

Methodological and Emotional Challenges of Studying Traumatic Experiences

(Developmental Paper)

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Introduction

Over recent decades, there have been many reported cases of crisis, involving violent crimes, natural disasters, or terrorism. Such extreme events expose salient and self-evident human emotions and make them easier to investigate (Stierand, 2016, Dörfler and Stierand, 2019, Dörfler and Stierand, 2009) for it is people's *lifeworld* (Lebenswelt) that ties their consciousness to the objects of experience (Moran, 2000, Ihde, 1986, Husserl, 1970).

Hällgren et al. (2018) have conducted a large-scale review of 138 articles in Management and Organization Studies (MOS) on extreme contexts spanning the period from 1980 to 2015. They found that when an organization is undergoing an extreme event, this either happens in an *emergency* context, if the event results from core activities gone wrong, like BP's Deepwater Horizon oil spill, or in a *disrupted* context if the event has nothing to do with the core business of the organization, for example, the shooting in the offices of the French satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo in Paris (Hällgren et al., 2018). An important difference between these two types of extreme contexts is the possibility of preparedness; while in emergency contexts, an organization is likely to be prepared for the majority of events, it is improbable in disrupted contexts where the events usually catch the organization off guard (Hällgren et al., 2018).

It is clear from the above that emergency and disrupted contexts can lead to trauma when they overwhelm people's coping mechanisms (see Van der Kolk, 1998, Young, 1995). In this paper, we introduce a vignette that describes a disrupted context in which the events caused traumatic experiences. The vignette was composed by the first-named author based on a Doctors without Borders' (MSF) archival report. This vignette offers an immediate and intuitive understanding of traumatic experiences of MSF employees but also of the phenomenal complexity, both methodologically and emotionally, that MOS researchers are facing when studying traumatic experiences caused by extreme events.

Background

The MOS literature includes some emergency context case studies, such as the Mann Gulch disaster (Weick, 1993), the Challenger (Vaughan, 1996) and Columbia space shuttle disasters (Madsen and Desai, 2010), the Three Mile Island nuclear accident (Stein, 2004), and the JR West rail crash (Chikudate, 2009). There are fewer studies on disrupted contexts (Hällgren et al., 2018), like the Black Saturday natural disaster (Shepherd and Williams, 2014), the Air France 447 crash (Oliver et al., 2017), or the counterattack on Flight 93 (Quinn and Worline, 2008). Moreover, the MOS literature lacks accounts of researchers studying those who suffered from traumatic experiences (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, Kinard, 1996) in "emotionally charged research" (Campbell, 2013: 9).

The impact needs to be assessed from the beginning of the trauma research process on both participants and researchers. Most of the trauma research literature concentrates on the methodological challenges of dealing with participants' vulnerability, with very few exposing the emotional effects on the researcher when investigating traumatic events like childhood sexual abuse (Stoler, 2002) or rape (Campbell, 2013). These two examples involve extreme individual suffering for the victims, but they are, sadly, not uncommon, and researchers can collect data from multiple cases. Extreme events, like those mentioned in the MOS literature,

are often “sudden, inconceivable, damaging, sensitive, unique” and therefore often need to be treated as single case studies (Buchanan and Denyer, 2013: 205).

There have been a few attempts to unearth ethical and methodological struggles when researching traumatic experiences (Fahie, 2014, Brennan, 2005, Schweitzer and Steel, 2008, Campbell, 2013). For instance, Brennan (2005) describes how the singularity of each experience in human trafficking makes generalizations of theory often imprecise and overall a naïve undertaking. Traumatized people who are ready and willing to become research participants are often difficult to access, demanding additional time and resources from the researcher (Brennan, 2005, Buchanan and Denyer, 2013). Ethical challenges can also arise in contexts where socio-cultural clashes exist, like those experienced by Schweitzer and Steel (2008).

Moreover, common methodological challenges often have to do with developing and sustaining the fragile relationship with research participants (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007, Fahie, 2014, Perry, 2011). Dickson-Swift et al. (2007) interviewed 30 qualitative researchers who have conducted sensitive health research to expose their challenges and coping strategies. The ‘interviews with the interviewers’ showed the significance of demonstrated caring through self-disclosure and reciprocity and revealed the vital role of emotion work in building and sustaining rapport by showing compassion, patience and empathy. It takes a lot of strength, as evidenced in Campbell’s (2013: 7) narrative, to sustain and recover from an intense and emotionally draining interview with a rape victim:

“I could not speak, I could not think, I just wanted to be anywhere else. I felt strong and weak - proud about what we had accomplished together, drained because of what it took from both of us. The nausea that I had held at bay throughout the interview was returning. I walked back to my building, found a deserted bathroom in a corner on the upper floor, and vomited, expunging everything that I had taken in that day.”

These challenges are often unexpected and typically identified with hindsight in researchers’ reflexive accounts. We observe a lack of clearly identified coping strategies and anticipation of methodological difficulties in trauma research practice. The unforeseen character of many of these methodological and emotional challenges are perhaps a result of the absence of frameworks and training in researching traumatic experiences. The field is missing guidelines on population-sensitive data collection and analysis methods despite a certain degree of transferability of practices from psychology studies like the implementation of “noninvasive sampling strategies” (Campbell, 2013: 2). However, even these strategies might bring new difficulties, as experienced by Campbell (2013), who altered the research methodology after a person had come forward but was distressed for being excluded from the research.

Researching trauma can even lead researchers to question their role. The self-reflexivity of Campbell highlights the confusion and sense of responsibility which goes beyond the purpose of the research that researchers can experience when being trusted with stories of dramatic events and traumatic experiences that might have been kept secret for years. Reflexivity in design and execution is, therefore, paramount in such sensitive research.

The Vignette

The following vignette represents the study of individual and organizational responses to extreme events experienced by staff members of MSF in a disrupted context. Known as an experienced emergency response organization, MSF failed to recognize and answer fast enough to the 1994 Rwanda Genocide, a disrupted context that hit MSF unprepared during a mission in Rwanda. Events like this might lead to traumatic experiences of those who experience them first-hand, and other organizational members can be exposed to ‘secondary traumatization’ (Hällgren et al., 2018), as expressed in the following quote:

“I will never forget the moment when Reginald took the floor and couldn’t string two words together. He started crying and said: “I can’t... what I’ve seen is beyond telling. I have no activity report to give today”. (MSF Speak Out Case ‘Genocide of Rwandan Tutsi 1994’ p.30)

The few contributions in Extreme Context Research (ECR) that focus on disrupted contexts have preferred case studies based on second-hand documentation (Hällgren et al., 2018). We followed a similar methodological approach with case studies based on MSF’s archives. However, access to the unfolding experiences of organizational members from archival data represents a methodological challenge that remains mostly unaddressed in the ECR literature (Miralles et al., 2019). Additionally, ECR researchers can experience severe emotional challenges, as expressed in the first-named author’s research diary:

“In the organizational archives, I found the narrative of an MSF medical coordinator who tried to save a local nurse with whom he had been working from being murdered by physically intervening. He eventually could do nothing but to let her die or he would have died alongside her. She was Hutu so she was from the same ethnic group than the killers, but as she was seven-month pregnant and her husband was Tutsi, according to the Rwandan law, the unborn child was going to be Tutsi. This is why they both got killed in front of him and all the staff. These archives contain countless numbers of dramatic events so maybe this one sticks to me because I have recently given birth. I have been carrying this narrative with me ever since. I cannot shake off the feeling of powerlessness he had felt and expressed.”

The process of coding the data revealed that the first-named author’s feeling of powerlessness was also expressed in the archives by several MSF members. This emotional entanglement is defined as countertransference and is often experienced by psychologists when they are immersed in the listening process (Dalenberg, 2000). This emotional entanglement has further been acknowledged by other researchers who had examined secondary traumatic accounts in files or reports without direct contact with those who had experienced trauma and can result in “sleeping disorders, emotional changes and a need for social support” (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007: 328).

It would be interesting to investigate, how we, as researchers, and especially those without a clinical psychology background, could learn from extreme events practitioners such as emergency doctors, and firefighters, to learn how to deal with such situations, and to train the next generation of ECR researchers. For instance, emotional intelligence is said to have a positive impact if we want to “connect with participants, skillfully listen during the interview

process, and more clearly understand the lifeworlds participants articulate” (Collins and Cooper, 2014: 88).

So far, the analysis process has been an intellectual as well as an emotional one.

“I feel angry about events that happened 25 years ago, which is ridiculous because I cannot change the past. I am so immersed in the data that I feel like I am part of the organization and that ‘we’ messed up. Of course, mistakes can be made, and communication can fail but this is an extreme life and death situation, and I am dismayed by the turn of events when one worker raises the alarm from the field, and it is dismissed in the headquarters. I have mixed feelings, I almost feel guilty because this is the kind of deficiencies that I am looking for in the data.”
(Research diary extract)

The above example is similar to what Campbell (2013) experienced. She reports that due to the traumatic nature of the research, the intellectual involvement in it was fast overtaken by an emotional one. Better understanding the roles and links between the intellectual and emotional involvements in trauma research is thus a fascinating and relevant area that demands future research.

Conclusion and next steps

In this developmental paper, we have explored the literature on the difficulties of researching traumatic experiences. Further, we have presented a vignette that outlines some emotional and methodological challenges we, as researchers, faced in ECR, a sub-field of MOS. Despite the fragmentation of the field, ECR has significantly contributed to and will continue to bring insights in MOS (Hällgren et al., 2018). Specifically, we argue that trauma research in ECR deserves more attention and we ask for a methodological (re)consideration of emotions of both researchers and participants in MOS, particularly as recent advancement in ‘hot cognition’ (see Hodgkinson and Healey, 2011) seems to suggest that it is impossible to isolate thinking from emotions.

Deeply understanding the experiences, emotions and meanings that trauma and crisis have for those affected, is a task for qualitative research that needs to reflectively acknowledge the impact on the researcher. At the conference, we hope to learn from others' emotional experiences of researching trauma, crises and other sensitive areas. We would also like feedback on the ethical issues of such research and whether MOS researchers are a hindrance or a help in understanding these issues, whether we may be accused of merely benefiting from others' misfortune and whether understanding of the field might be advanced by bringing researchers' experiences together in a book or journal special issue.

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