



Reconsidering Disaster Through Dis/ability Narratives: An Ethnographic Examination of Eastern North Carolina

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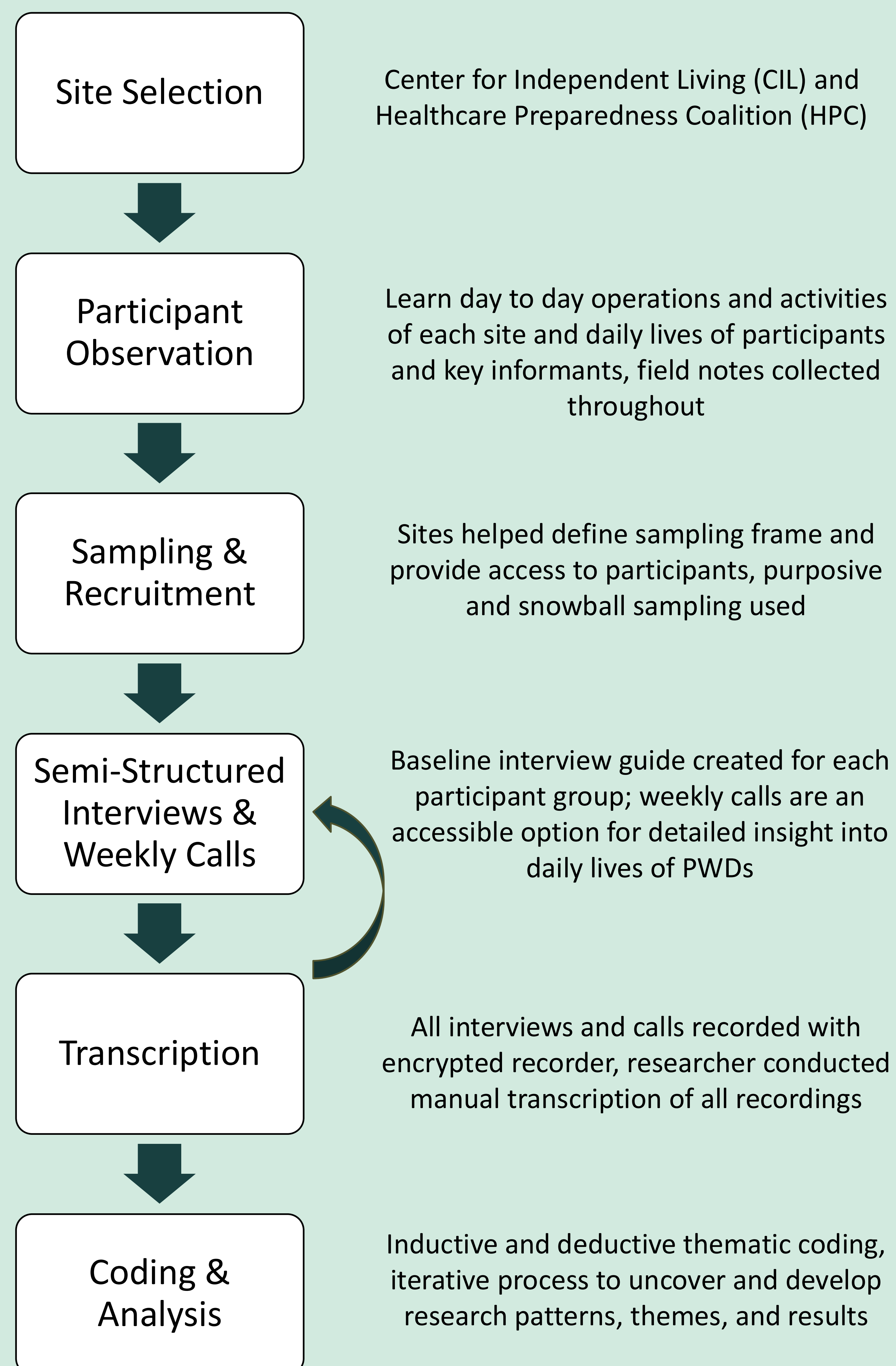
Applications

1. Anthropological and ethnographic methods provide creative ways for including marginalized populations and their expertise in research and policy processes
2. Research in a poor, rural, socially and environmentally vulnerable geographic area provides insight into the simultaneous struggle between recovery from natural hazards and everyday disasters
3. Final dissertation product provides new perspectives to understand the intersection of disability and disaster through concepts of slow violence¹ and slow emergencies²

1 Introduction

People with disabilities (PWDs) are disproportionately impacted by disasters, however, they also are more likely to face poor pre-disaster conditions due to social vulnerability, oppression, and discrimination. Through 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork, this research interrogates emergency management, disaster preparedness, and disaster recovery policy and practice in Eastern North Carolina by drawing on insight and narratives from disaster and emergency professionals, disability advocates, and PWDs. This research is situated in the conceptual frameworks of slow violence¹ and slow emergencies², with the main objective to examine the intersection of dis/ability and disaster by asking what it means to “return to normal” after disasters when the normal, everyday conditions for PWDs can be disasters themselves.

2 Research Process & Methods



3 Themes

Variety in disaster definitions and conceptualizations across participants

- HPC: extreme weather events, natural hazards, chemical spill, oxygen shortage, burst pipe
- CIL/PWDs: extreme weather events, personal events and crises, poverty, health problems
- **“A disaster is anything that alters your everyday life...it don’t have to be a natural disaster...I’m the only one working in my family and I lost my job today, that’s a disaster.”**

Disconnect between and within stakeholders

- Disaster and emergency professionals unaware of daily issues faced by PWDs
- No concrete consensus on who is responsible for community needs like education, preparedness, and response
- Providers and workers for PWDs not well integrated

Dis/ability conceptualizations and experiences are highly diverse and individualized

- All disabilities are not visible or physical
- Mental and emotional disabilities important to consider
- Disability often comorbid with other health issues
- Ability operates on a spectrum and changes daily

Everyday needs of PWDs largely unrecognized and unmet

- Poverty, food insecurity, unreliable or no transportation, unsafe and inaccessible housing, lack of support or help
- **“Do you know what the sad thing is? I find that the biggest barrier is not their disability. The biggest barrier is the bureaucracy...it seems like so many times, disability goes hand in hand with poverty.”**

4 Key Takeaways

This research offers a unique perspective by exploring and calling attention to the everyday disasters faced by PWDs, specifically through anthropological methods and ethnographic narratives. Addressing the underlying problems faced by PWDs can benefit all humans as disability is a category anyone can enter at any time, either temporarily or permanently. Further, using disability as a lens to understand phenomena like disasters can help us reconsider dominant or traditional ideas and advance social justice. Consider these key points:

- Traditional disaster practice and policy are based on specific definitions of disaster and might fail to consider personal crises and events
- PWDs need to be included in disaster and emergency management planning
- Physical help or support is not the only way to assist PWDs during disasters
- Underlying social vulnerabilities are too often ignored or considered personal problems for PWDs, we need to address this ongoing injustice and inequity

5 References

1. Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press.
2. Anderson, Ben, Kevin Grove, Lauren Rickards, and Matthew Kearnes. 2020. "Slow emergencies: Temporality and the racialized biopolitics of emergency governance." *Progress in human geography* 44, no. 4: 621-639.