

## Specialist Research Ethics Guidance Paper

### EMOTIONALLY DEMANDING RESEARCH: RISKS TO THE RESEARCHER

Any potential risk to the researcher(s) should be considered carefully before the research commences, and appropriate steps taken to mitigate these risks. For certain types of research, the risks may not relate to physical safety, but to mental health and wellbeing, particularly if the research has the potential to be emotionally demanding.

Research could be experienced as emotionally demanding if it involves the researcher becoming engaged in sensitive, upsetting or traumatic study areas or research processes (e.g. issues concerning, but not limited to: abuse, atrocity, death, dying, gender, grief, loss, marginalisation, mental health, (sexual) violence, racism(s) self-harm, sexuality, stigma, trauma and xenophobia(s)); or where the researcher encounters people who have been affected by these issues (even when it is not necessarily the focus of the research); or where the researcher has a particular connection to or experience with their area of research, e.g. disability, illness or disease models affecting themselves or close family members.

Although engaging in traumatic or sensitive research themes can be rewarding and important for developing understanding, it is necessary to be mindful that the wellbeing of researchers may be affected by engaging in challenging work, in which the onus of care for the researcher, and others, tends to be placed directly on the researcher themselves. Researchers who are in sustained contact with traumatic, upsetting, or sensitive research themes are particularly at risk, meaning that special attention should be paid to the wellbeing of postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers who tend to be immersed in a single project.

Exposure to traumatic research topics or processes (without appropriate self-care) may lead to vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma is the negative change in our thoughts, perceptions and interpretations as a result of repeated engagement with traumatic research-related materials and experiences. If your research may involve emotionally-demanding aspects or people in a vulnerable situation, it is important to consider at the outset what kinds of issues you and other researchers in the team may come across, how you and they may feel, and what steps you can take to prepare for this. A range of techniques may be employed by researchers to mitigate and manage the risk of experiencing vicarious trauma:

- Setting an appropriate working pace, and building breaks into the research schedule, thereby limiting the periods of exposure to traumatic or upsetting research materials, participants or data sources.
- Role boundary setting, e.g., making the role of researcher clear to research participants and communicating what the researcher will not do or help with, when they can and cannot be contacted, and where to seek further support.
- Physical boundary setting, e.g., ensuring that research work can be carried out on University campus and that researchers are not expected to take traumatic, sensitive or upsetting research materials into their homes and other personal spaces.
- Debriefing following interviews or data generation / periods of data analysis. Debriefing is a conversation (between peers, or with a Supervisor or Principal Investigator) which is focused on making sense of and normalising our reactions to upsetting or traumatic experiences. It aims to share good coping skills and strategies as well as helping the researcher to self-evaluate how they feel, and to spot the warning signs of stress or vicarious trauma.

- Peer-support, by identifying others undertaking similar kinds of research, with whom to share experiences and coping strategies (see the details about the Emotionally Demanding Research Network below). Other ways could include using small peer groups within departments who meet regularly.
- Coping strategies: integrating stress management processes into working patterns by helping researchers to be self-aware of how they feel emotionally, physically and relationally, and to act when they detect a deterioration in wellbeing. A resource on how to do this can be found here:  
<https://thinkaheadsheffield.wordpress.com/2018/08/08/who-cares-wins-the-abc-of-stress-management/>
- If you are a student, use of the University's Counselling Service, or referring to the Student Services Information Desk (SSiD) to identify further sources of support and guidance on well-being; or if you are a member of staff, use of the services offered by the Human Resources Health and Well-being programme (Juice); this includes a staff helpline and counselling services as well as a range of other opportunities.
- Being vigilant to the external communications (conferences, publications, social media) relating to traumatic or sensitive research themes, which may be controversial and could open up an opportunity for the researcher to be the victim of abuse, in person or online.

One potential source of support for researchers undertaking research of this nature is the Emotionally Demanding Research Network at The University of Sheffield. The network uses peer and specialist support to enable researchers to meet and discuss how to develop good self-care processes, working pace, boundary setting, debriefing and coping strategies. This online community also disseminates information, experiences, research, events, and resources related to this topic:

<https://plus.google.com/communities/103562737829578364036>.