

Socio-cultural norms significantly influence disaster response practices, affecting engagement, decision making, and intervention effectiveness across contexts



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The role of socio-cultural practices in shaping disaster response: Perspectives from Indonesian and Australian professionals

Disaster response often involves professionals operating across diverse cultural contexts. However, how socio-cultural norms shape the interpretation and implementation of response protocols remains underexplored. These dynamics can influence coordination, ethical practice and effectiveness, making culturally informed approaches essential for responsive and context-appropriate disaster management.

Background and research problem

Disaster management is globally professionalised as a technical, logistics-driven discipline, where competence is often defined through standardised procedures and operational efficiency. Although cultural competence is widely endorsed in policy, it is generally underrepresented in training, accreditation and formal practice systems. Comparative findings from Indonesia and Australia suggest this is a structural issue rather than a context-specific one. Practitioners frequently navigate cultural complexity without formal preparation. This study examines the resulting misalignment between institutional design and operational reality.

Study design

Interpretivist PhD study using semi-structured interviews with 40 disaster professionals (20 Indonesia, 20 Australia) across multiple sectors (for example, emergency response, DVI, community recovery). Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, compared cross-nationally and triangulated against international documentary evidence.

Three core findings

Institutional cultural misalignment

Cultural competence is valued in policy but is often not fully embedded in training or operations. Practitioners in Indonesia and Australia describe similar training deficits, despite different professional histories. This suggests a structural, rather than national issue within the contexts studied.

Trust-mediated engagement infrastructure

Formal disaster channels often miss vulnerable communities. Trusted community intermediaries (for example, community councils in Indonesia; peer bicultural workers in Australia) frequently outperform formal systems. This network is currently underfunded and treated as discretionary.

Ontological preparedness gap

Indonesian practitioners operate within spiritual and ritual frameworks that are often invisible to Western systems. Australian practitioners often lack the professional vocabulary to engage with these dimensions. This gap suggests the need for a new competency: ontological humility.

What the comparison reveals

Despite vastly different contexts, both countries exhibit similar structural gaps. This suggests that cultural limitations in disaster management may reflect systemic features of the profession rather than context-specific factors.

Why this matters

- Current systems may risk excluding vulnerable populations.
- Cultural competence often remains rhetorical rather than operational.
- These findings challenge the assumption that disaster management is culturally neutral.

Implications for practice

- Cultural competence should be embedded into training, accreditation and operational systems.
- Trusted community intermediaries should be formally resourced.
- Frameworks should be expanded to include non-Western ontologies.
- Ontological humility should be developed as a core professional competency.

