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Reflecting on the 2015 Gorkha earthquake, tread carefully

Hanna A. Ruszczyk

Introduction

I write this chapter from the perspective of a social scientist, a [human geography PhD researcher](#) who was investigating community resilience to earthquakes, as well as a practitioner who had worked for the United Nations (UN) in different countries for over a decade. First, I reflect on my experiences during and after the 2015 Gorkha earthquake in Nepal as well as on my role as a privileged foreign researcher who could leave for safety. Briefly, I reflect on what the earthquake allowed to happen in Nepal in the subsequent two years. The Gorkha earthquake sequence (including the 12 May earthquake) killed almost 9,000, injured 22,000 and devastated almost 800,000 homes ([GoN, Ministry of Home Affairs et al., 2015](#)). Most homes remain to be rebuilt over two years later due to delays in government handling of the disaster. Second, I consider ethical issues in relation to being a foreign researcher in a disaster. I consider how to approach settings, which are vastly different from one's own, and how to consider providing support to people in difficult and trying times. Natural hazard events occur with [regularity](#) but humans turn them into disasters. Over 40 years ago, [D'Keefe et al. \(1974\)](#) put forward the argument that there is no such thing as a 'natural disaster'. Society does not seem to have learnt the significance of this statement.

An earthquake

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Bharatpur, Nepal, only 38 miles south of the 25 April epicentre in Gorkha, is where I was conducting my long-term research on urban disaster community resilience when the earthquake began. These excerpts are from my Durham University (UK), Department of Geography PhD researcher blogs

(Ruszczyk 2015: a, b):

The earthquake started at 11:56 a.m. on the day of rest (Saturday), therefore there were few vehicles traveling, the shops were still closed and few people were out in Bharatpur. My research assistant and I were walking on New Road in the industrial area of town where the India bound trucks get serviced, where buses are made etc. It is a wide unpaved road near the river. The metal was shaking on the commercial building near me. I asked R what he thought was going on. He said, 'earthquake'. I felt faint and not stable on the ground, there was a yellow haze and it appeared as if waves were coming from the ground and the ground was shaking horizontally. It lasted around a minute and a half. I swayed but did not fall. The city's infrastructure was intact and only a few buildings were damaged. The 6.7-magnitude aftershock on Sunday, April 26, was especially grim and felt almost as powerful as the Saturday earthquake. In the first 72 hours, we experienced 68 aftershocks. It was, quite simply, terrifying.

Within five to seven days after the earthquake, Bharatpur (in Chitwan district bordering India) was a transit point for people fleeing the Kathmandu Valley by overcrowded buses. The Kathmandu Valley was perceived as dangerous; people were fleeing to temporarily relocate and live with extended families in the plains of Nepal. According to the Sub-Metropolitan City of Bharatpur (SMCB) authorities, Bharatpur provided food and water to over 100,000 people who were travelling onward to southeastern and southwestern parts of Nepal.

The aftershocks continued for many long months. On 12 May 2015 a particularly strong aftershock (almost as devastating as the 25 April earthquake) shook Nepal. According to the local authorities, the 12 May earthquake caused structural damage in the city: 100 buildings were totally destroyed and 300 buildings were partially collapsed. The SMCB staff struggled with the volume of

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requests for structural integrity assessments of earthquake damage. Subsequently, the SMCB trained 38 volunteer engineer consultants who assessed 3,000 reported damaged buildings out of a building stock of 40,000 in Bharatpur.

I wrote an article for the US-based *Natural Hazards Observer* in August 2015 and this is the concluding paragraph:

I will return to Bharatpur in late September 2015 to continue my [PhD] fieldwork. I look forward to learning how people and the government have incorporated the earthquake experience into their lives and professional work and if the experience will change more than natural hazards mitigation, preparation and response in Nepal. I wonder if there will be changes in the political sphere, the creation of a constitution and possible municipal elections.

I sought to learn how my professional colleagues, Bharatpur residents and also key stakeholders for the PhD research had incorporated the earthquake experience in their lives and how important the earthquake continued to be to them. The anthropologist, Edward Simpson, in his *Political Biography of an Earthquake: Aftermath and Amnesia in Gujarat, India* describes earthquakes as a special kind of a hazard. A hazard that creates ruptures in physical, social, political and economic spheres and from which a new kind of a future can be imagined and created by people and governments.

Terror and trauma

There is image on the cover of *Lapham's Quarterly* on the subject of disaster ([Lapham 2016](#)) of an ancient king's theatre mask in stone (with eyebrows raised and the mouth in the shape of the number 0). This theatre mask reminds me of the terror of the quaking and the fear of time – the unknown future. My physical geography colleagues told me the possibility of aftershocks was very high. Knowing there would be aftershocks and that some of those aftershocks could be worse than

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Saturday's 11:56 earthquake terrified me. I was also fleetingly terrified that some of Bharatpur's residents would think I had caused the earthquake by asking the city's residents questions about their earthquake knowledge and preparedness. In my Master of Arts research, I found some urban dwellers in the Kathmandu Valley were hesitant to talk about possible earthquakes for fear they would come (Ruszczyk, 2014).

After my initial email/blogs in the hours and days after the earthquake and some non-academic articles I penned; I have written very little about the earthquake and my experience (over two years after the event). Other academics have written eloquently, but I have needed to keep my experiences to myself. I did not lose anyone or anything in the earthquake except my centring. For this book, I had written a draft of this chapter in a scholarly fashion, with minimal emotion, stressing the points I thought relevant. I could already envision the yawn of the reader and the reader's eyes begin to close. I was not being honest regarding what the earthquake meant to me and what the earthquake possibly did and did not do to Bharatpur's residents whom I had been interviewing when the earthquake occurred. I decided to try again with this chapter.

It has taken me much time to process the experience and to make sense of it in some way. My reading of disasters and natural hazards has changed after the earthquake experience. I look more carefully at the tone and the concept of time in disaster literature. It is only when I read some disaster scholars or some scientists wearily discuss why is it people do not learn from earthquakes and why are the same mistakes repeated after earthquake experiences that I feel the urge to interrupt and explain. 'It is because people need to forget the earthquake and all of the accompanying feelings and occurrences that manifest themselves during a crisis that is triggered by nature and helped by man to create a disaster'. People cannot worry about something they cannot control. That is the role of governments and unfortunately, many governments have short attention spans. So we may be destined to repeat some of the same errors, year after each year, decade after

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decade and century after century. Unless, we link our efforts post-disaster to what people view as important – everyday *economic security* and *stability* in their everyday lives. Often, this link is not made during the post-hazard event.

There is a tremendous amount left unsaid and unacknowledged between those who were there and those who come after the earth stops quaking. I think it bears repeating and stressing that people were exhausted by the earthquake, we functioned at diminished capacity, we had sleepless nights and our memory was very short. The continued shaking of the earth and the not knowing when it would shake again and how intensely was a time full of terror. An earthquake is not experienced in the same way as a reoccurring hazard or a slow-onset event such as flooding. An earthquake changes everything and everyone in some way (Simpson, 2014). There are lessons to be learnt about the national building code, earthquake resistant construction, good governance, aid being distributed fairly, empowering communities to rebuild in the way they desire, building the capacity of government to assess where landslides might occur, how to distribute relief and reconstruction material in the quickest and most cost-effective manner and the list of lessons goes on.

What is imperative to also understand post the Gorkha earthquake – is what and how the earthquake changed the environment for those who did not lose their homes, their families or friends, their livelihoods, or those who were not displaced. The earthquake allowed other things to happen and, other topics are more important than the earthquake itself to millions of people in Nepal. In some cases, the earthquake itself is not the most important issue, as hard as this may be to believe (similar to Hyndman's (2011) findings post-tsunami in 2004). The approved constitution in September 2015 with its promise of stability and end of 'transition' for the country's inhabitants and the unexpected economic turmoil and devastation of the unofficial economic blockade at the border crossings with India (through which 85 per cent of all goods enter the landlocked country of Nepal)

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were much more relevant to the majority of Nepalis. Four months after leaving, I returned to Nepal. This coincided with the constitution being suddenly promulgated and the enactment of Indian unofficial economic blockade at all India-Nepal border crossings. Livelihoods were significantly impacted and uncertainty over future systems prevailed. Shock after shock for Nepali residents. Different traumatic events for different groups.

The earthquake and me

The earthquake experience changed me as a person and as a researcher. I now know that in time of crisis, a paradise is built in hell (paraphrasing Rebecca Solnit's title of her 2009 book detailing the extraordinary communities that arise in disaster). Solnit describes societies after a natural hazard-induced disaster as utopian for a brief time. Societies are 'more flexible and improvisational, more egalitarian and less hierarchical, with more room for meaningful roles and contributions from all members – and with a sense of membership' (Ibid: 308). In Bharatpur, people looked out for each other and created a collective spirit of resilience, which manifested itself in a variety of ways to the survivors. I witnessed a collective spirit where class, caste and gender were ignored. For a certain amount of time, a focus on the greater common good prevailed. Then the dust settled, everyday life returned and everyday coping strategies returned with all of their difficulties and limitations.

Through [Blanchot's \(1995\)](#) book, *The Writing of the Disaster*, survivors understand the difficulties of describing something that happened to those who were not present. There are words that are used among those who witnessed and participated in the event that those who were not there cannot understand. We, those who were there, talk about being a survivor (rather than a victim), time after the earthquake is considered in very long seconds, minutes and hours, rather than 'the first days'. Four days after the earthquake, I wrote:

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It is fascinating to witness the various stages that come after the hazard. Saturday was shock and everyone continued with their organized activities (I conducted a focus group and went to a scheduled interview), the second day (24 hours later) people were numb and nervous and were processing what had happened the day before and continued to happen with the too regular aftershocks. Monday, 48 hours later, people are emotional/tearful and needed to talk about where they were when the earthquake happened or 'attacked'.

Through the months of May and June 2015, I struggled to understand how to accommodate the earthquake event into my life and research. The trauma of the earthquake experience had a dramatic impact on my understandings of personal resilience and what constitutes community resilience in a crisis event. The word community no longer proved useful, rather, the word collective more appropriately reflected what I heard, saw and felt during and in the days after the earthquake. My understanding of concepts has changed (time, trauma, survivors, hope, compassion, uncertainty, security, sense of loss, communal, cooperative, upheavals, fractures, rifts). I found a more nuanced, deeper connection had been created between research informants and myself. When I returned four months later, people introduced me as 'one of us'. The local community knew I had experienced the earthquake in their city, felt the terror and uncertainty they had felt in the minutes, hours, and days after the quaking started. Everyone had a story about the earthquake but they were left unspoken for the most part. The silence, the lull in conversation when we thought back to the tremors and terror, was pregnant with emotion. What was surprising for me was how people had incorporated the earthquake into their lives and the continuing aftershocks; people had moved on with their lives, their worries and priorities. My research tried to reflect this.

The French philosopher [Blanchot \(1993, 1\)](#) proposes 'the disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact'. He also argues that (Ibid, 3) 'the disaster is related to forgetfulness – forgetfulness without memory, the motionless retreat of what has not been treated – the immemorial, perhaps. To remember forgetfully'. Survivors need to forget but it is always there in

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their memory. Survivors must move on in a way. In the weeks after the earthquake, my UK and American friends and colleagues suggested I seek counselling support if I thought I needed it. They said I needed to be aware of possible post-traumatic stress syndrome, to consider taking a break from the PhD research. My Asian friends and colleagues (both female and male) from Pakistan, India, Nepal and Bangladesh gave different advice – they told me to move on. To forget it. My Asian friends reminded me that everyday life is full of hardship (open defecation, intermittent access to municipal piped water, intermittent access to electricity, the problematic caste system, a 10-year internal conflict in Nepal which recently finished and killed 13,000 people, everyday hazards such as air pollution and road traffic accidents and the list goes on). The earthquake is just one of many hardships and disasters. This difference in attitude is very relevant to the discussion of how to support survivors. I do not have a clear answer except to suggest exercising caution when exporting coping mechanisms from one culture to another culture. This utilises the ethos of green social work (Dominelli, 2012) where a grounded understanding of the interdependencies between people and their environment and local contexts is considered before support is offered to those in need.

Ethical considerations

In the second part of this chapter I discuss ethical issues in relation to being a foreign researcher in a disaster. I consider how to approach settings, which are vastly different from one's own, and how to consider providing support to people in difficult and trying times. There were differences between my situation and those of the people I was engaging with during the earthquake sequence. I only had myself and my colleagues to worry about. My family was safe, far away. I could access expert knowledge about earthquakes and landslides from colleagues at Durham. They answered my questions and gave a level of comfort. On the other hand, I was heavily dependent on networks I created that are not based on family networks; in a way I was a burden or an additional obligation for

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them. After the Indian government relaxed entry procedures on the border crossings overland, I was able to depart at Raxual, the closest border crossing to Bharatpur (three hours away). Durham organised everything for me to evacuate except for the car that I organised. Once in India, again I was supported by high-ranking Indian government officials who generously gave their precious time which could have been utilised elsewhere in relation to the earthquake. Due to my privileged situation as a foreign researcher who had access to technical expertise, formal systems that functioned, money and connections, I was removed from a problematic situation.

Naturally, this left me feeling particularly guilty in relation to my friends, colleagues and key informants that I left behind. I was the special foreigner who could depart when she wanted to. I had to leave behind in a continuing dangerous situation people with whom I had shared a terrifying experience. It was highly problematic for me. I planned on staying and continuing my fieldwork, but Durham University required me to be evacuated or I risked losing the insurance coverage for my fieldwork trip. If I did not have the insurance, I was particularly vulnerable and would have had much greater difficulties if the situation worsened and I was hurt. I promised to return as soon as I could and when I would not be an additional burden to the people I interacted with.

The issue of risk assessments and insurance warrants further reflection. Who wields the power? Who makes the decisions on safety, protocols to be utilised, evacuating, to what extent is the student researcher involved? Whose knowledge is most valued in extreme situations, whose safety is most important? Also, UK universities provide insurance coverage for their staff and students, but not local team members who are part of research fieldwork trips. My research assistant was a long distance from his family and had to make his own way back to safety. [Duffield \(2014: 77\)](#) suggests that due to the 'growth of research-related risk aversion within UK universities', research maybe inhibited or curtailed in the future due to fear of terrorism, rioting and protests, flying and also malaria. I find that in addition to this list, we could realistically add everyday life where most of the

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world's population lives (motorcycles, power outages, quality of water and solid waste management). Only these items are not high on a Western risk register. So should we stop engaging with most of the world's population in their 'risky' reality? I should hope not.

Nepali culture is significantly different to mine and I am acutely aware of the differences in terms of religion, caste and class, gender roles, and the conditions lingering in a post-conflict state.

Mohanty criticises individuals from the world's minority who speak on behalf of the world's majority.

I acknowledge this as a significant risk although attempts were made to enter the 'space and vision of, and in solidarity with, communities in struggle in the Two-Thirds World' (2003: 507). I was aware of my status as a foreigner, as a woman who had much freedom of movement compared to some Nepali women, my level of education, my access to foreign healthcare and the relative ease in earning money compared to most Nepalis I engaged with.

My fieldwork and the study were conducted in accordance with the ethical principles set out by the Graduate Committee of the Geography Department, Durham University. I strove to be aware of my reflexivity and the role I played as a researcher as well as the research process as noted by England (1994). Following England's suggestion (1994: 81), I attempted to utilise 'a more reflexive and flexible approach to fieldwork [that allowed me] to be more open to any challenges to [my] theoretical position that fieldwork almost inevitably raises'. England (Ibid: 82) suggests, 'Reflexivity is self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical scrutiny of the self as researcher'. The questions of why are you doing this as a social worker, and of what benefit will you be to the people you want to engage with warrants reflection. Will you be requiring resources that could be utilised more effectively elsewhere post-disaster? Virtual helplines may be an alternative tool to utilise to support those on the ground (Dominelli, 2012). Do you require too much education about the local condition and norms in order to make yourself useful? Proceed with caution, I would advise in a disaster context. Green social workers would concur.

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Culture and disaster

[Bankoff's research \(2007\)](#): 338) in the Philippines highlights informal and formal community groups, forms of social capital, which have existed for hundreds of years in different forms. He believes this is due in part to the devastation that regularly hits the Philippines in the form of natural hazards. 'Perhaps the important role hazard has played in the daily life of its peoples encourages forms of mutual dependence and cooperative activity'. In the everyday of urban Nepal, there can also be dangers to going it alone. Formal and informal associations and networks devoted to mutual assistance allow people to withstand and prepare for unexpected misfortunes. The nature of informal associations and networks as well as social services defies easy definition as I learnt through my research. Who is excluded from local support mechanisms is not always clear. These issues are problematic for an external person to understand. For example, tenants in the city are particularly vulnerable, they are often excluded from the urban social support systems organised on a neighbourhood level. Even the more affluent tenants may be excluded. Social support systems are based on home ownership to a large extent in cities. Homeowners do not want to invest their time and energy to support tenants who are or may not be living there long-term.

Only action that places the community at the centre and supports the community's coherence will be of long-term benefit to people post-disaster ([Wisner et al., 2004](#); [Wisner et al., 2012](#); [Crabtree, 2015](#)). [Aldrich \(2012\)](#) found similar evidence regarding social capital and the benefits to the long-term redevelopment of communities based not necessarily on outside intervention, but on local people leading the efforts and receiving support, which they requested. [Crabtree \(2015\)](#) discovered in Bihar, India (bordering Nepal) after the 2008 Kosi Floods that dignity, safety, loss of livelihoods and also a loss of hope for the future were frequently mentioned by survivors as issues they were facing. The word disaster 'comes from the Latin compound of *dis-*, or away, without, and

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astro, star or planet; literally, without a star' (Spink 2009: 10). This may be interpreted as being lost, or losing a guiding light. In his writing about nature, Clark (2011: 68) suggests, 'Those who endure disasters large or small tend to feel estranged from others who have not shared what they have been through'. This is highly relevant. I struggled to explain to my family and friends what had happened and how it had felt. I felt most comfortable with those who had experienced it. But since I was evacuated out of Nepal, I was disconnected from those with whom I had spent the first 72 hours of the earthquake and the tens of aftershocks. Upon my return to the United Kingdom (UK), I found comfort with colleagues and friends who had a bond with Nepal and its people. Together, over a period of days and weeks, we reflected on the events and considered how to proceed or not.

Describing disasters, Hewitt (2011: 30) suggests, 'Disaster images are mostly of spectacular destruction and heroic rescue: maps, experts and spokespersons in distant metropolitan and agency headquarters; lorries, planes and ships bringing modern goods and expertise from donor countries and by dedicated agencies'. Years earlier, Hewitt (1998: 87) argued against such disaster pornography. 'Letting those in hazard speak for and of themselves, is one of the few possibilities for keeping the faces and pain in the foreground of interpretation and response; as part of the social evaluation of problems and responses, not merely as advertisements on the front cover'. This warning related to disaster pornography should be heeded post-disaster as well. As a foreign researcher or social worker, one has the luxury of being able to leave and return home. Fighting against voyeurism (England, 1994; Bigg et al. 2005) is essential. Power relations need to be explicitly considered; although reflecting upon them and 'being sensitive to these power relations does not remove them' (England 1994: 85). Considering who we are accountable to when we seek to provide help from a different cultural framing is worthy of reflection before embarking to provide support in a different cultural setting to one's own.

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The role of first responders must not be undervalued. They are not the foreigners who are flown in. First responders post-hazard event are everyday people, the neighbours, the family members, the local government or military. In his discussion of survivors, [Hewitt](#) argues that

inhabitants who are at risk or disaster victims are commonly portrayed as dysfunctional or panic-stricken, even though they typically carry out most of the immediate, life-saving actions, bear the brunt of the losses, hardships and disruptions, and are often side-lined in reconstruction efforts.

(2014: 28)

Over and over again, there are instances of outsiders disrupting social systems and imposing their own ways of working on the first responders and the communities overall. [Solmit \(2004\)](#) had similar reflections based on her research in New York City, Hurricane Katrina, Mexico City Earthquake, and other places. It is critical to understand that many survivors have carried out acts of courage and supported their fellow humans. This has been repeatedly documented by scholars. For example, [Ride and Bretherton](#) suggest,

community resilience may seem to be stronger in response to natural disasters than to other types of crisis such as a violent conflict. The perception that the disaster cause comes from outside the community helps to consolidate bonds between members to respond collectively to the crisis.

(2011: 15)

National residents are the first responders and their role should be not forgotten.

For those who have not been directly engaged by the natural hazard, there is an immediate desire to help, to act in some way. [Clark \(2011: 61\)](#) in his discussion of the response post the 26 December 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami (in which almost 230,000 died in 11 countries) describes it as

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a rushing through the response. Rather, there should be a need to stay in the moment and to feel the ground-swelling of emotions that accompany the devastation. 'A kind of surge, a fast-spreading intensity of feeling that swept up distant others into relations of attentiveness, care and giving. A wave of affect, we might say, at once global and very local'. Sometimes the need to 'do something' should remain as a need. Immediate action is not always the best response. [Joint \(2005\)](#) explains that we cannot disregard natural occurrences such as tsunami waves and the movement of tectonic plates. As humans, we need to make the space to be shocked, to consider and to grieve for what others and we have witnessed and lost. We need to be cognizant of our desire to help and how best to provide this care. [Ride and Bretherton \(2011\)](#): 9) argue forcefully that 'the root of culture is in meaning. The need to interpret and make sense of events will be evident in a disaster situation, and the different cultural groups will bring different frames of reference to this task'. This is very important to consider as an outsider to the disaster. The imperative should be to listen, and to be there as support is required again. This follows the green social work ethos.

To do no harm. This is an aspiration of all those who work with disadvantaged groups or individuals. [Kellehaer \(2002\)](#): 66) argues 'the ethic [principle] 'do no harm' is alarmingly simplistic'. To consider what this means for survivors and how to engage with people post-disaster event requires significant reflection, consideration and research into the context, culture and society and environment. Possibly, no action is the best action. Kellehaer also suggests that researchers (and I would suggest social workers both foreign and in-country are in this category as well) are also 'merely' travellers. 'We enter other people's territories' (Ibid: 71) with social, political, economic, environmental, governance and power structures that may be different to ours and ones that we cannot or possibly should not change due to our engagement. In *Green Social Work*, [Dominelli \(2012\)](#) argues also for doing no harm and being acutely aware of social and environmental issues at play.

[Schipper \(2010, 2015\)](#) argues for the necessity to understand the importance of religion, socio-

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cultural traditions and belief systems in their role of influencing perceptions and attitudes as well as behaviours and response to hazards. There are differences in perceptions of different cultures. Learning how different they are is important for an outsider.

[Krüger et al.'s \(2015\)](#) book, *Cultures and Disasters; Understanding Cultural Framings in Disaster Risk Reduction*, is a valuable resource in attempting to understand the role of culture in disasters. There is also research about the 'tyranny of Western expertise' ([Marsella, 2010](#)), arguing for locally based, culturally appropriate forms of social support and coping mechanisms. I have heard of Western psychosocial support being offered in Nepal post-earthquake. This is a new Western intervention in Nepal. Anecdotally, people are uncertain what to make of it. They are unsure if it is useful or not. 'Local knowledge regarding coping methods' ([Urbtree 2014](#): 171) is essential to understand before Western forms of support are introduced. Research is needed to assess the benefits or damage caused by Western psychosocial support interventions post-earthquake. [Summerfield \(2005\)](#) strongly argues psychosocial interventions have been appropriately criticised for their cultural insensitivity and insufficient consideration of people who are focusing on the future and rebuilding their lives. [Crabtree \(2015](#): 171–172) explains that post-flooding in Bihar; displaced people living in camps received psychosocial support including yoga. 'Counselling, a western form of intervention, was both given and received by the villagers; those who did not receive psychosocial help stated that they would have appreciated it'. In Nepal, research is needed to assess its appropriateness and effectiveness.

After a devastating earthquake such as the one in Nepal, compassion is easily felt. In her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, [Sontag](#) suggests:

Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. . . . The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated. If one feels that there is nothing 'we' can

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do – but who is that ‘we’? – and nothing ‘they’ can do either – and who are ‘they’? – then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic.

(2003: 79)

From my experience, I would say to tread carefully. Following the principles of green social work (Dominelli, 2011) there is a necessity to understand nuance, the context in which the natural hazard occurred, and which subsequently became a disaster. In conclusion, the word disaster signifies a loss of guiding star. If there is any guidance from this chapter, it is this: Tread carefully. Sometimes no immediate response is the best response. Sometimes, reaching out and listening is best. People need to find their guiding star again on the basis of their culture, belief systems, support systems and lastly, in the midst of the uncertain earth.

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