



## research article

# The personal, academic and political dimensions of researching domestic violence: an autoethnographic exploration

Emilie Lyng Rasmussen<sup></sup>, [emra@society.aau.dk](mailto:emra@society.aau.dk)  
Aalborg University, Denmark

Margunn Bjørnholt<sup></sup>, [margunn.bjornholt@vid.no](mailto:margunn.bjornholt@vid.no)  
VID Specialized University, Norway

Research on domestic and gender-based violence is vital for informing policy, shaping interventions and driving social change. However, conducting research in this sensitive field carries significant emotional, professional and ethical challenges that remain underexplored. This article offers a reflective methodological contribution, examining the personal and structural costs of researching domestic violence and other sensitive topics in academia. Drawing on autoethnographic material, we analyse three interrelated dimensions of being affected: the personal dimension – the direct toll and emotional costs on ourselves; the academic dimension – researchers' position and possibility of addressing and utilising emotions in academia; and the political dimension – the moral responsibility of doing justice to participants' experiences. These dimensions reflect the researcher as a human being, an academic and a responsible citizen. While situated in gender-based violence research, our reflections speak to all scholars engaged in emotionally demanding inquiry. We argue that transparency, reflexivity and recognition of the emotional impact are central to ethical research and essential for the sustainability of knowledge production in this and other sensitive fields. By highlighting the often-overlooked burdens on researchers, this article calls for academic structures that better support scholars working with violence, trauma and injustice – ensuring that research not only persists but flourishes.

**Keywords** autoethnography • researching domestic violence • research ethics • researcher safety and wellbeing • research sustainability

### Key messages

- Researching domestic violence involves emotional challenges for the researcher.
- Through an autoethnographic approach, the article identifies the personal, academic and political dimensions of studying domestic violence.
- The article calls for academic structures that support researchers' emotional wellbeing and the sustainability of this research.

To cite this article: Rasmussen, E.L. and Bjørnholt, M. (2026) The personal, academic and political dimensions of researching domestic violence: an autoethnographic exploration, *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, 10(2): 273–294, DOI: 10.1332/23986808Y2025D000000114

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### **Vignette: experiences of a novice researcher in academia**

At a seminar at my university, I presented reflections on the ethical challenges and emotional impact I had experienced during fieldwork at women's shelters. This included sharing ethical dilemmas such as challenges in maintaining boundaries, navigating my research role and worries about inflicting harm or disappointing. I presented how I would adjust my data collection to encompass these issues.

After my presentation, there was an overwhelming amount of feedback. I was struck by the number of colleagues praising my honesty and bravery for sharing. I intended my presentation as a methodological reflection with the aim of being transparent and reflexive. I thought of this as common practice and a requirement. However, most feedback was in the form of consolatory words like 'Don't be sad'. It left me feeling self-conscious and uncertain, wondering whether I had been wrong not to feel sad or embarrassed about my ethical struggles. I had assumed that such reflections were commonplace and therefore also commonly shared. Moreover, my presentation sparked a conversation of what questions to ask in this context, and, more importantly, how to ask them. I felt there was a norm I had failed to navigate as a novice researcher. As colleagues repeatedly remarked on my bravery and honesty, the feeling of embarrassment transformed into self-doubt and shame. I questioned what I had shared to prompt such a response.

A couple of months later, I did a similar presentation at a conference dedicated to domestic violence. Given my previous experience, I was apprehensive but believed the response would be different in a group of experts in gender-based violence. However, to my astonishment, the response was again only praise for my honesty and bravery in sharing.

### **Vignette: experiences of a senior researcher in academia**

My way of addressing the personal stems from a gradual feeling of discomfort and unease as a qualitative researcher of domestic violence. I came from gender studies and studies of working life, interviewing people about their everyday family lives and workplace matters. Although these stories were deeply personal, they normally did not involve suffering and pain. Working exclusively with victims of domestic violence over the past several years, I gradually realised that this research takes an emotional and mental toll and raised the issue with the head of department at my workplace at the time. I suggested that the self-care and the mental wellbeing of all who were involved in such research needed to be addressed routinely and proactively at an institutional level. In response to sharing my experiences and the emotional strain I felt, I was praised for being so honest, but I was also met with surprise that I, an experienced researcher, felt this way, and that I shared it. My suggestion, I later discovered, was never forwarded to the decision-making echelons of the organisation, which had been my intention for raising the issue.

## Introduction

Research on domestic and gender-based violence is crucial for informing policy, grounding interventions and fostering social change. However, investigating such a sensitive issue comes with significant emotional, professional and ethical challenges that remain underexplored. This article provides a reflective methodological perspective, exploring both the personal and structural costs of researching domestic violence and other sensitive topics in academia.

Drawing on the experiences conveyed in the vignettes as a cue, this article aims to contribute to the growing literature on the impact of research on researchers (Campbell, 2002; Rager, 2005; Dickson-Swift et al, 2007; Smith, 2021; Silverio et al, 2022; Skovlund et al, 2023). Studies have shown that qualitative researchers, in particular, grapple with challenges such as maintaining boundaries, practising reflexivity, ensuring emotional and physical safety, and navigating the process of exiting the field. They also bear responsibility for mitigating potential harm to those involved (Lee, 1993; Dickson-Swift et al, 2007: 238; Liamputtong, 2007; Skovlund et al, 2023). Qualitative research is inherently relational and transferential; emotional responses are not side effects but an integral part of the research process (Dickson-Swift et al, 2007; Rouse, 2024). Such emotional involvement may lead to effects often described as 'secondary traumatic stress' and 'compassion fatigue' (Alexander et al, 1989; Figley, 1995; Rager, 2005; Silverio et al, 2022). Citing Stamm (1995), Figley (1995) explains that 'compassion fatigue, compassion stress, and secondary traumatic stress have been used to label the natural, predictable, treatable, and preventable unwanted consequences of working with suffering people' (Figley, 1995: 4), thereby highlighting the relevance of awareness and preventive measures.

Research on gender-based violence is rapidly growing, reflecting a critical societal issue that affects countless individuals and families worldwide. However, as we engage in this research it is essential to explore how we, as scholars, can continue to investigate these vital topics while safeguarding our emotional and intellectual wellbeing. The importance of research on domestic violence cannot be overstated; it plays a vital role in informing policy, shaping interventions and ultimately driving social change (Stark, 2007; Gillespie and Lopez, 2019). Feminist epistemology provides a crucial foundation for this endeavour, challenging dominant assumptions and fostering emotional engagement, reflexivity and methodological plurality in knowledge production (Reinharz and Davidman, 1992; Butler, 2004; Fricker, 2007; Stark, 2007). However, such engagement inevitably places emotional demands on researchers. Therefore, the question arises: how can we ensure that research on violence and injustice, as well as the scholars conducting it, not only persist but flourish within academia?

While the existing literature acknowledges the breadth of violence research, there is a paucity of research focusing on the challenges faced by researchers in this field. This article addresses that gap by providing a reflective methodological contribution focused on the challenges, costs and sustainability of researching gender-based violence. By foregrounding our experiences, we aim to foster a deeper understanding of the emotional impact faced by many qualitative researchers and highlight ways to maintain the vitality of gender-based research within academia. We assert that emotions are an integral aspect of research, influencing academic knowledge production. Transparency, reflexivity and acknowledgement of emotional impact are central to this process, as emotions offer clues to insights and mediate researchers' political and moral obligations

when investigating other people's suffering and injustices. Additionally, we seek to remind fellow researchers that they are not alone in navigating these challenges.

## Background

Lee (1993) defines sensitive research as 'research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it' (Lee, 1993: 4). This definition covers a variety of research topics and encourages us to examine the potential harm posed to all involved. It resonates with us, as it is not the topic but the potential for harm that determines sensitivity. Silverio et al (2022) distinguish between sensitive, challenging and difficult research topics, adding nuance to what researching an emotionally charged subjects entail. Sensitive topics delve into acutely personal experiences. Challenging topics concern issues in groups or systems that may leave researchers feeling obligated to report findings or challenged in power dynamics. Difficult topics – often those the public view as morally objectionable – may cause discomfort, distress or a feeling of being unsafe (Silverio et al, 2022: 2). The definition of sensitive topics closely aligns with our experiences of researching domestic violence; thus, we adopt this term throughout the article.

From her own experiences, Rager (2005: 427) suggests that 'more needs to be done to formalize the safeguards that should be part of the process when a researcher takes on an emotionally laden subject'. This call to integrate structured self-care strategies into research practice has since been echoed by others, including Zschomler et al (2026), who advocate for institutional frameworks to mitigate vicarious trauma and promote researcher wellbeing. The most emphasised self-care recommendations concern the preparation and scheduling of data collection, journaling, debriefing and supervision, access to social, emotional and peer support, formal psychological support, and reflexive emotional work (Pickett et al, 1994; Rager, 2005: 429; Gillespie and Lopez, 2019; Silverio et al, 2022: 9–10). Harris and Huntington (2001: 142) argue that '[t]he effort of working analytically with emotions is justified both in terms of the quality of the work we produce and of the importance of maintaining our own emotional well-being'. Emotions are therefore valuable for safeguarding both researchers and participants from harm. However, only a few researchers have openly discussed how their research affects them emotionally (Campbell, 2002; Rager, 2005; Scerri et al, 2012; McQueeney and Lavelle, 2015; Gillespie and Lopez, 2019; Herland, 2023). Gillespie and Lopez (2019: 9) note that emotions are often erased or ignored in academia in favour of productivity and professionalism. Several scholars have argued that being openly subjective carries risk, as it may be regarded as contaminating data or appearing unprofessional. This devaluation of subjectivity conceals the difficulties researchers face in sensitive research (Campbell, 2002; Dickson-Swift et al, 2008; Gillespie and Lopez, 2019). We have both encountered this risk when disclosing our emotional experiences in academic settings. The vignettes illustrate what the literature suggests, namely, that professional detachment is prioritised, and emotional openness is often regarded as 'brave'.

### *Emotions in research*

The topic of emotions is vast and spans different disciplines, however our underlying beliefs about emotions – for example, whether they are controllable or acceptable –

shape how we interpret and respond to them (Ford and Gross, 2018). Although the centrality of emotions in social science has been acknowledged for decades, they remain insufficiently explored. During the 1970s, emotions became a field of study within social science, Hochschild's work (1979; 1983) on emotional labour being especially influential. Individual emotions such as grief (Lofland, 1985), sympathy (Clark, 1987) and shame (Scheff, 1990) have been studied, paving the way for emotions as a means of understanding human life. Building on this, Ellis (1991: 125) argues that through '[s]tudying emotions emotionally, examining our own emotions, and concentrating on introspective narratives of lived experience – emotional sociology offers a more holistic understanding of emotions and a fuller appreciation for how emotional experience is connected to other dimensions of human life'. Emotional sociology emphasises the researcher's emotions as a source of data, showing that emotions are integral to the research process and provide a pathway to insights and understanding (Ellis, 1991). An increasing number of sociologists acknowledge that emotional reflexivity is meaningful to research (Gilbert, 2001; Campbell, 2002; Rager, 2005; Dickson-Swift et al, 2009). A prominent contribution is Campbell's *Emotionally Involved* (2002), which explores the difficulties researchers face when studying rape and violence. Campbell (2002) argues that examining researchers' emotions more accurately reflects the nature and outcomes of the research project. In their anthology on researchers' and practitioners' experiences with witnesses of violence in the field, Gillespie and Lopez (2019) similarly argue that grieving and allowing oneself to feel and address the pain of research participants – often denied the right to be grieved – is part of the research process and, by extension, a political act. Together, these contributions demonstrate that emotions have a legitimate place in research. Yet, there remains a need to normalise emotional openness in academia and to acknowledge being affected as part of scholarly practice – a responsibility that extends beyond individual researchers to funding bodies and collective academic actions (Zschomler et al, 2026). We have experienced a taboo when disclosing the personal and emotional impacts of our research within academic communities. This article calls for the integration and acknowledgement of emotions and researcher subjectivity in academic knowledge production.

### *The detrimental impact of domestic violence*

It is well established that violence profoundly harms victims, affecting their health, social relationships – including their parenting and relationship with their children – as well as their career, finances and overall quality of life (Neroien and Schei, 2008; Alsaker et al, 2018; Katz, 2022; Bjørnholt, 2024; 2025). Exposure to domestic violence is strongly correlated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and complex PTSD, depression, anxiety, and a higher prevalence of substance abuse. Moreover, domestic violence severely affects physical health, with victims frequently experiencing sleep disturbances, chronic pain and stress-related illnesses (Dokkedahl et al, 2021; Elvin-Nowak et al, 2023; White et al, 2024). Help-seeking among victims of domestic violence is often a prolonged and multifaceted process. Negative reactions to the disclosure of violence are common and can significantly hinder wellbeing and impede emancipation from the cycle of violence (Stark, 2007; Dufour et al, 2023; Ullman, 2023).

Engaging in research on domestic violence necessitates confronting trauma, pain and injustice at every juncture. Special attention must be paid to the potential for re-traumatisation and harm (Dufour et al, 2023). Researchers must navigate not only the emotional burden of their work but also the moral imperative to authentically and ethically represent victims' experiences. The profound impact of witnessing violence – through narratives, testimonies and lived realities – renders emotional detachment unfeasible, making emotional reflexivity and resilience crucial for safeguarding researchers and sustaining this field of inquiry. An illustrative example of these challenges appears in one of Bjørnholt's (2024) recent articles. After elucidating the hardships encountered by mothers enduring post-separation abuse and negative systemic responses, as well as the resulting impact on their health and quality of life, she captures the often-devastating effects of such experiences on participants' lives, writing:

Some of the mothers reported that they had been completely broken down: they lost custody of their children to the abuser, felt powerless and disenfranchised, and were unable to protect their children. Many of them had also become seriously ill or disabled. In certain instances, I observed this process unfolding. (Bjørnholt, 2024: 8)

Engaging with the field of domestic violence can challenge researchers' own sense of justice, confronting them with the limitations and failures of the systems they work within or study. This invariably complicates the ethical and emotional dimensions of the research process. By recognising the profound consequences of domestic violence, we can transition into a discussion of the inherent challenges faced by researchers. This involves drawing parallels between the trauma experienced by victims and the emotional burdens that researchers may encounter.

## Methods

With inspiration from autoethnography, we explore the emotional costs of researching harm, using our firsthand experiences of studying domestic violence as data. Autoethnography seeks to account for the role of personal experiences in research, emphasising its importance for understanding cultural life and the complex research processes in which researchers engage (Holman et al, 2016). It is an approach that embraces subjectivity and emotionality to encapsulate how these elements influence the research process and its outcome (Ellis et al, 2011). Holman et al (2016: 22) describe autoethnography as differing from other personal writing by commenting on culture, contributing to existing research and embracing vulnerability.

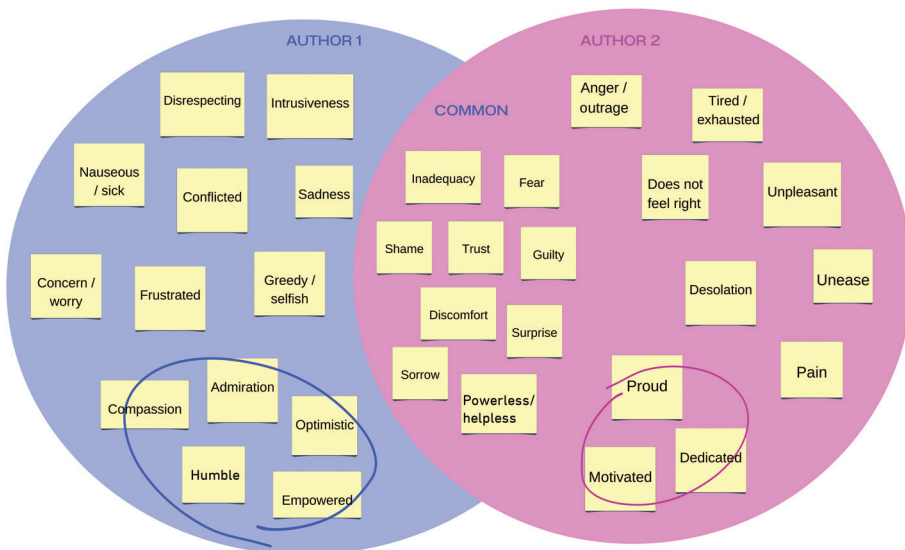
While exchanging reflections and experiences, we discovered a shared interest in exploring the personal experiences and cost from an ethical and methodological point of view. As a first step, we wrote autoethnographic memos loosely based on the prompt: 'Experiences of difficult moments when conducting research on domestic violence.' Our individual memos were written in parallel in a writing workshop and completed individually afterwards. Author 1 wrote based on her ethnographical fieldwork at women's shelters in Denmark during which, among other things, she observed admission interviews with women arriving at shelters seeking refuge. Author 2 wrote based on memories and reflections on several research projects on domestic

violence with qualitative interviews as the primary research method. Subsequently, we read each other's memos thoroughly. Despite differences in our research methodology and context, we were struck by the similarities in our emotional responses. Author 1 had ascribed her emotions and struggles to being a novice researcher, so it was unexpected that Author 2 was able to see herself reflected and conversely. Moreover, we were surprised by having encountered almost identical responses in our respective institutions, as reflected in our vignettes. We take these responses as an indication that in sharing our personal reflections, we had unintentionally touched upon a taboo in academia. We decided to explore in further detail the issue of managing and addressing emotional impacts and challenges in academia. Given the prompt for our memos, there was a focus on negative emotions, allowing for little data to explore the positive emotional impact. As a novice and a senior researcher, we find ourselves particularly well positioned to conduct a joint exploration of the personal experiences and costs of research for researchers.

### Mapping emotions

We started by coding each other's memos by hand, highlighting all emotions articulated. Afterwards, we went systematically through the coded emotions to elaborate, reflect and discuss similarities and differences. Both memos displayed a wide range of emotions, from empathy and optimism to disempowerment and outrage. Making sense of patterns in emotions involved a creative process where we manually sorted the emotions and compared them across our memos. Figure 1 displays all emotions identified in our memos organised in two circles, one for each of us, the directly overlapping emotions in the intersection. Additionally, the 'positive' emotions are clustered with two rings visualising the prevalence of negative emotions.

Figure 1: Map of emotions



This mapping led us to conclude that studying domestic violence had led to a wide range of emotions. Working from this overview, we reflected on similarities and differences, and possible interpretations. Among other things, we discussed the difference in intensity of emotions and argued that these variations may be due to differences in stages of the research process as well as stages of our academic careers, pointing to a cumulative effect. We summarised this in [Figure 2](#), where selected emotions are placed in categories of ‘early’ and ‘late’ regarding academic careers and the research process.

Author 1 was concerned with justifying her project and proving herself as a competent researcher able to navigate researching domestic violence by portraying a professional practice and identity ([McQueeney and Lavelle, 2015: 85](#)). In contrast, Author 2 found reassurance in her knowledge and experiences, having published on participants’ motivations and the ways they benefit from participating in research ([Bredal et al, 2024](#)). As we will show, her ethical qualms are more related to the later stages of the research process.

Finally, variations in our narratives may also be due to differences in methods, recruitment of research participants and the stages in participants’ help-seeking trajectories. Author 1 did fieldwork, while Author 2 did interviews. Moreover, there is a significant difference in recruitment. Author 2 primarily works with self-recruited participants in contrast to Author 1. In contrast, Author 1 met her participants as they entered women’s shelters, often on a help-seeking trajectory with some hope for the future. Author 2, on the other hand, met participants who had often reached the end of their stories, having accumulated negative experiences of post-separation abuse, including how support services and the judiciary were mobilised by the perpetrator ([Bjørnholt, 2021; 2024; 2025](#)). In this case, there was reason to feel outraged, disappointed and angry. This may also explain differences in emotional intensity, both for the research participants and researchers. The variations and correspondence between participants’ help-seeking trajectories, research stages and emotions are visualised in [Figure 3](#).

These discussions were important steps in our analysis, relating differences and nuances in our respective emotions to temporal dimensions in careers, research, and research participants’ trajectories. However, these discussions are also simplifications and do not

**Figure 2: Stages of academic career and research process**

<p>Novice researcher</p> <p><b>Emotions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confliction</li> <li>• Guilty/selfishness</li> <li>• Concern/worry</li> <li>• Intrusiveness</li> </ul>	<p>Senior researcher</p> <p><b>Emotions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desolation</li> <li>• Anger/outrage</li> <li>• Unease</li> </ul>
<p>Data collection</p> <p><b>Emotions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intrusiveness</li> <li>• Disrespect</li> <li>• Sorrow</li> </ul>	<p>Writing and publishing</p> <p><b>Emotions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tired/exhausted</li> <li>• Shame</li> <li>• Grief</li> </ul>

Figure 3: Correspondence between stages in participants' help-seeking trajectories, stages in the research process and emotions

<b>Participants' stories and help-seeking trajectories</b>	Beginning	Ending
<b>Stages of the research process</b>	Data gathering	Writing and publishing
<b>Emotions</b>	Hope and optimism	Disappointment, resignation and outrage

fully represent the lived and often messy emotional experiences. The emotions were fluid, appearing in early stages to disappear and then resurface, and some emotions developed or changed during the research process. Additionally, emotions were often present simultaneously in paradoxical combinations, for example, feeling motivated but powerless, or hopeful but exhausted. Nevertheless, the coding and temporal mapping of emotions provided a sensitising background for the next step in our analysis, during which we searched for patterns and constructed analytical categories.

## Analysis

Our subsequent analysis involved a reflective process, during which we read and discussed the memos and exchanged thoughts and reflections in relation to relevant literature. Through this abductive approach (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014), we identified three interrelated dimensions in our emotional responses and moral-ethical reflections as researchers on domestic violence. First, a personal dimension; the direct toll and emotional costs on ourselves. Second, an academic dimension related to us as academics, how we are positioned in academia, as well as the space (or lack thereof) for addressing emotions and personal experiences in academia. Third, a political dimension – our moral reasoning, self-doubt and frustration, trying to legitimise and do justice to the research participants' suffering and the responsibility of harbouring these stories and making them matter. In the following, we will present these three dimensions in more detail.

### *The emotional and personal impact of research*

Both authors have been personally affected by conducting research on domestic violence. We felt empathy for our participants navigating and suffering severe consequences of violence and we felt conflicted in our roles as researchers and fellow human beings.

Our personal lives intertwined with, and affected, our experiences in the field, highlighting the importance of self-care and underscoring a lack of institutional support. We emphasise the value of being personally affected and reflecting on these experiences, as it can ensure ethical research and offer important insights. This is perhaps particularly relevant in research on domestic violence, which necessitates confronting trauma, pain and injustice (Bjørnholt, 2024), and is often politically charged and contentious in debates on gender equality. Research must take a stance and navigate this terrain too.

### *The emotional labour and cost*

Conducting sensitive research entails being subjected to stories of pain, suffering and injustice, as these are often at the core of the social problem investigated. Author 1 conducted ethnographical fieldwork at shelters in Denmark, including observations of admission interviews. She describes the challenges in navigating the researcher role:

Observing the women speaking their cases, wanting formal help [at the shelter], and the power dynamic unfolding between the women and the social workers (and me) was difficult to navigate. My role as a passive observer contradicted how I would normally act in such situations. Watching someone hurt without responding was difficult.

Author 1 experienced an urge to respond to the women struggling and crying, but remained passive as the researcher, allowing the social worker to act as the caregiver. This is what [Hochschild \(1983\)](#) terms 'surface acting' in emotional labour, where Author 1 conforms to the feeling rules of the researcher by repressing her outward emotional expression, but not her inner feelings, to remain professional and collaborative. She reflects:

I wanted to give the woman a hug or take her hand, and I found it difficult trying to be invisible while feeling so visible. ... I felt somewhat powerless and even got a bit frustrated at times when the social worker didn't respond as I expected or would have.

Author 1 connects her urge to hug the woman to compassion, defined by [Sznajder \(1998: 117\)](#) as '[c]oncern with the suffering of others, accompanied by the urge to help'. Despite struggling to express compassion in a suitable manner, she viewed this emotional response as a guide to ethical research and protecting her participants. She felt conflicted by the powerlessness and feared appearing cold or lacking compassion, echoing [Behar's \(1996\)](#) notion of *the vulnerable observer*, but retrospectively recognises that her frustration stemmed from a paradox between her emotions and her professional identity. A similar tension arose during a victim's first meeting with the police, where Author 1 was unprepared to hear recordings of strangulation and see photographs of injuries. In that moment, self-protection felt impossible; she redirected her emotional response towards care for the woman and professionalism towards the officer. Writing fieldnotes afterwards offered some processing; however, she hesitated to share the experience, fearing she had failed to maintain proper boundaries.

Author 2 also felt powerless in doing justice to her participants' stories, reflecting a shared emotional tension between empathy and professional responsibility. She struggled to balance her anger with the need for analytical distance, feeling the cumulative toll of hearing numerous accounts of violence and systemic failures ([Bjørnholt, 2021; 2024; 2025](#)). Her anger was rooted in solidarity with the participants. She highlights the need for measures to support researchers in managing such emotional implications, including the normalisation of using emotions analytically to deepen understanding and reflexivity. Author 1 echoes this, noting: 'Navigating ethical and personal questions was a source of stress and overwhelmingness, at least for me. I experience it as bordering on shameful to discuss in academia.' These reflections

illustrate how emotional labour takes different forms throughout the research process. In the early stages of data collection, Author 1 engaged in spontaneous emotional work in the presence of others, where her reactions were visible and open to judgement. For Author 2, emotional labour emerged more privately during the stages of writing and publication, involving a deeply moral and value-based sensibility that was difficult to articulate within academic conventions. Despite these differences, both accounts highlight that researching and communicating violence requires continuous emotional engagement in distinct ways.

### *Being a researcher and a human*

Researchers enter the field as humans, and research unfolds amid unpredictable personal circumstances, such as bereavement, pregnancy and family life, all of which shape the research process and outcome. Reflecting on these circumstances is crucial for managing emotions, ensuring transparency and researchers' wellbeing.

In our autoethnographic memos, we connect physical and emotional reactions to life events. Author 2 writes:

On a personal level, I and my family suffered several losses, which also took their toll. My survival strategy has always been to work, and to work more when things get rough. Given my current research field, however, working meant being involved with some dark matters. This turned out to be challenging.

Work can offer respite from personal ordeals but engaging with issues like domestic violence remains challenging, reflecting a cumulative effect of personal and professional life.

Author 1 connects some of her physical reactions during fieldwork to her pregnancy, noting nausea and fatigue: 'Towards the end of the interview, I felt nauseous, and I remember being relieved when it was over ... however, I felt empowered by the fact that I managed and was able to put my own needs aside.' She highlights the challenges of conducting field-interviews while pregnant yet feeling empowered by her ability to set her own needs aside. Other scholars have also reported physical reactions during interviews about abuse (Alexander et al, 1989; Campbell, 2002; Herland, 2023). Learning this retrospectively eased Author 1's conscience, allowing her to recognise the humanity and solidarity in her response, having previously felt ashamed of it. In hindsight, incorporating self-care strategies, such as longer breaks, might have been beneficial, but seemed impossible at the time.

### *(The lack of) self-care strategies*

Interestingly, neither of us had planned self-care strategies during our research, yet, in retrospect, some emerged unintentionally and significantly supported our wellbeing.

For Author 1, writing fieldnotes became a key form of self-care. Although not intended to be therapeutic, the notes evolved into autoethnographic reflections that captured dilemmas encountered in the field. Author 1 reflects on her note-taking: 'Writing the

fieldnotes allowed me to work through the difficult and contradictory feelings during fieldwork and transform them into hope and optimism rooted in the justice of them hopefully getting help [at the shelter].’ The fieldnotes became an available means of processing the emotional impact of fieldwork, aligning with literature recommending journaling or diaries (Rager, 2005; Dickson-Swift et al, 2008; Silverio et al, 2022). Author 1’s maternity leave provided a valuable break to process and reflect on data, allowing time to process and adjust the data collection, reaffirming the importance of planning adequate time for this.

In retrospect, Author 2 found that analysing data with colleagues, students and co-authors supported her wellbeing, echoing calls for peer discussion and social support (Rager, 2005; Dickson-Swift et al, 2008; Silverio et al, 2022). This signifies the value of a supportive academic environment. During the COVID-19 pandemic, daily midday breaks to care for and ride horses also offered welcome relief, providing space to process.

### *Guilt, resistance and ambivalence in academia*

Exploring the academic dimension, we have both grappled with issues of conscience and qualms about the legitimacy of benefiting professionally from others’ suffering, as well as the challenge of doing justice to the participants’ stories.

### *Benefiting academically from other people's suffering*

Writing and publishing are integral to research and academic work – indeed, they are often its primary aim. Publication is the primary means of conveying results and serves as a foundation for academic recognition, career progression and institutional value. More mundanely, it generates credentials and financial rewards for academic institutions. Yet the publication process can feel hollow, standing in stark contrast to the stories of violence and neglect on which articles and our academic careers are built. This paradox evokes strong emotional reactions, as expressed by both Author 1 and Author 2. Author 1 describes how balancing the need for empirical data with the needs of the women became a consuming ethical concern during fieldwork at shelters:

These interviews were hands down the situations where I witnessed the most crying and pain. Some of the women were telling their story for the first time, displaying shame and agony in doing so. I felt like I was violating and disrespecting this, stealing focus with my aim for data even though they consented to me being there. ... I felt like I dehumanised the situation by observing and transforming it into data for my project, not knowing how I could ever pay them back.

Feelings of greed and selfishness emerged from concern for the women’s needs and safety, despite having obtained their written consent. On several occasions, Author 1 observed shelter staff speaking negatively about residents in closed forums. This raised an ethical dilemma: the urge to defend women who were not present, while still needing to maintain professional boundaries and refrain from interfering with

the data. The experience was unsettling, raising concerns about whether all women received the care and support they needed in a vulnerable state. Struggles to navigate the field are well-documented in research on sensitive topics, emphasising a conflict in recognising the inability to 'repay' the participant (Behar, 1996), often resulting in feelings of selfishness or guilt (Gillespie and Lopez, 2019). Author 2 echoes this tension, articulating feelings of shame:

In taking in all these stories, I feel disempowerment and disillusion and I feel a strong obligation to bring these stories forth and contribute to change. At the same time, I feel shame that I have not been able to process all these stories into monumental and game-changing publications. Rather, my last two articles have been rejected by journals, and I struggle to rewrite them, to make them more palatable, less offensive and, of course, simply better as academic texts.

Author 2's feelings of shame stemmed from a fear of not doing justice to participants' stories, a concern shared by Author 1. This adds emotional pressure to the already demanding imperative to 'publish or perish', resulting in further shame if unsuccessful. Conversely, academic success may evoke ambiguity and guilt. Author 2 recalls receiving an award for an article and the challenges of balancing pride in academic recognition with guilt over benefiting from others' suffering. While the appreciation she received within and beyond academia made her proud, navigating the tension between personal satisfaction and guilt required ongoing work – both personal and relational – to frame recognition as a means of honouring and amplifying participants' voices.

As Author 1 notes in her fieldnotes, the core struggle is not merely hearing the participants' stories and responding emotionally, but rather how to convey and depict the emotions and personal implications in academic settings without being regarded as unprofessional or inadmissible. As the vignette conveys, Author 1 shared her emotional responses and challenges with her academic communities and was praised as 'brave' and 'honest'. Initially, this led to feelings of shame for diverging from academic norms, thereby reinforcing the emotional toll she was addressing. Such emotional and ethical dilemmas are especially common in sensitive research, as our reflections across levels of seniority and stages in the research process reveal. Gillespie and Lopez (2019: 5) write very tellingly that 'it is plain that many academics, activists and practitioners have taken up the insistence on productivity over self-care', situating this tendency within a growing health crisis in academia. The personal implications transcend the academic sphere and dimension, and there is an acute need for this to be recognised.

### *The ethical challenges of researching domestic abuse*

Ethical considerations loomed large in our reflections. Some of the qualms were related to balancing the need to anonymise participants with doing justice to their stories of violence in full. Author 2 expresses this in the following excerpt: 'Writing academic texts, rearranging fragments of people's lives, also feels morbid and makes me feel guilty. Who am I to disaggregate the parts of their stories and rearrange them in patterns that inadvertently violate the full experience of each person?' The guilt articulated originates from the struggle to do justice to participants' full stories and

from the unavoidable power asymmetry between researcher and researched. However, guilt can be constructive, helping to distinguish right from wrong. When researching domestic violence, participants' actions, decisions and trajectories may not appear rational or even credible. However, research consistently shows that victims engage in complex decision-making processes as they manage and avoid violence, as well as navigate help-seeking (Stark, 2007; Dufour et al, 2023; Ullman, 2023). Emotional responses serve as valuable clues that guide the researcher in exploring complex topics such as domestic violence. Relatedly, scholars have argued that the principles of ethics, though necessary, may not always be sufficient and ultimately depend on the individual researcher (Juritzen et al, 2011; Müller et al, 2022).

Another way to ensure anonymisation is by removing or obscuring details that may be too recognisable. The assessment of what must be altered or omitted can weigh heavily on the researcher, as Author 2 contemplates:

One issue that I find hard is that it is impossible to do justice to the stories and to the lived lives of the participants while not compromising their anonymity and safety. On the one hand, the individual stories in all their details and specificity are what make them so terrifying and that make them so trustworthy.

Doing justice to participants' stories and ensuring anonymity and safety are not always compatible. In this regard, protecting participants always outweighs the story. However, removing or obscuring recognisable details also downplays and violates the lived experiences, potentially making them appear less credible or significant. When conveying participants' authentic stories without filtering out horrendous details, Author 2 has experienced being criticised as 'too activist'. This critique presents an additional challenge to navigate. Bringedal Houge (2022: 1244) asks the question: 'How comfortable a read can research that has violence at its core become, before the distance created by language becomes an ethical – and analytical – challenge in its own right?' This is the core of concern and a source of unease, powerlessness and frustration for researchers. A heavy responsibility rests on researchers when conveying participants' stories, in which asymmetry of the power dynamic becomes visible. If one cannot do justice to the participants' narratives, can you justify the research itself? Accompanying this dilemma are feelings of guilt, shame and frustration for not 'doing enough', which Authors 1 and 2 know well. Academic institutions carry a responsibility for addressing and acknowledging these struggles as a mainstream aspect of knowledge production. In this context, a supportive and transparent academic community is essential. However, as the vignettes illustrate, care and support in academia can be misplaced. Author 1 describes how she received well-intentioned praise about her 'bravery' in sharing the personal impact of research. Yet this response signalled that she had unintentionally crossed a taboo and revealed too much of herself. She writes: 'I felt there was a social code I failed to navigate as a novice researcher and that I had missed something obvious to everyone. As colleagues kept highlighting my bravery, the feeling of embarrassment transformed into self-doubt and shame.' Mainstreaming the sharing of personal implications may foster a more supportive academic environment, avoiding misplaced responses and care. This approach not only encourages researchers to engage more deeply with the complexities of gender-based violence but also contributes to the growth and flourishing of this critical field within academia. By creating space for personal

experiences and emotional insights, we can ensure that research on gender-based violence continues to develop, ultimately playing a vital role in promoting social change.

### *The researcher as a responsible and solidaric citizen*

We found that political considerations also figured prominently in our emotional and moral ruminations on researching domestic violence and how to justify our work. Such considerations were often expressed as sorrow or outrage on behalf of the participants, and as frustration or self-doubt about the role and effectiveness of academic work in contributing to political change. Moreover, there are inherent difficulties in balancing the academic and the political – particularly in processing and doing justice to participants' suffering.

### *Emotions as political acts*

We both felt the weight of the stories we were entrusted with and struggled to live up to the obligation participants implicitly placed on us through their sharing. We recognise that the emotional response evoked by participants represent only a fraction of the pain they themselves endured. This awareness is both a motivator and a profound responsibility, reflecting the emotional ambivalence that characterises sensitive research. Author 1 realised she had been told details by one participant that had not been shared with anyone else:

It leaves me with a great sorrow that I might be the only person knowing this part of her story. I feel guilty about not being able to do much or enough with it. How do I make sense of being told her story and how do I use it in an academic way for change? I feel a responsibility.

Author 2 similarly struggled to process the pain revealed in the interviews and to live up to her sense of obligation towards participants:

Listening to their stories and trying to write, I feel the participants' pain and desperation. Some turn to me to ask for advice as they have tried everything and got no help. I listen, but I don't know what to suggest, and I cannot help. This leaves me with a feeling of shame and disempowerment. ... And anger. The outrage I feel seeps into the text. What to do with these feelings? I tried to address them head on in one of the (rejected) articles but then reviewers found that I sounded too much like an activist.

Balancing justified emotions like outrage and empathy with analytical distance is challenging within academia's limited acceptance of emotional expression. This ties into the politics of emotions, focusing on what is acceptable in given contexts (Butler, 2004; Srinivasan, 2018; Gillespie and Lopez, 2019). Author 2 reflects on how shame, disempowerment and anger permeate academic work yet are often rejected, producing an internal struggle to address – and repress – these emotions. Gillespie and Lopez (2019: 9) argue: 'Complex emotions and their entanglements within

and through research are often elided, erased, or ignored in the service of academic productivity, global conservation, and professional attitudes.' Similarly, Author 2 found that suppressing emotions was essential to maintain academic productivity, highlighting the tension between professionalism and emotions like anger, which may be particularly pronounced for women, as gendered stereotypes often render women's anger less acceptable or credible (Kyed and Özkaya, 2025).

It is often argued that anger is politically – and, in our context, academically – counterproductive. However, the mobilisation and politicisation of outrage is an important driver of change. Following feminist philosophers who underscore the power and epistemic productivity of anger, Srinivasan (2018) argues that anger can be *apt*. In Srinivasan's view 'getting angry is a means of affectively registering or appreciating the injustice of the world' (Srinivasan, 2018: 132). Citing Lorde (1997), Srinivasan concludes that 'women's anger is not only a "source of energy" that can directly serve political ends, but also a source of "clarification", a means by which women can come to better see their oppression'. Thus, when researching suffering and injustice associated with domestic violence, outrage and anger may be *apt*, with such emotions potentially enhancing the social relevance of research. By framing domestic violence as a societal issue, research highlights the need for collective and political responsibility and response. Anger, in this sense, can function as a form of knowing and a mode of communication to publicly mark and share injustice. Thus, we must acknowledge the epistemic and moral value of anger itself. As Srinivasan (2018: 17) writes: '[I]t is not enough to think of it only in terms of its political efficacy. We must also think of it as an act in itself, an act that – when *apt* – registers and communicates the badness of injustice.'

Having to choose between *apt* anger and expressing it constitutes an affective injustice for those already subject to injustice, for example, as victims of domestic violence. If anger is understood as a form of knowledge, then this affective injustice also becomes an 'epistemic injustice',<sup>1</sup> occurring when one is epistemically harmed because of underlying social injustice (Srinivasan, 2018: 14). Within the realm of domestic violence, this implies that the voices and experiences of victims may be marginalised or dismissed, constraining our collective understanding of the complexities of their suffering. Similarly, as argued by Gillespie and Lopez (2019) in relation to grief, anger is entangled with the politics of emotions. Recognising and validating anger not only enriches our research but also challenges the structural and cultural conditions that perpetuate injustices.

### *Contributing to change*

The political dimension of research is often ignored or treated as something to be avoided. However, for researchers studying suffering or injustice, there is an implicit expectation that their work should contribute to positive social change (Lee, 1993; Butler, 2002; Liamputtong, 2007; Dickson-Swift et al, 2008). Research on domestic violence holds a unique significance in the pursuit of social change, as it directly addresses a pervasive societal issue that affects individuals, families and communities. This obligation beyond academia must be negotiated as part of the research process. Author 1 reflects on this struggle, grappling with justification and the fear of exploiting participants:

What I retrospectively found difficult as a novice researcher was navigating the ethical issues arising when researching such a sensitive field. How do I justify and make meaning of using the women's stories as data for research? It comes down to my research benefitting them, too. However, I feel like this is difficult to ensure.

She highlights the shared expectation that research should benefit participants, while Author 2 similarly describes feeling 'a strong obligation to bring these stories forth and contribute to change', and experiencing guilt when failing to do so. This intertwines academic and political responsibilities. Engaging with the political dimensions of research is not merely an academic exercise but a moral imperative that seeks to catalyse change and promote justice for those affected by domestic violence.

The lack of acceptance of researchers' emotions in academia reflects epistemic injustice, both towards participants and researchers, who undertake the emotionally draining alchemical task of transforming suffering into impactful and academically acceptable knowledge. It is essential to acknowledge this dynamic if research on gender-based violence is to evolve and thrive within academia.

## Concluding remarks

We argue that being emotionally affected is an unavoidable part of conducting sensitive research. By analysing our autoethnographic memos, we found that both career stage and position in the research process influence how emotions are experienced and responded to. Author 1, as a novice researcher, felt guilty about possibly intruding upon or exploiting participants, while Author 2, a senior researcher, felt guilty about not contributing enough to social change. These differences reflect three intertwined dimensions: the personal, the academic and the political. While sharing many common emotions and concerns, the emphasis on these dimensions differed between us.

The novice researcher was primarily concerned with empathy and ethics, while the senior researcher emphasised political responsibility and civic duty. Both faced the challenge of balancing the emotional toll of research with the desire to contribute to change. We can understand this in terms of personal risk and what is at stake for the researcher at different stages of the academic life course. We argue that emotions are valuable sources of insight and should be recognised and explored as integral to conducting ethical research.

In line with others (for example, [Silverio et al, 2022](#)), we argue that studying harm and injustices represents a mental health risk for researchers. Accordingly, there is an institutional responsibility to provide support, guidance and care for those engaged in such research. Moreover, researchers carry a personal responsibility to practise self-care and safeguard their wellbeing. This is not solely about compassion for the researcher or, some might say, about self-pity on our part, but about the sustainability and integrity of research itself. Caring for researchers is caring for the research, and ultimately, for participants whose voices need to be heard. This should be embedded in research ethics and normalised in academic institutions.

Building on these findings, and as part of writing this article, we invited fellow researchers to a workshop titled 'The Personal Experiences and Costs of Studying Harmful and Difficult Topics'. The workshop aimed to create a reflective space for sharing experiences of conducting sensitive research. Eleven researchers participated,

each contributing short presentations. The workshop reaffirmed to us that many researchers encounter emotional struggles that require ongoing labour to manage and respond to. For instance, one presenter offered a powerful example of the emotional strain and risk that accompany research on hostile or violent groups (Sousbois, 2023). Notably, few participants had planned coping strategies in place and lacked clear avenues for addressing such challenges within their institutions. This workshop provided further evidence of the need for greater institutional recognition of the emotional labour involved in research as well as stronger structures of care and support within academia. Several participants have also published on the matter (Herland, 2023; 2024; Sousbois, 2023). In this sense, the workshop not only created mutual support but fostered the opportunity to address these issues more openly in academic writing. Thus, we argue that if institutions facilitated spaces like this, it could help pave the way for a more caring and sustainable research culture.

We further argue that recognising and reflecting on the personal, academic and political dimensions of research is an important aspect of knowledge production that needs to be addressed as generally accepted principles of reflexivity and transparency. We emphasise the political dimension of studying gender-based violence and the civic duty of researchers to channel insights into public and political discourse. Within this context, emotions such as anger and sorrow may be both apt and necessary. Recognising them as legitimate forms of knowledge benefits researchers' and participants' wellbeing, strengthens academic environments, and enhances the transformative potential of research to address violence, pain and injustice.

As white women and sociologists, we recognise that our sociodemographic positions shape both our field experiences and how we are perceived. This is a limitation since researchers of other backgrounds may encounter different emotional and ethical challenges.

## Postscript

Authoring this article has been both inspiring and challenging. Despite our shared experiences, our different academic positions entailed varying levels of personal risk. To argue that personal experiences matter and should be acknowledged in academia, the text needed to be personal – exposing vulnerabilities uncommon in academic writing. However, our different career stages shaped what we felt we could risk, as reflected in our analysis and writing style. Using manual inductive coding, we abstracted our narratives into specific emotions, revealing our ongoing struggles to balance the personal with the academic. Lastly, the personal risk is reflected in our choice to use a third-person perspective, creating distance between ourselves and our experiences of researching domestic violence as a means of self-protection.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Srinivasan refers to Miranda Fricker's (2007) highly influential work, but the term 'epistemic injustice' was first coined by Gayatri Spivak in 1988.

## ORCID IDs

Emilie Lyng Rasmussen  <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1876-237X>

Margunn Bjørnholt  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1801-5465>

### **Funding**

These materials have received financial support from the Danish Victims Fund, grant number 2021-610-01141. The execution, content and results of the materials are the sole responsibility of the authors. The analysis and viewpoints that have been made evident from the materials belong to the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Council of the Danish Victims Fund.

### **Acknowledgements**

We are grateful for constructive comments on oral presentations of the article in different stages by colleagues at a seminar on researching sensitive topics that we organised with the research groups HumanHarm and Social Politics at VID Specialized University and comments on an early draft by members of the VID research group HumanHarm and by members of the PRAKSIS research group at Aalborg University. In particular, we thank Mari Dalen Herland for careful reading and comments on an early draft. We are also grateful for constructive comments from two anonymous reviewers.

### **Contributor statement**

ER and MB conceptualised and designed the study, produced equal shares of the autoethnographic material, and conducted data analysis and interpretation. ER wrote the first and subsequent drafts of the manuscript, with comments and revisions by MB.

### **Research ethics statement**

Ethical approval was not sought for the present study because the research did not involve any other participants.

### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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