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Supervising sensitive Masters dissertation research: challenges and mitigation strategies

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ABSTRACT

An understanding of who is affected by involvement in sensitive research has recently undergone closer examination. While the emotional risk to participants is widely acknowledged, scholars argue that emotional care should be extended to everyone in a research team. Yet work in this area presupposes that those who explore sensitive topics are already familiar with the field, and are to some extent prepared for the material they encounter. In the contemporary UK university, however, academics are required to supervise Masters level student projects in areas where they are not specialised, including sensitive themes. This paper provides a unique perspective in reflecting on the experience of a supervisor working with a Masters student on a dissertation exploring narratives of sexual violence, a field outside the supervisor's academic specialism. Drawing on the theory of emotional labour, as applied to academic supervisory work, we discuss the project's challenges, how it was approached, and what can be learned from this. Thus we make a significant contribution to literature on Masters supervision, highlighting the need for greater attention to be paid when allocating dissertation supervisors, and calling for more robust support for those working with students on sensitive research.

Introduction

Despite the slippery nature of defining sensitive research (Carroll, 2013), one approach is to consider how it impacts those who are involved. Lee (1993) suggests that sensitive research may be deemed as that which involves an element of threat or risk. Drawing on Lee, Dickson-Swift et al. (2008) highlight the notion of consequences, asserting that 'sensitive research has the potential to impact on all of the people who are involved in it' (p. 2). This definition allows for greater acknowledgement of the effect of researching potentially traumatising subjects on all those who may be part of a research project (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009; Miralles et al., 2022). This has already been recognised in fields where researchers are at risk of being affected by the data to which they are

exposed (e.g., Coles & Mudaly, 2010 on research into child abuse), and has resulted in closer examination of who might be affected by involvement in such projects (Carroll, 2013; Dickson-Swift, 2022; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Malacrida, 2007).

However, most work in this area presupposes that those involved in projects exploring sensitive topics are already familiar with such areas, and are therefore to some extent prepared for the type of material they may encounter. Yet, in the contemporary UK university, academic supervisors, especially those supervising Masters students, are increasingly called upon to oversee student projects in which they have limited subject expertise (Pilcher, 2011; Vos & Armstrong, 2019), including sensitive fields of study. But while there is an emerging body of literature on how supervisors may be supported in their role, there is little acknowledgement of the range of topics which they may be required to supervise.

Following work that provides a retrospective analysis of the research process by the researcher(s) involved (e.g., Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018; Medzani, 2021), this paper describes the experience of a supervisor, the lead author (SY), working with a Masters student (AG) on her dissertation project exploring narratives of sexual violence. It highlights the challenges of such a project, due to its sensitive nature (Scriver & Kennedy, 2016); discusses how the supervision was approached; and alerts those involved in allocating supervisors to student projects to better support the process.

Drawing on Hochschild's (2012) theory of emotional labour, as applied to supervisory work by Carroll (2013), this paper draws on two fields of examination. The first is scholarship which discusses the increasing awareness of the emotional effect of researching sensitive topics, and the need for support to be put in place for all members of a research team. The second is work that explores the role of the Masters supervisor, and how far that role has expanded (Cornelius & Nicol, 2016; Macfadyen et al., 2019), often requiring supervisors to oversee projects in which they have no subject expertise (Pilcher, 2011; Vos & Armstrong, 2019).

This allows us to examine the experience outlined above, where the supervisor was allocated supervision of a sensitive research project in which she had limited expertise, and how this was negotiated with the student. The reflection was guided by the following questions:

- What does the supervisory experience highlighted suggest about (i) the role of a Masters supervisor, and (ii) the expectations of a supervisor's expertise?
- How can a supervisor overseeing a project involving sensitive research (i) tackle the topic, and (ii) how can they be better supported in this?

In addressing these questions, the paper firstly provides an overview of the literature exploring how sensitive topics are approached in the contemporary university. The framework of emotional labour is then presented, followed by a review of the scholarship on the role of the Masters supervisor, and a discussion on how this role may be seen through the theoretical lens of emotional labour. The experience which gave rise to this paper is subsequently outlined, and reflected upon. Finally, the paper highlights implications of the situation, and offers recommendations for how supervisors taking on sensitive projects can be better supported.

Addressing sensitive topics in the university context

An understanding of how sensitive research may be defined has become 'more encompassing' in recent work (Carroll, 2013, p. 547), allowing for a broader understanding of the emotional and psychological impact that academic research can have on those engaged in such work, and in turn, greater consideration to be paid to all those involved in such projects. This includes not only the research team, but third parties, such as transcribers (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008). Describing a project which involved not only experienced researchers, but also undergraduate and postgraduate students working as transcribers and coders, Malacrida (2007, p. 1339) highlights the need for 'emotional safety', arguing for the provision of 'emotional care not only for research participants but for researchers themselves'. Studies have also drawn attention to the impact of examining sensitive topics on early career and doctoral researchers and the importance of providing appropriate support (Lau & Pretorius, 2019; Guerzoni, 2020; Velardo & Elliott, 2021).

Others suggest that greater training for sensitive research projects should be introduced, and included in the research design. Working in child abuse research, Coles and Mudaly (2010, pp. 57–58) insist that 'researcher safety […] should be included in the design' of such projects. Focusing on graduate students, Eliasson and DeHart (2022, p. 487) argue that 'risks of trauma experienced by researchers are not consistently addressed in the context of methodological training'. They highlight the need for such training to be implemented, and for it to be recognised as part of the ethics review process; McChesney (2022) argues for the need to embed such training within doctoral programmes.

This chimes with the growing recognition of the duty of care that universities have to those within them. Such concern has led to the use of trigger or content warnings alerting students to topics covered in their studies which they may find upsetting or potentially offensive (Bryce et al., 2023; Cebula et al., 2022). Yet while the use of trigger warnings may be seen as creating a more inclusive and protective environment for students (Nolan & Roberts, 2024), such a duty of care should also focus on researcher wellbeing (Velardo & Elliott, 2021). Unfortunately, this is not always fully extended to staff: in describing the online trolling received by researchers working on a feminist approach to sexual education, Berger-Correa et al. (2022, p. 656) call for universities to 'protect their staff' from such abuse, implying that such care is seldom accessible. In their examination of teaching sexual violence in the Irish context, Scriver and Kennedy (2016) highlight the need to support staff involved in such teaching, highlighting the secondary trauma experienced by lecturers in the field. Here, we extend this to cover Masters supervisors asked to oversee sensitive projects outside their field.

Supervision as emotional work

One way of understanding the demands of graduate supervision is through the application of Hochschild's (2012) theory of emotional labour, and an examination of its relevance to the role. For Hochschild, the term 'emotional labour' is used 'to mean the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' (p. 7), implying a disparity between how a person is feeling and the emotion they must

display. In her example of flight attendants, Hochschild identifies how they are required to maintain the façade that 'the work seems to be effortless' and to disguise any feelings of 'fatigue and irritation' (p. 8), even in difficult circumstances.

Hochschild's theory was adapted by Carroll (2013) in her study of experiences of in vitro fertilisation (IVF), and analysis of the emotional toll involved in researching the topic of infertility. She argues that emotional labour is key to the practices of 'many teaching and research academics', especially in the field of qualitative or sensitive research (Carroll, 2013, p. 548). This application to academic work is built upon by White and LaBelle (2019, p. 135), who define emotional labour as a suppression of feelings, arguing that this may be extended to the act of teaching, citing the need to perform during lecturing while concealing emotion.

The notion of academic work as emotional labour also underpins the formulation of the Higher Education Emotional Labour (HEEL) model developed by Berry and Cassidy (2013). This emerged from their study highlighting the stress to which academics are exposed, and how 'significantly higher levels of emotional labour than other occupations' were reported by academics, due in part to heavy workload and job insecurity (Berry & Cassidy, 2013, p. 22). This has been further discussed in recent work highlighting the pressure on academics. Arguing that the emotional labour of supervisors still 'remains largely underexplored', O'Neil and Gopal (2021, p. 471) draw attention to the struggle to produce teaching and research of a consistently high quality with diminishing resources. The HEEL framework has also been used by Abery and Gunson (2016) to understand the impact on staff stress of last-minute requests for extensions. Drawing on Lau and Pretorius (2019), Velardo and Elliott (2021, p. 1522) note how, in comparison with 'other professions, academia is shown to have one of the highest incidences of mental illness'. Following Berry and Cassidy (2013), they cite not only workload, but also the nature of the research with which academics may be occupied.

Echoing this, the concept of emotional labour has been applied to various research settings. Moran and Asquith (2020) cite the secondary trauma that can be caused by exposure to material studied in criminological research. Emotional labour is also drawn upon by Guerzoni (2020) on the experience of doctoral research into the area of child protection. Hanna (2019, p. 528) argues that this is also relevant when considering online research, which 'can expose researchers to a range of emotional narratives'. Exploring narratives of male infertility, she highlights the powerlessness of the researcher working with online data, who is unable to engage with the participants that are expressing such traumatising sentiments, and is left with an unresolved feeling of 'what happened next'.

Role and position of the Masters supervisor

Several points set out above can be identified in the increasingly pressurised role of Masters supervision, following the exponential growth in PGT (Postgraduate Taught) student enrolment at UK universities (Basturkmen et al., 2014). This is illustrated by the emerging body of scholarship addressing the challenges facing Masters supervisors (Ginn, 2014), although this remains limited in comparison with work on PhD supervision (Paran et al., 2017). Recent work has focused on understanding how supervisors can best work with their students (Millin et al., 2022) and recommending frameworks

for effective pedagogical practices. Macfadyen et al. (2019) conceptualise the role of the supervisor as that to facilitate and nurture the student, whilst also maintaining standards, while the relationship between student and supervisor has also been explored (Anderson et al., 2006; de Kleijn et al., 2012). Other scholars have examined the dissertation itself, with Pilcher (2011) highlighting the difficulty of defining the type of dissertation required at Masters level, with other work focusing on more specific academic elements on which a supervisor is required to guide students, such as introducing the genre of academic writing (Basturkmen et al., 2014). Further areas of discussion centre on providing constructive feedback from the viewpoint of both the student (Bastola & Hu, 2021), and supervisor (Bastola & Hu, 2023), while Cornelius and Nicol (2016) have examined ways of working with students in professional settings.

Another challenge highlighted is what Pilcher (2011, p. 34) categorises as 'inadequate supervisor-student allocation regarding subject knowledge'. Cornelius and Nicol (2016, p. 4) note there are far higher numbers of Masters students than PhD researchers, requiring a greater number of supervisors. Given the aforementioned increase in UK PGT student numbers, supervisors may be inexperienced and some may be allocated over 20 Masters students in an academic year. Such an increase means that Masters supervisors are not necessarily supervising work within their specific field of research, unlike PhD supervisors. Vos and Armstrong (2019, p. 52) highlight the 'mismatching of supervisors to students' within marketing and business-related Masters programmes, where supervisors are asked to 'supervise master's dissertations on subjects of which they have no in-depth knowledge of or are unrelated to their own areas of research' (also see Vos, 2013); they argue that issues identified in their study may apply equally to other disciplines.

The consensus across the literature, therefore, is that the role of the supervisor is to provide a range of support, engaging with both the student and their work in a close capacity (Ginn, 2014; Paran et al., 2017). It is this which corresponds to Carroll's (2013) conceptualisation of the role as 'emotional labour'. Yet while there are suggestions to help the supervisor guide the student, less attention is paid to how the supervisor themselves might be supported, especially those overseeing sensitive research. To illustrate this, in the following section, we reflect on how such a project was tackled.

Context

The current paper came out of a supervisory experience where AG was working on her MA dissertation project with SY as her supervisor. The topic of the dissertation sat within SY's field of Applied Linguistics, and aimed to explore the way that individuals who had experienced sexual violence positioned themselves in their narratives, using forms of linguistic analysis.

The process of supervision broadly adhered to the pattern found across UK universities, where a full-time Masters course is a one-year programme. Students are assessed on a number of modules and a final dissertation project whereby 'a student is assigned a supervisor early in the academic year, [will] take a course or set of lectures in research methods, and write a research proposal prior to working on their dissertation' (Vos & Armstrong, 2019, p. 48). On the programme on which AG was enrolled, a specific supervisor is allocated for the dissertation project, separate from a student's personal tutor who

oversees their progress throughout the academic year. For reasons of equity, a specific amount of time is allocated for interactions between supervisor and student amounting to a total of 5 hours direct supervision, 5 hours draft reading and an additional 5 hours for answering email queries. Training is offered to PGT supervisors at programme, department, faculty and institutional level.

The dissertation supervisor is allocated in Term 2, once the student has submitted their initial research proposal, so that a supervisor can be allocated with the appropriate specialism as far as possible. This was especially pertinent in the experience described here, as SY is an expert in narrative analysis, and positioning theory, and had introduced the concepts in earlier lectures and seminars attended by AG. In this way, there was an appropriate match of supervisor with the supervisee's interest. However, the subject matter – that of sexual violence – was not within the supervisor's area of academic research, and required her to become acquainted with the relevant literature in order to offer appropriate guidance to the student. This was in addition to engaging with the data, which by the nature of the investigation, included necessarily graphic descriptions of sexual violence.

Regardless of how broad the parameters of sensitive research have become (Carroll, 2013), sexual violence is indubitably one topic which would fall into that category (Scriver & Kennedy, 2016). Two challenges ensued: the first of these were ethical considerations; followed by a discussion of how AG might tackle the sensitive nature of the topic, both of which are presented below.

Ethical considerations

The project involved analysing data in the public domain, consisting of anonymised posts on a public internet forum. In accordance with the platform guidelines, the ethics board of the organisation was consulted prior to the study, and approval was given for the researcher to examine specific posts as pre-moderated by the board. As per institutional stipulations, the student then completed an ethics application, which was given approval by the supervisor (a member of both Faculty and University ethics review panels), and a second reviewer with expertise in the field of sensitive research. The option of escalating the application was available if the reviewers felt the project raised concerns. A recognition of the possible effect on the researcher, together with guidelines to ensure institutional wellbeing support was in place, if necessary, were noted on the form. Given the nature of the topic, AG was also careful to place a content warning at the start of her dissertation for anyone reading the submission (Girling, 2023).

As noted above, there was a close match between supervisor and the dissertation topic in several aspects. Additionally, SY's work in ethics allowed her to navigate the sensitive nature of the project. This included previous teaching work with DB, who has written widely in the area of ethics and mental health (e.g., Buchanan & Warwick, 2021), and who acted as an unofficial point for discussion. Nonetheless, SY is not an academic specialist in sexual violence.

This raises important concerns regarding the sensitive aspect of the material with which the supervisor was required to engage. As Dartnell and Jewkes (2013, p. 6) report, sexual violence of all forms 'occurs at an alarmingly high rate in many settings'; within the UK, over a quarter of women have experienced some form of sexual assault or

attempted assault since the age of 16 (ONS, 2023), notwithstanding the large number of assaults that remain unreported and are not included in such figures (see ONS, 2021). As Scriver and Kennedy (2016, p. 206) point out: 'Lecturers who instruct upon sensitive topics may also have personal experience of those topics.' Given the figures cited above, there was a possibility that this may have affected the supervisor; however, at no point was this considered prior to her having been allocated the project.

This oversight may be regarded as an ethical issue as much as a procedural one. If all those connected with a project are to be covered in the risk assessment, as suggested in the literature, the supervisor should be included within such considerations. This is reflected in guidelines from the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2024, p. 33), which highlights that 'part of the ethical responsibility of employing institutions' is the 'moral duty' to consider staff safety, stressing that this refers not only to their physical but also emotional safety. This will be discussed in greater depth later; in the following section, we describe how the dissertation project was undertaken.

Stages of the research

On being allocated the project, SY recognised the sensitive nature of the study, and designed a suitable plan for working with the student. The supervisor's experience in tackling potentially upsetting questions relating to bullying and anti-migrant hostility in research with young people and children (Young, 2019), alongside her work in ethics, had made her aware of general protocols to be followed when working with sensitive data. This led her to use the process of 'ethical triage' as outlined by Buchanan and Warwick (2021, p. 1092), which relates 'to how one determines which course of action should take priority when faced with competing persons or events that require immediate attention'. The following steps were therefore followed.

1. ***Room booking and scheduling***: Supervision literature highlights the need to create 'a supportive environment' (Macfadyen et al., 2019); here, it was necessary to consider the physical environment in which supervision meetings took place. Rather than use the supervisor's shared office, another room was booked, with an allowance for additional time in case the discussion over-ran. The room chosen had natural daylight, which helps engender a greater sense of wellbeing even in stressful situations (Golvani et al., 2021). Tutorials were scheduled before a natural break, such as prior to lunchtime, rather than another tutorial meeting or seminar, thereby allowing both student and supervisor time to decompress.

2. ***Identifying scholarship in the field:*** Part of the supervisory role is to advise on key reading and critical evaluation of the relevant literature (Anderson et al., 2006). As SY was unfamiliar with the scholarship on sexual violence, she needed to acquaint herself with it in order to work effectively with the student in this capacity. The field of sexual violence and trauma is necessarily a sensitive one (Scriver & Kennedy, 2016); in suggesting literature the student could access, the supervisor needed to consider both her own responses and how to navigate the literature search with the student.

    Additionally, as the student had received little guidance in relation to working on sensitive areas from the compulsory Research Methods module she had attended, the

supervisor provided the student with literature outlining ways of conducting research on sexual violence and on mitigating harm to the researcher (Campbell, 2002).

3. **Data analysis:** Another requirement of the supervisor is to guide the student in scheduling each stage of the project (Anderson et al., 2006). Following the literature review, the next step was to engage with the data itself, where SY needed to support AG in identifying key themes and conducting a linguistic analysis on accounts shared on the platform. Moving from the academic literature to frequently graphic descriptions of sexual assault shared on the platform was a difficult shift to navigate; prior to this, ways were devised to limit exposure (Coles & Mudaly, 2010). SY suggested a framework for linguistic analysis, whereby the data could be mapped onto the framework in a methodical, more detached way. This focused on identifying 'linguistic markers, such as the use of pronouns, or references to clothing and body parts, rather than the content, in line with applied linguistics studies', in addition to 'paying close attention to particular linguistic choices at the levels of clause, syntax and text' (Girling, 2023, pp. 26–27). A timeframe for work was also scheduled, where the data analysis and dissertation writing would be done in short bursts, to avoid a feeling of being overwhelmed. Additionally, when working alone, supported by practices discussed in supervision meetings and drawing on Olmos-Vega et al. (2023, p. 241), AG devised a safeguarding methodology and built 'concrete practices' into her process of analysis. These included making use of a reflective journal, alongside imposing time limits and taking frequent breaks while working on each stage of the dissertation.

4. **Debriefing:** In outlining techniques for educating about sexual violence, Scriver and Kennedy (2016, p. 201) suggest ending 'on a positive note to minimise distress experienced after the session'. While this was less possible when dealing with data, SY checked at each tutorial that the support available to AG, as outlined on the ethics form, was being accessed where appropriate. This involved ensuring that within the university environment there was a classmate with whom AG could work in the library, or meet after a supervisory session; and outside, when she might be working on the dissertation at home. SY was also able to schedule her own informal debriefing sessions, often meeting DB to discuss the preceding session.

5. **Writing up the dissertation:** The supervisor was also involved in reading and providing feedback on draft chapters. In addition to helping scaffold the student's work (Bastola & Hu, 2021, 2023), this provided a further opportunity to ascertain that the student was remaining in control of the material.

At the end of the supervisory period, the student was then able to complete the work independently, and submitted the dissertation successfully.

This section has provided an overview of the supervisory experience which the paper explores as a basis for shedding light on how a supervisor might tackle a sensitive topic outside their field of expertise. It gave an overview of the study and the processes followed, including ethical considerations, highlighting that while the potential emotional risks to the student researcher were acknowledged, no provision was made for supervisor support. It then set out how the supervisor and student negotiated ways of tackling such a topic to minimise the emotional impact. The next section discusses the implications of this, and offers some recommendations to help supervisors navigate such experiences.

Discussion

Here, we examine the experience outlined above in relation to the literature, addressing each of the RQs in turn.

(i) Implications for Masters supervision

The situation outlined above chimes with much of the literature on supervisory work, starting with the expectation of supervisors to oversee projects which lie beyond their remit (Pilcher, 2011; Vos, 2013; Vos & Armstrong, 2019). Given that the supervisor is the primary support for any dissertation (Paran et al., 2017), this speaks to not only the wider question of support for Masters dissertation supervisors, but also to those working with students in sensitive areas.

In the situation described above, the emotional labour (Campbell, 2013) of the supervisor was twofold: the academic support required; and the emotional engagement with the student as she navigated the project. In the initial stage of discussing the project, the supervisor and student need to negotiate how far the student is capable of taking on their proposed study (Anderson et al., 2006). In this instance, a discussion was initiated about the student's interest in the topic, what would be involved in tackling such a theme, and the support required. This was formalised through the ethics application, where the project was outlined, and ethical considerations stated, including identifying the support to be put in place for the student. This aimed to go beyond merely an institutional requirement to establish a duty of care (BERA, 2024), to an emotional engagement with the student (Anderson et al., 2006; de Kleijn et al., 2012). Yet while a supportive framework was arranged for the student, less attention was paid to what might have been necessary for the supervisor and how she might tackle a sensitive project beyond her subject expertise.

(ii) How supervisors can tackle a project overseeing sensitive research

The case presented illustrates the way in which frameworks and protocols for supporting researchers and their wider teams (e.g., Dickson-Swift, 2022) should be extended to supervisors overseeing projects that tackle sensitive areas. In their guidance for those working in the areas of child sexual abuse, Coles and Mudaly (2010, p. 65) advise formal debriefing sessions, rather than more informal discussions, due to the burden this can place on others.

Coles and Mudaly (2010, p. 58) also emphasise the effect of qualitative researchers being repeatedly exposed to data that describes traumatic events, often graphically. During data analysis, they therefore recommend limiting the time spent with the data on any one occasion (ibid 2010, p. 67), guidance which proved useful here, both during tutorials and when the student was working alone. However, the notion of limits also needs to apply to the supervisor, who, alongside advising the student on data analysis, will also be reading draft work and the final assignment (Scriver & Kennedy, 2016).

Given the above, this asks the question of whether the supervisor should have been allocated the dissertation in the first place. Yet the case also demonstrates how a

supervisor does not necessarily require expert specialism in the area covered by a PGT dissertation. Here, the overarching topic of narrative identity fell within the remit of the supervisor, and the project was successfully realised. It shows how, provided that the topic lies within their broad field of expertise, the supervisor can fulfil their role advising on the overall structuring and writing of the dissertation (Basturkmen et al., 2014), alongside guidance on approaching data collection and analysis.

Nevertheless, the role of Masters supervisor is not a generic one, and successful supervision requires close work with the individual student and their project (Macfadyen et al., 2019). This is especially important for supervisors working with sensitive projects outside their area of expertise. If a supervisor is too affected by the nature of the project, this could compromise their ability to provide the appropriate support, given their role is to offer not only intellectual guidance but also emotional support (Vilkinas, 2008; Vos & Armstrong, 2019).

Beyond the ability of the supervisor to perform their role satisfactorily, we argue that the question raised is also an ethical one. Drawing on BERA (2024, p. 33) guidelines which emphasise the role of the institution in '[s]afeguarding the physical and psychological wellbeing of researchers', we argue that this should be extended to supervisors of research projects. This echoes work in researching sensitive topics which highlights the need for all those involved with a project to be supported appropriately (Malacrida, 2007; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Velardo & Elliott, 2021).

In the light of this, we propose the following.

Recommendations

(i) **Allocation of supervisors:** There needs to be greater understanding not only of what could be distressing to students, but also to academic staff, and what warnings could be put in place. Nolan and Roberts (2024) highlight how the use of trigger warnings can help create a more inclusive and protective environment for students; this should also be extended to the supervisor, with tutors being warned before they take on such a project. Sensitive topics should be flagged up before supervisors are allocated to a project, with supervisors being given an opportunity to look at dissertation topics proposed by students before allocation is finalised.

(ii) **Transferring supervisees:** Where a project becomes too overwhelming for a supervisor, there should be the possibility of transferring supervisees. As with the initial allocation process, this would need to be handled carefully, without the supervisor feeling the need to expose their own experiences. It should be considered enough that the non-specialist wishes to pass over a project that they feel ill-equipped to supervise at any point.

(iii) **Support protocols:** On accepting the project, the supervisor should be made aware of the support available. A protocol such as that outlined by Scriver and Kennedy (2016), suggesting greater peer support and training for lecturers in sensitive topics, would be one way of providing support for supervisors. Provision could be made for MA supervisors to be mentored by a senior colleague with whom they could debrief. Arrangements for this could be embedded within the ethics

process (Coles & Mudaly, 2010; Eliasson & DeHart, 2022), or agreed with a line manager or programme leader.

(iv) ***Need for confidentiality:*** However, it is important that in each of the above processes, confidentiality should be afforded to the supervisor, who should at no point be expected to disclose any experience which may affect their capacity to accept the project.

In returning to the RQs guiding this reflection, it is clear that the experience outlined above shows the challenges facing a Masters supervisor working outside her field of expertise, and how these challenges were tackled. Her expertise in supervision and working in sensitive areas, together with the approach taken by the student, allowed for a successful supervision experience. Yet it raises several issues which can be understood through the lens of emotional labour.

As outlined above, it should firstly be ascertained that a supervisor feels equipped and supported to take the project on. A support protocol should be put in place, in the same way that student and participant support is outlined as part of the ethical process. Such training and support could be spearheaded by a psychology or health faculty where such protocols are commonplace (cf. Buchanan & Warwick, 2021). This will be of benefit not only to the supervisor, but to the student also. Abery and Gunson (2016, p. 69) highlight the need 'to consider staff wellbeing as the "missing link" in understanding the student experience' and in supporting student wellbeing. This underlines how greater support for supervisors can only be of advantage to students.

Conclusion

There is an increasing consensus amongst scholars on the need to recognise safeguards for those working on a research team, including those working in supporting roles such as transcribers. However, such work assumes that people involved in such projects are already familiar with the area of research. Yet the current situation at UK universities means that many academics required to undertake Masters supervision will be advising students whose projects sit outside their field of expertise. Moreover, while supervisors and teaching staff are issued with guidance to be mindful of their students' potential sensibilities, they themselves are frequently overlooked and receive less attention when working with students on potentially sensitive research topics, adding to the emotional load connected with supervisory work.

The example described here provides a rich illustration of how the supervisor and student created ways of dealing with challenging material. They negotiated the ethical questions of working with sensitive data, and created space to analyse graphic accounts of sexual violence, resulting in a powerfully written dissertation. While the experience was ultimately a mutually rewarding one, in presenting the challenges faced, we hope to encourage discussion over the role of the non-specialist supervisor and the level of support required when tackling sensitive student projects.

Disclosure statement

Declaration of interest statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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