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VIEWPOINT



## A cautionary tale: Trauma, ethics and mentorship in research in the USA

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### ABSTRACT

It has become commonplace in academia to encourage students from underrepresented groups to provide insider perspectives on experiences of marginality. Yet, there has been little discourse on how painful and traumatic this kind of vulnerability can be for students, or how academic advisors can best support students exploring potentially triggering researcher topics. In this article, we explore trauma, ethics and mentorship in graduate student research. To begin, Shea, a graduate student and transgender woman, describes the emotional and psychological trauma she experienced while chronicling her medical and social transition from male to female as part of her graduate research study. In section two, Kate discusses the difficulty of mentoring students experiencing research-related trauma and urges members of the academy to become more active in developing strategies to support students through such hardships. The purpose of this piece is not only to spark a frank discussion about the very real potential for trauma while conducting research on marginalized populations, but to also act as a cautionary tale by providing an example of an unexpectedly traumatic research experience from the points of view of the both mentor and the mentee.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Autoethnography; Ethics; Mentorship; Trauma; Transgender

### Introduction

The purpose of this article is to pose a series of questions to the field of feminist geography regarding trauma, ethics, and mentorship in research. More specifically we ask: how can academic mentors safeguard the well-being of graduate students pursuing research involving emotionally traumatic situations? Given the lack of diversity in academia, particularly in geography, students from underrepresented groups are often encouraged to provide insider perspectives on experiences of marginality. Transgender scholar Jack

Halberstam (2005), for example, encourages queers in the academy to “participate in the ongoing project of recoding queer culture” (159) in an attempt to combat years of research pathologizing and grossly essentializing queer experiences. But, what happens when students – particularly those from marginalized populations – put themselves in harm’s way to further academic knowledge? This is especially worrying in autoethnographic research, when the researcher and participant are one and the same.

While the literature on emotional geographies continues to grow (Davidson, Bondi, and Smith 2005), few studies have explored the role of trauma in research (Bondi 2005; Drozdowski and Dominey-Howes 2015; Widdowfield 2000; Warden 2013). Scholars rarely acknowledge that field research can trigger deep emotional pain. Moreover, while Institutional Review Boards (IRB) may consider the emotional and psychological risks for participants, they rarely consider these risks for researchers themselves. In this paper, we draw from Shea’s autoethnographic research experiences, as an actively transitioning transgender woman, in a women’s roller derby league. We ask: how can mentors and graduate students work together to mitigate trauma in research? Given pre-existing hierarchies in academia, are students encouraged to mask their emotional suffering? Are students even aware of how their affective and emotional experiences shape knowledge production in important ways? With these questions, we hope to spark a broader discussion concerning emotions, ethics, and mentorship and encourage advisors to adopt a feminist ethics of care in their work. We also hope that our experiences might serve as a cautionary tale for students and mentors considering similar work. This article is presented as two first-person accounts, followed by a brief conclusion.

### **Shea: on the pain and trauma of My graduate research**

I was less than a month into my graduate studies when I embraced my identity as a transgender woman and began medically transitioning from male to female. At the time, I grossly underestimated the hardships I would experience during the first two years of this physical, psychological, and social change. If I could have foreseen the pain I was about to endure, I’m unsure if I would have chosen to study transgender discrimination in the sport of women’s roller derby for my master’s thesis, or to make my medical and social transition part of my project.

My decision to explore transgender discrimination in the roller derby was inspired by several radical changes to the gender-inclusion policy of the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) in 2015, whereby all previous hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and sex reassignment surgery (SRS) requirements were removed from the organization’s membership criteria

with the intent to open the sport to anyone who believed that women's roller derby was the composition of the sport with which they most closely identified. As a transgender woman, I concluded that the best way to study the integration of trans athletes into this formerly cis-centric organization was to join a WFTDA league and participate in the sport myself, and I thought at the time that in California, a racially and socially diverse state often on the forefront of LGBTQ and transgender rights movements in the U.S., that my assimilation into the sport and the organization would be a relatively safe and easy affair. What I found though, was that even in the most seemingly progressive feminist spaces, like those fostered by WFTDA, transphobia ran rampant.

In early 2016, I came out to my thesis advisor, Kate, and told her of my plan to conduct an autoethnographic study as part of my thesis whereby I would join Angel City Derby, a WFTDA league in Los Angeles, California, and chronicle my experiences over the first thirteen months of my medical transition. Kate was supportive, albeit seemingly surprised. Understandably, it was a lot to process considering she had assumed I was a cisgender male up to this point.

During the preliminary phase of my project, I was very open with Kate about my transition and what I was experiencing, but as the months passed, I quickly found myself in new emotionally taxing, and even physically dangerous, situations that I was struggling to process, let alone express in a succinct manner. I was physically assaulted twice and endured extreme levels of hatred and disgust directed at me by members of the public, far in excess to anything I had experienced during my years presenting as a white male. All the while, the increased levels of estrogen and lack of testosterone in my system made my emotions far more vivid than they ever were before and feelings such as pain, rejection, and fear grew exponentially in intensity. I lost the ability to compartmentalize and shut off negative emotions.

In the United States, members of the transgender community face numerous forms of social, political and medical persecution. We are denied civil rights, lawful protection, and personal agency. We struggle to obtain legal recognition and basic healthcare. Many of us face daily transphobia, transmisogyny, and misgendering from society and even our closest friends and family (Doan 2010; Halberstam 2005, 2018; Stone 2006; Stryker 1994, 2006; Whittle 2006). Despite being well-read on these adversities, I went into my research relatively oblivious to the persecution I would face. I, like many of the transgender skaters I interviewed, joined the sport thinking we had found the antithesis to Doan's (2010) 'tyranny of gender space' in the WFTDA. I envisioned a space where trans skaters would receive equal access to the benefits this body-positive, gender-bending, and radically inclusive subculture was lauded for bestowing on its cisgender membership (Breeze

2014; Carlson 2010; Chanie-Hill et al. 2012; Finley 2010; Owen 2014; Pavlidis and Fullagar 2013). Sadly, this was not the case.

In October 2016, I filed my first of three grievances with the league's Skaters Advocate (SA) committee over repeated transphobic assaults by trainers and upper-level skaters. Not only was I frequently (and 'accidentally') referred to by male pronouns, but anytime I excelled at a particular skill or drill faster than my fellow skaters it was openly and verbally attributed to 'the fact that I used to be a guy'. I was frequently Othered and pushed to the periphery of the league, and any perceived differences between myself and my cisgender peers, particularly with regards to my physical ability or socialization as a male, were highly scrutinized.

By the time I reached the one-year mark with my hormone therapy, things were beginning to improve in many aspects of my life. This was in large part due to new social skills and physical traits I had developed which afforded me the ability to be more easily seen as female in public spaces. In derby spaces though, I was utterly miserable. The higher I rose into the competitive levels of the league the more intense the transphobia seemed to become. There were skaters who refused to skate with me. I was berated for being too strong, aggressive, and competitive. My body, my height, and even the amount I sweated were openly mocked as different from those of the cisgender women I skated with. I was misgendered intentionally and maliciously. When I attempted to discuss this treatment with my coaches, I was told I was delusional. Subsequently, I hit one new emotional low after another and I began to contemplate suicide. This was the point I finally stepped back, thirteen months to the day after I started my research. I had pushed myself to dangerous new emotional limits and severely taxed my mental well-being and sense of self-worth.

Before concluding this section, it is important to acknowledge that during the autoethnographic portion of my research I spent very little time reflecting on the history, context, and diversity of the groups and spaces I was seeking access to. Perhaps if I had, the discrimination I experienced might have been less biting, perhaps not. I, like many of the trans-feminine athletes I interviewed during my research, joined the sport as a result of a policy change designed to expand diversity of the Women's Flat Track Derby Association though many of us failed to adequately understand or respect the social, cultural, and racial "stories-so-far" (Massey 2005) that led to this change in the first place. Many of these skaters shared strikingly similar experiences to my own, and many of us accused the WFTDA for condoning transphobic behavior and failing to provide us with the seamless integration into their ranks our privilege led us to believe we deserved. We failed to realize that we were just as guilty of fostering what Mahtani (2014) describes as toxic geographies ourselves. Just like the scholars Mahtani discusses who

attempt to boil race down to “a supposedly objective material determinism” (362), we were quick to label spaces and groups in the WFTDA as inherently transphobic without taking into account the histories of violence and gender-based segregation and subjugation that led to the 2001 women’s roller derby revival in the first place. With the exception of the trans-masculine athletes who began their transitions after already being members of the WFTDA, many of us sought haven in spaces that we had no hand and, until recently, no stake in producing. For me, my privilege had arrogantly convinced me that my integration into the women-centric and queer-positive spaces of the WFTDA would be relatively easy, and I was completely unprepared for how dramatically the loss of my white, male privilege would affect me.

### **Kate: Mentoring students through pain and trauma**

I realize now that I was woefully unprepared to mentor Shea through the potential risks of her research. I was excited about her research, which promised to provide insight into a seemingly inclusive space that is working to redefine gender binaries in sport. I believed her work would push new boundaries on gender and space. Perhaps naively, I also believed members of this progressive subculture would fully embrace the organization’s policy, which states: “The Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) is committed to inclusive and anti-discrimination practices in relation to all transgender women, intersex women, and gender expansive participants, and aims to ensure that all skaters’, volunteers’, and employees’ rights are respected and protected.” However, as we know practices do not always follow policies. Moreover, no matter how much I researched transgender experiences, as a cisgender woman, I was unable to fully comprehend how Shea’s medical transition would involve profound physical, emotional, social and psychological change.

I am not unfamiliar with pain and trauma in research. Many of my graduate students pursue difficult topics that wrench at the heartstrings, particularly as they hear interviewees retell emotionally painful experiences. In my own work with unaccompanied migrant children from Mexico and Central America, I’ve listened helplessly as children speak candidly about murdered family members, raped friends, and their own impending deportations to situations of extreme violence. In ethical research, we do our utmost to protect the wellbeing of our research participants. Yet, we often do little to prepare ourselves for the personal pain we experience as we absorb these stories into the recesses of our subconscious. Sometimes this pain reemerges down the road, through depression, anxiety and other chronic health problems (Mountz 2016). Some even argue that research experiences in dangerous

contexts or on distressing topics can trigger post-traumatic stress syndrome (Dominey-Howes 2015; Warden 2013).

Shea's autoethnographic research brought this pain and trauma to an entirely different level. I will admit that I was not entirely aware that she was experiencing this much difficulty, as physical geography kept us two hundred kilometres apart. Given the distance between Los Angeles and San Diego, we spoke infrequently via Skype, or communicated by email. Perhaps due to the hierarchical and professional relationship we maintained, Shea did not open up to me about her depression until much later. As stated by the Fem-Mentee Collective (2017, 595), "Part of the socialization of the academy is that students are trained in the appropriate expressions of emotions in designated times and spaces." This was certainly true in my own academic training. But as we face a growing mental health crisis in the academy – both among faculty and students – (Mountz 2016; Peake and Mullings 2016; Mullings et al. 2016) is it ethical to continue masking our more negative emotions - such as fear, doubt, and despair - in the interest of professionalization?

A feminist ethics of care asserts the centrality of care to our lives (Lawson 2007). It is an approach that acknowledges that relationships are based on mutuality, interdependencies and trust. Adopting a feminist ethics of care could help mentors be more attentive and responsive to student needs, particularly their emotional needs. This approach could also help advisors mentor students through moments of pain, trauma and mental duress during their graduate student work. As reinforced through my work with Shea, students and mentors must recognize that identities and positionalities have profound impacts on research experiences. As mentors, we must think carefully about the projects our students pursue in search of cutting-edge knowledge. We must consider not only the emotional risks for research participants, but also the emotional risks for students themselves. Is it worth risking personal well-being for the sake of professional advancement?

Beyond this, departments need to value the emotional labour (Hochschild 2003) faculty provide. Few of us are trained in psychological counselling, yet in this era of heightened mental duress (Peake and Mullings 2016), this sort of emotional work is more important than ever. Faculty training on mental well-being and health, as well as guidance on where to find resources, would be tremendously beneficial for all faculty. Self-care is also vital. As noted by Parizeau et al. (2016), mental, physical, and emotional struggles proliferate in academic settings. Given mounting pressures in the neoliberal university, many faculty are struggling to not only care for their students, but also themselves - despite their ethical and emotional commitments to do so. Yet, care is relational; how can we care for others if we don't care for ourselves?

Autoethnography can be a powerful research method; yet, obviously, there can be substantial risks, particularly for those from underrepresented

groups. While Shea was able to provide deep insight into the inner workings of women's roller derby, she did so at great cost to her personal well-being. As her mentor, I was unable to anticipate the struggles she would face, which resulted in significant emotional and personal pain.

## Conclusion

In closing, we feel that it is important to end this piece on a positive note, as that is ultimately what blossomed from this situation. Shea is currently pursuing her PhD, after successfully defending her thesis. Additionally, her research culminated in the founding of a support group for transgender and gender expansive skaters in the WFTDA and the enactment of a new league policy protecting present and future members of the trans community at Angel City Derby. But, what if it had not ended in a positive manner? Student researchers who are members of underrepresented groups are often especially encouraged to provide insider perspectives on experiences of marginality. Yet, there is very little discussion regarding how painful and traumatic this can be for students. Rachel Alicia Griffin (2012) urges academics at the margins to draw from the productive power of anger to not only auto-ethnographically narrate their pain, but to use this anger to resist oppression and fight for change. But what if the pain is too much? As academic mentors, how do we help students accomplish their goals in a way that does not subject them to conditions and situations that could prove harmful or damaging to their physical, emotional, and mental well-being? To conclude, we hope this reflection serves as a cautionary tale to help students and mentors carefully consider how research can trigger significant trauma, particularly for students from underrepresented groups.

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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While her research interests are broad, she currently focuses on migration in Latin America and the U.S./Mexico border region. She has published her work in a variety of journals including: *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*; *Antipode*; *Gender, Place & Culture*; and *Urban Geography*. Her teaching largely focuses on critical social and environmental issues around the world.

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