

Ask the Expert

Stephanie Morrice is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her research interests concern disasters, the geographies of home and emotion, post-disaster populations and return-migration. She has previous research experience working with displaced Hurricane Katrina evacuees in New Orleans, Louisiana and Houston, Texas, where she investigated post-disaster issues of place-attachment, immobility and exclusion. Her doctoral project “Returning ‘Home’? The emotional geographies of the disaster displaced” is based in Brisbane, Australia and Christchurch, New Zealand, and explores the influence of emotion on post-disaster return-decisions.

1. How did you become interested in studying disaster management?

I became interested in natural disasters during my time at University after taking a Geography module on the topic. I wrote my Undergraduate dissertation on the effects of Hurricane Katrina, which devastated New Orleans in 2005. Conducting research in New Orleans and Houston (in the USA) was both eye-opening and fascinating. I got to see, first hand, the destruction disasters inflict upon cities and communities. Since then, I’ve had a strong passion for trying to understand the social effects of disasters.

2. Were you affected by aftershocks whilst working in Christchurch?

While I was in Christchurch I personally experienced four aftershocks. Most were during the night, and woke me from my sleep, but I experienced one when visiting The University of Canterbury. When this earthquake began to rattle the building, I gripped the chair I was sitting in tightly, watching the building sway from side-to-side, and anxiously willed the shaking to stop. Honestly? I was scared. I also experienced a real sense of powerlessness in that moment. The earth is moving and there is nothing you can do to make it stop.

3. Was it emotionally challenging to work with people who had been impacted by the earthquake?

There were times when I found listening to someone else’s trauma very difficult. As a relatively young researcher, conducting fieldwork in a very intense research situation, on emotionally sensitive material, was not always an easy task. At times, I felt quite isolated and found it difficult to assume a sort of councillor role when I have no training in that position. Still, despite my own struggles as a researcher, so many of my participants told me that they found talking about their experiences quite cathartic, and an opportunity to reflect on their experiences. In this sense, I found fieldwork deeply rewarding.

4. Was it difficult to find people willing to be interviewed for the research?

Not at all. Initially, I was concerned that people might not want to be interviewed, particularly because they have been through such an emotional ordeal. Instead, however, I was overwhelmed by the willingness of these people to share their stories with me. Many simply wanted someone to talk to. Others were hopeful that my research would help other post-disaster victims. As a result, I never experienced any problems recruiting participants.

5. What was the most interesting or unusual object used during the object elicitation phase of the research?

A number of people brought pieces of kitchenware. One in particular brought a frying pan. This, she told me, related to her desire to be back in her own home, cooking. Her comments placed value on cooking as a routine, everyday, domestic practice. Disasters disrupt these practices through destruction of the physical setting of home. As a result, migrants express a desire to participate in these practices, as they become particularly important ways of staying connected with home on a sensory level. The objects associated with these practices also gain new meaning in the post-disaster environment. Their familiarity and connection to a more stable lifestyle offer migrants comfort during an uncertain time.

6. What are the most important findings from your research?

The decision to return home following disaster displacement is no simple choice. Instead it is complex, individually unique and emotionally driven. For those who were displaced by the floods and earthquake, their desire to return home relates to the emotional connection to a specific place. There is, however, a common disjuncture between a migrant's expectation of return, and the reality of actually returning. Although all of my participants express a desire to return home, for some, the damage to their home and community is simply too emotionally distressing for them to deal with. These participants decide to relocate to a new city/suburb, where they see new opportunities. This, in turn, highlights the way in which 'home' is something may be re-evaluated overtime. It can both made and remade in the aftermath of disaster. My research also highlights the importance of objects in the post-disaster environment. In particular, salvaged personal possessions play a key role in post-disaster homemaking, as they offer people comfort and familiarity during a difficult time.

7. How would you like to see the findings of your research used in the future?

At a time when natural disasters continue to threaten the livelihoods of societies across the world, I believe a deeper understanding of the many factors that influence disaster displacement and return, will have relevance to both migrants themselves and policy makers dealing with the long-term effects of disasters. I would therefore like to collaborate with planners and policy makers in an attempt to enhance disaster management strategies.

8. How will your research help the local communities in which you were working?

In order to prioritise post-disaster recovery strategies, community centres and non-governmental organisations need to be aware of the local issues affecting residents. I am confident that my research provides an excellent insight into these issues, from the point of view of local residents. Understanding the emotional, social and economic impacts of disasters is crucial in planning for future disaster events.

9. Do you plan to conduct more research in the future?

I would be very interested in conducting more research in New Zealand. I am keen to find out how post-quake Christchurch continues to recover economically, structurally and socially. My work in New Zealand, Australia and New Orleans has also taught me that each post-disaster

situation is unique. As a result, I would also be keen to conduct more research in other post-disaster settings.

10. What did you enjoy most about working in New Zealand?

Speaking to those who were affected by the earthquake was truly awe-inspiring. These people have been through so much, and yet continue to be brave and strong. While they recognize that Christchurch will never be the same, they remain confidently hopeful that the city will recover and be beautiful once more.