

CHAPTER 9.

RISKY PROJECTS & RESEARCHER
WELL-BEING: LOCATING
NEW METHODOLOGICAL
TRADITIONS IN RHETORIC
& WRITING STUDIES

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Paired reading:

- Gelms, Bridget. “Social Media Research and the Methodological Problem of Harassment: Foregrounding Researcher Safety.” *Computers and Composition*, vol. 59, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2021.102626>

In rhetoric and writing studies, we necessarily put great emphasis on developing research projects that are meaningful and inspire change in the world—work that interrogates structural inequalities in pursuit of a more equitable and just future. Yet there are often unique challenges that come with taking on such high-stakes work. This chapter offers reflections on these challenges while locating researcher well-being as a rich site of understanding the hidden costs of pursuing high-stakes research. Throughout, the author reflects on her experiences as an online harassment researcher—a topic notorious for provoking researcher harm—and how her relationship to methodologies evolved over the course of a specific project. In reflecting on the entire lifecycle of this project all the way to publication, the author argues that a messy research process—one that is disrupted, emotional, and deviates from the processes typically celebrated and taught in rhetoric and writing studies—is not a failure on the researcher’s part but instead a natural piece of taking on challenging query topics. The chapter concludes by offering tangible steps the field can take to prioritize researcher humanity and thus sustain high-stakes research in rhetoric and writing studies.

Lying in bed, the light from my phone illuminating my face, I frantically googled the name of the sender of an email I'd received late at night about my dissertation. Researching gendered forms of online harassment, I'd recently started publicizing a survey I'd designed as the primary form of data collection, and the sender of this email—who self-identified as a “well-connected male troll”—wanted to “help” me with my project. He turned out to be more than just a troll. Search results revealed a sordid and litigious past, including a lawsuit involving hacking and his non-consensual distribution of women's private photos. He wanted to speak to me. I wanted nothing to do with him.

This uninvited email was just one of several experiences throughout my dissertation research that caused me to question whether I could even continue with my work. Violent, misogynistic, and invasive comments from strangers on the internet filled my social media feed in the days immediately following the survey going live, rendering these spaces unusable to me. Between the exorbitant amount of time spent blocking users and safeguarding my digital presence, I found myself wondering whether I was willing to experience this kind of stress and anxiety for potentially years to come as I, an early-career scholar not yet out of graduate school, built a research agenda around online harassment. Was my research worth jeopardizing my well-being? Nothing I'd learned about academic research or methodologies prepared me for this.

As a relative newcomer to the field at the time, I had limited training in research methodologies, and the ones I had encountered through coursework emphasized *participant* safety as the key value by which to organize my project. Because of this, I failed to consider *my own* safety, which ultimately left me vulnerable to harassment and the ensuing negative effects of it. Years later, as an assistant professor settled into a tenure-track job, I attempted to make sense of how my experience as a researcher came to bear on the process itself in my piece “Social Media Research and the Methodological Problem of Harassment: Foregrounding Researcher Safety” (Gelms). Thinking through questions of how to better methodologically prepare for when research goes “wrong,” I found that I still have many questions related to how we can prioritize our own humanity at every messy turn a project may take.

In this chapter, I'd like to offer an extension of our thinking about ways that methodologies enable research in rhetoric and writing studies—an extension that locates researcher well-being at the center to understand the hidden costs we face when we pursue the sort of high stakes, risky, and emotionally challenging topics that can inspire upset or damage to the researcher. Throughout, I'll reflect on my own experiences as an online harassment researcher—a topic notorious for provoking harm—and how my relationship to method/ologies evolved over the course of a specific project. This chapter won't exhaustively detail every

inherent risk in taking on a risky research project, but I will touch on certain risks that crept their way into my process. It's my hope that by narrativizing some of my own research experiences, this chapter can offer affirmation that a messy research process—one that is disrupted and deviates from those typically celebrated and taught in rhetoric and writing studies—is not a failure on the researcher's part but instead a natural piece of taking on challenging topics in an inquiry.

HIDDEN LABOR COSTS OF RISKY RESEARCH

A distinct value of rhetoric and writing studies as an organized field of inquiry is that we necessarily put great emphasis on developing research projects that are meaningful and inspire change in the world—work that interrogates structural inequalities in pursuit of a more equitable and just future, whether in the classroom or in our broader communities (Kirsch). Yet there are often unique challenges that come with taking on such high-stakes work. In my dissertation project, for example, as I investigated online harassment experiences and their effects on one's ability to participate in public discourses, my challenges extended well beyond typical hurdles researchers face. Instead, I found myself having to make decisions around personal safety and my commitment to seeing the project through to the end (Gelms).

Researchers working on feminist interventions of internet cultures often face extreme harassment from misogynistic agitators (Jane), and my project was no different. Once my survey went live, harassment arrived swiftly, in large quantities, and across multiple platforms. From name-calling to violent threats, this experience was both overwhelming and terrifying. I assessed things on the fly, weighing multiple aspects of the situation including goals of the project, bureaucratic deadlines to finish my dissertation, and my own comfortability level with being on the receiving end of intensifying harassment. Ultimately, I decided to close down the survey and pivot towards interviews as my main source of data—something that deviated from my original research plan but a decision made necessary by the threats to my safety and privacy. I also went into a full digital lockdown, changing all of my passwords and privacy settings . . . even going so far as to disconnect my devices from the internet for several days, just to be safe. In the end, I successfully completed the project in a form I was proud of, passed my defense, and graduated. But the experience of having plans go awry mid-project and feeling lost in a dark void when it came to my own well-being has stayed with me since.

Evidenced by my story, researching challenging or risky topics can introduce a lot of precarity and vulnerability into the research process that threatens the

well-being of the researcher (Mallon and Elliott; Vincett). Despite this, researcher well-being is often absent from methodological discussions. Sharon Mallon and Iris Elliot note, “the idea of researchers as potentially being vulnerable participants in the research process is a relatively new concept” that has only been sporadically examined in methodology scholarship (2). Indeed, in rhetoric and writing studies, method/ologies addressing risk mitigation typically focus purely on participant safety. But what happens when the researcher’s safety is threatened due to the nature of their work? How can we develop methodological frameworks in our discipline that support risky research projects and the unpredictability that may come with such inquiries? To start, we would do well to recognize the varied and abundant hidden labor costs of pursuing challenging research.

One such cost is the potential of suffering second-hand trauma—a serious condition in which a person experiences trauma indirectly, such as through witnessing or hearing about someone else’s traumatic experience. There are a variety of terms that are used to describe this phenomenon—secondary trauma stress, vicarious trauma, exposure trauma—each with nuanced differences but all describing the general experience of distress brought on by sharing in the pain of someone else’s experience through prolonged bouts of empathy. As one can imagine, clinicians, therapists, doctors, and other professionals who work in healthcare are at an extraordinarily high-risk of second-hand trauma (Honig; Ludick and Figley). Recently, scholars have begun to note how *researchers*, even those outside of healthcare fields, are also a group of people who shouldn’t be discounted in conversations about risks of second-hand trauma, as bearing witness to participants’ traumatic stories through observation, survey, or interview data can have significant and long-lasting consequences (Adonis; Berger; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes; Newell & MacNeil).

Second-hand trauma can manifest in a variety of ways. In their study of field researchers interviewing survivors of violence, Amelia van der Merwe and Xanthe Hunt find that researchers commonly feel “preoccupation with thoughts of the traumatized person outside of the interview session, reexperiencing clients’ trauma in memories, and distressing emotions such as grief, depression, anxiety, dread and horror, fear, rage, or shame” (15). These researchers “were deeply affected by participants’ traumas and reported that they themselves felt traumatized most often because of an empathetic response to participants” (17). Similarly, in their study of sexual violence survivors, Jan Coles et al. find that researchers experience “anger, guilt and shame, fear, crying, and feeling sad and depressed” as a result of their research work (100). Laura Shannonhouse et al. also report the prevalence of second-hand trauma among researchers working on projects that are traumatic in nature—in this case, researchers were interviewing parents of children who died in a fire at a daycare. Every researcher reported

evidence of second-hand trauma, with many going so far as to say they questioned their choice of profession given the immense difficulties they faced in doing this research. The authors ultimately conclude that the enduring effects of second-hand trauma are too great to ignore, noting that many researchers in this study needfully sought out counseling as a result of their research.

Of course, the amount of risk one faces in experiencing second-hand trauma has much to do with their level of empathy, world-view, positionality, as well as the nature of the traumatic material being discussed (van der Merwe and Hunt 12). These factors account for the variance in how a researcher experiences second-hand trauma, if at all, along with its severity and duration. But when experienced, it can cost a researcher their time and their health. For example, the amount of time I lost from having to take extended breaks from my work due to the traumatic nature of the topic itself is remarkable. Reading through narratives, survey responses, and other data about traumatic harassment experiences such as rape and death threats, doxxing, and stalking kept me in a heightened state of anxiety and sadness, which only worsened while conducting, transcribing, and coding interviews. Disruptions to my sleep in the form of nightmares also became more frequent and intense the longer my project went on.

This phenomenon is known as “researcher saturation,” or the specific immersion a researcher finds themselves in through data gathering, transcribing, coding, analysis, or any of the steps germane to their methods, and can cause second-hand trauma (Coles et al. 96; Wray et al.). Nikki Kiyimba and Michelle O’Reilly, too, note that transcribing specifically, a task that requires careful and repeated listening, puts researchers at risk of experiencing trauma. This kind of immersion—a deep dive into stories of trauma—often made me question whether I wanted to continue on with the project and, more broadly, the profession at all. I remember feeling a deep sense of regret in selecting this research trajectory, as another dissertation topic I considered pursuing was much less emotionally-heavy in nature.

The researchers in van der Merwe and Hunt’s study of second-hand trauma reported dissociating or “zoning out” in the days following an interview with a traumatized participant, which tracks heavily onto my own experience. In addition to the general research fatigue many of us face when working on a large-scale project such as a dissertation, I found myself becoming extremely physically exhausted after conducting interviews in which participants recounted a traumatic experience. I took prolonged breaks from working on my project and found myself dreading and avoiding transcription tasks or time spent analyzing my data. For obvious reasons, this made staying on track incredibly difficult.

Joanne Vincett, who interviewed immigrants undergoing indefinite detainment as part of her research, had a similar experience. She writes, “By the fourth

month of fieldwork, deep in the dark depths of women's horror stories and atrocities, I hit rock bottom," in that she started experiencing depression, cynicism, anger, inability to sleep, and a loss of interest in the things that once brought her joy (50). She identifies this as an extreme form of compassion fatigue, whereby someone suffers because of their relative inability to tangibly help a person in need. Natascha Klocker describes how researchers seeking to inspire structural changes that would positively intervene in a traumatized person's life face many emotional pitfalls when they aren't able to affect the change they had hoped to. She writes that for researchers pursuing high-stakes and risky research, "there's a great deal of pressure to achieve *something*" (Klocker 18). But "successful" or long-lasting change isn't always achievable or realistic. For researchers with idealistic expectations, this realization can be difficult to accept.

Of course, Vincett and I experienced instances of second-hand trauma, researcher saturation, and compassion fatigue because we cared deeply about our work and our participants. Given that many researchers begin a project from a place of care, selecting an inquiry topic that they feel passionate about and invested in, it's difficult to imagine anyone is able to truly maintain the emotional distance that might wholly safeguard us against these costs. This is not to say that every researcher working on a risky topic will experience the conditions described in this section, but it is important to take stock of how our time and well-being may be affected in the process, and the probability of early-career scholars working on emotionally challenging work abandoning their projects, or worse, leaving the field altogether as I almost did.

TAKING RESEARCH PERSONALLY: RESEARCHER IDENTITY & POSITIONALITY

Despite many celebrated methodological traditions that privilege a fictitious researcher neutrality in the name of objectivity (Acker et al.; Ackerly and True), research is deeply personal for many rhetoric and writing studies scholars, particularly when our work is entangled in our own communities and identities (Manivannan; Ray; Sparby). Threats to personal safety—physical, emotional, and everything in between—as a result of our work become compounded when we find ourselves personally close to the project, our very being wrapped up in the contours of our inquiry. As Mallon et al. note, researchers "are not unattached and objective instruments." Instead, "research is personal, emotional, and reflective" (518).

Research is also highly situated within structural, cultural, and rhetorical contexts. In this way, risky research becomes further complicated when navigating the contentious relationship we may have with our institutions and the

Academy writ large. Encapsulating this tension, Santos F. Ramos writes about his identity as a non-Black Xicano activist and scholar whose research centers around issues of social justice. Given the nature of his work, he writes about how participating in, for example, a Black Lives Matter action “could technically be considered part of my ‘research,’ though I still often cringe when using this word to describe what I do.” For Ramos, the word “research” signifies “the transformation of people into objects, centuries of colonial violence against Indigenous peoples, and the foundation of capitalist enterprise. ‘Research’ suggests that I am not an activist, but an academic who enters activist spaces in order to collect data, to bolster my career, and to improve the reputation of my institution.” As he explains, understanding our personal and professional relationships to power as well as our situatedness within unrelenting institutions deeply rooted in colonialism, racism, and subjugation is crucial to research that seeks to enact material change in our communities.

Similarly, Esther Ohito discusses her experiences as a Black African immigrant navigating a tenure-track position in academia—a profession, culture, and monolith designed for exclusivity and that which relies on exploitation to function. “A perpetual outsider” (516), Ohito struggled to grieve the loss of a loved one while having to navigate the “dehumanizing confines of the output-obsessed neoliberal academy,” (517) and demonstrates how the labor and cultural conditions of academia promote decay, stagnation, and indifference to the embodied experiences we have as compassionate human beings. Ohito advocates for embodied reflexivity in Black feminist research traditions of memory work as a method for “resisting, recovering from, and surviving the deadening trap/pings of neoliberal academia” (517). Her approach necessarily requires centering the self and personal affective experiences in order to bring attention “to where and how our positionalities and intersecting identities intertwine” with our bodies and our memories (521). Locating ourselves within a project is something that Lois Presser has identified as being a crucial part of inquiry. Like Ramos and Ohito, Presser argues that we should contextualize our identities, positionalities, and the conditions of our research as much as we are able to (2069). In this way, the aforementioned authors position methodology as something that communicates our *values*, distinctly as they relate to identity and the work we want to produce in the world.

Recent scholarship in rhetoric and writing studies has complicated our notions of what methods and methodologies can and should do for our work, demonstrating how research frameworks establish values that guide both our scholarship and our civic lives too. In *Race, Rhetoric, and Research Methods*, Alexandria L. Lockett, Iris D. Ruiz, James Chase Sanchez, and Christopher Carter demonstrate how antiracism can act as a methodology for research, particularly

in the context of our “ethical obligation to confront the epistemological, social, and political ramifications of living in a capitalist white supremacist patriarchal society” (16). Throughout the book, the authors use narrative and personal storytelling in order to unsettle “the idea of a ‘neutral,’ aracial point of view” (23). Incorporating their own lived experiences, the authors thereby provide a rich context for how antiracist methodologies can operate within rhetoric and writing studies research as well as our everyday lives.

Laura Tetrault also acknowledges her personal positionality in relation to her scholarly work and voices a commitment “not just to an examination or summary of my own positions and privileges, but also to finding ways to advocate for oppressed communities across differences in positionality” (459). In her methodology for rhetorical analysis of activist rhetorics, Tetrault advocates we center the notion of accountability so as to “*enact* social justice principles through our research by building accountability to vulnerable communities” (463). Much like Ramos, Ohito, and Lockett et al., Tetrault demonstrates how methodology can be used to advance a specific value, both of a personal nature and one of the rhetoric and writing studies field.

As a whole, these scholars remind us that our identities as researchers cannot be easily divorced from our identities as human beings, despite methodological traditions in the academy that ask us to do so. Their work describes entanglements with methodologies that not only seek ethical and just approaches to the research, but also to *themselves* as researchers and humans. Asserting our values through methodologies and locating the self within research allows us to demonstrate how our work extends beyond the confining pages of any single publication or conference talk. For me, I had a strong commitment to feminist research principles and wanted to undertake a project that could have real impact, and while I did feel broadly connected to the topic by interest, my personal involvement became more textured and layered once I started being harassed, experiencing the very thing I was studying. An unwilling participant in my own project, I suddenly had to pivot in ways that were unexpected and felt insurmountable.

In retrospect, there is much I could have done at the outset of designing my study to prepare for the likelihood that I might be harassed in conjunction with my work. However, any sort of plan I might have prepared wouldn't have changed my standing at my university and in the profession, and factoring the potential costs to well-being into our research plans also requires an acknowledgment of how our risks as researchers fluctuate across institutional positionalities. Access to resources that are necessary for well-being—things like time, money, healthcare, and job security—are insufficient for graduate students and lecturer faculty, thus making the pursuit of sensitive research topics among these

groups even riskier. As Vincett notes, “the practicalities of how to prepare and cope with [research] predicaments that may affect emotional and mental health are limited,” particularly among early-career scholars (44). Building networks of support, both emotional and professional, is important to sustaining and guiding a researcher through a challenging project. For graduate students, early-career faculty, and lecturer faculty, access to these networks can be difficult and insubstantial. Renee Ann Drouin, for example, notes how her own experience with harassment stemming from her work on fandom rhetorics mirrored mine (158). Like me, Drouin also suffered immediate hardships, while the threats to her well-being made her question her desire to continue researching, pursue publishing, or even graduate from her Ph.D. program altogether (159).

Drouin notes that her institutional status as a graduate student left her with limited resources to effectively handle the threats to her well-being brought on by her research (159). Time, for example, is a resource that is incredibly scarce, and institutional hierarchies make access to it inequitable. During my dissertation work, I knew that the threats to my well-being required, at the very least, time—time away from my work, time to process, and time to rest. Of course, as anyone who has navigated a Ph.D. program knows, academia is not an environment known for the promotion of health and wellness—a cultural norm greatly exacerbated under the conditions of risky research. Encountering story after story and the constant immersion in accounts of women being threatened, swatted, doxxed, stalked, and abused left me absolutely exhausted on every physical and spiritual level. As a graduate student going deeper into debt every semester I was enrolled in school, I didn’t have the luxury of time that most risky research projects require. Taking additional time to complete my project and Ph.D. meant more money spent and further delays to opportunities for advancement in my career. And so, I pressed on.

Additionally, the “publish or perish” culture of academia feeds into this untenable model whereby scholars are expected to consistently engage in research at an excessive pace (Ohito), leading to “burnout, stress, dysfunction, career-dissatisfaction and lack of support for researchers,” particularly among graduate students and others who find themselves in precarious institutional positions (Drozdewski and Dominey-Howes 175). For scholars working on consequential research who may need more time to address their own capacity and well-being, the publication expectations can feel even more grueling, especially when accounting for the amount of emotional labor that goes into these kinds of projects. After defending my dissertation, I was confronted with excited questions about how and where I might get my work “out into the world,” and I met these questions with total panic. Not only did the emotional toll of my research completely eliminate any desire to continue thinking about my work,

but I was also fearful of the prospects that publishing might trigger new waves of harassment. I was extraordinarily depleted.

A pervasive worry still hangs in the atmosphere today that wide circulation of my research about online harassment could invite more harassment and threats. Leigh Gruwell describes her experience being featured on a disingenuous yet popular Twitter account devoted to highlighting academic work that its anonymous moderator finds disagreeable. As a result of this wide circulation—certainly wider than its original publication—and into networks of audiences who were inherently hostile to feminist academic work, Gruwell was subjected to attacks on her character, loss of privacy, and even worse: threats of physical violence (Gruwell 97-98). No matter the severity or style of outsider agitation, it is difficult to predict exactly when and how it may manifest in a research process. As proven by her experience, “feminist scholars need not even actively publicize their research to become targets,” (Gruwell 96).

In 2021, I published “Social Media Research and the Methodological Problem of Harassment: Foregrounding Researcher Safety” because I knew I had something to say about researcher identity and safety. Reflecting on my own vulnerabilities helped me to see where and how my institutional standing as a graduate student came to bear on my project. Despite now having more institutional power and having had literal years to reflect on the experience, revisiting those events still stirred up a lot of anxiety and generally complicated feelings that I have about publishing and publicizing my work about online harassment. Would self-promotion or wide circulation—things encouraged and even demanded by the tenure process—invite trouble for me? Would I be targeted again, potentially on a larger scale?

I was even further conflicted by an opportunity to publish my piece open-access. I value knowledge-sharing and the democratization of information, but I also wondered if the potential for harassment would be made worse if my piece was readily available for anyone on the internet to read and circulate. I went back and forth about this dilemma for a long time before ultimately deciding that my want to have my work read and shared outweighed my concerns, and so I published it open-access. Perhaps my distance from the initial harassment experience helped me feel comfortable with the decision. But then the piece started getting picked up and promoted by various entities with varying degrees of visibility—my campus’s newsletter spotlighting faculty research; a European investigative journalism network’s story about online harassment and the costs to democracy (Gjocaj); The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction . . . These outlets have different sizes of audiences, but having my work publicly circulated outside of my immediate disciplinary field put me back in a headspace of feeling anxious that harassment and threats would arrive once

again at my digital doorstep, and potentially even my physical doorstep, as is the case for some women who speak out against harassment.

Thankfully, so far, harassment hasn't arrived. Though in highlighting the affective experience of even considering publishing my risky research, I hope to demonstrate that taking up sensitive research topics, regardless of how much institutional power or time the researcher has, will likely affect the researcher emotionally. It's important to normalize, validate, and manage negative emotions that arise in these scenarios (Dickson-Swift et al.; Holland), and equally important is understanding how many factors beyond the self are integral to the research process. As rhetoric and writing studies scholars continue to work within systems that structure our labor conditions and material realities, we have to appraise how we might make systemic interventions that support a sustainable pursuit of risky research.

SUSTAINING RISKY RESEARCH: PRIORITIZING OUR HUMANITY

There are no fast or easy answers to how we can reasonably support risky research in any given project considering the highly contextual nature of this kind of work. However, the concept of self-care is often posited as a primary method of addressing the many challenges brought on by emotionally demanding research (Kumar and Cavallaro; Rager; Theidon). Self-care is indeed an important piece of a holistic approach to well-being, but it is repeatedly positioned as a panacea to all which ails researchers working on sensitive topics. There are a few problems with this framing. For one, there is an incredible amount of privilege that comes with being able to engage in the kinds of self-care that promote long-term wellness. Self-care, in many of its iterations, is a luxury. As an activity, it can require time, money, and other resources that are scarce, particularly for academic researchers who may be overworked, underpaid, and have little worker protections, especially depending on institutional status. Additionally, advising a researcher facing risks to their well-being to simply practice self-care seems to put the onus on the researcher alone. Understanding well-being as a largely personal responsibility fails to acknowledge the very real systemic causes of emotional damage, trauma, or burnout and the conditions that make the practice of self-care so challenging.

While giving a conference talk early on in my dissertation process, an attendee asked an excellent question that jolted me into an awareness of how little I was doing to address my own well-being. She asked, "what do you do to take care of yourself while working on such an intense project?" After taking a moment to absorb the question, I answered something to the effect of, "not

much, to be honest.” Myself and others on the panel talked our way to the topic of self-care as an important sustaining feature of working on emotionally challenging research, describing the value of going on walks, spending time with loved ones, and engaging in hobbies that are totally disconnected from the work . . . I don’t wish to diminish those strategies or position them as being wholly unimportant, but in retrospect, I’m less convinced that “self-care” is the answer to this question.

Thinking about how to care for ourselves beyond what we may typically think of when we hear “self-care”—bubble baths or a good book—can be an important piece (*just one piece*) of a larger strategic network for preparing to do risky research. Of course, predicting what might happen during the course of a project that will cause harm can be exceedingly difficult. That’s part of what makes some research topics risky: you don’t quite know what might arise. Risk assessment is integral to sustaining our work, and while it’s something we do as researchers in a variety of contexts, risk assessment is often discussed as an activity necessary to determine the risks our research poses to participants and not necessarily to ourselves as researchers. Taking the time at the outset of a project to think about potential risks and subsequently codify how you plan to take care of your emotional and physical needs during a demanding project gives you a systemized plan to refer back to if conditions begin to feel untenable. Vincett points out that no matter your research area, “there is inconsistency in offering researchers training and support in emotional well-being and mental health. When issues develop, people rarely speak up about their struggles to cope” (54). That was certainly the case for me (and perhaps my writing this chapter is my way of rectifying that).

As I’ve noted throughout, my failure to assess the risks to my own well-being in the design phase of my research ultimately became detrimental to my work and, more importantly, my well-being. But I did recognize the value of spending considerable time carefully attending to plans for protecting the well-being of participants. My advisor and I, knowing the sensitive nature of online harassment, had numerous lengthy conversations about how to ensure participants didn’t just *feel* comfortable and safe but actually *were* comfortable and safe—an important distinction that I wanted to make sure I addressed. This meant taking a trauma-informed approach to my work with participants, remaining sensitive to what they may have experienced and taking care not to retraumatize them with how the discussion was framed or how individual questions were worded. Designing my project with participant safety in mind was made easier by both mandated human-subjects training as well as my graduate coursework, which included a required class on methodologies. While I didn’t encounter any frameworks used specifically for risky or sensitive research, the curriculum

of this class did include robust units on person-based methods with attention towards ethics, accountability, reciprocity, community, and institutional critique (Cushman; Grabill; Lamos; Lather; Porter et al.; Stoecker)—all topics that are important when thinking about risky research.

Of course, participant safety is necessitated by our Institutional Review Boards (IRB) as well, but compelling arguments have been made about the value of going beyond those minimum standards of ethics, especially when engaging in digital research (Eble and Banks; McKee and Porter), like I was. While IRBs are a necessary and important function of the university, they can't possibly consider the entire multidimensional context of any research topic, let alone ones that may be emotionally complicated for the researcher. However, the IRB review process allows us to secure “considered peer feedback based on the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, and justice” (Phelps 3), and is thus “a key avenue for pursuing greater recognition of researcher trauma” (Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes 176). This review process presents an incredible opportunity for researchers to develop the theoretical self-awareness and the practical plans necessary to adequately prioritize our own well-being amidst risky projects, regardless of whether the IRB requires this information or not.

Even more locally than the IRB, we should also consider the significant role that mentors play in shaping an early-career scholar's research project. Mentorship is particularly important and valuable in risky research contexts (Coles et al.; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes; Mallon and Elliott), and to harken back to methodology as an articulation of values, we should understand mentorship as having the same function. Mentors have a responsibility to an individual mentee in one-on-one support, but outside of these activities, mentorship should also involve advocacy for structural, institutional changes that support the researcher—things like greater access to healthcare and wages that sustain a high quality of life. Such mentorship practices are a commitment to prioritizing the care and humanity of the *people* who comprise our field, not just their ideas.

Many scholars also call for a standard practice in research mentorship whereby mentors receive training on how to support students working on sensitive or emotionally challenging research projects. Sharon Mallon, Erica Borgstrom, and Sam Murphy, for example, highlight the incredible influence mentors have on their mentee's work and affective experience (520). In my case, while my advisor didn't have specific training on mentoring researchers working on risky projects, I was able to lean on them for guidance during especially tricky times. For example, the morning after receiving the strange email that set me on edge, we talked on the phone for some time and they carefully guided me towards a decision about my work that prioritized my humanity over my responsibilities to the Ph.D. program. For me, this care and attention promoted psychological

safety in that knowing I had an advocate I could turn to—someone who saw me as a whole human being as opposed to just a graduate student who needed to finish their degree—really allowed me the emotional space to commit to acting in the best interest of my personal well-being. My project was better for it.

LOOKING AHEAD: MAKING THE PROCESS VISIBLE

As a graduate student working on risky but important research, I felt like I had somehow failed in my inability to foresee the threats to my safety. I had spent many hours carefully assembling a methodology and methods for my work, paying close attention to the aspects of each that would ensure I created a sound research design. Having to rework my research project mid-data collection in light of the harassment I experienced felt like something that wasn't supposed to happen. In retrospect, I wonder if these feelings were made worse by methodological traditions that privilege rigidity and present objectivity as a gold standard in research. Taking on a challenging problem like online harassment was sure to inspire the need to be methodologically flexible and attend to roadblocks as they arose, because a researcher can't possibly predict the twists and turns a project might have in store for us.

The meta-aspects of the kind of research that we do in rhetoric and writing studies are just as important as the research itself. In looking ahead at the future of the discipline, I hope rhetoric and writing studies researchers find more opportunities to document the emotional and psychological aspects of our work, especially that which could be considered risky in some kind of way. Of course, as Vincett points out, “incorporating researchers’ emotions in reflexive accounts is often a retrospective activity and a response after an emotional upheaval has occurred” (45). What could we learn about our values and approaches to research as a field if attention towards researcher well-being happens throughout *all* stages of research, rather than just in retrospect?

In my story and others’, we can recognize the need to develop greater support for researchers taking up this kind of work on myriad levels—individual, departmental, institutional, and within the broader field. In rhetoric and writing studies specifically, the concepts of care and well-being vary from community to community, and thus it’s important we normalize methodologies that attend to these concepts while listening to the varying perspectives, experiences, and institutional positionalities that make up our field. Articulating a value through methodology of locating the researcher within the project can inform our choices throughout the entire lifecycle of risky research, thus sustaining our commitment to work that is impactful, meaningful, and of consequence.

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