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# Women Leaders' Work-Caused Trauma: Vulnerability, Reflexivity and Emotional Challenges for the Researcher


## Structured Abstract

- Purpose

This paper advances what is known about emotional experiences and challenges when researching work-*caused* trauma in organisations and illustrates learning for researchers of work-related trauma. Viewing vulnerability as strength could be conceived as an oxymoron. The paper explains how vulnerability can lead to strength for researchers/participants and focuses on researcher reflexivity in relation to one interview with a woman leader in a small-scale qualitative study.

- Design/methodology/approach

The research protocols of the qualitative study are outlined: pre-interview briefings, participant journaling, semi-structured interviews. Researcher reflexivity, following Hibbert's (2021) four levels of reflexive practice (embodied, emotional, rational, relational), is applied to an interview with a woman leader.

- Findings

The paper illustrates how research design and recognising vulnerability as strength facilitates considerable relational work and emotional experiences. Researcher reflexivity conveys impact of work-caused trauma on participants and researchers. The paper advances understandings of vulnerability as strength in practice, emotional experiences and challenges of work-caused trauma research.

- Originality

There is lack of researcher reflexive accounts of practice when studying trauma. Few scholars suggest ways to support researchers in challenging and difficult research. There is silence in research exploring leaders' experiences of work-caused trauma. This paper provides a reflexive account in practice from a unique study of women leaders' experiences of work-caused trauma.

- Implications

There are practical implications for: researcher relationships with participants; demonstrating emotional awareness; responding to traumatic stories, participant distress and impact on the researcher; issues of vicarious/secondary traumatic stress; having safe psychological systems; scaffolding a process which recognises vulnerability as strength and becoming personally and methodologically vulnerable; risk of embodied and emotional impact; commitment to reflexivity, and; levels of reflexive practice.

## Introduction

Trauma reflects "negative events that significantly disrupt individuals' understanding about the world around them and their relationship to that world (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996)" (Greenberg and Hibbert, 2020: 123). Trauma explains the unravelling of individuals' core beliefs which disrupts the person's understanding of the world as predictable, stable, or knowable, and often leaves them feeling unsafe and insecure (Van der Kolk, 2014). Those experiencing trauma are known to have difficulty moving on with their lives. Leaders in organisations are expected to lead compassionately through trauma (Dutton et al., 2002), to be toxic handlers in organisations, shock absorbers for emotion in the workplace (Frost, 2004) and can also experience their own personal work-caused trauma. Work-caused trauma and loss can be complex for leaders as they experience overlapping personal and professional loss, indicating that "layers of loss may go deeper and be more prolonged, creating additional complications for recovery" (Greenberg and Hibbert, 2020: 124). Yet, there silence in research exploring leaders' experiences of work-*caused* trauma and a lack of researcher reflexive accounts when studying trauma in management and organisation studies.

The aim here is to illustrate learning for researchers of work-related trauma and advance what is known about emotional experiences and challenges when researching work-*caused* trauma in organisations. Shaw et al. (2020) argue that more research needs to be conducted on researcher experiences of vulnerable groups, highlighting how, in their experience, "tensions during fieldwork can be downplayed or covered up and this can have a negative cumulative effect on the researcher" (p.290). In response, I consider a reflexive account of an interview during an ongoing small-scale study of women leaders' experiences of work-caused trauma. This reflexive account was chosen as a case for analysis for its power in communicating the emotional experiences and challenges for researchers in work-caused trauma research.

As experiences of trauma are known to leave a "residual vulnerability" (Valent: 2012: xxxviii), work-caused or related trauma is a sensitive topic and people who experience this trauma are vulnerable participants. However, those in organisational leadership roles may be reluctant to share this vulnerability. Viewing vulnerability as strength could be conceived as an oxymoron. The paper explains how vulnerability can lead to strength for researchers/participants and focuses on researcher reflexivity in relation to one interview with a woman leader in a small-scale qualitative study. Vulnerability is at odds with how managers and leaders are expected to or 'should be', reflected in dominant discourses and ongoing identity work protecting them from harm. Vulnerability is socialised as weakness and "something to hide or overcome (Harrison, 2008; Hay, 2014), so that when managers experience vulnerability, they commonly adopt a mask of invulnerability to protect themselves" (Corlett et al., 2019: 557). Women leaders are differentially vulnerable at work; they do work historically and culturally associated with men and masculinity and are in a minority. Perceived as less legitimate and less socially acceptable power-holders than men (Vial et al., 2016), they face contradictory obligations of normative femininity and a leadership role. Women leaders are marginalized and vulnerable, at risk of having their credibility and legitimacy destabilized. Subsequently women leaders engage in significant identity-work to negotiate the complex manoeuvres they perform to negotiate leadership (Mavin & Grandy, 2016).

In researching leaders' work-caused trauma I ask women to become unusually vulnerable, when telling their stories in relation to me as researcher. Further, beyond the need for researcher safety and protection, the researchers' personal vulnerability in qualitative research is under-explored, particularly when considering vulnerability as strength in the research process. An intertwining of work-caused trauma and tensions between work roles, researcher/leader identities and social constructions of vulnerability, provides opportunity to advance understandings of vulnerability as strength in qualitative research.

As the special issue call highlights, "while some research acknowledges that trauma scholars need to be able to deal with participants' vulnerability, there is very little research conducted that considers the emotional effects on the researcher (Stoler, 2002, Campbell, 2013)" (Miralles et al., 2021). Following Shaw et al. (2020), this paper seeks to emphasise the importance of articulating emotion when undertaking research on sensitive topics and contributes understandings of the emotional struggles and challenges for the researcher in three ways. First, I consider possible emotional aspects of trauma research, how this 'appears' in research and consider vulnerability as strength by drawing upon existing research. Second, I outline the research protocols of a unique study of women leaders' work-*caused* trauma. Third, I develop new understandings by discussing what happens in practice in one interview, including vulnerability as strength for researcher and participant, through an extract from my reflexive research diary. I capture reflexive data in a structured way using Hibbert's (2021) four levels of overlapping reflexive practice; embodied, emotional, rational and relational and focus on an interview with Abriella. In doing so, I surface my emotional experiences and challenges in relation to researching leaders' work-caused trauma and conclude by outlining challenges and implications for researchers of work-related trauma.

**Understanding Trauma**

To provide context to my emotional experiences of researching leaders' work-caused trauma, I begin by considering understandings of trauma. The word trauma stems from Greek, meaning wound or penetration, as in stabbing (Valent, 2012; Mias deKlerk, 2007). Technically, in terms of penetration, "this can range from minor to lethal but it always leaves a scar and a vulnerability" (Valent: 2012: xxxviii). Describing trauma as a wound significantly represents "the violent emotional injuries and its associated hurt and pain" (Mias deKlerk, 2007: 38). Trauma, as a sudden potentially deadly experience, leaves lasting troubling memories and is subjective, associated with loss and grief. Attachment, loss and trauma are interlinked in that

we all cherish aspects of our lives; a loved one, a relationship, a job, a career, a professional identity etc. and we become emotionally attached to them (Mias deKlerk, 2007). Losing one of these, along with associated "trust, security or dignity has potential to trigger trauma responses" (Mias deKlerk, 2007: 35).

Emotional trauma can be prompted by any situation which overwhelms people with its emotional power so usual coping abilities no longer work, such as "the betrayal of trust, various forms of harassment, and abuse of power etc." (Mias deKlerk, 2007: 35). However, trauma is not just an event in a particular place, there are dimensions of time and space and physical, psychological and social consequences (Valent, 2012). Trauma also has a spiritual dimension as the suffering trauma causes ranges from physical to existential; "it can disrupt assumptions of morality, values, principles, identity, beliefs, ideals, meaning and purpose" (Valent: 2012: xxxviii). Accordingly, in traumatic circumstances, our understanding of social norms is crushed, we lose agency and relational work is challenging (Hibbert et al., 2021).

Trauma is not a one-time thing, it "does not stop once the traumatic event is over and traumatic events do not stand alone, they are cumulative, building upon previous trauma so that current experience becomes weighted with the emotions of present and past threats" (Mias deKlerk, 2007: 36). Cases of severe trauma can cause PTSD, where reminders of events trigger intolerable memories and associated emotional and physical responses like panic attacks or uncontrollable rage (Theranest, 2021). Symptoms of trauma include feelings and thoughts of shame reflecting weakness, so that we work to hide these rather than risk stigmatization (Mias deKlerk, 2007).

**Vulnerability**

Vulnerability is considered in various ways in this paper. First, the issue of vulnerability as central to research ethics and the lack of clarity in classifying vulnerable populations. Shaw et

al. (2020: 279) outline how vulnerable groups are those "presumed to be more likely than others to be misled, mistreated, or otherwise taken advantage of as participants in research". Vulnerable persons are susceptible of being harmed or injured in some way, or of being emotionally damaged or offended (Levine et al., 2004) and require special protections above those for all participants. Qualitative research with vulnerable groups is usually sensitive, carrying potential for distress and stories of suffering and loss (Whitt-Woosley and Sprang, 2018), with participants "susceptible to increased harms, such as emotional and psychological discomfort or distress" (Shaw et al., 2020: 279), where vulnerability is heightened or lessened depending on levels of inequalities and power. Such research poses some role conflict for researchers (Whitt-Woosley and Sprang, 2018), places them vulnerable to harm and calls for emotional relation and resources; researchers cannot be objective observers (Gabriel, 2018). There are complex personal consequences of conducting research with vulnerable populations and researchers have to prepare to manage the vulnerability and emotions of qualitative research (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2021).

Second, in researching leaders' work-caused trauma I ask women leaders to become unusually vulnerable when telling their stories in relation to me as researcher. The women leaders have experienced trauma and are likely to experience residual vulnerability (Valent: 2012). In outlining competencies for trauma research, Winfield (2021: 3) conceptualizes vulnerability as "diminished autonomy, a lack of power, limited agency or capacity to function due to physiological, psychological, spiritual, and/or structural factors (Liamputtong 2007; Moore and Miller 1999; Silva 1995)". This understanding of vulnerability reflects an impaired lack of agency. Simultaneously, women leaders carry invulnerable leader identities which expect vulnerability to be masked and/or hidden (Corlett et al., 2019), reflecting tensions and ambiguity in their capacity to experience and share vulnerability.

Third, socialised invulnerability at work and trauma-related vulnerability is reconceptualised as strength in the research process, conceptually and practically for both the women leaders *and* the researcher. Following Corlett et al. (2019) I understand vulnerability as, "relational processes, involving interdependency; risk of harm and loss *and* connection, through our relations to others; emotional expressions; power; and recognition" (Corlett et al., 2019: 561). In doing so, when vulnerability "is reconceptualised and recognised, conceptually and practically, as strength rather than weakness, more realistic and acceptable managerial identities may be constructed, and the need for managers to engage in defensive identity work is lessened" (Corlett et al., 2019: 561). The value of vulnerability then lies in its potential for alternatives to the norm (Corlett et al., 2019), in that "[w]hen a manager . . . shows that they are strong enough to take off their mask of 'glory' that is when they become vulnerable, but at the same time capable" (Deslandes, 2018: 11).

As discussed, women leaders perform work historically associated with men. They are judged through gendered stereotypes which expect femininity from women and masculinity from leaders. Such evaluations within hyper-competitive organizations create ambiguous and gendered contexts where women are vulnerable, at risk of harm. A feminist standpoint underpins this study reflected in a commitment to women talking to women, listening to women's voices; a focus on women's experience to develop theoretical frameworks, and; where I am accountable to the research participants and the wider feminist constituency (Griffin, 1995). The women leaders and I are interdependent, in relation to each other, in that we have existing social connection and I share some leadership experience and understanding of their contexts - as women leaders at risk of harm and loss.

In the research process, both researcher and participant each experience emotions, are subject to power dynamics and engage in acts of recognition of each other's vulnerabilities. Each are vulnerable at different times in the process and this is vulnerability is positively

valued, openly discussed and recognised in various ways. I explicitly recognise vulnerability conceptually as strength and recognise both my own and the women leaders' vulnerabilities practically in the research design and in the research process, through formal and informal communications and in the interviews themselves. I also recognise my vulnerabilities in reflexive research diary entries during the research process. Through these modes of recognition vulnerability is changed, in that "when a vulnerability *is* recognized, this recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of the vulnerability itself. …Vulnerability takes on another meaning at the moment it is recognized (Butler, 2003: 30; 2004: 43). This recognition of vulnerability supports relational openness of fragilities and limitations and provides alternative ways of being and learning" (Corlett et al., 2019: 561).

**Emotions and Research**

As the focus is my emotional experiences and challenges in relation to researching leaders' work-caused trauma, I next turn to consider emotions and research. Understanding emotions as relational expressions and not only as individual states has allowed for a reconsideration of the role of emotion in the research process (Blee, 1998). Emotions are socially constructed and 'managed' in social life, including in research and "there is a continuous, reflexive link between researcher emotions and research practice" (Vince, 2020: 519). Our emotions are provoked by events that heighten or diminish our view of self, values, beliefs and objectives (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) and we experience negative emotions when in situations that "have the potential to threaten these personal values and aspirations or harm our well-being" (Mazzetti, 2018: 160). Trauma-related research is emotive; both researcher and participant will engage in emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) as the management of one's emotions in order to present oneself and interact with others in certain ways while doing a job. I am interested in emotional experiences emerging from dialogue between researcher and woman leader in the context of interviews about work-caused trauma. Therefore, in contrast to the emotional neutrality

expected of social scientists in the past (Copp, 2004), I include myself as participant in the co-construction of dialogue in the interview. My emotions and that of the participant are part of data that can gain deeper sociological insights about participants, concepts and contexts under study and any implications of research (Copp, 2004). This departure from a socialised professionalism of maintaining 'detachment', particularly in sensitive research (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006), where researchers are expected to manage and hide emotions, is unavoidable (Shaw et al., 2020) when engaging in trauma-related research.

Gilmore and Kenny (2015: 57) outline how emotional aspects of the research "can tend to be played down; there is a 'silence' surrounding ethnographers' emotional experiences (Brannan, 2011)". They draw upon anthropologist Catherine Lutz who notes, researchers' feelings tend to be "relegated to an unspoken, hidden place that is considered to be 'ultimately and utterly private' (1988: 41)" (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015: 57). Within organization studies specifically, this refers to a lack of focus on researchers' emotions "even where the emotions of the research participants are the focus of the study [as in trauma research], and most likely relate to the attempt to produce a neat and rational account for publication (Fineman, 2005; see also Pullen, 2006)' (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015: 57). However, Vince, (2020) contends that researchers should notice and reflect on emotional impacts of research. A productive form of emotional labour is appropriate when researching sensitive topics (Carroll, 2012) and having heightened awareness of emotions in research may enable researchers to better prepare for complex and ethical issues (Fitzpatrick and Olson, 2015; Shaw et al., 2020).

Blackman (2007) suggests that to reveal what is most often hidden and openly display emotions in data-collection leaves the researcher professionally vulnerable. As researchers, we impact on and are impacted by what we hear from participants and having strategies to cope with this is important to deal with emotional fall-out from research (Shaw et al., 2020). As Vince (2020) argues, for business and management school academics emotions are

fundamental to qualitative research and it is significant to get beyond emotion as intrusive or the need to be detached.

## The Study

### *The Researcher*

Researcher positionality and relational values have implications for the topics I choose to study, the way I do research and engage with research participants, how I analyse data, and how I communicate findings (Shaw et al., 2020). A university professor, feminist scholar and qualitative researcher for more than 25 years, I am committed to critiquing various modes of gendering, domination and injustice in organisations and particularly those impacting on women leaders. As a researcher committed to social constructionism I value a relational approach as "a way of thinking about who leaders are in relation to others within the complexity of experience" (Cunliffe and Eriksen, 2011: 1434). We are always in-relation-to others and I draw upon an intersubjective view of the world where meaning is shaped by one's experiences and is socially mediated (Anderson, 2008). This intersubjectivity provides "a bridge between the personal and the shared, the self and the Other to interpret meanings of social and cultural life" (Mavin and Grandy, 2016: 7). These commitments involve me in engaged reflexivity, as the "critical examination of our pattern of personal norms and taken-for-granted assumptions", which changes "the patterns of our foundational assumptions (and if they do not, the process is futile)" (Hibbert, 2013: 805). This reflexivity has consequences for the understandings produced by our interpretive research processes (Hibbert, 2021). In this way reflexivity is "always a self-monitoring of, and a self-responding to, our thoughts, feelings and actions as we engage in research projects" (Corlett and Mavin, 2018: 377).

In line with a relational reflexive approach, my personal context is my own trauma. I have suffered trauma symptoms, related to both personal and work-based trauma as an

academic leader and have engaged in recovery processes including writing trauma narratives through journaling. This personal experience, my identity as a gender scholar and talking over time with women leaders about their experiences, led me to investigate women leaders' experiences of work-related trauma.

*Researching Work-caused Trauma*

There is no right way to conduct sensitive research (Shaw et al., 2020). In designing a study of work-caused trauma I considered related risks of finding and securing individuals into trauma research; how participants may respond in telling their story; the priority of keeping them 'safe' in the process; and, the demands facing the researcher in designing and delivering the research protocols and emotionally as an individual. I was informed by Winfield's (2021: 5-6) strategies to support trauma researchers: establishing clear professional boundaries; engaging in open communication around informed consent and (limits of) confidentiality; holding debriefs with participants after interactions and providing referrals to professional services; establishing protocols for calling and meeting with participants; mobilizing reflexivity as a tool to assess power dynamics in the research relationship and the participant and researchers' own positioning in relation to systems of injustice; and, supervision and care practices for researchers, who face emotional risks in exposure to distressing stories.

I designed a small-scale study to explore women's experiences of trauma as a result of their role as senior leaders in organisations, aimed to address a lack of knowledge and theory in understanding the impact of this trauma on women leaders' identities. My aim for the study is to surface voices and subjects often silenced or suppressed and I am continually aware, on high alert, of the risk of further stigmatization of women leaders. I am also explicit about my social location as a white, middle class, cis-gender woman academic and aware of my power as researcher and my responsibilities when interacting with the women and the research. The study involves pre-interview briefings, pre-interview journaling, semi-structured interviews on

an on-line platform and follow-ups. This design was informed by significant evidence of how writing can help heal from trauma (Siegel-Acevedo, 2021), is valuable mentally, emotionally, and physically (Tyler, 1999) and leads to profound social, psychological, and neural changes (Niederhoffer and Pennebaker, 2009). Through journaling, people can begin to organize painful thoughts and find meaning in their traumas (Tyler, 1999), where agency and control remains with the individual and they decide whether or not to share the writing or talk about what has been written.

The interview is designed as a place to craft trauma narratives, a psychological technique effective to symbolize trauma, in that telling one's story brings order to the insensibility and chaos of recollections and emotions (Mias deKlerk, 2007) and make sense of suffering, overcoming avoidance strategies which can intensify pain and make triggers more acute (Theranest, 2021). Women leaders are asked to revisit memories in a safe environment, where they are in control, to enable the jumbled mess of sounds, emotions, and images to form an empowering story that can be told (Theranest, 2021). Both journaling and trauma narratives are ways in which people experiencing trauma can make sense of the events, memories, thoughts, feelings and physical responses connected to them (Theranest, 2021).

The interview is where "dialogue occurs between participants, and participants engage in dialogue with themselves as they engage with their own experiences" (Mills, 2001: 286). Relational dialoguing in interviews with supportive others provides various ways to make sense of our emotions in relation to situations and contexts (Hibbert et al., 2021). Indeed, there is "power in speaking the unspeakable where disclosure has remarkable potential in alleviating the affects of emotional upheavals" (Mias deKlerk, 2007: 39). However, there is need for the right context, with "legitimization of emotions and a support" (Hibbert et al., 2021: 14). For researchers this includes sensitivity to the traumatic effects of change, compassion, empathetic

listening skills without explanation, awareness of own emotions, and vulnerability to show their own pain and sorrow (Mias deKlerk, 2007).

*The Women Leaders*

Of the ten women initially interested in joining the study and subsequently sent the participant briefing, one woman said no to being involved and one woman did not respond. Eight women to date have agreed to be involved in the research from four organisational sectors in the UK: a business owner, two CEOs, four Directors and a senior leader. I am personally/professionally connected to the women leaders involved to date. Some relationships are over a decade old and others more recent. I am aware to a greater or lesser extent that their experiences have been/are traumatic and the relationships all involve high trust and complete confidentiality. I feel the utmost responsibility for their safety, as well as my own through the ethics and process of this research.

In pre-interview briefings I share with the women that I am hyper-sensitive to their personal context, the contract of confidentiality and anonymity and of the emotions this process of dialoguing may provoke. The women are briefed on how their anonymous narratives will highlight learning for others and organisations. We contract to stop at any time should they not wish to continue with the interview or the process. They can choose to journal before interview or go straight to interview and one woman chose the latter. The women have power over their own story in all stages and the opportunity to read the transcript and agree whether they are happy for this to become data.

*Researcher Reflexivity*

Researcher reflexivity was built into the research process through a reflexive diary and in particular, a post-interview reflexive process. To structure my reflexivity, I used Hibbert's (2021: 4) four levels of overlapping reflexive practice; *embodied*, *emotional*, *rational* and

*relational*. Hibbert (2021: 4) outlines *embodied* reflexive practice as "the awareness we have of what is going on within our bodies". This has "strong connection and sets the stage for emotional reflexive practice" (Hibbert, 2021: 5). *Emotional* reflexive practice focuses upon "emotional perceptions that can impact dramatically on how situations and possibilities for action are interpreted and understood" (Hibbert, 2021: 5). *Rational* reflexive practice is understood as a critical examination and "opening up our patterns of interpretation to critical examination within contextualisation (showing where they come from) and conceptualisation (the ways we choose to describe our interpretation)" (Hibbert, 2021: 6). *Relational* reflexive practice is "engagement between the self and the other with the intent to support the possibility of learning and the development of a shared horizon of understanding (Hibbert, Beech and Siedlok, 2017; Hibbert, Sillince, Diefenbach and Cunliffe, 2014)" (Hibbert, 2021: 6).

Hibbert (2021) outlines how these reflexive practices can be more or less 'automatic', in that we are always adapting to experience whether it affects us through our bodies, emotions, thoughts or relationships. However, our awareness of what is going on in the different levels "lets us interrupt the automatic processes, in order to give an enriched account of our interpretations and choices" (Hibbert, 2021: 7). When working with these reflexive practices, Hibbert (2021) provokes researchers to engage in 'what should I do next?' and in past-oriented reflexivity, 'how did I come to make those choices?' As a qualitative researcher doing reflexivity, I aim to ''bend-back on (Archer, 2009) and turn inwards towards (Alvesson and Skőldberg, 2009: 9) myself and think seriously about my research practices" (Corlett and Mavin, 2018: 377).

*Preparing for Interviews*

The interview is designed for the woman leader to lead the dialogue. In advance I review the journaling and identify two or three areas I want to ask about if the women do not raise

themselves. I am conscious in planning carefully how to phrase the questions, their order and to be guided by the women's cues. For the woman who went straight to interview I opened with, what would you like to talk about. I am committed to holding the women leaders' emotional wellbeing above data-collection and theorising (Winfield, 2021). I make limited, careful interventions in terms of prompts/questions in the interviews and am on high alert for any signs of distress. Before the interviews began I felt prepared. I have experience of trauma and have developed trusting and confidential relationships with the women leaders. I am experienced in qualitative research interviews and reflexivity and designed a two stage journal and interview process to support working through trauma, with vulnerability as strength at the core. I have a safety system of psychological support. There were intense emotional experiences from the first three interviews, however, the experience of Abriella's interview (interview #four) had such a profound impact on me, in that the emotions continued after the interview requiring further reflexivity, it is this case I focus on to explore the emotional experiences and challenges of researching trauma in practice.

Following Grandy and Mavin (2014), Fletcher and Watson (2007) and Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), I understand a focus on one case is unexpected and has associated risk of not being viewed as credible research. However, I argue a longer, single case provides a more persuasive and richer account that allows the reader to better connect with my emotional experiences. The case is considered equivalent to "power quotes" taken from qualitative data, in that it was selected as compelling data (Pratt, 2009: 860) to illustrate both my own and the woman leader's emotional struggles. In Rogers-Shaw et al.'s (2021) study, understanding and managing the emotional labour of qualitative research based on marginalized populations, they argue that few scholars suggest ways to support researchers in challenging and difficult research. Further, much of the debate about research reflexivity omits actual reflexive research

practice (Munkejord, 2009) and where it is included, this is often as a mechanistic token element of published organizational ethnographies (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015).

**Work-caused Trauma: Abriella**

In committing to post-interview reflexivity I was conscious, as Gabriel (2018) outlines, that countertransference represents my own response to the transference of the woman leader, shaping my emotions during and following an interview. Gabriel (2018: 149) notes how "careful analysis of our countertransference can offer powerful insights into elusive unconscious emotions, helping us make sense of emotional dynamics and deeper significances of respondents' behaviour and utterances". Before moving to Abriella and my reflexive diary extract, by way of protocol and in keeping with studies of sensitive and distressing experiences where participants and their stories are anonymised, this convention also extends to what follows.

*Abriella*

Abriella is a white, 55-65year old senior leader who has had an extremely successful career to date, co-owning a global company and holding several Director positions in organisations. Abriella refers to work-caused trauma which happened 18 months earlier. I have known Abriella professionally for a short time as a result of the role she talks about in her interview. I was aware that she was no longer in the role but not of what happened or the details. Abriella's work-related trauma is grounded in a context where she was "head-hunted" for a newly created senior position, with the Chair and CEO (men) working hard over time to persuade her to join the organisation. Through journaling and the interview (90 minutes, on-line) Abriella talks of being assured their total support as a "change agent" in the organisation. She recounts how when she started, she "knew from the beginning" that there was direct and indirect opposition to the new position and beyond the Chair and CEO, she did not have support for the role or the changes they asked her to deliver. Abriella felt personally singled out from the outset and talks

of feeling very lonely and being politically astute enough to see the red flags very early in the position.

Abriella provided several extreme examples of appalling treatment and micro-violence from colleagues. She carried on in the role despite it being "incredible difficult", achieving several, very public successful achievements which had positive organisational-wide impact. After these celebrated accomplishments and within three years of appointment, Abriella was acrimoniously ejected from the organisation and found no support from the Chair or CEO. Abriella described this ejection in detail and names it as a lengthy character assassination and a vicious attack. Further hostility from the organisation continued over several months, during which time she also experienced the loss of a loved one.

Abriella had difficulty journaling her trauma narrative and shared her struggles with me in briefing discussions. I discussed with Abriella the options of going straight to interview, to delay or to withdraw. However, she was determined to be involved and her journaling was completed four months later. This conveys strong emotions and outlines her deep feelings of shame and pain.

*My Reflexive Notes on the Interview*

The reflexive diary writing began in the weekend after the interview and continued in the week following the interview. I used Hibbert's, (2021) four levels of reflexive practice to structure my experiences of the interview with Abriella:

> *Embodied* (awareness we have of what is going on within our bodies)**:**
>
> During the interview I find it difficult to sit still. The tension in my neck is painful. My body is seizing from sitting so long but I cannot move – I don't want to distract from Abriella's story. I am aware of my heart racing at certain points and that my lower back is seizing and my head is throbbing. I am stopping myself from crying, aware of my own vulnerability. I am fully engaged writing notes when I can, while giving my absolute attention - on a Zoom screen. Active and compassionate listening takes a lot of energy and focus. Keeping eye contact, providing supportive body language, not wanting to miss a word or a head nod or a change of position. My eyes are straining

and I realise I'm getting closer to the screen, to watch and listen. I find myself leaning further forward, wanting to physically reach out.

*Emotional* (emotional perceptions that can impact dramatically on how situations and possibilities for action are interpreted and understood):

The interview with Abriella is hard. Excruciatingly hard for Abriella and extremely hard for me to listen to. What I hear and see is pain, distress, shame, grieving and loss. Abriella is unusually vulnerable; the shock, humiliation and deep hurt, bleeding wounds. I find this a dark, horrifying story of deadly organisational manoeuvres towards a senior leader. I am deeply affected. I'm feeling anger, outrage and frustration at the injustice. This is moral outrage. Abriella starts to cry, talking about her double trauma of the work-caused situation and death of a loved one. She talks of feeling bereft, still grieving, alone, at the worst point in her career where she felt she had failed, was betrayed and humiliated. I want to reach out and give her a hug, to provide some physical contact and humanity. Hers are violent emotional injuries and I feel helpless. Abriella shares her suffering, despair, and fear and I feel sadness, frustration, anger. I am stunned. I am aware of Abriella's powerful sense of loss and feel myself starting to cry. I keep my glasses on as camouflage, focusing on my emotion work and supporting Abriella.

But what would have happened if I had cried? Would it have been the worst thing? Would it not be further recognition of vulnerabilities, of both Abriella's and my own? Did I stop myself from crying because the 'professional researcher' identity kicked in and/or I did not want to share my vulnerability in ways that would distract from Abriella? My professional identity tells me this is work not about me and I struggle with the relational contradictions of my vulnerability as strength - in being able to engage emotionally - and my perceptions of the professional expectations of researcher.

*Rational* (critical examination and opening up our patterns of interpretation to critical examination within contextualisation (showing where they come from) and conceptualisation (the ways we choose to describe our interpretation)):

I am aware of the embodied and emotional impact of Abriella's narrative and question whether I can fully engage in rational reflexive practice? I have knowledge and experience of senior levels in organisations and the practices that happen 'to' people 'underneath' formal policies and procedures, in a context of politics, power battles and hidden agendas. Still I am shocked. This was lethal. A terrible situation. Illegal in terms of employment law and as a type of assault. The lack of humanity and respect Abriella talks of is sickening. It reveals an incredibly frightening murky shadow side and an abusive injustice. I am aware of the organisation but horrified it could act so brutally. Totally at odds with its external personae. I am already thinking differently about the organisation and my interactions with it. My relationship to it is already changed. I'll behave differently towards it in the future.

*Relational* (engagement between the self and other with the intent to support the possibility of learning and the development of a shared horizon of understanding):

I'm aware that I've received new and shocking insights and through dialogue and mutual vulnerability. I have learned new understandings of the organisation and a shared understanding with Abriella of toxicity in context. We both inhabit this context and have shared understanding of Abriella's trauma; these new meanings can't be taken lightly. I am in an incredibly privileged position hearing Abriella's story. We know each other and the trust is extremely strong. I remind myself again and again that I have to do this research 'right', as in an absolutely safe and trustworthy way for the women and for myself. I am aware that Abriella's narrative has placed me at risk of a possible triggering of my own trauma imprint. I need to do some work to re-balance, ensure I maintain boundaries by drawing on my own professional system and, to give myself space and time between the interview and working on the transcript.

While able to engage dialogically and emotionally with Abriella, I recognise that the reflexive practice levels of embodied and emotional are dominating and impacting on me, effecting and affecting, my rational and relational reflexive practice. My own experiences enable me to be attuned to Abriella's distress. She knew I understood. We shared resonance through significance of particular stories and this shared experience surfaces the centrality of storytelling in coping with experiences.

*Researcher Notes on What Happened Afterwards:*

*After:* At points during the interview I was aware of feeling guilty that Abriella was putting herself through this for me, for the research. Afterwards I felt huge guilt that I had asked Abriella to talk about her experiences and felt that she had relived her double trauma. Aware that she would not have shared this story with anybody else, I feel a tremendous responsibility as the researcher. If I was exhausted and emotionally drained, then how must Abriella feel? I am fearful and worry that I am not equipped for this type of research. I cannot change the women's experiences but can make sure they are safe in the process after telling their stories. Am I sure they are safe? I am aware that all of us involved in this research process will be changed. Am I asking too much of myself and the women in this research?

*Reflexive Postscript – A Week Later:*

Abriella was interviewed on a Friday afternoon. I thought about Abriella all weekend and kept going over the interview in my mind. I couldn't focus well on other things. I was continually worrying. The impact of this interview hit me in a different way to others. I knew something about the women's stories before the interviews but this telling was visceral, reflecting a deep sense of loss and had impact on us both. I realised that because of the distress in the interview I had not formally arranged a date to follow up with Abriella. I felt disappointed and angry with myself. I didn't want to intrude on Abriella's life during the weekend but kept changing my mind and wanting to contact her. Eventually I messaged Abriella on Monday and twice on Tuesday. It took two days to get a response and during that time I was back and forth as to whether to drive to her house to see her. I was worried. When she did respond, my relief was palpable. She

included in her response 'you are doing such important work'. I had been afraid. We are both suffering. I knew Abriella had her own psychological system she was drawing upon and checked again that this was in place. We stay in regular contact in the weeks following the interview and continue to do so. I am continually checking in. I have written 'arrange follow up' several times in my interview prompt so that I will not miss this again.

*Postscript – Next Interview*

I left a month between Abriella's interview and interviewing the next participant, to give myself time to process and recover and as a researcher to distance myself from Abriella's story. In the next interview I remembered the follow up meeting with the woman leader. The data analysis remains ongoing and follow up discussions with the women are planned, to discuss experiences during and since the interview.

**Impact for the Research Study**

Abriella's interview illustrates how work-caused trauma has significant impact. During the interview dialogue I recognised Abriella's vulnerability as strength in a number of ways: through reassurance, encouragement and confirming resonance, shown in my responses, interjections and body language. In a context of vulnerability as strength, Abriella is prepared to drop the mask of invulnerability and defensive identity-work – she is vulnerable, aware she is susceptible of further harm and emotional damage (Levine et al., 2004) - yet prepared to tell her story 'warts and all'. Abriella conveys work-caused trauma as a sudden, shocking, potentially deadly experience, shattering her identity, values and self-belief which leaves her with lasting troubling memories. Her trauma portrays a vicious attack, experienced as highly manipulative, with deep 'betrayal of trust, various forms of harassment, and abuse of power etc.' (Mias deKlerk, 2007: 35).

Abriella's descriptions of feeling 'set-up' and dark, threatening, unlawful organisational manoeuvres, echo the other interviews in terms of actualities of 'what happened' and in outlining details of a sordid underbelly, the most vulnerable part of organisational life as experienced by women leaders. Abriella's distress conveys a person experiencing significant grief and suffering for a life-changing combined loss of position, career, identity and a loved

one. There are complex and nuanced processes of learning from/in traumatic experiences of vulnerability that involve irreducible toxicity (Hibbert et al., 2022) as multifaceted, injurious harm. While Abriella's framework of social norms is shattered, the interview context enables considerable relational work through shared vulnerability recognised as strength and related emotional experiences.

**Emotional Experiences and Challenges of Researching Work-caused Trauma**

> "As a storyteller opens her heart to a story listener, recounting the hurts that cut deep and raw into the gullies of the self, do you, the observer, stay behind the lens of the camera, switch on the tape recorder, keep pen in hand?" (Behar, 1996: 33).

Whitt-Woosley and Sprang, (2018: 476) draw upon Behar's The Vulnerable Observer (1996) where she describes the "challenges of listening to the stories of research subjects when engaged in 'sensitive' research and the dilemma this can create within the researcher". They note that this emotionally intense, ethical dilemma of how to respond in the face of human suffering, has the potential to affect researchers in adverse ways. How to respond and what impact this has on the researcher and the research, are key challenges for qualitative researchers of work-related trauma.

To advance understandings of emotional struggles and challenges for qualitative trauma researchers, I focus this section on: vulnerability as strength; relational and emotional connections between participant and researcher; trauma imprints and secondary trauma; psychological support systems; reflexivity; and, impact on research protocols.

Embedding vulnerability as strength into the research process enables vulnerability to take on another meaning through explicit discussions with women of how the process aims to recognise both participant and researcher vulnerability and related emotions. This recognition supports relational openness of fragilities and emotions (Corlett et al., 2019); the women are prepared to be vulnerable in telling stories of work-caused trauma to support learning through research ("you are doing such important work" Abriella). Recognition of vulnerability also

comes through awareness of how Abriella's narrative may trigger emotional and physical responses for us both in the interview process. I had invested in: scaffolding the journaling and interview process; building a trusted relationship; developing a supportive context, with compassion and empathy; and dialogical, emotional engagement to enable reinterpretation of Abriella's experience. In doing so, the implication for researchers is to demonstrate emotional awareness, as knowing when emotions are present by noticing when they enter into consciousness and knowing "why and how these are related to the research process" (Munkejord, 2009: 156). Empathy is key to this process and a challenge for researchers. Having empathetic understanding is the researcher's ability to understand what the person is feeling and to re-experience this for oneself; "it is interpersonal and a prerequisite for entering the lifeworld of participants more successfully, for navigating and adjusting research" (Munkejord, 2009: 156).

The process leading to the interview was grounded in connection, sensitivity and understanding of Abriella's risk of further stigmatization. The interview dialogue and interactions involved explicit recognition and appreciation of her vulnerability. Together this provided a context where Abriella felt her vulnerability was valued as strength and not weakness. While Abriella's narrative reflects deep shame and fear of stigmatization, she was determined to tell her story in her own way, to engage in relational work and speak the unspeakable (Mias deKlerk, 2007). Abriella felt safe enough for us to dialogue trauma. She was in control of her own narrative and with agency she could choose what and how to share. Abriella opened up her emotions, so together we could learn, understand and process her experiences. I recognised her vulnerability and shared my own. The research process provided a supportive context for reconnection where emotions are legitimised (Hibbert et al., 2021), enabling dialoguing in relational, reflexive engagement as an opening up of emotions providing different ways to process and understand relationships in context (Hibbert et al., 2021).

I was highly attuned to, and had prepared for, Abriella's trauma imprint and my own. While my own trauma is what brought me to the research and gives me access to participants, there is potential for my trauma to be triggered through the research. This has implications, as regardless of any personal experience of trauma, every research interaction involves "some transference and countertransference; the reawakening of experiences and emotions from earlier periods of their lives in both researchers and their respondents" (Gabriel, 2018: 148). Further, researchers of sensitive issues are known to experience vicarious traumatisation or secondary traumatic stress, as exposure to the trauma experiences of others (Molnar et al., 2017), including symptoms similar to those directly exposed to trauma (Whitt-Woosley and Sprang, 2018). Abriella had her own psychological support and following the interview I too drew upon my support system.

Imprints of trauma remain and have ongoing consequences for behaviour and survival (van der Kolk 2014) and although research interviews about trauma may be therapeutic, the reflexive extract highlights how complex relationships are and the fine line that researchers walk (Winfield, 2021). This has challenges for researchers of work-related trauma. I am not a therapist or professionally trained in supporting others through trauma, just as other qualitative researchers exploring trauma in organisations are generally untrained in this way. Having organised formal psychological support systems to draw upon for researcher and participant is critical.

There has been very little research considering the emotional effects on the researcher (Miralles et al., 2021), yet as the reflexive extract shows, researchers of trauma often hear "sensitive and traumatic stories, and may witness first hand traumatic or emotionally distressing events" (Winfield, 2021: 15). In viewing vulnerability as strength, the diary extract removes the 'mask' of professional researcher, illustrates my vulnerabilities and communicates the experiences of what happens in practice when witnessing and *experiencing* emotional

distress in research. Blacking (1977) points out the value that emotions have for research; they provide a missing link capable of bridging mind and body, individual and society and provoke translation of knowledge into understanding, bringing commitment to human action. Recognising participant distress, as well your own, makes big demands on your personal emotional resources (Gabriel, 2018) and is a challenge that researchers can prepare for.

Designing a study which explicitly contracts that both participant and researcher will share and recognise vulnerability requires a self-awareness, confidence, relational capability and commitment to reflexivity. Through the frame of vulnerability as strength I am confident to stop an interview to recognise and support a participant's vulnerability. I have become highly attuned to when I am distressed or anxious and talk about my vulnerability in supervision and via my professional system. However, as my reflexive extract highlights, despite my best efforts, both Abriella and I are both deeply affected by the interview process and the emotion and challenges continued beyond the interview event.

Preparation is necessary, as trauma research involves dealing with "stressful and potentially shocking experiences of injustices and suffering that can create feelings of guilt and exhaustion in the researcher" (Miralles et al., 2021) and requires sensitivity to the traumatic effects of change: compassion; empathetic listening skills without explanation; awareness of own emotions; and, vulnerability to show your own pain (Mias deKlerk, 2007). The reflexive extract illustrates how a researcher cannot 'just' prepare for a study and 'do' research about trauma through dialoguing, connection and relational vulnerability – they can feel and experience the participant's trauma and sometimes relive their own. Qualitative researchers can be exposed to environments that exceed anticipated emotional and relational involvement, especially when working with vulnerable people (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2021). The risk of embodied and emotional impact on the researcher and the research is a challenge which requires preparation and engagement with reflexivity and with recovery. Qualitative

researchers of work-related trauma can experience "feeling methodologically vulnerable, verging on the distressingly incapable, because of emotional and anxiety challenges" (Winfield, 2021: 12). My own personal learning was to organise a highly trusted 'academic supervisor' to collaborate with me when interpreting and analysing the overall study data-set.

In trauma research the need for researcher emotional labour and reflexivity about our epistemological and methodological approaches and about ourselves is continual, and the path "to generate radically ethical scholarship is lifelong" (Winfield, 2021: 23). Reflexive researchers cannot separate themselves from data, "as something stored in a computer file, to be processed, squeezed or distilled to generate knowledge at a later date" as their identities and practices as researchers are "intimately intertwined with their experiences in the field" (Gabriel 2018 :150). Emotional awareness is key, as only when we recognise emotions can we become reflexive about what and why one feels and how this impacts the research process (Munkejord, 2009). Using Hibbert's (2021) four levels of reflexive practice surfaces my embodied and emotional research experience and how this effected and affected my rational and relational reflexive practice. This better prepares for how this may impact on the research and to take appropriate actions where necessary.

## Conclusion

By exploring emotional experiences and challenges in work-caused trauma research, this study adds knowledge and contributes learning for qualitative researchers in how they might prepare for and explore work-related trauma research. Sharing researcher reflexivity from Abriella's interview contributes new understandings of trauma research and reflexive practice in organisation and management studies. Acknowledging perceived limitations in presenting a single case of reflexivity, future trauma research of multiple cases utilising Hibbert's (2021) levels of reflexive practice would be valuable. The paper also advances what we know about

vulnerability by operationalising vulnerability as strength conceptually and practically for researcher and participant and asking women leaders to become unusually vulnerable when co-constructing trauma narratives. Extending a vulnerability as strength approach into future work-based trauma and other trauma research with vulnerable participants would be useful to extend understandings of vulnerability in this context.

The disadvantage of illustrating researcher reflexive practice in trauma research is the intimate exposure of myself both personally and as researcher and, ironically, the associated risk of being exposed to harm and loss. Part of my learning through the process was to recognise need for an 'academic supervisor' when analysing the holistic data-set; a highly trusted collaborator to support me relationally and to support progress of the wider study.

Exploring trauma is not easy. Trauma, as a sudden potentially deadly experience, a violation, leaves lasting troubling memories; it haunts us. Trauma disrupts our assumptions and what we cherish as our secure and stable ground, whether we are the researcher or the researched. I chose women leaders' experiences of work-caused trauma, motivated by social injustice and to make change for those that have experienced work-related trauma. While the research is demanding, it provides potential to make a difference and to give voice to those often marginalised and silenced (Williamson et al., 2020). I recognise my privilege in the opportunity to engage in this research and am extremely grateful to the women leaders brave enough to engage in difficult and emotional conversations, be unusually vulnerable and, share stories of their work-caused trauma. There is no doubt that we are all changed through trauma research.

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