The Implications of Asking: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Researching College Student Trauma

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A wide range of traumatic experience is represented among college student populations, with many students arriving to college already having suffered trauma in their lives (Read et al., 2011). Unfortunately, college and adult life continue to produce even further opportunities for traumatization among postsecondary students. College students are exposed to a number of potentially traumatic experiences including but not limited to serious physical injury or illness, physical or sexual assault, death of loved ones, and racial trauma (Galatzer-Levy, Burton, & Bonanno, 2012; Frazier et al., 2009; Pieterse, Carter, Evans, & Walter, 2010). Recent years have also presented examples of campus-wide traumatic experiences such as campus shootings and/or natural disasters (Lambert, Lambert, & Lambert, 2014).

Within a climate of high trauma occurrence rates (Read et al., 2011), the topic of trauma-informed services is emerging at the forefront of American higher education and student affairs practice. This trend has been informed by a variety of issues, but perhaps most significantly by a heightened attention of federal actors to the persistence of sexual violence on college campuses and the need to train trauma-informed officials as part of confronting this crisis (e.g., White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault, 2014). Higher education institutions and state level education departments have responded with actions to tackle this crisis, including appeals for data. For

example, the Ohio Department of Higher Education called for campuses to conduct an annual campus climate survey to inform future strategies to combat sexual violence (Ohio Department of Higher Education, n.d.).

What these recent developments affirm is the importance of grounding calls for trauma-informed practice in assessment and research that is unique to the experiences of college student survivors of trauma. Given the wide range of traumatic experiences college students may confront and the varied reactions they may have, it is critical that practice and policy be evidence-based (Follette, Fitzgerald, Garfin, & McLean, 2016). However, the inherent sensitive nature of trauma brings forth questions of how investigations about students' traumatic experiences may impact both participants and those engaging in the inquiry. These concerns can result in apprehension from both researchers and practitioners to engage in inquiry about survivors' experiences. Becker-Blease and Freyd (2006) documented several common apprehensions including: not being prepared to work with survivors of trauma, concerns about triggering participants, and complications around mandatory reporting. Simultaneously, Becker-Blease and Freyd argued that "just as researchers underestimate the benefits of asking about abuse, they underestimate the risks of *not* asking" (p. 223). Indeed, the fears that motivate researchers and assessment professionals to avoid sensitive topics such as abuse and trauma can inadvertently reproduce a silencing system that ultimately harms survivors (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2007). This article illuminates possible implications of engaging with student survivors about their trauma through the experience of a researcher and former student affairs professional.

The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to investigate the implications of a qualitative exploration of college student trauma for the researcher. Against the backdrop of increased calls for trauma-informed work within higher education and student affairs, additional assessment and research is needed to understand the nuanced experiences of college student survivors of trauma situated within the particular context of postsecondary environments. The current study contributes to a broadened understanding of the possible impacts for higher education researchers and assessment professionals engaged in understanding college student trauma. Additionally, given the prevalence of trauma in college student populations (Frazier et al., 2009; Read, Ouimette, White, & Colder, 2011), it is likely that even researchers and assessment professionals not explicitly investigating trauma will encounter survivors' experiences during the inquiry process. This article, then, has implications across a broad range of inquiry topics that may intersect students' experiences of trauma.

Engaging in Trauma Inquiry

Dana Crowley Jack (1999), in researching aggression in women, commented on the difficulties of explorations of challenging subjects. As she explained:

> I learned how painful it is to listen, to hear the sounds of aggression in a sustained way. As we listen, sounds enter through the labyrinth of the ear into the body, into our felt existence. More often, we turn away to block them out…At times, I wanted to stop listening to the pain women conveyed about the hurt they experienced and dealt out to others. But, unbidden, my listening grew larger still. (Jack, 1999, p. 2)

Sustained engagement with trauma in the inquiry process can induce the complexities that Jack (1999) noted. Certainly, the researcher or assessment professional is not impenetrable and projects of sensitive topics undoubtedly impact the inquirer beyond simple intellectual engagement. In what follows, I summarize literature about the secondary impacts of trauma and situate the current study in terms of how this might manifest specifically in the higher education context.

The Secondary Effects of Trauma

In helping professions, it is well recognized that those who work closely with trauma survivors are at personal risk for traumatization. As Jankowski (2012) observed, the question is not whether a helper working with a trauma survivor *can* be traumatized through the interaction, but rather *how* to label this form of trauma. Two types of helper-related trauma identified in the literature are secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma (Hernández-Wolfe, Killian, Engstrom, & Gangsei, 2015; Jankowski, 2012; Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Although both forms of trauma are most widely researched in the context of helping or therapeutic relationships, there is also evidence to suggest the emergence of these forms of trauma for those engaged in trauma research (e.g., Coles, Astbury, Dartnall, & Limjerwala, 2014; Connolly & Reilly, 2007; Dominey-Howes, 2015).

Both secondary and vicarious trauma produce negative changes in those who work with survivors of trauma; however, there are significant differences in their presentations. Secondary traumatic stress results from a helper's exposure to another's trauma in addition to their empathetic engagement with that person (Jankowski, 2012; Newell & MacNeil, 2010). When secondary traumatic stress occurs, the helper experiences

symptoms similar in presentation to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including: intrusive thoughts, hypervigilance, nightmares of the other person's trauma, difficulty with concentration, and avoidance behaviors.

Vicarious trauma is again a product of a helping-related engagement with someone who has experienced trauma. This form of trauma, however, occurs in terms of cognitive changes for the helper, including shifts in self-concept, self-efficacy, worldviews about safety and trust, and/or spiritual beliefs (Hernández-Wolfe et al., 2015; Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Vicarious trauma, then, is primarily about a helper's inner cognitive experience while secondary traumatic stress is more about outward behavioral symptoms (Hernández, Gangsei, & Engstrom, 2007; Newell & MacNeil, 2010)

Although there are many real possibilities of negative effects for those working in helping relationships with survivors of trauma, it is important to underscore the reality that positive impacts occur as well. For example, those in therapeutic relationships with survivors of trauma can benefit in positive ways by learning about and bearing witness to their clients' resilience and coping mechanisms (Hernández-Wolfe et al., 2015). These positive outcomes are examples of vicarious resilience, a concept first introduced by Hernández et al. (2007), and include seven dimensions: changes in life goals and perspective, client-inspired hope, increased recognition of clients' spirituality as a therapeutic resource, increased capacity for resourcefulness, increased self-awareness and self-care practices, increased consciousness about power and privilege relative to clients' social location, and increased capacity for remaining present while listening to trauma narratives (Killian, Hernández-Wolfe, Engstrom, & Gansei, 2017).

Engagement with College Student Survivors of Trauma

The college student population is one in which exposure to trauma is widespread. Estimates suggest that as many as 66% of students have already experienced trauma upon their arrival to college and that number rises once students are well into their collegiate lives (Frazier et al., 2009; Read et al., 2011). Given the prevalence of trauma among college students, those who work closely with collegians will inevitably come into contact with students' traumatic experiences.

A small body of research has established the potential for secondary effects of students' trauma on student affairs practitioners (e.g., Bernstein Chernoff, 2016; Lynch, 2017; Stoves, 2014). These studies suggest the interplay of both individual and organizational factors in how higher education professionals are impacted by their engagement with college student trauma. For example, Lynch (2017) discussed several dimensions of student affairs professionals' experiences of secondary traumatic stress including personal factors (e.g., a professional's strength of relationship with a survivor) and systemic factors (e.g., inadequate training about dealing with students' traumas, organizational structures that promote maladaptive support of professionals working with students in crisis). However, a gap that appears in the current literature is how those who engage with student survivors of trauma through student affairs research or assessment may be impacted by the experience. Although studies in other fields have explored the impacts of trauma research on researchers (e.g., Connolly & Reilly, 2007; Dominey-Howes, 2015), the author could not locate examples specifically situated within higher education research or assessment. The current study contributes to that gap.

Research Methodology

The current study implemented an autoethnographic methodological design (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2014) to investigate the impact of researching college student trauma on a researcher (the author). As described by Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011), autoethnography is a research practice that "seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)" (p. 273). Situated as a methodology that emerged from postmodern perspectives, autoethnography is employed to intentionally "[give] voice to personal experience" (Wall, 2008, p. 39) in which individual narrative can provide insight to broader cultural concerns (Ellis et al., 2011; Wall, 2008).

For the purpose of this study, I draw on two autoethnographic approaches including Ellis et al.'s (2011) description of a layered account approach and Anderson's (2006) analytic autoethnography. Both methods emphasize using personal narrative to analytically explore broader social phenomena. In the layered account approach, the researcher's personal experience is considered "alongside data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 278). The layered account approach has been likened to grounded theory methods in which data collection and analysis proceed concurrently. What sets layered accounts apart from grounded theory, however, is an explicit attention to incorporating a multiplicity of representations in which both evocative text and vignettes are woven alongside abstract analysis.

Fundamentally, analytic autoethnography emphasizes analytic reflexivity with the intention of theoretical interpretations of social phenomena (Anderson, 2006). This approach intentionally uses empirical data to make interpretations about broader social

processes. In other words, this approach seeks to "[render] the social world under investigation but also [transcend] that world through broader generalization" (Anderson, 2006, p.388).

The current autoethnographic study was framed by two research questions. First, what is the impact of studying trauma on the researcher? Second, what are the broader social implications of engagement with personal experiences of trauma within the inquiry process?

Project Background

The current autoethnographic study emerged alongside my previous work conducting a research study (Shalka, 2019) to explore intersections of trauma and college student development. In that previous study (conducted from May 2015 to April 2016), I explored how experiences of trauma in college affect processes of identity development among 12 participants who were survivors of trauma. Participants were asked questions that probed how they conceptualized their identities before and after college trauma, what was significant in their lives before and after trauma, and how their social identities and roles impacted their traumatic experiences. That study included nine women, two men, and one gender fluid individual who collectively experienced varied forms of trauma including car accidents, suicide of friends and family, sexual violence, identity-based trauma, and death or serious illness of loved ones. Four participants identified as individuals of color, and eight participants identified as White. Consistent with the layered account approach (Ellis et al., 2011), I incorporate data collected during the course of that previous study alongside relevant literature and personal reflective

writing completed after the conclusion of the original study to explore the ways in which I, as the researcher, was impacted in studying college student trauma.

Data Collection

Adams et al. (2014) noted that autoethnographies often begin when "epiphanies prompt us to pause and reflect" (p. 47). Long before I started collecting data for my trauma and identity development study, I was aware of such an epiphany – that, in the words of one of my mentors, the project was "working me" as much as I was working the project. Thus, I began tracing that work knowing that it would have significant personal and research implications.

Data collection for this project occurred in the spirit of a layered account approach to autoethnography. Adams et al. (2014) likened this approach to grounded theory in which data collection and analysis occur concurrently. Although there were distinct phases of discrete data collection in this study, there was simultaneously a stream of analysis occurring throughout, which informed subsequent data collection and analysis.

I engaged in three phases of data collection over the course of 14 months. First, throughout the process of conducting a study about college trauma and identity development, I kept a research journal to chronicle how the work was impacting me and to trace the meaning I was making of that interaction. At the conclusion of each interview, I wrote about the salient elements of that data collection event, my interpretations of those elements, and observations about how I was personally interacting with the interview and information. Additionally, throughout data collection and analysis, I continued to write sporadic memos as additional thoughts occurred to

me that I wanted to capture. I was particularly attentive in these sporadic memos to chronicle the impact the research was having on me.

Second, after the conclusion of the research project, I continued the work of further engaging in an autoethnographic exploration of my interactions with the project by doing reflective writing. I began with a free writing exercise in which I posed the following questions to myself: How was I impacted by this work? What external and internal factors affected that impact? As particularly salient themes began to emerge, I probed these further and did intentional writing around some of these spaces to further investigate their relevance. This was an emergent and ongoing process. As I began to notice repeated themes appearing in my writing, this drove me in new directions to explore these salient themes in more depth. Consistent with Ellis et al. (2011), in this reflective writing I sought to create thick descriptions that were attentive to both the personal and the sociocultural contexts in which my personal experience was situated.

Finally, in further engaging an autoethnographic exploration of this topic, I also immersed myself in literatures that were relevant to my topic. These literatures included research-based accounts of the impact of discussing sensitive topics for participants, researchers and/or clinicians. I also read autoethnographic accounts of working or living within what might be considered sensitive or traumatic experiences.

Analysis

Researchers note that autoethnography does not dictate a particular form of analysis and that there is wide variation in how autoethnographic data are analyzed (Jones, Kim, & Skendall, 2012). Given that the current study implemented a layered account

approach to autoethnography, which Adams et al. (2014) compared to grounded theory, I used constructivist grounded theory analytic procedures drawing on initial and focused coding techniques to "[make] analytic sense" of the data and "an interpretive rendering" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 111). Consistent with constructivist grounded theory and a layered account approach to autoethnography, data collection and analysis occurred concurrently throughout this project. Preliminary analysis began while I was conducting a study of trauma and identity development as I engaged in ongoing journaling about how the work was impacting me. Analysis continued during reflective writing after the project had concluded.

To begin more formal analysis, I engaged in an open reading of all my data for deeper familiarity and to note my initial impressions. Next, I moved through the data and used a constructivist grounded theory coding process (Charmaz, 2014). For this coding process I first engaged in initial coding, in which I worked through my text and assigned preliminary codes to meaningful units of data. I then returned to the data and engaged in focused coding to synthesize themes drawing on significant codes that emerged during the initial coding phase.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness of data in autoethnography can be interpreted differently from other qualitative projects, particularly because there is often only one participant who is simultaneously the analyst of the project. Ellis et al. (2011) suggested that in autoethnography reliability relates to the author's credibility. Validity is a function of a coherent and believable story, and generalizability occurs when readers are able to connect with the work that is presented. In addition to being attentive to these criteria,

I also sought to add to the rigor of this study in other ways. First, knowing that memory can be fallible (something that Ellis et al., 2011 also noted), I was attentive to collecting part of the data for this autoethnography concurrently with the trauma and identity study upon which the current work is based. Additionally, although autoethnography does not specify particular analytic procedures, I drew on methods of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) to help add to the rigor of analysis.

Results

Results of the analysis suggested one axial theme with four related sub-themes. In what follows, I re-story my data to create a descriptive narrative that illuminates these themes, mindful of a goal of autoethnographic research to bridge scientific analysis and aesthetically minded representation (Ellis et al., 2011). What appeared in data analysis was the persistent question of "where does the researcher belong?" in the study of a sensitive subject such as trauma (axial theme). Four related sub-themes of this broader question framed the ways in which I explored and understood this question at various stages of the inquiry process and was, consequently, impacted by the work. I position these sub-themes as four distinct lenses through which I understood the nature of this impact: (a) resistance; (b) fear; (c) connection; and (d) affect and embodiment.

Axial Theme: Where Does the Researcher Belong?

How can we be present and hold ourselves accountable in our research? Without discrediting our research through "personal bias"? And without displacing it with what Daly calls an "intellectual narcissism" that goes over the reflexive edge to

produce a study that becomes too much of "us" and too little of "them"? (Clarke, 2005, p. 13)

Where does the researcher belong? This question represented the central conflict of my trauma research – when do I bring my voice to this work and when do I silence it? Although the question of how much of oneself to bring to the work is wrestled with in most inquiry, the balance of "us" and "them" that Clarke (2005) identified takes on nuanced shades in a study of trauma.

I trained in a counseling-based student affairs program and considered similar questions of when and where to bring personal voice to the work of therapeutic relationships. Certainly, the helper must engage in persistent self-reflection to investigate their purpose in introducing personal stories to a client. Is it about them or is it really about you? Do you share for validation or connection (about you) or do you share because it's a story that can be useful to the client's journey (about them)?

I was mindful of this balance throughout my trauma and identity development study; however, there were many moments of doubt impacting how I situated my sense of belonging in the work. I questioned whether I should be engaging in trauma research, or if this should be reserved for clinicians. Both internal and external forces nurtured that doubt. For example, an early interaction I had with a researcher embedded in comparable work tried to deter me from my topic, noting that the work is difficult to do when you are not a clinician. As I, too, was already grappling with questions of belonging in the work, these kinds of interactions further fueled my own questions of worthiness for the project.

Ultimately, I was aware that the project was more than just research. To bear witness to another person's pain and challenge is an encounter of connection and humanity, not a simple act of data collection. I felt a deep sense of responsibility to do justice to the voices that were so brave and honest in sharing their pain with me. My participants expressed their hopes and aspirations that their participation might help others. As one participant shared with me, "This experience right now, talking with you, is very much about letting people know that they're not alone." I felt the weight of clearing space for that aspiration to materialize.

My identity as a trauma survivor meant a variety of things in relation to this project and how to situate myself within it. It meant that I had a natural empathy towards other survivors, something that many of my participants would articulate about their own experiences. It meant that my experience of trauma informed how I understood trauma in a particular way, a reality that had both benefits and challenges. I could hear and see aspects of my participants' experiences that perhaps someone who has not lived through similar hardships may not as readily understand. Simultaneously, I had to work that much harder to hear and see trauma that might be different from my own understandings. I worked intentionally throughout the project to challenge my initial assumptions and consider alternatives to how I understood what I heard, as I wanted the voices of my participants to be at the forefront, rather than my own experiences of trauma.

My desire to foreground my participants produced frequent dilemmas for me in terms of where my voice belonged or did not. I disclosed to my participants that I was a survivor of trauma before they started the project, because I wanted to give them agency

to decide what that meant for them in deciding to participate or not. However, I avoided details of my experience unless they asked (which I stated they should feel comfortable to do), because I didn't want it to be about me. I still struggle with whether I navigated that correctly. Had I offered enough of my own vulnerability to those who offered me so much of theirs? Or, had my limited disclosure been the right decision to center the project on my participants and not me? Or, did that decision-making process have nothing to do with my participants, but rather with an unexplored anxiety of my own in being judged not simply for the quality of my work, but in the context of my most raw identity – my survivorship.

I would move in and out of how much of the researcher belonged in the study as the project both progressed and concluded. Certainly, the work itself kept drawing me into it – "working me" as a mentor had predicted. Below, I elaborate on four related sub-themes that describe the nature of this impact in both productive and challenging ways. These sub-themes represent the lenses through which I experienced my researcher role in the project. I begin each section with an excerpt that emerged during my data collection through my journals or reflective writing.

Sub-Theme: Resistance

I was energized by this grant opportunity. My project was so clearly aligned with the goals and ethos of this funding opportunity. I was relieved that this was a likely possibility for me after hearing there was plenty of funding available this year, and my topic was a strong fit.

[???????]. Confusion. My project wasn't funded. I learned the decision was due to insufficient evidence to suggest I would not inflict psychological harm to my participants. I learned that the deliberations included conversations that my primary recommender's letter failed to articulate how I would not inflict psychological harm to my participants (although nothing in the application criteria suggested this type of concern needed to be addressed, nor was there outreach to that recommender for clarification). I would also learn that another individual had been consulted to review my application and provided a detailed list of how they felt there was sufficient evidence to support minimal risk to participants. This is aside from the work of an Institutional Review Board process to approve my study, a signal of minimal risk to participants. Regardless, my application was denied.

My study often brought me face-to-face with a persistent challenge of trauma in our society – silence. Given that reality, I had to figure out where I would situate myself in relation to that silencing effect and what I would or could do about it. In other words, I had decisions to make about my role as a researcher in relation to the points of resistance and silencing I encountered in relation to both the project and broader discourses about trauma.

I interpreted my grant process experience (mentioned above) as an example of how trauma is resisted and consequently silenced. It is not necessarily an intentional silencing of trauma that manifests in our social worlds. Certainly, the grant committee did not subscribe to an approach of overt silencing of trauma, as they were an organization that had sensitivity to a variety of similar issues. Regardless, the committee deliberations signaled to me that the "t-word" (trauma) was a scary and

disarming one for some, which should not have surprised me. Resistance to hearing about and/or being near life in its raw forms are echoed by other trauma scholars (e.g., Herman, 2015), which helped to explain the resistance I interpreted in the grant process as one of fear-based rather than fact-based decision-making.

Silencing and resistance to trauma were not simply theoretical realities of my topic. They were deeply embedded and lived in the experiences of my participants, as they too tried to navigate social contexts in which resistance to trauma was pervasive. Through policies, discourses, and interactions with others, participants encountered places where their traumatic experiences were unwelcomed. My interaction with these significant moments in participants' experiences heightened my own desire to fight against these silencing mechanisms. Undoubtedly, the resistances I witnessed informed my evolving understandings of where the researcher belongs. In this case, I began to see the importance of using my researcher voice to push against these persistent cultural tendencies to silence trauma.

My commitment to resist silences, however, did not come without its own complications and challenges. Based on the intersection of what I have learned from various survivors of trauma over the years, the literatures with which I was familiar, and my own experiences of trauma, I was adamant in designing my study that trauma is a subjective experience – what is traumatic to one person may not be to another. Thus, I did not provide a definition of trauma for participants to measure themselves against. Instead, I invited participants who self-identified as having experienced something traumatic during college. I anchored my work in the emerging area of critical trauma theory, which aids in exposing the ways in which trauma is a cultural object (e.g., Stevens,

2016). As a cultural object, it is subject to the possibilities and restrictions implicit in anything that is socially constructed. Certainly, how trauma is framed is a product of such social forces that may or may not capture the experiences of all who endure trauma.

My decision to leave the definition of trauma in the hands of those who self-identified as experiencing it drew resistance. It was a critique of my work in presentations, manuscripts, and conversations. Certainly, there were those who valued my commitment to leaving the agency of a definition to my participants, especially those participants who shared the resistance they had experienced when others did not recognize their experiences as traumatic. One participant shared that she is "not the poster child for trauma" while another thanked me for the space of this study to name his trauma, acknowledging that it allowed him to not just feel "weak".

Still, even I had to concede many times that my fervent commitment to trauma self-identification was challenging. In a few interviews, I recall struggling to figure out what the trauma was, which really shook me. If I was questioning whether or not something "counted" as trauma, was I not just reinscribing the precise social structures I was seeking to push against? I learned to interrogate my assumptions with greater depth and reflection and began to see how deeply ingrained I had been in "seeing" trauma as event-based rather than trauma that was of a more pervasive or insidious quality.

My decision about how to define trauma was human-oriented as well as politically-oriented, and informed by the broader social resistances I felt I was pushing against. I was often frustrated by the narrow parameters of trauma that have been crafted through the prominent diagnostic criteria of PTSD (Briere & Scott, 2015). It can be difficult to

separate PTSD criteria from the political. As Neocleous (2012) explained it, "…from the outset…PTSD was a *politically driven psychiatric diagnosis*" (p.193). What emerged in the context of PTSD's origins (and persists today in slightly updated variations) is that the definition of trauma in PTSD criteria leaves many people out (Briere & Scott, 2015). This leaving out ultimately means an inequity in terms of access to resources to help support trauma recovery and healing (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005).

At the level of researcher impact, the resistance lens produced both frustrations and possibilities. As the project progressed, I was able to see with greater acuity the work of many cultural systems that restrict and silence survivor experiences. However, this awareness does not translate to being able to easily change or fix that reality. I could see the possibilities of my work to advocate for changed dialogues about trauma, but also felt the complications of pushing against implicit silencing systems.

Sub-Theme: Fear

"I internally really didn't want her to talk about suicide today." That's what I wrote in my research journal after an interview with a participant who expressed suicidal ideation just a few weeks before our conversation that day. Although I tried to keep my reaction from my participant, internally I panicked. Because of my professional background, I knew what to ask about to check in on her safety that day. Yet, I realized how isolated I felt as a researcher. I reached out to a mental health colleague that evening to ensure there was no immediate threat and consulted with another mental health professional the following morning. Both assured me the situation was under control and reminded me of the frequent intersection of suicidal ideation with trauma – in other words, this was probably not the only time this would happen.

Those were the facts of the situation devoid of emotions. Underneath those objective facts were feelings of intense fear and anxiety for me. As I drove home that night after my interview I was panicked – had I asked the right questions to make sure she was not suicidal that day? What if something happened? What if something happened in the future? Could I continue this work? Did the benefits outweigh the risks? That night, I contemplated the possibility that this might need to be my last trauma study.

I prepared myself, perhaps even over-prepared myself, for many of the emotional tolls that researching trauma could provoke. I was familiar with the possibility of vicarious or secondary trauma (e.g., Jankowski, 2012; Newell & MacNeil, 2010) that this work could elicit. I knew I would hear difficult stories and prepared strategies to be present to these stories, while avoiding taking them in as those that would haunt me. I knew as a survivor of trauma I could face many personal triggers in the research process, and I was well prepared to handle that too.

What I was surprised by were the blind spots that induced deep emotional responses in me. One of those blind spots arrived relatively early in the research process in the story I shared above of my participant's recent suicidal ideation. The additional challenge I came to understand in studying college student trauma was that the isolation of research makes the potential for harm somehow scarier. My past experiences in administrative or teaching capacities with sensitive topics frequently meant that I was both protected by and included in a much broader umbrella of support to handle such situations. I rarely felt on my own in either of those roles. As a researcher, however, I did. This feeling of isolation was, in part, amplified by the complicated terrain of trying

to protect the anonymity of participants in addition to the nature of research often being solitary work.

The fear lens emerged for me as a reaction to concerns about inflicting harm to others or myself. This space of fear and anxiety frequently prompted me to consider how that protection was supposed to work. Who was I really trying to protect? These questions became particularly salient around issues of protecting my participants' anonymity. For one participant, in particular, I was worried that the constellation of their circumstances might reveal their identity if I shared the full picture. My participant appreciated my concern, but assured me that they were fine with everything being revealed. Regardless, I kept erring on the side of fear, wanting to protect this participant's identity. It frequently brought me to an ethical question around navigating what to share about participants and whose voice should matter most in that decision-making. I had a participant telling me they were fine with it, yet my fear-voice asserted there could be unforeseen complications and to err on the side of caution. I kept giving in to my fear voice.

Josselson (2011) reflected on a similar dilemma in a collaborative project with several scholars from different methodological traditions to analyze the same interview transcript. What emerged over the course of the project was that the participant who had previously been using a pseudonym wanted to use her real name in her response chapter to the scholars' work that would ultimately become part of a book. As Josselson (2011) described the original request by the participant:

> This threw our group into quite a muddle. We consulted lawyers and ethicists who advised us that there was nothing either illegal or unethical about allowing

> this person….to do this…We warned her that in the future she might regret her decision…She replied that she was aware of these possibilities and that she was an adult who could make decisions. So, somewhat hesitantly, we agreed that she could have her real name on her chapter and as co-author of the book. (pp. 35-56)

Josselson's (2011) observations astutely capture this tension of anonymity. A seemingly straightforward obligation of research, to protect anonymity, becomes contested terrain. I believe part of why it is contested terrain (as it was for my decision-making or as Josselson (2011) described) is because it takes us to a place of the "what if?" That grey area, the unknown, can bring up profound anxiety. Certainly, it is a space of vulnerability to admit fear, especially in academic and professional circles. Nevertheless, I believe these are the disclosures we need to hear more often, especially in relation to research of sensitive topics where these questions inevitably emerge.

Sub-Theme: Connection

I was reluctant to admit a significant experience that I was having with my study. It was often difficult to hear about the traumas my participants had endured. I grew to feel connected to each person in a way that made it inevitably difficult to listen to each person's pain.

Yet, at times, I simultaneously felt pleasant emotions while listening to these difficult stories. What I felt at various points in interviews with my participants was something that is increasingly rare in our world – deep, empathetic connection. Being present to trauma was difficult, but it was simultaneously rewarding to just sit with and share in

a very special place of authentic vulnerability. I was often in awe of the depth and rawness that my participants were willing to invite me to share with them – it was a humbling experience.

To engage in a study about trauma, for me, meant a level of personal investment and connection that transcended the research process. The study offered the possibility of something productive for my participants, but it offered parallel promise for my own development and sense of self. This potential enrichment ultimately pivoted around connection – that this work was as much about understanding connection, as it was anything else.

My participants unanimously discussed how trauma connects. They shared many stories of how their own painful experiences allowed them to feel a sense of connection and kinship with others in pain of any kind. Trauma was not something my participants invited, but it allowed them to feel an enhanced bond with others. I understood that. What I learned through my own trauma, and continued to foster in researching trauma, was that this heightened sense of connection with those who struggle was a valuable gift. The connection I experienced was part of what made it possible to sit with the difficult stories of others. This proved a powerful connector that allowed me to listen in different ways and to foster deep empathy in which I could seek to understand the world through the eyes of others.

A surprise element of connection for me arrived with those on the periphery of the study. An interesting phenomenon emerged of people sharing their traumas with me once they realized the work that I was doing. The combination of the topic and my own proximity to it suggested a melding of my life with my work in ways I perhaps had no

sense of at the time I embarked on studying trauma. The sharing of trauma releases us from it in some small way – to not hold the burden of the secret alone. Perhaps when people learn what I study, they see an opportunity to release that burden with someone who might at the very least be able to sit with it and hold it. Although there are aspects of the sharing that are difficult on both sides, there is ultimately a deepened sense of connection that emerges in the process.

Sub-Theme: Affect and Embodiment

One afternoon I had several interviews in a row lined up and realized very quickly that my body was going to tell me how this needed to go. I HAD to move. I was compelled to move. So, that in-between-interviews-time became very active. My body went back in time to old routines of how it prepared for the physical – way, way back…to when I was still a figure skater. Perhaps it had no relationship to what I was doing in the moment on an obvious level, but somewhere deeper in my body it did. I started to do a warm-up jumping routine my coach had me do before I got on the ice as a way to simultaneously release my previous interview and prepare for the next.

The academic world emphasizes cognitive dimensions of awareness and knowing. Pasque, Carducci, Kuntz, and Gildersleeve (2012) acknowledged this reality in noting the dominance of a Cartesian Duality in higher education environments that undergirds both research and teaching. They concluded that the academic milieu is one of an "overemphasis of the mind at the expense of the body" (Pasque et al., 2012, p. 36).

As I progressed through my trauma and student development study, I became acutely aware of the prevalence and shortcomings of the emphasis of the mind over the body in

higher education. Not only did this dominance prove inadequate to meet and support the experiences of many of the participants with whom I was interacting, but also in terms of my own experience as a researcher and how I ultimately needed to interact with the project. Through my participants, I was frequently made aware that trauma brings embodiment and emotion to the forefront of experience and reminds us that we are more than our minds. My awareness of my embodied experience was a critical insight for my positionality as a researcher, too. Research is often approached as an intellectual exercise, but I became acutely aware in studying trauma of the need for expanded conversations about this assumption. The engagement of a researcher with his/her/their work is not just one of intellect – it simultaneously resonates deeply in the affective and physical body.

As the project progressed, I noted both the emotional and physical/energetic impacts of the work. Saturation is a word used in qualitative research to describe that nebulous point in which there is enough data to ensure adequate coverage of the topic (Charmaz, 2014). Saturation resonated for me in researching trauma in a very different way. It remained a product of collecting data, but not in terms of when I had "enough" to ensure quality coverage of a topic. Rather, I encountered saturation very frequently in this project as a point in which I had "enough" exposure to data. I realized I was approaching an over-saturation in spending my days both reading about trauma and then creating space to listen to first person accounts of trauma.

Over time, I developed very tangible and practical strategies to work with this consistent exposure to trauma, but only after I confronted the profound ways in which my emotional and physical state was being compromised in the face of saturation. My

summer of data collection for this project took a toll early on. I felt stressed out, experienced disrupted sleep, and encountered strong emotions. Physically, I felt a diminished sense of energy. I became increasingly aware of the need to pull back and engage in stronger self-care. Striking the balance between sitting with difficult experiences in ways in which I was open and present along with protecting myself from over-internalizing these stories proved a constant navigation.

As I became aware that my physical and emotional self was being compromised, I started to implement changes to ensure I would be well and grounded throughout this study and others. I created space for increased breaks throughout data collection, analysis and writing. I realized the maximum number of interviews I could do in one day was two and I was ok with that. I increased the number of yoga classes I attended every week and made more frequent appearances at the gym. I also began using some energy techniques to enter into and come out of interviews that my therapist taught me to support me in not taking the stories and their resonances on as my own in my body. I also learned I needed the physical to think. Very often, I would be thinking hard about something and reach a point of feeling stuck – if I did something physical, I could move through that stuck state and reach a new place of understanding with the thought to continue moving through it and working with it.

The affective and physical dimensions of research seem to have had less space in academic discourse. Stevens (2016) has noted the need to shift beyond this tendency by observing:

> I have more recently begun to think about committing to engaging this kind of work from a posture that is different from what we have typically done in the

> past…we can no longer be invested in merely conveying ideas. While we do want to do that, of course, we also need to evoke experiences that can host some of the tensions about which we have such deep interest. What this has meant thus far has been insisting on bodily awareness and breath while speaking of affect in the radically intellectualized contexts academic institutions tend to offer. (p. 22)

In the context of research about trauma, it seems nearly impossible to me to not connect the disparate strands of experience that Stevens (2016) highlighted. Discussion of affect and the body permeated the narratives of my participants. I would become increasingly aware over time that it permeated my experience as a researcher, also, and how I came to understand my presence in the work.

Discussion and Conclusion

As calls for trauma-informed approaches within higher education and student affairs continue to emerge, there is concurrently a need to ground this call in assessment and scholarship that investigates the impacts of trauma unique to college student populations to support trauma-informed practices that are evidence-based. Still, there remains considerable reluctance to asking about trauma (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006, 2007).

The purpose of this autoethnographic study was to contribute a unique lens on what it means to do trauma research that is specifically focused on college student learning and developmental experiences in hopes of encouraging continued inquiries in this area. What emerged as central in the current autoethnographic project was a pervasive question of "where does the researcher belong?" This question meant different things at

different points in the research process and was framed by four related sub-themes that shaped how I engaged with this question as well as the overall impact of the work on me as a researcher. These four sub-themes included (a) resistance; (b) fear; (c) connection; and (d) affect and embodiment.

Given the pervasiveness of college student trauma (Avant, Davis, & Cranston, 2011; Frazier et al., 2009; Read et al., 2011), it is likely that both researchers and assessment professionals may encounter student trauma in the inquiry process even when that is not the explicit focus of their projects. In other words, while this study has direct implications for those inquiring about trauma, it also provides useful information to those who may be investigating other topics in which stories of traumatic experiences may emerge. Both researchers and student affairs assessment professionals can benefit from an awareness of how they may be impacted by trauma that erupts in the course of the inquiry process. Additional research may be needed to investigate the impact on the inquirer when trauma emerges unexpectedly in the research or assessment relationship.

Specific to investigations of college student trauma, the current project provides several implications for future research. First, this study underscored the dynamic nature of research engagement with trauma. There were points at which the research was too much and I had to pull back, while at other times leaning into the discomfort was critical in fostering cathartic and desirable outcomes for my participants and myself. Although it is beyond the scope of the current project to identify whether my experiences met criteria for vicarious trauma, secondary traumatic stress (Newell & MacNeil, 2010), or vicarious resilience (Hernández et al., 2007), my research engagement with trauma certainly activated both negative (e.g., fear, disruptions to sleep, frustrations with

resistance) and positive (e.g., a sense of connection and empathy with others, a renewed awareness of the inseparability of the body and mind) impacts at various points in the process. Thus, the current study offers a roadmap of what may occur in this type of work that can be of value to those who are considering engaging in similar projects. Second, this autoethnography illuminated some broader sociocultural elements that intersect college student trauma research. For example, social structures work to silence aspects of trauma, academe can contribute to making the body invisible, and cultural practices around protection of data often make aspects of research isolated. In each of these situations, something is hidden, and these shadows can create corresponding discomfort or even fear for both participants and researchers in the research process. Future research about a variety of sensitive topics will continue to benefit from researchers who openly and honestly articulate not just their final products, but also their challenges along the way. Unearthing these silences is critical not just for purposes of research, but also in continuing to articulate the lived experiences of students who may not be represented in broader literature and practice.

Although this study focused on what researchers may encounter in investigating trauma, this is an area with direct relevance to student affairs assessment professionals, also. In many cases, work to combat prominent college trauma such as sexual violence is informed by large-scale quantitative data (e.g., Ohio, n.d.). These measures are important to frame the scope of trauma on college campuses and what may be the lived reality of many students. However, given the tremendous subjectivity of traumatic experience, qualitative investigations are a critical complementary approach to inform the nuanced experiences that inevitably occur for survivors who experience a broad

spectrum of traumatic experiences. Still, qualitative assessment of trauma brings forth the need for thoughtful approaches that minimize negative impacts for participants (such as re-traumatization) and assessment professionals (such as vicarious trauma or secondary traumatic stress responses) (Newell & MacNeil, 2010).

Several important implications for those in student affairs assessment roles emerged in the current study. First, the current study demonstrated a range of lenses that can emerge in qualitative investigations of trauma that result in an inquirer's encounters with resistance, fear, connection, and embodiment. Considering the nuanced experiences that can arise in these domains may inform decisions about what skills and knowledge assessment professionals should acquire before engaging in similar work. For example, assessment professionals may want to consider the degree to which potential interviewers are themselves versed in trauma-informed practice and/or how personal triggering or secondary traumatic stress (Newell & MacNeil, 2010) may occur in the process. Second, the current study noted the contested terrain regarding how trauma is defined. Specifically, narrow definitions of trauma have created conditions that restrict access to resources (Briere & Scott, 2015; Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005), and, in the case of research and assessment, can be imagined to restrict possibilities of capturing diverse voices in understanding experiences of trauma. Attention to who is left in and out by various definitions of trauma is an important consideration in student affairs assessment for inclusive design. Finally, the current study demonstrated the ways in which engagement with trauma survivors may result in emotional and physical strain that necessitates different degrees of self-care to be considered as part of the interviewer's own preparation. Assessment professionals may want to engage in their

own self-reflection about what may be needed for personal wellness in the midst of inquiries about a variety of difficult subjects within their projects, whether a result of an explicit focus on trauma or other topics in which students' traumas may emerge.

Additionally, the current study highlighted several dimensions of how trauma operates in sociocultural contexts that may be worthy of future assessment efforts for institutions. For example, I became aware of many points of resistance in this project in which systems of silence operated around traumatic experience. Assessment professionals may want to consider assessment projects that unearth such practices on their own campuses, including assessment questions such as: What systems of silence operate in the policies and practices of my campus with which survivors have to contend?

Although recent developments have increased attention to trauma-informed practice in higher education (e.g., White House, 2014), trauma in the lives of college students is not a new phenomenon. In fact, the vast majority of students on college campuses have had exposure to trauma (Avant et al., 2011; Frazier et al., 2009; Read et al., 2011). The capacity for researchers and assessment professionals to have honest dialogues about the complications and potential of engaging with college student trauma is a critical step towards encouraging much needed assessment and research to understand the implications of trauma for student survivors that will, in turn, inform future practice.

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