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Qualitative Research and Vicarious Trauma: The Use of Reflexivity

Dawn M. Higgins, PhD

Abstract

Qualitative researchers studying traumatic events may experience vicarious trauma. The research practice of reflexivity addresses biases of the researcher, however, there is no explicit practice to address symptoms of vicarious trauma. In this introspective study, the researcher uses a reflexive worksheet to explore vicarious trauma in her study on 9/11.

Problem

The data collection method of in-depth interviews can be emotionally challenging for a researcher, particularly when the respondents' narratives concern traumatic events.

The emotional response of the qualitative researcher to traumatic narratives may result in symptoms that are related to vicarious trauma. As such, the researcher may:

- Avoid analyzing or reporting certain data.
- Analyze the narratives through a lens that has been influenced by an emotional response to the traumatic stories.

While the use of reflexivity is a practice in qualitative research, there is no defined practice to address vicarious trauma.

Purpose

The purpose of this introspective study is to understand how reflexivity may assist a researcher in identifying symptoms of vicarious trauma when conducting a qualitative study on a traumatic event.

Through the use of a relational self-reflection tool a researcher may be able to, not only identify vicarious trauma symptoms, but also incorporate emotionally healthy strategies as part of the research process. These findings will contribute to the knowledge in the field of trauma related qualitative research.

Relevant Literature

Theoretical Framework

Symbolic Interactionism is a social psychological theory that explains how individuals make meaning of events based on their own self-concept (Mead, 1934).

Vicarious Trauma and Therapists

While exposure to trauma through the stories of clients in therapy sessions are not related to psychological distress, it is a strong predictor of trauma symptoms (Makadin, Farrell, & Turpin, 2017).

Vicarious Trauma and Research

Vicarious trauma is defined as experiencing symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, such as, anxiety and avoidance of situations that remind the person of the event, through the exposure to the victims' imagery of the trauma (Wies & Coy, 2013).

The qualitative data collection method of in-depth interviews of traumatic events can be emotionally difficult for the researcher (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, and Liamputtong, 2006).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a self-reflective process that requires personal introspection (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2002) and is used by the researcher to help manage the emotional demands of qualitative research (Malacrida, 2007).

Mauthner & Doucet (2009) operationalized **the reflexive voice-centered relational analysis** (Gilligan, Brown, & Rogers, 1990) by creating a worksheet that focuses on the social, emotional, and intellectual perspectives.

Research Question

How can the use of reflexivity assist qualitative researchers with vicarious trauma?



The World View of the Young Adults Who Were Adolescents When Their Parent Died on 9/11 (Higgins, 2008)

The 9/11 Study Interview Question: September 11th was a horrific day for all of us. I can only imagine what it was like for you. Can you tell me what it was like for you on that day...

Procedures

Design

Qualitative Introspective Study

Data Sources

- 13 Interview transcripts
- Field Notes

Procedures

The data will be collected using the reflexive voice-centered relational worksheet. The researcher will review the narratives that were collected in the 9/11 study in 2007. The narratives and the field notes collected in 2007 will be placed on the worksheet in one column. In an adjacent column, the researcher will write her personal reaction and interpretation of the traumatic narratives from a relational lens socially, emotionally, and intellectually.

Data Analysis

The self-reflections on the reflexive voice-centered relational worksheet and the field notes will be analyzed using a thematic coding that is informed by the literature on vicarious trauma.

Findings

The researcher anticipates that this introspection will assist this researcher in understanding how vicarious trauma may impact scholarly work. Also, the use of the reflexive worksheet as an approach to addressing vicarious trauma in qualitative research may serve as a model for reflexivity in qualitative research.

Limitations

This study is on one qualitative researcher's experience studying one traumatic event.

Conclusions

This researcher anticipates that, in conclusion, the findings will support the importance of further exploration of researchers' emotional response in qualitative trauma related research. With the focus on "researcher as the instrument" in qualitative research, special attention tends to be given to the distinction of researcher, versus therapist. However, more attention needs to be given to strategies that address vicarious trauma.

Social Change Implications

Traumatic events are a part of society and many qualitative researchers are exploring the experiences of the individuals directly impacted. By understanding the strategies to address possible vicarious trauma, these researchers will stay healthy and be able to continue contributing valuable knowledge to the world.