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Bearing Witness to Witnesses: Developing the Vicarious Trauma Reflexive Sequence (VTRS) for Emotionally Demanding Fieldwork

Content warning: ***This paper contains descriptions of wartime violence, atrocity, and psychological distress which some readers may find disturbing. Readers are advised to prepare strategies for self-care when engaging with trauma-related material.***

Abstract:

Purpose

This paper explores the emotional impact of conducting qualitative interviews with UK military veterans who testified to the International Criminal tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. It shifts from the participants narratives to focus on the researcher's embodied experience of vicarious trauma, offering a reflexive and theoretical response to the affective demands of field work in emotionally charged contexts.

Design

Using a reflexive autoethnographic approach, the study draws on two in-depth interviews and the researcher's own emotional and somatic responses to trauma-laden testimony. The paper introduces the Vicarious Trauma Reflexive Sequence (VTRS), a six-stage conceptual model developed from the author's experiential narrative and contextualised within the literature on emotional labour, trauma-informed research, and reflexivity

Findings

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The VTRS charts the researcher's journey through emotional exposure, vulnerability, disruption, reflexive processing, integration, and eventual resilience. The model provides a structured lens for understanding how trauma is internalised by researchers and offers insight into the rituals, memory triggers, and coping strategies that support emotional recovery. It demonstrates that vicarious trauma, when critically reflected upon, can function as a site of methodological insight and knowledge production.

Originality/Value

This paper contributes a novel conceptual framework that bridges autoethnographic experience with organisational and methodological theory. The VTRS offers a practical tool for trauma-informed supervision, researcher training, and institutional ethics review, while challenging prevailing norms of stoicism and emotional silence in qualitative organisational research

Keywords:

Emotional Labour, Vicarious Trauma, Reflexivity

Introduction

"*Everything was destroyed. On fire. Smashed. Burned. Cows. Dogs. Children. Women…everything, all just shot...all close distance. They had been shot through the head*." [Andrew].

Vicarious trauma (VT) is increasingly recognised as a significant occupational hazard for researchers conducting qualitative interviews on sensitive topics (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Coles and Mudaly, 2010). While originally conceptualised within clinical contexts (Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995), vicarious trauma has profound implications for academic researchers who work closely with survivors of violence, conflict, or systemic abuse.

This paper explores the emotional toll of sensitive topics using a reflexive autoethnographic lens, focusing specifically on the experiences of the researcher. Drawing on interviews with former UK military personnel who testified before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), it seeks to document the emotional responses of the researcher and propose a conceptual framework for recognising, processing, and mitigating researcher trauma.

Background: The conflict in the Former Yugoslavia and UK Forces involvement

The breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s triggered some of the most violent conflicts in post war Europe. After President Tito's death in 1980, rising nationalism led to Slovenia and Croatia declaring independence in 1991, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992. These moves were resisted by ethnic Serbs and the Yugoslav people's army, sparking brutal conflict characterised by ethnic cleansing, mass killings, and displacement, especially in Bosnia (Burg and Shoup, 1999).

As the humanitarian crisis escalated, the UN imposed an arms embargo in 1991 and deployed UN peacekeepers in 1992. Despite this, atrocities continued, most notably the Srebrenica

massacre in which over 8000 Bosnian Muslims were killed (United Nations, 2005). The UN responded with a stronger NATO-led intervention and the Dayton Peace Accords.

To prosecute war crimes, the UN established the ICTY in The Hague, the first such tribunal since Nuremberg and Tokyo in the second world war (Chiarini, 2024). It set legal precedence on sexual violence, command responsibility, and joint criminal enterprise, indicting 161 individuals (Mégret, 2011). UK forces played a major role from 1992 under Operation Grapple, later contributing to NATO-led IFOR (Implementation Force) and SFOR (Stabilisation Force) peacekeeping missions amid ongoing threats and instability

Vicarious Trauma in Research

Originally developed in therapeutic contexts, VT is recognised as a key risk in qualitative research on sensitive or traumatic topics (Smith et al., 2023; Clark, 2008). The emotional labour embedded in building rapport, bearing witness to suffering, and interpreting narratives can produce what Rager (2005) terms ‘compassion stress’ and may result in disrupted worldviews, intrusive thoughts, and long-term psychological distress (Wasco and Campbell, 2002). VT disproportionately affects those working on topics such as sexual violence, forced migration, war, child abuse, and empathetic engagement (Kennedy and Booth, 2022; Močnik and Ghouri, 2024; Kiyimba and O’Reilly, 2016).

Symptoms associated with VT include emotional exhaustion, numbness, anxiety, sleep disturbance, and feelings of helplessness or guilt (Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995; Sexton, 1999). Researchers may begin to question the purpose of their work or experience bouts of cynicism and disengagement from academic life (Etherington, 2007; 2004). VT also raises methodological and ethical concerns including blurred boundaries, compromised objectivity, and challenges to reflexivity (Vogel and Boyle, 2024). Nylen (2022) illustrates these tensions through an autoethnographic account of university-society collaboration, exposing the

emotional labour and disillusionment experienced by academics operating in liminal spaces between knowledge production and social engagement.

Despite increased attention to participant protection, institutional ethical review boards rarely consider the psychological well-being of researchers themselves (Bloor et al., 2007; Drolet et al., 2023). A culture of stoicism and productivity encourages emotional vulnerability, framing distress as personal failure (Coles et al., 2014). Isolation in long term or fieldwork-based research further heightens the risk of emotional harm (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Researcher vulnerability must be made visible and legitimate within institutional cultures, especially when researching trauma-related themes in emotionally charged environments. As Mavin (2022) demonstrates, research into work-caused trauma among women leaders produced powerful emotional aftershocks for the researcher, challenging norms of detachment and neutrality.

Mitigation strategies identified in the literature include trauma-informed training, reflective practices such as journaling, supervision, peer debriefing; socialisation and hobbying and building researcher care into ethical protocols (AbiNader et al., 2023; Clark, 2008). Calls for institutional reform have emphasised the need for integrated mental health services, peer support networks, and cultural change to normalise discussions of emotional labour and psychological risk (Vogel and Boyle, 2024).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is vital for understanding and managing vicarious trauma in qualitative and trauma-focused research (See: Howe, 2022; Nonomura et al., 2020). It helps researchers examine emotional responses and positionality, fostering ethical awareness and resilience (Dickson-Swift et al., 2022). As vicarious trauma becomes more acknowledged in the social sciences, reflexivity is not only seen as a methodological tool but as an essential process for

safeguarding researcher well-being and maintaining research integrity (McCosker et al., 2001). Reflexivity as a concept has evolved from simple self-awareness to a more complex engagement with positionality, emotion, and power. Finlay (2012) proposes layered reflexivity, with researchers examining not only their influence on the research process but also the emotional and epistemological consequences of their involvement. Bourdieu (2002) offers a theoretical anchor for understanding emotional labour as a product of socially conditioned dispositions, shaped by the researcher's background and institutional location. These perspectives show reflexivity is more than introspection - it is a critical negotiation of identity, field dynamics, and emotion.

Methodology

This research was approved by the author's institution. The retention of the interview data was covered under the conditions of this approval, which required secure storage and anonymisation. To ensure that the current reflexive analysis was conducted in line with best practice, I later submitted a new application for ethical approval specifically for this paper. This second review focused explicitly on the reflexive autoethnographic use of the material, safeguarding the participants, anonymisation, and management of researcher wellbeing. Approval was granted, confirming that the continued retention and use of the data for this reflexive inquiry was ethically appropriate.

The study initially involved conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with former members of the UK military who had testified at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. The original aim was to explore the post-trial experiences of a broader group of witnesses. Some potential participants declined to revisit their testimony, a choice that can be seen not only as self-protection but indirectly may have become an act of safeguarding the me from further vicarious trauma. Those who did agree to participate

exercised agency in choosing to share, while others protected themselves and the researcher through their silence.

The two interviews were secured through a personal connection. Participation was entirely voluntary and not pressured. Participants were provided with full information, reminded of their right to withdraw at any stage, and signposted to veteran welfare services should they have wished. Ethical standards therefore extended beyond confidentiality and anonymity, to include care for their wellbeing in recounting distressing memories.

Following the second interview, it became evident that the testimonies were having a profound emotional impact on me as the researcher. Consequently, the methodological focus shifted. The project became a reflexive exploration of my experiences in relation to vicarious trauma. The approach adopted in this paper, therefore, is one of personal reflection, centred on processes of exposure, vulnerability, emotional reaction, and the strategies employed for mitigation. This reflexive process also foregrounds the embodied nature of researcher distress, which is often expressed through affective, somatic, and relational responses during and after fieldwork (Ellis, 1997).

This paper introduces the Vicarious Trauma Reflexive Sequence (VTRS) as a methodological contribution to the practice of qualitative research in emotionally hazardous settings. While the phenomenon of vicarious trauma is widely acknowledged in therapeutic and humanitarian contexts, its implication for researchers, particularly those engaged in deeply affective, ethically charged fieldwork, remain under-theorised in organisational research.

The VTRS offers a six-stage framework: exposure, emotional vulnerability, disruption and intrusion, reflexive processing, mitigation and integration, and future resilience; that charts the researcher's affective and cognitive trajectory through the experience of vicarious trauma. Unlike conventional approaches that isolate researcher distress as personal pathology, the

VTRS positions emotional disturbance as an epistemically significant process. It reveals how trauma exposure is mediated through embodied rituals, sensory memory, symbolic coping, and relational reflexivity. The model reframes emotional disruption not as an interference with objective data collection, but as a legitimate and generative site of methodological insight; echoing Cunliffe's (2003) call to embrace reflexive engagement as a means of producing meaningful and situated knowledge. The model also contributes to the growing field of autoethnographic inquiry that emphasise how researchers' emotionally process trauma through embodied awareness, relational ethics, and reflexive storytelling (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015).

This model contributes to qualitative research by offering a structured, experience-based tool that can be adapted for use in researcher training, supervision, and institutional ethics procedures. It extends existing work and reflexivity by foregrounding the nonlinear, somatic, and often unspoken aspects of researcher vulnerability. Moreover, it invites research communities to interrogate the emotional labour implicit in knowledge production and consider trauma-informed infrastructures as integral to responsible organisational scholarship.

Case Studies: Witnesses of horror

While moments of distress arose during interviews, participants retained control of the process and were offered breaks, reassurance, and information about support services. Both participants chose to continue, demonstrating agency in decision to share their stories.

Case Study A: Andrew (a Non-Commissioned Officer) – Deployment, witnessing atrocities, and testifying at the War Crimes Tribunal

Andrew provided an emotionally powerful account of his deployment to Bosnia in the 1990s. His experience highlights the personal, moral, and psychological complexities faced by

military personnel in conflict zones, particularly those who witnessed atrocities and later provided evidence to the ICTY.

Deployment came with little warning. "*The actual whole process of getting ready to go was short and fast*," Andrew recalled. His unit was one of the first to arrive, initially tasked with peacekeeping duties. They were stationed in Vitez, where they endured freezing conditions, makeshift facilities, and a complete absence of comfort or privacy. Despite this, Andrew described the early days as formative: "*it was a good time for bonding and gelling*," he said, adding that he used this time to prepare his soldiers for what lay ahead, even though none of them truly understood what was coming.

I felt the enjoyment and camaraderie in his memories; there was excitement as he described the early days, with soldiers playfully navigating fields in their armoured vehicles, bonding through shared challenge and laughter.

The situation in the country deteriorated rapidly. Initially, the mission involved food aid and showing a military presence, but it soon escalated into navigating an increasingly violent and chaotic environment. Ethnic factions splintered and turned on each other. Andrew recounted being ambushed, coming under fire, and entering abandoned towns marked by violence and destruction.

"*People were getting executed and all sorts of mad things were happening. I remember us going to a medical centre which was a prominent building by the athletics track. We had to get out of our* [armoured] *vehicles and go and clear the building…clearing room by room. Make sure no one was there or hostages or anything like that. We didn't know what we were going into. A local told us that the hospital had gone underground in a supermarket area. After being in that building where we found a couple of bodies we then moved out. We went to this supermarket, now underground hospital and downstairs there was* [sic] *soldiers who had*

been shot, civilians who had been shot. Then we started learning they'd been tortured as well. People were being tortured because they weren't doing as they were told or didn't want to go and fight. The next day we got told to go to a place, [and] *as we headed towards it you could see all the smoke in the distance.*"

Andrew recounted heading toward a village, driving slowly past a wood mill. The armoured vehicles came to a bend in the road.

"*…loads of people just ran out of a ditch on the side of the road…I told the driver to stop. They were all just crying and they had babies in their hands. I found one that spoke a bit of English, and I said to him "what you do is - stay in the ditch. We're going to cover you up…*"

There was a long silence. I felt a wave of guilt, fearing I had triggered something deeply distressing. Speaking over the phone to Andrew, I felt powerless to offer comfort. I ensured my voice was calm and asked several times if he was alright. He assured me he was and wanted to continue.

[Broken voice] "*…I remember putting them all back in the ditch…. cut some branches off and put them all over them so they couldn't be seen. We told them to stay there and not to come out. I said, 'I promise you, I'll come back.*'"

Andrew and the men who had helped, returned to the armoured vehicles and continued along the road. They had an issue with the navigation equipment and stopped. Then he noticed a sight in the immediate distance that shocked him:

"…lots and lots and lots of soldiers there. All celebrating and drinking beer and firing guns in the air. So, we turned our vehicles round and were pointing at them. They were just cheering and everything. I think…no, not think. I know that at that point it wasn't hard to put one and one together and get two [that they had undertaken the killings]. With the vehicle's

cannon pointed at the soldiers: "*I just wanted to...crease* [kill] *them, if you know what I mean. But, hey ho! – would've been me in the dock,"*

Continuing to the village, Andrew and his soldiers made a terrible discovery. "*Everything was destroyed. On fire. Smashed. Burned. Cows. Dogs. Children. Women*… [voice break] *everything. All just shot. All close distance. They had been shot through the head*." It went silent again and I could hear him weeping. I wanted to stop the interview as I feared for him and again repeatedly asked if he wanted to carry on. He rallied and recalled returning to the ditch.

"*…we got 13* [people] *into our vehicle alone, from that ditch. We put 13 in. I know one was a disabled child, and she died. One was a very old woman who couldn't stop cuddling me and kissing me and crying all the time."*

Andrew was called to testify at two tribunals. He was not forced to participate but never hesitated: "*you can't let people get away with this... it was always a 'yes'*." Despite this resolve, he received no preparation or psychological support from the military. The tribunal process was taxing, with lawyers often attempting to undermine his memory and integrity. "*They're trying to catch you out all the time*," he said. However, he attended with his own records including maps, photographs, and daily notes as evidence.

The emotional impact of these experiences continue to shape Andrew's life. He admits to having a shorter temper, recurring emotional triggers – such as a particular road crossing that reminds him of Bosnia, and a deepened sense of responsibility in both personal and professional settings. He has maintained contact with one of the survivors he rescued, describing the relationship as personal and rewarding. Andrew's case illustrates not only the enduring psychological effects of military service in war zones but also the sense of moral

duty that compels some veterans to ensure justice. His account underscores the importance of support mechanisms for those who carry the burden of truth long after the war has ended.

Case B: Ben (a senior officer) – The emotional toll of testifying at a war Crimes Tribunal

Interviewed online on MS Teams. One of the most significant challenges Ben faced was the emotional difficulty of remembering and recounting events from a highly traumatic environment. He noted that trauma disrupts memory, making accurate recall difficult: "*in the thick of it, I didn't even know what day it was*." He had to comb through radio logs and Operational Diaries to reconstruct events, acknowledging the limitations of relying on second or third hand reports. This necessity to piece together fragmented memories heightened the emotional toll and reinforced the sense of vulnerability he experienced throughout the process.

Ben recalled receiving what became inaccurate reports about a village under attack. Consequently, he deployed armoured vehicles to the wrong location, and by the time the error was corrected, a massacre had already occurred. He is blameless, but it remains a heavy burden which he continues to work through. At this point he stared pointedly into the middle distance from his view – but directly into the camera at me. The hurt was very clearly etched on his face.

Another particularly distressing aspect of Ben's experience was his treatment by the WCT defence lawyers, who he said sought to damage his credibility at every opportunity. These lawyers, he explained, scrutinised every aspect of his personal life and integrity: "*they will do anything to cast doubt - if a skeleton is in the cupboard, they will try to find it*." He recounted being accused by the defence lawyer, of having an extra marital affair in Bosnia, "*if you cheated on your wife how can we believe anything you say here*." He realised they had confused him with another officer and asked the judges if he could sue them for slander, the

judges said no but warned the defence to check their sources. He was repeatedly accused by the defence of fabrication, "*On what day did this alleged situation happen, if you can't remember the exact day how can we believe you*?" He was warned by the prosecution that being too well prepared or word perfect could undermine a witness's credibility - a conundrum. The adversarial approach left witnesses exposed and intimidated, especially those unprepared for such personal attacks.

Ben also emphasised the intensity and isolation of the tribunal experience. After reliving traumatic events during testimony, he felt emotionally discarded: "*after they have finished with you, the defence move on, but you have lived it*."

He felt dirty after testifying, suggesting a deep sense of moral violation. On the way back to the UK from his first WCT, he purchased a small flawless diamond in the Netherlands. He said that he needed to hold "*something pure and perfect*." He felt there was no other mechanism to feel clean again, no post tribunal support structure, and no formal care to address the psychological aftermath. The absence of welfare or decompression systems had left him with unresolved emotional scars.

Ben reflected that not everyone can handle this level of personal and professional scrutiny, and many potential witnesses may choose or be told not to testify because of it. He noted that credibility comes at a cost, requiring individuals to be upfront and emotionally resilient from the outset. But without proper preparation and emotional support, testifying can become not just a legal challenge but a deeply personal trauma. Ben's account highlights the moral, psychological, and institutional complexity of war crimes tribunals. While he recognised the importance of justice, he also struggled with reconciling his anger, confusion, and eventual empathy for individuals caught "*in evil times*". His reflections underscore the need for better witness preparation, emotional aftercare, and a greater understanding of the human cost borne

by those who speak out. At three subsequent trials he felt better prepared for the style of questioning, although it remained confrontational.

Commonalities and differences in the case studies.

Both Andrew and Ben experienced significant emotional distress as the result of giving evidence at the war crimes tribunal. Neither witness received instruction on preparation or formal emotional or psychological support from the military or tribunal system. Both men described the tribunal process as adversarial and emotionally taxing. Each relied heavily on personal documentation such as maps, photographs, and logs to prepare for the testimony.

There are differences between the two cases. Andrew's account is marked by intense emotion and audible distress as he relived incidents involving civilian deaths. Ben's reflections, by contrast, were more analytical, focusing on the structural and ethical dimensions of the tribunal. He often paused before continuing, suggesting internal processing. Andrew centred on what he witnessed and a moral imperative to testify, rooted in direct trauma and a desire for justice. Ben focused more on the burden of command, process, how the system operated, the psychological demands, and the defence's tactics. Unlike Andrew, who mentioned personal reconnections, Ben reflected on moral ambiguity and came to understand, though not forgive, former enemies. Andrew, while not without empathy, maintained a clear distinction between victim and perpetrator.

Aftermath

During this period, I received no institutional support. I did not ask for it. At the time I underestimated my own vulnerability and did not anticipate the need for structured aftercare. In retrospect, strategies such as supervision, peer debriefing, and reflective journaling – highlighted in the work of Dickson-Swift et al., (2022) would have been valuable, but were absent. The decision to set aside the original project was pragmatic but may also have been

unintentionally protective, as I worked through intrusive memories and sought to gain equilibrium.

Immediately following the first interview, I was overwhelmed by emotion, resulting in unexpected and uncontrollable weeping. The emotions I felt were varied and intense: grief at the suffering they described, guilt at my own comparative safety, a sense of vulnerability. Alongside these emotions, I felt anxiety that in inviting them to revisit their testimony I might have triggered feelings they had sought to contain, despite the steps I had taken to mitigate the risks. As a researcher listening to the stories of these brave men, I was not only absorbing factual testimony but also engaging with their unresolved trauma. Such reactions are consistent with findings that qualitative researchers may experience immediate and intensive emotional dysregulation following exposure to traumatic accounts. The emotional responses to the interviews did not dissipate quickly. I experienced significant sleep disruption, often lying awake mentally inhabiting the scenes described to me, vividly reconstructing events that I had not witnessed but now carried with an imagined proximity. This ‘empathetic imagination’, though central to qualitative understanding, can become a source of psychological distress, as it blurs the boundaries between participant experience and researcher subjectivity (Etherington, 2007).

These experiences were not episodic or isolated but have persisted in various forms over time. I had not kept field notes, an omission which I now recognise as weakness in my practice. Partly this was because I did not fully appreciate, in the moment, how deeply I was affected. Only later did I understand the embodied intrusions that stayed with me: nights of sleepless rumination, the way placing my phone on my desk in the same position as during Andrew’s interview would instantly bring the conversation back; the ritual of then moving the phone deliberately as a way of disrupting that memory. As Rager (2005) notes, embodied

triggers such as objects, places, or gestures can provoke somatic memories of traumatic fieldwork encounters.

The road crossing mentioned during Andrew's account resembled one near my home and became a persistent trigger. Another embodied reaction centred on a pair of boots I owned. Ben told a side-story about his military boots being contaminated with human remains from an Improvised Explosive Device during the second Gulf War, I found myself unable to wear mine. Initially put into storage, they were eventually discarded in a symbolic act of release. This resonates with the findings of Puvimanasinghe et al., (2015), who suggests that trauma can become materially encoded in objects, leading researchers to enact small rituals of separation as coping mechanisms.

Perhaps the most enduring psychological imprint came after the account involving the deaths of children during a massacre. Since that moment, I developed a private, habitual gesture: kissing my sons on the top of their heads each time I see them. While this act might appear benign, it is laden with meaning. It has become an embodied reminder of fragility and grief, a non-verbalised attempt to affirm life in the wake of imagined loss. Perhaps it is also linked to an experience in my own life where I have carried a baby’s coffin to a grave – a potential influencing factor noted later in this paper. Vicarious trauma can surface in the form of protective behaviours, rituals, and relational intensities in the researcher's private life as an effort to integrate the unbearable knowledge acquired (Ellis, 1997).

These responses show how emotional research blurs personal and professional life. The impact of bearing witness to trauma second-hand is not only intellectual but also deeply embodied and affective. As such, these experiences call for a more trauma-aware methodological practice - one that validates emotional response, prioritises researcher well-

being, and acknowledges that reflexivity must also account for the invisible effects that field and research work can leave.

Although there has clearly been negative consequence as described above, an unexpected outcome of this research was a shift in how I perceive personal discomfort. Confronted with stress or frustration, I will naturally react to it; but more regularly find myself instinctively measuring my experiences against the profound anguish described by those who were reliving traumatic moments to describe them to me. This quiet act of comparison provides a sense of proportion, reminding me that many of life's ordinary struggles are, in fact, markers of stability and peace. What once felt burdensome often now feels like a privilege - the normality of daily life itself has become something to notice, appreciate, and celebrate. In this way exposure to the testimony of others has not only left its emotional imprint but has also cultivated a deeper gratitude for the simplicity of the present.

Vicarious Trauma Reflexive Sequence (VTRS)

As I reflected on the process of documenting the testimonies of Andrew and Ben, I recognised that I had reached the final stage of what I now conceptualise as the Vicarious Trauma Reflexive Sequence (VTRS) at Figure 1.

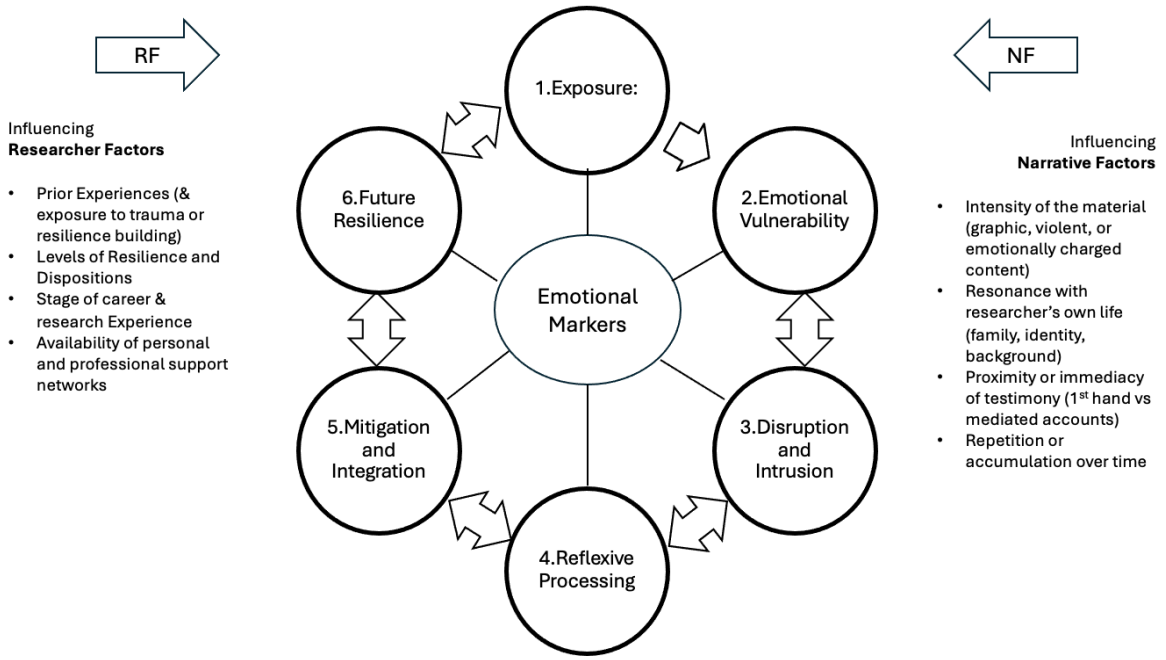


Figure 1: The Vicarious Trauma Reflexive Sequence (VTRS)

1.Exposure. The initial phase marks the researcher's first contact with traumatic material, often through raw, detailed participant narratives. For example, hearing Andrew's account of atrocities during the interview initiated a cascade of emotional responses including shock, empathy, and cognitive overload, indicating a deep, immediate absorption in the participants experience.

2.Emotional Vulnerability. In this phase the researcher begins to internalise the trauma content. Emotional boundaries blur, leading to somatic and affective responses such as weeping post-interview and identifying specific sensory or material triggers. The emotional markers such as anxiety, guilt, and helplessness, reveal embodied experience of distress.

3.Disruption and Intrusion. Trauma begins to disrupt daily life, manifesting in persistent psychological and systematic symptoms. Examples include nocturnal rumination, behavioural changes such as repositioning objects or discarding clothing, and symbolic familial rituals.

These responses signal deeper intrusions of trauma, including hyper-vigilance and ritualised coping.

4.Reflexive Processing. In this phase, the researcher begins to consciously engage with the traumas emotional and intellectual impact. Acts such as reorienting the research focus or writing as a cathartic exercise represent efforts to process and make meaning. Emotional complexity emerges such as grief, ambivalence, and self-doubt, alongside insights into one's own psychological state.

5.Mitigation and Integration. Here, coping strategies are developed, allowing the researcher to integrate traumatic experiences into a revised self-concept. Finding peace in mundane routines and letting go of the emotionally charged items signifies emotional resolution and personal growth. This phase is marked by increased self-awareness, gratitude, and adaption to stressors whilst maintaining psychological wellbeing.

6.Future Resilience. This final stage envisions a future in which the researcher is better equipped to manage vicarious trauma. Through prior integration of traumatic experiences, they gain the tools to safeguard their emotional well-being while upholding research integrity. This stage signals psychological preparedness, enabling sustained, ethical engagement with future trauma narratives.

Researchers will not experience the VTRS in identical ways. The model is influenced by two broad sets of factors shown at its periphery.

Researcher factors include prior experiences, levels of resilience, and personality traits, all of which may shape how quickly or whether individuals move through the stages. These differences underline that the VTRS is not prescriptive but a heuristic, open to adoption according to personal and contextual circumstances.

Narrative factors also play a powerful role. Some testimonies may be so graphic, resonant, or proximate that they overwhelm even experienced researchers. As one reviewer reflected in response to this paper, the soldiers' stories carried such effective weight that they risked eclipsing the reflexive data. This demonstrates that it is not only the researcher's disposition but also the intensity in character of the material itself that determines how vicarious trauma is encountered and processed.

These influencing researcher and narrative factors shape both the intensity of disruption and the possibility of progression through the stages meaning that the VTRS should be understood as flexible and recursive rather than a fixed sequence.

Embodied illustrations of the VTRS

To ground the VTRS in lived reality, the following section illustrates how its stages became visible through my own embodied experience.

Looking back, I can now see how each stage of the VTRS was lived through my own embodied experience. Stage 2, emotional vulnerability, was marked by weeping after interviews and a sense of bodily exhaustion. Stage 3, disruption and intrusion, showed itself in nights of broken sleep and the way my phone on the desk instantly pulled back into Andrew's testimony until I deliberately moved it as a ritual to disrupt the memory. Stage 4, reflexive processing, emerged in the writing process itself, when I began to reframe what had happened and recognise the depth of its impact. Stage 5, mitigation and integration, was evident in symbolic acts of release, such as discarding boots that had become contaminated in my imagination through Ben's story, and in cultivating small daily practices of gratitude. Stage 6, future resilience, is represented by this paper itself: returning to the material with stability and the capacity to shape it into a conceptual model that might help others. These

embodied illustrations serve to anchor the model in lived practice and provide the basis for the broader discussion that follows.

Discussion

The Vicarious Trauma Reflexive Sequence (VTRS) developed through this study provides a novel framework for understanding how qualitative researchers experience, internalise, and ultimately manage emotional trauma encountered in the field. In contextualising this reflexive model within the testimonies of war crimes witnesses and the researchers' responses, this discussion draws out the implications for emotional labour, reflexivity, and the politics of knowledge production in organisational research.

Emotional Labour and Researcher Subjectivity

This study extends Hochschild's (1983) foundational concept of emotional labour beyond formal workplaces and into the research process itself. The interviews and their aftermath did not simply produce affective responses, they demanded sustained emotional management, somatic awareness, and cognitive realignment. The researcher's emotional labour was not peripheral to the inquiry but central to it, embedded within the process of knowledge generation. The VTRS positions this labour as cyclical and developmental, rather than incidental or pathological, thereby reframing researcher distress as part of a dynamic and potentially transformative epistemic process. It supports calls from Cunliffe (2003) and Finlay (2012) to legitimise the researcher's affective presence in the field. Emotional entanglement is not presented here as a loss of objectivity, but rather as a site of methodological richness that opens access to insights otherwise obscured by traditional notions of neutrality or detachment.

By treating emotional vulnerability as both data and process, the VTRS reorients the role of the researcher from passive observer to affective subject. While Cunliffe (2003) proposes

reflexivity as an ongoing dialogical engagement with one's experience in relation to context and others, and Finlay (2012) articulates layered reflexivity as a method for interrogating positionality and relational dynamics, the VTRS extends these concepts by foregrounding the somatic and trauma-induced disruptions that occur within the researcher's body and psyche. The model does not merely reflect on researcher experience, it tracks the involuntary, often pre-reflective intrusions, rituals, and sensory memory associations that emerge in the wake of vicarious trauma. This attention to the material and embodied symptoms of emotional impact distinguishes the VTRS from existing models of reflexivity, which typically emphasise cognitive awareness or social positioning. Instead, this approach theorises the researcher's emotional rupture as a primary mode of knowledge formation and insists on its methodological legitimacy. The VTRS moves reflexivity beyond dialogical introspection and into the terrain of embodied trauma epistemology, where knowledge arises not only from reflection, but from the disruption, reconstitution, and ritualisation of the researcher's emotional life

Organisational Silence and Institutional Complicity

A further contribution lies in the paper's implicit critique of the institutional conditions under which emotionally hazardous research is conducted. As some scholars have noted, academic cultures often reward stoicism and productivity while downplaying research of vulnerability (Coles et al., 2014; Vogel and Hazelton-Boyle, 2024). In both case narratives and personal reflections, this paper surfaces the absence of preparation, supervision, or debriefing for researchers exposed to secondary trauma. However, while institutions undoubtedly hold responsibility for establishing trauma-informed protocols and resourcing researcher care, it is also arguable that researchers themselves must bear some responsibility for recognising the emotional risks inherent in their work. This includes cultivating anticipatory reflexivity, engaging with literature on researcher well-being, and integrating self-care as a

methodological concern. The VTRS offers a framework that responds to this dual burden, providing both a structured vocabulary for researcher's self-awareness and a conceptual tool to inform institutional practices and training. I have considered my lack of preparation and the absence of supervision or debriefing as exemplifying the institutional silence surrounding researcher wellbeing. These omissions were not incidental but systemic, reflecting how academic cultures normalise stoicism and leave researchers to manage vicarious trauma alone. A practical implication of this work is the need for ethics committees to explicitly address researcher wellbeing. Provision for supervision, debriefing, and trauma-aware care should be integral to the review processes, alongside participant protection. What strikes me in reflection is that researchers may not fully recognise the risks they are facing until after they have begun to gather data. The problem then is not simply the absence of institutional safeguards, but the inability of researchers themselves to anticipate how trauma will affect them until they are already immersed in it. This is why models such as the VTRS matter: they provide a language and a framework for recognising risk where, in the moment, the researcher may not.

VTRS: Conceptual and Methodological Impact

The VTRS offers a practical and conceptual advancement in how emotional disruption in research is understood, anticipated, and responded to. Rather than simply illustrating the consequences of vicarious trauma, the model serves as an applied reflexive tool, a means of recognising, naming, and processing the embodied symptoms of trauma as they emerge. Its structured format can be used by researchers as a self-monitoring framework, by supervisors as a diagnostic aid, and by institutions as a basis for developing trauma-aware training and ethics protocols.

It moves beyond conventional accounts of reflexivity by capturing the pre-reflective, symbolic, and somatic dimensions of emotional labour often omitted from methodological discourse. Unlike clinical models such as Secondary Trauma Stress (Figley, 1995), Compassion Fatigue (Figley, 2013), or Vicarious Trauma as formulated within Constructivist Self-Development Theory (McCann & Pearlman, 1990), or the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (2013) which are designed primarily for diagnosis and treatment, the VTRS is not therapeutic but methodological: it foregrounds the researcher's own embodied disruptions as data that shape inquiry. It invites a shift from viewing trauma as an interruption to viewing it as an organising principle of knowledge production. Through this lens, it offers language for articulating how emotion and memory shape the researcher's epistemic position, not only retrospectively, but prospectively and organisationally. This prospective and organisational utility lies in positioning trauma not as a private aftermath, but as a structurally anticipatable dimension of knowledge production, one that demands collective responsibility and systemic preparedness.

Conclusion

This paper has traced the development of the Vicarious Trauma Reflexive Sequence (VTRS) through the lived experience of conducting emotionally demanding fieldwork with military witnesses to atrocity. In doing so, it has argued that the 'data' of vicarious trauma lies not only in participants' narratives but also in the embodied and symbolic disruptions experienced by the researcher. The model demonstrates how such disruptions can be named, processed, and integrated, offering a structured vocabulary for recognising risk that is often invisible until after it has been encountered.

The contribution of this work is threefold:

Theoretical contribution: It extends reflexive methodologies by positioning trauma as an organising principle of knowledge production rather than a peripheral interruption. In doing so, it advances theory by demonstrating that embodied disruption is not simply a personal response but a generative epistemic resource, one that shapes how knowledge is produced, validated and shared.

Methodological contribution: It provides a heuristic that can help researchers anticipate and work through their own vulnerability, distinguishing itself from clinical models by treating embodied disruption as methodological data rather than pathology.

Practical contribution: It can inform well-being infrastructures, early-warning systems, and supervisory conversations, helping embed researcher care into the fabric of qualitative practice.

Ultimately, the VTRS does not remove the trauma of bearing witness to witnesses, but it may help researchers become more aware of its potential, offering a way of recognising and working with that trauma. Its purpose is not only to account for my own experience but to provide a guide that other researchers can adapt when faced with emotionally hazardous fieldwork.

Future Research

Future research should test the adaptability of the VTRS across different contexts, with particular attention to how researcher and narrative factors shape progression through its stages. Systematic testing could involve methods such as longitudinal diary studies, survey-based evaluations of researcher wellbeing, or supervisory trials that assess the model's utility as a reflective and training tool.

Data availability Statement

Data are not available for sharing, as participants consented to its use solely for this study. Witness names have been pseudonymised to ensure anonymity.

[This list used software to ensure correct journal specific referencing.]

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