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ARTICLE



Bearing Witness to Suffering – A Reflection on the Personal Impact of Conducting Research with Children and Grandchildren of Victims of Apartheid-era Gross Human Rights Violations in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Social scientists who conduct qualitative research frequently use emotional engagement to gather information about participants' thoughts, feelings, and behaviours in relation to a particularly research question. When the subject under investigation is related to trauma, listening to, or being exposed to personal accounts of participants' traumatic experiences can carry a significant emotional cost for researchers. This may place them at risk of secondary trauma. In this article, I examine these issues from the context of my doctoral field research in South Africa, which focused on intergenerational trauma amongst descendants of victims of apartheid-era gross human rights violations. I reflect on my positionality as both an insider and outsider and feelings of guilt that emanated from my sense of being privileged and an imposter. I also reflect on the emotional turmoil brought about by my engagement with the trauma of participants and their families. I conclude by sharing the lessons I have learnt, and that have enabled me to sustain my scholarly engagement with intergenerational trauma. Ultimately, this article gives insight into, and raises awareness about, the emotional consequences of conducting trauma research. It offers practical suggestions to help researchers navigate the emotional minefield involved in conducting trauma research.

KEYWORDS

Secondary trauma; gross human rights violations; post-apartheid South Africa

Introduction

There is a burgeoning scholarly interest in secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and self-care in the helping professions (Killian 2008). Jordan (2010), for example, examined vicarious traumatisation among military (and civilian) therapists working with combat veterans, and the personal and professional ramifications it has for them. Michalopoulos and Aparicio (2012), on the other hand, explored the role of personal trauma history, social support, and experience level, in the development of vicarious trauma among licensed social workers in the US State of Maryland. Similarly, Bercier and Maynard (2016) investigated shared vicarious trauma and its effects on Palestinian social workers.

However, compared to health professionals, scholarship on secondary trauma and its offshoots among researchers are rather limited. Much of this could perhaps be attributed to the fact that although emotions are an integral part of research, particularly for those working with sensitive questions or vulnerable or marginalized people, institutional ethics policies or research training programmes may not provide sufficient guidance on how to deal with these challenges (Vincett

2018). Dickson-Swift, James, and Kippen (2005), who investigated whether university human research ethics committees (HRECs), in their written documents, actively seek to protect members of the research team, as well as the subjects of their study, confirmed this much. Based on the content analyses of 37 Australian university HREC applications, they found that only three included an explicit request for the applicant to reflect on all possible aspects of safety (physical, psychological, and emotional) of the researchers (Dickson-Swift, James, and Kippen 2005)

At the same time, it needs to be added that over the last decade, we have witnessed an increased focus on the personal and professional impact that conducting research on sensitive questions or with vulnerable or marginalized populations has for researchers. Some of these highlight the inherently emotional nature of qualitative research in general and the importance of promoting emotional safety for researchers (see Bowtell et al. 2013; Brannan 2014; Broussine, Watts, and Clarke 2014; Holland 2007). Others emphasize the emotional and psychological pitfalls inherent in conducting ethnographic research in particular (see Alvesson 2009; Benoot and Bilsen 2016; DeLuca and Maddox 2016; Drake and Harvey 2014; Mazzetti 2016); and even the possibility of traumatic stress among transcriptionists (see Kiyimba and O'Reilly 2016). Others still, focus on the impact of conducting research with certain marginalized and vulnerable populations, and sensitive topics. These include asylum seekers at immigration removal or detention centres (see Bosworth and Kellezi 2017; Gerlach 2017); and sex workers (see Armstrong 2012; Coles et al. 2014; Melrose 2002; Sinha 2017).

Scholars have also begun to focus on secondary traumatic stress in researchers who conduct research with trauma-exposed populations (see van der Merwe and Hunt 2019; Whitt-Woosley and Sprang 2018). This type of research, however, has been rather limited, despite the fact that listening to, or being exposed to deeply personal accounts of participants' traumatic experiences may place researchers at risk of traumatisation, especially if participants' trauma was caused by other human beings, and there is repeated exposure to traumatic material on the part of the researcher (Morrison 2007). In this paper, I examine these issues within the context of my doctoral field research, which explored the salience of transgenerational trauma, and its potential implications for political forgiveness in post-apartheid South Africa. The participants for my study were drawn from children and grandchildren of Black South Africans who had suffered gross human rights violations¹ under apartheid (an Afrikaans language word meaning 'separateness'), and who had made written submission to and testified at the victims' hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (hereafter referred to as the TRC or simply the Commission).

I start by sketching the contextual background in which my dissertation research was located. While delving into this may seem superfluous at this stage, its relevance will become clear. This is not only because it contextualizes my research, but also because it will give insight into my positionality. In the section that follows, I briefly address the notion of reflexivity specifically in relation to trauma research, and make explicit my positionality both as an insider and as an outsider. I then reflect on my interaction with the study participants and their families, and the emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical impact it had on me. Here I draw on entries from fieldwork notes combined with selected verbatim quotes from my interviews with participants in order to provide further context to the emotional and other challenges that I encountered in my engagement with them and their families.

I conclude my paper by sharing the lessons I have learnt, and that have enabled me to sustain my scholarly engagement with the field of intergenerational trauma. It is my hope that these could be instructive to other trauma researchers so that they could come to the realization that, while their work may be emotionally, psychologically, and even physically taxing, there are measures they can take to mitigate these impacts, and that the rewards of working with the traumatized far outweigh the costs. Ultimately, this article offers insight into, and contributes to raising awareness about the emotional complexities and quandaries involved in conducting trauma research. It offers practical suggestions aimed at promoting resilience and strengthening the capacity of researchers to navigate the emotional minefield that often involves conducting research with trauma content, particularly

those who are in the early stages of their trauma research careers, and who are committed to the pursuit of social justice.

Finally, it should be noted that a number of distinct, but interrelated terms have been used to describe the effects that working with traumatized people has on others. These terms include *secondary traumatic stress*, *vicarious trauma*, and *compassion fatigue*. In this paper, I employ the term *secondary trauma*, primarily because it is distinct from the more operationalized concepts of *secondary traumatic stress*, *vicarious trauma*, and *compassion fatigue*; and rather refers to a variety of more general phenomena that are related to being adversely affected by exposure to someone else's trauma (van der Merwe and Hunt 2019).

Contextual Background

South Africa has a long history of race-based oppression, discrimination and exploitation that predates *apartheid*. In fact, it is widely accepted that racial oppression in South Africa can be traced back to the arrival of the Dutch settlers in 1652, as well as the British colonists, who ruled the country from the 18th century until 1910. According to Gibson (2004), these racist practices were merely expanded and formalized into a system of legitimized racism that became known as apartheid when the National Party (NP) gained power in 1948. Apartheid finally ended in 1994 when the first democratic election was held. The African National Congress (ANC), which had been banned during apartheid, won the elections and its leader, Nelson Mandela, became the first president of a democratic non-racial South Africa.

In order to deal with the injustices committed under apartheid, the new parliament enacted The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995, (henceforth the TRC Act), which allowed for the establishment of the TRC. Its mandate was to investigate gross human rights violations (as defined in the TRC Act) pursuant to which it had three main objectives. Firstly, it had to establish as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature, and extent of the gross violations of human rights, which were committed from 1 March 1960 to 10 May 1994, by conducting investigations and holding hearings. Secondly, it had to facilitate the granting of amnesty to individuals who made full disclosure of all the relevant facts pertaining to acts associated with a political objective, and who complied with the requirements of the TRC Act (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998). Thirdly, the Commission had to establish, and publicize the fate or whereabouts of victims, and restore the human and civil dignity of such victims, by granting them an opportunity to relate their own accounts of the violations to which they were victims, and recommend reparation measures in light of them (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998). In addition to this, the Commission had to compile a report providing as comprehensive an account as possible of the activities and findings of the Commission, containing recommendations of measures to prevent future violations of human rights (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998). The first five volumes of its final report were released on 29 October 1998, and the remaining two volumes on 21 March 2003.

Many are convinced that the TRC was an important milestone in South Africa's commitment to dealing with past injustices and its pursuit of a society based on respect for all of its persons regardless of creed or color. The fact that it had afforded victims the opportunity to talk about their suffering was considered an important step towards the attainment of psychological healing for many (Hamber 1996). According to Minow (1998), they could finally deal with the past trauma, as well as the powerlessness and humiliation that many had suffered privately for decades. Some were able to confront perpetrators, while others were finally able to learn the truth of what happened to their loved ones (Goodman 1999). Thus, it is contended that the revelations facilitated by the TRC resulted in the creation of an institutionalized collective memory of the past that was endorsed locally (Christie 2000) and had a global impact (Derrida 2002). For others, the TRC brought about a national consciousness by giving Black and White South Africans the opportunity to realize that they have a common history and that they will need to work together in order to build a new nation (Verdoolaege 2005).

At the same time, it would be remiss not to point out that many criticisms were lodged against the Commission. These include its narrow focus on gross human rights violations at the expense of the structural evils of apartheid (Nattrass 1999). Mamdani (2000) for example, was critical of the TRC's omission from its mandate, the approximately 3.5 million people who, between 1960 and 1982 had their families, communities, and livelihood shattered by forced removals. Others such as Terreblanche (2002) suggested that the TRC's work should not have been restricted to only 34 years (1960–1994), especially not in a country where Black people had suffered gross human rights violations for almost 350 years. Moreover, while the TRC only (narrowly) focused on perpetrators who committed gross human rights violations, there were those who did not commit these violations, but nonetheless took advantage of the apartheid's social and economic benefits (Mamdani 2000). Mamdani (2000) also took exception to the TRC's narrow distinction between a particular kind of victim (often a political activist), and a particular kind of perpetrator (often a government official). Perpetrators were often foot soldiers, with little attention being given to those who gave orders.

Others such as Hayes (1998) have refuted the claim that the TRC was responsible for bringing about national reconciliation. This view could be said to derive, in part, from shortcomings in its reparations policy. Many victims were poor Black South Africans, and the assumption was that national reconciliation was dependent on redressing socio-economic inequities that were a direct result of apartheid (Terreblanche 2000). Though not meant to lead to economic redress *per se*, reparations were regarded as important for providing some form of redress. However, the reparations recommended by the TRC, as well as the amount ultimately approved by the President, fell well short of not only victim expectations, but even TRC commissioners who expressed disappointment at the reparations amount, ultimately awarded to victims (Orr 2000).

In addition to this, many victims were of the opinion that the restoration of their sense of dignity required that those who had harmed them be punished; and that in order to feel like moral agents worthy of respect, they must know that their injuries merit protection by criminal law (Gibson 2002). Thus for them, restoration of their dignity and individual worth, was not manifested solely in their capacity to testify, but also in the commitment of the state to apply its coercive powers on their behalf (Eisikovits 2006). For this reason, Little (1999) asserted that amnesty was seen to have impeded, rather than encouraged social amity, because it denied victims the human need for justice and retribution, and thereby left a trail of resentment and frustration. Indeed, research revealed that most South Africans opposed the granting of amnesty to those who committed gross human rights violations in the struggle over apartheid (Gibson 2002). For this reason, Gibson (2002) argued that the shortcomings in the government's reparations policy, ultimately failed in its intended task of counterbalancing amnesty.

Finally, the TRC's Final Report also did not escape criticism, much of which related to its inability to forge an overarching and unequivocal version of the past (Possel 1999). In addition to this, Du Toit (1999) accused the TRC Final Report of being confined to making perpetrator findings. Rather than putting apartheid as a system on trial, and addressing the issue of racism adequately (Chapman and Ball 2008), the TRC was accused of having focused more on findings of single gross human rights violations.

Reflexivity and Trauma

According to DeLuca and Maddox (2016), reflecting on the role of the self is a crucial task, particularly for researchers working to understand the lived realities of others. Similarly, O'Reilly (2012) claims that one cannot conduct rigorous and honest research, if one does not engage with the self, identify and make explicit positionalities, and manage shifting identities in the field. The importance of reflexivity is borne out of the acknowledgement that researchers not only affect the research process, but that they are also affected by the research process (Widdowfield 2000). Ergun and Erdemir particularly underscore the importance of '... factors such as cultural, social, and linguistic affinities; ideology and political preferences; age, gender, marital status, and profession; and the interplay of these identities' (2010, 34).

In qualitative research, reflexivity is often employed consciously and deliberately to make explicit the researcher's biases, values, ideologies and beliefs that might influence the research

process (Miles and Huberman 1994). Engaging in reflective practice becomes especially important when conducting trauma related research. This is because trauma researchers have to navigate the fine line between conducting research that could promote social justice on the one hand, and causing further harm to individuals that are already under duress, on the other. In addition to this, Clifford (2010) reminds us that there is little critical discussion on the potential harm that trauma researchers may encounter because of the highly emotive and confronting nature of their work. While engaging with the experiences and conflicts of identity has not been deliberately discouraged, it has not been actively encouraged either (Clifford 2010).

As a Black South African male, the topic for my doctoral dissertation was not only a professional interest, but also had intense personal significance for me. Though not deemed to have suffered gross human rights violations in terms of the TRC's conceptualisation of the term, my family was adversely affected by apartheid. Thus, my parents and grandparents suffered forced removals, which affected them both economically and psychologically. South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy has been widely hailed as a miracle; and while this is a reasonable assertion, the reality is that the promises of democracy have failed to materialize, especially for Black South Africans, the majority of whom continue to suffer economic, social and cultural marginalisation. In addition to this, many people have not begun to heal from the pain and trauma brought on by decades of racial oppression, discrimination and exploitation. As a Black South African, I am highly sensitive and sympathetic to the plight of fellow South Africans, particularly the younger generation of Blacks who, despite years of democracy, are still confronted by similar challenges that their parents and grandparents had to face, and for whom post-apartheid South Africa has failed to deliver on its promises (Gibson 2002).

While this paper is based on my experience of completing my doctoral dissertation between 2007 and 2010, it should be added that the genesis of my interest in my dissertation topic could be traced to when I was pursuing a Master's degree in Psychology from 1997 to 1998. This was a time when South Africa's TRC process was in full swing. Thus, the Commission held the first of its victims' hearings on gross violations of human rights, coincidentally in my hometown of East London from 15 to 18 April 1996. The fact that these were public hearings that were broadcasted on national television attracted widespread interest, both local and internationally. Like many people, I became an ardent follower of the TRC's victims' hearings from the moment it started until it finished in 1997. Listening to families testifying about the brutality with which loved ones were tortured or killed, was often gut-wrenching and difficult to stomach. Many testimonies were emotion-laden, with victims frequently breaking down during testimony and bringing me to tears as well.

At the same time, I became particularly intrigued by something else that was taking place at some of the hearings. Despite the trauma they had been subjected to, and that they may have re-lived during testimony, many victims publicly expressed forgiveness towards perpetrators. I found this not only intriguing, but also extremely perplexing. I imagined myself being in the shoes of those who testified and questioned whether I would be able to forgive the perpetrators, particularly given the brutal, and what I and many others would consider to be, evil nature of their actions. As a result, I felt that the issue of forgiveness, at least from a psychological perspective, would be an ideal topic on which to do my Master's thesis.

Thus, my thesis involved conducting in-depth interviews with five individuals, who had testified at the TRC victims' hearings, and publicly expressed forgiveness towards perpetrators. It was during my engagement with these individuals that the seed for my doctoral dissertation topic was planted. My interaction with a White female participant was particularly crucial in this regard. She had been attending an end-of-year party with colleagues in 1992, when members of Azanian People's Liberation Army (APLA), armed with hand grenades and AK47 rifles, attacked them. Four people were killed, and more than a dozen seriously injured, including the participant. She suffered numerous gunshot and shrapnel wounds and had to undergo numerous surgeries. This had a devastating effect on her family, particularly her children, one of whom eventually had a nervous breakdown. She managed to recover to the extent that she could carry on and live a productive life. The attackers were convicted and jailed. She met with them after they were granted amnesty by the TRC. She described the meeting as a very rewarding experience as

it allowed for closure. Her children, however, were unable to cope with what had happened and had moved overseas as a result. They wanted her to join them, but she remained adamant that she would remain in South Africa. She shared with me the fact that shrapnel still lodged in her body would routinely set off alarms at security checkpoints at airports, especially when she visited her children abroad. The confusion this would cause amongst security personnel was a great source of amusement for her, and she would only later show her medical documents, which attested to what had been activating the alarms.

This stimulated my interest in how those close to primary victims of trauma, particularly children, are affected. I felt as strongly as Harvery (2007) did that it almost seems to be common sense to assume that any massive trauma would have a debilitating, or at the very least altering effect on the victim, and that these changes would severely affect the nature of the victim's personal relationships, including parenting. This is referred to as the intergenerational transmission of trauma (Danieli 1998). Given South Africa's history of racial oppression, I was convinced that examining this phenomenon in that context would be a worthy cause of my dissertation research.

I commenced fieldwork for research for my doctoral dissertation, entitled, 'An Exploration of Transgenerational Transmission of Trauma and Its Potential Implications for Political Forgiveness in Post- 255 Apartheid South Africa,' in September 2007. The main aim was to understand how the past and the present affected children and grandchildren of Black South Africans who testified at the TRC, and how they view and feel about political forgiveness. In total, I conducted in-depth interviews with 20 participants, 10 males and 10 females with an average age of 25 years. Of these, 16 were unemployed, while eight were single parents. This research was an obvious extension of my Masters research with the added focus on intergenerational trauma. I was fortunate that the chair of my dissertation committee was an Israeli national who had done extensive work in the field of intergenerational trauma concerning descendants of Holocaust survivors, and whose guidance would be critical.

Experiences and Challenges Encountered

In this section, I reflect on my PhD dissertation experience and the challenges I encountered during that process. I confine these reflections primarily to my experiences during the data collection, transcription, and data analysis of my dissertation. These are organized thematically, and focus in particular on issues of guilt, emotional distress, loneliness and isolation. This is primarily because these were the most salient challenges I experienced while conducting my dissertation research, and because I would invariably encounter them in trauma research I have been conducting subsequent to obtaining my PhD, including research I conducted with ex-combatant fathers who had engaged in armed resistance against apartheid and their sons (Adonis 2014). These reflections are based on personal recollections of my experiences as captured in fieldwork notes, presented alongside relevant quotations from my participant interviews, which, I believe, will clarify and contextualize my reflections.

Guilt

Convention dictates that researchers behave in an ethical manner, which is underpinned by (among others) the need to gain informed consent, ensure anonymity and confidentiality, make explicit the potential benefits and costs that participating in a study could have for participants, as well as their right to withdraw from a study, even after they had agreed to participate. These responsibilities are formalized in the ethical clearance researchers need to obtain from recognized research ethics committees and institutional review boards. The purpose of gaining ethical clearance is to protect the rights and well-being of participants, and to ensure that the research is conducted in an ethically sound manner. As mentioned previously, Widdowfield (2000) reminds us that as much as researchers affect the research process, they are themselves affected by this process. For many researchers, and particularly those conducting research with traumatized populations, feelings of guilt and privilege almost inevitably become part of the research process (Hockey 1993), notwithstanding the fact that ethical requirements

had been complied with. These emotions are unfamiliar, uncomfortable, and messy (Pillow 2003), and tend to emanate from the fact that the researcher is emotionally invested in the participants (Bott 2010) and identifies with the group being studied, which leads to a corresponding sense of indebtedness or obligation (Snow 1980).

As a Black South African, I identified strongly with my study participants, as previously stated. Furthermore, my research was not only a professional endeavour to earn a PhD, but it was also a personal undertaking that was grounded not only in my identity as someone who is committed to the pursuit of social justice. Thus, the dominant emotion I had when I started my research was the enormous sense of guilt that plagued me. My Master's thesis experience had, to some degree, prepared me for my entry into the field. Having built up significant contacts through my thesis research and subsequent TRC-related research that I had been involved in, I had a relatively clear idea of where to start, the type of gatekeepers to expect, and the concomitant challenges they would present. I had maintained contact with people and organisations that had facilitated my access to participants for my Master's thesis. Therefore, the fact that there was no sudden immersion into an unfamiliar environment when I started, provided a useful cushion that mitigated my vulnerability and allowed me to cope during the process of entering the field. There was none of the 'existential shock' or 'experience of bewilderment' that Nordstrom and Robben (1995, 13) allude to in their book, *Fieldwork Under Fire*.

Yet my Master thesis research had only lasted a few months, while my doctoral dissertation process lasted more than three years, excluding the year it took me to write up my dissertation and have it accepted for final defence and examination. In light of this fact, as well as the general aim of my research, it was always going to be impossible for me to become an 'academic tourist': a term that Scheyvens and Storey (2003, 2) use in reference to those who merely wander into the field for the sake of collecting data and producing detached, objective scholarship. Indeed, my entry into the field spanned a few months and entailed countless meetings with gatekeepers, before I was able to initiate contact with families.

Many families who had suffered gross human violations, had participated in TRC-related research on issues such as reparations, amnesties, exhumations, and other issues related to South Africa's transitional justice process. It would be reasonable to assume that there may have been a level of research fatigue among them. Clark (2008) defines this as the process in which individuals or groups tire of engaging in research or resist and avoid participation in any further research. Thus, while engaging with gatekeepers were time-consuming, they were indeed necessary in order to facilitate access to participants. One gatekeeper, who was a member of a prominent TRC victims' advocacy group, and through which I accessed 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.

I had a lingering sense of guilt about coming to ask families to participate in yet another research project, when their participation in past projects did not yield any material benefit and when they had more pressing concerns. The majority of victims were poor and had supported the TRC's national reconciliation project with the hope that socio-economic inequities, including those that were a direct result of apartheid, would be redressed (Terreblanche 2000). However, the dramatic political changes of the 1990s have not been matched by similar economic changes that would have increased the material well-being of those previously disadvantaged by apartheid's policies (Daye 2004). In addition to this, the monetary reparations that victims received had fallen well short of expectations (Orr 2000), while the TRC's amnesty provisions led to unrequited expectations for justice and in the process created what Gibson (2002) refers to as a justice deficit.

In addition to the above, my guilt emanated from the fact that I was going to expect participants to recount extremely painful and horrific experiences. The following extract from a participant

interview gives a sense of how participants were affected by what happened to their loved ones and the type of experiences I expected them to recount.

I didn't go there (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.

The participant's elder brother had disappeared along with nine fellow student activists ranging from the ages of 15 to 19 years in 1986. No one knew what had happened to them, but there had been rumours that they had been abducted and killed by the apartheid security establishment. This was confirmed when six former policemen applied for amnesty at the TRC in connection with their abduction and killing. Someone who had pretended to be able to secure them safe passage into exile, where they had planned to join the ANC's military wing, had lured the ten student activists into a trap. They were drugged, and the vehicle in which they had been traveling was set alight. They were burnt beyond recognition and buried as paupers. Based on the policemen's testimony, the National Prosecuting Authority's Missing Persons Task Team (NPA-MPTT) was able to exhume the remains of nine of the youth, 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 all of them were buried in a mass grave.

Thus, my guilt was compounded by my fear that I would eventually be what Villenas (1996) calls 'a tourist to their troubles', in that I would finish my degree and pursue a career while they would remain stuck in the same place. My awareness of my privilege was particularly distressing and uncomfortable. I further identified with DeLuca and Maddox (2016) view that guilt emanates from the fact that one's work is, or at least is being perceived as limited in its ability to catalyse social change. This only served to exacerbate my feelings of guilt. In addition to this, I could not help but to feel that I was perhaps exploitative. As Connolly and Reilly note: 'Within our general cultural framework, "only getting without giving" smacks of exploitation' (2007, 536). Ultimately, confronting feelings of guilt and privilege became an integral part of my dissertation research experience.

Emotional Distress

Conducting research with traumatized populations can be debilitating on the part of researchers, who not only have to directly engage with the context of their participants' traumatic experiences through heart-wrenching interviews, but also relive these through fieldwork notes, diaries, and tape-recordings of interviews. Punch (2012) highlights the struggles associated with using fieldwork diaries. In addition, Gregory, Russell, and Phillips (1997) note, that emotionally disturbing events may become embedded in their consciousness if it is listened to repeatedly. Thus, I found engaging with the content of participants' experiences emotionally distressing due to the horrific nature of the violations suffered by their parents and grandparents. For example, one participant's father was injured in a bombing. He summed up the impact this event had on him.

In '99 I had panic attacks. I was admitted to hospital. Panic attacks from that photo because when I closed my eyes, I was looking at it. And the depression ... then I was admitted at the hospital for three months. I had migraine headaches. Panic attacks. It was something like I was mad. I was taking psychiatrist medication. I was attending counselling and all those stuff.

Another also vividly recalled the deep emotional and psychological impact that being exposed to her grandmother's suffering had on her.

My grandmother once appeared on television. I was at school and my mother went with my grandma, then I saw on TV that my grandmother was crying. I was confused and worried, almost depressed.

Her grandfather disappeared in 1987 when she was only a year old. He had a history of political activism and though no one knew what had happened to him, there were sufficient reasons to believe that the security establishment killed him. Her grandmother, who testified at the victim's

hearing of the TRC in 1996, only received confirmation of her husband's fate in a newspaper article that was published earlier that year. Thirteen security policemen that were implicated in the disappearance of her grandfather had applied for amnesty at the TRC. During the amnesty hearings, they claimed responsibility for the abduction, torture, and subsequent killing of her grandfather and three other men, all of whom had been Umkhonto we Sizwe operatives (members of the military wing of the ANC). In their amnesty application, perpetrators testified how they had unsuccessfully tried to extract information from her grandfather through methods of intense torture, such as forcing a knife into her grandfather's nose. Subsequent to the unsuccessful attempts at extracting information, her grandfather, along with the three other men, were killed by electrocution. Their bodies were then blown up with explosives, and their remains buried along with that of another victim in a single coffin in an unmarked grave. In 2005, the NPA-MPTT, assisted by an Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team, exhumed a coffin from an unmarked grave in a cemetery to which the amnesty applicants had directed them. Forensic tests positively identified her grandfather as one of those to whom the remains belonged. As a result, they were able to give him a decent burial in 2007.

Not only did I have to listen to participants' stories during my interviews with them, I also had to make descriptive fieldwork notes subsequent to each interview. This meant, among other things, that I had to document my reflection of my own emotionally distressing experiences during the interview, as well as other aspects that cannot be captured by a tape-recorder. I had conducted the first of my 20 interviews on 28 September 2007 and the last one on 7 April 2008. The fact that I conducted 20 interviews over an approximately six-month period had less to do with the availability of potential participants than with my need to disengage from the trauma content of my research, in order to give me an opportunity to process my experiences, re-energize myself, and recommit to finishing my dissertation. Thus, there was an approximately four-month break between my 11th interview on 22 November 2007 and the subsequent one on 15 March 2008. An entry in my fieldwork notes captured the extent of the emotional toll conducting these interviews had on me.

Not sure if I can take this any longer. Always known these things took place and the capacity we have to be evil, but to put faces to the dehumanization that some people had experienced at the hands of others, challenges my overall assumption about the inherent goodness of people. The emotions I experience today was overwhelming and frightening. Intense anger, even vengeful ideation; what if this changes me? Why should we promote forgiveness a world that it at best indifferent to the suffering of others?

In addition to this, I also had to relive the agony of participants during the transcription and data analysis process. Transcription, by its very nature requires that one replay recordings in order to transcribe accurately. Being unable to afford the services of a transcriber, I could not escape the constant and intimate engagement with the emotional content of participants' experiences and not be affected by it. My emotional reactions oscillated between anger, depression, and sadness, and while those are surely 'normal' human reactions to hearing about someone's suffering, especially at the hands of another human being, the intensity of these emotions at times had a debilitating effect on me. Listening to the quivering voices, hearing their wailing and the sounds of them crying, was often overwhelming.

I felt angry that more than a decade into democracy, Black people largely still experienced the same material deprivation they experienced under apartheid. I felt angry with the TRC and its amnesty policy that allowed perpetrators to go free. I felt angry with the ANC government for not dealing with structural injustices. I also felt anger towards White South Africa that refused to confront their complicity in apartheid and the fact that their privileges were gained at the expense of Black South Africans. I felt depressed and sad that human beings were capable of the type of evil to which they subjected other human beings. I had difficulty falling asleep, had no appetite, and had to sometimes force myself to eat. I was often tired and developed a debilitating back pain for which I was prescribed painkillers. Because of prolonged use, I developed a dependency and was only able to kick this habit about two years ago, more than five years after having completed my PhD.

Also emotionally taxing was the overwhelming sense of helplessness I experienced vis-à-vis my inability to change the material conditions of participants and their families. My research involved numerous meetings with participants and their families, even before I conducted the actual interview with the participant. The personal engagement with their emotional lives inevitably meant that I developed personal relationships with them. This increased my sense that I was indebted and had certain obligations towards them. Unfortunately, what I could offer them was limited to being there if they needed someone to talk to, or if they needed advice on something. I could not do much to change their material conditions, which left me with an overwhelming sense of helplessness. Coles et al. (2014) note that the work of the trauma researcher could potentially be more traumatising than that of the trauma clinician because of an inability to help the victim. Similarly, Connolly and Reilly (2007), in reference to sexual violence research, observe that researchers may identify problems and needs but feel unable to provide any assistance that helps survivors cope. Figley (1995) further asserts that helplessness and loss of a sense of personal control were significant features of secondary traumatic stress (STS). According to Maslach (1982), this is often accompanied by a sense of reduced personal accomplishment and purpose, and feelings of hopelessness, which, as Punch (2012) has argued, can erode one's enthusiasm and decrease motivation for one's work. Indeed, I began to question the value of my work, and whether I was really going to positively impact the lives of those that are marginalized and vulnerable.

Loneliness and Isolation

My dissertation research experience was at times characterized by feelings of loneliness and isolation. According to Kiyimba and O'Reilly (2016), the combination of isolation and emotional impact increases one's risk of secondary traumatic stress. My loneliness and isolation was compounded by the fact that the topic I was researching enjoyed little scholarly attention in South Africa at the time. I was unable to share my experiences with family and friends, who failed to understand how I was affected by my research on a personal level, and to appreciate how emotionally invested I had become in the well-being of my participants. My isolation was also a useful way of avoiding situations that would trigger a negative reaction from me. Branson and Bixby Radu (2018) remind us that while secondary trauma is an internal condition, outward symptoms such as avoidant behaviour are often manifest.

Rather than running the risk of being confronted by their indifference towards the well-being of others, I therefore, limited my social interactions substantially. When I did socialize, I decided not to share my experiences or engage in discussions that were even remotely related to politics. Indeed, my research experience changed my political views significantly. I developed strong views about the transition from apartheid to democracy and the price that the poor continued to pay for this. While the international community lauded the TRC as a miracle, my view on the Commission is less flattering. I came to believe that many of our challenges could be directly attributed to the structural injustices that continued to prevent people from transcending generations of poverty and deprivation, and made them susceptible to many of the social ills. I agree with Terreblanche (2002) that the ANC's eagerness to be co-opted into global economic neo-liberalism, and the subsequent adoption of a conservative version of free market and globally oriented capitalism, had perpetuated many of the deep-seated inequalities that developed under colonialism, segregation, and apartheid. Thus rather than risking the sharing of my experiences being greeted with insensitivity, or being attacked for my views, I limited my social interactions to a select few.

Lessons Learnt

The previous section delved into my experiences in terms of the challenges I encountered in the process of conducting my doctoral research. Despite the challenges outlined in the previous section,

I have learnt valuable lessons, not only from my own experience, but the experiences of others, as well as from scholarship on the emotional challenges faced by researchers who conduct research with trauma-exposed populations. In this section, I reflect on the lessons I have learnt and that have enabled me not only to deal with the challenges, but also to sustain my engagement with the field of intergenerational trauma in South Africa. While I still encounter many of the challenges I encountered in my dissertation research, I am confident that I am now more experienced and skilled to deal with them effectively because of the lessons I have learnt. These have been instructive in allowing me to safeguard against possible psychological, emotional, and physical harm that my engagement in trauma research could have for me. It has enabled me to properly process my feelings of guilt and privilege, of being exploitative and being an imposter, the internal conflict brought about by positionality, my sense of doubt and of being overwhelmed, so that my empathetic engagement with traumatized populations are not compromised. It has also enabled me to realize 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 capable of acknowledging the complexities of constructing knowledge. I am confident that these lessons could be of use to other researchers doing similar work.

Preparation

While preparation is generally recommended for researchers before entering the field (Coles et al. 2014), the importance of this precept within the context of conducting research with trauma-exposed populations cannot be over-emphasized. Preparation include, among others, reflecting on the reality of undertaking trauma research such that one is prepared for the emotional minefield one is likely to encounter. This process also includes becoming familiar with the ever-increasing literature on the impact that conducting trauma research can have on researchers. While this will not insulate one against the potential impact, it will enable one to know what to expect in terms of the emotional investment that is required to do trauma research, and how to possibly deal with the emotional and other challenges.

Accepting Loneliness and Isolation

I found becoming comfortable with loneliness and isolation to be an important coping mechanism. In addition to this, being able to draw on the guidance and experiences of my dissertation committee, especially my chair, was also useful in dealing with the loneliness. Although all three were scattered in different time zones across the globe and thousands of kilometres away, their support and guidance allowed me to sustain my commitment to my work and remain motivated by the potential positive social impact of my research. I decided to embrace my vulnerability and my emotionality, and use it to strengthen my resolve to ensure my findings are used for advocacy and policies that could ultimately serve the interest of South African victims of gross human rights violations in particular, and the pursuit of social justice in general. This is what Campbell (2002) refers to as the 'positive gains of engagement'.

Creating a Realistic Work Plan

People generally want to complete their doctoral degrees as soon as possible. While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this, one also needs to be realistic about what one will be able to accomplish and at what pace. This is particularly the case when one does trauma research. The emotionally laden nature of this type of research means that one could be overwhelmed by the continuous exposure, over an extended period, to time to the trauma of others. Once I had made peace with the fact that my research was going to take a few years, I found it useful to occasionally step aside in order to

recover and re-energize myself. This also allowed me to deal with the feelings of doubt I would sometimes have, and to recommit myself to my work.

Debriefing

Debriefing is critical in the treatment of STS (Harris 1995). According to DeLuca and Maddox (2016), debriefing is of immense value for all researchers and it is important for them to have access to a professional outlet of colleagues and peers. One could argue that it is even more important for trauma researchers to have an avenue to process their experiences, and get emotional support in order to deal with the distressing aspects of their research. Given my background in psychology, I was able to obtain support from former colleagues and friends who were clinicians.

Self-care

Research has highlighted the use of a wide range of self-care strategies for researchers. These include creative, physical, and spiritual pursuits and time spent with family (Dickson-Swift et al. 2009). For me, physical activities such as walking, jogging, and cycling, proved to be the most beneficial. Spending quality time with my infant son also helped to relax me when I felt overwhelmed.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have reflected on the emotional and other challenges I encountered while conducting my doctoral research with children and grandchildren of Black South Africans who had suffered gross human rights violations under apartheid. I also reflected on my interaction with the study participants and their families, and the emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical impact it had on me. I concluded my paper by sharing the lessons that I have learnt. These have allowed the importance of my work to override the emotional and physical costs I had to pay and have enabled me to sustain my engagement with the field of intergenerational trauma in South Africa.

It is clear that more attention needs to be given to researcher well-being and the need to focus on issues of emotional risk (Mitchell and Irvine 2008). Qualitative methods training and textbooks have outlined the processes involved in conducting research (Miles and Huberman 1994). However, a discussion of how repeated exposure to traumatic material impacts researchers, and its consequences for the analysis and reporting of findings, is more recent (Dickson-Swift et al. 2009). Furthermore, while the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Ethical and Safety Recommendations (Watts et al. 1999) and the Code of Practice for the Safety of Social Researchers (SRA Code) (Social Research Association 2006) provide guidance for the physical safety of researchers, they give relative little attention to the emotional impact that conducting research could have on researchers. If we agree that emotions are an integral part of social research, then we should heed the call for the creation of safe and effective spaces where we could share with others the emotional impact our work has on us, and reflect on personal issues that affect our work.

Note

1. The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995, (henceforth the TRC Act), which made provision for the establishment of the TRC, defined gross human rights violations as: (a) killings, abductions, torture, severe ill treatment of any person; or (b) any attempt, conspiracy, incitement, instigation, command, or procurement to commit an act referred to in (a) (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1998).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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