

1 **Seeing ‘*the dark passenger*’ – reflections on the emotional trauma of**
2 **conducting post-disaster research**

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12
13 **ABSTRACT**

14 This paper acknowledges ‘*the [my] dark passenger*’ of emotional vicarious trauma associated
15 with conducting post-disaster research. Post-disaster research is tightly bounded by ethics and
16 professional codes of conduct requiring us to be vigilant about the impact of our work on our
17 *participants*. However, as a disaster researcher, *I* have been affected by vicarious trauma.
18 ‘Direct personal’ vicarious trauma is where I experienced trauma associated with witnessing
19 devastation making a professional separation from my objective subjects impossible.
20 ‘Indirect professional’ vicarious trauma occurred when PhD students and others under my
21 supervision that I sent to disaster affected places, experienced significant negative emotional
22 responses and trauma as they interviewed their participants. In these situations, I became
23 traumatised by my lack of training and reflected on how the emphasis on the participants
24 came at the expense of the researcher in my care. Limited literature exists that focuses on the
25 vicarious trauma experienced by researchers, and their supervisors working in post-disaster
26 places and this paper is a contribution to that body of scholarship. In acknowledging and
27 exploring the emotions and vicarious trauma of researchers embedded in landscapes of
28 disaster, it becomes possible for future researchers to pre-empt this phenomenon and to
29 consider ways that they might manage this.

30
31 **Keywords:** Disasters, researcher, emotions, vicarious trauma, impacts, responsibility,
32 vicarious resilience

34 **Introduction**

35 Disasters – both natural and non-natural greatly affect societies, disrupting our social and
36 environmental systems. Disasters shake the foundations of social and community structures,
37 rip places and communities apart and undo the long socio-cultural histories of communities.
38 The most conspicuous impacts however, are upon people. Pictures of death, injury, suffering
39 and loss generate powerful emotional responses and remind us that, as Will Durant stated in
40 relation to natural disasters, “*civilization exists by geological consent, subject to change*
41 *without notice*” (Durant, 1946).

42

43 As humanity has sprawled out across the Earth’s surface, occupying places subject to the
44 forces of nature, events that we label ‘hazards’ are inevitable (Dominey-Howes, 2015). The
45 occurrence of a discrete, potentially hazardous event does not need to result in a disaster.
46 However, it does seem that disasters occur somewhere around the world on a daily basis.
47 Disasters occur because of the intersection of *hazard* with *exposed* people and assets that are
48 *vulnerable* to the hazard (Birkmann et al., 2013). Disasters are usually characterised by a lack
49 of resilience and adaptive capacity and limited ability to cope and respond. Without
50 vulnerability there can be no disaster. For me, disasters are a social construct and disasters are
51 about people. I make no apologies for taking such an anthropocentric view.

52

53 Although contested, a disaster is an event that may be defined as “*a serious disruption of the*
54 *functioning of a community or a society involving widespread human, material, economic or*
55 *environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community or*
56 *society to cope using its own resources*” (UNISDR, 2009). As tragic as disasters are, their
57 occurrence provides intense and important moments of learning. They allow us to investigate
58 the causes, processes, impacts and consequences of disasters – including on survivors, as well
59 as how communities respond and recover (Van Zijl de Jong et al., 2011). From these new
60 understandings, those tasked with the responsibility of disaster risk reduction, may advance
61 new methods, strategies and techniques for safeguarding us in the future. Over the years, a
62 plethora of academic disciplines have become involved in pre- and post-disaster research
63 including but not limited to, geographers, sociologists, geologists, engineers, historians,
64 political scientists, economists, atmospheric scientists, disaster managers, ecologists,
65 mathematicians and health experts. Each of these academic disciplines provides unique and
66 important insights.

67

68 I am a *Geographer* by training and my interests and expertise lie in investigating the
69 intersections between the hazards originating within the physical earth system and the socio-
70 cultural contexts in which hazard events trigger disasters. My work is informed by, and
71 follows a long scholarship of disaster geography exemplified by experts such as Gilbert
72 White, Susan Cutter, David Alexander and others. The goal of my work is to reduce the
73 losses associated with disasters by enhancing community resilience through the development
74 of appropriate disaster risk reduction strategies. To do this, it is necessary for my team and I
75 to visit disaster affected places. Sometimes this occurs immediately after a event has occurred
76 – perhaps as part of a larger post-disaster assessment team (see for example, Van Zijll de
77 Jong et al., 2011) and sometimes this occurs weeks, months and years later for a variety of
78 reasons (see for example, Méheux et al., 2010). We often interview survivors and
79 stakeholders such as emergency response personnel, NGO volunteers, community leaders
80 and the business sector all of whom contribute in various ways, to response and recovery
81 efforts.

82

83 Before we can depart for a disaster-affected place, we are required to complete a variety of
84 administrative and bureaucratic tasks designed to keep us safe from risks and physical harm
85 and to ensure we abide by appropriate domestic and international standards and rules. These
86 include for example, applying for authority to travel, fieldwork risk assessments, travel and
87 research visas and so on. Since so much of our work focuses on the experiences of people,
88 humans are often the subjects of our research. Consequently, and appropriately so, we are
89 required to complete extensive documentation to gain Human Ethics approval from our
90 university Ethics Committees. This tightly controls our work and demands rigorous
91 professional codes of conduct (Dowling, 2010).

92

93 The process of applying for Human Ethics approval to survey and interview people in pre-
94 and post-disaster situations whilst complex, is extremely valuable since we are obligated to
95 identify the types of questions we wish to ask, the themes we want to explore and as such,
96 what methods are appropriate and the likely consequences of our actions (Dowling, 2010;
97 Dunn, 2010). Specifically, where human subjects have experienced and survived disaster, the
98 ethics application process requires that we document how we will be mindful of the potential
99 negative effects our questioning will have on our participants, how we might prevent this
100 from occurring, and what we will do to ameliorate such negative affects should they occur.
101 The emphasis is always on us to protect the participant from any further emotional turmoil

and we are required to constantly be vigilant about the impacts and effects of our interviewing on our participants. I have gained Ethics approval for such work in four universities that I have worked at in my post-PhD career. Interestingly, on not one occasion has the documentation I have completed noted that ‘I’ the researcher might experience unsettling emotional responses to the work, or that I might experience some form of traumatic response. Never has the process asked me what I might do to anticipate and monitor for emotional trauma working with such material or what I might do to protect myself from emotional harm. Interestingly, casual conversations with colleagues who do similar work at other universities, reveal that they have not been advised of the possibility of negative emotional responses to their field-based post-disaster research either. Thus this lack of focus on researcher trauma seems rather wide spread.

In practicing a form of critical reflexivity defined as “*a process of constant, self-conscious scrutiny of the self as researcher and of the research process*” (England (1994) cited in Dowling (2010: 31)) as we are required to do as researchers (Israel and Hay, 2006) and specifically, reflecting upon my personal experiences and those of my team working in disaster-affected places, I have realised that I have struggled with complex and difficult emotions. I have also been affected by vicarious trauma. Over and over, a ‘*dark passenger*’ has accompanied me on this research and it is time to acknowledge this both as a form of catharsis and to reassure others that may experience similar reactions.

In light of this introduction and the fact that a limited literature exists that focuses on the traumatic experiences of academics that do research in *post-disaster places*, my aim is to reflect on my own experiences with vicarious trauma as a disaster researcher in order to contribute to a widening knowledge base. Whilst my intention here is to reflect on my own experiences, I acknowledge that my reflection and contribution rests alongside a developing body of scholarship that includes interesting work by amongst others. For example, Lund (2012) who through a reflection of crisis research with Sri Lankans affected by tsunami and conflict unpacked the complex of emotions impacting the researcher and the research process. In undertaking post-2011 earthquake research in Christchurch, New Zealand, Hutcheson (2013) drew on geographical literature and psychoanalytic concepts to examine how unconscious, subconscious and embodied experiences can inform research interactions between researcher and the researched.

I begin by briefly detailing what is meant by vicarious trauma and how it relates to the ‘researcher’ – thus focusing on the researcher as subject. Next I examine both the value and challenges to researchers of doing research in disaster-affected places, drawing on examples of others. I then acknowledge the *emotions* faced by PhD candidates new to the research journey drawing upon recent higher education literature. This is useful because it provides a foundation upon which we may extend recognition of the emotional and traumatic affects of undertaking post-disaster research. Next I outline my own experiences of vicarious trauma, describing both ‘direct personal’ and ‘indirect professional’ vicarious trauma. The paper concludes with a discussion and explores ways in which vicarious trauma might be anticipated and can be prepared for by those who will engage in such professional activities.

What is vicarious trauma and how can it affect researchers?

Eriksen and Ditrich (this issue) note that vicarious trauma has been defined as “*the response of those persons who have witnessed, been subject to explicit knowledge of or, had the responsibility to intervene in a seriously distressing or tragic event*” (Lerias and Byrne, 2003). Dickson-Swift et al., (2010) define vicarious trauma as “*the normal response of researchers who have engaged with traumatic stories of survivors, and as a result often feel distress, distrustful, disconnected and unable to manage their feelings or behaviour*”. For a more nuanced exploration of the definition and occurrence of vicarious trauma, their impacts on the professional and coping mechanisms, interested readers are referred to seminal work of McCann and Perlman (1990).

Vicarious trauma occurs when for example, a researcher interviewing disaster survivors, experiences a negative psycho-emotional response to the traumatic experiences of their subjects. The condition is associated with numerous negative symptoms. Vicarious trauma can be very disabling, causing interruptions to sleep patterns, loss of appetite, increased anxiety and inability to concentrate, increased stress, emotional outbursts, inability to cope, incapacity to think, write and process research data and, in extreme cases, psychological breakdown (McCann and Pearlman, 1990). The implications for the researcher are both obvious, and profound. Whilst I am focusing on the process of vicarious trauma in relation to researchers dealing with disasters, I acknowledge that vicarious trauma has been extensively examined elsewhere in relation to those that deal with traumatic events and material. For example, McCann and Pearlman (1990) explore the issue in relation to psychologists assisting patients, Gibbons *et al.*, (2014) deals with military personnel and McFarlane and

Raphael, 1984; Chopko and Schwartz, 2009) deals with emergency service first responders to name just a few. Vicarious trauma may also occur (and be studied) in relation to extraordinarily traumatic events such as the 9/11 terror attacks in New York (Greenall and Marselle, 2007).

A number of factors can contribute to the onset of vicarious trauma in the researcher including previous occurrences of trauma experienced by the researcher (predisposing them to experiencing trauma in the new post-disaster research context), extended periods of exposure (e.g., as would occur during long periods of intense field work in the disaster-affected place), the absence of support networks (which is likely for the researcher who travels to a place that may be far distant from home), age and gender (younger people are more likely to be affected and women are reported to experience greater vicarious trauma than men) amongst others (Eriksen and Ditrich, this issue). Very significantly, because vicarious traumatisation may occur at a ‘relatively low intensity’ as opposed to the direct experiences of those affected by disaster, researchers developing vicarious trauma may not realise that this is actually happening at all. If you do not know or recognise what is happening, it is extremely difficult to manage the condition.

Importantly, Eriksen and Ditrich (this issue) note:

“the stories narrated by disaster survivors are often elaborate, filled with suspense and emotionally charged. It should therefore come as no surprise that researchers with whom these stories are shared could be vicariously traumatised. Yet, while there are extensive accounts and analysis of vicarious trauma amongst, for example, mental health professionals and emergency service personnel, there are no studies to date, to our knowledge, that explicitly deal with vicarious trauma amongst academic researchers who specifically work with individuals and communities directly impacted by natural disasters”

Van Zijll de Jong et al., (2011) made very similar observations. This paper and this *Special Issue* are an effort to redress this gap.

Why do [post-] disaster research?

As already mentioned, when disasters occur, they provide intense and important moments of learning. They provide a fresh canvas of new data that allows researchers to advance existing,

and develop new concepts and theories in their respective disciplines and to peer in to the underlying processes that relate to causes and effects of disasters. Our efforts also contribute to documenting the needs of survivors so government resources may be effectively distributed (Van Zijl de Zong et al., 2011). They also challenge us as professionals.

For example, Sloan (2008) describes how following Hurricane Katrina's impact on South Mississippian communities in 2005, oral historians from the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at the University of Southern Mississippi set out to document the impacts, effects and experiences of Katrina on local people and communities. This was an unusual activity for oral historians unaccustomed to such research so soon after an event. He notes:

"the human story of Hurricane Katrina, much like the storm itself, is difficult to comprehend in simple terms although interviewing post-Hurricane Katrina presents many challenges and concerns, it also presents great potential to researchers" (Sloan, 2008: 178)

He goes on to note:

"in working between tragedy and memory there are many considerations such as the ubiquitous truth that the experience is raw. Devastation, both emotional and physical, is palpable.... People are hurting, confused, and unsettled. Composure is often elusive and emotions can be overpowering.... There are ethical issues involved, from discounting loss to compounding grief. It is an invasive exercise..... Working at such moments requires more of us as professionals" (Sloan, 2008: 178)

These quotations demonstrate both the professional responsibility that he and his colleagues felt about the need to document and give voice to the experiences of the survivors and the difficulties they experienced. It was a critical time when alternative metanarratives about deserving and undeserving victims of Katrina abounded within political and media debates in the United States, and giving real people affected by the disaster a voice in history mattered. What is also clear from these quotes is the *emotional context* of the interviews both for the participants and the researchers and that the process was demanding both in terms of methodological approach and sheer affect. None-the-less, the effort was worth it. My personal view is that no matter how hard the process of conducting post-disaster research with human subjects is on us as academic professionals, no matter how many logistic,

methodological or personal challenges are confronted, we have an ethical, moral and social duty to undertake such work since we can give voice and meaning to those that have experienced the disaster.

In an interesting description of working as a researcher in a post-disaster context in Samoa in 2009 after a large earthquake and tsunami (Goff and Dominey-Howes, 2011), Parkes (2011) observes that post-disaster situations present many complex obstacles to researchers working in these spaces:

“The prevailing emotional state of survivors following a disaster of grief, shock and fear imposes ethical constraints on conducting research..... In the environment of ongoing trauma and waning tolerance for outsiders, fieldwork conducted in affected regions requires unique methodological approach..... while respecting ethical concerns....” (Parkes, 2011: 30, 31)

Interestingly, Parkes reports on the need for flexible, responsive and sensitive field method approaches to working with disaster survivors that are aware of and reactive to their highly charged emotional states. Parkes notes in depth how she carefully monitored the emotional states of her participants so as to direct interview conversations away from unnecessary trauma and excessive emotion. However, she does not refer to the emotional states of herself as a researcher. She also acknowledges that as a white woman outsider, she ‘imagined’ that for the locals she would be considered just like other white outsiders – specifically journalists with a different set of agendas, ethics and interests rather than on documenting their experiences.

Emotions as a regular part of the research process for PhD students and early career researchers

Within the field of higher education studies and pedagogy, it is understood and acknowledged that undertaking a higher degree such as a PhD is a very difficult task (Christie et al., 2008; Herman, 2010; Dowling et al., 2012). However, as Cotterall (2013) observes:

“while the epistemological and ontological challenges faced by doctoral candidates are well documented, the same cannot be said of the emotional dimensions of the journey..... Doctoral study involves many challenges.... PhD students experience a rollercoaster of

confidence and emotions..... It may be that little is said about the emotional dimensions of PhD research because of the academy's distrust of emotion or the fear of discussing students' feelings might morph into a concern for the therapeutic rather than the pedagogic. There is evidence that PhD students suppress their emotions, yet the emotional aspects of research practice and the formation of a scholarly identity are deeply embedded in being a successful doctoral student" (Cotterall, 2013: 174)

Emotions influence our perceptions and thinking, affect our ability to motivate action and communicate and can be powerful forces in driving us [and the doctoral candidate] to completion (Cotterall, 2013; Thompson and Walker, 2010; Willis 2012). In light of this, it is critical that we allow ourselves as PhD students and supervisors to be aware of, and sensitive to, these emotional moments in the research journey. This is because they are so implicit in the formation of confidence related to understanding the theoretical bounds of our work, the data we collect and analyse and how we convey their meaning through writing and other forms of communication. Ignoring or denying them may threaten our professional development and the integrity of the research data.

Cotterall (2013) observes that in the humanities, emotions have been considered in two separate ways yet remarkably, both are relevant to the emotions researchers encounter whilst working with human subjects in post-disaster contexts. The first is inherent, or biological and neurological, where the emotional state experienced is considered as a physiological response to a stimulus. The other, socially constructed, is that emotions reflect responses to the social, cultural, historical and political context in which they are produced and experienced (Lupton, 1998).

However, emotions – especially during stressful times such as data collection in the field after a disaster – can also inhibit thinking leading to anxiety impacting on the researcher's capacity to make sense of the experiences they are researching *and* experiencing. Whilst Cotterall's paper does not deal with PhD research experiences or emotions in post-disaster research contexts, it does serve as an important reminder that we must, as supervisors, be aware of and sensitive to the potential emotional experiences of our PhD candidates.

Whilst the preceding comments related to the emotional stress felt by PhD students struggling with their research, they may very well equally apply to early career researchers newly

qualified from their PhD. In many instances, young academics are particularly keen to ensure that having graduated with their PhD, they can indeed work effectively as a researcher. They are eager to demonstrate their capability and to please their new employers or grant funding agency [I must succeed, I must succeed!]. In many instances, it is reasonable to expect that they likewise stress and wrestle emotionally with their field experiences.

Reflections on my experiences with vicarious trauma

Critical self-reflection as researchers is important for a variety of reasons (Chacko, 2004; Dowling, 2010; Hutcheson, 2013; Mistry et al., 2009; Rose, 1997). Over the years I have come to realise that I have been affected by vicarious trauma in two ways. The first is what I term as ‘direct personal’ vicarious trauma. In this case I personally have experienced trauma associated with witnessing the devastation first hand making a professional separation from my objective subjects impossible. Through repeated interviews and community consultations, the experiences of others have impacted me personally. The second has been ‘indirect professional’ vicarious trauma. In this latter case, I have sent PhD research students, research assistants and Post-Doctoral Fellows out to communities affected by disaster as part of their research project journeys or as staff working on projects that I hold grants for. In many cases, those under my care have experienced personal trauma as they interviewed their participants – sometimes calling back seeking counselling, support, guidance and coached relief from the horrors of their daily research experience. In these situations, I became traumatised by my own lack of training and reflected on how the emphasis on the participants came at the expense of the researcher.

An example of ‘direct personal’ vicarious trauma

In almost every post-disaster affected place I have worked in I have experienced some form of ‘direct personal vicarious trauma’. However, my first, and still most significant experience, relates to when I assisted in a post-disaster search and rescue mission. On 17th August 1999, a magnitude 7.4 earthquake impacted northwest Turkey. This event is known as the Izmit earthquake and it was extremely devastating (Schiermeier, 1999).

My PhD training had been as a physical geographer looking at geological and archaeological records of past tsunamis, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions that had affected coastal sites in the Aegean Sea region of Greece from the Bronze Age period to the recent (Dominey-Howes, 2004; Dominey-Howes, 1996). As a physical geographer my training had taught me to

340 examine and interrogate rocks and sediments. There was no space for me to focus on people
341 and the associated myriad research issues and challenges.

342
343 At the time of the Izmit earthquake, I was working as an early career academic and Project
344 Officer within the Coventry Centre for Disaster Management, at Coventry University in the
345 UK. I was just three years out of my PhD. This was a tremendous opportunity in that it
346 allowed me to broaden my teaching and research interests and skills especially given the
347 Centre was multidisciplinary and comprised experts from all areas of disaster studies. The
348 Centre worked closely with the World Health Organisation (WHO) through an arrangement
349 with one of its regional offices and my colleagues and I had many opportunities to participate
350 in a variety of projects related to contemporary disaster processes, planning, response and
351 recovery under the umbrella of the WHO.

352
353 Following the Izmit earthquake, I had the opportunity to work as part of a team observing and
354 assessing the effectiveness of search and rescue activities on the ground. Eventually, rather
355 than simply observing, I became involved in the physical process of searching for and
356 rescuing people trapped within collapsed buildings. This takes a remarkable set of skills and I
357 became involved in this activity following some discussion between the WHO, the agency I
358 was assigned to and specific search and rescue teams working on the ground. I was given this
359 opportunity as part of my 'ongoing professional development'. The particular case of
360 relevance here is that we were focused on a residential building where it was known that a
361 five-year old girl was trapped. Her cries could be heard whilst we worked. We laboured for
362 more than 24 hours carefully shifting the debris to reach the girl. It was difficult work. As we
363 worked the little girls' cries became quieter and in the last hours before we reached her, she
364 fell silent.

365
366 When our team eventually lifted the last broken beam of debris and uncovered the small
367 space the little girl had been confined to, we discovered she had died from her injuries.

368
369 Again, it was decided that as part of my professional development, that together with a
370 Turkish colleague who would act as my interpreter, I would return the body of the girl to her
371 family. Her parents had remained very close throughout the search and rescue mission and
372 were aware we had clearly reached their daughter. We wrapped the little girl in a blanket

373 being careful to cover her whole body and head. She was placed in my arms and together
374 with my colleague, I walked the few metres to where the parents were waiting.

375
376 I was at that moment completely overwhelmed with emotion.

377
378 Even now, the actions of recollection and reviewing my field notebook transport me back to
379 that moment – it was and still is, filled with raw emotion. As I looked the mother in her eyes
380 and returned her daughter to her, she asked me one simple question. Why? I hesitated
381 thinking in my junior inexperience that some response about the shear strength of and failure
382 in rocks subject to sustained tectonic pressure might be appropriate but oddly, and
383 fortunately, the emotion that had seized my entire body prevented me from saying anything at
384 all. Tears filled my eyes. I struggled to stop myself from completely breaking down. I could
385 not possibly imagine the pain and heartbreak she felt as a mother yet at the same time, I was
386 completely traumatised by this loss and my response was intensely emotional. I am
387 struggling as I type these words at my desk. I remember every pained wrinkle on her face, the
388 sounds of the activity going on close to us. I recall the smells of the devastation of the town
389 outside, I am there right now and I am wrestling with my emotions.

390
391 There was a challenge here for me professionally in that I had been told I was to try and
392 avoid showing emotion. I was instructed to remain professional and focus on the task that
393 needed to be done. I was told that as a westerner I should not try and demonstrate sensitivity
394 to the moment because I was an outsider. However, I felt like I should show this woman that
395 I understood, I cared, I was sorry, I was affected by her grief and trauma as well but I did not
396 know how to ‘step along a delicate line’ between going against the advice I had been given
397 and an internal dialogue I had about not appearing cold and insensitive. This is an ongoing
398 issue for me when working with individuals affected by disaster, especially in cross-cultural
399 settings where as Cotterall (2013) notes:

400
401 *“One important aspect of the social-historical context in which emotions are produced is*
402 *culture. Cross-cultural psychologists have identified significant cultural variations in*
403 *emotions. These include differences in the rules that govern the display and expression of*
404 *emotions and in the ways that events are interpreted”* (Cotterall, 2013: 176)

I have vivid recollection up to the moment that the mother took possession of her daughter's body but not much that happened in the minutes and hours after. Given I was working with the WHO, I was lucky and did have access to psychologists as part of the general relief efforts and I was able to get two 15 minute sessions in the field to discuss how I was coping and feeling. I felt great embarrassment that I needed to discuss my feelings about the horror and devastation and loss around me when I was just an observer. I also felt like a bit of a failure. I ought to be stronger, more able to cope, harder, so to speak. I was not. I was a mess. I remained in the field assisting and observing for another ten days and throughout this period, I recall wanting to talk all the time to my colleagues and the psychologists about how I was feeling and coping or not, and how my experiences were disturbing my dreams and causing me to cry in the privacy and security of my accommodation. I felt guilty the whole time. I wanted to take time out to workshop through my emotions and the impacts of what I was doing on me but I could not because others – the actual real victims – were experiencing so much more grief and loss. Who was I to claim I was experiencing grief as well? My field notebook records:

“.....it's so terrible..... can't stop crying. Why am I so affected? I haven't lost anything. I can leave anytime and return home. These people are trapped here. Why am I so overwhelmed..... How are they coping when I'm not?.....”

On returning home, I organised counselling through my employer and several sessions enabled me to make some sense of my experiences. Interestingly, even back in 1999 the counsellor advised that I should write about this professionally since it was, we felt, an important issue. As I write, I am aware that the process of recalling this event transports me back to that very moment and that it is still intense and unsettling. I am able to access the memory, recall it, relive it and it affects me intensely. Similarly, Sloan (2008) tells the story of driving to Columbus, Mississippi in early 2006 as part of the work of the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage to interview a Mrs Pope who was 100 at the time of the interview. Mrs Pope had survived the 1927 Mississippi Flood as well as Hurricane Katrina. Powerfully, Sloan relates how *“as Mrs Pope shared her story [of 1927], emotion overcame her. Here, eighty years after the event, she struggled to manage the almost overwhelming emotion – feelings of fear from the flood....”*. This emotive recollection makes sense to me. My experience was as significant to me as Mrs Pope's was to her.

440 *An example of 'indirect professional' vicarious trauma*

441 More recently as I have developed as a researcher, I have been lucky and have obtained a
442 succession of grants to undertake research in pre- and post-disaster contexts. With these
443 grants I have either recruited PhD students and/or employed research assistants and early
444 career Post-Doctoral Research Fellows to assist with the work. Further, I have had students
445 enrol to undertake PhD programs under my supervision and co-supervision, exploring topics
446 related to disaster that were their own ideas. In both situations these PhD students and early
447 career researchers have ended up in the field in many cases, in disaster-affected places.

448
449 On several occasions, those under my care have experienced personal trauma as they
450 interviewed their participants – sometimes calling back seeking counselling, support,
451 guidance and coached relief from the horrors of their daily research experience. In these
452 situations, I became traumatised by my own lack of training and reflected on how the
453 emphasis on the participants came at the expense of the researcher.

454
455 The most significant example relates to the fieldwork undertaken by a former PhD candidate
456 – Emma Calgaro (see Calgaro, this issue). By way of context, in 2005, Emma had undertaken
457 fieldwork in Thailand following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami disaster as part of an
458 Honours project. I was not involved in her Honours research. After gaining a first class for
459 that work, Emma enrolled in a PhD and I was privileged enough to become a co-supervisor.
460 The PhD sought to greatly extend the Honours work and in 2006/07, Emma returned to
461 Thailand for an extended period of fieldwork.

462
463 The primary supervisor and I kept in regular contact with Emma whilst she was in Thailand.
464 Weekly telephone and skype conversations and exchanges by email quickly revealed that
465 Emma was experiencing significant difficulties¹ in managing the research process in a place
466 she thought she knew and with a community that had given her a particularly positive
467 experience during her Honours. Things had changed very dramatically between the two
468 periods of fieldwork.

¹ I am extremely grateful to Emma Calgaro for giving me consent to reflect upon and discuss this situation in this paper. For Emma's more nuanced experiences, see Calgaro (this issue)

470 In early 2007 I visited Emma in Thailand for a week to gain a better understanding of the
471 field study location and the relevant issues. As we sat over dinner on the first night discussing
472 how things were going, Emma slowly opened up about the emotional difficulties she was
473 having and these were very significant. That evening and the remaining week were extremely
474 emotional for us but a significant revelation came to us that first night when after listening to
475 Emma speak for some time, I simply stated something along the lines of “*but what your*
476 *describing sounds like post traumatic stress*”. And in so many ways – that was it. We
477 instantly realised that a very significant traumatic experience had occurred that was having
478 profound physical and psychological impact.

479
480 Whilst the revelation was extremely uncomfortable for both of us, it did mean we could begin
481 to think about what was actually happening and what actions we could undertake to enable
482 Emma to manage this situation – especially after I left and returned to Australia. Reflecting
483 on the internal dialog I had with myself whilst in Thailand, I was extremely worried that
484 given I had no formal training as a psychologist, my attempts at supporting and reassuring
485 Emma were very inadequate. I was concerned that Emma might be frustrated and angry with
486 me that I could not provide a magic solution that would solve the problem. I did want to solve
487 this problem. Being in the field with Emma did appear to provide some comfort and support
488 but as my departure date neared, I became consumed with fear that once I departed, Emma
489 might become very overwhelmed and affected by both the emotional and traumatic
490 experiences. I wondered if I should report this up through our University system, whether we
491 as supervisors should ‘recall the candidate from the field’ so as appropriate counselling could
492 be undertaken and so on?

493
494 As a supervisor, I found this process and the lack of protocol either within the University
495 structure and ethics policies or in the literature to guide me, overwhelming and on reflection,
496 traumatising. I was not adequately trained for this and if I did not act, acted inappropriately or
497 inadequately, the well being of the PhD candidate in my care could be profoundly affected
498 leading to all kinds of terrible outcomes. This was not a good situation to be in. Fortunately,
499 Emma found a way to work through the situation and her wellbeing and emotions became a
500 central part of the weekly skype discussions with the supervisory team – sometimes more
501 important than the research and its data. This refocus on the emotional needs and traumatic
502 experiences of the candidate provided a valuable space for Emma and us as supervisors to

hold the situation together. Emma went on to complete an outstanding piece of valuable research – a credit to her perseverance and resilience.

Discussion, ways forward and conclusion

Disasters are by default, devastating. They have significant physical, material, economic and psycho-social impacts on affected individuals and communities. It is right and appropriate, as noted by Sultana (2007: 375), that ethical concerns “*permeate the entire process of the research, from conceptualization to dissemination.....*”. That said, research with traumatic content affects the researcher. It is simply unrealistic to assume that in some way the researcher can remain totally objective and detached from the content and experience of their research.

England (1994: 242) wrote that “*years of positivist-inspired training have taught us that impersonal, neutral detachment is an important criterion for good research*”. It is, but not being detached, being emotional and affected can also bring great benefits (Caballero, 2014; Procter, 2013) and as Lund (2012) notes:

“researchers who make themselves vulnerable to emotions not only make research more engaging and intelligible, but also provoke reflection” (Lund, 2012: 94).

In the context of my experiences, the emotion and trauma have shown me what it is that I want to do with my research. It has revealed to me a series of questions that have guided me in the last decade and a half. It has shaped my research agenda and my understanding and empathy as a researcher. Emotions do influence our perceptions and thinking, they do affect our ability to motivate action and communicate, and are powerful forces in driving us to completion (Caballero, 2014). This is certainly the case for me. My emotional reactions – no matter how painful, have made me determined to see my research to its conclusion. I owe it to the survivors that have shared their much more traumatic experiences with me. The event in Turkey was utterly profound for me. This single event was so significant that it caused a quantum shift in my understanding of disaster and I realised (the light bulb went on) that it was about people. I understood that processes of vulnerability, power, corruption and so on were at play. It caused me to start to slowly change the course of my research interests from exclusively physical earth sciences to social science in disasters.

As Parkes (2011) argued, doing post-disaster research with human subjects probably requires a unique methodological approach that is sensitive to the survivors. I contend however, that this approach must also be sensitive to us as researchers. Van Zijl de Jong et al., (2011) in their reflections of doing social research in Samoa after the earthquake-tsunami disaster also referred to ‘sensitive research’ and indicated it is critical to open up methodological discussion on how to take care of us as researchers undertaking research on sensitive topics in post-disaster contexts so that we can make sense of issues such as grief, death, mental health and loss of community. As researchers, we should be aware of professional help groups (such as University counselling services) available to us and of mutual care and stress management in post-disaster research (Dyregrov, 1997; Dyregrov et al., 2000; Newhall et al., 1999).

In Turkey I was also aware that as a ‘man’ I was supposed to be emotionless, strong, masculine. I wrestled with the idea that if I revealed my emotional state, the dominantly ‘male group’ around me might question my masculine identity. This question of my masculine identity has also caused me considerable emotional difficulty throughout my career. However, this is a whole other issue that warrants careful exploration and discussion and will be considered elsewhere. That said, I did wish to briefly acknowledge it as a researcher and note that recent work (including that by Geographers) has begun to explore the intersection of gender, masculinity, emotions, empathy and how these relate to researcher positionality and researcher career development (Buzzanell and Turner, 2003; Evans, 2012; Meth, 2009).

The last major issue than continues to cause me emotional difficulties is that I recognise as an employee of a university that is funded by external, highly competitive funding grants, I must be productive – research productive. I am expected to gather data, analyse it and then publish. People who experience and survive disaster and then tell me about it are the material that becomes my next manuscript for publication, are the content of my next grant application. Their experiences are wrapped up in my desire to get value for money from the grant I hold. But of course, I also desire recognition from my peers and the promotions process. This results in a complex of emotions for me that are ongoing. How do I stay true to my subjects whilst wanting good data for my research and aspirations? I acknowledge that as Van Zijl de Jong et al., (2011) said, ‘survivors are people not research subjects’.

In reflecting on the experiences of my PhD students and Post-doctoral research colleagues, I have become mindful of a process that may well cause significant emotional stress for them as young researchers. PhD candidates may not wish to discuss their emotional difficulties in undertaking research because in the current constrained and highly competitive job market of higher education and research, to get ahead and to secure a job, being emotional and admitting to struggling with work is at odds with university employers, funding agencies and promotion committee's who demand output and productivity. Being emotional and traumatised and admitting that this results in 'perceived or actual lack of productivity' can be very problematic. As supervisors, we must be sensitive to this and continue to reassure and guide and support those in our care.

My post-disaster research with people and in places has resulted in unbearable emotions and some forms of trauma. This has been a burden – sometimes more obvious to me, sometimes not. It has however, always been there riding with me like a *dark passenger*. So having acknowledged and accepted this, the dark passenger riding with me has also fostered a sense of 'vicarious resilience' (McKinnon, pers. comm, 2014). I may actually be more resilient in my own life because of my professional experiences.

Ways forward?

If it is accepted that researchers can be affected by strong emotions and vicarious trauma, then this acknowledgement points towards some strategies to manage this. These might include:

- university ethics application processes should be modified to explicitly note such potential emotional and traumatic impacts on researchers and the process should ask the researcher to identify how they might look after themselves if it does;
- researchers and supervisors planning disaster related research, especially post-disaster work, should discuss openly and honestly the potential impacts that such research may have on the researcher. In doing this, it at least allows researchers to think about the circumstances in which they might experience negative emotional experiences;
- researchers and their supervisors should communicate regularly once the researcher has departed and ensure infield debriefs tackle issues of how the

researcher is feeling and coping. This is just as important as focusing on the data and research process;

- the researcher going in to a disaster-affected place should also identify counselling or psychological services that they may utilise themselves should the need arise;
- no matter how tight the timeframe for field based research, the researcher should think about building ‘time out’ in the research (maybe one to two days per week) to take a break from the grind of the human research, to give themselves a reward, to be normal and focused on something else;
- phone or skype home regularly to speak to family, loved ones and friends since this allows the researcher to remain connected to their support network;
- consider an alternative research strategy such as working with a more experienced, older field buddy so that the researcher does not feel alone in the field;
- consider stopping interviews and other activities if the researcher realises that they are becoming emotional. If necessary, undertake a discrete physical action to ‘ground the researcher in the moment’ such as looking away or gently tapping their own hands or knee in order to remind themselves to do their best to separate from the process of the research in that emotional moment; and
- as part of the research training which includes how to do interviews or surveys etc, also consider learning meditation or other forms of mindfulness and relaxation techniques and practice them in order to manage stress.

These represent very basic suggestions and many others would be appropriate. The point is to simply start a dialogue within research teams about the possible affects of emotion and trauma on the researcher.

In summary, the research with traumatic content explored in this *Special Issue*, including post-disaster research, is tightly bounded by ethics and professional codes of conduct requiring us to be vigilant about the impact of our work on our *participants*. However, *I* have been affected by both ‘direct personal’ and ‘indirect professional’ vicarious trauma. In these situations, I became traumatised by my lack of training and reflected on how the emphasis on

the participants came at the expense of me and those in my care. For some time, ‘a [my] *dark passenger*’ has accompanied me. Whilst the traumatic experiences I have had have not been easy to live with, they have shaped my professional career and helped me resolve the questions I have been interested in. Limited literature exists that focuses on the vicarious trauma experienced by researchers, and their supervisors, working in post-disaster places. In acknowledging and exploring the emotions and vicarious trauma of researchers embedded in landscapes of disaster, it becomes possible for future researchers to pre-empt this phenomenon and to consider ways that they might manage this. I sincerely hope this reflective personal account is of value to others.

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