

Research Aims

Recently, there have been more calls to attention about the potential negative impact that researchers may face through exposure to traumatic topics. Undergraduate students, many of whom have no prior research experience, may be particularly vulnerable to negative impacts when exposed to such topics. This student research project was conducted to study how professors working with undergraduates manage their research teams. Specifically, this project's aim was to gather accounts of how professors manage and support teams of undergraduate students on projects that study potentially traumatic topics.

Background

Vicarious trauma can be defined as the negative impact and behavioral response(s) that one may experience as a result of exposure to traumatic material in their work (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Exposures to potentially traumatic topics in the workplace has a wide range of effects that can vary greatly from one person to the next, and researchers have said that their work shows that secondary exposure can change how a person sees the world as well as their own place in it (AbiNader et al., 2023). For example, research has shown that this secondary exposure can also lead to intrusive thoughts and memories, dissociation, and other changes in memory (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Without any type of intervention to limit the scope of impact, one may experience burnout or an increased sense of cynicism as a result of the cognitive overload they are dealing with (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Furthermore, researchers may unintentionally cause harm or influence the results of their work, through the use of inaccurate methodologies or through a less-than-optimal approach to working with study participants (Bride, 2007; Maslach, 2001; Molnar et al., 2017). More research is also needed about how to promote vicarious resilience, which can be informally defined as how an individual “bounces back” (Pack, 2014, p. 18) from the exposure to potentially traumatic topics. While avenues of intervention to promote resiliency and prevent traumatization have been long studied among frontline workers, little is known about avenues of intervention with researchers.

Methods

This student research project involved recruiting Penn professors from lists of standing Penn faculty who hire undergraduate students to work on research studies that involve data on potentially traumatic topics (e.g., violence, crime, injury, disease, disaster). The student researcher reached out to potential participants over email. If they were interested in participating, the student researcher scheduled a thirty-minute interview with them on Zoom. These interviews were recorded by Zoom and transcribed so that the student researcher could conduct analyses. The student researcher analyzed the interviews to identify themes related to the research question across all interviews. Finally, the student wrote up an analysis for a public report.

Analysis

Formal and Informal Introductions to Risks

Participants expressed that while there was often not a systematic process specifically in place for introducing students to the potential risk of distress or other strong reactions to their work, they've used other protocols to do so. These included various lab training sessions, holding mock interviews as practice before sending students into field placements, having students engage with the written work of other colleagues so that they can get a better understanding of what their assignments will entail, and even withholding students from the more potentially distressing aspects of their work in the beginning as they adjusted to their position.

Supportive Work Environment

Participants made it clear that they took steps to establish a working relationship with students in their lab in which the student would feel comfortable coming to them if they felt activated in any way. One participant said that debriefing in a less formal manner after students conduct interviews is protocol in her lab. Another mentioned that when an upset student came to them and described how they were feeling desensitized to the issues within their work, she felt it was incredibly important to talk to the student in a supportive manner and to validate their feelings. Two participants addressed the need to keep a boundary in place between themselves and their students while still fostering a supportive environment. They felt it was important to express their care for their students' emotional and mental well-being, but they did not feel it was appropriate to take on a “therapist role”.

Relating Personal Experiences

Participants all agreed that one of the best ways to foster a supportive environment for students was to share their own personal experiences in working on potentially traumatic topics. One participant shared that she had experienced regular activations during a field placement, and she shared this story with a student going through a similar experience in the hopes that they would know she understood their feelings.

The Fine Line of Positionality

Participants described how positionality in relation to one's work can have effects on a student's well-being. One participant said that she continues to look to hire students who have a general understanding of the issues she focuses on through their own lived experiences, but she also understands that the emotional aspects of a lived experience related to a potentially traumatic topic may mean that the work is too much for them to take on. Another participant went into detail about how difficult it can be to keep herself in a good spot in relation to her work. Being hardened by data can lead to a sense of detachment from the issue, which often comes across negatively when working with survivors and their families. Allowing oneself to get “too close” to the data, however, may lead to a large negative impact.

Continually Caring for Oneself

When asked about practices that they've adapted to take care of their own well-being over the course of their careers, participants shared a range of ways they've discovered on the path to vicarious resilience. One participant noted the feelings of hopelessness that often come with working on potentially traumatic topics, and she said that focusing on what can be done through her work helps her get through harder moments. Another participant shared that she turns to artistic hobbies to practice self-care. Multiple participants shared that they have chosen to focus their time on projects that they truly care about over ones that would be solely for promotional or career-advancing purposes.

References:

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