

# Shit happens. How do we make sense of that?

Researcher  
trauma in  
extreme  
fieldwork

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon how encountering trauma unexpectedly in the field informs the doing of fieldwork.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A reflexive essay approach was adopted to explore traumatic incidents in extreme contexts. Written vignettes, interviews, field notes and information conversations served as the bases for reflections.

**Findings** – Four themes arose from the reflections (Bracketing, Institutional Pressure, Impact on Research and Unresolvedness). It was suggested that researchers engaged in extreme context research, and management and organization studies scholars engaged in dangerous fieldwork more broadly, are under institutional pressure to continue work that may put themselves in harm's way. Traumatic experiences also shape and reflect the researcher's identity, which informs choices about current and future research projects.

**Research limitations/implications** – It was suggested that scholars will benefit from reading the accounts of others to reduce the burden of isolation that can accompany traumatic field experiences.

**Originality/value** – Exploring single traumatic events enabled in engaging with trauma encountered unexpectedly and directly in the field. The reflections reveal the effects of psychological and physical trauma on researchers, and highlight how trauma impacts the research process.

**Keywords** Reflexive essay, Extreme contexts, Researcher trauma, Sense-making, Identity

**Paper type** Viewpoint

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## Introduction

Distance is lessened and listening intensified as researchers ask the question of what it means to suffer (Hovey and Amir, 2013, p. 160)

The Tuskegee Syphilis experiments, the Milgram experiments and Stanford Prison experiments of the mid-century alerted the research community to an important ethical boundary; participants must not be put in the way of psychological or physical harm that they cannot consent to and must be allowed to leave the study at any time. As a result of these abuses, there are now institutional safeguards in place to protect human subjects from harm. Yet despite efforts to protect research participants, less attention has been paid to the

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wellbeing of scholars. This is perhaps not surprising; the image of the “ideal scientist” (Blankenship, 1973, p. 271) is one who has autonomy, control over their environment and the ability to remain detached from the outside world.

Yet, the issue of researcher harm has received more attention recently, particularly with regards to researchers who are exposed to trauma. A traumatic event “at least temporarily overwhelms the individual’s resources” (Briere and Scott, 2014, p. 10), and presents “significant challenges to individuals’ ways of understanding the world and their place in it” (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004, p. 1). Researchers are at risk of becoming traumatized when engaging with disturbing material (Coles *et al.*, 2014; Donoso, 2021; Fohring, 2020). Accounts of researcher trauma enable scholars to make sense of their experiences, highlight potential hazards and provide practical recommendations for research. Yet most of these contributions have arisen in fields such as academic medicine, studies of sexual assault or violence, political science and criminology, and rather less in management and organization studies (MOS). To address this issue, we examine researcher trauma we encountered as three MOS scholars engaged in research in extreme contexts.

We focus on researcher trauma encountered in extreme contexts for two reasons. First, in extreme contexts, settings “where one or more extreme events are occurring or are likely to occur that may exceed the organization’s capacity to prevent and result in an extensive and intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, or material consequences to—or in close physical or psychosocial proximity to—organization members” (Hannah *et al.*, 2009, p. 898), trauma is common. In MOS, the research on trauma that has emerged has arisen from fieldwork in dangerous settings (see de Rond *et al.*, 2019; Whiteman and Cooper, 2016; Alvi *et al.*, 2019), and we build on this tradition. Second, research on extreme contexts has the potential to inform MOS more broadly (Hällgren *et al.*, 2018). However, while researchers in this area have discussed the traumatic experiences they encountered through fieldwork, there has been less discussion about how trauma impacts the research process. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to reflect upon how encountering trauma unexpectedly in the field informs the doing of fieldwork and the implications of trauma for the research process.

For researchers studying extreme contexts, exposure to trauma is likely to arise in two ways. First, researchers may experience trauma vicariously from analyzing disturbing material (Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995). Second, researchers engaged in fieldwork may directly expose themselves to physical and psychosocial harm (Nikischer, 2019). By nature, directly experienced trauma is often unexpected and challenging to study intentionally from the outset. However, most of accounts of researcher trauma arise as a result of being continuously exposed to harmful conditions or materials. As such, there has been relatively less exploration of more acute forms of trauma encountered in the field. Therefore, in this paper, we recollect three traumatic events that impacted us as researchers while being engaged in fieldwork in extreme contexts. Despite each of us knowing in advance that the topics and environments that we were exploring had the potential to be dangerous, even deadly, our trauma “found” us, its occurrence was not, and did not become, the principal focus of our studies. At the same time, these experiences have remained with us, and continue to influence how we do research today. We therefore became interested in understanding: *How does encountering traumatic events unexpectedly in the field shape the research process?*

Our essay delivers three insights. First, we engage in a reflective journey, inspired by Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE) (Chang *et al.*, 2016) and phenomenon-based theorizing (Fisher *et al.*, 2021; Ployhart and Bartunek, 2019) to explore three separate, traumatic events that occurred unexpectedly in fieldwork. Second, our analysis reveals four main themes: Bracketing, Institutional Pressures, Impact on Research and Unresolvedness that highlight the challenges of making sense of trauma as it unfolds. Third, we reflect on how these

experiences are related to our identities, and we suggest several dilemmas that researchers engaged in fieldwork in extreme contexts may encounter.

Our paper proceeds as follows. We first review the literature on researcher trauma and discuss the various forms of trauma that researchers may be exposed to. We then turn to research on experiencing trauma in extreme contexts research, before introducing our own experiences. We then elaborate the four major themes that arise when we view our narratives together. Finally, we suggest implications of our work for extreme context research and MOS.

### *Encountering trauma in research*

Trauma is broadly defined as an emotional and/or psychological response to adverse events. While individuals may initially experience shock and denial, long-term reactions can include emotional disturbance, intrusive memories, relational strain and physical symptoms (American Psychological Association, 2021). Reflecting this, research has drawn attention to the psychological risks encountered when reading testimonies and personally experiencing trauma, so-called “research-related trauma” (Loyle and Simoni, 2017, p. 141). For instance, Stoler (2002) describes how studying childhood sexual abuse victims impacted her interactions, relationships and ability to persevere with the project. Similarly, Connolly and Reilly’s (2007) account of researching the murder-suicide of American businessman, John Bauer reveals how the material implicated their identities, reciprocity between researcher and participant, reflexivity and stress.

It is possible that researchers are uniquely impacted by trauma. For example, Coles *et al.* (2014, p. 96) suggest that researching trauma may have more deleterious effects than working as a clinician or counselor, owing to the researchers “inability to ‘help’ the victim”. More recently, Nikischer (2019) notes that researchers may experience guilt and secondary trauma from “taking” from participants (Nikischer, 2019, p. 910), as well as the challenge of conducting research that may not make sense to others who were not present.

Scholars have also explored how researchers respond to trauma. Coles *et al.* (2014) note several coping strategies employed to manage the emotional toll of engaging with traumatic material. Fohring (2020) observes that researchers may be compelled to engage in emotional labour, risking the likelihood of vicarious trauma, harmed productivity and mental wellbeing. Researchers have also explored the potential benefits of engaging with troubling material. For example, Hovey and Amir (2013) argue that researching and writing about trauma may inform education and practice, while Donoso (2021) explores how reflexivity and vulnerability can aid the analytic process. Similarly, Tamas (2008) recognizes the potential for autoethnographic work on trauma to contribute knowledge to the field. Together, these studies highlight the risks and benefits of researching disturbing topics.

### *Encounters with trauma in management and organization studies*

Within MOS, researchers have begun to *write the researcher in* through autoethnography (e.g. Fernando *et al.*, 2020; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012), reflexivity (Hardy *et al.*, 2001; Alvesson *et al.*, 2008) and calling for researcher advocacy (Adler and Hansen, 2012). Calls for compassionate research – that would blur the strict lines implied by more objectivist approaches – have also emerged in recent years (see Hansen and Quinn Trank, 2016). MOS scholars have also highlighted the challenges of getting close to their data, while remaining removed from it in the analysis (Langley and Klag, 2019).

MOS scholars have also reflected on encounters with trauma. A large but fragmented literature concerns organizing in extreme contexts (see Hällgren *et al.*, 2018 for a review). The majority of the research in extreme contexts is not directly (e.g. ethnographically) involved with the extreme settings due to the challenges associated with research site access, the serendipity of events or ethics (Buchanan and Denyer, 2013; Hällgren and Rouleau, 2018).

Still, exceptions exist that offer some clues to the perils of researchers. On the physical side, Whiteman recalls her experience of slipping and falling into sub-zero water. Fearing for her life, Whiteman acknowledges that without the quick efforts of her companion, “this incident could have been the surprising end of the beginning of [the] study” (Whiteman and Cooper, 2011, p. 889). In a study with the Norwegian special forces, Danielsen (2018, p. 119) reported participating in a parachute jump above ground that was  $-18^{\circ}\text{C}$ . She writes “I felt uncomfortable; with a pulse of 190 my fear was probably easy to spot.”

Extreme contexts researchers have also reported psychological, rather than physical trauma. For instance, Warden’s (2013) ethnography on sex workers and human trafficking in Guatemala resulted in a PTSD diagnosis. Similarly, Taylor (2019) has described the complex PTSD diagnosis he received after fieldwork in urban South Africa, owing to the violence and threats he witnessed. Others have reported on the lingering effects of fieldwork. For example, de Rond (2017) notes that, years after working with military doctors in Afghanistan, he feels “guilt for not feeling more deeply moved by suffering; a feverish desire not to fall back into a self-absorbed academic life yet an inability to think of what else to do; confusion about the human condition yet a determination to write about it.” (de Rond, 2017, p. xvii). Prasad, reflecting on his experiences of doing research in the contested areas of Palestine, notes that his research came to “alter [his] ideas of self and Other” (Prasad, 2014, p. 234) where his writing served as a “cathartic exercise” (Prasad, 2014, p. 246). Vincent (2018) describes the self-care strategies she developed to manage the compassion fatigue she experiences while working with immigration detainees. Finally, Taylor *et al.* (2021) highlight the traumatic experiences of engaging in organizational ethnography, serving as a warning to scholars embarking on research in dangerous contexts.

As our review shows, many of the issues that accompany researcher exposure to trauma have already been written about. We do not need to reinvent the wheel here. Rather, we reflect on how trauma impacts research and what it can tell us about the “doing” of research in extreme contexts. Specifically, we reflect upon how the experience of trauma is processed, organized and ultimately managed by the researcher in order to continue research.

### Who are we?

We are currently employed at the same Business School in Northern Europe. Markus is a professor who has worked within our department for the majority of his career, while Virginie and Sophie are postdoctoral fellows. Markus recruited Virginie and Sophie, and our shared interest in extreme contexts research formed the basis for our postdoctoral training. Markus is native to the country in which we work, and Virginie and Sophie are both Europeans originating from different countries. All three of us have spent time studying outside our country of origin (Sophie in the US; Markus in the US, UK and Finland; Virginie in the UK), with Sophie completing all of her higher education in the US Markus is 45, Virginie is 45 and Sophie is 32 and we all identify as cisgender. We employ qualitative methods in our work, and we are interested in process approaches to understanding organizational phenomena. We speak English (Sophie is a native speaker, while Virginie and Markus learned English as a second language) and completed our PhD training in Western countries. We have all presented our work at international conferences. However, despite these similarities, there are also differences between us. For instance, Virginie had a significant background in industry, while Markus and Sophie have spent most of their careers within academia. Our research interests also differ, and we have had different lived experiences as a result of the societies, bodies and social groups we occupy. We are also part of different professional and scholarly groups. Sophie has perhaps the most “American” viewpoint and training, owing to her time spent in the US Markus and Virginie could therefore be described as more “European” scholars, presenting work more often at European conferences, although Markus publishes regularly in both US and European outlets.

*Relaying our experiences with trauma in the field*

This reflexive essay is inspired by phenomenon-based theorizing (Ployhart and Bartunek, 2019; Fisher *et al.*, 2021). The three of us have shared “war stories” from the field in the process of getting to know each other, and have developed a shared identity as extreme context researchers over the year. Prompted by the call for papers in this Special Issue, we began to more purposefully discuss traumatic incidents we have encountered in the Fall of 2021. We began by each writing a vignette of the incident, and shared, when possible, field notes taken during that time. We then interviewed each other, using four questions below as a starting point:

- (1) How did you make sense of the traumatic experience at the time?
- (2) How, if all, did this experience influence the research process?
- (3) How did this experience help you to learn about yourself?
- (4) What was the most surprising aspect of the experience?

We recorded these conversations in Markus’ office [1]. Our recorded conversation was conducted in a single setting and we took turns playing the role of interviewer and interviewee. Our interviews lasted 35 (Markus), 21 (Virginie) and 18 (Sophie) minutes, respectively, and we prompted one another to expand upon what was shared, and to empathize with one another in the telling of these stories. Interviews were transcribed and shared for reflection. Since that point, the three of us have further reflected on our experiences, prompted in part through the review process.

Our goal has been to walk the middle road between finding patterns and shared experiences in our stories, and preserving the unique experiences that we had with encountering trauma in the field. Thus, when similarities were observed only between two of us, we attempted to highlight this with our quotes, while emphasizing that these thoughts were not always shared across the three of us. We have continued to revise our writing as we made sense of our stories and the ongoing conversations that these narratives sparked. In some cases, this involved the inclusion of quotes in our written accounts that had been neglected the first time. In other cases, we wrote additional reflections to add nuance and depth to what had been captured in our interviews. It is through this iterative process that we arrived at the reflections we share in our writing.

*Research context.* Sophie was engaged in dissertation research with a performing arts group working in the hazardous regions of the Southwest United States and encountered the incident in 2021, while Virginie was collecting dissertation data on mountain rescue in the Haute-Savoie region of France in 2016. Markus’ experience arose during fieldwork in Nepal in 2013, where he was studying expeditions to the Everest. Interestingly, all three events took us by surprise, despite being somewhat probably for the contexts we were studying. Sophie’s fieldwork took place within a remote, known to be deadly, desert festival environment where sexual assaults were frequently reported, while Virginie’s work concerned emergency rescue where accidents and death are commonplace. Similarly, Markus’ work in a high-altitude terrain meant that altitude sickness was an ever-present threat. Yet, as our vignettes reveal, these incidents still took us by surprise.

Markus: “I knew about altitude sickness, but I thought it was a lack of coffee.”

During fieldwork, as part of exploring decision-making in mountaineering, I found myself trekking in the Khumbu valley of Nepal with four research assistants and an Everest expedition team. What started in Namche Bazar (3,440 meters) as a slight headache escalated from an individual matter to an expedition-wide concern within a few days. When I entered the village of Dingboche (4,410 meters) on wobbly legs, a pounding head and sick to the

stomach I knew my condition was not related to a lack of coffee. Others however knew already. I was suffering from Acute Mountain Sickness, which was serious but not yet lethal if treated appropriately. Starting the days before, the expedition leader had continuously inquired about my health; periodically compressed my finger to assess whether it flexed back (which it should but hardly did) and measured my oxygen saturation level with a device attached to my finger. At sea level, the saturation level is about 100 and below 70 is potentially fatal. At its worst, I was at an oxygen saturation level of 59. Back home, I would have been hospitalized and subject to constant monitoring. Now, in addition to past measures, Joe moved into the room to monitor me. Joe also spoke to the expedition doctor, an experienced client, and the Sirdar (leader of the guides). The other researchers observed them debating whether to send me down immediately or if I needed a Gamo-bag (a bag where the air pressure can be manipulated, acutely). When my condition did not improve for 24 h we (or, rather, they) decided that I should descend to Pangbouche (3,985 meters) to recuperate. After less than 12 h at a lower altitude I felt reasonably well and ascended again, even if my oxygen saturation levels were dynamic. Years later, I recall my fear of not being able to continue the research rather than any fear of death.

Sophie: "I thought I had a fairly good idea of what we would be talking about."

The organization that my colleagues and I were studying was a performing arts group that stages cage fights in remote desert regions of the Southwest United States. I had conducted fieldwork with the group on four occasions, each time camping in hostile conditions where, owing to extreme environment and the activities performed, people were frequently subject to illness, injury and occasionally and very sadly, even death. I had just begun the third wave of interviews with the organization, and due to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was conducting the interviews remotely. The last time I had contacted members of the group was about one year prior, and I was anticipating – perhaps naively – that not too much had changed in the interim. Yet during my first interview, a participant shared with me that a long-standing member of the organization had recently left the group because of multiple accusations of sexual harassment and assault. I knew the accused individual through my fieldwork. We were connected on social media, had engaged in long conversations while I was collecting data, had shared meals and he had been one of the first to unofficially welcome me into the organization. It was therefore upsetting to imagine this person at the centre of multiple violations of consent. While everyone was careful not to name the victims, it also became clear that I had likely interviewed many of the women who had been victimized by this individual and I felt a mix of emotions as I tried to process this news. I was not sure how to engage with this individual, as we were still connected through social media as part of the study. Should I take him off my social media, for fear of signalling to the other participants that I thought his behaviour was acceptable? Should we change the focus of the study itself? What to make of participants who continued to believe he was innocent? We informed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and were asked to put a plan in place for participants who became uncomfortable with questions relating to the topic, should it come up. The month-long delay caused further anxiety as I scrambled to finish data collection. At the heart of this, I felt the discomfort of trying to press forward with completing my dissertation on time, uncertainty about my role and responsibilities to my participants and increased awareness of my vulnerability as a researcher in the field.

Virginie: "I felt that I had already written too much about me [...] So what happened was, there was a dead body, it was left in the shed."

This was the penultimate day of the first data collection of my PhD. I was with the French mountain rescue team in Chamonix, and I stayed alone with a dead body in a big empty shed for what felt like hours. The rescue team had to intervene in a deadly accident in the morning.

A few minutes after they stored the corpse in the helicopter hangar, they were called for another lethal fall from the mountain. They asked for my help, which in the moment felt like an honour. I was asked to stay by the door of the hangar to open and close it very quickly when the helicopter returned with the second body. I had no idea how long the intervention would be and how long I had to wait for the helicopter to come back. I entered the shed. The black bag was there, about 3 meters from the shed's door. I turned my back to it, looking outside through a window, waiting for the helicopter to return. I do not know how long it lasted but it felt like an eternity. All the time I felt a "presence". It echoed what I felt when my father passed away, but this time it felt more violent. I was alone, with a body and "something bad" that was filling the air. I was scared. I felt shivers in my back. My whole body, especially my guts were yelling "RUUUUUUUUN!!! THE BODY WILL RISE!". I could almost expect hearing him talking to me, or poking my shoulder. But my brain told me this was completely irrational, almost childish and I had to do something anyway. I stayed. I tried to ignore the fear and to focus on the task. I projected myself mentally in the tarmac as much and as strong as I could. The feeling was so strong, that I hardly remember what happened at the end of the rescue, not even a feeling of relief. Surprisingly, it completely disappeared from my field notes as I decided to ignore the experience, I considered that this was not relevant at the time. I reckoned this was part of my own experience, but I thought that my emotions were not the point of the data collection.

### **Bracketing to make sense of the experience**

One of the key patterns to emerge was that each of these events were a surprise. As such, it was not clear that a harmful event was about to unfold until it was underway. Each of us described how we became aware that something physically or psychologically threatening had (or was) taking place, starting with bodily or emotional discomfort. For instance, Markus noted that he had trouble deciphering the cues his body was sending, owing his lack of experiential knowledge about altitude sickness, and the mixed signals that he was receiving from consuming caffeine while increasing the altitude, as follows:

I was drinking like four or five liters of water each day and just pouring it into me. And so, "It can't be altitude sickness. It just can't. I'm drinking so much. I'm only kind of drinking like three cups of coffee each day. It must be coffee"<sup>[1]</sup>

Similarly, Sophie recalled difficulty determining the extent of what had happened in the organization and experiencing confusing feelings in the moment, "So, at the beginning it was sort of confusion, surprise, a little shock."

For Virginie, being asked to stand inside the helicopter hangar with the corpse was not initially problematic, and she described herself as eager to assist the rescue personnel. However, once left alone, the discomfort of being in the presence of the body transformed into fear and shivers and the difficulty of remaining in close proximity began to emerge:

... two bodies [referring to her father's in her memories and the actual corpse in the hangar] were there, unexpressive and saying nothing, but the air was filled with something. And I know I sound completely crazy, but it truly felt that.

As such, it took time to become aware of the severity of the event. For instance, Markus described how he started to feel increasingly unwell over several days. It took time to recognize that the problem was not coffee, and this realization was accompanied by an increased awareness of how exposed he was on the mountain.

... all of a sudden I was there alone ... I'm like, "Okay, I'm not feeling well at all. I could barf any minute now." My head was pounding and there was no one around. And I felt really, really vulnerable at that time.

Similarly, the severity of what had happened in the organization became clearer over the course of several interviews, talks with the IRB and the rest of the research team. This led Sophie to reflect on her vulnerability in the field:

... this person that I had spent a lot of time with, in the field [...] to learn that this was the person that had been asked to leave over such serious accusations was shocking.

Once the cues from the body and the environment were noticed, we needed to dispel ambiguity and stabilize our streams of experience. It happened to be a lonely process in the heat of the moment for Virginia since the situation was quite clear:

... it was kind of a struggle between the body shouting, "Leave, you have to keep safe." And my mind telling me, "It's completely irrational, he won't rise up. He won't be a zombie anyway."

This was more a social process for Sophie and Markus. Owing to the understandable desire of the group to preserve the dignity of the victims, as well as the ongoing nature of the discussion, Sophie drew on multiple interviews to make sense of what had happened:

I struggled at first to understand quite what had happened and the extent to what had happened, because the first informant to tell me about it didn't want to give too much away. They were sort of implying what had gone on, and I was trying to sort of fill in the gaps.

Similarly, Markus was still confused, but people around him eventually realized that he was experiencing altitude sickness and started to take action by monitoring him more closely and identifying treatment strategies.

The events were, thus, handled differently by each author due to the contextual differences in the experiences. The common denominator, however, included the difficulty of recognizing how the experiences started to shape, become recognizable and require attention.

### *Institutional pressures*

When we discussed what kept us going, how we navigated the trauma as we came to understand it, and in some cases, what led us to minimize the potential threat as it was unfolding, the sense of pressure to continue doing the research (and to engage with this task competently) came up repeatedly. For instance, Sophie turned to the Institutional Review Board at her University to collectively make sense of the situation at hand:

We ended up informing them of what had happened [...] And then we had several conversations about whether or not we were going to ask any more questions about this

Simultaneously, she attempted to navigate her responsibility to complete the dissertation on time, while feeling a responsibility to co-process the unfolding events with her participants:

... I felt like I sort of had a responsibility as a researcher to stick to the questions [...] At the same time, I wanted to be someone that they could speak to and feel like - if they wanted to share - they had someone to process that with. And it felt really callous to ask them to return back to questions when it was clear they had something that they wanted to talk about.

Possibly, experience allows for researchers to rest more easily in the knowledge that research does not always go according to plan. In Markus' case, one reason for the team approach was to allow for the researchers to rest and have some redundancy if someone got sick. Thus, while Markus had a team at hand to carry on the research in his absence, Sophie and Virginia felt particularly the normative pressures to carry the projects to completion themselves.

In reflecting on these experiences, we see the projects as institutional constraints that blurred cues, and the framework that gave us a reason to resume our activity. For instance, Markus shared that he " ... was still trying to pursue research while feeling miserable,

making the observations.” As Sophie and Virginie recalled, both found themselves attempting to move forward with the projects, in order to cope with the experience:

Virginie: “The team was counting on me, relying on me to open the door and shut it very quickly. To preserve the confidentiality and the dignity of the victim and the family. So, that’s what I focused on.”

Sophie: “. . . I focused on trying to minimize my emotional response to it a bit, and to try and stay on track with getting the research project finalized and getting the data wrapped up. So I moved into quite a rational, I think, sense of mind about it. I didn’t reflect too much on how I felt, but I was very concerned with doing the right thing . . .”.

Markus’ reflections on the pressure display conflicting identities compounded by personal uncertainties and an unknown project future. This contributed to downplaying his own suffering, for too long.

I was really looking forward to climbing this Lobuche East, to go up 6,100 m to test myself as a person. So that was exciting on the personal level, but also on the project level, kind of what does this mean? Can we continue with this? Will we keep collecting the data or not? . . . I didn’t want to be of trouble. I was there to observe, I wasn’t there to be someone that they had to be concerned with, I think that was the main reason. I didn’t want to be weak. I wanted to be able to push through. I think, also perhaps playing into it, this was a really homogenous, testosterone-fueled, group. And, you don’t want to be weak. I know, it’s silly!

We note that while our experiences of institutional pressures played out differently, they still impacted us and our research in subtle ways. This pushed us beyond physical and psychological comfort levels.

#### *Trauma’s impact on research*

Experiencing traumatic events, narratives and accounts can have a powerful impact on the research process. For instance, [Stoler \(2002\)](#) recalls that experiencing vicarious trauma led to significant delays in analyzing and writing up the findings. Yet for us, our research was not greatly affected in the short term. For instance, Markus commented that “the data would still have been there because we were doing it as a team. And I wasn’t spending the full two months there anyway . . .” Similarly, Virginie noted that, “at the time, it could not change a lot because it was supposed to be my last day there. [. . .] In my head, I was already away.” Perhaps the most significant effect was on Sophie’s research, who noted that:

We had to rewrite our informed consent document, I think. We at least had to have something extra in the research protocol with instructions about what to do if someone was getting distressed, phone lines that they could have access to resources

However, for the most part, there was little impact on the timelines of the projects, the purpose of the study or the study procedures. Interestingly, we also observed that, for two of the three of us, the incidents did not feature in our field notes. For instance, Virginie, when asked what was surprising about the incident, commented that, “when I went through my field notes, what was surprising was that it was not there.” Similarly, Sophie did not make any notes about the accusations that had occurred.

At the same time, we find that encountering trauma did shift the lens through which we made sense of the data that we were collecting (or had collected), during our time in the field. For instance, Markus noted that:

. . . it influenced the sense of the data, the feeling of it. Both the understanding of the dangers of altitude sickness, but also the experience of the other climbers.

Similarly, all three of us viewed our experiences in the field as having an impact on our identities as researchers. As Virginie noted, this led her to see herself in more human terms.

Whereas for Markus, it allowed him to empathize better with the individuals and reaffirms his role as a researcher when conducting qualitative studies:

Virginie: “My identity as a researcher is more full and faithful to who I am. I’m not just a function, I’m not just a brain that does research, I’m a human being doing that.”

Markus: “So in the short-term, it was fine. In the long-term, I guess it made me realize the dangers of high-altitude mountaineering in extreme contexts. The reality of what we’re doing research on was made much more real. It’s no longer a text. It’s no longer narratives, it’s humans. And of course, we can be empathetic to others and we can feel bad about others that we read about or hear about. But honestly, I think that it’s when we have experienced it, then it adds another layer to it . . .”

Thus, our traumatic events were *written out*, for the most part. For Markus, fieldnotes about altitude sickness did not really make sense to theorize in MOS compared to more surprising phenomenon he noticed on the field. As an unexperienced researcher in the field who was concerned about replicating the intrusive behaviour of journalists who were also in the field, Virginie tried to be “a fly on the wall” and to depict usual busy days in the summer for mountain rescue. Reporting what happened to her did not feel like data for her at the time. While the event implied rewriting the research protocol for Sophie, she did not mention the event in her field notes either, nor did she focus on the event in her dissertation work. One can consider this a denial strategy or normalization in the face of trauma (de Rond and Lok, 2016). Yet despite this, these events gave us an extra-layer of understanding and enabled us to better understand what our participants faced in their work. Virginie has been exposed to discussions about deadly accidents almost on a daily basis, she identified how black humour was used by rescuers to distance themselves from death. Similarly, Sophie gained a greater appreciation for the importance placed on who was included and excluded from the organization. In the long run, the trauma informed us about the communities we study, and reinforced our researcher identities socially embedded in the extreme contexts research community.

### *Unresolvedness*

We note that what had transpired continued to affect us, both as researchers and as people. We do not claim to be suffering from PTSD, but what was striking was the lingering nature of these events that impacted how we approach our work. As Markus commented, “. . . it’s how the experience stays with you. Still until today I can relate to it in ways I have a hard time expressing.” As Sophie and Virginie both noted, the experience continued to stay with each of them, though manifesting in different ways:

Sophie: “I didn’t know where to put it. It was sort of, I felt sad and I felt concerned, and obviously I could appreciate the fallout of what had happened, but there was nowhere to direct it because no one person would come forward to say ‘This happened to me’. And so you’re sort of left feeling unresolved about the whole thing.”

Virginie: “Okay, death happens, that’s it, that’s not so traumatizing. And no, I didn’t talk to anyone. But that’s now five years after, and when I was writing it, I was feeling the shivers in the back. And the fear of being poked on the shoulder by a cadaver, despite, I still know it’s irrational, and it couldn’t have happened. But it’s still there, when I wrote it, it was there. So maybe it was traumatizing”

We vary with regard to the degree to which we have gleaned lessons from these experiences. For instance, Markus reflected on the importance of not maintaining the professional boundary of a researcher when one runs into trouble, and instead emphasized the necessity of turning to others in the field for help:

It’s just that you need to be able to, or you should be able to, voice your concerns also within the community that you’re doing research with. And I think that’s perhaps a lesson learned. Showing the

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vulnerability actually helps you because then you're not the fly on the wall, watching them. You're part of the group, you're experiencing, you're going through whatever they are going through. That helps them to relate to you as well

At the same time, Sophie expressed difficulty with coming to a conclusion about the experience, "I worry about how I handled it in the time that I was being told. I worry about, was I receptive enough? Or did I create enough space for people who wanted to talk, to talk? Did we do everything right?". These ongoing questions reflect the testimonies of other researchers. For instance, [de Rond \(2012, p. 260\)](#) notes that "fieldwork affected me in ways I am still trying to understand [ . . . ]." It is understandable that such experiences take time to process and may never result in neat and clear answers.

The feeling of unresolvedness may be what motivated this paper. Each event has disturbed us physically, psychologically, directly and indirectly. This paper feels like a way to address the feeling of unresolvedness reflecting of our experiences both individually and collectively. Obviously, it will not wipe out the blurriness of what it means to us. However, it clarifies that an unexpected trauma in the field is an occasion for sensemaking and identity that questions who we are, who we want to be, what the trauma means to us in the moment and in the long run.

## Discussion

In extreme contexts research, harm is often the starting point ([Hällgren et al., 2018](#)). In this essay, we explore how encountering trauma unexpectedly in the field informs the doing of fieldwork. We find that our experiences brought new insights into the forefront that we had not previously considered when doing the research. Our second observation lies in responding to recent calls for researchers studying extreme contexts to carefully evaluate the treatment and seeking out of dangerous events ([de Rond, 2021](#)); and to pay more attention to the use of emotions in theorizing from violent contexts ([Whiteman and Cooper, 2016](#)). We do so by reflecting about our exposure to trauma (e.g. [Chang et al., 2016](#); [Roy and Uekusa, 2020](#)). We recognize that we have not experienced life-changing physical or psychological injury. In the light of others' experiences, our stories are superficial, even silly, perhaps. Yet we argue that trauma comes in many forms and exists along a continuum. By sharing our stories and theorizing these experiences we hope to "bring into the world something that has been held inside the person, our private thoughts and despair, out into the open." ([Hovey and Amir, 2013](#)). In the following sections, we discuss the implications of these reflections for extreme contexts, and MOS scholarship more broadly.

### *Researcher trauma and researcher identity*

Trauma triggers an attempt to make sense of the world. Sensemaking in fieldwork typically starts with disruption (a scandal, a request for help, a change in altitude) that leads to the enactment of the environment (consulting with others, imagining the worst, increasing intake of coffee and water) to bracket cues such as bodily sensations (chills, headache) and emotional experiences (anxiety, fear) to continue ([Weick, 2020](#)). Yet the selection among cues, and the stabilization of the flow of events that allows for a plausible story to emerge, are likely linked to the researcher's identity. While Virginia pressed on as one of the team, Sophie emphasized her institutional embeddedness and repeatedly consulted with co-authors, the IRB and her participants. Markus engaged in several more days of hiking, attempting to keep up with those around him. As such, our identities as researchers seemed to function as unintentional avoidance strategies in the face of trauma ([de Rond and Lok, 2016](#)). Indeed, it was only several months later that it became clear that the experience had stayed with us (c.f. [Weick, 1979, 1995](#)). To cope in the moment, we acted. Those actions allowed us to continue our projects,

and a commitment to continuity pushed us to question the research process in the short run without major modifications, but the pressure left us with a sense of unresolvedness about what to make of the experience. We suggest that one explanation for the difficulty of “discovering” trauma in the context of fieldwork could be that the implicit pressure to complete the research project and the threats to our identities pushes us towards ignoring our own current first-hand experiences.

Bracketing these experiences triggered the question “who am I?” (Weick, 1993, p. 637). The events backgrounded our identity as researchers and activated other selves that functioned as the lenses through which we made sense of what was out there (Bataille and Vough, 2022; Weick, 1995). For Markus, noticing the cues and blaming the coffee made his climber self more salient. The more he ignored the symptoms, the more he became a “sick climber”, and he eventually had to confront the fact that he was alone and vulnerable. For Sophie, the shock highlighted her position as a young woman who had been in close proximity to an accused predator. The realization that she may have been at risk, combined with concern for the actual victims, foregrounded the gendered aspects of her identity and triggered new questions about if, how and when to approach her context (Langley and Klag, 2019). For Virginie, being alone with a corpse felt consistent with her identity as a researcher collecting data through participant observation, but conflicted with herself as a first-timer with the dead body of someone she did not know. These traumatic incidents put our professional identity on the background while our vulnerable selves confronted with threat were put in the forefront, triggering our need for self-enhancement (Weick, 1995, p. 20). In the moment, the environment turned from being fieldwork to threatening scenarios we were embedded in. For Sophie and Virginie, restoring their researcher identities seemed to be the appropriate coping strategy they improvised to avoid the emotional threat of the moment (de Rond and Lok, 2016). Conversely, Markus coped with the threatening environment by deflecting the cues and continuously doing observations, thereby endangering himself. The ways we dealt with our experiences may have influenced the feeling of unresolvedness. In Markus’ and Virginie’s cases, coping increased our immersion in the field. On the other end of the continuum, Sophie’s coping strategy created distance from the field. By virtue of being a mainly transient physical experience Markus probably had the least feeling of unresolvedness, and Virginie and in particular Sophie the most – as an effect of a more emotional consequence. In Sophie’s case, being unable to help the victims and seeing the potential that she could have been a victim herself seemed to prolong this uneasiness.

The trauma we encountered therefore presented a dilemma between preserving ourselves or preserving the research project. The answers we generated and enacted were grounded in our researcher identities and remained the desired identities we wanted to restore. This is particularly visible for Sophie and Virginie who were PhD candidates at the time. Values of what is expected in academia played an important part on how they handled the trauma. For Sophie, the event prompted ethical concerns that needed to be addressed. Her PhD dissertation was at stake and dealing with what was ongoing was critical. For Virginie, advice to become part of the team led her to stay in the hangar rather than to flee, and motivated her to ignore the warning signs she felt. Markus is more experienced, and he eventually relied on the resilient data collection process to allow himself reckoning altitude sickness. Interestingly, this institutional pressure helped us focus on cognition as a way to alleviate the physical and emotional effects of trauma. More broadly, the encounter of trauma questions how much one needs to go with the flow of trauma and how much one needs to resist it. The institutional environment acted as a pressure early-stage researchers felt to comply with expectations and norms of a profession they aspired to. At the same time, it acted as a resource all of us could rely on to cope with the trauma.

Identity is at the heart of the sensemaking literature (Weick, 1995; Vough *et al.*, 2020). Weick (1993) suggests that one’s professional identity can hinder professionals and make it challenging to

behave differently, sometimes with fatal implications. Similarly, the trauma we encountered and the themes that arose reflecting upon the same, suggest that the researcher identity is important to make sense of our experiences. By enacting the experiences through trial and error from the vantage point of a researcher, we allowed for our identities as researchers to take precedence which to some extent put us in harm's way. Reflecting on the events, we came to understand who we are as a researcher, and how we feel about what we faced as it was our researcher identity that was disrupted but also the one we strived to restore. To do so, we used the institutional context as an improvised coping strategy (de Rond and Lok, 2016). Writing this essay is a step towards closure and a way to address the feeling of unresolvedness.

In sum, we note that while Weick (1996) suggest that researchers should drop their tools to make novel insights, we found it difficult to drop our tools even when the experiences were uncomfortable. Instead of abandoning our research, we drew on the norms and values of our research methodologies and research ethics to push through.

*The Researcher's body as a (suffering) tool.* Ethnographic fieldwork in extreme contexts has inherently carnal consequences. Such research does not always involve direct exposure to trauma. But some of our own and others experiences suggest the body is employed as a (suffering) tool in the service of research. In our own fieldwork we have encountered feeling faint from observing surgeries, hunger, dehydration, sunburn, muscle pain, chafes, blisters, cuts, bruises and even a fractured nose (see also, e.g. de Rond *et al.*, 2019; Whiteman and Cooper, 2011; Prasad, 2014; Wacquant, 2004). Our minds, as part of our bodies, are also subject to harm. We have witnessed the deaths of participants, feared for our personal safety and experienced anxiety, fear, vulnerability, loneliness and guilt.

Reflecting on these encounters draws our attention to the ways in which the body impacts the doing of research more broadly. Carnal sociologists (e.g. Wacquant, 2004) have argued that attention to the suffering body during data collection is integral for understanding social life. Building on this, we suggest that trauma (whether physical or psychological) lingers, shaping our thinking and identity in the long term as well (c.f. Prasad, 2014). While all bodies are capable of suffering, different bodies may suffer under different conditions. What is painful for one person is manageable for another, and what is traumatic for one researcher is a neutral event for another. While we rely on a certain degree of shared knowledge – owing to the communities of academic practice in which we are embedded – our experiences will be differently impacted by what our bodies can withstand, where our bodies are granted access and what dangers our bodies bring to us (and can bring us to). For instance, Whiteman reflects upon how her white, female-gendered body both made her susceptible to, and safe from, danger in the field (Whiteman and Cooper, 2016). Similarly, Tone Danielsen's (2018) ability to keep up with the Norwegian special forces was likely integral to her obtaining access to the field. Thus, it is not just interactional expertise (Collins, 2004) that is important for the achievement of MOS research; the body of the researcher (and sometimes the researcher's capacity for suffering) dictates the knowledge that can be brought home.

We, thus, suggest that the lack of researcher presence and experience of research in research accounts is problematic. Research is not merely headwork, it is also body work that requires first-hand experiences (to the extent it is possible) to empathize and further theorize situations. While recognizing that researchers differ in their bodies and abilities, we suggest that to do so, we need to bring the researcher's body back in. We thus suggest that theorizing MOS would benefit from a carnal leap. Yet at the same time, this argument brings into question the researcher's resilience safety while being embedded in extreme contexts. How much can (or should) we take?

## Implications

We recognize that our experiences may be particular to our circumstances, yet we anticipate that our stories will resonate with many engaged in extreme context research. Therefore, we highlight some dilemmas that researchers might consider before embarking.

### *Proximity dilemmas*

First, ethnography and carnal sociology's value lies in the immersion with the context. The dilemma is that the assumption is that the more immersed a researcher is, the better data is collected, but also the more likely it is that unpleasant experiences may arise. We encourage researchers to consider this balance. Our stories suggest that experiences may linger with us for longer than appreciated at the moment but as far as possible, continuously asking, "is it worth it?" could be a strategy.

### *Identity dilemmas*

Second, identity is prominent in each of our stories and the four themes we identified. The dilemma is that, on the one hand, our researcher identity allowed us to get the job done. On the other hand, our researcher identity also puts some of us in clear physical danger and others in emotional and ethical perils. Sometimes one must push the comfort zone to reach a goal, but the risk of being locked into a particular identity shape the cues we attend to and the decisions we make. We believe that doctoral students and junior scholars are particularly vulnerable. Many institutional forces emphasize the researcher's identity at the expense of personal safety. We believe it would be advisable for project owners and supervisors to discuss potential situations and expectations with project members beforehand to facilitate decisions in the heat of the moment.

### *Sharing dilemmas*

Finally, we found great joy in sharing our experiences. Sharing allowed us to recognize new aspects of ourselves and our studied context. We, therefore, believe that such collective reflective sessions could provide some relief but also be helpful in the analytical work of others. At the same time, we recall Tullis' (2021) caution that reflexive accounts such as these may pose risks to our own careers, and it is difficult to say in advance what implications may arise as a result of sharing these experiences. We therefore call on MOS scholars to normalize describing traumas they have encountered when possible, while recognizing that not all scholars have the privilege to do so.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we explored how encountering trauma unexpectedly in the field shapes the production of knowledge and our understanding of ourselves as researchers. While the situations were not always meticulously documented at the time of experiencing them, our conversations revealed that these experiences stayed with us, and shape how we approach research today. Some of our experiences were difficult to put words to, or we prefer not to share them. Nevertheless, some reflections seem in order. Contributing to the literature on extreme contexts specifically, and management and organization studies more broadly, we identify four themes: bracketing, institutional pressures, impact on research and unresolvedness. We find that these themes have shaped our identities as researchers and how we produce knowledge. Bodily experiences linger with us and provide further depth, but our piece should not be viewed as a call to look for traumatic experiences as a purpose *per se*. Rather, it should be viewed as an encouragement to consider ourselves as part of the field and as such producing data that need to be collected and made sense of, during the data analysis or at the right moment. As our reflections inform us, shit happens, but do not go looking for it.

## **Notes**

1. When the researchers are quoted, it originates from the interviews

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