine. The implementation of this second strategy yielded significant results in the subsequent weeks.

Over the next few weeks, I managed to conduct interviews with a hotel owner and two trade union officials. Even though my plans were slightly delayed, I remained hopeful and satisfied, knowing that my research was moving forward. This experience taught me valuable lessons about the significance of patience, perseverance, and flexibility as a researcher. Two weeks later, a hotel owner told me that staff members were gradually returning to work, which gave me more hope. I got the chance to interview additional trade union executives and members within the first week of August. I had other appointments as a result, which would keep me occupied for the upcoming month.

Despite expectations, research progress was slowed down by several factors, including time-consuming visits to hotels and airlines due to government and private owners demolishing damaged properties. Road blockades and debris made commuting difficult, limiting the number of people and research activities. Many days, I had to walk for hours to conduct interviews due to overcrowded public buses. In addition, we had to deal with frequent power outages that lasted for 12–14 hours each day. This made it extremely challenging to use the internet and charge our mobile phones. To cope with this situation, my wife and I came up with a plan. We adjusted our meal preparation schedule to align with the power cuts since we had switched from cooking gas to a heater. On some days, we would start preparing dinner as early as two in the afternoon, while on other days, we would start cooking our lunch at six in the morning. It was a bit unusual, but it helped us navigate through the power cuts.

I was under a great deal of mental strain as a result of my inability to conduct a sufficient number of interviews and the short amount of time I had to finish my PhD fieldwork. The pressure was so overwhelming that it occasionally overwhelmed me, leading to feelings of anxiety and depression. It became more and more obvious to me that I would need to stay longer in Nepal to complete the data collection process. This realization added significant pressure, as I was required to achieve my data collection goal within the specified timeframe, specifically by November 2015.

By the time the second week of October rolled around, I noticed a shift taking place. While the progress was still somewhat slow, I managed to conduct interviews with more individuals. To my pleasant surprise, some participants showed great cooperation, going above and beyond my expectations. They took the initiative to reach out and schedule appointments, and many even helped me in recruiting additional

participants without any prompting. It was clear that my earlier strategy of maintaining regular contact by calling one participant per day was paying off. Recognizing the improvements in my situation, my supervisors granted me a three-month extension to complete my fieldwork. As a result, I returned to New Zealand in mid-February 2016, feeling a sense of accomplishment.

6 DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the unique challenges that the researcher encountered in the field of disaster research (the 2015 earthquakes) in Nepal. This study aligns with existing literature, shedding light on methodological challenges in disaster-affected areas (Lavin, Schemmel-Rettenmeier and Frommelt-Kuhle, 2012). Time constraints, difficulties in reaching participants, and disruptions in data collection due to logistical obstacles resonate with previous research (Eisenman et al., 2007). These challenges emphasize the complexity of conducting research in uncertain and upheaval environments. Additionally, this study delves into the ethical dilemmas faced by researchers in disaster settings, particularly the role conflict experienced during fieldwork in affected areas (Hu, 2015). These ethical considerations are vital for maintaining integrity and effectively disseminating research findings, in line with existing literature (Ausbrooks, Barrett and Martinez-Cosio, 2008).

In addition to aligning with previous research on methodological and ethical challenges, this study offers unique insights into the personal experiences and coping mechanisms of the researcher during fieldwork in earthquake-affected Nepal using an autoethnographic approach. Autoethnography uses the researcher's personal experiences and reflections to understand a socio-cultural phenomenon, providing a unique perspective compared to other qualitative methods like ethnography that focuses on others' experiences (Méndez, 2013). It allows researchers to explore their own lived experiences, recognizing their complexity (Polkinghorne, 1991). By focusing on the emotional journey, resilience, and adaptive strategies of the researcher through an autoethnographic approach, this study provides a deeper understanding of the human aspect of disaster research. This study highlights the interconnectedness of personal challenges, logistical hurdles, and psychological well-being within the research narrative. It emphasizes the researcher's integral role and well-being in the research process. By focusing on the researcher's coping mechanisms and emotional experiences through autoethnography, this study offers a comprehensive perspective of the research journey. It deviates from conventional narratives of coping mechanisms such as anticipatory planning, collaborative efforts, and cultivating a nuanced understanding of the target community (Eisenman et al., 2007; Mukherji, Ganapati and Rahill, 2014) and underscores the importance of self-care and resilience in navigating disaster fieldwork effectively.

The researcher's fieldwork in Nepal during earthquakes significantly impacted his psychological well-being due to the unpredictable disaster environment, delays, and uncertainties. As mentioned above, challenges in accessing sites and engaging with participants led to logistical hurdles and increased stress. Despite these challenges, the researcher's resilience and coping strategies played a crucial role in managing his psychological well-being, potentially mitigating the negative impact on his mental health.

From the tourism research point of view, this study sheds light on the obstacles faced by researchers conducting fieldwork in places devastated by disasters, where natural calamities can significantly disrupt tourism destinations, leading to a decline in

demand, cancellations of bookings, and the closure of tourism establishments (Zhang et al., 2021). By showcasing the researcher's personal experiences in navigating these challenges amidst two earthquakes in Nepal, this study provides first-hand insights into the repercussions of during and post-disaster events on tourism destinations. Through the researcher's reflections on coping with stress, managing logistical hurdles, and ensuring daily survival in the aftermath of a disaster, this study offers valuable perspectives on resilience and recovery strategies that hold relevance for the tourism industry. Gaining an understanding of how individuals adapt to and cope with post-disaster conditions can inform strategies for rebuilding tourism destinations and reinstating visitor confidence (Mukherji, Ganapati and Rahill, 2014). Furthermore, by emphasizing the interconnectedness of personal experiences and professional endeavours in such contexts, this study underscores the significance of adopting holistic approaches to post-disaster tourism recovery.

7 CONCLUSION

This study examines a doctoral researcher's journey during a disaster in Nepal, where he was forced to prioritize survival and family well-being in a makeshift camp. Despite the psychological toll of uncertainty and fear, participant cooperation increased, leading to the successful extension of the research. The researcher overcame adversity, completing his fieldwork and returning to New Zealand with newfound resilience and determination (refer to Table 1 for the timeline of events between arrival at and departure from the earthquake site in Kathmandu).

Research gaps exist regarding researchers' vulnerability in the field, both in general disaster research and specifically in the context of disasters in tourism destinations. While participant vulnerability is extensively studied (see Ferreira, Buttell and Ferreira, 2015; Rosenstein, 2004), little is known about the challenges faced by researchers themselves. Furthermore, there is a lack of research on researchers encountering disasters during their work. Most existing studies focus on post-disaster research (Hu, 2015), with guidelines primarily addressing external factors and people in the disaster sites (Lavin, Schemmel-Rettenmeier and Frommelt-Kuhle, 2012), neglecting internal contexts and experiences. This study aimed to bridge these research gaps.

The current study contributes to disaster and tourism research in multiple ways. First, it adds a personal dimension by highlighting researchers' challenges and coping strategies during fieldwork in disaster-affected settings, humanizing the research process. Second, it explores the interconnectedness of personal experiences, logistical challenges, and psychological well-being in disaster fieldwork, deepening our understanding of these dynamics. Third, it offers insights into the practical implications of conducting research in unpredictable conditions, including impacts on timelines, methodologies, and ethics. Additionally, the researcher's first-hand accounts shed light on the profound impacts of disasters on tourism destinations, providing a nuanced understanding of challenges in rebuilding and revitalizing. Finally, this study emphasizes the need for robust disaster preparedness and response strategies in tourism destinations, recognizing the unpredictability and uncertainty of disaster-affected regions.

From the point of view of practical implications, this study highlights the importance of preparedness, adaptability, and self-care strategies for researchers in disaster-affected settings. It calls for comprehensive training programmes and support mechanisms within universities to address personal and emotional challenges faced during fieldwork (Indah, 2018). This study emphasizes the need for collaboration and

Table 1 Timeline indicating the sequence of events, experiences, and progress between arrival at and departure from the earthquake site, Kathmandu

23/3/2015	25/4/2015	12/5/2015	5/6/2015	18/6/2015	25/6/2015	3/8/2015	22/8/2015	11/10/2015	16/2/2016
Kathmandu arrival	Massive earthquake Moved to a makeshift camp the next day No electricity/ telephone/ mobile phone broke down (for several days) Continued aftershocks (throughout the fieldwork period)	Another massive earthquake	Returned to home All family members and relatives (16 people) started sleeping in the same room (for the next several months) Started to experience psychological trauma, panic attacks, shortage of cooking gas begins Managing firewood for cooking Started visiting union offices, and hotel staff, unable to meet	Changed data collection strategy Contacted hotel managers and owners for interviews, agreed but was refused later	Changed contact strategy again – telephoned at least one potential participant every day for an interview request	Conducted several interviews with employers, managers, and union officials Started to feel hopeful Slow research process Commuting difficulty due to debris and roadblocks Crowded and slow-running buses Needed to walk often for long distances for data collection 12–14 hours of power cut – needed to reschedule cooking according to power availability Internet and mobile charging problems	Stressful situation continues Mental pressure Anxiety and depression Inefficiency in conducting enough interviews Fieldwork completion deadline nearing pressure	Things started to change Participants proactively contacted Additional participants were approached through referral Supervisors granted an extension for three months nearing Renewed hope	Fieldwork completed Returned to the University of Otago, New Zealand

Source: Author.

effective communication between researchers and disaster response organizations, advocating for seamless coordination and data collection efforts to optimize resource utilization and provide targeted support in post-disaster scenarios.

The researcher's first-hand accounts reveal the significant effects of natural disasters on tourist locations, providing a unique perspective on the post-disaster landscape (Zhang et al., 2021). These observations offer a complex understanding of the challenges faced by the tourism industry in restoring and revitalizing travel destinations after a disaster (Leta and Chan, 2021). These findings underscore the need for comprehensive approaches to post-disaster rehabilitation and have implications for tourism management strategies. This study emphasizes the importance of integrated solutions in managing post-disaster tourism recovery, considering the interplay between individual well-being, community dynamics, and tourism operations.

While this study offers valuable insights into the challenges of conducting research in a disaster-affected setting, there are important limitations to consider. Relying on a single researcher's perspective through autoethnography may limit the generalizability of the findings; however, it also opens avenues for future research. For example, by comparing various other types of research, such as different natural disasters or conflict situations, researchers can broaden their understanding of the complexities of conducting fieldwork in challenging environments. These comparative studies could provide valuable insights into the diverse ways in which researchers navigate adversity, cope with trauma, and maintain their well-being during data collection in high-stress contexts. Similarly, collaborative studies and longitudinal analyses could further deepen our understanding of the diverse challenges in disaster research (Delamont, 2007). Addressing potential subjectivity and bias from personal reflections is crucial to maintaining objectivity during data interpretation (Riessman, 2008). Future research could incorporate longitudinal studies to explore long-term impacts and conduct comparative analyses across different contexts, deepening our understanding of diverse challenges. These explorations would pave the way for more comprehensive and impactful disaster research in the future.

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