Mitigating Vicarious Trauma in Conducting Sensitive Research

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CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**;

KEYWORDS

sensitive research; racism; social support; vicarious trauma; compassion fatigue;

STUDYING INTERPERSONAL RACISM

The sensitive nature of our research (interpersonal racism) requires that we pay careful attention to the psychological safety and emotional well-being of both participants and members of the research team, and we hope to share the strategies we have used to help mitigate the negative consequences of sharing and vicariously experiencing deeply personal, vulnerable stories. In this position paper we share the insights we have gained in recruiting for and conducting a semi-structured interview study about people's experiences with racism and their post-incident social support-seeking strategies.

Recruitment Study Description: "We are researchers from CMU conducting an interview and survey study to understand how people experience racism in personal interactions (e.g., slights, insults, microaggressions, hate speech, threats, physical violence, etc.)."

Recruitment Study Details: "We will ask participants to describe an incident in which they were the target of such racism or racialized aggression, which may have resulted in strong negative emotions such as anger or fear."

Sidebar 1: Excerpts from a recruitment flyer for an interview study. We use candid but sensitive language.

Researcher Self-Disclosure: "I have a lot of personal experience with racialized aggression as do many friends and family and community members, but in this work I want to take a look more broadly at how other people experience these events and specifically how they cope with them and address them after the fact."

Sidebar 2: Sample text introducing the researcher's stake in this work.

During our study design process, we incorporate special considerations in addressing the sensitive nature of the research for participants by carefully iterating and screening the language in both our recruitment and study materials. We share suggestions from this work that may be of use to researchers more broadly who speak with participants about sensitive topics.

Another key issue that arose, surprisingly, throughout the research process, was that the researchers on our team began experiencing levels of stress and fatigue outside of what may be considered to be the 'normal' amount. We reached out to friends and professionals in adjacent fields and learned about work on 'vicarious trauma.' Here we share definitions of vicarious trauma and early warning signs that researchers may be experiencing it, and broach the question of how researchers may mitigate it.

EMPATHY AND ALLYSHIP

For participants, discussing personal stories of experienced racism can be challenging both because participants may not know if they can trust the researcher in highly vulnerable self-disclosure and because the discussion runs the risk of bringing up bad memories and resurfacing trauma. We approach these concerns by directly acknowledging these risks with potential participants throughout the research process as well as by disclosing our personal relationships to the topic at hand.

In recruitment materials we are careful to fully disclose that participants will discuss a sensitive topic (Sidebar 1). In designing the flyer we acknowledge the topics that will be under discussion candidly without presenting images or language that may be triggering (e.g., graphic descriptions of experiences of racism).

During the interview, we open with personal self-disclosure that acknowledges the interviewer's experiences with racism (Sidebar 2). We utilize research practices that prioritize establishing trust and a rapport with participants [8]. We want to establish with the participant that their experiences are valid and valued. We additionally explicitly state that they are in an environment where we will ask questions repeatedly for the sake of clarity but that we are never questioning the nature of their own experiences. Humanistic psychologists utilize a similar approach - emphasizing importance of non-judgmental responding and unconditional positive regard in eliciting others' personal experiences. Our aim is that this more therapeutic approach can result in psychological benefits rather than repeated trauma when talking about difficult experiences.

Finally, at the conclusion of the interview, we provided every participant with a list of local and national resources for peer support groups and services. While the validation and informational support that we prioritize in our interviews is believed to provide therapeutic benefits in terms of processing and providing positive psychological buffers against trauma (e.g., through understanding and defining microaggressive stressors [7]), we want participants to feel they have resources in the long-term should the need to unpack the experiences they shared with us further arise.

VICARIOUS TRAUMA

For researchers, it can be emotionally and psychologically exhausting to listen to traumatic stories, especially those including prejudice and violence [3]. In our interview process, we began to notice that interviewers and note-takers were fatigued and that their professional and personal lives were impacted (e.g., quicker to feel irritated, feeling that friends and families problems are less important, difficulty in talking about feelings, loss of sleep). We reached out to clinical psychologists and therapists who pointed us to literature on "vicarious trauma" or "compassion fatigue" [4, 5]. Vicarious trauma describes the emotional residue of exposure that counselors have from working with people as they are hearing their trauma stories and become witness to the pain, fear, and terror that trauma survivors have endured (i.e., 'the cost of caring' [3]).

Approaches to dealing with vicarious trauma should be broken down into both individual and institutional types of support. For individuals, Clinical Psychologist Judith Pierson writes that the "ABC's of Addressing Vicarious Trauma" are awareness (of one's own needs and resources), balance (of taking care of others and taking care of yourself), and connection (to yourself, others, and something larger) [6]. Some self-care techniques in this vein might include physical exercise, social refueling (e.g., intentionally making time for fun social activities), spiritual refueling (e.g., reading inspirational materials, walking in nature, engaging in spiritual practice that is meaningful to you), journaling, affirming your values to yourself, etc. Finally, it is key to recognize that your compassion makes you better at your job. Developing empathy and perspective-taking for one's research participants is valuable in most domains. For example, the Emancipatory Action Research method positions the researcher not as a "friendly outsider" but as someone who is aligned with those whom they are conducting research with [2]. Sensitive work often requires a deeper level of compassion and empathy, as well as researcher vulnerability, because, for example, interviewers may directly express their own similar experiences.

While self-care practices are important, especially when it comes to identifying early signs of fatigue, the most impact is achieved when there is structural institutional support to complement individual strategies [1]. That is to say, it is not solely the responsibility of the researcher to manage their psychological response to dealing with sensitive research. There has been some suggestion of what these institutional practices might look like (e.g., balancing work load by shifting departmental responsibilities temporarily, creating support groups to debrief on difficulties of conducting sensitive work), but there is a strong need for more exploration in this space.

WORKSHOP PARTICIPATION

In participating in the Sensitive HCI workshop, we hope to contribute to the group our understanding of vicarious trauma as a framework for how researchers may be impacted by engaging with sensitive topics, particularly in performing qualitative research such as interviews.

We hope to gain insight on how peers working on sensitive research similarly create safe spaces for participants as well as navigate the tension between serving as an 'objective' researcher and desire to establish rapport and display compassion as participants disclose sensitive topics. We also hope to discuss more about how institutions can better support researchers performing sensitive research.

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