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2017

Supervisor's Perspectives on the Ethical Supervision of Long Form Writing and Managing Trauma Narrative within the Australian Tertiary Sector

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Recommended Citation

Joseph, S., & Rickett, C. (2017). Supervisors' perspectives on the ethical supervision of long form writing and managing trauma narrative within the Australian tertiary sector. *Ethical Space: The International Journal of Communication Ethics*, 14(2/3), 61-71.

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Supervisors' perspectives on the ethical supervision of long form writing and managing trauma narrative within the Australian tertiary sector

Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation.¹

Miller and Tougaw observe: 'If every age has its symptoms, ours appears to be the age of trauma.'² Their observation may help explain the emergence of memoir and autobiographical or autoethnographic creative works, not just commercially but also within the tertiary sector. Almost all of this work is appearing within journalism, English and creative writing schools as students turn to creative practice degrees as a means to write through traumatic events. The focus of this paper is to share various perspectives from experienced academics gathered during a qualitative research project where a range of scholars supervising trauma narrative Higher Degree Research (HDR) candidates within Australian universities were interviewed regarding what their needs are in relation to the ethical supervision of their candidates. We anticipate this paper may also contribute to a better understanding of the supervisory relationship pertinent to candidates undertaking their own personal trauma narrative research and the ways in which academics might provide a safer space for both themselves and their Higher Degree Research students.

Introduction

The research for this paper is shaped by the field of literary journalism, a long-debated and critiqued scholarly arena in the northern hemisphere though it is far less debated and critiqued in Australia. Away from this global debate concerning the naming of this genre, we contend that memoir/life-writing/autoethnography sits comfortably within this burgeoning field of journalism research, also found nestled within creative writing schools.

Our concern with current practices pertinent to supervising this mode of literary journalism is twofold: firstly, is the commodification of trauma in the tertiary sector in order to gain a degree, without proper safeguards for the student, an ethical practice? And secondly: linked to this concern is also the possibility of vicarious traumatisation for academics managing these kinds of student testimonial projects. There is clear documentation of 'vicariously induced PTSD in therapists who talk to traumatised clients' (Littrell 2009: 308). Witnessing student repackaging of traumatic narrative in a supervisory role might produce the same effect in academics (Joseph and Rickett 2010: 4) and, therefore, they too need safeguards.

Building on previous scholarly work focusing on the benchmarking of Australian doctoral standards (Webb, Brien and Burr 2012), this paper aims to develop an understanding of the institutional framework supervisors require to support and empower them and their candidates to safely produce literary journalism texts of trauma narrative. Can there be a generic form of doctoral supervision applicable across the disciplines? Debate around this issue has been on-going for some decades. We argue that, indeed, there is a generic scaffolding around doctoral supervision, but that the space within this scaffolding must be fluid, depending on many elements, both professional/disciplinary and personal. In this way, we agree with Frick et al. when they contend: 'The pedagogic relationship between the doctoral student and research supervisor(s) forms an important *relational* learning space. This relational learning space exists regardless of the doctoral programme format' (Frick, Brodin and Albertyn 2014: 1). This is a quasi-private space between supervisor and candidate, with periodic and eventual institutional and community accountability.

What we have learnt from our own research is that the canon around supervision literature is growing but none of it attests, or tests, what we

recognise as the fraught issues around supervising trauma narrative in this quasi-private and fluid relational space. Catherine Manathunga (2007) comes close to echoing a broad warning: 'For both supervisors and students, there are additional risks associated with the blurry boundaries between acting upon students' disciplinary subjectivities and providing advice and guidance about aspects of students' personal lives' (Manathunga 2007: 219); as do Aitchison and Mowbray (2013: 859) when they observe that: '... the role of emotion in the doctoral undertaking is often subsumed in the passionless language of bureaucratic rationalisation and economic imperatives'. Again, while not directly addressing the writing of trauma narrative as creative artefact, they are articulating some of our supervisory concerns. They argue: '...governments and institutions demand efficiency and productivity, and favour "countables" such as research outputs, completions and competencies rather than the more subjective and elusive aspects of experience such as emotion' (ibid: 859-860).

While Aitchison and Mowbray lean towards recognition of this seemingly unspoken gap of emotion within the learning space, again their approach, while non-specific, is still important: '... the emotional aspects of doctoral education are rarely openly discussed during candidature. The research culture of higher education is deeply rooted in notions of scholarship that favour objectivity, disembodied rationality and autonomy' (ibid: 861). Indeed, their research, as with Manathunga's eight years earlier, finds that candidates rarely felt able to confide in their supervisors about emotional issues affecting their lives and candidature. Two years later Aitchison (2015) insists:

...discourses that view the ability to write as a 'given', ensure writing is silenced, that it is not explicated in curriculum or supervisor training, and is therefore situated as incidental to doctoral scholarship. Thus, discussions about pedagogical practices of writing remain peripheral, even subversive – except at times of crisis, when writing comes very much to the fore (Aitchison 2015: 1294).

Psychology professor James Pennebaker (2000: 8) argues that 'converting emotions and images into words changes the way a person organises and thinks about trauma...'. He further explains: '... by integrating thoughts and feelings ... the person can more easily construct a coherent narrative of the process'. But as taboos are broken down by society and the market place

explodes with memoir, students look towards the academy to write about their own crises. Joseph asserts this allows '...for the discussion of formerly proscribed subjects' where 'people write their life stories in an attempt to heal, to expose, to indict, to rebalance an injustice, as a community service, to help other victims, to empower', and that increasingly 'many turn to the university as a framework to execute their work' (Joseph 2011).

Doctoral supervision in the Humanities and Social Sciences has become a focal point for debate, growing in magnitude in the past decade. There are various reasons for this, but one of the integral explanations is the emergence of the creative PhD and, attendant to that, differing definitions of what constitutes 'research' in this space. Hamilton and Carson conclude that it was the publication of the Strand Report,³ formally recognising practice-led research in 1998, which led to the acceptance of the creative PhD throughout Australia (Hamilton and Carson 2013: 1). Our research⁴ examines a particular category of creative doctoral investigation – life writing/memoir/auto-ethnography shaped by the narration of trauma. It is clear from the cumulative literature reviews on supervisory practices⁵ that issues around the safety or, otherwise, danger zones of such endeavours – and the resulting ethical tensions – have not been adequately addressed within the academy. We believe both issues are of paramount importance both to the professional and personal approaches within supervision in the Australian tertiary sector and, we argue accordingly, further afield.

This paper, while one of several we are producing from our research to date, aims to draw attention to what supervisors of HDR candidates writing trauma narrative believe may be lacking pedagogically on an institutional level, and what strategies could be implemented for 'safer' supervision of such projects.

The study: Methodology

Ethical approval for this research project was granted by the University of Technology Sydney's human research ethics committee,⁶ and thirteen supervisors drawn from the Humanities and Social Sciences within the Australian academy were interviewed between 13 October 2015 and 6 May 2016, either by Skype, telephone or face-to-face. The qualitative interviews were semi-structured, drawing on a set of five inter-related questions in an attempt to answer our over-arching question: do supervising academics of long form trauma narrative doctoral

research within the field of literary journalism (memoir, life-writing, autoethnography) feel professionally and emotionally equipped to supervise ethically and safely such work, and what further resources and training are needed to support ethically and safely their role?

Interviews were recorded, including consent, and academics were given the opportunity to be on-the-record or de-identified; two of the thirteen academics chose de-identification during the course of the interview. In these two cases, it was to protect the identity of candidates, since what was discussed may have led to recognition. Interviews were then transcribed. This research was funded by the Journalism Education and Research Association of Australia (JERAA) as part of the JERAA Research Grant 2015. It was also conducted in accordance with the Australian Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance Code of Ethics.

A major indication from the data is that the majority of interviewees believe there is an opportunity for more explicit addressing of the life-writing of trauma narrative with its attendant triggers for psychic injury. Within the HDR supervisory pedagogy in their own institutions, many flagged existing ethical and supervisory protocols, but nothing which had a specific focus on the creative and autobiographical rendering of trauma narrative, and its ramifications. Having identified trauma narratives as a potentially fraught space for both candidate and supervisor (Joseph and Rickett 2010; Joseph 2011), we hope that the long-term objective of this research project promotes a further discussion throughout the academy, with the future goal of developing strategies for redress.

As a starting point, this paper immediately focuses on the final two questions of the five we asked the thirteen academics taking part in our research project. The following selected data will be presented in a raw, Question and Answer format (edited only for space) to provide an authentic voicing of how our interviewees, all highly experienced HDR supervisors within creative or journalism disciplines, initially and instinctively responded to the selected questions:

1. What are your recommendations for improving the pedagogy and practices around supervising HDR trauma narrative?
2. How can institutions further support both the student and supervisor working within this field?

We acknowledge that given the word limit constraints of this paper, we have not been able always to provide the supervisor's responses to these two questions in full, but as part of the qualitative interview process we have selected the most representative observations to build a collegial picture of current and possible future practice.

Supervisors' perspectives on Question 1

Professor Catherine Cole, Wollongong University

I think it's really important that less-experienced supervisors get the protocol thing right, get the support thing right and also have a forum in which to discuss, without breaching confidentiality too much, some of the things they've had to deal with and how they're managed. I think that's really, really important. ... But there are always things that slip under the radar. Know where the support is. Be very clear, as a supervisor, about your own feelings about the whole process. If you've experienced similar trauma, this can be a good thing...

...I don't want to make the protocol thing sound too bureaucratic. I think it's just more that ensuring people are aware of what's required legally, what's available as support and where to go for help. How to ensure the annual report or the biannual report process is honest and fair and the student can talk about it. But I do think also being aware of your own psychopathology within this is important.

... this is something that maybe in the past was dealt with, a long time ago, by the students either failing or becoming so unhappy they just left so the university didn't have to worry too much about it. But now, more and more people are coming – especially through the creative and visual arts. It isn't just unique to them. Other areas as well are taking more and more international students, for example, where they've often come from very, very traumatised places. Of course it's important that at least these matters are discussed and protocols and supports set in place that is respectful of both student and teaching while meeting the organisational response. ... It just seems you can't pretend it's not happening. It's happening and it's happening very much within these areas (interview, Cole, 2015).

Dr Fiona Giles, University of Sydney

I'm wondering if rather than a set of guidelines about how to manage the relationship that the supervisor follows and ticks boxes, it might be better to build it up ... between the candidate and the supervisor ... and to write an ethics of

engagement to some extent. So it's not just the supervisor saying: 'I've done this, I've ticked the box' but there's two of them understanding together what the process is. At least having a road map of some kind, a broad road map of where they're headed and what they might encounter along there.

There's things like history that people ... might be doing which might be written in narrative form, not as memoir. But they still cover traumatic material. And then in psychology people writing PhD on child abuse or incest or self-harm. In cultural studies, I met a PhD student a few years ago who'd worked as a prostitute and was writing about prostitution and self-harm and drug taking. So there were trauma elements there. So I think it comes up in ... different contexts (interview, Giles, 2015).

Professor Kevin Brophy, University of Melbourne

I think [the] suggestion that there be explicit training around the ethics concerned with that is a good suggestion, that's specifically for supervisors ... I think it would be very important if you did focus on trauma narrative to make it, for any kind of training, involve awareness that this applies at any moment to all, or can apply at any moment to all kinds of creative writing, even film scripts.

I think, maybe rather than subjecting theses of a non-fiction kind that are dealing with narratives of trauma, rather than subjecting them to an ethics clearance process, maybe it needs to be framed as an ethics awareness process to make sure that the student is aware of as many of the ethical implications. I'm wary about the term clearance because I don't think you're going to eliminate the ability of creative writing to hurt, to reveal, to run a very dangerous line between offence and revelation, and I wouldn't like to see creative writing become anodyne in the face of needing clearance. I'd rather that the clearance was framed as a process of increasing awareness of the ethics of the project such as this (interview, Brophy, 2015).

Professor Matthew Ricketson, University of Canberra

The practices need to be written up in projects of this kind and in other places so that people become more aware of them. Within institutions, one thought might be to have a more ... overtly ... balanced and mindful supervision team so that you have, let's say, someone's come to you as the primary supervisor because of your experience in this kind of area. Well, maybe the other people on the panel are not simply a junior colleague or a very, very senior colleague who's just filling in the numbers, but

someone who is more attuned to the kind of issues here so that you've got more than one port of call.

Different places place different weight on the primary as distinct from the secondary. ... I think it's an area where having two people who are quite closely involved will be of benefit to the student and will be of benefit to the supervisor because – it's like a co-author – you've just got that ability to bounce things backwards and forwards and to hopefully complement each other. One person is, say, really strong on the content of the area to do with the trauma. Then you've got someone who's got a stronger mental health background, or a background that complements so you build from the original supervision model. If you're weak on theory, get a good theory person; if you're weak on the content well then get a strong content person and so on. You build your supervision panel – or you should – so that it complements your needs as a student and your weaknesses and strengths. Apply that idea to this so that you are explicitly understanding and recognising there are mental health issues involved for both student and supervisor. That's what it's referred to at the Uni of Canberra. It's a supervision team ... the primary supervisor is the only person who gets a workload allocation; you will then have a secondary supervisor and you might have an associate depending on what the student wants. The idea is to build it a little bit more as a team that will provide complementary input (interview, Ricketson, 2015).

De-identified interview 7

There's really very little at our university of any kind of advanced standing on how to supervise or be a supervisor; it's all very operational. I was going to say I'm now supervising a number of projects with a professor of mental health nursing and that's actually really great because even though they're not even that kind of project – we're actually working quite a lot on history and other kinds of things, but it's really fantastic when those issues come up, because there's actually an expert that can deal with things. When questions come up in the ethics forum, it's really great.

Well I think it [trauma narrative] is a quite risky-in-a-way form of supervision and I don't think that fledgling supervisors should be just thrown into it. I don't believe that for any kind of supervision. I think it would be really great if there was maybe not a mandated module, but resources available that people could go to and find. One of the troubles with OLT⁷ is that all of these resources are developed, but often you

don't know about them and often they're these cumbersome, difficult websites. I think a little ready-reckoner kind of thing, something like a booklet or something. A little resource that was just a checklist or something (de-identified interview 7, 2015)

De-identified interview 8

If there was some kind of basic workshop, a three-hour basic workshop or something, that someone getting into this territory could do, online or something, text – certain texts to read, warn – certainly the warning areas, key discussion points. I think something like that would just be fabulous. We all have to do these supervision workshops, which are a lot of the general stuff about supervision, but to have one dedicated to people who are going to deal with trauma narratives or even creative writing more generally ... that would be fabulous, I reckon. If you could distribute it maybe even via an organisation like AAWP or something (de-identified interview, 2015).

Associate Professor Debra Adelaide, University of Technology Sydney

I would think that if there isn't some kind of statement or set of guidelines or protocols, or whatever you like to call it, then there should be, but it shouldn't be too extensive because we don't need more paperwork. If supervisors are taking on a student who's writing a trauma narrative and they feel that they don't really understand what will be involved – it should be made available to them in the form of a statement.

If there was something that a student was working on and for some reason – and I can't imagine why – this would affect me really, really personally to the point where I felt that I was myself suffering or traumatised, I suppose I would go and talk to someone more experienced. In the past I would've gone and talked to ... really, really experienced supervisors.

I suppose as confronting as some of the material is ... I mean, I read this piece [of a life-writing candidate] and just wept. It was such an awful story. So things do have the ability to affect me like that. It's hard not to be moved by – sometimes by what your students are writing, but I don't feel that I am affected to the point where I ever need to seek any help. I don't feel that at all. I suppose if I did I would see what support was available at the – through Student Services, for a start. I know they're very good for students. I don't know how helpful they are for staff (interview, Adelaide, 2015).

Professor Nigel Krauth, Griffith University

My recommendations for pedagogy and practice are not formulaistic. For the kinds of knowledge that trauma narratives uncover, the frameworks need to be flexible, agile and capable of innovation.

- Supervisory teams need to be solid in their supervisory capacities and insights, and in their caring and communicative skills.
- A crucial factor is the trust the student has in the supervisor, and vice versa, and the commitment of the supervisor. If there is a breakdown of trust or commitment, then there needs to be quick action to find alternative supervision arrangements. This requires a culture in the school where the student feels safe about speaking freely regarding their supervision.
- Common sense, caring, and a general understanding of defamation and other publishing laws and practices need to pertain in supervisory advice.

Get to know your HDR students very well in the supervisory process through personal discussions and friendly email exchanges. Go out to lunch, regularly, in HDR groups and one-to-one (interview, Krauth, 2015).

Associate Professor Dominique Hecq, Swinburne University

I think it's very important for supervisors to know themselves first of all, so I would recommend supervisors to answer a list of questions for themselves before they embark into such a difficult territory. So basic questions about what makes them tick, what are their master signifiers, whom they identify with and what makes them distressed, what makes them angry, what makes them identify with people or what are the triggers of empathy for instance. Sometimes we identify with victims without knowing why we are doing it, but it's important to know why we do it. So that's the rational aspect of it, but also I think that supervisors need to have an analyst – a therapist. I don't like the idea of therapist because there is the idea of normality attached to it, but a psychoanalyst is better because he always flicks back the question to you.

And then the student needs to do the same work independently of their supervisor, and I think the student needs a therapist or somebody they can turn to if there is a crisis because trauma never goes away.

I've written a ... paper for *TEXT* about problems and mistakes I made and what I did about it and how I learnt from my mistakes. However, what has helped me in this process is this reflecting upon it and writing and working through the problem, through writing actually was to think about another person I might like on the supervisory team. So it has been to broaden the supervisory panel and I have found that immensely useful (interview, Hecq, 2015).

Professor Gail Jones, University of Western Sydney

I've supervised a lot of trauma narratives and a lot of trauma work – there's not a lot of institutional recognition of what this means as an area of investigation. So I guess I've just developed my own protocols and my protocols are to deal with reading and discussing particular works ... talking about what is empathy, what is empathetic unsettlement, what is the distinction between historical and structural trauma, giving some sort of rather great examples. So talking about the way in which levels of generalisation are offensive to the victims of trauma and to historical victims of violence. So ideas about levels of discussion, but being historically specific and contextualising is more likely to lead to an ethical outcome, but also more likely to lead to one's own caution and hesitation I think. I don't know anybody has ever investigated this before. There's so much theoretical work, you know, I can give anyone a bibliography on trauma settings, but I doubt anyone's actually asked these questions about the academy (interview, Jones, 2015).

Associate Professor Kate Douglas, Flinders University

I think I'm increasingly thinking that it would be good – everybody, I think, feels kind of slightly undermined when you create more kind of guidelines to support supervisors. ... I work in RHD for a portion of my job and every time we try and do something that we think is more supportive, people feel as though it's an increased level of kind of surveillance or something like that, which is not what I think this is. But I do really feel no supervisor should be going into these kinds of projects without ... either a very experienced supervisor working with them, perhaps two other supervisors working with them, or some sort of set of guidelines that can be talked through with the candidate in the initial meeting perhaps with at least two supervisors present. I think there has to be something like that (interview, Douglas, 2016).

Supervisors' perspectives on Question 2

Professor Catherine Cole, University of Wollongong

One way or another, supervisions – and I speak here from having worked at three unis now on different experiences of supervision. I think most universities are aware from a number of points of view. One is their own liability issues, including vicarious liability around supervision and expectation of completion and so on. I think there are a whole lot of just straight organisational matters which made people say: if we take this person on, are they going to complete within three years? Most universities now [are] introducing this element that if you don't finish in time, you start paying, all these sorts of things. So there are legal issues. I think also universities are mindful of who's a – and I say this in inverted commas – 'good supervisor' and who's not. People who get too close to students, who don't supervise well through protocol because they don't know the best ways to do it. That's why those annual reports or biannual reports are always important to be done honestly.

I suppose there are other elements too. But if you said to a university do you really sit down and think about what this might mean, I don't know. There are so many elements of what constitutes trauma. But I do think most universities, to be fair, do have enough internal mechanisms to say: all right, the student's distressed. Let's get them student support or student counselling or international studies or supervise – they do provide supervisor training around these issues, if not directly, then certainly peripherally. They'll talk about it through supervisor training programmes. I've heard it at UTS. I've been in seminars where people have talked about what happens when a person starts to break down for a range of reasons, not just trauma.

...I've been doing some work with Liverpool Uni in the UK and UEA and so on. Do you know some of these universities actually specialise in trauma narratives and have units which are looking at trauma from the point of view of the post-colonial and so on? So they must, in themselves, have a whole range of protocols. I haven't looked into it in depth. But if you've got a cohort of 15 people who are all people who've experienced some pretty remarkable things, how do they manage a group like that? You've almost got to kind of gestalt, haven't you, where there's this conversation around a particularly painful area (interview, Cole, 2015).

Dr Fiona Giles, University of Sydney

I'm a bit torn about whether or not more ethics. Just that I don't want more in my life. ... I'm really wary of requiring more documentation and compliance requirements of ourselves and our students. On the other hand, I can see in certain instances why it's important to have that.

You're responsible for your own fate. If you make a mistake it's you who made the mistake, not the institution that can support you to prevent the mistake happening. So I'd really like the institution to support you to prevent the mistake. Not make you fill out another form (interview, Giles, 2015).

Professor Kevin Brophy, University of Melbourne

Maybe there needs to be – maybe institutions need to be a little bit more sophisticated and targeted in the kind of counselling services that are offered and specifically employ people who are capable and knowledgeable enough to supervise the highly intelligent but perhaps fragile people who are doing PhDs, and not send them to the same counsellors that other graduates are talking to (interview, Brophy, 2015).

Dr Willa McDonald, Macquarie University

Just to recognise it as a potential issue and to make sure supervisors know they can access support. And where they can access it, and also for students. I don't know if this is related or not, but we do have nominated people who are students' representatives that students can go to if they have issues with their supervision, that's not you. They have to have someone they can go to, to bypass you if they have complaints or concerns.

I think there not only needs to be support for the supervisor who may recognise what the student is going through, but perhaps somebody independent within the department or faculty that the student can go to if they feel they can't come to you, but something is going on. Because you've got this double role of having to keep them on track with the project (interview, McDonald, 2015).

Professor Matthew Ricketson, University of Canberra

I don't think academia as an institution or as an enterprise, deals with the muck of human emotions very well at all ... they're head people, they're intellectual people. When I say 'they' I mean 'we' you know, so it's just not where they go to naturally.

It used to be a kind of once-a-year, one-day workshop. It's now a continual series of work-

shops on all different aspects: examination, ethics committees, writing workshops. When I arrived there it was mandated, you had to do one a year; now I don't think it is mandated, but they're actually offered all the time. They are face-to-face. There's some materials online for some of the stuff, but they did that because they were responding to 'I can't make it on this day' whereas if we just continually are offering them, you just come along as you need ... the process that you're in and having struggles with at the moment.

There are modules on dealing with the examination process; the supervisor/student relationship; the confirmation seminar and getting you ready for ... writing ... but I don't recollect trauma.

The hope is that I think it's probably fair to say that five or ten years ago, there wasn't much in the way of workshops about the student/supervisor relationship and how important it is and how potentially difficult it can be and how much management it requires from both parties and from the university to support both parties. Like at least there is some understanding now that that is a key relationship ... that lots of PhDs, if they fall over, it's because the relationship between the supervisor and the student has broken down. This is the next thing which is to do with the content of what you're researching about and not just seeing it through a 'rats and stats' mindset, but understanding, you know ... there are disciplines that are quite attuned to this, like anthropology and ethnography and you would presume, psychology and psychotherapy and so on (interview, Ricketson, 2015).

Professor Jen Webb, University of Canberra

I'd like to see them work together. When someone's doing a PhD that's engaging with trauma narratives then I think that the supervisor and the candidate together, or supervisors because we have panels, should actually be in conversation maybe with a specialist trauma psychologist who's trained in the field, and talk every six months – you touch base and you debrief and then you go on from there. That means you're getting an outside – the cold, calm, outside – view of it who will see if there's risk – people go slow enough, do the first years, but I think six months is probably long enough. I think by the time you get to your six months if there are serious problems you can catch them then before it becomes a disaster. But that would have to be mandated and then there would have to be some sort of sign off by the research students'

office. They need to see the document; they need to see the confirmation document. They need to see all the other documents to be sure that you're going – that you're going about it the right way.

I think it's that failsafe button and the failsafe would be something like knowing that there is a system in place to back me up, knowing there's a system – I'm not a trained psychologist. I don't have time to go to the doctor and say I feel a little bit stressed because one of my students is having a bad time. What are they going to do about that?

I think it's probably fairly obvious in the writing disciplines because we are pouring ourselves out in a way. I think the problem is we supervise them and say I'm not a therapist, you're having issues, let's get you into counselling, let's get a professional to deal with you and that. So I think that students may expect that supervisors be the grown-ups and to be responsible. [Supervisors need to] understand if they did try to counsel them, they're going to be in legal trouble. Because you've given them advice and you've got no idea what you're talking about (interview, Webb, 2015).

De-identified Interviewee 7

Well, I think really authentic support and really knowledge-based training delivered by experts. That's my answer to lots of these kind of projects because often we get people supposedly offering us training, but they know a lot less than us and then I think that becomes quite – what is it called when you're distanced? Yes, it makes you feel alienated. It's very alienating, but there really are pools of experts out there that have done a lot of work in these areas (interview, 2015).

De-identified Interviewee 8

I think maybe there needs to be a kind of more open process between the research deans and – when they're allocating students, or when you accept a student, maybe there does need to be a kind of area where you can declare whether you think this is an area that you need support or not, but yes, that would be suggesting again a kind of counselling approach and I'm not sure that is the best approach. Might just want to talk to colleagues or talk to someone about what you might do under certain circumstances (interview, 2015).

Associate Professor Debra Adelaide, University of Technology Sydney

... The fundamental thing about being a creative writer – not that I'm setting them all up to be basket cases; I'm not trying to set up anything except preparing them for the confronting things they're getting in workshopping. They do. It's very confronting putting your work out there and getting feedback. It can be really confronting, and I always tell them how affected I was the first time I ever got feedback on my work. Felt sick for a month, but I realise that that was necessary.

The other thing that absolutely has to be taken into consideration, I think, in this sort of discussion, is that our postgraduates are experienced writers, and if they're not they don't get into the programme. It's basic, they should be. We'd only accept them if they've got a track record. Basically by the time I would get a DCA student, that student is an experienced writer, so they've gone through a lot of this stuff anyway. So they may not need the help. They may not need any help, and they may find that the writing of the story is sufficient to – difficult though that may be – it is sufficient to help them. Just thinking of the students I've got at the moment, they're all experienced. They've all been well published (interview, Adelaide, 2015).

Professor Nigel Krauth, Griffith University

A school needs a flexible reporting and support system within its culture, in conjunction with a dependable university counselling service (interview, Krauth, 2015).

Associate Professor Dominique Hecq, Swinburne University

I used to think they [ethics committees] were a pain in the ass because they'd ask questions and so forth, but I think it's a good thing that they go through the ethics committee. It helps us think through the dangers. But you're right about particularly autobiographic projects, you never know what you are going to find, there are always skeletons in the closet and you don't know whom you are going to upset but it's important to at least cover your bases from the academic point of view. Even if the person upset is a family member, it can be disastrous. I think it's an important part of the process. I think the forms are not devised for our kinds of projects, and I think a lot of work needs to be done in the policy department. The questions they ask are not particularly addressing the problems we are encountering. So yes, there is an area there that needs to be addressed.

I think there should be a team of therapists or analysts who are attached to the university but not part of the university. So a team of people we can trust and that are not, how shall I say, traceable through human resources for instance. Something that is really confidential or para-institutional. It [trauma] pops up everywhere, even in straight doctorates. But certainly in poetry a lot of trauma comes, but not only lived trauma but also witnessed trauma. It's everywhere, yes (interview, Hecq, 2015).

Professor Gail Jones, University of Western Sydney

Ethics committees seem to be very much based on social sciences rather than the humanities and don't always have a sensitivity to language and to the kind of things that we do. What I would like is for there to be instruction to supervisors. So not an ethics committee that clears the project, because we don't really ever know where a project will go, and there are privacy issues and intimate disclosure makes people very vulnerable, and I'm not sure I would want some of my students to have to lay out before an ethical committee whatever exactly they're doing, or to describe it before it's thought through. But I think if we insist that supervisors need some training and ethical circumspection and some strategies, psychological strategies, to help students. Kind of a language. Language is things like projection, transference. Even to talk to students about something like denial, how that works in being in the university. So vocabulary, ethical vocabulary and ethical strategies for dealing with real people and their experience, they would seem to me more useful.

And I think actually having awareness of the discourses of psychology and psychoanalysis and all of those things because we're dealing with psychic damage often. And then with recovery, you know, how does one recover, how does one use language and intellectual strategies for a restorative purpose? I mean, don't you think that we need a restorative ethic? We need to believe that there's some good that comes from this. I really think the idea of a humanistic discourse about self-growth, identity and inferiority, you know, recognising the irreducible inferiority of your students, that seems to me so much more important than the risk assessment model (interview, Jones, 2015).

Associate Professor Kate Douglas, Flinders University

... I think that we had a community of practice at Flinders for a little while and we had kind of interdisciplinary people working together and talking through these issues and I found that

very supportive. But like everything else that's organised for academics, it's fine for the first couple of meetings and then everyone says I don't have time to attend these meetings anymore. But we had people from law and politics and sociology and English and creative writing and it was really good. And so I thought these kinds of interdisciplinary conversations are very supportive because people all of a sudden realise that this is not an issue that just they are dealing with alone, which is fantastic. But I don't know, I think every time you feel like you can offer some kind of support, people always just see it as some kind of invasion on their time. So I don't know. I feel like I can micromanage all this stuff with a couple of really close colleagues and I find that very helpful (interview, Douglas 2016).

Conclusion

The important perspectives drawn from the representative supervisors' lived experiences not only demonstrate the commitment these academics have to their candidate's ultimate success, but also testify to the impulse to manage ethically projects borne out of trauma narratives. Those of us working in the fields of humanities, journalism and creative practices are perhaps more likely to increasingly encounter candidates who seek to write personally about traumatic events that have disrupted their lives and caused psychic distress. As one of the interviewees, scholar and novelist Gail Jones observes:

And to be alive is to be wounded, and that doesn't have to incapacitate you. It can become another kind of capacity for imagining the humanity of other people. I'm sure that's why we're all in the field, or why we all care about it (interview, Jones, 2015).

Writers often turn to writing projects as a response to wounding. Another of the experienced interviewees, writer Debra Adelaide makes this particular observation about candidates: 'If they're going to be creative writers, they are going to be vulnerable' (interview, Adelaide, 2015). It would seem vulnerability is part of the creative process when rendering authentic autobiographical experiences. We return again here to echo Kevin Brophy's observation and warning: '...the ability of Creative Writing to hurt, to reveal, to run a very dangerous line between offence and revelation, and I wouldn't like to see Creative Writing become anodyne...' (interview, Brophy, 2015). These notions allude to the somewhat nebulous core of creative practice and the more political heart

of journalism; notions which do not always neatly align with an empirical paradigm of traditional modes of ethics clearance or academic writing.

There is a general consensus amongst those we interviewed that further onerous and time-consuming protocols for already time-poor writing project supervisors is not necessarily the best strategy for improving pedagogical and supervisory practices relating to autobiographical trauma projects, and there is a sense from some interviewees that further bureaucratisation and compliance might adversely affect creative output. However, we do wish to signify that many of the interviewees signalled the need for more intentional institutional work to be done by way of educating and establishing a shared model of best practice that involved developing tailored training modules for academics supervising HDR projects dealing with traumatic narration. Aitchison reminds us: 'In the humanities and social sciences, writing is the major pedagogical activity that dominates, even defines, interactions between students and their supervisors ... our understanding of what goes on in supervision around writing is still relatively limited' (Aitchison 2015: 1295-1296). To advance our shared understanding of supervisory practice and support, several interviewees flag that at their universities, candidates have supervision panels, with more than one supervisor. But several also acknowledge that this can also create tensions – frequently, only a principal supervisor is allocated workload credit, which may create a disincentive to already overworked and time-poor academics from taking part as a panel member. Reflecting on the possible incentive for being on a panel without a workload allocation, Matthew Ricketson, of the University of Canberra, comments:

Well look here's the trade-off ... at the point at which the student graduates with their PhD or their Master's, the secondary supervisor is acknowledged, not only acknowledged in the same way that the primary is at the graduation ceremony, but you as a secondary supervisor or second member of the panel can count it as a completion and because of the metric which says in your performance and development review meeting each year, one of the measures that you are judged by, is how many HDR completions you have (interview, Ricketson, 2015).

Regardless of possible 'trade-offs', we would argue there is a strategic opportunity for institutions to more formally address this possible inequity (and lost opportunity in some cases) to

create a more robust and safer HDR experience by affording workload allocations to all panel members, and include trauma experts, or psychotherapists, on panels if necessary.

We offer this preliminary research paper as a starting point of collegial dialogue undertaken with expert HDR supervisors working in the Australian tertiary sector. In voicing some of their perspectives, we hope this paper serves to generate an ongoing nation-wide conversation devoted to addressing the issue of how to create safer boundaries around trauma narrative projects. Our future work, in dialogue with colleagues and experts, will turn attention to how tertiary institutions might go about implementing practical strategies to further support both the supervisor and candidate because as Gilmore concludes: 'Trauma inflects so much autobiographical material that we should probably admit that it has already chosen us and acknowledge this demand' (Gilmore 2007: 368). Finally, we hope to further this research internationally, as a potentially comparative and discursive model.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the thirteen academics who gave freely of their time and expertise. The generous sharing of insightful responses to the selected research questions have added to a deeper understanding of supervisory practices in the area of autobiographical writing projects shaped by trauma. We also acknowledge the Journalism Educational and Research Association of Australia's Research Grant scheme (2015) of which we are the grateful recipients.

Notes

- ¹ Greene, G. (1980) *Ways of escape*, London, The Bodley Head p. 9
- ² Miller, N and Tougaw, J. (2002) *Extremities: Trauma, testimony, and community*, Illinois, The University of Illinois pp 1-2
- ³ Australian government-funded inquiry into research in the creative arts, Strand Report, 1998
- ⁴ JERAA grant 2015: The ethical HDR supervision of literary journalism: Managing long form trauma narrative within the Australian tertiary sector
- ⁵ See Baker and Buckley (2009) Evans, T., Macauley, P., Pearson, M. and Tregenza, K. (2003) and Brien, D. L., Burr, S. and Webb, J. (2012)
- ⁶ UTS HREC No. 2015000377
- ⁷ Office for Learning and Teaching

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Interviews

Catherine Cole, University of Wollongong, 13 October 2015: Skype; France

Fiona Giles, Sydney University, 22 October 2015: Skype; Sydney

Willa McDonald, Macquarie University, 29 October 2015: Skype; Sydney

Kevin Brophy, University of Melbourne, 29 October 2015: Skype; Melbourne

Matthew Ricketson, University of Canberra, 27 November 2015: face-to-face; Melbourne

Jen Webb, University of Canberra, 30 November 2015; face-to-face; Melbourne

De-identified interview 7, 15 December 2015: telephone

De-identified interview 8, 17 December 2015: telephone

Debra Adelaide, University of Technology Sydney, 18 December 2015: telephone; Sydney

Dominique Hecq, Swinburne University, 29 January 2016: telephone, Melbourne

Nigel Krauth, Griffith University, Queensland, 26 January 2016: email; Queensland

Gail Jones, University of Western Sydney, 29 January 2016: telephone, Sydney

Kate Douglas, Flinders University, 6 May 2016: telephone, Adelaide

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