

Guidelines for academics when dealing with survivors of right-wing violence

The following information is aimed at academics planning qualitative research projects with survivors of right-wing violence. It is based on a trauma-informed approach and addresses the question of how those affected can be protected from re-traumatisation as research participants while sharing their story in a way that promotes their resilience.

The information is taken from the following article and supplemented by our own points:

Alessi, Edward J.; Kahn, Sarilee (2023): Towards a trauma-informed qualitative research approach: Guidelines for ensuring the safety and promoting the resilience of research participants. In: Qualitative Research in Psychology 20 (1), pp.121-154. DOI:10.1080/14780887.2022.2107967.
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14780887.2022.2107967>

Preparation for research:

- The project, all work steps and the corresponding framework conditions and requirements should be discussed in advance with those affected and their supporters. All persons involved should be prepared accordingly.
- Consider the role of historic trauma in participants and how this type of trauma is compounded by other social/systemic forces (e.g. exploitation, repression, sexism, discrimination).
- Reflect on power differences and adapt your project and research methods accordingly.
- Use a variety of sources to understand the trauma experiences of those affected. If possible, develop collaborations with support or community organisations or create an advisory board or a form of supervision or similar.
- Recognise that individuals and communities who have experienced trauma demonstrate exceptional resilience and that this manifests in different ways (i.e. what is considered resilience for one group may be different for another).
- Recognise the expertise of those affected as the main witnesses to the events.
- Prioritise the self-determination of the participants. This means that you should not automatically assume that participants are too 'traumatised' to take part in the research, as this may deprive them of the opportunity to tell their stories.
- Consider your research and relationships with those affected as a dynamic, non-linear process.
- Inform the participants about the anonymisation of their personal data and make them aware of the dilemma of anonymisation, which is necessary to protect the participants but at the same time makes your expertise invisible. Alternatively, you can use participative methods such as collaborative writing.
- If you are planning participatory research, involve those affected and their supporters in the research at an early stage.
- Beforehand, deal with supposed scientific 'objectivity' and read materials on the topic of anti-racism and anti-discrimination at the university and in research.
- Clarify in advance what the person needs if they relive a traumatic event.
- If necessary, clarify with supporters which questions should not be asked.

Implementation:

- Clarify the purpose of the qualitative interview or focus group
- Communicate to the participants that they are not responsible for satisfying the researchers.
- Remind participants that they can ask questions and raise concerns at any time before proceeding with the research. You should also make it clear that the research can be paused or terminated at any time if the researchers so wish.
- Go for radical transparency – don't promise supporters or participants more than they can actually expect from the study.
- Create a safe and trusting environment.
- Be transparent and keep your promises.
- Appear calm, empathetic and self-confident and be prepared for a possibly emotionally difficult situation.
- Expect strong feelings from the participants, but do not try to process these feelings, give advice or 'solve' the situation. Instead, listen actively and show empathy and sensitive curiosity.
- Mitigate the risks of re-traumatisation.
 - Be aware that the researcher-participant relationship may re-enact other dynamics in which power imbalances have historically existed or currently exist.
 - Actively empower participants to set their own boundaries by deciding what they want to disclose or which questions they want to skip.
- Help participants to recount their experiences instead of reliving them.
 - Recounting means being fully anchored in the here and now while talking about experiences that happened in the past.

Recognise when participants may be reliving a traumatic experience during an interview or focus group (e.g. if they seem to digress or lose a sense of the here and now...). Clarify in advance what a person needs in this kind of situation.

- Pay attention to the implicit or explicit signals that participants send when they feel uncomfortable (e.g. numbness, blank or absent expression, overwhelming emotions, anger or frustration).
- Steer the interview or focus group towards a discussion about resilience or strength if a participant becomes overwhelmed by their feelings or begins to withdraw.
 - The researcher can ask questions: "What gives you strength?"
 - If the participant is still overwhelmed, interrupt the interview.
 - Offer clear choices – ask the participant if he/she wants to stop the interview.
 - If the participant wishes to continue, return to a question focussing on resilience.
 - If the participant is unable to continue and is still in distress, do not leave the person alone. You should clarify in advance what the person concerned needs in this situation.
 - Consider doing a simple grounding technique before leaving the physical space to bring them back to the here and now (e.g. ask the participant to look around the room and simply describe what they see, what they hear and what they smell)
- Ensure that participants finish the interview with a sense of empowerment. Switch to questions that promote their natural coping strengths or ability to recognise and mobilise their own resilience. For example:
 - "You've obviously been through so much. So tell us how you've managed to stay strong?"
 - "Thank you for sharing such difficult experiences. You've managed it so far, how did you do it?"

Aftercare:

- Do not use those affected/relatives to legitimise your research.
- Carry out a follow-up discussion and ensure that support is available in co-operation with support staff.
- Inform the participants about your next steps and the schedule.
- Offer further contact. Involve those affected in the further work process, if desired.

Self-reflection:

- Consider how examining trauma affects your own thoughts and emotions. Use resources to understand your own trauma history and emotional reactions (sadness, helplessness, frustration, over-identification).
- Recognise that these reactions may only later be linked to participants' trauma narratives.
- Develop self-care strategies for the entire research process.
- Conduct peer debriefings to prevent indirect traumatising and reflect on power relations.
- Consider those affected as experts.
- Do not pass off the thoughts of those affected as your own.
- Share research results with the participants and integrate their feedback if desired and possible.
- Investigate whether you are reproducing discrimination in your work.