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# Preventing vicarious trauma through the research process as healing justice praxis

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This article explores how our research team integrated abolition feminism (Davis et al, 2022), critical inquiry, embodiment and praxis-based knowledge into a four-year process investigating transformative justice (TJ) and restorative justice (RJ) remedies for gender-based violence. To generate insights, we used an iterative approach that involved reflective memo writing, team dialogue and engagement with relevant literature on gender-based violence and vicarious trauma. Drawing from healing justice and praxis (Freire, 1968; Pyles, 2020; Page and Woodland, 2023), we wove together reflection and action to foster belonging, meaningful productivity and collective growth. This process not only deepened our understanding of TJ and RJ, but also supported us in reducing vicarious trauma and mitigating its harms. We share these insights to aid other researchers in developing trauma-informed, justice-oriented approaches to address gender-based violence and its impacts.

**Keywords** transformative justice • abolition feminism • healing justice • restorative circles  
• vicarious trauma

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This article explores how our research team integrated abolition feminism (Davis et al, 2022) and praxis-based knowledge into a four-year research process that led to a complex scoping review on gender-based violence (GBV). The review covered over 400 artefacts (including academic articles, law review manuscripts, grey literature reports and websites) on sexual violence, restorative justice (RJ) and transformative justice (TJ), resulting in five co-authored manuscripts and three presentations at national research conferences. Drawing from our own experience and in alignment with emerging literature, we offer these lessons as potentially valuable strategies for GBV researchers seeking to prevent vicarious traumatization (VT).

## Context of the gender-based violence research project

The project began when the second author, who has research expertise in RJ implementation in schools and extensive GBV social work practice experience, encountered a Title IX reporting situation while teaching a graduate research methods course. In the United States, Title IX, the regulation that governs the handling of reports of GBV on university campuses, includes a mandatory reporting component for faculty who receive disclosures from students. A student, familiar with RJ through a class project, disclosed a complex GBV-related concern involving another student. Both the student and instructor were distressed by the mandatory reporting process, which risked causing additional harm to the student. The student expressed interest in addressing the issue through an RJ approach, but no such option was available at the university.

Seeking to understand better the evidence for RJ approaches to GBV to engage in advocacy, the second author consulted the third author – a longtime colleague with GBV prevention expertise – and then the first author, a newer collaborator with expertise in both GBV and RJ. In early conversations, the team recognised the need to deepen knowledge specific to RJ approaches to sexual violence in university settings. In response, the team embarked on a scoping review project. Sharing a structural analysis of GBV and a commitment to transforming the conditions that reproduce violence, the team intentionally incorporated TJ alongside RJ approaches into the review. Despite growing literature on RJ and TJ in response to GBV, no systematic review had examined both frameworks together. Existing reviews have also largely overlooked grey literature, where much experimental and practice-based knowledge resides. The goal was to map and synthesise academic and grey literature on RJ and TJ approaches to GBV (Christensen et al, 2022; McMahan et al, 2024), addressing a significant gap and informing non-carceral, abolitionist-aligned research and praxis. The research team consisted of three social work faculty members and six graduate students, who participated at different phases. Grounded in a healing justice praxis – combining reflection and action (Freire, 1968; Pyles, 2020; Page and Woodland, 2023) – the team integrated RJ, TJ and cooperative leadership principles throughout the research process, fostering belonging, meaningful productivity and growth. While not framed initially as a trauma-prevention initiative, the project evolved in that direction. This article offers a framework for VT prevention that emerged from that process.

## Our assumptions about gender-based violence

Our understanding of GBV is grounded in abolition feminism, which links GBV to the structural violence of borders, prisons and other state institutions that uphold intersecting systems of oppression (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2006; Richie, 2012; Davis et al, 2022). Addressing GBV thus requires confronting both interpersonal and institutional violence – including within academia. Higher education, shaped by colonial, white supremacist and patriarchal logics, continues to marginalise those most affected by violence (Patel, 2015; Castrillón-Guerrero et al, 2024). For critical GBV researchers, especially those from marginalised communities, violence is not only an object of study but a condition of labour. Alongside the emotional toll of engaging with survivors' stories, they face institutional harms such as harassment, epistemic exclusion and structural inequity (Jessup-Anger et al, 2018; Ahmed, 2021; Stein, 2022). These harms are exacerbated in neoliberal academic

environments that prioritise individualism and detachment, leaving researchers isolated and unsupported (Mountz et al, 2015). The violence within institutions compounds the trauma of GBV research, heightening the risk of VT. Addressing VT, therefore, requires not just individual strategies, but systemic change both within and beyond academia (Krieger, 2021).

## Violence and vicarious trauma

Mainstream VT literature rarely aligns with abolition feminist understandings of GBV. Rooted in clinical and practice-based fields, most VT research emphasises individual-level predictors and outcomes, with little attention to the structural conditions shaping researchers' trauma experiences. VT is typically defined as negative shifts in identity, mental health and worldview due to prolonged exposure to others' trauma (McCann and Pearlman, 1990; Cummings et al, 2021). Studies often focus on helping professionals, highlighting factors like personality (Măirean and Turliuc, 2013), coping skills (Lerias and Byrne, 2003), and years of experience (Michalopoulos and Aparicio, 2012). Interpersonal and organisational factors – such as social support, supervision and caseload – also influence VT (Michalopoulos and Aparicio, 2012; Possick et al, 2015; Sutton et al, 2022). VT, in turn, is linked to outcomes like distrust of colleagues and attrition from the field (Middleton and Potter, 2015).

Systematic inquiry into VT in GBV research remains limited, with existing studies often emerging from high-intensity, practice-based contexts. Cullen et al (2021) describe the emotional toll of fatality review work, including the erasure of Indigenous women and researcher-targeted harassment. AbiNader et al (2023) highlight the traumatic impact of data collection and call for trauma-informed policies to support research teams. Schulz et al (2023) and others emphasise that VT arises not only from the content of GBV research but also from the institutional and sociopolitical structures surrounding it. Yet, most VT interventions remain individualised – mindfulness, psychoeducation, art therapy, acupuncture (Kim et al, 2022) – failing to address the structural roots of trauma.

While structural change is essential to address the roots of VT, our GBV research team adopted relational practices to mitigate harm – disrupting isolation, fostering peer support, and acknowledging the emotional and political weight of the work. These practices don't eliminate institutional violence, but they highlight the need for care, accountability and critical reflection within research teams. By rethinking how we relate and collaborate, we can challenge norms that perpetuate trauma. Though not sufficient alone, such process-oriented interventions offer a step towards a more just and sustainable research praxis.

## Core approach, values and praxis guiding our research process

Our research approach is grounded in abolition feminisms, which we operationalised through explicit values and praxis. Next, we describe these ideas, values and practices.

### Core approach: critical inquiry grounded in abolition feminisms

We share a commitment to a critical paradigm for understanding GBV – one rooted in reflexivity, praxis, accountability, and an ongoing analysis of power and the tension

between reform and transformation (Collins, 2019). As critical feminist scholars, we integrate these commitments into our lives and scholarship, recognising how power operates through our own actions. Our praxis builds on the work of critical scholars and activists (Ford and Airhihenbuwa, 2010; Ahmed, 2021; Goodkind et al, 2021).

We approach GBV as an interpersonal manifestation of structural violence, drawing from critical and abolition feminism. Addressing GBV and preventing VT requires dismantling intersecting systems of oppression, including racism and heterosexism (INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, 2007/2017). We reject state violence – such as policing and incarceration – and view abolition as a framework for repair, relationship and justice (Davis et al, 2022). Healing demands we address harm without reliance on carceral systems.

Trained within neoliberal universities, we recognise that academic norms – individualism, hierarchy and competition – shape our thinking and must be actively unlearned (Goodkind et al, 2021; Stein, 2022). We understand research as a space for resocialisation and praxis, where critical theory informs our everyday actions. A critical feminist lens is therefore essential to the VT prevention model we propose, guiding us to name and challenge power at every level.

## Transformative justice

TJ recognises the societal conditions that shape our individual experiences and provides a framework grounded in abolitionist values, using diverse practices to address violence without relying on state mechanisms like policing and prisons (Generation FIVE, 2007; Kaba and Hassan, 2019). It prioritises the safety, healing and empowerment of survivors while fostering the transformation of those who cause harm (Creative Interventions, 2012). We argue that TJ offers a comprehensive approach to addressing VT, challenging individualistic models and emphasising the interconnectedness of personal and collective healing in GBV research. Most importantly, TJ includes ‘justice practices that go all the way to the root of the problem and generate solutions and healing there, such that the conditions that create injustice are transformed’ (Brown, 2015: para 15).

We incorporate other practices from TJ (accountability), RJ (Circles) and cooperative shared leadership (Living Agenda; RoundSky Solutions, nd) with healing justice principles. These practices, rooted in Indigenous traditions and relational worldviews, and advanced by activists, offer practical strategies for building a life-affirming world now. They help translate visionary ideas like abolition and healing justice into behaviours that can be implemented in daily living, including the research process.

## Healing justice

Healing justice, central to TJ, emerges from the work of Black feminists, activists and healers like Audre Lorde, Cara Page, Erica Woodland, and collectives such as the Kindred Collective and BEAM. It offers a politicised approach to healing that incorporates structural analysis and critiques the commodification of wellness, including the role of the medical industrial complex in sustaining oppression (Page and Woodland, 2023). These ideas are vital for understanding, preventing and healing VT. Described by Pyles (2018; 2020) as a holistic self-care framework for change-makers,

healing justice blends traditions like yoga, mindfulness, social constructionism, eco-feminism and scientific approaches such as systems theory and neuroscience. It calls for care of the whole self – body, mind, spirit, emotions, community and nature – while resisting Western individualism by affirming a relational sense of self.

## Values guiding our research process

As [Kim \(2020\)](#) points out, anti-carceral, liberatory values (or beliefs that animate our actions) originate in Indigenous communities and through the determination of communities of colour, who have resisted erasure through colonialism and genocide. So, when we describe our shared values, these come through not only our personal experiences and histories, GBV research work and healing justice concepts, but also through respectful engagement with these lineages.

### *Embodiment*

[Krieger's \(2021\)](#) ecosocial theory of embodiment illustrates how bodies biologically reflect societal and ecological conditions over time, emphasising that health and harm are shaped by structural forces and distributed agency. Bodies, in this view, express both justice and injustice. Building on this, somatic and embodiment practices are vital for trauma healing, particularly in marginalised communities. [Page and Woodland \(2023\)](#) frame bodily reconnection as both healing and resistance, while [Pyles \(2018; 2020\)](#) emphasises mindfulness and body awareness within a broader healing framework. Our use of the Living Agenda provided structure for such embodied practices, aligning with healing justice principles to counteract VT, foster collective wellbeing and address systemic harm. By integrating somatic practice, critical theory and structural analysis, we advance both immediate harm reduction and long-term transformation.

### *Holistic*

Further, our research and practice in RJ and TJ have underscored for us the importance of a holistic approach to VT, one that includes an emphasis on community, relationship-building and systemic change as simultaneous pathways to address and prevent VT. RJ and TJ are praxis-oriented and move a critical paradigm into action. These practices involve communities identifying and addressing harm, usually through dialogue. TJ addresses not only individual harm but also the broader social conditions that perpetuate injustice. Both frameworks view individuals as part of a larger whole, enabling individuals and communities to question, learn and take action towards healing and justice in a broader social context.

### *Equanimity*

Equanimity, defined as 'the acceptance of things as they are' ([Goenka, 2010; Pyles, 2018: 79, para 1](#)), has a paradoxical nature: accepting the current reality makes change easier to engage in. Equanimity allows us to critique systems of oppression while

accepting that we are part of them, recognising that the dynamics we seek to change also exist within us. This awareness makes it easier to acknowledge our mistakes and take responsibility without fear of punishment, understanding that we can be victims, survivors and perpetrators simultaneously. By embracing equanimity, we invest in creating conditions that prevent harm and enable transformation, recognising that our wellness is interconnected with this process.

### *Compassion*

Page and Woodland (2023) and Pyles (2018; 2020) frame compassion as a core element of healing justice, rooted in community care and collective support for both personal and systemic trauma. They advocate for empathic, empowering and inclusive practices that respond to structural oppression. Compassion, as a collective responsibility, integrates emotional support with critical reflection, fostering resilience through shared experience and mutual aid. This approach helps prevent VT by addressing not only its symptoms but also its structural causes. In our meetings, integrating emotional support with critical inquiry and systemic awareness helped ease the burden of VT.

### *Curiosity*

Curiosity encourages individuals and communities to explore their experiences and the structures around them, fostering a deeper awareness and critical engagement with the forces that shape their lives. Framing curiosity as a vital component of healing, Page and Woodland (2023) promote an open-minded and inquisitive approach to understanding the systemic causes of trauma and oppression. Similarly, Pyles (2018; 2020) sees curiosity as a driving force for critical reflection and transformative practice, integrating it with holistic and somatic approaches to uncover societal power dynamics and inequities. Curiosity affects VT by encouraging a deeper understanding of its root causes, both personal and systemic, fostering a proactive approach to healing and capacity-building.

### *Humour*

Believing humour was an intentional part of Pyles' (2018) healing justice framework, one of our team members enthusiastically tried to convince the rest of us that 'silliness' (versus stillness) was indeed included. When it was eventually realised that 'silliness' was not part of the original framework, everyone had a good laugh. The intimacy of our relationships allowed humour to surface and we found our process integrated humour regularly. It enabled us to joke, share amusing situations during our check-ins, occasionally tease one another and, at times, allowed us subversive ways of undermining the overwhelming experiences of existing within violent intersecting systems of oppression. While 'silliness' wasn't originally part of the framework, we decided to embrace it, as it reflects the joyfulness of our process and the quality of the culture we have built together.

## Praxis guiding our research process

Praxis structures our collaborative processes and approach to scholarship. Praxis involves the integration of critical inquiry, embodiment and the values elucidated earlier. Taken together, our shared values facilitate collaboration, shared leadership, productivity as critical scholars and healing through community activism. Healing from the isolation, competition and dismissal of critical scholarship connects personal wellbeing to social transformation. The following section provides examples of the supportive practices in which we engaged to embody our values, including active accountability practices, the use of RJ circles, a living agenda to guide our work, and memo writing.

### *Power-with relationships*

Our engagement with critical scholarship often meant navigating academic spaces where commitments to critical feminism, abolition and healing justice were dismissed as naïve or unrealistic, resulting in cumulative ‘small t’ traumas. In contrast, our four-year research process intentionally fostered a power-with rather than power-over hierarchical approach, building a community grounded in abolitionist readings, liberatory practices and creative resistance. By including students, scholars across career stages and TJ activists, we centred collaboration and collective wellbeing while challenging academia’s power-over dynamics. These values translated into concrete practices that flatten hierarchy: co-developing community agreements, rotating facilitation and note-taking, and making decisions collaboratively rather than centring the lead author.

### *Active accountability*

Our understanding of accountability is grounded in TJ. Priya Rai and the Northwest Network define it as taking responsibility for one’s choices and their consequences ([Project Nia and the Barnard Center for Research on Women, 2020](#)), which includes stopping harm, acknowledging impact, making reparations and committing to change ([Creative Interventions, 2012](#)). Mia Mingus emphasises accountability as an embodied practice that requires awareness of impact on others, oneself and the community, along with a capacity for discomfort and transformation ([Project Nia and the Barnard Center for Research on Women, 2020](#)). In our research team, accountability meant responsibility without blame – naming impact, checking in and making space for repair. When a task was missed, a group member took responsibility, acknowledged the impact and asked for the resources needed to complete the work. The team members responded with care, not shame, fostering trust and mutual responsibility. Practised daily, this approach transformed tension and conflict into opportunities for growth.

### *Living Agenda*

We implemented a Living Agenda ([RoundSky Solutions, nd](#)) grounded in cooperative economics and shared ownership, to support power-with relationships

and active accountability. Structured to foster collective care and relational support, each meeting began with a somatic arrival (for example, meditation, mindfulness, movement), followed by a check-in centred on personal wellbeing and belonging. These practices invited vulnerability, mutual witnessing and affirmation – resisting the isolation perpetuated by academic systems. The agenda included an ‘Ops Report’ to share progress and maintain collective accountability, allowing any member to step into facilitation with ease. A standing ‘Tensions’ item enabled us to engage conflict as a generative force, drawing on nature’s zero-waste model ([RoundSky Solutions, nd](#)). This practice, aligned with abolitionist commitments that ‘no one is disposable’ ([Gossett et al, 2014](#)), reframed conflict as a path to intimacy and authenticity rather than shame and disconnection.

### *Circles*

We used RJ circles to facilitate our meetings, where each person spoke one at a time, maintaining that order throughout the agenda. Circles are rooted in the tradition of talking circles practised by Indigenous peoples in North America and globally, emphasising relationship-building based on commonalities, which helps manage differences and tensions ([Ball et al, 2010](#)). This structured process shares power, centres listening, and values all voices and perspectives, countering the dynamics of violence.

### *Reflexive memo writing*

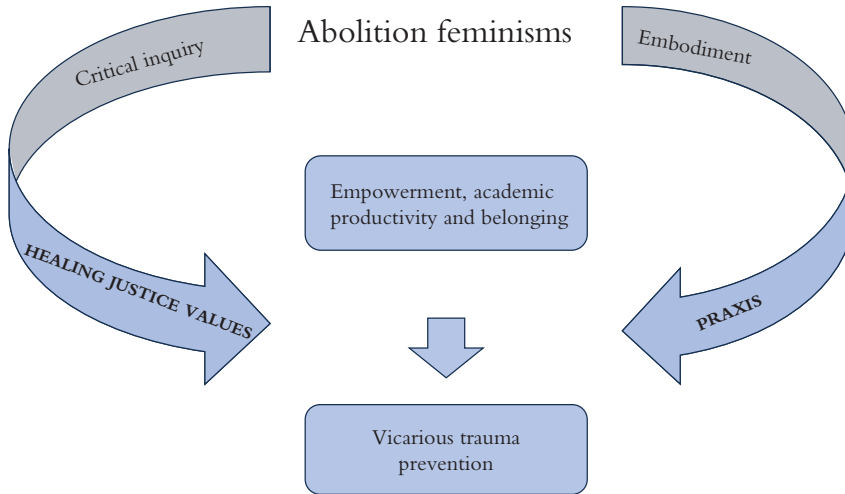
To reflect on our process of working together, we used a structured, iterative process centred on memo writing. Each member wrote memos addressing key questions about our collaborative process. We compared our reflections, identifying patterns that highlighted the value of our collective approach, which were later enriched by integrating relevant literature on VT. While we are all trained as social work researchers, we also have diverse perspectives based on our respective areas of work, including place-based health equity, feminist theology and ethnographic insights. So, sharing our memos with one another allowed for deeper layers of reflection, understanding and connection. This process informed the VT prevention approach we present in [Figure 1](#).

## **Outcome: research process grounded in healing justice**

The values and practices guiding our research fostered empowerment, academic productivity and belonging, and appear to mitigate burnout and VT. Although we did not formally study VT, our experience aligns with protective factors identified in the literature – particularly interpersonal and organisational supports such as peer accountability and emotional care ([Michalopoulos and Aparicio, 2012](#); [Possick et al, 2015](#)). While not structured as formal supervision, practices like regular check-ins, open conversations about capacity and mutual support functioned as peer supervision. These practices sustained us through the emotional demands of GBV research on this project and beyond. By integrating restorative practices,

Figure 1: Preventing VT through research process as healing justice praxis

## Preventing VT on a GBV research team



*Note:* This figure presents abolition feminisms as the foundation of our conceptual framework, which links interpersonal and structural violence. In research, this foundation supports critical inquiry and embodied practice, grounded in healing justice and ongoing praxis. These commitments foster team empowerment, academic productivity and belonging, creating a protective space that resists institutional violence and helps prevent VT in GBV research.

emphasising ‘power-with’ relationships, and cultivating accountability, we persisted in our critical scholarship despite the isolation and resistance often faced by praxis-based researchers. Our experience underscores a gap in the VT literature, which largely overlooks the structural and relational conditions that shape researchers’ vulnerability and resilience.

A community grounded in holistic wellbeing, relational support and critical reflection fostered our growth as scholars and professionals. We met and exceed professional demands – producing scholarship, securing funding and presenting at conferences – while safeguarding our health and integrity. Shared values of compassion, humour and curiosity helped break through isolation and cultivate a transformative sense of belonging. Our experience embodies healing justice principles, demonstrating how self- and community care can mitigate the VT linked to critical GBV scholarship. These commitments continue to shape our work across classrooms, community research and new collaborations – sustaining our productivity, integrity and resistance to VT, even amid rising political suppression of critical inquiry.

### Conclusion

We recognise that our insights may not fully translate to teams outside a critical feminist paradigm, which we view as essential for VT prevention. This is a key consideration when evaluating our framework. Even within critical paradigms, researchers may lack

the skills to cultivate a healing justice culture, at times unintentionally reproducing harmful dynamics. While this project does not trace the path to adopting a critical lens, our experience highlights the urgent need for scholars studying GBV to engage with critical feminist theory, TJ, RJ and healing justice – perspectives often absent from conventional training. Though our findings are most relevant to critically aligned scholars, they point to the broader need for educational frameworks that embed these principles across disciplines concerned with violence.

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### Research ethics statement

This manuscript and the experience of conducting a large scoping review on which this reflection is based did not include any human subjects. Therefore, formal ethics approval was not needed for the research process.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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