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Research Note - “Doing the research I do has left scars”: Challenges of Researching in the Transitional Justice Field

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Research Note - “Doing the research I do has left scars”: Challenges of Researching in the Transitional Justice Field

Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to all researchers who shared their experiences with me. Without their valuable insight this paper would not be possible. I am also thankful to the editor and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on the previous draft of this paper. This research was made possible in part by funding from the Socio-Legal Research Centre, Griffith Law School, Griffith University.

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Research note
“Doing the research I do has left scars”:
Challenges of Researching in the Transitional Justice Field¹

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Introduction

Although I know that it is terribly unprofessional, I have held hands with my interviewees and wept openly with them—if a woman is talking about her experience being gang-raped, or about her child being abducted, how can I remain passively un-engaged? I know there’s a fine line about emotional engagement in this kind of work, but I can’t figure out where that line is and how to properly negotiate it.²

Although an increasing number of academics and researchers seek to analyze causes of and responses to atrocities, they may not be well prepared to undertake fieldwork in politically and economically fragile and unstable societies. It is common for qualitative researchers to report on the contexts they are studying by taking detailed field

¹ I am grateful to all researchers who shared their experiences with me. Without their valuable insight this paper would not be possible. I am also thankful to the editor and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful feedback on the previous draft of this paper. This research was made possible in part by funding from the Law Futures Centre, Griffith Law School, Griffith University. Compliance with Ethical Standards: The research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Griffith University (GU. Ref No: Law/02/14/HREC February 2015).

² Female participant in the study.

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notes about the setting and the interviews they have conducted.³ However, it is less common for these researchers to report on personal challenges they have encountered during the research process. Researchers of transitional justice processes often need to pay close attention to painful human experiences and listen to stories of intense suffering and injustices. They may need to see the world through another person's eyes,⁴ which can require techniques for navigating and absorbing life stories that can be deeply disturbing. While researchers are expected to maintain a certain detachment from their participants, they must weigh this against the empathy required to grasp the world from another's perspective.⁵ Research in conflict and/or post-conflict societies often confronts fieldworkers with difficult questions⁶ by disturbing their basic expectations, hopes and assumptions. Although Ethics Committees will normally act as gatekeepers as part of a systematic effort to protect from harm the researchers and the individuals and/or groups who form the research sample,⁷ researchers frequently find themselves facing challenges that are difficult to predict and/or manage on the ground.

In such complex political environments, researchers need to take particular care of their personal wellbeing and that of their interviewees, who may belong to highly vulnerable and stigmatized

³ Virginia Dickson-Smith, Erica Lyn James, and Pranee Liamputtong, *Undertaking Sensitive Research in the Health and Social Sciences: Managing Boundaries, Emotions and Risks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 38.

⁴ Jenny Fleming, "Learning to Work Together: Police and Academics," *Policing* 4.2 (2010): 139-145.

⁵ Antonius C.G.M. Robben, "The Politics of Truth and Emotion among Victims and Perpetrators of Violence," in *Ethnographic Fieldwork: An Anthropological Reader*, eds. A.C.G.M. Robben and J.A. Sluka (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 84. Also see Roy F. Ellen, ed., *Ethnographic Research: A Guide to General Conduct* (Academic Press: USA, 1984), 227.

⁶ Sarah M.H. Nouwen, "'As You Set Out for Ithaca': Practical, Epistemological, Ethical, and Existential Questions about Socio-Legal Empirical Research in Conflict," *Leiden Journal of International Law* 27.1 (2014): 227-260; doi: 10.1017/S092215651300071X.

⁷ Heather McCosker, Alan Barnard, and Rod Gerber, "Undertaking Sensitive Research: Issues and Strategies for Meeting the Safety Needs of All Participants," *Forum Qualitative Social Research* 2.1 (2001): 1-14.

groups, such as victims of genocide, rape, torture or other war crimes. Transitional justice researchers are expected to be experts in the context they research, with all of its laden complexities, including navigating the contested divisions between ‘victims’ and ‘perpetrators’. A lack of local language skills or social networks can heighten the risk of “being instrumentalized and unconsciously becoming the voice” of either non-state actors or government.⁸

Although a relatively young field of inquiry, transitional justice has received significant attention from scholarly psychologists, lawyers, anthropologists and others interested in understanding and critically evaluating how individuals and societies deal with past human rights abuses in societies in transition to democracy and the rule of law. The field has recently seen its first methods manual,⁹ which raises questions for researchers and practitioners to consider in the context of their own work. The manual aims to raise awareness about “the need to talk about how and why do we do research.”¹⁰

So far, despite the significant number of qualitative research studies that have been undertaken on mechanisms and actors, scant attention has been paid to the personal challenges posed by the research process in transitional, conflict and post-conflict contexts.¹¹

⁸ Maria-Joëlle Zahar, “Fieldwork, Objectivity and Academic Enterprise,” in *Surviving Field Research: Working in Violent and Difficult Situations*, eds. Chandra Lekha Sriram et al., (Routledge: London, 2009), 206.

⁹ Swisspeace and Oxford Transitional Justice Research, *Transitional Justice Methods Manual: An Exchange of Researching and Assessing Transitional Justice* (Bern: Swisspeace, 2013).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹¹ Valuable contribution in identifying challenges in conducting qualitative research in difficult circumstances come from other fields of study, in particular anthropology. For some good reflections on difficulties of research in conflict and post-conflict see, for example, Gearoid Millar, *An Ethnographic Approach to Peacebuilding: Understanding Local Experiences in Transitional States* (London, Routledge, 2014); Dyan Mazurana and Karen Jacobsen, eds. *Research Methods in Conflict Settings: A View from Bellow* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Chandra Lekha Sriram et al., eds., *Surviving Field Research: Working in Violent and Difficult Situations* (London: Routledge, 2009); Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C.G.M. Robbe, eds., *Fieldwork Under Fire: Contemporary Studies of Violence and Survival* (California: University of California Press, 1995). For more recent personal accounts into

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As in other social science fields, transitional justice research stories have been “treated lightly” and left to be “told informally,”¹² over conference dinners and coffee breaks, rather than framed as methodological issues demanding serious and systematic consideration. As Browne and Moffett argue, there remains reluctance by researchers to be open and candid in sharing their personal experiences on the challenges faced in fieldwork.¹³ This paper aims to bring some of these issues to the fore.

Positioning myself within the study

My engagement with feminist research methodologies means that I do not intentionally draw boundaries between those doing the research and those being researched.¹⁴ That I am often an insider and an outsider¹⁵ is not an obstacle from the standpoint of feminist

challenges of research practice in the field, see, Njoki Wamai, “First Contact with the Field: Experiences of Early Career Researcher in the Context of National and International Politics in Kenya,” *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 6.2 (2014): 213-222; Nouwen, “As you set out for Ithaka,” 227-260; Susanne Buckley-Zistel, “Ethnographic Researcher after Violent Conflicts: Personal Reflections on Dilemmas and Challenges,” *Journal of Peace, Conflict & Development* 10 (2007): 1-9; Olivera Simić, “A Tour to a Site of Genocide: Mothers, Borders and Bones,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 9.3 (2008): 320-330.

¹² For more see Raymond M. Lee and Elizabeth A. Stanko, eds., *Researching Violence: Essays on Methodology and Measurement* (London: Routledge, 2003), 4.

¹³ Brendan Browne and Luke Moffett, “Finding Your Feet in the Field: Critical Reflections of Early Career Researchers on Field Research in Transitional Societies,” *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 6.2 (2014): 213-222.

¹⁴ Betty-Ann Lloyd, Frances Ennis, and Tannis Atkinson, *The Power of Woman-Positive Literacy Work: Program-Based Action Research* (Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 1994).

¹⁵ Plenty has been written on negotiating insider outsider status in feminist research. See for example, Nancy A. Naples, “A Feminist Revisiting of the Insider/Outsider Debate: The ‘Outsider Phenomenon’ in Rural Iowa,” *Qualitative Sociology* 19.1 (1996): 83-106; Sonya Corbin Dwyer and Jennifer L. Buckle, “The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 8.1 (2009): 54-63; Nancy Naples, *Feminism and Method: Ethnography, Discourse Analysis, and Activist Research* (London: Routledge, 2003); Stéphanie Wahab, Ben Anderson-Nathe, and Christina Gringer, eds., *Feminisms in*

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research, which rejects the assumption that maintaining a gap between the researcher and the research subjects produces more “valid knowledge.”¹⁶ On the contrary, knowledge creation in feminist research is a result of a dialogue that presupposes a context of equality and accepts the involvement of the researcher in the lives of the people being studied.¹⁷ This approach to research requires self-reflection and acknowledgment of the researcher’s position and experiences, which necessarily frame, whether explicitly or obliquely, a particular perspective on the chosen topic.¹⁸ This framework requires me – the researcher – to be critical and open about my subjectivities in order to be aware of the impact of my perspective on the research process and analysis, and to systematically consider the data from alternative angles.¹⁹

Over the past few years I have become increasingly aware of the impact that my research has on aspects of my personal life and emotional wellbeing. I have written extensively about this elsewhere; about the emotional challenges, ostracism and stigma that I have faced from my family and community because I speak about crimes committed by ‘my own’ ethnic group.²⁰ Through private conversations and consultation with my colleagues, it has become clear to me that I am not the only one affected by difficult research, which in my case spans genocide, ethnic cleansing, torture and rape.

Social Work Research: Promise and Possibilities for Justice-Based Knowledge (London: Routledge, 2015).

¹⁶ Mary Margaret Fonow and Judith A. Cook, “Knowledge and Women’s Interests: Issues of Epistemology and Methodology in Feminist Sociological Research,” in *Feminist Research Methods: Exemplary Readings in the Social Sciences*, ed. J.M. Nielsen (Colorado: Westview Press, 1990), 69-93.

¹⁷ Nielsen, *Feminist Research Methods*.

¹⁸ Alessandra Tanesini, *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies* (New Jersey: Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

¹⁹ Mats Alvesson, *Postmodernism and Social Research* (London: Open University Press, 2010).

²⁰ See, for example, Olivera Simić, *Surviving Peace: A Political Memoir* (Melbourne: Spinifex, 2014). For most recent and detailed account of a challenging experience I faced with my research on rape survivors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, see Olivera Simić, “Feminist Research in Transitional Justice Studies: Navigating Silences and Disruptions in the Field,” *Human Rights Review* 17.1 (2016): 95-11.

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As Tomsen notes in relation to the limited extent that personal stories are shared amongst researchers in the field of criminology:

Over dinner and late drinks at research conferences, many of us have realised that others have shared similar difficulties that are sharpened in the case of qualitative studies. Yet these are mostly not articulated, discussed or theorised... even the strong contemporary criminological interest in emotions and criminal justice issues has not done much to reverse this collective silence...²¹

Silence about the various obstacles that scholars have encountered during their qualitative research process is a feature of the transitional justice field as well. The difficulties that I have faced have made me think more deeply about the personal risks and costs that other scholars in the field may be facing when dealing with sensitive research. I am reminded of the necessity that we as researchers need to "...understand and become aware of our own research activities as *telling ourselves a story about ourselves* [original emphasis]."²²

Where sensitive issues are divulged in the research process, it is important for a researcher to understand the possible effects upon themselves as the recipient of that information. McCosker, Barnard and Gerber state that the minimization of harm is a significant ethical consideration, and that researchers must be able to debrief where research and data may impact the psychological and physical health of all participants.²³

This paper is based on empirical inquiry into the views of researchers concerning the emotional challenges faced in the process

²¹ Stephen Tomsen, "Foreword: The Collective Remembering of the Stories of Qualitative Criminology," in *Qualitative Criminology: Stories from the Field*, eds. K. Richards and L. Bartels (Sydney: Hawkins Press, 2011), v-vii, vii.

²² Frederick Steier, *Research and Reflexivity* (London: SAGE Publications, 1993), 3.

²³ Heather McCosker, Alan Barnard, and Rod Gerber, "Undertaking sensitive research: Issues and strategies for meeting the safety needs of all participants," *Forum Qualitative Social Research* 2.1 (2001): 1-14.

of conducting research in the transitional justice field, and ways of negotiating these challenges. Most of the participants in the study had not encountered this kind of inquiry before, and felt that there was a great need for discussion about this often messy but nevertheless real side of empirical research in the field. Part I of the paper explains the methods used in this study. Part II turns to exploration of the issues raised by participants. The paper concludes with some suggestions about how to improve support to transitional justice researchers.

PART I

Empirical inquiry into the challenges of research

What sort of books do we publish when we hope no one will read them?²⁴

The purpose of this study was to find out about the range of emotional challenges faced by researchers in the transitional justice field while undertaking empirical research in the field. I used an email-questionnaire as the primary data collection method. The chief advantage of questionnaires over other interview methods is that they are cheap and can be group-administered.²⁵ They are relatively easy to administer and can potentially gather large data in a relatively short time at low cost.²⁶ An email-questionnaire can also reach a large number of people who are geographically dispersed. Questionnaire participants may also feel more comfortable providing private or sensitive answers in written form rather than being interviewed face

²⁴ Personal exchange of emails with a colleague who recently published a book that questions dominant narratives of victimhood in Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the time of communication, she noted that she was waiting to hear feedback from readers, with some trepidation and concern.

²⁵ Michael Wilson and Roger Sapsford, "Asking Questions," in *Data Collection and Analysis*, eds. R. Sapsford and V. Jupp (Sage, 2006), 93-123, 102.

²⁶ Leonard Cargan, *Doing Social Research* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 117.

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to face or by phone.²⁷ Another advantage of questionnaires is that participants can reply to questions at their leisure and not be confined to a scheduled time and setting. Email questionnaires are not susceptible to interviewer bias or variability because they are self-administered.²⁸ They can also encourage openness with respect to sensitive topics when they are anonymous.²⁹

However, questionnaires are not without their drawbacks. Popper argues that participants may read differently into each question and therefore may reply based on their own interpretation of the question.³⁰ Questionnaires are also relatively mechanical, rigid and impersonal in comparison to interviews, for example. There is no possibility to develop a relationship and build trust between the participant and the interviewer, which may serve as an advantage or a disadvantage.³¹ Because questionnaires do not have the same opportunities for clarification and explanation as an interview, questions need to be simple, specific and clear.³²

Since lengthy questionnaires risk a lower response rate, I did not want to include more than two questions.³³ It has been acknowledged that lengthy questionnaires may overwhelm participants who might otherwise be interested in contributing to the

²⁷ Stephen A. Sivo et al., “How Low Should You Go? Low Response Rates and the Validity of Inference on IS Questionnaire Research,” *Journal of the Association for Information Systems* 7. 6 (2006): 351-414.

²⁸ Don A. Dillman, *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method* (New York: Wiley Interscience, 1999).

²⁹ Frederick Steier, ed., *Research and Reflexivity* (Sage, 1991), 117.

³⁰ Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959, reprint London: Routledge, 2004).

³¹ James D. Brown, *Using Surveys in Language Programs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 77.

³² Jon A. Krosnick and Stanley Presser, “Questionnaire and Questionnaire Design,” in *Handbook of Survey Research*, eds. J.A. Krosnick and S. Presser, 263-313 (Bingley: Emerald, 2010), 264.

³³ Cynthia Iglesias and David Torgerson, “Does Length of Questionnaire Matter? A Randomised Trial of Response Rates to a Mailed Questionnaire,” *Journal of Health Services & Research Policy* 5.4 (2000): 219-221; see also Michael Roszkowski and Andrew Bean, “Believe It or not! Longer Questionnaires have Lower Response Rates,” *Journal of Business and Psychology* 4.4 (1990): 495-509.

research. For this study, generating a reasonable response rate was my priority rather than doing an in-depth investigation of the topic.

There is no simple answer to the question of how large a questionnaire sample should be. Les Back suggests that the only answer is “it depends”³⁴ but Michael Patton states unequivocally that “there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry.”³⁵ Mack et al. elucidate that this is because it is “not necessary to collect data from everyone in a community in order to get valid findings.”³⁶ The authors note the size of sample required depends on the nature of the population, the purpose of the study, and the resources available.³⁷ However, qualitative sample sizes are acknowledged as being smaller than quantitative sample sizes.³⁸

The purpose of this study was not to provide comprehensive answers to the ethical and methodological challenges that researchers may encounter in the field, but to map and explore some of the pressing issues. This study thus serves as initial discussion that hopefully will prompt elaboration in the future.

Recruitment

After receiving ethics clearance, I sent out a call for participation in the research project, titled “Challenges of Researching Sensitive Topics in Transitional Justice,” to five scholars through my personal contacts. I also posted information about the research project on the

³⁴ Les Back, “Les Back, Goldsmiths, University of London” in *How Many Qualitative Interviews is Enough? Expert Voices and Early Career Reflections on Sampling and Cases in Qualitative Research*, NCRM Methods Review Paper, eds. S.E. Baker and R. Edwards (National Centre for Research Methods: Southampton, 2012), 12-14, 12.

³⁵ Michael Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (California: SAGE Publications, 1990), 184.

³⁶ Natasha Mack et al., *Qualitative Research Methods: A Data Collector's Field Guide* (North Carolina: USAID, 2011), 5.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Jane Ritchie, Jane Lewis and Gillian Elam, “Designing and Selecting Samples,” in *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, eds. J. Ritchie and J. Lewis (California: SAGE Publications, 2003), 77-108.

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e-list TJnetwork Digest,³⁹ which gathers together a community of transitional justice researchers.

Participants

All of the researchers who expressed an interest in this study received a consent package via email that contained information about the research project and a document that had two questions. I asked the participants to provide written responses to one or both questions and to return their responses to me via email. The two open-ended questions that I asked participants to reflect upon were:

1. Does your research affect you politically, physically (your security) or emotionally? If yes, can you briefly explain in which ways it affects you?
2. How do you negotiate emotions, politics, security and neutrality in your research?

Open-ended questions were chosen in order to elicit more detailed answers, and all participants were free to answer without limitations. None of researchers asked for further elaboration. Most responses were one and a half pages long, and all participants addressed both questions. The deadline to reply to the questionnaire was two weeks. The interest expressed in the research project was overwhelming. It is well known that questionnaires are a much quicker data collection method than any other structured data collection method.⁴⁰ While questionnaires are often plagued by low response rates, in a span of only five days I received 35 responses. In total I received 29 full responses to the questionnaire. Five came through personal contacts and communication, and the rest through TJnetwork Digest.

The distribution of gender was twenty-three female and six male participants. Participants were based in Australia (5), the USA (3), the UK (8), Germany (2), Sweden (1), Macedonia (2), Hungary

³⁹ Call for participation was sent to e-list on 24 February 2015 and repeated on 28 February *TJnetwork Digest* 80, no. 9. Please see Annex to this paper for the text of original call.

⁴⁰ Michael Wilson and Roger Sapsford, "Asking Questions," in *Data Collection and Analysis*, eds. R. Sapsford and V. Jupp (Sage, 2006), 93-122,102.

(1), Croatia (2), India (1), South Africa (2), Rwanda (1) and Canada (1). Participants came from the fields of psychology, politics, anthropology, sociology, gender studies and law. Some of the participants were early career, while others had over than twenty years of experience researching sensitive topics. All of the researchers, apart from one, conduct qualitative studies with vulnerable groups and spend considerable time undertaking fieldwork. I observed the code of ethical conduct and guaranteed privacy and confidentiality to all participants.

Limitations to the study

The methods I have chosen have limitations. Receiving responses from two groups (personal and public) of respondents can negatively affect representation. The first group forms my immediate social contacts and I used my academic networks to contact respondents. Out of 35, five respondents come from this informal research method and personal contacts initiated fortuitously.⁴¹ The respondents were all my colleagues with more than five years of experience researching in the field. Despite their position, expertise and knowledge, these researchers are a purposefully selected sample and do not necessarily reflect the knowledge or opinion of the majority of transitional justice scholars. They are important and useful but they cannot be generalizable to a more broad audience.⁴²

The rest of respondents I solicited through the TJnetwork Digest online email list. I have chosen this list since it is made for and by the transitional justice community and it is the listserv that most researchers, scholars and practitioners would be subscribed to. It is possible that some of the TJnetwork respondents may have reacted to my call because they already had emotional difficulties that they wanted to share with me. Those researchers may have been more

⁴¹ Patrick Biernacki and Dan Waldorf, "Snowball Sampling: Problems and Techniques of Chain Referral Sampling," *Sociological Methods & Research* 10.2 (1983): 147.

⁴² Erica Weintraub Austin and Bruce E. Pinkleton, *Strategic Public Relations Management: Planning and Managing Effective Communication Programs* (Oxfordshire: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 127.

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likely to reply to the questionnaire than researchers who did not have such experiences and thus may be over-represented in my sample.

While there is no prescribed rule about the numbers of questions to be included in the questionnaire, the study is weakened by asking only two questions. Some authors argue that the length should depend on how many questions are necessary to produce the needed information.⁴³ Others argue that the questionnaire should be kept “as short as possible” by excluding any repetitive questions and those not directly relevant to the objectives of the study.⁴⁴ I have opted for a short questionnaire since I wanted to receive as many responses as possible and I assumed the shorter the questionnaire the less time it will demand from often busy academic life and therefore increases chances of responding. Also, these two questions captured the essence of my study: to receive a glimpse into challenges and the ways researchers deal with them. Since I wanted to provide only initial study into some methodological challenges researchers face in transitional justice study, I found these two questions sufficient for the study. Nevertheless, the study has limitations and could be richer in data and analysis if I included more questions.

The sample in this study is gender imbalanced with twenty-three female and six male participants. According to Chambliss and Schutt, women tend to respond more often to most surveys.⁴⁵ Studies of subjective emotion experiences find that women report greater sadness,⁴⁶ fear, and anxiety.⁴⁷ Kwak and Radler also note that women seem to respond in greater numbers to surveys whether they are web

⁴³ Cargan, *Doing Social Research*, 91.

⁴⁴ Judith Dwyer, *Communication for Business and the Professions: Strategies and Skills* (Melbourne: Pearson, 2013), 358.

⁴⁵ Daniel F. Chambliss and Russell K. Schutt, *Making Sense of the Social World: Methods of Investigation* (California, SAGE Publications, 2014).

⁴⁶ John Brebner, “Gender and Emotions,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 34.3 (2003): 387-394; A.H. Fischer et al, “Gender and Culture Differences in Emotion,” *Emotion* 4.1 (2004): 87-94.

⁴⁷ Alan Feingold, “Gender Differences in Personality: A Meta-Analysis,” *Psychological Bulletin* 116.3 (1994): 429-456; Fischer, “Gender and Culture Differences in Emotion,” 87-94.

based or more traditional modes.⁴⁸ In addition, some researchers report that females are more likely to engage in online activity characterized by exchanging of information and communication, whereas males are more likely to engage in online activity characterized by seeking of information.⁴⁹ Responding to an email questionnaire, completing it and returning it, is certainly more a process of information exchange and communication than online information-sharing.⁵⁰ The fact that female respondents in this study outnumbered males is perhaps due to a combination of these earlier findings: women generally respond more to emailed online questionnaires and that they do report more on emotional experiences.

In this study, I have analysed the data received from a non-representative sample and cannot generalize my findings to all of the transitional justice community. The sample is not large enough to generate theory and make generalizations. The question of how large the sample should be is based on two considerations: the representativeness of the sample and repetition of the data.⁵¹ Beinacki and Waldorf argue that the number of respondents should be limited when data becomes repetitious.⁵² For generating theory, more research needs to be done with transitional justice scholars, and data should be analysed on an ongoing basis.

The purpose of the study was not to reach a representative sample that would require quantitative and qualitative analysis and extrapolation for the whole population of transitional justice scholars. The aim was to provide an insight into some of the emotional challenges that transitional justice scholars may encounter while

⁴⁸ N. Kwak and B.T. Radler, "A Comparison Between Mail and Web Surveys: Response Pattern, Respondent Profile, and Data Quality," *Journal of Official Statistics* 18.2 (2002): 257-273.

⁴⁹ L.A. Jackson et al., "Gender and the Internet: Women Communicating and Men Searching," *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 44.5-6 (2001): 363-379.

⁵⁰ See William G. Smith, *Does Gender Influence Online Survey Participation?: A Record Linkage Analysis of University Faculty Online Survey Response Behavior*, (San José: San José State University (2008):13, <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED501717.pdf>.

⁵¹ Beinacki and Waldorf, "Snowball Sampling," 156.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 147.

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undertaking fieldwork, which will hopefully lead to other projects that will build up on this study. In the next section of this paper I bring to light some of the ethical and methodological challenges that scholars experience during their fieldwork.

PART II

Difficulties of researching and the effects on emotional well-being

There is no view from nowhere... and there is no 'purely' academic perspective, secured, isolated and protected from ethics and power.⁵³

Weber was among the first to write about personal involvement in research. He maintained that social scientists need to be clear about their own ideas and values and how these will affect their work.⁵⁴ While one may argue that all researchers "are to some degree connected to, or part of, the object of their research,"⁵⁵ some topics of research are more sensitive than others. For some researchers, sensitive research is considered to connote a study that has emotional, political and social implications. Sieber and Stanley define socially sensitive research as:

[s]tudies in which there are potential consequences or implications, either directly for the participants in research or for the class of individuals represented by the research. Such studies may lead to a shift in public policy and it might also affect people's attitude towards a particular group.⁵⁶

⁵³ Steve Smith, "Singing Our World into Existence: International Relations Theory and September 11," *International Studies Quarterly* 48.3 (2004): 499-515, 499.

⁵⁴ Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Illinois: Free Press, 1949).

⁵⁵ Charlotte A. Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography: A Guide to Researching Selves and Others* (London: Routledge, 2008), 3.

⁵⁶ Joan E. Sieber and Barbara Stanley, "Ethical and Professional Dimensions of Socially Sensitive Research," *American Psychologists* 43.1 (1988): 49-55, 49.

Renzetti and Lee define a sensitive research topic as one that is “intimate, discreditable or incriminating.”⁵⁷ Lee puts forward another definition of sensitive research that encompasses the topic, the consequences, the situation and any number of other issues that may arise, by saying that sensitive research is “research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it.”⁵⁸ This definition suggests that sensitive research has the potential to impact all of the people involved, including the researchers, since qualitative researchers immerse themselves in the settings they are studying. Researchers form personal interactions and connections with participants in their research, which may affect them in various ways. Indeed, undertaking sensitive research may leave researchers, as Melrose contends, “feeling methodologically vulnerable... because of emotional and anxiety challenges... that may arise in this context.”⁵⁹ Indeed, emotional challenges were raised by most researchers in the present study, who commonly reported difficulties in listening to stories of pain:

...The research I conducted with victims and survivors of war-related violence mostly affected me emotionally, because it was, at times, difficult to listen to their painful experiences. My interviewees sometimes cried during the interviews and this affected me in such a way that I also sometimes started crying.

My research affects me in a number of different ways... I feel emotionally affected by the stories I hear. Talking to people about experiences of significant violence is emotionally draining...

⁵⁷ Claire M. Renzetti and Raymond M. Lee, eds., *Researching Sensitive Topics* (London: SAGE Publications, 1993), ix.

⁵⁸ Raymond M. Lee, *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics* (London: SAGE Publications, 1993), 4.

⁵⁹ Margaret Melrose, “Labor Pains: Some Considerations on the Difficulties Researching Juvenile Prostitution,” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 5.4 (2002): 333-351, 338, doi:10.1080/1364557011004596-3.

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A research process in... post-conflict circumstances affects me in every way – intellectually and emotionally... It affects my capacities to listen to others (and not always in a good way), to stay open and careful... and to remain objective and focused even when struggling with my own emotional responses and reactions to the situation I am involved in...

I become upset when listening to stories of pain and suffering. I find that tears come to my eyes very easily and I have to do deep breathing and meditation not to cry or become too emotional...

Sensitive research may leave researchers who are working with particularly traumatic materials subject to a degree of vicarious traumatization, in which they may begin to experience the effects of traumatization themselves.⁶⁰ Researchers who work in the field often undertake empirical studies with highly vulnerable populations and their time can be demanding and challenging and test the researchers' emotional and psychological wellbeing.⁶¹ Their repeated exposure to traumatic stories, materials and images can produce symptoms similar to the trauma victims they research about. Lee proposes that sensitive research can be seen as an “intrusive threat”, which deals with areas that are “private, stressful or sacred.”⁶² As Campbell writes, research is a reflexive process: “our emotions influence our research, and our research can affect us emotionally.”⁶³ It is important to examine the feelings and emotional impacts that research has on us as researchers, to provide us with deeper intellectual understanding of the social

⁶⁰ Laura J. Schauben and Patricia A. Fraizer, “Vicarious Trauma: The Effect on Female Counsellors Working with Sexual Violence Survivors,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 19.1 (1995): 49-64.

⁶¹ Dinka Čorkalo Biruski, “Etički Izazovi Kvalitativnih Istraživanja u Zajednici: Od Planiranja do Istraživačkog Izvještaja,” *Ljetopis Socijalnog Rada* 21.3 (2014): 93-423.

⁶² Lee, *Doing research on Sensitive Topics*.

⁶³ Rebecca Campbell, *Emotionally Involved: The Impact of Researching Rape* (London: Routledge, 2001), 15.

phenomenon we analyse.⁶⁴

Perhaps not surprisingly, a majority of researchers reported that their research affects them emotionally. All participants wrote about diverse emotions that their research settings produce:

I currently feel that my research mostly affects me emotionally. Many of the accounts of conflict-related sexual violence in general... are oftentimes extremely graphic and explicit, which obviously often leaves horrific impressions...

I collect women's oral narratives to capture women's unique experiences in doing justice... These women's... knowledge and experiences... makes me humble, respectful and privileged but also angry leaving me with a great feeling of inadequacy and despair as I watch ongoing injustices... I try to stay attuned to lived realities of these women which in turn affects me emotionally and politically.

... aspects of my research affect me emotionally... I would find it hard to write about without feeling affected by the material...

I am currently working with rape victims... It is a subject that I have wanted to tackle for a long time but somehow I never felt emotionally 'ready'... It is not easy and I often think about the people I have spoken to. Sometimes, and particularly when I am alone at night, I do become very emotional...

...I am... engaging in the field with people who have lived through terrible events and often suffered personally, including through the loss of close family. This does have an emotional impact on me...

I spent one year researching transitional justice issues in post-

⁶⁴ Ibid.

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genocide Rwanda, which affected me a great deal emotionally...

I see a lot of pain and suffering. The oftentimes very gruesome stories these individuals share evoke a variety of emotions in me: sadness, anger, frustration, hopelessness to name but a few... I also have a lot of very bad dreams in which I re-live the stories people tell me with me experiencing their stories first-hand...

As Arditti et al. argue, “the distance between researchers and participants is dissolved, *their experience becomes our experience*” eliciting profound and very real emotion.⁶⁵ In the transitional justice field, the emotional wellbeing of a qualitative researcher is important to consider given the sensitive nature of the topic, as well as the intimate and intensive nature of some qualitative methods, which may increase risk of harm.⁶⁶ These concerns for the participants were echoed by the majority of participants in the study, who felt a great responsibility of care for their own participants. Some expressed concerns about the potential re-traumatization of participants:

I also struggle with the fact that many of the people I interview have already told their stories to many different organisations and there is a certain level of fatigue about this. Some people have told me bluntly that they do not wish to be interviewed (a decision of which I am always respectful).

Emotionally I often found it hard to sit with people who told their stories from the war(s)... and to decide when I should stop them in order not to risk retraumatization...

⁶⁵ Joyce Arditti et al., “The Role of Emotions in Fieldwork: A Self-Study of Family Research in a Corrections Setting,” *Qualitative Report* 15.6 (2010):1387-1414, 1388.

⁶⁶ Kelly Richards and Lorana Bartels, “The Story Behind the Stories: Qualitative Criminology Research in Australia,” in *Qualitative Criminology: Stories from the Field*, eds. K. Richards and L. Bartels (Sydney: Hawkins Press, 2011), 1-12, 5.

The researchers struggled as to whether their questions could harm people by asking them to recount traumatic events, and whether participants answering questions on sensitive subjects were being endangered.⁶⁷ While this has been well recognized in relation to participants,⁶⁸ it has rarely been discussed in relation to researchers. Similar views were echoed by some of the participants in the study. For example, one participant commented, “the concern is disproportionately for the participants in the research and not for the researcher.” The literature in qualitative research has acknowledged the emotional risk for participants, but there is little evidence providing understanding of researchers’ emotions.⁶⁹ However, the acknowledgment and awareness of one’s own emotions is important for both participants and researchers. As another participant noted, “The fact that I am conscious of my strong feelings... makes me able to be respectful of the research participants and their views.”

Researchers such as Wilkins often report feeling frustrated by the lack of discussion of the emotional nature of qualitative research: “I consulted the approved academic and methodologic texts and was astonished at the intellectual cover-up of emotion... in the name of expert or academic knowledge.”⁷⁰ Ferrell argues that a qualitative consciousness implies that emotions emerging in the field serve to strengthen the research process because feeling is a way of knowing, but researchers in social sciences are not necessarily encouraged to write about them.⁷¹

There are many reasons why researchers would be reluctant to talk about the personal costs of doing research. One of the most common concerns is that if researchers openly express emotion, their

⁶⁷ Lee and Stanko, *Researching Violence*, 2.

⁶⁸ McCosker, Barnard, and Gerber, “Undertaking Sensitive Research,” 1-14.

⁶⁹ Gill Hubbard, Kathryn Backett-Milburn, and Debbie Kemmer, “Working with Emotion: Issues for the Researcher in Fieldwork and Teamwork,” *International Journal Social Research Methodology* 4.2 (2001): 119-137.

⁷⁰ Ruth Wilkins, “Taking it Personally: A Note on Emotion and Autobiography,” *Sociology* 27. 1 (1993): 93-100, 94.

⁷¹ Betty Ferrell, “Ethical Perspectives on Pain and Suffering,” *Pain Nursing Management* 6.3 (2005): 83-90, 89.

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research may be seen as too emotional and subjective, thus devaluing their research.⁷² There are tensions between, on the one hand, the normative professional requirement of being an objective observer, and on the other, intellectually honest interrogation of a researcher's emotions while doing research. Researchers may fear breaching the norms of their discipline, and may fear for their reputation: that they are undermining their competency and objectivity; that their research is not 'real' and denounced as 'subjective.' In the field of international law and politics, reflexivity is rare, and while socio-legal research may be more open to reflexivity, peer reviewers often discourage reflexive accounts.⁷³ Marcia Bellas argues that there are explicit codes of conduct in academia that led to the assumption that:

At first glance, research appears to involve little emotional labour relative to teaching and service. This perception stems from the strong association between science and objectivity, as well as the view that emotions are an impediment or contaminant to the scientific process.⁷⁴

Researchers are expected to write about the facts, theories and methods, but not about the personal, ethical and political characteristics of research.⁷⁵ Qualitative researchers in the transitional justice field do not readily turn their analytical lenses inwards to reflect on their ethical and methodological journeys and interactions

⁷² Sherryl Kleinman, "Fieldworkers' Feelings: What We Felt, Who We Are, How We Analyse," in *Experiencing Fieldwork: An Inside View of Qualitative Research*, eds. W.B. Shaffir and R.A. Stebbins (London: SAGE Publications, 1991), 184-195.

⁷³ I have experienced such discouragement in a recent peer review of my book proposal. See also Charli Carpenter, "You Talk of Terrible Things So Matter-of-Factly in this Language of Science': Constructing Human Rights in the Academy," *Perspectives on Politics* 10.2 (2012): 363-383.

⁷⁴ Marcia L. Bellas, "Emotional Labour in Academia: The Case of Professors," *ANNALS, AAPSS* 561 (1999): 96-110, 104.

⁷⁵ Nouwen, "As you set out for Ithaca'," 233; Matthew Lockwood, "Facts or Fictions? Fieldwork Relationships and the Nature of Data," in *Fieldwork in Developing Countries*, eds. S. Devereux and J. Hoddinott (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992), 164-178.

from a personal perspective. The rare few who do disclose in a reflective way expose themselves to the possibility of being ‘accused’ of limiting their findings. An even smaller number of academics engage in autobiographical reflection, sometimes due to privacy issues or to avoid the risk of being criticized for “self-indulgence and intellectually sloppy work,” which has, as Letherby argues, “some basis in reality.”⁷⁶ Due to this largely entrenched discourse, personal feelings have often been censored or dismissed in scientific research.⁷⁷ Such views were echoed by one participant:

...I was presenting a paper at a large international conference and someone asked me what it was like, as a researcher, to do research on X topic. I started describing how it felt and found myself engulfed by emotion and tears rolling down my cheeks. I remember looking up and no one made eye contact with me, no one said anything and there was silence - people avoided me and I felt in some way that I/my reaction represented something that shouldn’t exist or that I should have been stronger and just buried it.

Partially due to pressure to be perceived as objective scholars, and partially due to emotional effects that research has on them, many scholars struggle with balancing their personal and professional lives. Two researchers reported high levels of distress that had made them think of leaving research all together:

My research has affected me psychologically and emotionally in profound ways. I have been teaching and researching... extremely painful topics - for over twenty years now, and I am only slowly recognizing the impact this had on me. So much that I am thinking of leaving academia completely...

⁷⁶ Gayle Letherby, “Dangerous Liaisons: Auto/Biography in Research and Research Writing,” in *Danger in the Field: Risks and Ethics in Social Research*, eds. G. Lee-Treweek and S. Linkogle (Routledge, London, 2000), 91-113, 109.

⁷⁷ Emma Wincup, *Residential Work with Offenders: Reflexive Accounts of Practice* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

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Doing the research I do has left scars—I would be so intensely connected to the work, that I would not be able to sleep, or eat. Or socialize. I would get sad, angry, frustrated and depressed...

...I spoke to women who told me that they were raped and tortured by state soldiers while looking for their husbands, sons, fathers – all of whom had disappeared in the conflict. This left a deep emptiness inside me, and several times, I vacillated between leaving this particular area of research and holding onto it.

Emotions of anger, frustration or depression are often associated with fieldwork, but not often discussed, at least not in print.⁷⁸ Fieldworkers are not encouraged to reflect on their emotions throughout their research, nor to take their feelings into account while analysing their data.⁷⁹ One participant commented on the difficulties of being away from her husband for prolonged periods of time during fieldwork:

Being away so often is definitely difficult on my marriage. My husband is employed in a job in which he has to be physically present in the city where we live, which means that he can't travel with me. Being away for two to three months at a time makes married life difficult.

Being alone while on fieldwork can not only affect a woman's personal relationships back home, but can also create work barriers in the field. Scholars such as Cipollari have written about negative judgments that can be experienced by women researchers in their thirties who are unaccompanied while in the field; judgments that can

⁷⁸ Sherryl Kleinman and Martha A. Copp, *Emotions and Fieldwork* (California: SAGE Publications, 1993), vii.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

subsequently affect that fieldwork.⁸⁰ While women researchers may have guilt about leaving their partner or family behind, local people may find a woman's presence in the field without a male partner confronting.⁸¹

Disseminating research results is an important part of the research process and researchers are increasingly expected to share their research with others beyond the research community.⁸² However, sharing research findings is not a simple process and its reception and utilization is diverse and complex.⁸³ One participant was concerned with how her research could be received by her interviewees and their community:

I do have anxieties about how my work will be received... particularly those among whom I did my research... I fear that I will be accused of disrespecting victims, propping up Serb (or Croat) nationalism, denigrating the Bosniaks, or similar things because I do not wholeheartedly and uncritically embrace the moralizing discourses of collective innocence vs. evil perpetrators...

Another participant, after publishing her thesis, had been invited to present the results of her research at public speaking seminars in Serbia and Croatia. She reflected on one public presentation to an audience, which also consisted of her informants:

In that space there was lots of unspoken discomfort,

⁸⁰ Chiara Cipollari, "Single or Married? Positioning the Anthropologist in Tourism Research," *Journal of Tourism Consumption and Practice* 2.2 (2010): 30–58.

⁸¹ Diane C. Freedman, "Wife, Widow, Woman: Roles of an Anthropologist in a Transylvanian Village," in *Women in the Field: Anthropological Experiences*, ed. P. Golde (California: University of California Press, 1986), 333–358, 287.

⁸² Kay Tisdall, John M. Davis, and Michael Gallagher, *Researching with Children and Young People: Research Design, Methods and Analysis* (London: SAGE Publications, 2009).

⁸³ Hurriyet Babacan and Alperhan Babacan, "Difficult Research Conversations: Sharing Socially Sensitive Research in the Public Domain," *Etropic* 21.1 (2013): 52–63.

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defensiveness and aggression. That was one of the reasons why I rush through my presentation instead of, as I planned to do, not only to read from my slides but give lots of examples too.

Another participant noted:

At times these individuals [participants] can be extremely upset that I am counting something as a mechanism that they feel was a sham, manipulated by people with power. Alternatively, they can be upset that I am not including a mechanism in my research that they worked tirelessly to bring about. It can be emotionally taxing for me as researcher.

A majority of researchers reported facing emotional challenges at all stages of the research process including the sharing and dissemination of research results. The difficulties of dealing with sensitive materials can affect personal lives, including the relationships of some participants and the psychological wellbeing of others. These are all important factors to draw on in devising strategies for coping with difficulties in the field, and later, the researcher's return from the field.

Negotiating emotions

Some scholars suggest that supervisory arrangements should be an integral part of qualitative research, as well as peer support for researchers while they reflect on their experiences.⁸⁴ Others suggest that discussions with colleagues can be helpful to process experiences, but also argue that researchers working with sensitive topics need institutional support.⁸⁵ Two participants suggested that universities should have mechanisms in place to support their work:

⁸⁴ Helen M. Richards and Lisa J. Schwartz, "Ethics of Qualitative Research: Are There Special Issues for Health Research," *Family Practice* 19.2 (2002): 135-139.

⁸⁵ Buckley-Zistel, "Ethnographic Researcher after Violent Conflicts," 1-9, 8.

I do believe the university should provide more support for the academics who are engaged with the type of work we do. Instead, I feel we are not acknowledged or appreciated. I do feel the work we do has more consequences on us... but there is a hierarchy of research based on the involvement of politics/emotions/security...

Another key observation from this research is the significance of collegial support from a psychological perspective, and the need for training in trauma awareness and approaches to working in less secure environments. Academic researchers generally do not have systemic mechanisms for this type of support, unlike our colleagues in NGOs who work in similar environments.

Rager tackled the issue of self-care of researchers by suggesting a number of strategies to address the emotional costs to the researchers who deal with emotionally charged subjects. These include journal writing during the research process, peer or colleague debriefing, and personal counselling.⁸⁶ Other scholars argue that a supportive collegiate culture was thought to buffer the negative impact of any stress that was experienced.⁸⁷ Three participants echoed the importance of debriefing:

I try to talk about my emotions to colleagues and share concerns with research team members... talking about the research and my related experiences... with both my supervisors and academic staff, but also—if appropriate—with my partner who can often do a good job in being able to draw a line between the personal and the professional, and in somehow navigating the respective emotional challenges.

We have created a mini-support group of close colleagues to

⁸⁶ Kathleen B. Rager, "Self-Care and the Qualitative Researcher: When Collecting Data can Break Your Heart," *Educational Researcher* 34.4 (2005): 23-27.

⁸⁷ Walter H. Gmelch, Nicholas P. Lovrich, and Phyliss Kay Wilke, "Sources of Stress in Academe: A National Perspective," *Research in Higher Education* 20.4 (1984): 477-490.

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share in these experiences - a type of Academics Anonymous and it's very helpful to have a supportive environment to discuss these issues.

Such exchanges, in particular between junior and more senior scholars, are important to pay attention to. Sharing practical skills with younger scholars can replace abstract, doctrinal knowledge with real life examples.⁸⁸ It can also assist younger scholars in dealing with stress, given their lack of research and life experience, despite their high academic and intellectual credentials.⁸⁹ One participant recognized the importance of the debriefing and emotional support that she now offers to her students:

I have made sure to brief and debrief my own PhD students whenever they go on fieldwork, but not always sufficiently in terms of the psychological impact, because I'm not a counsellor. As a result of this awareness, I am planning to organise a session on trauma awareness for HDR students doing fieldwork, along with... a counsellor from Kenya who did her fieldwork with South Sudanese refugees.

Burnout is a state of mental and/or physical exhaustion caused by excessive and prolonged work stress. Kinman argues that while universities put considerable effort and time into enhancing the student experience, little consideration seems to be given to "exhausted, demoralised and dissatisfied academics."⁹⁰ Two research participants mentioned that they had sought professional psychological help to deal with their emotions:

My employer has recently offered me the opportunity to see a psychologist to help me process some of the difficult stories I

⁸⁸ Wamai, "First Contact with the Field," 213-222.

⁸⁹ Judith Dwyer, *Communication for Business and the Professions: Strategies and Skills* (Frenchs Forest: Pearson, 2012), 403.

⁹⁰ Gail Kinman, "Doing More with Less? Work and Wellbeing in Academics," *Somatechnics* 4.2 (2014): 219-235, 231.

process as a result of my work. In the process I am realising how deeply the material that I work with affects me, my worldview and - increasingly - my social interactions.

...It took me sometime to admit to myself that I should speak to psychologist about it, and my research coordinator told me that I should see someone about it. I felt much lighter when I did.

Experienced researchers highly recommend taking regular breaks from research.⁹¹ These views were echoed by participants in the study too:

I am really conscious now of the need to give myself breaks and take days off. I realise now that if I am really going to be present and listen to people I cannot be feeling burned out or exhausted. I have to go into the interview feeling willing to listen and empathise.

I often engage in silly activities in my “off” time while I am in the field. For example, I will spend time painting my toenails or reading a fashion magazine or watching a mindless TV series. It took me a long time to realize that being in the field, talking to people who have experienced significant trauma, affects me too. And so I consciously spend time doing “nothing” in an attempt to let my emotions level out before heading back out to do more interviews.

I’ve been researching violence-related issues for over 17 years now, so in some ways I have learned to cope with difficult subject material; by ensuring that I spend precious time with my family and friends.

⁹¹ Christopher Brendan Barrett and Jeffrey W. Cason, *Overseas Research: A Practical Guide* (London: Routledge, 1997), 63.

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For me, there is an emotional investment from the beginning and I have learned over the years that I need to be emotional in the field and that it's okay to feel, that I am affected by the research I do and the people I meet and vice versa. It is a type of re-training of my academic self that I must do and constantly engage with literature such as Rebecca Campbell's *Emotionally involved: the impact of researching rape and with other academics who have similar experiences and/or mindsets*.

Some researchers noted that their long-term experience equipped them to better deal with emotional effects of their research:

I believe I am sufficiently experienced that I am aware of when I need to take a break from such work, again largely due to my previous experience in active conflicts...

How do I negotiate it? I'm not sure I manage, but I do try for maximum empathy and listening to how others frame their stances, experiences, and hopes. I still have to be critical, though. And maybe that's what saves me from getting too depressed at some people's situations. But I also find huge amounts of good will and the ability to laugh at the absurdities of life in BiH, so that keeps me going, too.

I believe I am constantly negotiating my own positionality, and reflect upon shifting relationships between myself as a foreigner probing in the politics, memories and past personal experiences, and emotions in my research and how I in various ways and with various successes manage to deal with these complex issues.

As Arditti et al. argue in their paper on the research process in correctional settings, writing about the emotional labour invested in the research was an important "means of closure," which may also

prove helpful to other researchers in similar field settings.⁹² One participant reflected on writing as a cathartic process:

Negotiating emotions is hard, because I am an emotional person. Frequently I am haunted by images and stories. I negotiate by going deeper into the details and protagonist's story. This helps me in some sort of cathartic way, when I turn to writing about it.

Many researchers pointed out the importance of physical exercise:

Sometimes, and particularly when I am alone at night, I do become very emotional. I find that going for long walks helps.

Likewise, for me personally, staying physically active through sports and exercising to relieve emotional stress and frustration potentially caused due to the research is another helpful attempt to negotiate the emotional challenges.

I do daily exercise, eat well and enjoy my work.

Participants in the study reported using various strategies to protect themselves from emotional exhaustion by negotiating the topics they will research: perhaps purposively changing or modifying topics or methods so they are easier to deal with emotionally, or taking a break from research with physical exercises like long walks. Others find it harder to break from their research and seek professional help, and one researcher reported that she may leave academia all together. Sharing insights into the risks of doing sensitive research is important and can help develop strategies into how to cope with some of the challenges. One strategy that may be used to assist with dealing with emotions is a debriefing with the researcher after fieldwork was completed. Such a debriefing will allow

⁹² Arditti et al., "The Role of Emotions in Fieldwork," 1407.

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the researcher to share feelings and discuss any challenges they may have encountered.

Researching in transitional justice contexts

Transitional justice researchers and practitioners are at “the frontline” in responding to the consequences of crimes against humanity, genocide and war crimes and the research they produce is of “great utility.”⁹³ The research they produce “contributes data to policy makers” and since it is up to the government to put in place transitional justice mechanisms, transitional justice advocacy is important because it demands attention to “pressuring leaders and governments to respond” to it.⁹⁴ International transitional justice policy is led by the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence.⁹⁵

This study documented and analysed experiences of researchers in the transitional justice field who work on sensitive issues and in contested environments. It has been inspired by informal exchanges of shared experiences with scholars working on sensitive issues. However, while these informal encounters and conversations between researchers are important, the implications of these issues for qualitative research, researchers and research processes merit more serious attention. There was an overwhelming feeling among participants in this study that more space needs to be created for such conversations to take place. The findings confirm that my personal experience of feeling emotionally drained and vulnerable was not something unique but rather affected almost every participant.

The study aimed to extend theoretical understandings of transitional justice methods and ethics, and to intertwine the

⁹³ Laurel E. Fletcher and Harvey M. Weinstein, “Writing Transitional Justice: An Empirical Evaluation of Transitional Justice Scholarship in Academic Journals,” *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 7.2 (2015), 177-198, 191.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Office of the High Commissioner, Human Rights Council Resolution, “Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparations and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence,” UN Doc. A/HRC/18/L.22 (adopted 29 September 2011).

academic and theoretical with the personal and subjective. Here, the academic self is studied to gain understanding of what it means and what it takes to conduct research in transnational contexts. These insights are important since they can foreshadow issues that may be preventing researchers from pursuing research on certain topics or with particular vulnerable groups. For example, negotiation of wellbeing may affect the subjects of research, whose voices as a result may be either silenced or re-enforced. Lack of support for researchers may mean that some researchers, as some participants self-reported, decide intentionally to cease researching their original ideas, or modify their research projects. As a consequence, they may decide not to invest their expertise where it is direly needed, which in turn may affect the quality and/or quantity of the research and policy making in countries in transition.

Rather than fixating on objectivity, transitional justice—as a social and human science—should allow for greater, explicit emotional intrusion by a researcher. This would allow the researcher to contribute to deeper levels of analysis of contexts in which they research, and also allow them to connect their personal observations and stories to wider issues within and outside the discipline. These stories may illuminate the social and political context in which transitional justice researchers' work. Situating the stories of researchers of transitional justice within a broader context can help us gain in-depth understanding of the specificities of societies that go through transition. In that sense, studying the personal challenges of researchers is not just a goal to capture emotional and evocative content, but can provide a framework for developing a broader analysis of a given post-conflict, post-dictatorship society.

If we agree that our emotions can influence our research, then not acknowledging them can introduce dangers, since our research can directly feed into policy and law reforms in countries in transition. Paradoxically, the potential significance of our contributions may make us even more resistant to looking inward and speaking about the difficulties we encounter in our work. In contrast to those whose research is focused on difficult themes in peaceful democracies, such as rape or homicide, researchers working

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in transitional societies may feel more vulnerable, more helpless and hopeless. In the contexts in which transitional justice scholars work, the rule of law is often in its infancy if it exists at all, and the kinds of institutions and non-governmental organizations that should support victims simply do not exist, or if they do, are extremely underfunded and precarious. In such circumstances, structures to provide emotional support to researchers or victims are scarce.

This lack of support has, unfortunately, led to some researchers ‘burning out’, either leaving research altogether or turning their attention to topics that they perceive as less intrusive and ‘dangerous’. There is a need for researchers involved in transitional justice fieldwork to receive systematic support from their respective institutions. Universities and research institutions have a duty of care to ensure that their research staff are not harmed by their participation in their research. However, while postgraduate students have regular consultations with supervisors to this effect, experienced researchers usually do not have regular formal supervision and support.⁹⁶

Understanding how emotions can have a negative or positive impact on research, how they might affect our work is important.⁹⁷ Informal peer or mentor support groups, and regular meetings to discuss methodological and emotional challenges of qualitative research on sensitive topics, could also be considered to minimize the risk to researchers’ wellbeing. To approach the issue seriously, universities and research institutions need to put in place systematic provisions for the support of all researchers, whether early career or senior, part-time or full-time.

This study underscores the need and demand for transitional justice researchers to organize conferences and workshops dedicated to issues of ethics and methodology. It may also be possible to

⁹⁶ Dickson-Smith, James, and Liamputtong, *Undertaking Sensitive Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 38, 112.

⁹⁷ See, Sherryl Kleinman and Martha A. Copp, *Emotions and Fieldwork: Qualitative research methods series* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1993); Dale Spencer, Kevin Walby and Alan Hunt, eds., *Emotions Matter: A Relational Approach to Emotions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

develop an online blog that would allow researchers to exchange their experiences from their fieldwork. PhD students and early career scholars would benefit from mentors who would guide them through issues that they could encounter in the field and assist in locating a scholar, researcher or organization in the field that could provide necessary psychological and other support. As reported by the participants, researchers are generally left to their own devices to find solutions to the difficulties they face. Ignoring and repressing feelings may endanger the wellbeing of researcher while also producing distortion of data, rather than clarity.⁹⁸ The results and observations of this study hope to add to what is known and perhaps, more importantly, not known in the field of transitional justice methods and ethics.

Conclusions

There is growing interest in sensitive research topics, which are often seen as the embodiment of the transitional justice field. Minimising the risk to the wellbeing of those who undertake sensitive research is of paramount importance to the field. This paper was intended to validate serious consideration of a transitional justice researcher's wellbeing during the research process and to signal the complex difficulties that may be encountered during the research process. In this way, it is hoped that researchers can learn from each other and from their 'mistakes' and become better informed and more reflective scholars.

Similar experiences are to be found with researchers working broadly on sensitive topics, such as health, domestic or child violence and abuse. Some of these common ethical and methodological concerns are inherent in researching sensitive topics and can hardly be avoided. However, certain concerns are unique to transitional justice scholars, who not only work on sensitive issues, but do so in vulnerable situations with a high degree of risk to personal safety.

⁹⁸ Geraldine Lee-Treweek, "The Insight of Emotional Danger: Research Experiences in a Home for Older People," in *Danger in the Field: Risks and Ethics in Social Research*, eds. G. Lee-Treweek and S. Linkogle (London: Routledge, 2000), 128.

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Rather than leaving transitional justice researchers to cope with the difficulties they encounter on their own, universities and research institutions should develop programs of support. As I suggested in this paper, informal peer and mentor support groups could be established too.

This paper does not pretend to offer all solutions or outline all methodological and ethical concerns. Instead, it serves as an initial contribution, intended to provoke deeper thinking about ‘the stories behind the stories’ of empirical research undertaken in the transitional justice field. Despite having a small sample, the study hopefully provides an important snapshot that suggest trends in experiences of emotional impacts due to researching transitional justice topics. It seeks to dismantle the assumption that the stories behind research are trivial or essentially personal with no value for the larger researcher community.

Annex: Email letter titled “Researching Sensitive Topics in Transitional Justice Field”, dated: February 24, 2015

Dear listmembers,

I am currently running a small scale project which aims to bring to light ethics and methodologies transitional justice scholars use in their research, to gain a well-rounded view of the difficulties transitional justice researchers’ face when doing their research. This project aims to open discussion among transitional justice scholars about how doing research on a sensitive topic affects researchers and what are their experiences in undertaking research on sensitive topics. The project will draw on informants’ experts’ experiences in researching difficult themes. The benefits of the research are to provide an insight into researchers ethical and methodological concerns, which may assist to better understanding of the risks and challenges researchers face in the fieldwork. All the information gathered in the project is confidential.

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide a written response to two questions. I estimate that the typing up responses to questions will not exceed more than 10 min.

Please do contact me if you are interested to learn more about project and/or participate at: o.simic@griffith.edu.au