



“WE CARRY IT AROUND WITH US”: THE IMPACT OF PERFORMING EMOTIONAL LABOUR IN TRAUMA-LADEN AND SENSITIVE RESEARCH

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Abstract

The responsibility researchers must have for their human participants is a crucial focus in any ethically sound research methods training. In particular, the responsibility that we should actively avoid causing any psychological harm. However, though researchers are highly attuned to this, when it comes to our own psychological wellbeing we are often not as diligent. In the course of our work, the weight of emotional labour can be profound, and the potential risks of psychological harm ever present. And this is particularly the case for those of us who undertake sensitive and trauma-laden research. In this article, we three authors discuss our experiences of conducting such research and subsequently, the ways in which we perform emotional labour. Using first person narratives, we reflect on our research with women survivors of domestic abuse, male perpetrators of domestic abuse, and trans people accessing community justice services and the staff who work with them. Our accounts explore how we enact empathy, the ways in which we hold and process participants’ stories of trauma, the challenges of balancing multiple, and often competing professional and personal identities, and the unrecognised, extended timeframe of emotional labour – where the emotional demand of such research means engagement substantially before and substantially after data collection. In drawing all this together, we reflect on how researchers in similar fields mitigate the effects of emotional labour in conducting trauma-laden and sensitive research and conclude by offering six recommendations of our own on this topic.

Keywords

Emotional labour, trauma, mental health, empathy, identity, wellbeing

Introduction

Conducting trauma-laden or sensitive research can be incredibly rewarding – allowing the researcher precious access to people’s inner-worlds and, when done right, perhaps laying the foundations for change, development and growth. Yet, such research can also be emotionally exhausting, requiring the researcher to give more of themselves than they anticipated at the outset (MacIver et al., 2024) and with the impact being profoundly felt through the degradation of that researcher’s mental health and wellbeing (Smith et al., 2021). Though many person-facing professions (e.g., probation, NHS, mental health services, social services) have drawn important attention to the risks to the worker in navigating client trauma, especially where it comes to emotional labour and vicarious trauma (e.g. McFadden, 2020; Shepherd, 2022; Ellis Devitt, 2024; Phillips et al., 2024), the risks to researchers working in such fields has received notably less attention (Moran and Asquith, 2020; Smith et al., 2021; MacIver et al., 2024; Gatwiri et al., 2025). Whether this is because of false notions that the research process is in some way objective, with researchers able to remain neutral in their endeavours (Smith et al., 2021) or that by sharing the challenges faced in conducting such work, we might face criticism of our professionalism (Mallon and Elliott, 2019), the emotional labour involved in undertaking sensitive and trauma-laden research has largely been ‘invisibilise[d]’ (MacIver et al., 2024). This feeling is captured powerfully in the words of Gatwiri et al. (2025):

It is an open secret that researchers, particularly in Western contexts have traditionally been advised to detach themselves from their participants and stories they tell to maintain “objectivity”. Under the “guise of objectivity” and the neoliberal culture of ‘getting on with it’ researchers are harmed in a myriad of ways due to the barriers to help-seeking and misrecognition of the symptomology of burn-out, compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma (Gatwiri et al., 2025:2)

In response, an emergent literature base has begun to advocate strongly for social researchers to share their experiences and learning, with academics from across the globe expressing the impact of sensitive and trauma-laden research on their own mental health and wellbeing (e.g., Fohring, 2020; Moran and Asquith, 2020; Waters et al., 2020; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021; Keller and Pierce, 2024; MacIver et al., 2024; Gatwiri et al., 2025).

In articulating the nuances of these challenges, scholars engaged in emotionally demanding research have given considerable space to unpacking the role of emotional labour in their practice (e.g., Nelson, 2020; Waters et al., 2020; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2021; Gatwiri et al., 2025; MacIver et al., 2024). Emotional labour – a concept brought to us through the work of Hochschild (1983), involves the process of managing one’s emotions as a requirement of certain professions. Within the context of qualitative research, emotional labour can take several forms. Rogers-Shaw et al. (2021:3) suggest, it occurs where a researcher listens to participants’ traumatic stories while still being required to express ‘*culturally appropriate reactions*’. Or where a researcher distances themselves from personal feelings when interviewing about sensitive issues. And Waters et al. (2020:2) discuss its presence where the researcher is obliged to ‘*adopt multiple personae, sometimes simultaneously, such as participant, observer, researcher, expert and novice*’. Such role changing, we note, will almost inherently expect the self-management of emotions in order to achieve the research goals. To these points we firmly agree. Indeed, so common is emotional labour in the work of social researchers, especially those working in sensitive research fields, that we are to be forgiven in forgetting we are enacting it at all. As MacIver et al. (2024:7) comment while reflecting on their own experiences of emotional labour in conducting sensitive research – ‘*we ‘felt’ it... but initially did not recognise or ‘name’ it*’. A hazard of the occupation no doubt familiar to many of us.

Others exploring the impact of conducting emotionally demanding research have brought attention to the effects of vicarious trauma as a cost and consequence of researching such topics (e.g., Fohring, 2020; Moran and Asquith, 2020; Smith et al., 2021). Vicarious trauma – occurring where people who are indirectly exposed to trauma (e.g., through reading or hearing of it) experience psychological distress because of that exposure (Burman et al., 2018) – can create feelings of mistrust, low self-esteem, pessimism, alienation, and withdrawal in the individual (Lee, 2017:375). Pearlman and Caringi (2009:202) describe it as the ‘*negative transformation*’ resulting from ‘*empathic engagement with trauma survivors and their trauma material*’. For researchers working in highly sensitive and trauma-laden fields, the risks of vicarious trauma are often tremendously high. Moran and Asquith (2020), consider its effects through drawing on their experiences working on a project involving survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and another involving quantitative analysis of police hate crime reports. In taking us through their journeys, we reflect on how they engaged with trauma in their research, and the broad and far-reaching effects it had on them. Among other concluding points, we warn of the ‘*absent present*’ (p.8) of vicarious trauma in criminological research – always around but not well recognised as a health risk, and largely unaddressed in academic research design, training and ethics protocols. All leading to a significant risk of researcher isolation and stigma (p.9), with the subsequent mental health and wellbeing issues that then brings.

The following paper explores such themes in our own work. In sharing our experiences, we take the less common approach of providing first person accounts, returning ourselves, and the readers, to the encounters that shaped us. In the first instance, Kerry shares her memories of interviewing victims/survivors of domestic abuse (DA), considering the role of emotional labour in such work. David then reflects on interviewing perpetrators of DA, seeking to regulate and reconcile empathy and compassion alongside feelings of shock and revulsion. And finally, Jess takes us through their recent work on a project exploring the experiences of trans people accessing community justice spaces, and the staff who work with them. In doing so, Jess, talks of the challenges of balancing the demands of research alongside their own queer identity and trans activism.

Researching victims/survivors of DA

Undertaking research with victim/survivors is challenging, not least because the risk of causing (unintended) psychological harm feels that much higher than amongst many other populations. The researcher may be grappling with multiple anxieties in doing such work, e.g. re-traumatising the participant, triggering their own trauma, over-promising what the research might do, further disclosures, managing and addressing risk, and the responsibility of holding participants’ personal and painful stories and doing right by them. To guide us, we work in trauma-informed ways. Trauma-informed practice refers to approaches grounded in the understanding that exposure to trauma can impact an

individual's neurological, biological, psychological, and social development (Office for Health Improvement & Disparities, 2022). It operates around six basic principles – safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural consideration – and recognises the necessity of appropriate approaches and support through a knowledge of the impact of trauma on behaviour (Petrillo, 2022:14). A trauma-informed approach recognises a change in perspective from 'what's wrong with you?' to 'what happened to you?'. Though trauma-informed training is common amongst services and organisations with a client-facing element and will (ideally) be routinely offered to all practitioners working with vulnerable and traumatised populations, this often is not the case for researchers. In many instances, we must either directly seek out such training or pull from our past experiences, recognising and implementing the principles of ethical research as set out by others e.g. the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct (2021) or the British Society of Criminology's Statement of Ethics (2015). For the most part, we are just doing our best to protect participants from harm.

In reflecting on my research work with survivors, I (Kerry) draw from two projects – 1) a study exploring survivors' experiences of temporary 'safe' accommodation (Office of National Statistics, 2024). For this we interviewed 40 women of different ages, ethnicities, nationalities and religions about their experiences of accessing, living in and moving on from temporary accommodation following DA. And 2) a study evaluating a new DA intervention in Surrey (Ellis Devitt, 2024), where as part of a wider mixed-methods approach, I conducted narrative interviews with three survivors of DA, producing detailed pen-portraits (narrative, descriptions of the key characteristics, experiences and perspectives of participants, bringing their unique stories to life).

Undertaking research with victims/survivors has required more of me than with any other type of research. In both projects, my approach saw the highest levels of sensitivity, planning, accountability and, perhaps inevitably, worry. I felt a huge responsibility to my participants and wanted to do whatever I could to ensure their involvement aligned with every element of trauma-informed research principles. The interviews required me to enact significant emotional labour in ensuring I did the work to the highest ethical standards, whilst ensuring the best possible outcomes for everyone involved. As introduced earlier in this article, emotional labour takes place where an individual, through the course of their work, is expected to manage and regulate their emotions. This is often undertaken through adhering to 'display rules' – social guidelines which govern which emotions should be shown and how. Display rules may involve 'surface acting,' where the workers feelings differ to the emotions they are displaying, 'deep acting', where the worker makes effort to align feelings with the emotion they are displaying, and 'genuine emotional responses' – where there is natural alignment between the worker's feelings and the emotional expectations of the organisation, however, emotional labour is still required as the emotions must be regulated such that they are displayed appropriately (Phillips et al., 2020:5).

My use of display rules was observable in how I first encountered the women I interviewed – specifically, my use of 'surface acting'. With each interview, I felt substantial anxiety going in. This was in part due to factors common to all qualitative researchers – e.g., wanting to get the most out of the interviewee, hoping technology would not fail, and pre-interview nerves. But it was also due to factors common amongst researchers exploring people's trauma – e.g., wanting to avoid re-traumatising the participant, fears of vicarious trauma, and the hope that participation would be felt as empowering and equitable, rather than passive and even harmful (Diab and Al-Azzeh, 2024). However, despite what was going on in my inner world, my demeanour was always friendly, warm and relaxed. This felt crucially important given that I wanted and needed my participants to feel I was a trustworthy and safe person to share their stories with. I also engaged in surface acting when it came to the way I responded to the various living situations of my participants. For the temporary 'safe' accommodation project, I conducted several interviews in women's refuges and in asylum accommodation. This brought with it additional mental challenges as I strove to find cheerfulness in what I typically found to be bleak situations. In one interview, a young mother was telling me how she was trying to create a happy environment for her two very young children whilst I could see she had almost no possessions, was living with noticeable damp, and had insects running across the walls. As Diab and Al-Azzeh (2024) observe survivors from displaced communities, *'often bear the weight of traumatic experiences compounded by displacement and associated hardships'*. To this I felt acutely aware, and as such sought to work even harder to maintain a positive presence.

Emotional labour was also present in how I built trust with my participants (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006). Again, this required significant emotional investment, knowing that my usual ways of putting participants at ease (e.g., smiling lots, being enthusiastic, engaging in self-deprecating humour) was often not appropriate. For example, meeting with one young mother in a refuge, I could see she was extremely vulnerable, was visibly traumatised and would not form eye-contact. My approach instead became one of trying to find any topic where we might align, and this came in the form of a shared experience of parenting a school-age child. Though the research goal was to encourage my participant to tell me about navigating the temporary housing system, the route to it was in finding a place where she felt safe enough to do so.

This also speaks to empathy. Empathy is expected in person facing roles, and can be a challenging requirement anyway, but it is particularly so when a professional knows that they will be holding somebody's trauma in the process of their work. Used within research, showing empathy is useful in building relationships (Waters et al., 2020), demonstrating understanding and trust (Hubbard et al. 2001), and perhaps most importantly, encouraging conversation. As researchers, we want and need our participants to talk to us. As a naturally empathetic person, I was easily able to show my (very genuine) sadness or sombre understanding as my participants shared their stories. I could empathise with their frustrations in trying to progress through complex services and systems. And I was able to show happiness in their tales of moving-on – 'thriving, not just surviving'. However, what I found difficult was protecting myself from exposure to trauma – specifically when it came to empathising with their pain and suffering (Fohring, 2020; Moran and Asquith, 2020; Smith et al., 2021). I frequently wanted to hug or comfort participants as they shared their stories with me. There were several times when I had to hold back tears when the women told me about the abuse they had suffered, or indeed the devastation they felt trying to take themselves out of that situation. And I would often encounter feelings of helplessness as I was repeatedly asked, 'what do I do?' or if I could help them in some way. Reflecting the principles of emotional labour, my enactment of empathy saw me engage in both 'deep acting' - aligning my emotions with the emotions I was displaying, but also 'genuine emotional responses', where I was instinctively feeling the emotions I was showing but I was working hard to ensure they appeared appropriately. As such, in every interview, I would leave with a heady mix of emotions – relief at having completed it, happiness at having connected with another human, but with the weight of sadness and worry as I was left holding their story and not knowing what their ending might be.

However, the emotional demands of conducting research with victims/survivors and the specific emotional labour involved in the interviews was not just in the interviews, it was also in the significant responsibility I felt for my participants' safety and wellbeing afterwards (see also, Waters et al., 2020). Having built a rapport with these women and subsequently being made privy to their most personal and painful experiences, my sense of responsibility towards them compounded. With the women living in asylum accommodation, my thoughts were on whether the relatively small financial remuneration offered for their time was going to be seen as paid work and affect their benefits or living situation in some way. I was also preoccupied worrying about whether the difficult topics we had spoken on had left them worse than I found them, or that I should have done something to actively help their situation. This subsequently became a talking point with my team, and we began to create bespoke aftercare sheets, signposting to specific services and organisations that the participant indicated having need of e.g., local food banks, mental health services, women's centres and organisations directly supporting women in ways that reflected their specific identity. I was also using email and text to 'check in' with participants after interviews, reassuring them (and perhaps myself) about the parameters of the study, which indicated they could remove their consent by a certain date if they subsequently changed their mind about participating.

This post-interview anxiety was also present in my interviews for the Surrey study. However, here I had an additional concern in ensuring the analytical approach we had used (detailed pen-portraits) would not place participants at risk of identification. Even though we removed any references to names, places or uniquely recognisable information, in line with the ethical principle of anonymity, my concern was that their stories might be seen by someone who would make the connection to them, or worse place them at further risk. This fear was particularly present with one participant whose perpetrator was a member of the police. Given the report was being submitted to the participant's local Office for the Police and Crime Commissioner, this fear was far from unfounded. In addressing this, I requested the main report be closed (i.e., for the eyes of only a few people), with an additional redacted report being produced to ensure such risks were mitigated.

With both projects, the practical demands of the research felt eclipsed by the emotional demands. Though I always expect a certain level of emotional labour in undertaking qualitative research, undertaking research with victim/survivors required a different level of mental and emotional engagement. And though the work has since completed, my thoughts remain with the participants – something I expect will be the case for a long while to come.

Researching perpetrators of DA

Though researching victim/survivors' stories of DA engenders significant emotional costs, so too does researching those who perpetrate such harms. And in some ways, even more so. Not only do these stories require the researcher to hold participants' trauma as they recount the harms they have enacted on others, they are often accompanied by revelations of the perpetrators' *own* experiences of abuse and harm – thus making it a doubly demanding task for the researcher; a phenomenon no doubt familiar to those working in frontline justice spaces.

Amongst probation staff, job pressures align with routine immersion in distressing and disturbing client biographies, often leading to experiences of vicarious trauma. This occurs as staff cannot help but interact with difficult life-narratives, then absorb, internally process and retain the troubling accounts they hear (e.g. Lee, 2017). Importantly though, the differences for the front-line probation officer and the researcher lie in the responses given to the stories they are told. Whilst the researcher should endeavour to listen without commentary or judgement, the probation officer must listen for risk and accountability. So, what then of the emotional demands for researchers who wear, or have worn, both hats?

The research which I (David) draw my experience from is a Home Office funded study exploring male pathways towards DA perpetration (Ellis Devitt et al., 2021). Drawing on narrative interviews with 10 men with convictions for perpetrating DA against a female partner, the research sought to unpack 1) how participants explained and made sense of their lives and relationships (and by doing so, their DA behaviour patterns), and 2) *why* they told the stories they did – e.g. what that might reveal about their sense of identity and their motivations to desist from (or even, to persist in) future perpetration. Though the research topic was emotionally and mentally demanding enough, it provided additional challenges as I sought to disentangle myself from my former identity as a probation officer.

Although at the time of undertaking the research I was a professional researcher, I had previously worked in probation services for over twenty years. Working within the liminal spaces between frontline practice and operational research was psychologically demanding – frequently swapping hats, each signifying two different approaches to interviewing. Wearing my probation officer hat, I was familiar with having to utilise emotional labour in everyday work situations and had been trained in taking a trauma-informed approach. I was also familiar with having to cope with self-managing vicarious trauma resulting from engaging over many years with accounts of violent and harmful offending. Equally, while wearing my researcher hat, I was cognisant of the risks involved in having to re-visit the traumatic experiences of people on probation.

Participant stories provided motifs referencing extremes of violence and abuse in childhood, adolescent knife stabbing incidents within the context of ‘street culture’, accounts of deep loss, isolation, intra-familial stress, latent anger and loneliness, all alongside violent and in one case homicidal actions committed against female partners.

The cases that presented the foremost challenges to me in terms of the requirements of emotional labour, holding stories of trauma, and the subsequent safeguarding of my own mental wellbeing, were those of Gary, Mike and Travis (pseudonyms). The stories recounted often threw me off balance as my mind raced through split second decisions, working hard to remain emotionally connected and yet simultaneously maintain a safe space for both interview parties. Feelings of revulsion and aversion surfaced and had to be contended with, as the interviews had both an individual and cumulative effect on me. Gary’s account was particularly impactful – a case resulting in femicide. Listening to his account was harrowing as he described the actions that led to the death of his partner. Despite his expressions of remorse and regret, as with all participants’ narratives, I could not prevent my probation officer training from kicking-in as my instinctive and experiential radar worked overtime to look for signs of victim blaming, minimising, justifying and denial of behaviour. Separating this mode of thinking during interview from that of my professional researcher persona and expected modes of interaction was difficult. Gary’s narrative and emotional expression tested this to the limit as he depicted a life involving loss and instability leading to mental illness and substance misuse, culminating not only in an act of ultimate violence but also his personal act of self-destruction. This led at times to my voice cracking and my composure faltering as I had to dig deep to maintain personal equilibrium and keep the conversation on course. In DA focussed interviews, finding and following the line between exploring violence but not being seen to excuse or condone it, is exhausting work. And this is true for the probation officer *and* for the professional researcher.

Participants presented a sense of incomprehension as they struggled to understand the traumatic events of their early lives. They expressed, in almost naïve terms, confusion as to why certain things happened to them – harmful events in their childhood just did not make sense and remained bewildering to them in later life (see van de Ven, 2020, for similar thinking on sensemaking and identity). The depth of feeling they portrayed remained with me for some time, compelling me to question how individuals make sense and find meaning from violence in childhood. If this is unattainable for them, then what? To share this bewilderment, with its sense of loss and almost bereavement, cannot but impact upon others attending to it, and I struggle today to fully comprehend their upbringings, limited sense of personal agency and motivations in their lives. The best I could do in the moment was to listen, acknowledge and validate their experiences, whilst inwardly struggling to find any worthwhile emotional and constructive response.

Relevant too is that the interviews were conducted over the phone – a necessity at that point due to the study taking place in the first quarter of 2021 and therefore needing to adhere to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. This presented a significant dilemma. Participants could only access my persona via audible cues, without the aid of visual access to facial expressions and additional body language. This was of course a two-way process as equally I could not see their

physical demeanour to assist broader inter-personal communication. Language use and verbal tone were the sole forms of expression and reciprocal understanding, and this subsequently also took a toll on me. The detrimental effects of undertaking complex, sensitive or trauma-laden one-to-one work using remote methods during the COVID-19 pandemic, has been a challenge discussed by others (e.g., Dominey et al., 2021; MacIver et al., 2024), and certainly speaks to the substantial challenges we faced as researchers at that already very difficult time.

To what extent I was self-aware and prepared for the participants' narratives possibly triggering my own emotional vulnerability from past life events presented as pertinent. Of importance was to guard against not only my experiences of bereavement, relationship loss, and encounters with emptiness, alongside episodic waves of depression, but also the broader uptake of participants' sense of confusion, loneliness and inability to find direction in their lives. Even their highly emotive use of language, such as Gary's phrase depicting the '*hole in my soul*' strikes deep within any interviewer. These 'states of being' mirrored some of my own life encounters and inevitably led to not only self-reflective post-interview moments but the adoption of defensive psychological positions relating to maintenance of my mental wellbeing.

One of the primary challenges I had to deal with was that of conflicting emotions – sympathy and empathy clashing with feelings of disgust and revulsion. It was impossible not to feel for my participants' traumatic and unsettled histories, especially with the increasing degree of trust and rapport which grew organically through the interview, but it created significant cognitive dissonance in me (see also, MacIver et al., 2024). Could such feelings, *did* such feelings, lead to a degree of collusion? As a male researcher this is something I had to mentally and emotionally wrestle with.

Within the context of this research the enactment of emotional labour and immersion in secondary trauma stress went hand in hand. The intersection of the two was inescapable, challenging my professional identity and my previous practice in relation to trauma-informed face-to-face work with people on probation. Through absorbing harrowing accounts of violence against women, presented by individuals struggling to comprehend aspects of their lives, powerful, conflicting and triggering feelings arose within me. And it's these feelings I am left to internally manage to this day in an effort to maintain and sustain balanced mental health and broader wellbeing in my research and in my professional practice.

Conducting research with trans people in community justice spaces, and the staff who work with them

Conducting emotionally demanding research is not just about working with trauma, of course. It can also be in the identities of those we research, and the vulnerabilities they might present because of that. And this emotional demand can be even higher when those identities closely intersect with our own. Moran and Asquith (2020:2) note that a personal connection with the issues or people being researched can add significant emotional weight, but it can also bring '*important skills for meaning-making and developing vicarious resilience*'. By understanding the individual, we are better placed to understand their experiences. And in turn, better able to prepare ourselves for what may come.

The research which I (Jess) draw on concerns a project exploring transgender awareness and inclusion in community justice services (Lawrence, 2024). For this, I interviewed three trans people attending 'Activity Hubs'¹, and several hub staff members, including support workers and hub managers. The research explored how trans participants viewed and experienced the hubs as a person identifying as trans, and the organisational culture and practice around trans awareness and inclusion. As with David and Kerry, in conducting this research I was required to perform considerable emotional labour. This was mainly due to the constant need to balance competing parts of my identity, priorities and responsibilities.

Firstly, it is important to share some facts about myself. I am a queer person (using she/they pronouns) and a passionate ally for other LGBTQ+ people, particularly trans and non-binary folk. In both my personal and professional life, I continually advocate for and educate others on LGBTQ+ issues, and accordingly, this part of my identity is well known to those around me. However, in undertaking this project, I found myself in emotionally challenging territory. As both a researcher *and* an employee of the organisation who ran the hubs, I was required to work within certain confines and in certain ways – balancing insider/outsider dynamics (Nelson, 2020). This resulted in a level of 'mental gymnastics', having to resist, regulate and alter my actions, attempting to operationalise my authentic self within the parameters

¹ Activity Hubs are spaces exclusively for people on probation, prison licence or post sentence supervision, providing holistic wrap-around support to improve employability and reduce reoffending. Engagement is voluntary and non-enforceable, but staff are in regular contact with probation to maintain accurate risk assessments and contribute to sentence plans. At the time of the research, the hubs were co-funded by HMPPS, and my organisation was contracted to run some of these.

determined by my professional priorities and responsibilities. This echoes Waters et al. (2020:2), who discuss the considerations researchers must make in distinguishing between their 'private' self and the 'professional researcher' they may become in the field.

The sensitive nature of the research required building substantial trust with both the hub staff and the trans participants. I needed trans people to feel that I was a safe person to talk to; an ally with good intentions and the knowledge and ability to use their stories sensitively. I needed staff to feel able to be honest with me, not just about good news stories but also around topics they were unsure or uncomfortable about, or situations where inclusivity had not been prioritised. The two groups required different approaches, however, in the early stages of the project I had little opportunity to interact with people individually as both staff and trans participants were usually in one room. I therefore had to balance my approaches and remain 'on-side' with each group, without the risk of alienating the other. I was also mindful that there may be trans people who were not 'out' to others, which felt like I was addressing 'an invisible person' too. Emotional labour, therefore, was in how I balanced these different parts of my identity; constantly monitoring, adjusting and re-assessing how I was presenting to my participants. I found the constant fluctuation exhausting, requiring significant energy in maintaining this throughout the project.

My identity also flexed depending on who I was talking to, and in what context. To trans participants, I was conscious of appearing as both 'insider' (part of the LGBTQ+ community, and someone who uses mixed pronouns), and 'outsider' (a professional, and part of 'the system'). Given the negative experiences many trans people have with public services (particularly within the justice system; Lawrence, 2024; 2025), I felt I had to work even harder to prove myself 'friend' not 'foe'. I was aware that trans participants were likely sussing me out too. How could they be sure I was a safe person to speak to, or that I was going to do good with the information they gave me? Whilst I knew the answers, I was not able to communicate this in the way I wanted to i.e., relying on my authenticity, responsibilities and identity as a queer ally. I had to retain an element of neutrality due to my position as a researcher. But also, because we were often in the presence of other hub staff and attendees, I had to maintain impartiality so as not to affect responses from other parties. I felt highly visible, which although not a comfortable position for me, did mean that I was able to utilise more subtle cues (e.g. particular queer-coded language, ways of dressing) to signal my identity which were more perceptible to fellow LGBTQ+ people, but less significant to those I did not mean to alert (see also, Moran and Asquith, 2020; Nelson, 2020).

However, for staff, I was 'insider' with respect to being a colleague, but 'outsider' in my alignment with the trans community – possibly seen as 'expert' and therefore daunting to approach on this topic. An example of this push and pull of balancing 'insider' and 'outsider' labels was in whether, and where, I shared my pronouns. When recruiting trans participants, I displayed my pronouns on written materials, demonstrating my identity (a queer 'insider') and contributing to trust building with trans people. However, this meant that my identity was also apparent to (mainly non-LGBTQ+) staff, which possibly placed me as an 'outsider' to them. I had to balance sharing my identity to encourage trans participants to feel safe with me whilst appearing neutral enough that staff would not feel pressured to *only* share positive experiences, or shield uncertainty or negative thoughts and beliefs about trans people from me due to feeling psychologically unsafe (Lawrence, 2025).

The pre-interview stages of the research lasted around two months. This meant that before I had even begun the interviews, I was already exhausted from having to balance my authentic and professional self during the planning stages, and then assessing and balancing how to display and utilise my 'insider'/'outsider' status to earn interviewees' trust. This constant need for awareness and management of my natural inclinations antagonised my pre-disposition to over-thinking and perfectionism, and I was caught in a loop of self-analysis and fear that I was appearing insincere, even when I was acting with genuine emotion.

The interviews themselves contained trauma from trans participants, which I had anticipated and therefore was largely able to prepare for. Yet perhaps because I was so focussed on getting the trans participants' interviews 'right', there were issues and feelings raised in the staff interviews that I was not expecting. Many expressed feeling scared of failure when it came to trans inclusion, but some also had underlying tones of trans exclusion or caution, which were hard for me to hear, and required rapid emotional management in order to understand and explore these themes safely. Similarly to Nelson (2020), I found that I was using trial and error to test and implement boundaries to protect myself from emotional harm and vicarious trauma. Due to the variety in both the interviewees' characteristics and the stories they chose to share with me, I was unable to plan where these boundaries should be, necessitating some split-second decisions. There were several occasions where I ceased a line of conversation to protect my mental health, but then post-interview regretted this, feeling I had missed out on valuable data – a self-preservation technique also noted by MacIver et al. (2024). This regret was difficult to reconcile as the decision was influenced by such personal factors. These

complex feelings were hard to articulate or rationalise to the colleagues and friends I would debrief to – knowing that they, having different life experiences, feelings and resilience, would likely have made different decisions.

By this point in the project, I was relying on mental compartmentalisation to deal with each stressor individually. This worked sufficiently for the planning and data collection phases but backfired during analysis as it inhibited my ability to consider everything together. There were so many factors influencing people's experiences. However, this was further compounded by the bonds I had developed with each of my participants, given not only how hard I had worked to forge them but also the depth of emotion and trauma many had shared with me. My competing responsibilities felt impossible to balance as I tried to be all things to all people; centring trans experiences but also giving fair representation to the breadth of staff voices.

I was fortunate to receive clinical supervision during this time. Although the sessions were arranged initially on the assumption that I would need space to process trauma from the interviews, they mainly focussed on the intense pressure I was feeling to get not just the interviews, but the whole project, perfect. Initially I had believed that this was because of the responsibility I felt to my trans participants (and by extension, any justice involved trans person) (see also Rogers-Shaw et al. 2021; Waters et al., 2020), and this was certainly a significant source of concern for me. However, this was also the launch point for my awareness of my neurodivergence and beginning a personal journey beyond the research that I did not anticipate at the outset.

I knew going into this research that I would be giving away part of myself by using my experiences and identity to build trust and relationships with participants, to better understand (and ultimately, report) their experiences. What I did not expect was the emotional toll that having to modify, and at times compromise, my personal identity would take. The way my identity and values interact with my work have been tested and transformed, plus, I have come out the other side with a new identity in my neurodivergence. These are changes in myself that I will carry for the rest of my life and will always be inextricably linked to this project and the impact it had on me.

Discussion

In this article, we three authors have spoken of our experiences conducting emotionally demanding research with victims/survivors of DA, perpetrators of DA, and trans people in community justice spaces and the staff who work with them. Sitting firmly alongside a growing body of literature, (e.g. Fohring, 2020; Moran and Asquith, 2020; Waters et al., 2020; Keller and Pierce, 2024; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021; MacIver et al., 2024; Gatwiri et al., 2025), our accounts have explored the ways in which emotional labour is required in sensitive research topics, and the impact that has on researcher mental health and wellbeing.

However, though these accounts explore our experiences individually, three collective themes stand out. The first is *the emotional weight of trauma disclosures*. David and Kerry highlight the struggle of trying to hold space for participants' stories of trauma whilst simultaneously seeking to self-protect from the negative effects of exposure to them. David talks of trauma stories seeing him tapping into his own painful experiences, whilst Kerry reflects on feelings of powerlessness as such stories led to participants' pleas for help. The challenges of emotional labour lay in the need to understand and share the traumatic feelings of participants yet simultaneously find ways to maintain emotional distance. The second theme concerns *the challenges of balancing competing identities*. In David's account, he talks of disentangling his two professional selves – the probation officer and the professional researcher. David discusses the 'psychologically demanding' requirements of working within the liminal spaces between frontline practice and operational research, noting how each requires different approaches when it comes to interviewing men who perpetrate harm. And in Jess' account, we learn of the complex cognitive task of balancing 'insider' and 'outsider' researcher statuses, where personal and professional identities compete for priority. The emotional labour in this instance residing in knowing how to pull from two separate aspects of self, but not to the detriment of each other. The final theme is *the extended timeframe of emotional labour*, specifically how it was required not just during the interviews but in the days and weeks before and after them too. For Jess, they discuss extended emotional labour in terms of the preparation time needed to create psychologically safe interview conditions. This was achieved through meeting everyone in advance of the interviews and communicating being a knowledgeable ally with good intentions to trans participants, and a trustworthy and judgement-free professional to staff. Though essential and willingly done, it was an extra task that left Jess exhausted before the interviews even began. And for Kerry, the extended emotional labour came afterwards as she sought to 'check-in', 'check-up' and support participants in their requests for help, all the while carrying the weight of responsibility for their wellbeing.

Mitigating the impact of emotional labour in research

Many of the experiences we have discussed in this article will no doubt be familiar to those working in rehabilitative, restorative and therapeutic spaces (e.g., in frontline probation, the prison service or in DA spaces). Practitioners in these fields will recognise the propensity for stress, anxiety and exhaustion in undertaking such work, and the considerable risks of burnout. So, what can we do to better protect ourselves?

Those engaged in sensitive and trauma-laden research have highlighted numerous strategies for mitigating its effects. On a personal level, researchers have recommended emotional reflexivity and reflexive diaries (MacIver et al., 2024; Gatwiri et al., 2025), developing a close network of researchers doing similar work (Keller and Pierce, 2024) and breaks, down time and decompression activities e.g. engagement in physical activity, connecting with loved-ones (Keller and Pierce, 2024; Gatwiri et al., 2025). From an organisational perspective, there are calls for more training – both around emotional labour *and* better managing the risks of vicarious trauma (Waters et al., 2020; Smith et al. 2021); and for the provision and uptake of clinical supervision (Waters et al., 2020). However, what came through from the literature most vociferously, was the urgent need for a cultural shift when it comes to organisational responsibilities towards its research staff. Scholars spoke of the need for understanding what such research takes from those who do it (Smith et al., 2021; Waters et al., 2020), and a prioritisation of relevant research ethics and protocols around researcher safety and wellbeing (Waters et al., 2020; Rogers-Shaw et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021; Stonebridge, 2022; MacIver et al., 2024). And to this, we add our own names firmly into the mix. As MacIver et al. argue, researcher emotional safety should be *'considered routinely as part of ethical review procedures, akin to participant protections'* (MacIver et al. 2024:7). We could not agree more.

In adding to the knowledge base, we offer six personal recommendations for those working in similar fields of research, and/or using similar methods:

1. Access/request clinical supervision – though we understand this is not always available, where possible this is a valuable tool for processing the complex emotions that may arise from emotionally challenging research.
2. Schedule interviews sparingly (no more than two a day) – understanding that the interview is often considerably more than just 'the event', allow time before and after to prepare and decompress. These steps are essential in avoiding overwhelm and exhaustion.
3. Join like-minded research communities e.g. The Sensitive and Traumatic Research network; the Challenging Research Network; and the Emotionally Demanding Research Network Scotland. Extending conversations with others doing similar work has been an enormous help and has seen us find validation and understanding on the often rather solitary path of research.
4. Engaging with the growing body of literature – similarly, reading about the experiences of others can be enormously beneficial in better understanding and making sense of one's own experiences.
5. Have conversations at individual, project and organisational level (Stonebridge, 2022) – we have benefitted significantly from this, using our experiences to educate colleagues and managers and subsequently implement adjustments/changes to our researcher support systems.
6. And finally, check-in and 'offload' with colleagues – difficult or emotionally demanding interviews can weigh heavily on the researcher. We have found the support of colleagues to be invaluable and can go a long way in alleviating a burden or worry that, tackled alone, might see withdrawal, undue stress and perhaps even burnout.

Conclusion

Emotional labour is becoming a much talked about topic amongst justice professionals, particularly amongst probation officers. As the narrative develops, and the call for better support for frontline practitioners' emotional wellbeing increases, so too must the narrative develop and the support increase for those tasked with researching such issues. In this article, we have shared our experiences of performing emotional labour in trauma-laden and sensitive research, we have discussed the strategies others have used to mitigate the effects of emotional labour in sensitive and trauma-laden research, and we have provided recommendations of our own – all furthering this essential conversation. However, whilst we look forward to more conversations, we remain aware that we cannot protect ourselves entirely. Since the decision to write this article, I (Kerry) have been speaking with others about their experiences of conducting sensitive research. Attending a conference recently, I spoke with a woman whose work involved researching femicide. Talking of

this article, and how we hoped to end with some form of guidance for researchers, I asked her how she kept herself emotionally safe in her work. She told me – ‘*I don’t, really. It just stays with me*’. And to this we shared a short silence because, for all of us who work in such fields, be it research or frontline practice, it is simply a universal truth that we carry these stories with us.

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