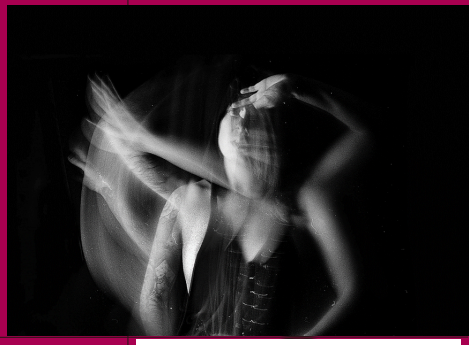
Emotionally Demanding Research



Initial Findings - Dec. 2025

Ollscoil na Gaillimhe
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Overview

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Between February and April 2025, 30 interviews with researchers were conducted to deepen understanding of the impacts, contexts and institutional challenges involved in undertaking Emotionally Demanding Research (EDR). This document presents the initial findings from the first round of analysis, based on 30 qualitative interviews. These findings are based on some of the most common impacts and do not represent the full spectrum of experiences.

Further analysis will dig deeper into themes and issues identified.

The Participants

- Most were in academia, but some worked as researchers for NGOs or commercial research.
- Most were early career academics (PhDs and Post-Docs), but also had Profs, senior lecturers and highly experienced consultants who took part.
- Working in 12 different countries.
- Many disclosed experiences of sexual or domestic violence, either as children or as adults.
- Many worked in areas traditionally recognised as sensitive - GBV/DV, migration, development, poverty - but some did not.
- The vast majority were women, a small minority identified as gender fluid, gender queer or non-binary.

Key Themes

The following themes emerged from the interviews. Each theme is a composite of responses from multiple interviews

1. Impacts and Burdens
2. Temporality and Spatiality of the experience of EDR
3. Guilt and Obligation
4. Supports and Abuses of power

Theme 1: Impacts and Burdens

Acute: Participants described some immediate impacts of EDR, including crying, shaking, panic attacks and avoidance. However, most described impacts that occurred over a longer period rather than during or immediately following engagement in the research.

Behavioural: Alcohol and drug misuse described by some; over- or under-eating described by others. Emergence of unhealthy coping strategies for some while for others, EDR intensified or re-ignited existing behavioural health issues.

Emergence or intensification of mental health issues: Described as occurring as a result of the research itself, due to the environment in which the research was conducted, or due to a lack of support from supervisors or colleagues.

Relational: Many participants described their research as contributing to the breakdown of intimate partnerships due to their own stress or because partners were unable to cope with the worry. Some described challenges in maintaining friendships when they couldn't talk about their research, or friends didn't understand what they were going through. Many described 'role-switching' between researcher to friend, sister, partner, mother as adding to the burden. However, friendships were also described as critical for wellbeing.

Systemic: For some researchers, the burden of EDR was too great, and they swapped their research focus to 'lighter' areas. Represents a potential loss to institutions of talented researchers and a loss of knowledge in relation to 'heavy' topics

Positive: Some participants described positive impacts of EDR. Many described intensifying friendships, creating new friendships and networks with others going through the same experience. For a couple of participants, this led them to create support groups. Many participants also discussed overcoming hardships and discovering new strengths and coping skills.

Theme 2: Temporality and Spatiality of the Experience of EDR

Impacts often had temporal dimensions. We see that vicarious trauma from the research recalled other traumas in the lives of many participants. This manifested as distress linked to previous trauma emerging in relation to the emotional demands of the research. Examples included:

- Research on sexual violence recalling traumatic childbirth,
- Researching marginalised people recalling the experiences of being a patient (chronic illness, cancer) and feelings of helplessness.

This temporality also worked forward; the vicarious trauma of EDR shaped experiences that came later for some, creating additional trauma.

Additionally, **spatial dimensions that contributed to the burden of EDR were also evident.**

- The home was presented as important across many interviews. Some identified choosing their home based on the refuge it could provide - e.g., in peaceful neighbourhoods, closer to nature, etc. However, for others, particularly where costs were a significant consideration, the inability to use the home as a refuge weighed heavily. Inability to separate work/home, shared space in the home, and the sense of trauma being brought into the home through the computer were all mentioned.
- Some also noted the 'space' of safety offered by the supervisor, e.g., supervisors provided a place (their office) where they could be emotional without judgement.

Theme 3: Guilt and Obligation in the Emotional Labour of EDR

Almost all participants mentioned feelings of guilt, obligation or responsibility relating to their research work. Guilt and a sense of (often failed) responsibility, related to:

- Moral obligation of a sociologist to research the marginalised,
- Needs of self and others (family, friends, partners) were neglected,
- Perception of stories 'poured in' but not being able to do anything directly about them or to help participants - guilt about potentially exploiting participants,
- Guilt and a sense of failure when research cannot continue/ researcher has to step away,
- Guilt relating to the impact of research on loved-ones.

It is at times unclear whether guilt relates to an individual's personal orientation and is part of the same motivation to conduct this work (for some) or emerges from the research content itself (distress and sense of impotence). Both of these factors may be at play.

Theme 4: Supports and Abuses of Power

Supports: Participants detailed a range of existing supports and desired supports

Helpful supports were identified as:

- Empathetic supervisors (mixed experiences with supervisors were also noted),
- Networks of colleagues/fellow students with an understanding of EDR. These networks were often created intentionally by researchers or developed organically among colleagues/students,
- sufficient high-quality counselling/therapy (not often available).

Desired Supports included:

- Better-trained supervisors and mentors for early-career researchers,
- Ringfenced funding support for peer networks,
- Trauma-informed counselling available throughout research process (before data collection, during data collection and analysis, after completion of the project),
- Dedicated desk space/offices to limit the requirement to work at home,
- Adequate recognition of the 'cost' of EDR - weighting outputs that involve significant emotional demands or labour to recognise the additional time and energy involved.

Abuses of Power: The majority of participants were PhDs or Post-Docs. In addition, many of the more senior researchers reflected on their early experiences in research. Abuses of power were identified that contributed to the emotional impacts of the research. These included:

- Putting students under their supervision in ethically and/or legally compromising positions,
- Tenured academics taking credit for the work of early-career researchers,
- Specific disadvantages faced by early career researchers and those in precarious positions (including contract researchers), including time, pay, and working conditions,
- Intersectional discrimination, particularly based on gender, sexuality, and country of origin, compounded the emotional demands of the research.

Summary

Efforts to address researcher distress and support well-being, where they exist, often focus on researchers engaging with sensitive topics without consideration of their position within broader socio-ecological frameworks. Consequently, counselling for researchers expressing distress is often the only institutionally provided support.

This research so far identifies that the impacts of EDR are significant for the researcher's physical and psychological wellbeing and impacts on their careers and career progression. Furthermore, it also affects relational engagement, with both temporal and spatial implications.

Researchers are thus impacted by the content they engage with, their own biographies and experiences, the institution and immediate environment in which they work and live, and the broader context in which their lives are situated. These multi-level experiences create unique and intersectional vulnerabilities for researchers. Institutions require a deeper understanding of the embedded and embodied nature of emotionally demanding research to support researchers and preemptively address the potential harm that may occur during their work.

Next Steps

The analysis of the interviews is ongoing.

We would be delighted to hear from you if you wished to share your thoughts on these initial findings.

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