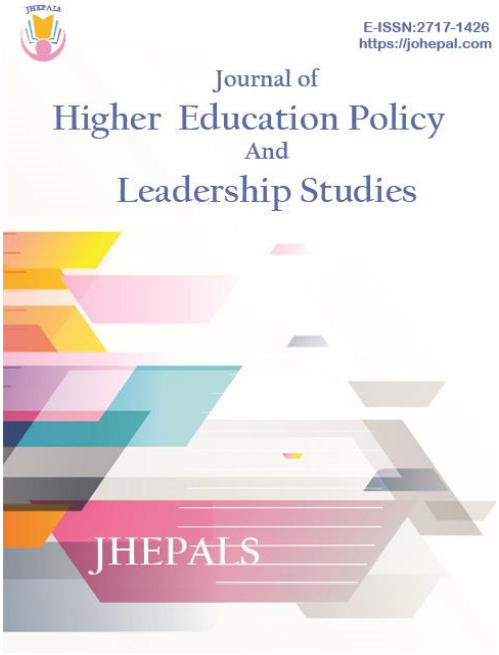
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Emotional Vulnerability in Researchers Conducting Trauma-Triggering Research

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Abstract

Qualitative researchers prioritize rapport-building to ensure safety of research participants and validity of data collected. Although there is extensive literature about prioritizing the safety and emotional well-being of research participants, much less has been written on the topic of researcher vulnerability with lack of consideration for researcher safety within ethics approval applications. The authors present a reflexive account of a research project involving interviews with young people aged 15 to 30 in Toronto, Canada who had firearm related charges. The methodological, ethical issues, and research burnout and vulnerability that arose due to the shared lived experience between the principal researcher and the research participants are discussed. Overall, the article explores the complexities and nuances involved when conducting research with topics that may be trauma-triggering and can contribute to researcher burnout and compassionate fatigue. It is argued that researchers are not immune to these risk factors and due to such exposure may experience depression and other negative side effects. Series of suggestions are outlined to reduce harm exposure for researchers and to improve how they can better be supported to cope and heal from conducting trauma-triggering research before, during, and after completion of a research project.

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Keywords: Researcher Vulnerability; Trauma-Triggering Research; Qualitative Research; Firearm Related Charges; Emotional Implications; Ethics Approval

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Introduction: Prioritizing Researcher Vulnerability

Despite a steadily growing acknowledgement of the importance of researcher safety and emotional support (Komaromy, 2020; Hanna, 2019; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008), there continues to be a significant lack of research that investigates the impacts on the researcher, in particular understanding the emotional vulnerability of practitioner-researchers within sensitive or trauma-triggering research. Qualitative researchers prioritize rapport-building to ensure safety of research participants and validity of data collected. Although there is extensive literature about prioritizing the safety and emotional well-being of research participants, much less has been written on the topic of researcher vulnerability with lack of consideration for researcher safety within ethics approval applications.

In this article, the authors present a reflexive account of a research project involving interviews with young people aged 15 to 30 in Toronto, Canada who had firearm related charges. The methodological, ethical issues, and research burnout and vulnerability that arose due to the shared lived experience between the principal researcher and the research participants are discussed. The article examines the complexities and nuances involved when conducting research with topics that are trauma-triggering and can contribute to researcher burnout and compassionate fatigue. It is argued that researchers are not immune to these risk factors and due to such exposure may experience depression and other negative side effects. A series of suggestions are outlined to reduce harm exposure for researchers and to improve how they can better be supported to cope and heal from conducting trauma-triggering research before, during, and after completion of a research project.

Scholars have typically defined sensitive research in two ways: 1. Based on the topic under investigation (e.g., addiction, illegal activity, mental health, victimization) or 2. Based on the response of the participant to the research such that it contributes to causing distressing emotions and feelings (Dempsey et al., 2016; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Elmir et al., 2011). As Emerald and Carpenter (2015) state,

> Researchers have documented that research can engender the full range of emotions: frustration, loneliness, sadness, boredom and apprehension, guilt, and physical and emotional exhaustion; it can entail crying, feeling moved, and experiencing fear and disgust; it can leave one helpless vulnerable and forlorn. Emotion can be stimulated by the relationship between the researcher and the topic, the researcher and the respondents, or both. (p. 6)

When submitting applications for research approval through Institutional Review Boards (IRB), often the focus of questions is on how risks to research participants are minimized and mitigated. We argue that more attention needs to be given to examining how researchers can be protected and supported as part of engaging with research, before, during, and after conducting research, particularly involving topics and methodologies that may be trauma-triggering such as via interviews. According to Howard and Hammond (2019),

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> While protecting the health and safety of research participants is paramount to any research study, it is important to also recognize and address the potential risk to researchers. Researchers too may have an acute or delayed adverse or emotional reaction as a result of their engagement in research. (p. 411)

This topic is important to examine as understanding emotional and spiritual complexities involved in leading trauma-triggering research can contribute to more effectively protecting researchers and the research participants from harm and negative side-effects (Devilly et al., 2009).

Contrary to positivist paradigms in research that value researcher objectivity, qualitative researchers, particularly practitioner-researchers, rely on interpretive paradigms that prioritize rapport-building and establishment of trust with research participants to collect authentic meaningful data. Collecting data such as via interviews is a subjective process that can contribute to the vulnerability of researchers. As Mikanovic (2019) states, "The face-to-face proximity of researchers to people whose stories are heavy with sorrow, loss, disappointment, or grief make it easy to understand that there will be an emotional cost to undertaking these kinds of studies" (p. 3). The emotional implications for the researcher can arise at different stages including before, during, or after data collection and analysis, or even after completion of the research project. The feelings and emotions do not cease to exist once interviews are completed. As Emerald and Carpenter (2015) state, "Vulnerability pursues us beyond the administrative requirements and protocols into our writing, publication, and the public reception of our work" (p. 4).

While researcher vulnerability is a topic that is being explored more extensively by scholars in recent years, we advocate that it needs to be prioritized by organizations and institutions to support researchers leading projects associated with trauma-triggering topics. The objective of engaging in such critical conversations is to let researchers know that they are not alone in what they are experiencing, especially early career researchers, and to find ways to work collaboratively and constructively through the emotions and feelings rather than dismissing or avoiding them which can be harmful. Insights from such scholarly work exploring researcher vulnerability can lead to better supports for the well-being of researchers via implementation of policies, processes, and strategies to reduce harm and promote coping skills and healing at the individual and institutional levels.

Autoethnography as Methodology: Centering Feelings and Emotions as Data

This article uses autoethnography as a methodology to centre the feelings and emotions of the principal researcher as she conducted interviews with young people aged 15 to 30 in Ontario, Canada who had firearm related charges (Gopal-Chambers et al., 2018). We agree with Howard and Hammond (2019) who state that "Authoethnography allows the centring of our (the researchers) experiences as the unit of analysis" (p. 415). Thus, as a case study this article explores the emotional implications involved between the researcher and the participants, particularly the methodological and ethical issues that arise from engaging in trauma-triggering research associated with violence and interactions with the police.

Emotions should be viewed as a form of data which relay important information about those being interviewed as research participants as well as about the researcher and how

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they are receiving the stories shared with them. Keep in mind that emotions can be communicated in different ways including words expressed, tone of voice, and body language. Emerald and Carpenter (2015) point out that "As social researchers, many of us are comfortable to note that our participants' emotions are data, or rather, evidence" (p. 747). Exposure to trauma-triggering information via words or the content of stories shared as part of data collection in the research process can contribute to researcher vulnerability relative to their identity and lived and professional experiences. Yet, researcher emotions are often not discussed and when expressed viewed as a form of weakness. We advocate that sharing of researcher emotions is a form of strength, counter to the positivist approach of predominantly centering objectivity. We argue that researcher emotions should be just as much prioritized, observed, and monitored over time to help with coping and healing when engaging with sensitive and trauma-triggering research.

Bell (1998) defines vulnerability as "[O]ne of being open to danger and personal injury." (p. 188). Bell further explains that "Historically, we have tended to see the scientist and researcher as being far from such conditions" (p. 188). Yet as Howard and Hammond (2019) outline, "Qualitative inquiry positions the researcher as the instrument, suggesting the process of collecting, analysing and interpreting data are affected and informed by one's positionality and subjective stance" (p. 413). Particularly, practitioner-researchers leverage insider positionality and established trust with research participants to reduce barriers in communication leading to collection of data that is more reliable and authentic. Similar to research participants, researchers should also be supported during and after the research process to facilitate coping and healing from engaging with triggering content. As Emerald and Carpenter (2015) explain,

> Sadly, emotionality is often still constructed in binary to rationality, intellectual work, and professionalism. But in taking the feminist stance that the personal is political and the autoethnographic stance that our personal experiences can lend understanding to the social/cultural/political context, we cannot avoid recognizing that qualitative research is both emotional and intellectual labor. (p. 7)

Therefore, emotionality and emotions should be viewed as an integral component of the research process. We need to listen to emotions as a form of data similar to how we analyze words and numbers. As Micanovic et al. (2019) explain, "Undisputedly, the intense nature and immediacy of fieldwork can be emotionally draining and requires a constant management of self during the research process, especially in situations where there is a high level of expressed emotion" (p. 7). Hence, practitioner-researchers should have more mental health and emotional supports available to them to reduce the risk of burnout and experiencing of vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue.

Interviewing Young People with Firearm Related Charges

In the present study we aim to specifically highlight the impact of the emotional experience on the researcher-researched relationship based on commonalities of negative, traumatic lived experiences with violence and police interactions. The reflections shared are based on a research project that investigated firearm possession by young men and women aged 15

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to 30 in Toronto, Canada who self-identified as having firearm related criminal charges (Gopal-Chambers et al., 2018). Research ethics approval was obtained from Humber College. The criteria for participation in this study included: being age 15 to 30 (at the time of the firearm charge), having multiple charges from different incidents, and the firearm charge(s) having occurred in Toronto post 2004.

Eleven people were interviewed with nine of them self-identifying as male (91%). Participants were on average 23.8 years old. Demographics of participants are presented in Table 1 which outlines factors such as highest level of education completed, employment and marital status, and whether they have dependents and if so how many. One participant self-identified as Latino and all others self-identified as Black. Participants reported a range of criminal charges in addition to firearm possession, including drug possession and trafficking, human trafficking, robbery or armed robbery, and forcible confinement. Due to the nature of the charges, all participants had lengthy interactions with the criminal justice system. It is not known how many of the charges were dismissed or resulted in criminal convictions. Data was collected in 2016 with coding and analysis completed in 2017. In 2018, preliminary findings were presented and published (Gopal et al., 2018).

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Demographic	N	%
Gender		
Male	10	90.9
Female	1	9.1
Highest Education		
Elementary	4	36.3
High school/GED	5	45.5
Post-secondary	2	18.2
Employment		
Employed (full-time)	2	18.2
Employed (part-time)	3	27.3
Unemployed	6	54.5
Marital Status		
Single	8	72.7
Common law	2	18.2
Married	1	9.1
Dependents		
0	5	45.5
1	4	36.3
2	1	9.1
3	1	9.1

Field notes, interview audio recordings, transcripts, and emotions and feelings were drawn upon as part of the analysis for this article. The benefits and challenges that arose from the commonalities shared by the lead researcher and the research participants are highlighted, both as they pertain to their impact on the research study and on the researcher.

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Positionality and Reflections of the Principal Researcher

"I" statements are used by the principal researcher (T.N.) throughout the article to centre emotions and feelings as part of outlining the embodied experience engaging in the research process and coping with being triggered during interviews.

As a racialized female who grew up in a low-income neighbourhood in Toronto, shooting incidences plagued my life during adolescence and as a young adult. Several people in my personal life were impacted by firearms in different capacities. In 2008, my home was raided for firearms. It was a mentally, emotionally, professionally, and financially a traumatic life experience. For many years following the police raid and throughout my professional career as a frontline practitioner, I was impacted by the emotional implications of these experiences associated with surveillance, police raids, firearm possession charges, and shooting incidents.

Studies have indicated that interactions with law enforcement may be correlated with trauma-related symptoms and life experiences in particular for persons of colour (Aymer, 2016; Lopez et al., 2018). Even less research has been conducted on the specific impact of law enforcement raids. Data indicates that a disproportional occurrence of law enforcement raids occur in racialized communities (American Civil Liberties Union, 2014). This can be attributed to deficit thinking about racialized identities and where they live. Lopez et al.'s (2018) study concluded that experiencing law enforcement home raids may contribute to the development of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or PTSD-like symptoms. Although the research project and the interviews conducted focused on firearm related charges, perhaps naively, I did not anticipate hearing stories about the impact of police raids.

During the interview process, I was hesitant but eventually chose to purposefully leverage my insider status and shared personal experiences related to police raids to gain the trust of my research participants. What I did not consider was how to navigate the fluid self and move safely between multiple selves to accomplish rapport building while mitigating my own researcher vulnerability. I was overly focused on my previous youth work experience and felt confident I could handle hearing distressing experiences as I had done so throughout my twenty-year professional career. Perhaps it was because I was outside my professional role that I did not anticipate the emotional impact that would infiltrate my personal life and the magnitude of the impact on me emotionally as part of analyzing the data and writing about violence and its impact. This is an important reminder for researchers of all experience levels to mindfully prepare for emotional distress and burnout as part of the research process, particularly involving trauma-triggering topics.

Presentation of Self as a Practitioner-Researcher

Ample scholarship has examined the dynamic of the researcher-researched relationship from membership status with respect to insider/outsider status and positionality of researchers (Cassell, 2005; Chavez, 2008; Finlay, 2002; Innes, 2009). As a collective, these concepts emphasize the importance "that the researcher's own emotions are a necessary part of research enabling the researcher to enter into the participant's world and hence gain a deeper understanding of it" (Emerald & Carpenter, 2015, p. 7). Whereas initial conceptualizations in academic literature considered the researcher's identity as a fixed concept (Cassell, 2005; Razon & Ross, 2012), more recently the debate has shifted from a

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dichotomized conceptualization of insider-outsider to a fluid conceptualization of self and identity (May, 2014; Ochieng, 2010). A fluid conceptualization of self acknowledges the complexities researcher's experience as part of data collection and writing involving sensitive or trauma-triggering topics.

One aspect of this interaction is the notion of purposeful 'presentation of self' – what specific and unique aspects of self the researcher presents during the research process to engage and connect with participants authentically. Insider status facilitates access to the target community by helping the researcher(s) build immediate rapport based on shared experiences and commonalities (Berbary, 2014; Burns, Fenwick, Schmied, & Sheehan, 2012; Few et al., 2003; Innes, 2009). Establishing rapport with participants is critical to constructing a trusting relationship and encouraging participants to share their stories without holding back (Mealer & Jones Rn, 2014), especially when working with marginalized and disenfranchised identities whose voices have often been silenced due to systemic barriers.

Practitioner-researchers leverage rapport-building techniques to connect with research participants and create safer spaces for sharing of experiences. This rapport building is often accomplished through purposeful sampling and specific presentations of the self as a researcher. Validation of emotions and experiences are used during data collection with the intention of connecting with others. As researchers employ a purposeful presentation of themselves to research participants, they also increase the likelihood of experiencing emotional risks and vulnerability (Mallon & Elliott, 2019). This is especially true if presentation of the self is used to self-disclose traumatic experiences similar to what the research participants have experienced and are sharing.

Findings

Reflection #1: Presentation of the Self as Rapport-Building with Research Participants

Presentation of self has been acknowledged as an important dynamic in research. In this section, we focus on the experience of practitioner-researchers navigating research and its emotional implications. Successful and meaningful data collection is accomplished through established trust and a positive relationship with the research participants. As such, the quality and characteristics of the relationship between the researcher and researched population is vital to ensure research participants share their experiences and stories authentically, particularly when it involves trauma-triggering topics. Drawing on the benefits of leveraging common experiences between the researcher and the researched, a recruitment and engagement strategy was developed prioritizing rapport building.

As a trained practitioner with over twenty years of experience, I have purposefully shared information with young people in vulnerable circumstances to build trust and rapport based on similar lived experiences such as living in the same neighbourhood and prior interactions with the criminal justice system. This purposeful presentation of self enhanced my capacity to effectively support young people. In foregrounding this insider status throughout the interviews, a secondary goal was to highlight the voices of those who are typically excluded from knowledge production and exchange opportunities. Most research conducted on firearms is quantitative in nature and examines prevalence rates and risk factors, rather than in-depth investigations into understanding why young people carry or use firearms and how exposure to various risk factors increases the likelihood of a person

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gravitating towards violence which can involve purchasing and carrying a gun (Keil et al., 2020; Spano & Bolland, 2013; Teplin et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2021).

It was important for me to capture the voices of the participants authentically. Although I was supported and guided by mentors and research colleagues, I was a novice researcher. As I planned the recruitment strategy and interview questions, I perceived my insider status as beneficial to counter issues of distrust as I would present myself as a practitioner with somewhat similar traumatic life experiences. This strategy successfully established trust and reduced participant hesitancy to share their experiences. The main commonalities shared with research participants across multiple interviews was the experience of living in the same or similar neighbourhood, immigration and settlement issues, interactions with the police, substance use, and experiences with gun violence and police raids. This resulted in an insider status where I could more easily understand the experiences shared and the language used to express such experiences which at times involved the use of slang vocabulary. I felt obligated to be vulnerable and share with them my past traumatic experiences to create a safer environment for the participants to tell their stories. I was navigating blurred boundaries between keeping it real with the participants and always being perceived as a professional in the role of the researcher. During the interview process, I identified myself as a practitioner who supports young people vulnerable to incarceration, yet I also shared my distrust with the justice system affiliated with systemic inequities and barriers that exist for racialized identities and communities.

Overall, prior to entering the field for this research project, I felt very prepared. I had a strong recruitment and engagement strategy and trained as a practitioner with anti-oppressive and trauma-informed approaches. Reflecting on the supports I had established, I now recognize that these supports were focused on participant safety and not researcher safety or healing. Strategies I had learned via my training included planning and identifying potential risks in conducting the research, providing peer support, and debriefing activities (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; McCosker et al., 2001; McGowan, 2018; Thompson et al., 2019). However, as I commenced data collection via interviews, it became clear that my professional and personal life were overlapping, and I was vulnerable to the stresses induced by engaging in trauma-triggering research. The emotional implications and its impacts are further explained in reflection two and three.

Reflection #2: Revisiting Past Trauma through the Interview Process

Trauma-triggering research is more than the topic itself. It is based on the response of the participant to the research and how the researcher engages with such narratives as a collective (Dempsey et al., 2016; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007; Elmir et al., 2011). In this reflection, I share my experience in conducting sensitive research on emotionally difficult topics related to violence and how it resulted in triggering my own past traumatic experiences that are deeply personal. While the rapport-building and participant safety protocols outlined were effective in protecting participants' confidentiality, they were not effective in protecting myself from emotional vulnerability as a researcher as it forced me to revisit past personal trauma associated with violence and loss of loved ones. Even though participants did not disclose information that required breaching confidentiality, I did not anticipate learning information about young people I worked with in the past. For example, participant #7 recounted a time when he was stopped by the police with his friend, and in

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doing so, I learned about the death of a young person on a previous caseload.

> Participant 7: *Certain situations that you go through like…one time I was with* (names friend)*, rest his soul.*
> Researcher: (repeats friend's name)*?*
> Participant 7: *Yeah, he's, he's…*
> Researcher: *I know* (friend) *from* (names a location), *that's why I'm asking if it's the same.*
> Participant 7: *I don't know. One that passed away from up here.*
> Researcher: *Oh…I was wondering, I was like, woah…no one told me that he passed. So. Sorry about that. Just got shook for a minute.*

While I knew that neighbourhood violence existed, I was devastated to learn that specific young people I worked with from different communities were causing harm to each other leading to the death of someone I personally knew from previous interactions in my professional role. Due to the interactive nature of the researcher-researched relationship, qualitative researchers tend to be self-critical, self-reflexive, and self-aware of their perspective, biases, and positionality (Moore, 2015). It was not until the data collection process commenced that I recognized that my professional and personal lives were overlapping and that I was both an insider and an outsider in this community.

As a South Asian woman of colour, married to a Black man and raising multiple children who identify as Black, I have lived experiences with racism and previous interactions with the police and the justice system personally and via my advocacy efforts professionally in the community. Hearing traumatic experiences of research participants with the police and violence evoked all kinds of emotions and feelings inside me, particularly hopelessness, despair, and sadness. I felt helpless with how systemic inequities continue to lead to overrepresentations of people of colour across the criminal justice system (Douyon, 2016; Fitzgerald & Carrington, 2011; Malakieh, 2018; Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2012). I was not prepared for these feelings to be specifically triggered during this research project, during, and after the interviews.

Like other experiences I had with individuals who have experience with the criminal justice system, a few participants were initially very suspicious of my intentions and thought I was there to have them admit to criminal activity. After I shared how I had endured similar experiences (e.g., law enforcement raid, lost friends due to gun violence, incarceration and shootings), participant attitudes changed from defensive and suspicious to relaxed and more conversational. Sharing these commonalities reduced the power imbalance between myself and research participants and accelerated the rapport-building process, but it came at the expense of increasing my researcher vulnerability and having to revisit my own past trauma and the emotional baggage it came with.

Commonalities between the researcher and each research participant was different and it involved sharing a range of different experiences related to law enforcement raids, shootings, incarceration, substance use, or living in the same neighbourhood. These tools were successfully used as participants shared detailed accounts of their experiences and sincerely reflected on the impact of these experiences on themselves and their friends and families. Following excerpt from one of the interviews is an example of disclosure Participant

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4 shared about the impact of a police raid on them:

> Participant 4: *My house was raided for no reason trying to get me to go back negative…Like raided, came to look for what... you know, look for firearm which like I stayed away from...It was just was the negative. A negative…. I had my child in the house and that affected me. That was a negative effect. That just like. Oh, I was angry. I was angry. I was angry man.*
> Researcher: *I too have had my house raided before…..it definitely is a traumatizing experience* (moment of awkward silence).

Sharing my common experiences throughout the interviews resulted in participants relaxing and feeling comfortable to tell their story, but it was at the expense of myself having to revisit my past trauma which was emotionally exhausting and contributed to burnout. Yet, such disclosures to research participants validated their experiences and feelings, reducing distrust to tell their stories authentically. Taking note of the participants' body language, they were visibly more comfortable and relaxed as a result of exchanging common negative experiences related to violence and interactions with the criminal justice system. In one interview, after I shared that I had negative experiences in my past, but was now a successful practitioner, married, and had children, Participant 2 shared that their uncle had a similar trajectory. After being incarcerated for possessing firearms, he married and had children, completed his education, and obtained employment. Through this interaction and exchange of lived experiences, the participant was able to see that while they have firearm charges, it does not have to define their life trajectory.

The following excerpts are from two interviews that demonstrate the use of disclosure and how it acted as a catalyst for increasing researcher vulnerability. The first example is from Participant 8, the youngest person I interviewed. He shared a story of the police raiding his house, resulting in firearm related charges for him and his brother. In recalling the impact of the raid, he started to cry. As he told his story, it triggered memories and emotions from when my home was raided by the police.

> Participant 8: *When they raided the house, just seeing them with all the guns to my mom, to everyone including my three younger sisters and my two brothers, one younger, one older… it wasn't nice.*
> Researcher: *Yeah* (getting emotional due to remembering the raid I also experienced*).*
> Participant 8: *It was scary.*
> Researcher: *Yeah. Scary. And you weren't, you weren't expecting the raid?*
> Participant 8: *No.*

Participant 8 further shared that he started using marijuana to help him sleep and cope with the stresses stemming from the psychological impact of the police raid. At this point in the interview, I understood why he was crying and felt he needed to know that he was not alone, so I also disclosed my experience of being a target of a police raid. After sharing my own similar experience, we were both crying, and continued to do so for the next two questions.

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> Researcher: *It's pretty scary, eh? Yeah. Pretty scary. I know how you feel. I do know how you feel. Cause my house was also raided. I know what it feels like and I know how [messed] up it is…*[I break down crying]*…and I know how scary it is. So I completely understand how you feel. And I know it's not a good feeling and there are times when I cry too. So I understand how hard it is to go through a raid. Emotionally and mentally. I do understand cause I went through that. Because they thought that there were firearms in my home, right, and they came and it was the same, it was the same situation. So I understand. You okay?*

Despite successful use of purposeful presentation of self and disclosure to develop trust with research participants, there was great emotional risk in identifying with the participants and sharing my past traumatic experiences with violence and interactions with the police.

Reflection #3: Taking the Trauma Home- Coping, Healing, and Researching Simultaneously

When researching trauma-triggering topics, researchers have to continue to lead the project while simultaneously coping and healing from the negative emotions induced from the research process as part of data collection such as with interviews. Conducting the interviews over a short period of time, I became increasingly vulnerable throughout the research project to the extent that the research process and my personal life were impacted. This vulnerability led to burnout and vicarious trauma where I felt like "a passive bystander after hearing graphic descriptions of violence, neglect, and physical, sexual, and emotional abuse day after day" (Micanovic et al., 2019, p. 3). I used sharing of personal traumatic experiences as a tool to build rapport and establish trust with the research participants, yet the constant retelling and disclosure of my own traumas resurfaced negative feelings and depressive emotions that I began to carry home even after the interviews were completed. I recorded the interviews to support notetaking and provide additional opportunities to review the interview content as part of the data analysis. Rehearing the interview exchanges and the traumas shared in them further intensified the negative feelings and emotions I was going through. After reviewing the transcriptions, I identified instances where I could have probed participant responses more to elicit additional details, yet my emotions and vulnerability inhibited that. For example, after learning about the death of a young person on my previous caseload, I missed an opportunity to probe a participant's response to a police interaction they described as harassment.

> Participant 7: *We're swarmed with undercovers in police cars. I'm saying where did you guys come from? The streets were just completely empty. Where did you guys come from? They harassed us that night. They planted a gun on him that night […] Officers walk over and said it was a joke. You didn't like my joke?*
> Researcher: Wow.
> Participant 7: *It was a joke. Then he gave me [*numerous*] tickets. [*Numerous*] tickets for my bike.*

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Following this statement from the participant, I stumbled for words and carried on with other questions without taking time to deconstruct the scenario shared by the research participant with follow-up questions. Retrospectively, I realize these opportunities were missed as I was simultaneously both managing my own emotions and processing participant information shared with me in the interview. The multitasking was complicated by the trauma-triggering research topic and the vulnerabilities I experienced.

Managing Researcher Vulnerability through Coping and Healing Strategies

This section focuses on discussing how researcher vulnerability can better be monitored and managed by investing in coping and healing strategies before, during, and after the completion of a research project. Participant confidentiality and anonymity were key priorities of the rapport-building strategy with research participants. The topic under investigation, firearm related charges, required extra effort to ensure participants felt comfortable and ensuring them that I was not trying to trick them or trap them into admitting involvement with criminal activities. Participants were informed of the limits of confidentiality following standard research protocols (e.g., consent form detailing confidentiality and requirements by law to breach confidentiality), frequently reminded of these limits, and asked not to share names of individuals when recounting experiences.

As I sat down to reflect on the impact of the research project, I realized my risk of emotional vulnerability was not limited to the data collection phase. I am sure this realization would not have occurred without time and space from the project hence the gap between the data collection and analysis period. Despite post-interview debriefs and mentor support, my emotional well-being deteriorated. Throughout the interview, transcription process, and data analysis I began to experience significant burnout and emotional distress (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). I have a history of depression and anxiety and recognize early signals that I am declining.

I had to invest in various self-care practices to minimize the risk of researcher burnout and harm induced by conducting trauma-triggering research (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Thompson et al., 2019). The sample size and timeline of the project were altered. The goal of conducting twenty interviews was reduced to eleven as a coping mechanism to reduce the harm I was experiencing. The data analysis phase was extended to provide more time between conducting, transcribing, and coding and analyzing the interviews. Retrospectively, I recognize that I was avoiding transcribing interviews to avoid re-living triggering moments. Furthermore, a research consultant was hired to support the final stages of data analysis and recommendations phase of the project.

Conclusion

This paper presents a cautionary tale reminding the research community that as qualitative researchers and community-based practitioners we are human beings with our own traumatic lived and professional experiences that shape our participation in the research process. Researcher vulnerability must be shared and prioritized to mitigate the risks of burn-out, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue (Ashley-Binge & Cousins, 2020; Cohen & Collens, 2013; Sollund, 2008). Emotions are important data that we need to take time to

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listen to and deconstruct, instead of trying to avoid it as part of the research process. This applies to research participants but just as much to the researchers and what they are experiencing as they lead a research project. Researcher vulnerability and triggered trauma is a topic that is often seen as taboo and unprofessional, yet it needs to be acknowledged, discussed, and prioritized to ensure more researchers are effectively coping and healing from engaging with topics and issues that may trigger negative emotions and past traumas (Råheim et al., 2016). Sharing such experiences through scholarly publications and other knowledge mobilization platforms will lead to improvements via policies, processes, and practices to support researchers. As Micanovic et al. (2019) emphasize, we should be able to "openly admit to other team members when we feel emotionally exhausted, without fear that this will be regarded as researcher incompetence" (p. 7). We hope sharing T.N's journey and experiences leading a research project involving interviews with participants who had firearm related charges contributes to creating brave spaces (Campbell & Eizadirad, 2022) that openly discuss the challenges and barriers in doing research with vulnerable populations, but more importantly how to support the research participants and the researchers at all stages before, during, and after completion of a project.

Recommendations for the Research Community

The following recommendations reflect the lessons learned from this project related to mitigating risks associated with researcher vulnerability. Some of these recommendations are not new and are very much in line with best practices practitioners utilize to protect their emotional health and well-being, but these are particularly important considerations for early career scholars, researcher practitioners, and members of Institutional Review Boards research that grant approvals for research projects. These recommendations add to the growing calls for systemic and sustainable support for researchers through established policies and practices:

1) Prior to the start of the research project, researchers involved with trauma-triggering topics should identify a series of coping mechanisms and how they would monitor their stress levels. Creating a list of support services that can be accessed if warranted as part of the research process will be helpful. Conducting a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis with respect to the research project during the planning phase will proactively identify potential harms involved in the research process and how to mitigate and respond to it constructively.
2) Ensure researchers are connected to strong support systems such as mentors and experienced researchers who have conducted research with trauma-triggering topics to assist with pre-planning and ongoing debrief sessions throughout the research process from data collection and transcribing to data analysis and sharing of findings.
3) Permit adjustments to data collection and analysis activities by streamlining the processes involved to get approval for it to support and prioritize researcher safety and harm reduction.

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4) Ethics approval committees should require researchers to submit a check-in form periodically (quarterly or at the mid-point of the research project) to check in on the mental health and spiritual status of researcher(s), particularly how data collection is progressing and what kinds of supports are needed.
5) Where possible and applicable, conduct research in teams to enhance peer to peer support and opportunities for mentorship and sharing of feeling and emotions induced by engaging in trauma-triggering research.

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Human Participants

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