Establishing a Vicarious Trauma Community Group within the SeNSS/SENSS Network

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Vicarious trauma is a harmful change that occurs when an indirect exposure to trauma causes emotional distress or a shifted worldview (Baird & Kracen, 2006). It can impact practitioners working with potentially distressing situations and content across many different professions, such as healthcare or social work personnel, counsellors, prison or probation officers, lawyers, journalists, humanitarian aid workers, members of the clergy etc (see Lee, 2017; Maguire & Byrne, 2017; Hendron et al., 2012). Recent research studies have increasingly recognised that vicarious traumatisation is also an occupational risk for academic researchers interacting with trauma victims and trauma stories (see Nikischer, 2019; Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2018; Dhollande et al., 2025; Wallace & County, 2023; Smith et al., 2021). Beyond directly conducting interviews with participants relaying a traumatic experience, vicarious trauma can result from coding qualitative data, reviewing historical archives, reading academic articles on difficult and emotionally challenging subjects or other repeated forms of exposure to traumatic material.

However, even with the shift towards recognizing the potential risk of vicarious trauma among academics, this recognition is largely focused on certain fields of study and 'outside of these fields, there is often a complete lack of understanding that traumatic topics have the potential to cause harm' (Nikischer, 2019). Furthermore, the view of what may constitute a traumatic topic remains fairly narrow (discussed in the context of research addressing the environmental crisis in Pihkala (2007) and in the context of veterinary work in Hanrahan et al. (2018). The risks of researchers being exposed to potentially traumatic material are further compounded by new technological developments (Lee, 2024).

Although experiencing vicarious trauma can harm emotional well-being and negatively impact the ability of academic researchers to meet their professional responsibilities, 'the social sciences have been slow to address the challenges engagement with potentially traumatizing material pose to researchers' (Lee, 2024). Research conducted on this topic frequently recommends that researchers develop self-care protocols and coping mechanisms which help them to curtail the effects of vicarious trauma (Woodby et al., 2011;

Rager, 2005; Malacrida, 2007). However, to ensure 'that the research […] conducted is of the highest quality and is undertaken with safety as a primary goal' requires developing institutional approaches to protecting researcher safety and well-being, 'thereby rendering it a collective concern' and not leaving it solely as the responsibility of the researcher themselves (Nikischer, 2019).

The SeNSS/SENSS doctoral training partnership funds research related to the following themes: 1. sustainability and climate emergency; 2. health, well-being and social care; 3. justice, institutions, and social change; 4. resolving uncertainty and addressing crises; 5. digital social sciences; and 6. advanced methods for social and economic research. Under these themes, many of the SeNSS/SENSS doctoral researchers address distressing topics, conduct fieldwork and interviews which may be emotionally challenging, and may be exposed to traumatizing material on a regular basis. Based on conversations over coffee at various SeNSS/SENSS events, the availability of dedicated resources, training, and mentorship to build resilience to the effects of vicarious trauma is limited. Indeed, across the different institutions that form the partnership - or even among the different departments within the same institution - there are varying degrees of awareness and even acknowledgement around vicarious trauma as a concern for doctoral researchers.

Following up from these conversations, several SeNSS/SENSS doctoral researchers are working together to establish a Vicarious Trauma Community Group. Through the Vicarious Trauma Community Group, we aim to systematically embed into the SeNSS/SENSS structure knowledge building around this topic and to develop training focused on the needs of researchers to better prepare them for engaging with traumatic stories and material. By addressing the subject of vicarious trauma openly and collectively - and introducing it to new SeNSS/SENSS researchers as early as their induction into the network - we hope to counter feelings of isolation, strengthen self-care and resilience mechanisms, and create a growing space for peer support.

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