

Book review

Clift, B. C., Costas Batlle, I., Bekker, S. and Chudzikowski, K. (Eds.). (2023). *Qualitative Researcher Vulnerability: Negotiating, Experiencing and Embracing* (First Edition). London: Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003349266>

Qualitative Researcher Vulnerability is an edited book on various aspects of researcher vulnerability and how it can be navigated. It arose from a symposium held in Bath, UK, on researcher vulnerability. Although the focus is on researchers, there is a recognition that others, such as transcribers, research assistants, translators, supervisors, and any other participant may experience vulnerability in relation to research. All of the contributors are from the UK or North America, though some of them have worked in places such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, and India.

I am a South African lecturer currently working on PhD on student resilience. I hadn't previously read about researcher vulnerability, but I am familiar with qualitative research, positionality reflexivity, and vicarious trauma, all of which are mentioned in the book. I first read the book to help me think through my own relationship with my topic and my participants. The book isn't focused on higher education. The contributors come from a range of disciplines from Management to Geography. Despite this disciplinary diversity, many of the issues raised in the book would be relevant to researchers in the field of Higher Education Studies.

As the second part of the title, *Negotiating, Experiencing and Embracing*, suggests, vulnerability is recognised as creating both difficulties and opportunities for researchers. Various contributors point out that although vulnerability is often seen, at least within Western academia, as something to be avoided or at least covered up, vulnerability is part of the shared experience of being human, as well as being potentially generative for research.

This book covers vulnerability that arises from a range of factors. The most obvious one is when researchers examine sensitive topics and are affected by the topic. This can happen even when the researcher is only looking at published texts (Chapter 7). Researchers may also be emotionally affected by the stories told by participants, potentially leading to vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue (Chapters 1, 3). When participants are vulnerable in a range of ways, researchers may have to make decisions about what kinds of help to offer or what kinds of requests to agree to, and when care or advice should be withheld. This can blur the boundaries between research and caregiving (Chapter 4), leading to difficult decisions needing to be made. Researchers may also need to know how to work with participants who know that they are frequently labelled as vulnerable and who reject that label (Chapter 12).

Another aspect of vulnerability is when the researcher has had the experience that the research focuses on. The researcher may need to make decisions about whether or not to disclose personal information to other people involved in carrying out the research, to research participants (potentially as a way of creating trust), and to the readers of the research. These are



all decisions that have to be made since self-disclosure can be beneficial or harmful, and the researcher can't always predict which it will be (Chapters 1, 2, 5, 6).

In some cases, the research site or context can create vulnerability for the researcher and this can include online research (Chapter 5). Contributors discuss some of the ways in which they were made vulnerable as part of their attempt to gain access to research sites (Chapters 1, 5, 8, 9). The contributors all write about spaces they were in temporarily, even if for fairly long periods. An absence from this edition of the book is a perspective from a researcher who is deeply embedded in the context of violence, structural inequality, or misogyny, and is unable to leave it at the end of the research process. Chapter 5 mentions this, but it isn't explored in any detail, probably because none of the contributors have experienced this.

Various chapters also discuss institutional vulnerability. This can range from being vulnerable to research misconduct perpetrated by colleagues (Chapter 2) to general precarity in academia (Chapter 5), to the lack of support for people conducting sensitive research, and the stigma in higher education about asking for support (Chapters 4, 5, 10, 12). Some of these discussions could have been related to the issue of moral injury, though this is not done in the book (Reynolds, forthcoming).

Researchers need to make decisions about how much of their vulnerability to reveal in the texts they create, and may be worried about how others will receive their published work, whether the readers are research participants or reviewers (Chapters 6, 8, 9). Submitting work and having it rejected or criticised is another potential moment for vulnerability. The discussion does not include student researchers, and their supervisors, who are potentially even more vulnerable to reviewers/markers since their whole future may hinge on how their readers respond to their work. There is no option to resubmit to a different set of readers, as there is when a paper is rejected. This is another area that could perhaps be explored in a second edition.

Contributors also provide a range of ways of dealing with vulnerability in research using more individual practices, such as research journaling and tapping into emotions (Chapters 1, 2, 8), to more structured and institutional or cross-institutional resources, such as protocols and frameworks (Chapter 3, 5) or peer-support networks, and working collaboratively rather than competitively (Chapters 4, 10).

I'm working with a relational research paradigm in my PhD. I noted that the words 'relational' and 'relationality' came up in various chapters in the book, but are never fully explored. Feminist ethics of care, as a form of relational ethics, is concerned with human vulnerability and dependency (Metz and Miller, 2016; Miller, 2020; Pettersen, 2011). If a second edition of the book is written, this may be a productive area for consideration. Relationality is also central to many indigenous research frameworks (Chilisa, 2020; Wildcat and Voth, 2023) from many places, so contributions from researchers from a wider range of contexts would enrich a second edition.

This book is intended for both students and more experienced researchers. Despite my lack of familiarity with vulnerability in research, I found most of the book easy to read, so it would be appropriate for postgraduate students and possibly also for undergraduates. It may be useful to people who run research courses and want to provide students with examples for discussion on research decisions, ethics, reflexivity, positionality, and, of course, vulnerability. It is also useful for researchers and supervisors to help them think through a range of issues related to researcher vulnerability.

References

- Chilisa, B. (2020). *Indigenous Research Methodologies* (Second Edition.). London: Sage.
- Metz, T. & Miller, S. C. (2016). 'Relational ethics'. In LaFollette, H. (ed.) *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Miller, S. C. (2020). 'From vulnerability to precariousness: Examining the moral foundations of care ethics'. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 28(5): 644–661. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2020.1804239>
- Petterson, T. (2011). 'The ethics of care: Normative structures and empirical implications'. *Health Care Analysis*, 19(1): 51–64. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10728-010-0163-7>
- Reynolds, J. (forthcoming) 'When trust is lost: Moral injury in higher education'. *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning*
- Wildcat, M., & Voth, D. (2023). 'Indigenous relationality: Definitions and methods'. *AlterNative*, 19(2): 475–483. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801231168380>

Reviewed by

Judith Reynolds, Humanities Extended Studies Programme Coordinator and PhD (Higher Education) student in the Centre for Higher Education Research Teaching and Learning at Rhodes University.