



Research and trauma: Understanding the impact of traumatic content and places on the researcher



Danielle Drozdowski ^{a,*}, Dale Dominey-Howes ^b

^a School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, Faculty of Science, UNSW, NSW 2052, Australia

^b Asia-Pacific Natural Hazards and Disaster Risk Research Group, The School of Geosciences, The University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia

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1. Introduction

As researchers, we are taught to remain vigilant about the ramifications of our research and subsequent methodologies on our participants. University ethics approval processes contain specific clauses about the potential for research methodologies to cause trauma to participants, the measures we must implement to mitigate and or remedy such trauma and processes of debriefing participants. As Sultana (2007: 375) has noted, ethical concerns ‘permeate the entire process of the research, from conceptualization to dissemination ... researchers are especially mindful of negotiated ethics in the field’. Yet we seldom consider how our research topics, methodologies and subsequent work affect us as researchers. In this Special Issue we agitate for greater recognition of the potential negative long-term effects of our encounters with trauma in both our research content and place – time, as well as a capacity to recognise trauma, is paramount. For instance, how does repetitive exposure to trauma influence our wellbeing, our capacity for ‘empathetic corporeal exchange’ (Robinson, 2011: 18) with our participants, and our own capacity to continue to flourish in a

demanding academy? Cameron et al. (2009: 272) drawing on Lorimer (2003) have observed that ‘geographers have not only silenced and ignored the emotions but even penalised expression of emotion’. We suggest that this omission may be because often we do not have the time to insert ourselves into our own research practice but more likely is that we are taught firstly to think about our participants and that such self-reflection might seem indulgent.

We all ‘do’ research, but in ‘doing’ research, we rarely spend time thinking about the outcome of that research on our own emotional wellbeing, let alone on our writing and analytical research practices. As England (1994: 242) has argued ‘neopositivist empiricism specifies a strict dichotomy between object and subject as a prerequisite for objectivity’ – it follows that we have kept (and keep) ourselves, and more specifically our emotional responses, separate as a matter of practice.

Within Geography – a discipline whose research thematic is broad and multiple – there are few tools given or taught to us for dealing with especially traumatic research content, places and experiences. One of Haraway’s (1988:584) initial theses was that an ‘ideology of objectivity’ within scientific disciplines spurred feminist geography (and geographers) to critique research practice and embodiment. This move to look more closely at how we were doing research was fuelled by normative assumptions that research began with the view that methods are learnt and performed (consciously and unconsciously) from the,

‘position [of] the researcher as an omnipotent expert in control of both passive research subjects and the research process. Years of positivist-inspired training have taught us that impersonal, neutral detachment is an important criterion for good research’ (England, 1994: 242).

Within such stoic forms of the research process, there is little room for reflection, regardless of how valuable it is in social sciences and humanities research. England’s (1994) influential paper ‘Getting personal: reflexivity, positionality and feminist research’ set the standards for including personal reflexivity, for considering the role of the self in the research journey and for recognition of the researchers’ situated knowledge as integral to research practice. Drawing from England (1994); Dowling (2000:22) describes critical

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: danielled@unsw.edu.au (D. Drozdowski), dale.dominey-howes@sydney.edu.au (D. Dominey-Howes).

reflexivity as 'a process of constant, self-conscious scrutiny of the self as researcher and of the research process'; a requirement of us as researchers (Israel and Hay, 2006). The two key elements of England's work that have relevance to this Special Issue are that (1) reflexivity is critical to the conduct of fieldwork and that it induces self-discovery and can lead to insights and new hypotheses about the research questions and (2) we should locate ourselves in our work and we should reflect on how our location influences the questions we ask, how we conduct our research, and how we write our research. This reflexivity means we must remain attendant to both the emotional nature of our research and the research outcomes from our emotions, especially when dealing with traumatic content and places. In this vein we echo Bondi's (2005: 433) argument for the emotion to be treated as 'relational, connective medium in which research, researchers and research subjects are necessarily immersed'. Further, we seek to underscore the resonance between our calls for a greater focus on reflexivity and attendance to our emotions with Robsinon's (2011) framing of corporeography as a research strategy. For Robsinon (2011: 17), corporeography encompasses the 'dual interest in the bodily and emotional experiences of others and in the knowledge-making capacities of the researching body itself'.

We acknowledge the need for reflexivity and the centrality of emotions, but what has become apparent in our own research and the work associated with this Special Issue is the necessity for time and space to undertake the process of 'retrospective reflexivity' (Drozdowski, 2015). This necessity for temporal perspective scaffolds from Jones' contention that 'we are not aware of, or in control of, how experiences are mapped into us at the moment of their living out, or of how they are retained and retrieved' (Jones, 2007: 208). We seek to build on England's call for reflexivity but extend it to include recognition of the research content and the place we are researching on our researcher positionality. For example, what are the impacts and outcomes for the researcher of working in traumatic places, or venturing into stressful and distressing research topics and practices? We suggest that investing time into such reflection holds most importance for repetitive research with traumatic content and in traumatic places, because our emotional responses 'loop back over and over' consciously and unconsciously shifting our positionality and changing how we approach our research each time we start over. Moreover, assuming that we can make time to contemplate the influence of our research ventures on ourselves, our capacity for self-knowing may not extend to our ability to recognise the trauma. Trauma, and exposure to it, is frequently buried, unrecognised and repressed. Thus, in addition to exercising self-reflection as a necessary part of the research process, we also emphasise the need for a relational dialogue about research impacts between researchers, peers, and professional counselling services where necessary.

The impetus then for this Special Issue comes from both Guest Editors' very different experiences with trauma in their research. For Drozdowski, research interviews with Poles, including concentration camp and Warsaw uprising survivors, were harrowing and deeply upsetting given her positionality, as a researcher with Polish heritage. For Dominey-Howes, years of research in places and with survivors affected by natural disasters resulted in 'direct personal' and 'indirect professional' trauma. Having had time to reflect on the traumatic content in their own research, both Guest Editors are acutely aware of the lack of space to talk about such aspects of traumatic research. Further, it has arisen because conversations with colleagues who engage with traumatic research content and places revealed that they too experienced significant emotions and affects in relation to their work due to the lack of appropriate forums to debrief.

Recognition of these issues advances a call for a practice of

researcher self-care that aligns itself with a growing movement for slow scholarship lacking in the current neoliberal university. We see this as necessary to affording researchers' time and space to deal with the emotional and traumatic nature and effects of their research (Eriksen, 2015, Mountz et al., 2015). The issues raised here will be returned to in the concluding section of this editorial introduction.

2. Talking about researcher trauma

Geographers have been good at recognizing emotion and affect in research but have been less attentive to 'trauma' in research (Davidson et al., 2007; Bondi, 2005). We contend that there is an absence of tools and methods in Geography specifically to deal with traumatic research content and places. We acknowledge however, that in other fields, mostly clinical and health and holocaust related, there is an awareness of the implications of working (repeatedly) with traumatic material and places (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Dunn, 1991; McCann and Pearlman, 1990; Laub, 1992; LaCapra, 2001; Mukherji et al., 2014). These authors have identified a number of deleterious outcomes of distress, trauma, vicarious and secondary trauma for researchers including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), physical and emotional symptoms, headaches, sleep disturbances, gastrointestinal upsets, increased stress and loss of appetite. In their respective papers, Dominey-Howes (2015) and Eriksen and Ditrich (2015) provide further of the impacts of trauma on researchers.

We are loath to specifically provide clinical definitions of trauma, vicarious or secondary trauma or distress since this is less useful than recognizing and unpacking the experiences of individual researchers working with traumatic content and places. In talking about researcher trauma, this Special Issue points to the very personal character of its impacts and effects, which are not easily categorized and which represent part of a tapestry of experiences that do not necessarily correlate with hard clinical diagnoses. Further, we acknowledge that a researcher's experiences are entirely individual. We see no necessity for a scale of impact and affect as no two cases will be the same. No researcher should ever have their personal experiences with distress, direct or secondary trauma dismissed or devalued since they are real to that person.

In this Special Issue we advocate for a more nuanced recognition of what we think of as an 'assemblage of traumatic experiences'. Such an assemblage may encompass the various stages at which trauma manifests throughout the research process, the researcher's body, as well as their non-work life. As Geographers, we remain mindful of how these emotions and concomitant traumas are place-based and multi-scalar. For example, the multiple scales of enquiry in this collection highlight the significance of both immediacy and temporal distance and change to place.

3. The contributions in this Special Issue

The papers in this Special Issue agitate for a shift in focus as outlined above, and respond to four key objectives that are to:

1. Demonstrate how as researchers we think about, but do not always necessarily come to terms with, our experiences researching with traumatic content and places;
2. Provide a place to devote to encounters into the traumatic; a place where they can be the feature events of the articles, and not merely sentences embedded within methods sections;
3. Promote critical reflection on our own research practices that involve traumatic experiences for us as researchers; and
4. Identify a set of guidelines, best practices, tools and materials that can be used by researchers and their supervisors to help

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