

# CONDUCTING RESEARCH WITH TRAUMATISED POPULATIONS: THE COST OF BEARING WITNESS



Research on the impact of conducting qualitative research with traumatised populations is rare. In this article, *Dr Cyril Adonis* reflects on the challenges he encountered and the lessons he learnt from researching intergenerational trauma among families that suffered gross human-rights violations under apartheid.

Being exposed to a disturbing first-hand account of someone else's trauma can lead to secondary trauma, typically experienced by witnesses such as therapists and journalists. However, research on this phenomenon among researchers, especially those conducting qualitative research with traumatised populations, is rare. This is despite the fact that emotional and psychological engagement is an integral part of qualitative research. Furthermore, researchers have found that institutional ethics policies or research training programmes may not provide sufficient guidance on how to deal with the emotional and psychological challenges encountered when doing this type of work.

I encountered these challenges throughout my research career, but particularly when I conducted research for my doctoral dissertation. It focused on intergenerational trauma among adult descendants of black South Africans who had suffered gross human-rights violations under apartheid. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) defined gross human-rights violations as killings, abductions, torture, and severe ill-treatment of any person. In this article, I share some of the lessons I learnt that have enabled me to sustain my scholarly engagement with the field of intergenerational trauma. I believe that these could be instructive, especially to early-career researchers, so that they are better able to navigate the emotional and psychological minefield that is inherent in conducting research with trauma content.

## Guilt

Research suggests that feelings of guilt and privilege invariably become part of the research process, notwithstanding the fact that ethical requirements had been met. This is especially so when the researcher identifies with the group being studied. Feelings of guilt and privilege often lead to a corresponding sense of obligation. A number of factors exacerbated my own feeling of guilt as I engaged with my participants and their families. One was research fatigue, when individuals or groups tire of engaging in research, resisting further participation. A gatekeeper that facilitated my access to participants made the following comment:

"The problem is that you guys come and you go, and we stay behind and nothing has changed for us. We have many people coming from overseas wanting to do research with our members on the same issue. You take our stories, write your books, and then it's finished. We understand that research is important, but people want to see things happen that will change their lives for the better."

Many participants had participated in prior TRC-related research, much of which did not bring them any material benefits or changes in their living conditions. I asked them to participate in yet another research project when they had more pressing concerns, also expecting them to recount extremely painful and horrific experiences. One participant's older brother had disappeared, along with nine fellow student activists aged 15 to 19 years, in 1986. Six former policemen applied for amnesty at the TRC in connection with their abduction and killing. Speaking about TRC hearing, he said:

"I didn't go there (to the TRC), I couldn't. My mother just went there. I saw on TV that my mother was in pain, too much pain. It makes me feel bad, very, very bad. She always asked: 'where is he? Where is he?' It affected me a lot emotionally."

Based on the policemen's testimony, the National Prosecuting Authority's Missing Persons Task Team was able to exhume the remains of nine of the youths, including the participant's brother, in 2005. Delays in the forensic identification process, however, meant that the remains could only be handed over to the families in 2008, after which the youths were buried in a mass grave.

My acute awareness that I would likely become what anthropologist, Sofia A. Villenas refers to as a "tourist to their troubles," was often unbearable. I would finish my degree, make use of the material and other benefits that a doctoral degree offers, while their existential realities would likely remain unchanged. That I was going to be getting without giving and essentially being exploitative, compounded my feelings of guilt.

### Emotional distress

Often, the emotionally disturbing events become embedded in a researcher's consciousness. I directly engaged with the participants' traumatic experiences through heart-wrenching interviews, reliving these through engaging with fieldwork notes, and repeatedly listening to their stories during the transcription of recorded interviews. My emotional reactions oscillated between anger,

depression and sadness. At times, the intensity of these emotions had a debilitating effect on me. The following entry is from my fieldwork notes:

"The emotions I experienced today were overwhelming and frightening. Intense anger, even vengeful ideation; what if this changes me? Why should we promote forgiveness in a world that is at best indifferent to the suffering of others?"

Also emotionally taxing, was the overwhelming sense of helplessness that I experienced as a result of my inability to change the material conditions of people with whom I had developed close personal relationships. [Research](#) suggests that the work of the trauma researcher could potentially be more traumatising than that of the trauma clinician, like a psychologist or a social worker, because of an inability to help the victim. Feeling helpless is one of the defining features of secondary trauma, potentially eroding a researcher's enthusiasm and motivation. Indeed, I began to question the significance and impact of my work.

### Loneliness and isolation

At times, I experienced intense feelings of loneliness and isolation. My community of practice was relatively small, and there was much scepticism around the salience of intergenerational trauma in post-apartheid South Africa. I was unable to share my experiences with family and friends, who failed to understand the personal impact my research had on me, and to appreciate how emotionally invested I had become in the well-being of my participants and their families. Inevitably, my research experience also altered my political and ideological outlook significantly. Rather than risking the sharing of my experiences being greeted with insensitivity or hostility, I limited my social interactions.

### Dealing with the trauma

While the World Health Organization's Ethical and Safety Recommendations, and the Social Research Association's Code of Practice for the Safety of Social Researchers provide guidance for the physical safety of researchers,

they give relatively little attention to the emotional impact that conducting research could have on researchers.

Over the years, I have learnt valuable lessons that have enabled me to deal with the challenges I encountered in my research. I now realise the importance of harnessing, rather than dismissing these seemingly negative emotions, such that I am able to draw conclusions that are bound to produce more meaningful scholarship. In this regard, the importance of preparation, particularly within the context of research with trauma-exposed populations, cannot be overstated.

A good starting point is to become familiar with the available literature on the impact that conducting trauma research can have on researchers. Part of preparation is also about being realistic about what one can achieve and in what timeframes. Doctoral students, in particular, generally want to complete their degrees in the shortest possible time. However, the emotionally laden nature of trauma research could become overwhelming. This requires one to occasionally step back and properly process one's experiences so that one can re-energise and recommit.

I found becoming comfortable with loneliness and isolation to be an important coping mechanism. Drawing on the guidance, support and experiences of research supervisors and colleagues could offset the negative impact of isolation. Furthermore, embracing rather than resisting vulnerability and emotionality can enable you to strengthen your resolve and become an advocate for social justice. In contrast to relying on the support of family, friends and colleagues, debriefing provides a more professional outlet to deal with the distressing aspects of trauma research.

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