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# Seeing '*the dark passenger*' – Reflections on the emotional trauma of conducting post-disaster research

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ABSTRACT

This paper acknowledges '*the* [my] *dark passenger*' of emotional vicarious trauma associated with conducting post-disaster research. Post-disaster research is tightly bounded by ethics and professional codes of conduct requiring us to be vigilant about the impact of our work on our *participants*. However, as a disaster researcher, *I* have been affected by vicarious trauma. 'Direct personal' vicarious trauma is where I experienced trauma associated with witnessing devastation making a professional separation from my objective subjects impossible. 'Indirect professional' vicarious trauma occurred when PhD students and others under my supervision that I sent to disaster affected places, experienced significant negative emotional responses and trauma as they interviewed their participants. In these situations, I became traumatised by my lack of training and reflected on how the emphasis on the participants came at the expense of the researcher in my care. Limited literature exists that focuses on the vicarious trauma experienced by researchers, and their supervisors working in post-disaster places and this paper is a contribution to that body of scholarship. In acknowledging and exploring the emotions and vicarious trauma of researchers embedded in landscapes of disaster, it becomes possible for future researchers to pre-empt this phenomenon and to consider ways that they might manage this.



## 1. Introduction

Disasters – both natural and non-natural greatly affect societies, disrupting our social and environmental systems. Disasters shake the foundations of social and community structures, rip places and communities apart and undo the long socio-cultural histories of communities. The most conspicuous impacts however, are upon people. Pictures of death, injury, suffering and loss generate powerful emotional responses and remind us that, as Will Durant stated in relation to natural disasters, "*civilization exists by geological consent, subject to change without notice*" (Durant, 1946).

As humanity has sprawled out across the Earth's surface, occupying places subject to the forces of nature, events that we label 'hazards' are inevitable (Dominey-Howes, 2015). The occurrence of a discrete, potentially hazardous event does not need to result in a disaster. However, it does seem that disasters occur somewhere around the world on a daily basis. Disasters occur because of the intersection of *hazard* with *exposed* people and assets that are *vulnerable* to the hazard (Birkmann et al., 2013). Disasters are usually characterised by a lack of resilience and adaptive capacity and limited ability to cope and respond. Without vulnerability there can be no disaster. For me, disasters are a social construct and disasters are about people. I make no apologies for taking such an anthropocentric view.

Although contested, a disaster is an event that may be defined as "a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society involving widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources" (UNISDR, 2009). As tragic as disasters are, their occurrence provides intense and important moments of learning. They allow us to investigate the causes, processes, impacts and consequences of disasters – including on survivors, as well as how communities respond and recover (van Zijll de Jong et al., 2011). From these new understandings, those tasked with the responsibility of disaster risk reduction, may advance new methods, strategies and techniques for safeguarding us in the future. Over the years, a plethora of academic disciplines have become involved in pre- and post-disaster research including but not limited to, geographers, sociologists, geologists, engineers, historians, political scientists, economists, atmospheric scientists, disaster managers, ecologists,

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mathematicians and health experts. Each of these academic disciplines provides unique and important insights.

I am a *Geographer* by training and my interests and expertise lie in investigating the intersections between the hazards originating within the physical earth system and the socio-cultural contexts in which hazard events trigger disasters. My work is informed by, and follows a long scholarship of disaster geography exemplified by experts such as Gilbert White, Susan Cutter, David Alexander and others. The goal of my work is to reduce the losses associated with disasters by enhancing community resilience through the development of appropriate disaster risk reduction strategies. To do this, it is necessary for my team and I to visit disaster affected places. Sometimes this occurs immediately after a event has occurred – perhaps as part of a larger post-disaster assessment team (see for example, van Zijll de Jong et al., 2011) and sometimes this occurs weeks, months and years later for a variety of reasons (see for example, Méheux et al., 2010). We often interview survivors and stakeholders such as emergency response personnel, NGO volunteers, community leaders and the business sector all of whom contribute in various ways, to response and recovery efforts.

Before we can depart for a disaster-affected place, we are required to complete a variety of administrative and bureaucratic tasks designed to keep us safe from risks and physical harm and to ensure we abide by appropriate domestic and international standards and rules. These include for example, applying for authority to travel, fieldwork risk assessments, travel and research visas and so on. Since so much of our work focuses on the experiences of people, humans are often the subjects of our research. Consequently, and appropriately so, we are required to complete extensive documentation to gain Human Ethics approval from our university Ethics Committees. This tightly controls our work and demands rigorous professional codes of conduct (Dowling, 2010).

The process of applying for Human Ethics approval to survey and interview people in pre- and post-disaster situations whilst complex, is extremely valuable since we are obligated to identify the types of questions we wish to ask, the themes we want to explore and as such, what methods are appropriate and the likely consequences of our actions (Dowling, 2010; Dunn, 2010). Specifically, where human subjects have experienced and survived disaster, the ethics application process requires that we document how we will be mindful of the potential negative effects our questioning will have on our participants, how we might prevent this from occurring, and what we will do to ameliorate such negative affects should they occur. The emphasis is always on us to protect the participant from any further emotional turmoil and we are required to constantly be vigilant about the impacts and effects of our interviewing on our participants. I have gained Ethics approval for such work in four universities that I have worked at in my post-PhD career. Interestingly, on not one occasion has the documentation I have completed noted that '*I*' the researcher might experience unsettling emotional responses to the work, or that I might experience some form of traumatic response. Never has the process asked me what I might do to anticipate and monitor for emotional trauma working with such material or what I might do to protect myself from emotional harm. Interestingly, casual conversations with colleagues who do similar work at other universities, reveal that they have not been advised of the possibility of negative emotional responses to their field-based post-disaster research either. Thus this lack of focus on researcher trauma seems rather wide spread.

In practicing a form of critical reflexivity defined as "a process of constant, self-conscious scrutiny of the self as researcher and of the research process" (England (1994) cited in Dowling (2010: 31) as we are required to do as researchers (Israel and Hay, 2006) and specifically reflecting upon my personal experiences and those of my team working in disaster-affected places, I have realised that I have struggled with complex and difficult emotions. I have also been affected by vicarious trauma. Over and over, a '*dark passenger*' has accompanied me on this research and it is time to acknowledge this both as a form of catharsis and to reassure others that may experience similar reactions.

In light of this introduction and the fact that a limited literature exists that focuses on the traumatic experiences of academics that do research in *post-disaster places*, my aim is to reflect on my own experiences with vicarious trauma as a disaster researcher in order to contribute to a widening knowledge base. Whilst my intention here is to reflect on my own experiences, I acknowledge that my reflection and contribution rests alongside a developing body of scholarship that includes interesting work by others. For example, Lund (2012) who through a reflection of crisis research with Sri Lankans affected by tsunami and conflict unpacked the complex of emotions impacting the researcher and the research process. In undertaking post-2011 earthquake research in Christchurch, New Zealand, Hutcheson (2013) drew on geographical literature and psychoanalytic concepts to examine how unconscious, subconscious and embodied experiences can inform research interactions between researcher and the researched.

I begin by briefly detailing what is meant by vicarious trauma and how it relates to the 'researcher' – thus focusing on the researcher as subject. Next I examine both the value and challenges to researchers of doing research in disaster-affected places, drawing on examples of others. I then acknowledge the *emotions* faced by PhD candidates new to the research journey drawing upon recent higher education literature. This is useful because it provides a foundation upon which we may extend recognition of the emotional and traumatic affects of undertaking post-disaster research. Next I outline my own experiences of vicarious trauma, describing both 'direct personal' and 'indirect professional' vicarious trauma. The paper concludes with a discussion and explores ways in which vicarious trauma might be anticipated and can be prepared for by those who will engage in such professional activities.

## 2. What is vicarious trauma and how can it affect researchers?

Eriksen and Ditrich (2015) note that vicarious trauma has been defined as "the response of those persons who have witnessed, been subject to explicit knowledge of or, had the responsibility to intervene in a seriously distressing or tragic event" (Lerias and Bryne, 2003). Dickson-Swift et al. (2010) define vicarious trauma as "the normal response of researchers who have engaged with traumatic stories of … survivors, and as a result often feel distress, distrustful, disconnected and unable to manage their feelings or behaviour". For a more nuanced exploration of the definition and occurrence of vicarious trauma, their impacts on the professional and coping mechanisms, interested readers are referred to seminal work of McCann and Pearlman (1990).

Vicarious trauma occurs when for example, a researcher interviewing disaster survivors, experiences a negative psycho-emotional response to the traumatic experiences of their subjects. The condition is associated with numerous negative symptoms. Vicarious trauma can be very disabling, causing interruptions to sleep patterns, loss of appetite, increased anxiety and inability to concentrate, increased stress, emotional outbursts, inability to cope, incapacity to think, write and process research data and, in extreme cases, psychological breakdown (McCann and Pearlman, 1990). The implications for the researcher are both obvious, and profound. Whilst I am focusing on the process of vicarious trauma in relation to researchers dealing with disasters, I acknowledge that vicarious trauma has been extensively examined elsewhere in