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Teaching Brief

What Does It Mean to Teach Trauma-Informed Anthropology?

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Introduction

This Teaching Brief is an extended discussion on the findings presented in our article 'Field of Screams Revisited: Contending with trauma in ethnographic fieldwork' (Procter, Spector and Freed, this Special Issue). In the article, we report on a survey on the fieldwork experiences of 43 anthropologists. The survey sought to understand the kinds of trauma exposure experienced by anthropologists; the ways in which researchers were affected by this exposure both during and after fieldwork; and the support they received – or would have benefitted from – to anticipate, prevent and mitigate this. In summary, analysis of the survey led to the following core findings: first, that trauma exposure is a feature of many fieldwork experiences whether or not the fieldwork takes place in a violent or chaotic setting. Second, that there are notable gaps in the skills, preparedness and support of researchers who are exposed to trauma in the course of their fieldwork. Third, that encounters with trauma, even if 'only' vicarious trauma, during fieldwork can have significant adverse impact on researchers, which in turn has an impact on the overall quality and integrity of the research produced as a result of the fieldwork. Finally, we shared findings on how researchers coped with the difficulties they had faced, including levels of support received from departments and supervisors (more than half of respondents who felt able to share the challenges they had faced doing fieldwork with their supervisors or other senior academics felt that their concerns had been downplayed or dismissed). Taken together, it appears that many aspects of the fieldwork preparation experience are not sufficiently trauma-informed, and that this is detrimental both to the wellbeing of some researchers and to the quality of research produced. In this Teaching Brief, and in the style set out by this journal, we offer educators a series of questions to reflect on in order to move towards a trauma-informed anthropology, prompted by the findings of this survey.

An idea often central in anthropological methods training is that doing ethnography is inherently unpredictable and can only be prepared for to a limited extent.[1] Indeed, some attitudes, shared with us informally, suggest that even if preparation were possible, it would not be desirable – because it may somehow confer a premature sense of 'knowing' that would risk closing down enquiry. While these arguments can perhaps be made with regards to the experience of doing ethnography overall, neither position is tenable in relation to trauma, to which anthropologists are at risk of exposure to with great predictability and regularity. Indeed, in other professions in which interviewing individuals who have had, or are experiencing challenging circumstances, it is routine have an established practice of providing appropriate training.[2] There are also emerging models for how these learnings can be made relevant and accessible for researchers.[3] Informed both by our study findings and our collective experience in developing and delivering fieldwork training, we argue that there is an ethical and professional responsibility to develop trauma-informed approaches to every stage of fieldwork, and suggest that consideration of the following five key questions can be helpful in developing a vision for a more trauma-informed anthropology.

[1] This is an assertion that Procter and Spector seek to counter in their recent textbook on ethnographic research methods, *Inclusive Ethnography: Making fieldwork safer, healthier and more ethical* (Sage: 2024).
[2] For example, for the international justice system (United Nations 2021, Trauma Center at Justice Resource Institute), the UK criminal justice system (Council of the Inns of Courts 2015), and for those offering victim support (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network: available via https://www.rainn.org/consulting-services#training).
[3] One example is the Oxford University one-day Vicarious Trauma Workshop offered termly to masters and doctoral students since 2016, and extended in 2023 to staff (https://staff.admin.ox.ac.uk/article/vicarious-trauma-workshop)

1. Should Trauma-Related Input Be Embedded in The Curriculum or Delivered Separately to a Sub-Set of Students?

Currently some universities offer optional input in managing the impacts of trauma, and this approach seems to be gaining traction. However, we believe there are some compelling arguments in favour of embedding this material in mainstream research methods training curricula. One of the key findings of our survey, which is discussed in depth in our article, is that trauma is not an issue that relates only or even primarily to fieldwork in contexts of violence or extreme insecurity. Any fieldwork that has involved the deep exploration of difficult facets of human experience can be traumatic, irrespective of the broader geographic or political context in which it takes place (p.9). When we recognise that trauma exposure is not limited to violent or chaotic field settings but is a feature of any research which entails engaging with traumatised individuals and communities, it becomes apparent that the relevance is broad. Moreover, researchers may be called to supervise and train others whose fieldwork entails trauma exposure later in their career. Anthropologists have always undertaken to engage with the whole of the human experience, including the most distressing experience. It follows that handling trauma exposure should be regarded as a foundational competence for all anthropologists.

The decision to engage with training should not be left to the discretion of the individual researcher. Drawing also from our own experiences of training, even researchers who expect to encounter trauma in fieldwork can be reluctant to engage with trauma-related training, preferring a strategy based simply on firmly resolving to be 'the resilient researcher' (Benoot 2016). Even where training is readily available, many researchers elect to participate only after they have begun to experience troubling symptoms of trauma exposure. Embedding these discussions in methods teaching instead could also help to shift the culture within the discipline. Our survey found that, while 52% of respondents discussed fears and apprehensions ahead of fieldwork with their peers, only 36% did so with their supervisors (p.10). Centring these discussions in methods training would help to normalise discussions of the emotional and psychological impacts of research in professional spaces and affirm the idea that emotional work is part of the professional work of an anthropologist.

2. What Topics Should Be Incorporated into Methods Teaching?

The following topics, we suggest, could fit well within existing research methods courses, integrating understandings of trauma throughout the research process:

The Anthropologist as The Instrument of Research

Research methods training routinely teaches reflexivity, which commonly takes the form of acknowledging the researcher's positionality as potentially affecting their findings. However, there is rarely broader consideration of what it means that the anthropologist is the research 'tool', and that anything – not only positionality – that affects the functioning of the tool will in turn affect what the anthropologist will be able to produce. Methods training should instil a strong sense of responsibility to maintain one's functioning as a reliable research instrument. Within this, a topic worthy of special emphasis is the way in which anthropologists may instinctively, even unconsciously, avert their gaze from material which unsettles or disturbs – a tendency that becomes more pronounced with accumulated trauma exposure.

Trauma Literacy

Diverse understandings of trauma should be explored within a research methods curriculum, and researchers should be encouraged to consider the ways that trauma might be understood within the context in which they intend to work. Development of researchers own trauma literacy should include an understanding of neurobiology of response to trauma. Researchers should also be able to use this understanding to recognise their own response to fieldwork stressors—including their response to what is happening in the present moment, and their response to an accumulation of disturbing or unsettling experiences. They should be aware of how the four symptom categories of PTSD manifest in researchers, as well as knowing that vicarious trauma can and often does lead to these.

Researchers should know how to recognise when they are in a state of sympathetic nervous system arousal (or, colloquially, 'fight-flight'). They should therefore also be familiar with tools they can use to restore parasympathetic nervous system function (colloquially, 'rest and digest') so they can think more clearly and access more of their coping resources. These might include: simple grounding techniques; deliberate breathing

practices (e.g. box breathing); and activation of the 'mammalian diving reflex' via facial immersion.[4] Researchers should be encouraged to commit to regular, active acknowledgement and processing of distressing experiences (whether or not obviously 'traumatic') in the course of their research. They should be well-informed about a range of approaches to doing this (for instance, the use of gentle trauma therapy techniques and trauma-release exercises (e.g. Berceli 2008), and should be encouraged to explore these actively and to identify those which feel most comfortable and helpful. Some of the richest writing about the impact of trauma on researchers comes from researchers who are additionally trained as psychotherapists or psychoanalysts, for example Ivana Maček and Suzanne Kaplan (Maček 2014). Involving a psychotherapist in the teaching of some of the techniques we suggest could be helpful and could help to bolster links between student/staff support services within the university and the department.

Emotional Preparation for Fieldwork

Researchers should be encouraged to reflect on their personal, family (including ancestral), and community history, identifying any areas of experience that may lead to heightened vulnerability during fieldwork. It is important to emphasise that *any* traumatic experience from the past has potential to create vulnerability during fieldwork, not only those areas of experience that are directly and obviously related to the experiences studied. Researchers should be made aware of some of the ways that past trauma can come into play during fieldwork and should be encouraged to reflect honestly on what they need: is it sufficient to be aware of their vulnerabilities, or would they benefit from some counselling or therapy to be research-ready?

Practical Preparation for Fieldwork

Many survey respondents expressed a sense of regret that they had not done more to prepare themselves for fieldwork experiences, and explained this as resulting from a combination of ignorance and complacency (see p.10). This is easily remedied. Thinking ahead about ways in which the researcher will maintain a sense of ontological safety in the field, including: reflecting on all sources of apprehension about fieldwork; allowing time to orient and familiarize oneself prior to engaging with challenging tasks (through preliminary visits, reading, or making personal connections); creating as safe and stable a living situation as possible; and anticipating challenges to establishing an adequate personal care routine. Within these discussions around preparing for fieldwork, anthropologists should be encouraged to plan intelligently so that exposure to difficult or disturbing material is paced and recovery time is adequate – for example, limiting the number of difficult interviews done in a day, and being realistic about how much time can be spent in the field before needing a break.

Ethnographic Tools I: Trauma-Informed Interviewing

Trauma-informed interviewing training gives attention to the challenges of creating interview conditions which will be experienced as safe; understanding how questions may need to be framed differently for individuals who have experienced trauma; and being prepared to listen and respond to difficult or disturbing information or disclosures. The researcher should understand how to deploy empathy intentionally, and to moderate the intensity of the empathetic connection if the emotional intensity is becoming too much to manage. Finally, the researcher will need to be prepared to respond to an interview subject who becomes either acutely distressed or dissociated and shut down. Alongside this, researchers should be encouraged to reflect on the boundaries they regard as appropriate to their professional role, and also to anticipate that there may be situations in which they feel a very strong pull to behave in ways that violate those boundaries. As we discuss in the article (p.14), vicarious trauma exposure can destabilize beliefs about the self and the world. Over half of our respondents reported that feeling guilty or upset that they could not alleviate the problems or suffering of research subjects had led them to do things which violated their personal and/or ethical boundaries. The ability to conceptualise what is taking place may help researchers to resist this pull.

Ethnographic Tools II: Keeping Effective Fieldnotes

Despite being at the core of ethnographic research, the practice of making fieldnotes is, in our collective experience, rarely taught. Teaching on how and when to make fieldnotes, and the role they play in maintaining the integrity of the research instrument (the anthropologist) is key. In our survey, we found that 43% of respondents felt unable to write field notes during the course of their fieldwork because they could not bear to think about the experience they would have recorded. This should be a clear indication of disturbance, and one

[4] These and other tools and techniques can be explored in texts on trauma interventions and mitigation practices (see, for example, the work of Baranowsky and Gentry (2015) and Curran (2013)). Many researchers will find it helpful to learn in more depth about breathing practices, e.g. Brulé (2020) and Nestor (2021).

which may be likely to have a subsequent impact on the integrity of the eventual research output. In the psychotherapy profession, which recognises the importance of making clinical notes not only as a means of recalling what has taken place in a session but also to enable the therapist to process their experience and to put thoughts of it safely away (Levine 2007; Tudor 2022). Anthropologists should have a clear understanding of the role of field notes not only in generating data but as a means of maintaining emotional and psychological wellness in the field.

Data Analysis: Safe Handling of Research Materials

The survey also found that following fieldwork, 55% of respondents avoided listening to recordings, transcribing or reading transcripts, while 36% described distracting themselves while engaging with research data – e.g., by listening to music or podcasts, or watching TV while transcribing interviews – to protect themselves from disturbing thoughts (p.14). When engaging with transcription of difficult material, and subsequently with the transcripts themselves, it is not healthy to do endless, aimless re-reading. This results in constant re-exposure to trauma intensive material. It is important to train anthropologists from the outset in knowing why they are 'in' certain material, and to put safe parameters around that. Some basic examples of this are keeping transcription in a professional space, during the day time (for instance, not as the last thing you do at the end of the day because it is less intellectually demanding work); learning to use good subject markers the first time one goes through an interview transcript or notes; and good practice of using word/phrase and other qualitative search tools to move through material.

3. What Is the Proper Role of The Supervisor in Relation to Trauma?

It is encouraging that among our survey respondents, nearly two-thirds (64%) talked with supervisors about the emotional and psychological impacts of their fieldwork (p.16). Supervisors themselves do, inevitably, play a critical role in modelling management of the impacts of trauma exposure resulting from academic work. To be able to do this, supervisors should begin by being honest with themselves about any unprocessed trauma exposure they may be carrying as a result of their own research. If this remains unaddressed, it could lead to defensive denial of the impact of trauma on themselves and subsequently to turning a blind eye to signs that a supervisee is struggling. From the outset of a supervisory relationship, supervisors can then normalise conversations about the emotional and psychological impact that work can take, initiating these conversations early and asking routinely about whether there are aspects of a student's work that they are finding emotionally difficult. Supervisors can encourage their supervisees to include reflection on their own emotional and psychological responses as part of their field notes – especially when they feel an instinctive aversion to reflecting on and/or writing about their experiences, as such aversion often indicates some disturbance that could be important to process and metabolise. A way of keeping an eye on this while supervisees are doing fieldwork is to ask them to share detailed notes and reflections each month.

Another opportunity for supervisors to better pre-empt challenges that their students might face – and therefore establish support systems for their students and themselves ahead of time – is the ethics review processes. In the survey, most respondents indicated that existing institutional pre-field work ethics processes gave no attention to their wellbeing (p.11). Yet the ethics review process presents a natural opportunity to engage with researcher wellbeing, and to do so as a professional issue. This process could, for instance, ensure that questions asked of researchers directly address the expected emotional and psychological impact on the researcher and plans for mitigating this. The review process already includes questions related to the phenomena to be investigated, and added to this, researchers could be asked whether there is any likelihood of exposure to emotionally or psychologically challenging material – again, requiring demonstration of the researcher's plans to mitigate this, as well as mandating additional learning around vicarious trauma.

A major challenge herein is that many senior academics have never been a part of such spaces themselves. Fieldwork challenges are hardly new, and many senior academics have candidly shared with the authors that no such spaces existed while they were training, or establishing their careers. This, perhaps, goes some way towards explaining the quite alarming finding from our survey, that 52% of respondents found supervisors to be dismissive of the challenges they had faced. Coupled with this is the ever-increasing workload placed on supervisors that may limit their capacity to engage meaningfully with students.

Some supervisors may be interested to have access to trauma literacy training comparable to that offered to students. However, and at a minimum, supervisors should be aware of the full range of symptoms of PTSD and how these are most commonly manifested in researchers. This should include being alert to the possibility that

problems relating to concentration, attention, academic productivity or sleep may be trauma-related. They should also be aware that, if trauma is at the root of any symptoms, a period of time away from work is unlikely to be sufficient to resolve the problem and that other intervention is likely to be important. Finally, they should have access to clear, up-to-date information about available sources of support within and beyond their institution.

4. What Additional Support, At an Institutional Level, Should Be Available to Researchers Undertaking Fieldwork?

Ensuring timely access to appropriately trained counsellors and psychotherapists, while resisting any temptation to medicalize distress, is critical. The provision of such services should include access to a pre-fieldwork consultation with a mental health professional; access to remote consultation as needed throughout fieldwork; and the ability to access specialist trauma psychotherapy should this be needed.

It is also incumbent on institutionally-provided counselling services to communicate clearly their capacities for working with those suffering from trauma as a result of their research. Both conventional talking therapy (e.g. counselling) and more structured specialist trauma therapies (e.g., EMDR) should be made available and researchers should be able to access clear advice regarding the circumstances in which each is most likely to be helpful.

5. What Cultural Change is Needed?

Based on our survey findings, it is clear that a wider shift in attitudes towards trauma in anthropology is also needed. While institutional change can take a long time, a number of shifts at a departmental level could make a significant impact. This begins with the role of departments in creating spaces for discussion of trauma across different levels. Senior academics have a significant role to play in continually affirming to junior academics and students that emotional work is part of the work, and acknowledging the ways that fieldwork had been difficult for them. Creating spaces for academics across all levels to share insights on doing fieldwork could go a long way towards normalising these challenges. Departments could also initiate internal research seminars for staff and students in which 'emotional work' is the subject of each meeting. Another way of doing this can be through the production of videos or podcasts of researchers speaking about the emotional and psychological challenges of their research[5]. These are important ways to counteract the perspective that vicarious trauma is an individual problem, and that researchers should be able to 'handle it' for themselves.

Conclusion

Our survey findings shed light on a problem in anthropology that many of us have been aware of for some time, but which the discipline has not yet adequately faced and addressed. We believe it is now important to develop a tangible programme to move forward. We do not presume to have all the answers about how best to do so and there is certainly further thinking to be done about how best to shape effective interventions. Specific challenges and opportunities will inevitably vary between contexts, departments and institutions. However, in this Teaching Brief we have identified some key questions which will need to be addressed as part of the process. Our perspective shared here has been informed by our survey results, our collective experiences of working in this area, and recent discussions within the discipline, including with other authors in this Special Issue and among colleagues at a recent panel on mental health in anthropology at the 2024 meeting of the European Association of Social Anthropologists. Our hope is that structuring this Teaching Brief around questions will prompt educators to form their own views about how best to move forward, and that together we can make meaningful progress towards a more trauma-informed anthropology.

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[5] For an example from the University of Oxford Social Sciences Division, see: https://www.socsci.ox.ac.uk/fieldworker-experiences

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