



Canadian Network for Research on Security, Extremism and Society

Researcher Safety and Vicarious Trauma: A Literature Review and Recommendations for Universities, Supervisors, and Researchers

Research Report

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July 2025

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Research Report

SUMMARY

This report reviews the existing literature on researcher safety and vicarious traumatization to catalogue the dangers that researchers face in studying topically sensitive research areas. Further, it reviews promising practices and strategies to mitigate these risks. It begins with a discussion of circumstances where researcher safety and vicarious trauma may arise, focusing on physical threats and mental wellbeing. This includes a brief review of the literature on researcher safety and vicarious trauma across a variety of fields. Building on the existing literature, it then puts forth a non-exhaustive list of practices, strategies, and recommendations to be adopted by institutions and departments, supervisors, and individuals to address these issues.

nature (or topic) is not widely discussed;

- Graduate students, early career scholars, and/or researchers that are part of marginalized communities studying sensitive topics are more likely to be targets of online harassment and experience vicarious trauma resulting from their work;
- Graduate students and Early Career Researchers (ECR's) studying sensitive topics require more support from their supervisors, and supervisors require more support from their institutions or professional associations.

Key Findings

- Research ethics boards and post-secondary institutions often prioritize the need to protect participants during research with little-to-no acknowledgement of the protection of the researcher;
- Researcher safety and the impact of vicarious traumatization on academics conducting research of a sensitive

INTRODUCTION

Research ethics scholarship, programs, and frameworks typically emphasize the need to protect participants in research at every stage of the process.¹ However, conducting research also involves risks to researchers' physical and psychological safety, and may have implications for family, friends, and colleagues. Social science research, whether in conflict-affected environments, seemingly safe venues, or in digital spaces, carries many challenges given the heightened risks to a researcher's physical and mental wellbeing by known and unknown threat actors (Conway, 2021; Gordon, 2021; Nikischer, 2019; Pearson et al., 2023; Segers, Gelashvili & Gagnon, 2024).

We argue that for all those who study sensitive and dangerous phenomenon (including, but not limited to terrorism, violence of all kinds, grief, war, human rights violations, extremist groups, human health, criminal law, institutional and social injustices), researcher safety and vicarious traumatization are two sides of the same coin. Both deal with the risks associated with handling sensitive people or data that can take a physical,

emotional, and psychological toll on the researcher. Unfortunately, few institutions have implemented formal training, care, protections, resources, and/or support for researchers, often leading to a "Do-It-Yourself" culture in cultivating knowledge around these challenges, best practices, and strategies to mitigate harm (Pearson et al., 2023). This needs to change. We begin with a discussion of some of the circumstances where researcher safety and vicarious traumatization may arise, with a focus on physical threats and mental wellbeing. Then, we review the literature on researcher safety and vicarious trauma across a variety of fields. Finally, we distill from this literature a non-exhaustive list of practices, strategies, and recommendations to be adopted by institutions and departments, supervisors, and individuals to address researcher safety.

Researcher Safety & Vicarious Trauma: Two Sides of the Same Coin

This report examines two main types of researcher trauma. Direct traumatization occurs when an individual experiences a traumatic event themselves. In the context of academic research, this could include online or offline threats from research participants or their peers, incidental physical harm during the research process (such as an accident or incident during

¹ In Canada, research ethics is primarily driven by the Tri-Council Policy on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2), which stresses the importance of participants' informed consent, safety, and the option to withdraw from the project at any point across all domains of study. (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2022).

fieldwork), or psychological breakdown from the cumulative effects of duress. A researcher facing direct traumatization is more likely than those experiencing less direct forms of trauma (vicarious traumatization) to develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), complex trauma (often referred to as CPTSD) and a range of other mental illnesses.² In less severe cases, there may still be substantial physical or mental health concerns.

In contrast to direct traumatization, vicarious traumatization occurs when a researcher develops trauma while studying violence and other sensitive areas throughout their projects (Conway, 2021; Nikischer, 2019; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995). In this case, the trauma is not directly experienced by the person in question but instead occurs through the exposure to someone or to material(s) that may induce trauma. It is the process in which a researcher's cognition, beliefs, expectations, assumptions, and view of self, others, and the world are shaped by their engagement with sensitive/disturbing material or traumatized participants (Cohen & Collens, 2013; Gurdin et al., 2017; Nikischer, 2019; Markowitz, 2021). These traumatic experiences are legitimate and

real and can have an impact on the careers, hobbies, and interpersonal relationships of academic researchers even in the absence of physical threat.

To be sure, direct and vicarious traumas may overlap and reinforce each other. For example, researchers who are engaged in digital spaces on the internet as the “field” they study may find themselves exposed to distressing material, and also may be the recipient of online harassment. This is especially true for researchers examining topics like far-right extremism in their own communities, where the potential for physical threats to be actualized is far greater than studying similar groups abroad. As terrorism researcher J.M. Berger's article states: “to date, jihadist extremists have not systematically targeted researchers for potential violence outside of conflict zones. Indeed, groups such as al Qaeda have often sought to benefit from adversary research.” (Berger, 2019, p. 9). However, the same cannot be said for researchers that may be studying extremist groups who operate in their own community.³

Online harassment can also turn into real-world harassment through practices such as swatting, where harassers make prank calls to emergency services, bringing the

² It should be noted that complex PTSD (CPTSD) is not recognized by the DSM-V but has been proposed by clinicians and therapists in the field that details repeated, severe, refractory, or exacerbated symptoms of PTSD. See Weiss (2025) for more information.

³ Such as the experiences reported by women researchers of right-wing extremism (Gelashvili & Gagnon, 2024).

police to a researcher's home under false pretenses of serious crimes. For instance, Caroline Sinderson, a woman studying harassment problems in video game culture, had her mother's home swatted after someone found the address in public records and linked it to Sinderson. She posits that someone had disagreed with her research work and wondered what she had done "to make people so angry, and what I had done to upset strangers so badly." (Sinderson, 2015, para. 11). Another researcher found the harassment extend to family at her child's nursery school, ultimately forcing the family to relocate (Pearson et al., 2023).

Finally, the experience of vicarious trauma can lead researchers or research participants to blur boundaries between their research and personal lives. One of the participants in Gelashvili and Gagnon's (2024) study of far-right researchers reports being contacted by a research subject seeking support years after the research was over, leaving the researcher in a bind about what they owed their research participants. Van der Merwe and Hunt (2019), who are trauma researchers, describe a researcher who gave their personal phone number to a research participant who was at risk of

suicide, despite this being against research protocols. In these cases, the direct threat may not be (immediately) violent but can still result in the work overwhelming a researcher's personal life and spaces with detrimental effects.⁴

⁴ To be sure, an ethics of care requires some degree of accountability to research participants, and fieldwork relationships in many contexts can be "the sources of accountability and joy alike...keep[ing] lives willingly entangled" (Krystalli, 2024, p. 84). Here, we are concerned with those cases where entanglement is not a choice, or where the relationship ceases to be a source of joy.

GAPS IN ADDRESSING RESEARCHER SAFETY AND TRAUMA

The following subsections illustrate existing gaps in addressing direct and vicarious trauma to researchers at three levels of action: institutional/departmental, supervisory, and individual.

The Institutional & Departmental Level

At the institutional level, scholars agree that more needs to be done to better inform students, junior and senior faculty, and researchers how to better protect themselves against evolving threats and threat actors in the digital space, as well as vicarious trauma resulting from work in sensitive research areas (Argentino, 2023; Grimm et al., 2020). The perceived (and real) lack of formal institutional safeguards has prompted scholars to call attention to this problem (Cantor, 2016; Dominey-Howes, 2015; Loyle & Simoni, 2017; Nikischer, 2019; Howe, 2022).

Lack of Formalized Training or Risk Evaluation

Few universities recognize threats to researchers that emerge from their area of research in their official research ethics or research security practices. Research security practices tend to be focused on protecting the intellectual property related to research.⁵ Fieldwork safety is primarily

concerned with the physical risks from the research environment, rather than the research topic.⁶ Currently, few universities offer workshops or course curriculum curated around addressing the nature of one's research especially as it pertains to violence and/or other sensitive topics. There are many reasons for this, ranging from budget cuts at post-secondary institutions to poor advertising of these workshops. Resulting from this, such institutions have been the subject of scholarly critique in as many have fallen behind in educating graduate students, junior and senior academic researchers on promoting researcher safety and bringing awareness to vicarious trauma. The question then becomes: How can researchers studying extremism or sexual violence (for example) possibly navigate and address the personal toll of their work on their mental health with no prior training?

⁵ See, for instance, *British* (<https://www.npsa.gov.uk/trusted-research>) and *Canadian* (<https://science.gc.ca/site/science/en/safeguarding-your-research>) guidance on research security.

⁶ See, for instance, guidelines from the University of Waterloo, <https://uwaterloo.ca/research/office-research-ethics/research-human-participants/pre-submission-and-training/human-research-guidelines-policies-and-resources/risks-researchers>. Though, some professional associations, such as the UK Social Research Association, have begun to include physical and psychological threats to researchers in their guidelines: <https://the-sra.org.uk/common/Uploaded%20files/SRA-safety-code-of-practice.pdf>.

While it is reasonable for institutions to approach the potential for trauma from the perspective of protecting research participants and vulnerable populations from re-traumatization or exploitation, they often do so at the neglect of the researchers conducting the studies themselves (Loyle & Simoni, 2017).

Others have documented their experiences with research ethics bodies that seem to lack relevant expertise, leading them to either underestimate, or overestimate dangers in proposed research (Morrison, Silke & McGowan, 2021; Schrag, 2011). On the one hand, ethics offices may underestimate the risks to researcher mental health of working with vulnerable populations. Terrorism and online extremism research, by contrast, is often inherently perceived as being high risk or potentially “unethical.” (Morrison et al., 2021, p.272).

Specific Vulnerability of Graduate Students

Graduate students constitute a “high risk” group for several reasons. Graduate researchers are six times more likely to experience mental health-related concerns such as depression and anxiety in comparison to the general population (Evans et al., 2018). This is due to a variety of factors including workload, financial concerns, quality of supervision over the course of their degree, previous and ongoing health problems, personal issues, and the epistemological and

ontological challenges posed by the program or position (Cantor, 2016; Dominey-Howes, 2015). Graduate programs generally appeal to those seeking to contribute something innovative or novel to the field, often leading them to new virtual or physical research sites (Conway, 2021). This search for innovation may lead them to enter fragile contexts or to take on particularly emotionally challenging topics—whether in physical or digital spaces—sometimes with few research skills or little experience. Moreover, they face pressure from their institutions “based on degree timelines and funding limitations, to remain in the field longer or to complete more concentrated research, rather than being able to return to their home institution or take breaks from a trying project.” (Loyle, 2017, p. 142). On the researcher safety side of things, graduate students (as well as undergraduate students), untenured faculty, early career scholars, and/or researchers that are part of marginalized communities studying sensitive topics (like terrorism, far-right wing extremism or ideology) constitute as “a more attractive and persistent target for extreme right online harassment than those who do not” (Massanari, 2018, p. 6).

Stigmatization of Receiving Help

The literature on researcher safety and vicarious trauma also highlights the stigmatization of receiving help even if there are supports and services available. In

Pearson et al.'s (2023) report on the safety of extremism researchers, they find that even when researchers were made aware of supports they had over the course of their project, but there was a stigma around accessing them because "researchers either perceive them as inadequate, or fear of being stigmatized, the responsibility and emotional labour of providing care is pushed back onto the research community that is seeking help, potentially leaving this community more isolated" (p. 101). Relatedly, when researchers do find themselves on the receiving end of an online harassment campaign, have had digital threats move into the physical realm, or are exposed to the trauma of their research subjects in other ways, many remain uncertain about the extent their institutions and departments will support them (Massanari, 2018).

At the Supervisory Level

In the previous section, we discussed that graduate students constitute a high-risk group for compromised physical safety and vicarious trauma. Because supervisors inherently wield considerable power over their graduate student's research interests and career prospects (Cantor, 2016), they have the potential (and we would argue, responsibility) to be of great assistance in ensuring researcher safety for graduate students, but also the potential to be part of the problem. In their scoping review of dissertations by Canadian graduate student dissertations

that use qualitative methods, Orr et al. (2021) found that less than 5% of all theses reviewed included protocols or strategies to mitigate psychological and emotional distress risks to the researcher.

Risks to Research Teams

Research teams, often made up of a mix of graduate students, post-docs, junior and senior scholars—are also at risk during the process of coding and transcribing interviews, especially if they deal with topically sensitive material. Scholars have identified the transcriber of sensitive data as a particularly vulnerable person in research (Gregory, Russell & Phillips, 1997; Williamson et al., 2020). A researcher or transcriptionist may be at an increased risk of vicarious trauma resulting from the repeated listening of their audio files (Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016). Andrea Nikischer (2019) recalled her experience with transcribing interviews with survivors of sexual assault under a strict deadline from her institution's IRB to transcribe and destroy all audio files from her interviews within one month of being recorded. While the stories she heard were powerful and important, they also took a toll on her productivity: "Pacing, pacing, pacing. I'm wearing a path on my floors. I can't listen. I can't read. I can't think. I just want to walk away from it. More pacing, I just can't sit and write." (p. 911).

Desensitization to Materials

Seasoned researchers may be desensitized to distressing or potentially traumatizing research material in a way that more junior scholars have not. In seeking to understand the lived experiences of researchers and vicarious trauma, Miller-Reed et al. (2023) interviewed academics from a variety of fields. One participant in their study recalled a time they had asked their supervisor how they coped with the nature of their research on violence. The supervisor in question showed an emotional disconnection from their work and indicated that it was nothing more than data to them. They may have, in effect, become “numb” to their data. Kimberly Theidon (2014) states that she was often left to navigate these challenges as a then-graduate researcher with inadequate support from her supervisor: “Frankly, graduate school felt as though I were being inducted into a secret society, left to divine how senior scholars had really conducted their research—and how they had actually written their books” (p. 3). Supervisors may effectively not see what they are exposing their students to or may view it as simply part of the cost of doing this sort of research.

Inadequately Prepared Supervisors

Finally, because graduate students are, by definition, breaking new ground in research, supervisors may not be expert in the same subject area as their students. They may simply not have experienced the same level

of exposure to distressing material as their graduate students (Eliasson & Dehart, 2022; Mulcahy, 2021). This means that new researchers are left to seek out their own professional education in this field—in some cases not knowing, until it’s too late, what they need to find. Moreover, while some projects may have allocated funds designated for researcher mental health, this does not always translate into adequate training or awareness prior to onboarding. In their study of research assistants on a homicide research project, AbiNader et al. (2023) find that prior training on traumatization, built-in check-ins with their supervisor, and weekly logs indicating if they had experienced any vicarious trauma as part of their data collection and abstraction processes increased their overall confidence in approaching the research, leading to asking for help and taking time off from the project when necessary. This demonstrates the need for supervisors whose projects require part of the budget to support researcher mental health to implement training for research assistants as part of the onboarding process.

At the Individual Level

Perhaps the greatest problem that academic researchers face in addressing researcher safety and vicarious trauma is recognizing that they had developed trauma over the course of their research. Scholars writing about their experiences

with researcher safety and vicarious trauma recall the many months it took for them to realize that they were exhibiting serious signs of burnout or vicarious traumatization, but when they did realize it, they felt lost and no idea where to begin (Howe, 2022). The challenge of recognizing symptoms of vicarious trauma is compounded by the fact that we often do not even recognize the possibility of safety concerns and vicarious trauma in the first place. It is important to find ways to build knowledge about the possibilities for threats to safety or mental health before the research is begun, in order to facilitate symptom identification before it is too late.

Failing to Understand the Emergent Consequences of Research Choices

For those that experienced a traumatic event over the course of their fieldwork, they report being taken “by surprise” despite their knowledge of the contexts they were entering. To them, it was unclear that a traumatic event was about to befall them until it was well underway, often starting with bodily or emotional discomfort (Jané et al., 2022, p. 431). When ignored, or dealt with on one’s own, trauma has the potential to derail an individual’s wellbeing and career in any context. It can also impact a researcher’s ability to analyze their data in an unbiased way, and the lack of support or “inadequate attention to [these emotional dynamics] may lead field researchers to make errors in judgment that may have severe consequences for their

research subjects as well as for their research and possibly for themselves personally” (Wood, 2007, p. 141).⁷ In dissecting the stories and asking questions of the data they collect, Eades et al. (2021) suggest that researchers engage in a “sense-making process” particularly when it comes to abuse and trauma and are likely to draw on their own lived experiences to bring meaning to the data (p. 4). This is especially true when researchers come from families as well as marginalized communities with ongoing and historical experiences of trauma, thus making them more susceptible to vicarious traumatization.

Gender

Another problem as it relates to vicarious trauma in research is that when faced with such dilemmas young and early-career female researchers have turned to other women scholars doing similar work for advice as opposed to their own (male) supervisors. Theidon (2014) finds that women researchers are more likely to acknowledge their emotional responses as they are given the “social space” to do so (p. 5). Relatedly, women researchers studying everything from the far-right to sexual violence have reported being reached out to by former informants and participants needing someone to talk to.

⁷ Of course, in many critical and feminist research traditions, there is no assumption that the self and the research are separate or separable.

In Gelashvili & Gagnon's (2024) examination of the challenges of researching the far right as a female researcher who this happened to, the interviewee reported that she felt that the experience was gendered because: "as a female, I was expected to care and listen." (p. 10).

The Structure of the Research Profession

Over time, training and socialization lead academics to identify strongly with their profession, and as researchers. The profession of research has some structural features that intersect with researcher safety and vicarious trauma in particular ways. A researcher's project choices will shape and reflect their own identities, informing the choices they make about ongoing and future research projects (Jané et al., 2022). Experiences of trauma can dramatically shift a scholar's research agenda, with associated consequences for their career. In their article on making sense of research trauma, Jané et al. (2022) further suggest that 'publish or perish' or completion pressures can lead researchers to ignore their first-hand experience of insecurity or trauma, to the detriment of their health and wellbeing (p. 436).

Isolation

The literature on vicarious trauma identifies isolation as taking one (or all) three forms: isolation in relation to the topic area one studies and teaches, isolation in working on research projects, and social withdrawal or

isolation in response to a traumatic event (Cohen & Collens, 2013; Loyle & Simoni, 2017). In cases where a researcher is engaging in research for a solo publication, the likelihood of developing or experiencing trauma-like symptoms from repeated and/or long-term exposure to this material increases (Chang, Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2016). Moreover, researchers do not have the ability to "leave their work" at their respective offices or institutions (Loyle & Simoni, 2017). Research is thinking work, and ideas do not always come on a schedule. Fieldwork involving travel or immersion can be 24/7. Finally, precarious academic researchers (like students or sessional instructors) may not have offices at their institutions at all, and must therefore work from home where they are both isolated from co-workers and less able to maintain boundaries between home and work.

This section has examined the literature on researcher safety and vicarious trauma within the academic profession to create a comprehensive overview of the risks of both. The next looks to detailing some of the practices and strategies found in the scholarship that ought to be implemented at the institutional/departmental level, supervisory level, and individual level.

MOVING FORWARD: PRACTICES AND STRATEGIES

Change is never easy, especially when it involves reconstituting the behavioural and professional expectations of academic institutions. There is a scholarly consensus that aspiring and current academic researchers should be aware of what they are getting into, and this should include the dynamics of the research being undertaken, the potential to encounter trauma-triggering materials, and strategies for processing the resulting fallout (Loyle & Simoni, 2017). One of the realities in promoting practices and strategies in combatting in-person and online harassment and vicarious traumatization is that even in adopting these measures: safety is not guaranteed. There is no definitive way to protect against trauma or being on the recipient end of abuse from threat actors. This raises a set of critical questions we must consider:

- What does the research actually involve?
- What mindsets, practices and strategies should academic researchers adopt to best protect themselves from direct threats and vicarious traumatization resulting from their research?
- How should researchers go about determining their expectations of privacy and safety when participating in topically sensitive spaces or

forums?

- Are researchers equipped to make these judgement calls?
- What measures must researchers take to conceal their identity or data trail?
- How much can (or should) researchers on take over the course of their projects? (Jané et al., 2022.)

The biggest challenge in cultivating knowledge around best practices to protect researchers especially from direct threats is that threat actors are likely to find exploits in the programs and strategies researchers use to protect themselves (Argentino, 2023). Relatedly, the problems in developing research ethics guidelines for researchers conducting their study and data collection in the digital spaces is that they are always evolving. Moreover, there can be difficulty in determining the source or person(s) behind the harassment (Pearson et al., 2023). As it relates to vicarious trauma and the mental wellbeing of a researcher studying distressing topics/materials, the problem is the same. Universities and REBs often do not account for the researcher as the primary focus is on the participants. Therefore, much of the knowledge, strategies, and practices on trauma in research is passed through informal networks or peer-to-peer contacts (Loyle & Simoni, 2017). This section details a non-exhaustive list of the practices, strategies, guides, and “mindsets” proposed in the literature and drawn from preexisting research ethics guidelines at

three different levels (institutional/departmental strategies, supervisor strategies, and individual strategies) to better protect researchers facing threats to their physical and online safety.

Institutional/Departmental Strategies

An obvious obstacle facing institutions and departments in implementing any changes is that they “require political will, time, and financial investment by universities as well as granting bodies.” (Nikischer, 2019, p. 913; Williamson et al., 2020; Howe, 2022). This is especially true considering the poor economic situation and recent budget cuts at universities across North America and Western Europe over the last few years (Frisen, 2025; Williamson et al., 2020). Political pressure on American universities is also having global consequences as grants and partnerships are cancelled, and certain kinds of research have come under fire. Even though these constraints exist, this report proceeds to lay out some of the recommendations from the scholarship on the topic.

The literature on researcher safety and vicarious traumatization places a substantial onus on institutions in enacting a trauma-informed ethics of care (Markowitz, 2021; Segers, Gelashvili & Gagnon, 2024). Scholars have emphasized the need for an “ethics of care” and have looked towards

feminist research for institutions to develop “best practices” to ensure researcher safety (Massanari, 2018, p. 6). Institutions should lead the creation of workshops that bring awareness to researcher safety and vicarious traumatization in research by helping researchers identify/recognize PTSD and trauma-like symptoms or changes in behaviour (Pearson et al., 2023). This could take the form of a mandate, either general and context-specific training and counselling as part of any research proposal that graduate students are involved with. This requirement could also be tied to government policy or to external funding (Eades et al., 2021).

Other proposals may consider universities and REBs to expand the scope of their protections to researchers, and commit to informing the development of policy, sharing outcomes in academic and community forums, and publishing data as it relates to addressing researcher safety and vicarious trauma in research (Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2018). Orr et al. (2021) recommend that ethics review applications be revised in a way that also situates graduate students as “an active research participant at risk for harm” and require further documentation detailing the steps that they (along with their committee) will take to mitigate harm (p. 11). Additional measures might include requiring universities and REBs to include components in the ethics application reviewing emotional safety in research protocols (Williamson et al., 2020). For

those conducting sensitive research, the scholarship recommends building supports into project funding and budgets, making services like counselling, for example, mandatory and therefore removing the stigma associated with accessing these supports (Loyle & Simoni, 2017).

There is also the issue of teaching about violence and other potentially distressing subject material(s) to the student population. Many researchers are also teachers and may meet students who have also experienced trauma themselves. The researcher and the teacher exist in two separate, but related worlds. In this instance, the teacher may be uniquely qualified to discuss trauma and coping mechanisms with students because they understand what it is like to “be in their shoes.” Nikischer (2019), however, notes a gap in the research related to vicarious trauma among faculty and sessional teaching about violence and trauma-related topics.

To summarize, the scholarly literature reveals several institutional and departmental practices and strategies that could be implemented to promote the safety of employee researchers, faculty, and graduate students:

- University-level IRB/Ethics boards should mandate researchers (and their teams) to document plans as to how they will protect themselves from

vicarious traumatization, and provide training for how to do so;

- Departments should curate research methodology courses that inform students of practices and strategies related to researching sensitive topics like extremism and violence;
- Universities and professional associations should encourage a trauma-informed educational practice when teaching topically sensitive issues;
- Universities and professional associations should institute introductory training, workshops, and organize conferences revolving around the protection of researchers both on-and offline;
- Governments and universities should develop policies and procedures to provide greater protections for researchers (Whitt-Woosley & Sorang, 2018).

Supervisor Strategies

The supervisor(s) and dissertation committees play a major role in providing guidance to their graduate students as it pertains to their research projects. This includes the responsibility of supervisors to also be part of the assessing the risk of harm over the course of a graduate student’s research. Graduate supervisors should be responsible for preparing students for their research, monitoring them throughout, and observing their mental

health and general wellbeing (Orr et al., 2021).

Among many recommendations at the institutional/departmental, supervisory, and individual level by vicarious/trauma researchers is implementing a trauma-and-violence-informed care (TVIC) approach which refers to the “delivery of social, mental and behavioural services, or in this case...graduate supervision, that accounts for possible experiences of trauma.” (Orr et al., 2021, p. 10). This includes supervisors (and even institutions) understanding how trauma and violence in research can impact their graduate students’ livelihood, health and behaviours, and ultimately their productivity (Orr et al., 2021). Supervisors could, therefore, benefit from TVIC in their approach to their graduate researchers/research teams and directing them to the appropriate supports and services at their respective institutions.

The risks discussed above notwithstanding, scholars of trauma encourage working in teams. In research teams, there can be a distribution or a rotation of duties that can (in theory) lessen one’s exposure to working with sensitive materials (Nikischer, 2019; Williamson et al., 2020; Howe, 2022). Supervisors and their research teams can develop contingency plans to effectively respond to any emerging psychological concerns on-top of physical threats to security. Meeting on a frequent basis (or having scheduled check-ins) where team members can discuss problems they

encounter during and beyond the research has been identified as a way supervisors can support their researcher’s safety and wellbeing (Williamson et al, 2020).

Poverty researchers Eades et al. (2021) suggest that supervisors should be aware of which research methods are more likely to put researchers at the most risk. Researchers whose projects involve interviews with (potentially) traumatized populations could benefit from adopting relational interviewing into their research design. Fuji (2017) defines relational interviewing as the following:

“[Relational interviewing] is a method for generating data through interactions between researcher and interviewee. Its ethos is humanist. Its main ingredient is reflexivity. Its guiding principle is the ethical treatment of all participants. All three elements orient the researcher to interviewing as a learning process and to interviewees as people deserving of dignity and respect” (p. 25).

Fuji (2017) explains that an important aspect of relational interviewing is observing and establishing boundaries that interviewees and even researchers draw around certain subjects. This approach helps build rapport between interviewers and their participants from the outset of the interview process and pace information the interviewee gives the researcher. Supervisors have a major part to play in helping their students design and execute

their research plans. They could assist their graduate students pursuing interviewees for their research by simulating the relational interview process to better equip them with field-testing techniques that can reduce psychological trauma during- and after each one of their interviews.

Howe (2022) draws our attention to the concept of “using the brake” as a mechanism she uses in interviews revolving around sensitive topics or traumatized participants (p. 371). This involves a variety of tactics including subtle and direct diversion to keep participants on topic and mitigate the risks of (re)traumatization. Howe (2022) illustrates this by reflecting on her experiences interviewing an Iraqi refugee. During this process, she recalls her interviewee asking her if she would like him to recount his story. Instead of outright saying “no”, she used diversion tactics and meta-level questions and asked him why he wanted to share his story and if he had ever told his story to others (p. 371). Inevitably, when her interviewee did tell her his story, Howe (2022) occasionally took a pause to ask him how he was doing and for both to take breaks. She concludes by stating that this method of interviewing has helped her mitigate the psychological impact of traumatic material during interviews. Therefore, supervisors can play an instrumental role in equipping their graduate students with methods and tools to mitigate vicarious traumatization.

Perhaps one of the simplest, but fundamentally impactful things a supervisor can do to assist their graduate students working on difficult topics is to instill the idea that it is okay, and even necessary to take breaks. After all, taking care of oneself is also work.

To summarize, supervisor strategies to better inform and safeguard their graduate student(s) and research teams from the harms of their research include:

- Supervisors should engage in trauma- and-violence informed care (TVIC) training to recognize and deal with early signs of trauma in research to understand the impact on their graduate students;
- Supervisors should routinely check-in with their graduate students and research teams when researching distressing topics or violence;
- Supervisors should advise graduate students on field techniques such as relational interviewing and using the brake for those pursuing interviews as part of their research;
- Where possible, supervisors should have research assistants work in teams and divvy up tasks that expose researchers to traumatic material(s) and alternating between them;
- Supervisors should encourage graduate students to rest and take breaks from their research and that they do not need to work all the time.

Individual Strategies

Individuals on the frontlines of targeted abuse or conduct research on topically sensitive areas can best prevent and mitigate its impact when they are supported by their institutions, departments, supervisors, family and friends, and their colleagues, but also when they take proactive approaches to minimize these effects themselves.

First and foremost, it is imperative for academic researchers to develop an understanding and awareness of trauma, and assessing the potential risk factors associated with the kind of research they aim to conduct (Loyle & Simoni, 2017). This is especially when considering the effect that PTSD and trauma-like symptoms can have on the quality and content of an academic researcher's project(s). This also requires researchers to, as Loyle & Simoni (2017) put it, "engage with the possibility of trauma" in their research (p. 144). In their book, *Safer Field Research in the Social Sciences: A Guide to Human and Digital Security in Hostile Environments*, Grimm et al. (2020) draw on a number of sources such as security handbooks for humanitarian workers and the experiences of journalists and other academics to create a comprehensive risk assessment that is to be conducted before the advent of any research.⁸ To them, security and protection is relational and therefore must account for a variety of factors related to one's research, their respective teams (if

applicable) and participants. They split this into three principal steps:

- 1) Context Analysis
- 2) Qualifying Vulnerabilities and Capacities
- 3) Designing a Plan

The first step is simply 'knowing where you are' once you are in the field and to take account of a multitude of factors that may impact the safety of researchers and their participants. The main aim of conducting a contextual analysis is to identify "threats and assess [...] the likelihood that they will materialize as well as their potential impact on the research project" (Grimm et al., 2020, p.20-22). For example, in contextualizing trauma in fieldwork, Howe shares a range of successful (and less successful) experiences in her research on post-conflict violence in Karamoja, Uganda. Howe (2022) recalls being distressed by how interviewees and her interpreter used humour to cope with tragedy upon observing participants seemingly mocking or making light of a woman's injuries. She articulates that she could have conducted more pre-field research to "understand the culturally sensitive ways to inquire about violence, how trauma is locally understood, how people manage traumatic pasts, and the supports available." (p. 372).

⁸ *This book is an excellent resource for researchers, especially in the social sciences, to read when conducting sensitive research.*

Such assessments before diving into fieldwork can prove to be invaluable to a researcher taking part in the study of traumatized participants in post-conflict states, but can extend to researchers conducting different types of topically sensitive research. Grimm et al. (2020) pose a variety of questions that researchers ideally might ask themselves as it pertains to their projects:

- Who are the potential opposing actors? Who might support them?
- What reasons do they have to oppose the project (or its incentives)?
- What are their capabilities, and how likely are they to use them?
- Can I take action to de-emphasize these aspects in my social presence both on- and offline?
- How accessible and reliable is the communication infrastructure?

In the second step, Grimm et al. (2020) stress that the situational awareness and vulnerabilities in research may differ from researcher to researcher. This is contingent on a wide variety of factors, including but not limited to the type of research being conducted, the size of a research team, gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic factors, nationality, and sexual identity. It is imperative for researchers to understand the types of data they wish to produce and make use of over the course of their study.

Lastly, once researchers have established the risks, identified potential (or real) threat

actors and the potential (or real) threat they pose to the researcher, their teams, and participants, the final step is to create a security plan that accounts for these factors. Grimm et al. (2020) stress that it's important for researchers to look at what they already do to protect themselves, and how these practices may change as they enter the physical or digital field. While safety is never guaranteed, researchers can decrease their risk by curating public profiles, locking them down, suspending, or deleting accounts, removing photos, personal emails and phone numbers when creating social media accounts, and using virtual private networks (VPNs) or virtual machines (VMs) to protect privacy online and in person (Argentino, 2021; Grimm et al., 2020). Routinely updating the security plan to account for the “where, when, and how of research” as threats to safety and mental wellbeing evolve. As it relates to security planning, Grimm et al. (2020) provide more questions researchers can ask of themselves and of their research project:

- Do you have everyday security measures in place? What do they look like?
- What will you do in case of an emergency? Who is your point of contact in and out of the field? How will s/he know if there is an emergency?
- Do you have measures in place to protect against specific threats?

- How realistic is your security plan? Will you be able to sustain the full implementation of all security measures on a daily basis?
- Is your security plan responsive? Can it adapt to an evolving situation?

In building their safety plans, researchers conducting their research on social media platforms may benefit from engaging with “technologists, legislative bodies, and law enforcement to help them better understand these the threat [extremist and far right] communities present—and how social media is the primary means by which they organize and harass” (Massanari, 2018, p. 6). This can also include building rapport with other academics with similar research interests (through formal and informal networks) and learning how they have navigated these platforms and forums.

While these steps are placed under individual strategies to promote researcher safety and mitigate vicarious trauma, this process can also be done alongside a supervisor (for graduate students) or implemented at the institutional or departmental level for junior and senior researchers as well.

Researchers should also design boundaries into their research design and work practices (AbiNader et al., 2023; Markowitz, 2021; Theidon, 2014). Boundary-setting has been identified as being one of the most important tools that researchers can adopt in mitigating the risks related to

researcher safety and vicarious traumatization (Loyle & Simoni, 2017). Learning to establish boundaries is not an easy feat as for researchers uncovering, say, injustices or abuses of power, may experience “empathy fatigue” or “compassion fatigue” resulting from this.⁹ Trained therapists, for example, are directly able to help their patient/client that has experienced trauma to learn healthy coping mechanisms. But a researcher working with traumatized participants or exposed to distressing material is usually rendered unable to directly change or help their research subjects, which may result in feelings of powerlessness and guilt (Theidon, 2014). As Nikischer (2019) writes: “[academic researchers] generally exit from their sites with the hope that the data will someday contribute to larger structural changes that will benefit all of society.” (p. 911). Theidon (2014) states that setting boundaries are another part of the coping repertoire for researchers studying sensitive topics, and that it is imperative to do so earlier on in research rather than later. She advises researchers having difficulty setting boundaries and overcoming these feelings to “promise only that which you can do.

⁹ *There is scholarly work that subsumes “researcher empathy” and “compassion fatigue” into Secondary traumatic stress (STS). However, this report takes on the position that it is a symptom of vicarious/research trauma as researchers may experience feelings of fear, pain, suffering and helplessness towards their participants (for example) in being unable to help them.*

Identify actions that might help and do them. Our diligent efforts work too slowly, but there is a cumulative effect when we do something. Each promise we fulfill makes a difference—insufficient, yet certainly preferable to making grandiose but empty promises, or to resignation.” (p. 9).

Loyle & Simoni (2017) highlight the challenges in recovering from the effects of traumatic events in isolation as being “difficult—if not impossible.” (p. 144). They, like others that have written on the subject stress the importance of researchers talking about their experiences with friends or colleagues that have worked on similar projects or topics. Finding a “field ally” which Howe (2022) suggests can be “a professor, supervisor, or colleague, or someone who knows first-hand the vagaries of field research” is critical for researchers studying sensitive topics given the relative isolation of the academic profession and staying connected (p. 374). This highlights the importance of community and support in tackling both researcher safety and vicarious trauma in sensitive research areas.

The academic literature also stresses the importance of taking breaks, maintaining a work-life balance and disconnecting from research (AbiNader et al., 2023; Howe, 2022; Nikischer, 2019). Minimizing one’s exposure to sensitive topic material, depictions of real-world violence in research is the most concrete and effective measure a researcher can take over the course of

their work. When a researcher is amid their fieldwork or site of research, some thought should be given to identifying and/or maintaining a “safe space” over the course of one’s research. For example, during Theidon’s (2014) research project working with victims of genocide and violence, as well as those who have perpetrated said violence, she found a favourite hillside not far from her field site where she could temporarily disconnect from listening to distressing and harrowing stories to ground herself. For those who study the digital space as part of their research, this could mean having work-designated device(s) and stowing it away at the “end” of a research/writing day.

Otherwise, the literature recommends “self-care” in the form of a researcher’s hobbies and pursuits outside of their research. This can take on a variety of strategies and interests, Coles et al. (2014) put together a comprehensive list after their interviews with researchers that have experienced vicarious trauma:

“They included creative, physical, and spiritual pursuits and time spent with family and community members. Creative pursuits, cooking, writing gardening, painting. Physical activities included walking jogging, gardening, cycling, and massages. Driving, taking trips, travelling to new places, cycling and shopping were of help to some others. Time spent with families, friends, and communities in an accepting and caring environment also

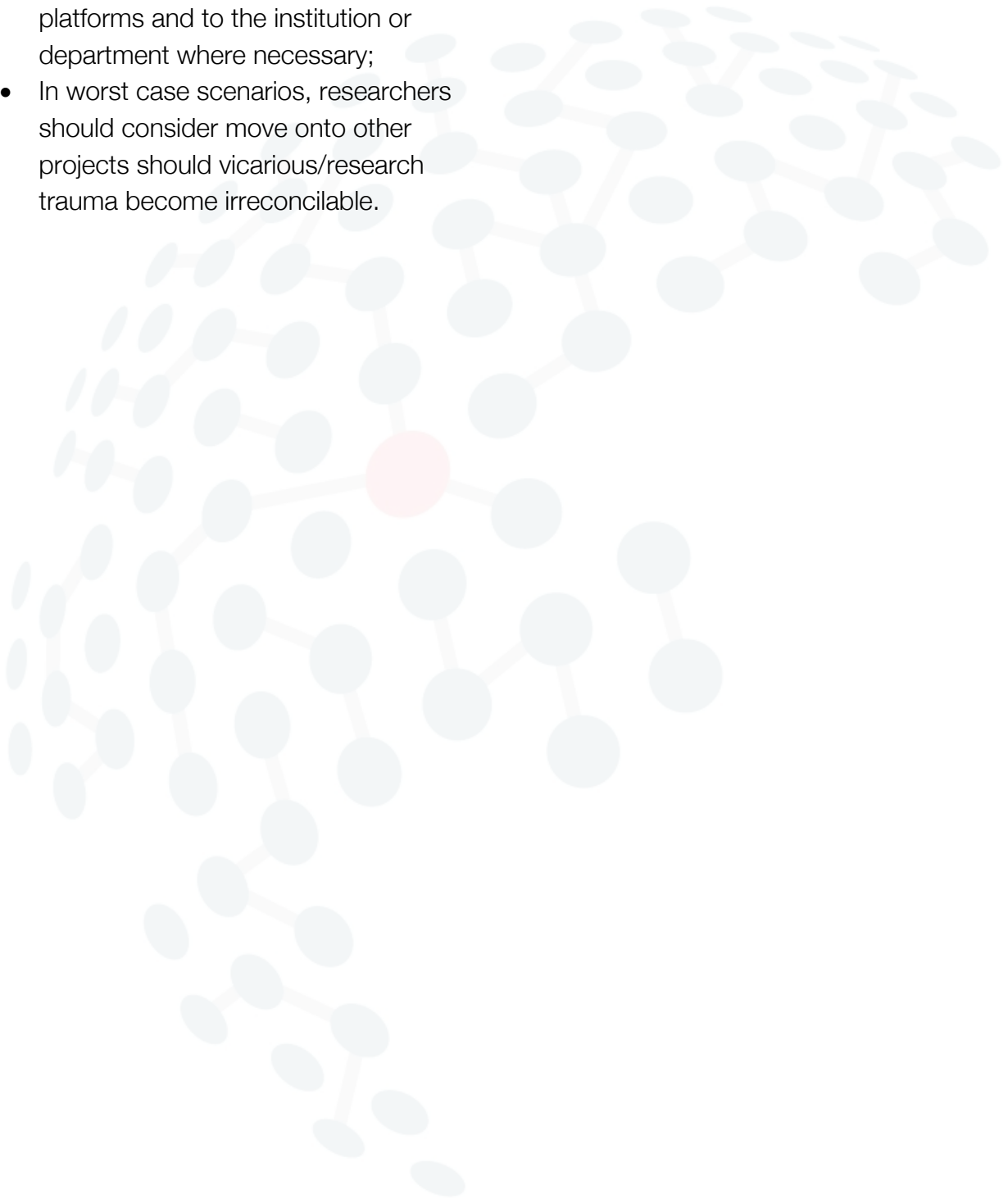
helped researchers manage their stress. Practicing their faith and spirituality assisted other researchers in feeling supported” (p. 108).

Lastly, if the traumatization becomes too much to reconcile, the literature suggests extending grace to oneself as a researcher to move onto other research projects or altering them in a way that does not expose their physical safety and mental wellbeing (Loyle & Simoni, 2017).

To summarize individual strategies to promote researcher safety and mitigate the effects of vicarious trauma:

- In consultation with their supervisors, students should conduct pre-field research to assess and understand the level of “risk” it may pose to the researched, and the researcher’s mental wellbeing, including culturally sensitive ways to inquire about violence and trauma;
- Researchers should minimize their exposure to sensitive topic material/depictions of violence in research, impose strict timing controls when consuming or writing about topically sensitive and/or traumatic material(s);
- Researchers should maintain a work-life balance and disconnect from research; take breaks, have hobbies/engage in favourite pastimes, have meaningful relationships with others, etc.;
- Researchers should maintain physical health (i.e., exercise, spending time outdoors, eating well) to help mitigate physical impacts of mental trauma;
- Researchers should set boundaries at the beginning of one’s research to mitigate feelings of powerlessness and guilt;
- Researchers should seek a field ally or allies that have conducted similar research for support;
- Researchers and supervisors should seek advice from technologists, academics, relevant legislative bodies and law enforcement prior to and throughout the research process, as appropriate;
- Researchers should identify and maintain safe space(s) over the course of one’s research to decompress after engaging with traumatized participants or distressing material(s) (Theidon, 2014);
- Researchers should decrease risks to online security by locking down public profiles, suspending, or deleting accounts, removing photos, personal emails and phone numbers when creating social media accounts, and using virtual private networks (VPNs) or virtual machines (VMs);

- Researchers and supervisors should support other researchers who are targeted, lending support, and encouraging reporting through the proper mechanisms on social media platforms and to the institution or department where necessary;
- In worst case scenarios, researchers should consider move onto other projects should vicarious/research trauma become irreconcilable.



CONCLUSION AND AREAS FOR FURTHER INVESTIGATION

This report demonstrates the need for greater focus on promoting researcher safety and mitigating vicarious/research trauma across all disciplines and vocations—from graduate students to seasoned scholars. We are increasingly inundated with disturbing headlines, images and videos, posts and tweets that impact our mental health and perceptions of the world whether we are conscious of it or not. It is our hope that in identifying practices and strategies from the literature, we can prevent and mitigate threats to researchers and help better protect individuals physical- and mental wellbeing.

Yet, there is still much work to be done in creating more awareness around researcher safety and vicarious traumatization in the social sciences. While some scholarly work does address these issues, it is evident that it is not enough to spur change at the institutional/departmental level. Relatedly, qualitative studies on researcher safety and vicarious trauma in research are still relatively few, and quantitative or mixed methods analyses on the topic are even fewer (Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2018). Another limitation is that as a literature review, this report did not directly interview scholars researching violence or other topically sensitive subjects. A certain level of

nuance is also lost when considering that the examples of compromised researcher safety and vicarious trauma in research that this report relies on are often retrospective and largely focus on scholars reflecting on their past experiences.

Nor did this report engage directly with the experiences of marginalized researchers (including indigenous researchers) or researchers in conflict-affected countries who may have valuable lived experiences that could inform researchers in more privileged or stable circumstances. As Conway (2021) notes, much of the existing research on online extremism and terrorism is often carried out within Western liberal democracies where REBs and IRBs are commonplace. This does not account for the work done by researchers outside this geographic region. Future research would likely reveal critical insights or norms from researchers outside settler North America and Western Europe that could add onto the list of practices and strategies. Without these changes, this predicament is likely to continue. What is needed is a pragmatic reconfiguration of institutional deliverables and expectations to account for researcher safety and vicarious trauma when conducting research on sensitive subjects in a world of evolving threats.

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The Canadian Network for Research on Security, Extremism and Society (CANSES) is a national network that fosters communication, collaboration, and knowledge sharing between researchers and practitioners, law enforcement and national security, and government policy- and decision-makers. CANSES is funded by the Community Resiliency Fund (CRF) administered by the Canada Centre for Community Engagement and the Prevention of Violence under Public Safety Canada.

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