



An Ansoms

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## Living with the psychological burden of academic research

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The psychological burden placed on researchers who work in contexts of conflict and violence is a topic scarcely addressed, despite the traumatic events many researchers must confront. An Ansom writes about the extraordinary mental cost of fieldwork, and the negligence (or ignorance) of institutions in the global North who subcontract African research assistants and collaborators without considering the necessary mental health support.

*This post was produced as part of the 'Bukavu Series', a series of blogs highlighting the violence that persists in the process of academic knowledge production.*

A quick Google search of the keywords 'trauma among academic researchers' reveals the immense gap around this topic in academic discourse. Search results indicate that most studies of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) focus on stress following a childhood trauma or a major life

event (assault, violence, abuse, rape, etc.). At the same time, there is a robust literature about particular professional groups with an elevated risk of encountering potentially traumatic situations: soldiers, medical staff, journalists, human rights defenders, and so forth. Ironically, though, there is nothing on the phenomenon of post-traumatic stress among academic researchers who work in contexts of conflict or violence. They head to the field, often without any form of physical protection, without any preparation for the mental weight of their research, and without any follow-up or after-care when things take a bad turn.

This lack of academic (ac)knowledge(ment) is paired with an immense *omertà* (a code of silence), among researchers themselves, around the psychological burdens of their research. In effect, within the global academic enterprise, there is very little space for researchers vulnerabilities. This era of *cognitive capitalism* drives us towards a model of *deliverology*. We must perform in an immensely competitive context in which, in Europe, the allocation of posts and projects depends on a performance measured by evaluative and quantitative matrices that leave no room for inconsistencies or shortcomings. In Africa, the competition is no less intense, given a research setting that relies heavily on donor logic, and offers scant space for processing painful fieldwork experiences in the face of constant pressures on one's livelihood.

This institutional environment collectively drives us to hide our vulnerabilities within our research trajectories. Debates around field ethics centre on what principles to follow in order to guarantee the safety of research participants. They are frequently rooted in rigid administrative procedures, poorly adapted to the realities of the field. Within the European academic context, reflections on the physical safety of the researcher herself are generally limited to questions of insurance coverage. For African research assistants and collaborators, often working on subcontract for organisations of the global North, this aspect is often not addressed, given a lack of targeted security mechanisms. In such an environment, there is hardly hope of finding a safe space in which people can speak openly about the mental wounds accumulated during their academic research.

And yet, the need is immense. Over the past three years, while confronting my own nightmares after fifteen years of research in the African Great Lakes Region, I have had the opportunity to speak confidentially about this subject with dozens of researchers working in violent settings. Their words bore witness to an immense loneliness in the face of the psychological burdens connected to their research. Many are deeply traumatised by the violence that they have experienced, or witnessed, or heard about in their research participants' accounts; or by their feelings of helplessness in the face of the injustices they encounter. Very few of these researchers have found the necessary space within their professional settings to talk about this; still fewer have been able to count on psychological support to process the effects. The *omertà* appears to be generalised.

And yet, there are exceptions. In January of 2018, a group of researchers of different ranks, disciplines, and nationalities (men and women), gathered in Bukavu, DRC to discuss the ethical challenges of research in conflict and post-conflict zones. All of these researchers had extensive research experience in the context of the eastern DRC. Among the topics that came up, the mental cost of fieldwork was explicitly addressed. Together, we arrived at certain metaphors that explained the challenges we face. Someone framed research in conflict settings as living with a constant risk of getting burned. As researchers, we grow accustomed to the burns; we even begin to trivialise them. Until the day we realise that our skin no longer heals. Another person spoke of a backpack filling up over the course of one's research. Every painful experience gets thrown into the backpack like a little stone. Even though it might hurt, one's back often grows accustomed to the new weight. Until one day, a single little stone may cause one's back to break.

The discussions during this workshop made a profound impact on me. The words of other people touched on my own lived experience. The courage involved in the exchanges around our vulnerabilities inspired and continues to inspire me. The fact that such a discussion is possible between researchers of different ranks, nationalities, and disciplines exceeded all my expectations. And that has given me hope. For in effect, such exchanges

allow us to break out of our loneliness. Moreover, the intersection of various points of view allows us to reflect together on how to do things differently, on how to create spaces in which we can escape the *omertà* surrounding our mental wounds in order to begin to heal.

At the institutional level, there are still many challenges to overcome. Discourse around the psychological cost of research and the importance of researchers' mental health must gain legitimacy. The creation of a culture of exchange should not depend on the initiative of a few groups of researchers. Research institutions must plan out spaces for discussion in a structured way. And adequate support from mental health professionals can channel the gains made in these exchanges into formulas for coaching future generations of researchers. Thus, we need a fundamental change of mentality within the academic community. Breaking the *omertà* around one's vulnerabilities as a researcher is a sign neither of weakness, nor of courage. Rather, it should be seen as an essential part of every epistemological and ethical reflection on research.

*The 'Bukavu Series' is the result of a collaboration between the Institut Supérieur de Développement Rural de Bukavu, and three partners of the Governance in Conflict network: the Université Catholique de Louvain, the Groupe d'études sur les conflits-Sécurité Humanitaire, and the LSE Firoz Lalji Centre for Africa's partner institution, Ghent University.*

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