



Vicarious Trauma and Doing Research on Sexual Violence

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“ I remember well the initial physical sensation I experienced. It was deep bone-chilling coldness, which came whenever the women told me about the depths of their horror, terror and torture....Whenever I am writing from that emotional place of horror, I still experience deep seated coldness and my ears feel congested and I feel flu like. This lasts for the length of time I am immersed in such deep writing” (SVRI Discussion Board, 2009)

Researching Sexual Violence



- The SVRI is working to build an evidence-base for research on various aspects of SV
- Researching and working with sexual violence survivors is challenging

“I have often gone home feeling really down and at times guilty. In fact many a times I have contemplated doing something else development oriented like agriculture that seems less traumatic.”

- Most effective way to support and encourage more research on sexual violence is to develop and retain a skilled research workforce.
- Literature and models on how best to support sexual violence researchers in different countries and contexts is limited.

What is Vicarious Trauma?

- Doing research on sexual violence can result in secondary trauma.
- The empathy we feel as researchers, and the intimacy we experience with our research subject creates a permeable link between ourselves and the research subject, through which the trauma experienced can be transferred to the researcher.
- The negative change in our thoughts, perceptions and interpretations as a result of repeated engagement with traumatic research relate materials and experiences.

What Did We Do?

- Moderated Online Discussion – 4 wks Sept-Oct 2009. 3 questions, 49 postings:
 - Have you ever been traumatised by your sexual violence related work?
 - How did you try to protect and take care of yourself?
 - What worked well for you?
- One on one interviews with researchers in the field (4)
- Workshop for Sexual Violence Researchers, 20-21st July, 2010:
<http://www.svri.org/takingcare.pdf>
- Researcher Trauma, Safety and Sexual Violence Research, Briefing Paper: <http://www.svri.org/traumabooklet.pdf>
- Vicarious Trauma: Understanding and Managing the Impact of Doing Research on Sensitive Topics, Researcher Handout:
<http://www.svri.org/researcherhandout.pdf>

Who is at Risk?

- All of us – it is a normal response to doing research on traumatic issues
- Personal Factors that may increase risk:
 - Personal trauma history
 - Gender
 - Level of experience and influences within a workplace (workload; management)
 - Working with victims of sexual abuse
 - Personal coping styles
- It can be no less debilitating than the primary trauma

Organisations and researchers themselves often fail to recognise the potential impact – providing little or no support.

“The organisation I worked for offered no support systems and I had no external support systems in place.....at the time, I did not realise how vitally important it was to protect myself. I became adept at burying the emotional stress, but of course, it continues to surface in a number of guises (SVRI Discussion Board)”

Impact of Vicarious Trauma

Challenges our understanding of the world in 5 key areas:

- Safety
- Trust /dependency
- Esteem
- Control
- Intimacy

Difficult to recognise. Symptoms include: anger, anxiety, depression, sadness, exhaustion, concentration problems, headaches, sleeplessness, increase in drug and alcohol use and social isolation.



What Did Researchers Say?

“I still cry [researcher starts to cry]...when I remember this girl’s story. I still feel a small pain in the middle of my chest. I was meant to be writing the report in a week between country trips, but I could not write – my mind was all over the place, I had no energy to write, but was anxious about not being able to write.”(SVRI interview Cuba 2009, female researcher, Latin America and the Caribbean).

What Did Researchers Say?



“There are many ethical issues involved when doing research on men and the perpetration of sexual violence — you have a number of choices — I chose to be neutral which at times was very difficult for me. I had too many emotions and feelings that I couldn’t show or share during the interviews. I have often cried.” (Interview Cuba 2009, male researcher, Latin America and the Caribbean)

What Did Researchers Say?

“Having to dedicate energies on such issues has, at times, created a critical event for me placing me under such stress that I have suffered insomnia and sleep deprivation, urinary nocturnal frequency, migraines, lack of time to attend to exercise, etc.”(SVRI discussion board 2009, female researcher, North America).

What Works For Researchers?

- Share your experiences with colleagues
- Plan your workload
- Learn about the topic you are going to research, reflect on your own personal experiences
- Humour and fun into your work
- Know that this work will affect you – learn how to identify early warning signs of VT and emotional distress
- Know that this is a normal reaction
- Develop and employ self care strategies

For Supervisors?

- Normalise the effects of working with trauma in the workplace
- Provide effective supervision – create opportunities for staff and peer support, ensure safety and comfort particularly during times of intensive data gathering and analysis
- Provide opportunities for group debriefing – must form part of an overall workplace support system
- Recognise and acknowledge own personal risks
- Learn and recognise early warning signs
- Allow researchers to have a flexible schedule
- Know that this work is not for everyone



- Research must be rigorous and ethical
- Findings must reach those who can make a difference.
- Use research as a tool for positive change.

“...the sad and heart wrenching experiences of the victims inspired a member of the data collection team. At the end of each day she would tell me that she was more determined to interview more people to help shed light on the existence of sexual violence in the universities of my country.”



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