Researching Under Fire: Political Science and Researcher Trauma

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ABSTRACT Despite dynamic discussions of research methods within political science, there has been comparatively scarce attention paid to the possibility and effect of research-related trauma—the trauma experienced by individuals working on issues and data related to violence and death. There are many activities within the field of political science that put members of the profession directly at risk for this form of trauma. In this article, we draw attention to the possible risks of research-related trauma for scholars, graduate students, and research team members, and offer some recommendations for best practices in what can be a challenging discipline.

The spate of attacks on journalists and aid workers by ISIS and affiliates has turned public attention to the risks of working in conflict areas, including the psychological impact of these professions (e.g., Hughes 2015; Marroushi 2014). While discussions have been largely focused on journalists and members of the humanitarian aid community, political scientists are often exposed to similar traumatic experiences, with potentially similar consequences. Despite scholarship focused on physical safety during field research (e.g., Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Reed 2015; Sriram et al. 2009; Wood 2006), little attention has been paid to the activities that put members of our discipline at risk to the possibility and effects of psychological trauma.[1] Especially within the field of political violence and conflict studies, students and scholars travel to active conflict and post-conflict areas, interviewing and interacting with people who have experienced high levels of violence, bearing witness to it or having it directed at them, personally. Furthermore, scholars spend hours in their offices, often alone, reading testimonies, personal stories, or State Department and human rights group reports, cataloging years of horrendous crimes and abuse. These are all experiences capable of producing psychological harm—a phenomenon that we refer to as "research-related trauma".

Many of us working in these research areas are familiar with issues of trauma. We have stories of colleagues experiencing elevated levels of aggression, excessive drinking, and strains in their interpersonal relationships. However, these anecdotes are frequently relegated to conference gossip rather than systematically or even empathetically addressed in our profession. It is rare for researchers to debrief once they return from the field or complete a project. It is even less common for a social science department or working group to have a serious discussion about the phenomenon of trauma.

The purpose of this article is to begin that discussion about research-related trauma in political science, and to call attention to the real and persistent impact that trauma can have on ourselves and our work. We argue that trauma can affect researchers across a wide range of methodologies—not solely fieldwork—and across a wide range of topics. In this article, we discuss research-related trauma and ways to identify the phenomenon. We go on to provide recommendations for addressing possible trauma before, during, and after research projects, and call for increased attention to the possibility of research-related trauma within our research groups, departments, and institutions.

WHAT IS RESEARCH-RELATED TRAUMA?

Political scientists often tackle research questions that require us to directly address issues of death and violence or to be in locations where this exposure is unavoidable. In her research on UN peacekeeping missions, for example, Séverine Autesserre conducted participant observation in North Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo, "the most violent area in the country at the time [of her research]" (Autesserre 2014, 276). In addition to general concerns for her physical safety, she writes that at one of her research locations, her "hosts worried that [she] might get sexually assaulted" (Autesserre 2014, 285). Elisabeth Wood acknowledged that her research in El Salvador during the civil war "raise[d] challenging issues of personal security (for those interviewed but also for the researcher)" (Wood 2003, 40). During his fieldwork for *Inside Rebellion*, Jeremy Weinstein stated "asking [his interview questions] often put [him] in an uncomfortable position and sometimes placed [him] at personal risk" (Weinstein 2007, 356).

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Yet, personal risks in these settings are not limited to physical safety. Research-related trauma refers to the psychological harm that emerges from exposure to death or violence while engaging in research.[2] Trauma can be a product of both direct and indirect exposure to violence (e.g., Figley 1985, 1995; Herman 1992) and can be produced either through personally experiencing a traumatic event, witnessing that event, or having indirect contact with traumatic material. A discrete form of trauma—vicarious trauma—underscores the specific psychological effects of working with trauma survivors or in traumatic contexts (Figley 1985, 1995; Pearlman and Saakvitne 1995). This form of trauma happens over time as a researcher witnesses and/or hears distressing stories, or deals with distressing data (e.g., Dickson-Swift et al. 2008). In this way, we do not need to travel to conflict-affected areas to be impacted by the stories we read or the data we gather. Coding news articles and victim testimony can be as impactful as personally interviewing victims.

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Research-related trauma is overlooked in political science. When trauma is discussed in our discipline, it is often in relation to the level of trauma suffered by our research subjects, plus the potential elevation of that trauma through participating in our research (e.g., Ross 2009, 191–193). Some scholars have documented personal risks through anecdotes. For example, in his discussion of the physical risks of conducting research in conflict zones William Reno mentions "border hassles, mistreatment at checkpoints, small arms in the hands of children, and the threat of kidnapping" as potential hazards, adding that "harm can include … psychological damage associated with regular contact with traumatized populations and the stress connected with constant concerns about safety" (Reno 2013, 175). Elisabeth Wood (2007) identifies the intense emotions of "fear, anger, outrage, grief, and pity" that accompany working in conflict settings, not to mention the emotional strain in questioning "why research is worth pursing over purely humanitarian relief work" (141). Scott Straus attributes his research into understanding the origins of genocide violence in Rwanda to prior "trauma" he experienced as a journalist covering the war in neighboring Zaire (Straus 2006: x). Despite their seriousness, however, these observations have not led to the systematic evaluation of the effect of trauma on our ourselves or our work within political science.

IDENTIFYING RESEARCH-RELATED TRAUMA

While there is variation across individuals, the typical, expected response to a traumatic event is psychological and physical distress. Trauma—whether direct or vicarious—deeply impacts an individual's view of self, others, and the world. It disrupts an individual's fundamental assumptions about safety, the positive value of the self, and connection between the individual and his or her community (Figley 1985; Herman 1992). In short, a researcher's ability to think clearly, to relate effectively, and to function efficiently is compromised by traumatic exposure. Common signs of distress in response to a traumatic event include:

- **Intense or unpredictable feelings.** Noticeably anxious, nervous, impatient or overwhelmed. More irritable or moody than usual. Generalized despair and hopelessness.
- **Changes to thoughts and behavior patterns.** Disrupted sleep and/or eating patterns. Difficulty concentrating or making decisions. Procrastination, specifically on work related to the traumatic material.
- **Strained interpersonal relationships.** Increased conflict, such as more frequent disagreements with family and coworkers. Social withdrawal or isolation. Decreased interest in activities that used to bring pleasure or relaxation.
- **Stress-related physical symptoms.** Headaches, nausea and chest pain (APA 2013).

IMPACTS OF RESEARCH-RELATED TRAUMA

As there is variation, not all individuals are impacted by traumatic events in the same way. The factors deemed to play an important role in how an individual experiences a traumatic event include: personality and coping style, personal history, current life circumstances, social support, professional role and work setting, and institutional support (Pearlman and McKay 2008). With research-related trauma, the level and type of personal involvement, as well as the duration and nature of the research, can also have an impact on "emotional well-being" (Martin-Ortega and Herman 2009, 237). Understanding risk factors, as well as the signs and symptoms of trauma, are critical to being able to address it. It is particularly important to give consideration to the unique factors associated with an individual's role in the profession, such as the unique risks to graduate students and research team members, as well as the impact that trauma can have on their research.

Graduate Students

Graduate students constitute a high-risk group when considering the impact of research-related trauma. Often, dissertation field research or archival work is the first major research project a graduate student will participate in, and is almost certainly the first solo work. This brings with it its own doubts and anxiety, but subject matter and exposure to violent topics can add additional strain. Graduate students may have greater external pressure, based on degree timelines and funding limitations, to remain in the field longer or to complete more concentrated research, rather than being able to return to their home institution or take breaks from a trying project.[3] Furthermore, graduate students may feel they have no other option than to complete a particular project, despite signs of fatigue or psychological distress.[4] Dissertation advisers have a responsibility to prepare and monitor student research, a responsibility which extends to monitoring the basic mental health and well-being of their students.

Research Team Members

An additional subset of people uniquely affected by research-related trauma are members of our research teams. This can include the

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graduate and undergraduate students contracted to work on research projects within our universities, or in-country research assistants hired to assist us in the field.

On campus, students who assist with our research often receive very little background on the material they are tasked with collecting. While senior researchers may have built up a tolerance or perhaps a greater contextual understanding of the subject material over time, undergraduates may be overwhelmed by descriptions of torture, or first hand accounts of sexual violence and other human rights abuses. Certainly, given the growing data on sexual assault on college campuses and high levels of violence in the contemporary news media, there are more reasons than ever to be concerned with the possibility of re-traumatization when dealing with many of these topics.

Off campus, in-country research assistants are contracted for participant identification, translation, archival research, and other forms of research support, which can directly expose them to the same or, more likely, even higher levels of trauma than the primary researcher. Sometimes, we identify local research assistants already working in a related field (e.g., human rights research, governance reform, sexual violence prevention, etc.) who may have developed coping mechanisms for engaging with traumatic material. More often, research assistants are hired based on their linguistic skills, or recommendations from in-country colleagues. Local students may accept a research position because the compensation is good and the topic is interesting, without first critically assessing their own mental health and personal well-being. Furthermore, in-country research assistants do not get to go "home" once the project is completed, and may struggle to gain physical distance from the information they collect. This can make it especially difficult to disengage and mentally recuperate once the project is over.

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Our Research

Trauma impacts not only the personal well-being of researchers, but also the quality and content of our research. Repeated exposure to traumatic events can impact our ability to analyze data in an unbiased way. Wood (2007) argues that "inadequate attention to [these emotional dynamics] may lead field researchers to make errors in judgment that may have significant consequences for their research subjects as well as for their research and possibly for themselves personally" (141). For example, after repeated exposure to violent narratives, a researcher may be more likely to avoid interviews on particular events. One might limit the scope of the original research design in a way that undermines the scholarly value of the project, itself. Alternatively, one could tackle a particularly ambitious research plan, which may result in only a superficial understanding of the topic of interest (Wood 2007).

Furthermore, there are important ethical manifestations of trauma. The existing literature on trauma highlights its effects on professional functioning and on upholding a "do no harm" ethic (e.g., Etherington 2007; Hesse 2002; Iyamuremye and Brysiewicz 2012; Ross 2009; Wood 2006). Traumatized individuals have an increased risk of exposing others—including research participants and colleagues—to psychological harm. Among humanitarian workers, for example, those who are impacted by trauma are more likely to: make decisions without adequate reflection; make mistakes that cost time or money and put people at risk; take on too much work; not fulfill commitments; devalue and/or ridicule beneficiaries, staff, managers, or donors (Pearlman and McKay 2008).

STRATEGIES FOR ADDRESSING RESEARCH-RELATED TRAUMA

Despite the real risks associated with research into certain topics within the field of political science, there are several strategies that can be employed to mitigate the impact of research-related trauma.

Before beginning a project, gain an awareness and understanding of trauma, including your risk factors, as well as signs and symptoms of trauma's potential impact. Identify your own risks. Prioritize a balance of personal needs with research demands, and similarly, psychologically demanding activities with less challenging work. Establish sustainable connections; maintaining meaningful contact with others (friends, family, professional networks) is one of the best ways to mitigate the potential impacts of trauma (Dickson-Swift et al. 2008).

During data collection, make sure to take a break from your research. Build time into the project schedule to gain some distance from the material (Barrington and Shakespeare-Finch 2014, Wood 2007). Establish time and space within your project to discuss potentially difficult experiences (e.g., a weekly team meeting [Coles et al. 2014], a call home from the field to institutional collaborators, or writing about the experience in field notes). Exercise, eat well, and get outdoors when possible (Hesse 2002).

For particularly sensitive projects, it may be advisable to do even more than the above. In a public health study on genocide participation in Rwanda, for example, a local psychologist was contracted to hold weekly meetings with the research team to facilitate conversations regarding the week's research (Adler et al. 2008). While this type of strategy can be prohibitively expensive for smaller research projects, it's worth exploring the various degrees of support available to research team members. As a team leader, we can lessen the impact of research-related trauma for all involved by setting a good example in taking care of ourselves: work at a sustainable and reasonable pace over time, take allocated time off, and acknowledge the difficult nature of the work. In addition, team leaders and graduate student mentors should express concern for the general well-being of the researchers, and not just the quality of the work being done; regularly check in with students and team members about how they are coping, rather than waiting for them to approach.

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Even once data collection is complete, continue to take breaks from the material during your data analysis and write-up phases. Use these opportunities to move onto an unrelated project or take personal time to get distance from the research. Talk about your experiences with friends or colleagues who have worked on similar topics. Keep up with your routine; continue to concentrate on exercise, eating well, and outdoor activities (Hesse 2002). Seek professional help (Dickson-Swift et al. 2008), particularly on university campuses, where there are likely to be counselors who specialize in research-related trauma. It is likely—and common—to recover from the effects of a traumatic event; it is difficult—if not impossible—to recover in isolation. The ability to accept support and help—from family, friends, colleagues, and/or professionals—is essential in resolving the impacts of trauma, and often, to being able to effectively and efficiently continue both present and future research endeavors.

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Moving Forward

Professions involving work in difficult settings (e.g., journalists, humanitarian aid workers, academics) often promote attitudes of self-reliance and machismo that, unfortunately, often render it challenging to name and address trauma. However, a culture of self-neglect, rigorous work expectations, and denial of personal needs contribute to furthering the impacts of trauma. Trauma influences the way that we perceive, consume, and ultimately evaluate information. It can have an impact on how we conduct research and how we analyze it. Furthermore, trauma can indirectly impact our research through our ability to concentrate and interact with others. This impact is present whether or not we acknowledge it. For these reasons, the stakes for beginning an informed dialogue in political science could not be higher.

Engage with the possibility of trauma. It is our responsibility as teachers and colleagues to engage with the possibility of research-related trauma for our students, our research teams, and ourselves. We would all benefit from discussions about trauma being more commonplace within the discipline. Each of us should make sure that our students and research assistants are aware of the signs of trauma and that we can give them guidance on seeking help, if needed.

Broaden university and professional resources for trauma. University communities should be more aware of research-related trauma and its impacts, and develop or strengthen on-campus programs to assist researchers tackling difficult topics. The Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) and the Institute for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research (IQMR) could incorporate modules that address the possible issues of research-related trauma in political science. APSA and ISA could offer short courses addressing both the inherent and potential dangers of research in violent areas, and on violent topics. Furthermore, funding agencies should require thorough accounting for addressing the potential of research-related trauma and accommodate budgets that address these challenges directly.

As members of academic departments, let us ensure that trauma and its impact are effectively addressed within the curriculum and training courses meant to prepare future researchers for this line of work. As a discipline, we can improve the quality of our research and its lasting impacts by improving the quality of mind of those on the front lines—our researchers.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096516002328 ■

NOTES

1. Other fields in the social sciences—such as anthropology—have been more in tune with the potential hazards of research in conflict settings, however, this writing has been primarily focused on physical danger, rather than psychological trauma (e.g., Howell 1990, Sluka 1995).
2. According to the American Psychiatric Association, a person is considered to have experienced a traumatic event when they have been exposed to or threatened by death, serious injury, or sexual violence, either through direct exposure, witnessing in person, awareness that a close family member, friend, or colleague was exposed, or repeated or extreme indirect exposure to aversive details of the event(s). (APA 2013)
3. Funding organizations such as Fulbright often require extended periods of time in-country and do not allow for research reprieves.
4. These stresses may also apply to junior scholars who feel pre-tenure pressure to complete research quickly and efficiently.

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