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Navigating the Emotional Terrain of Trauma Research: Reflexive Art Journaling as a Tool for Researcher Wellbeing and Integrity

Lorelei Voronin, LPC-S, ATR



Duality of Qualitative Trauma Research

- Qualitative research is uniquely positioned to explore the nuanced, first-hand experiences of trauma survivors, offering depth and empathy often unattainable through quantitative approaches.
 - This strength also introduces emotional and ethical challenges for researchers.
- Exposure to trauma narratives increases the risk of vicarious trauma (VT) among all members of the research team, master's-level counselors-in-training, doctoral students, and faculty.
- While VT symptoms are common, many researchers also report enhanced personal and professional satisfaction, indicating posttraumatic growth (PTG)
- Together, these dynamics highlight the paradox of qualitative trauma research: It is both emotionally taxing and profoundly transformative.

(Berger, 2020; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2025; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995; Wallace & County, 2023)

Vicarious Trauma (VT)

- Negative changes in personhood, including altered worldviews, cynicism, disrupted belief systems, and identity questioning
- Counseling students may be more vulnerable, due to developing research competence and professional identity, while navigating emotionally charged content.
- Can lead to boundary challenges and bias from emotional overidentification



Posttraumatic Growth (PTG)

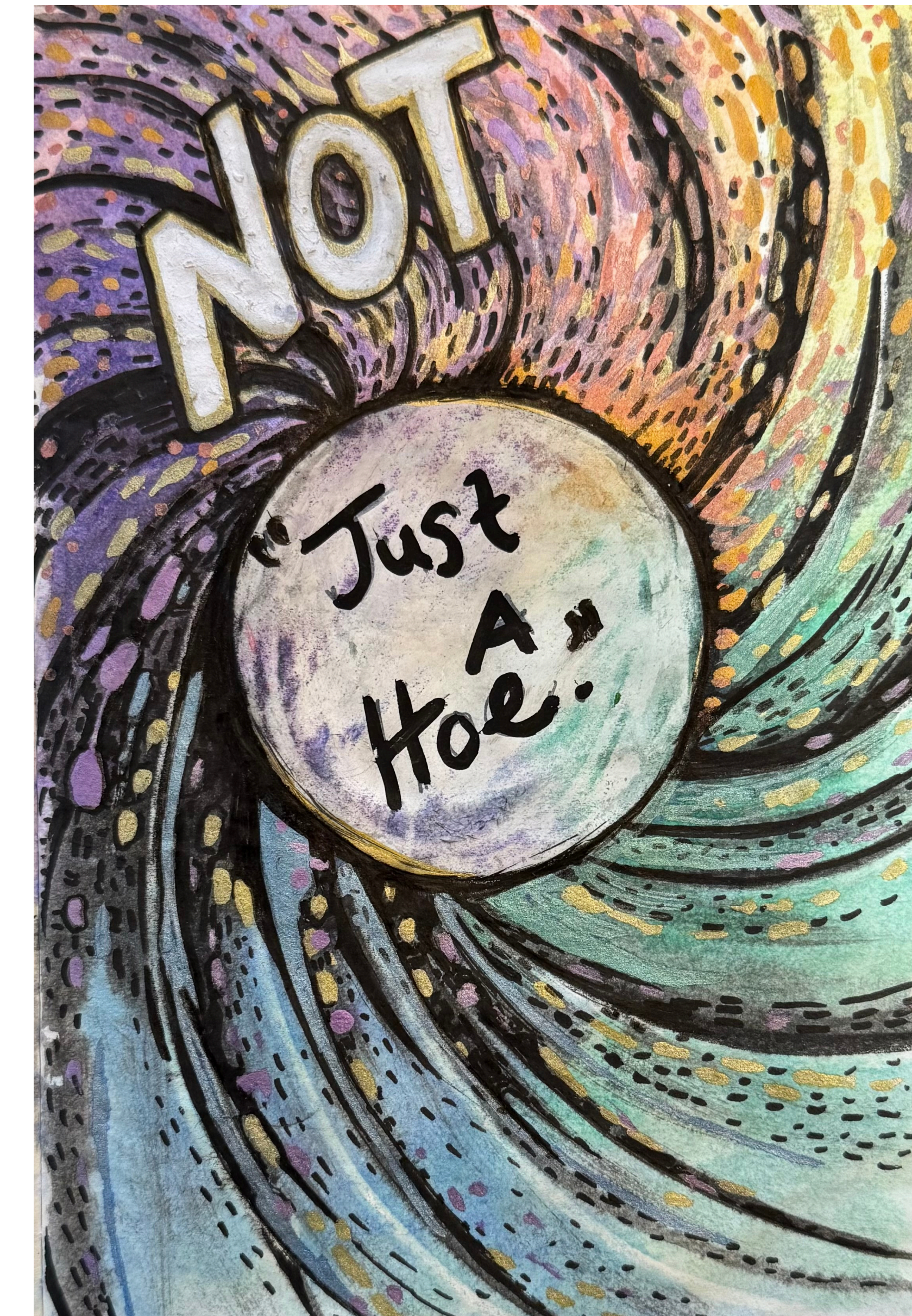
- Positive psychological change through meaningful engagement with trauma survivors and/or narratives.
- New ways in thinking, feeling and behaving that move beyond the trauma rather than returning to baseline functioning.
 - Greater appreciation for life and relationships
 - Increased personal strength and resilience
 - Development of new life perspectives or priorities
 - Enhanced sense of meaning or spiritual growth

(Berger, 2020; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008; Interiano-Shiverdecker et al., 2025; Joseph & Linley, 2008; Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995; Wallace & County, 2023; Woodby et al., 2011)

Reflexive Art Journaling Pieces

Techniques

- Timed Art Response: *Create art for 30 minutes after engaging with data, followed by short written reflection.*
- Dual-Page Format: *Visual art on one page, written interpretation on the opposite.*
- Symbolic Reflection: *Use color, texture, and imagery to represent emotions or themes.*



Reflexive Art Journaling

- A creative tool to combat VT and promote PTG among qualitative trauma researchers.
- Reflexive journals help researchers document thoughts, emotions, and methodological decisions throughout the study.
- Incorporating artmaking, such as drawing, painting, or collage, adds a non-verbal, deeper layer of reflection.
- Visual art responses help maintain focus on participants' experiences, reduce bias, and support epoché.
- Beneficial for all research team members, regardless of experience level.
- Enhances self-awareness, supports bracketing, and provides a way to process difficult emotions.
- Promotes researcher wellbeing, strengthens trustworthiness of findings, and enriches both the research process and its outcomes.

Need for Exploration

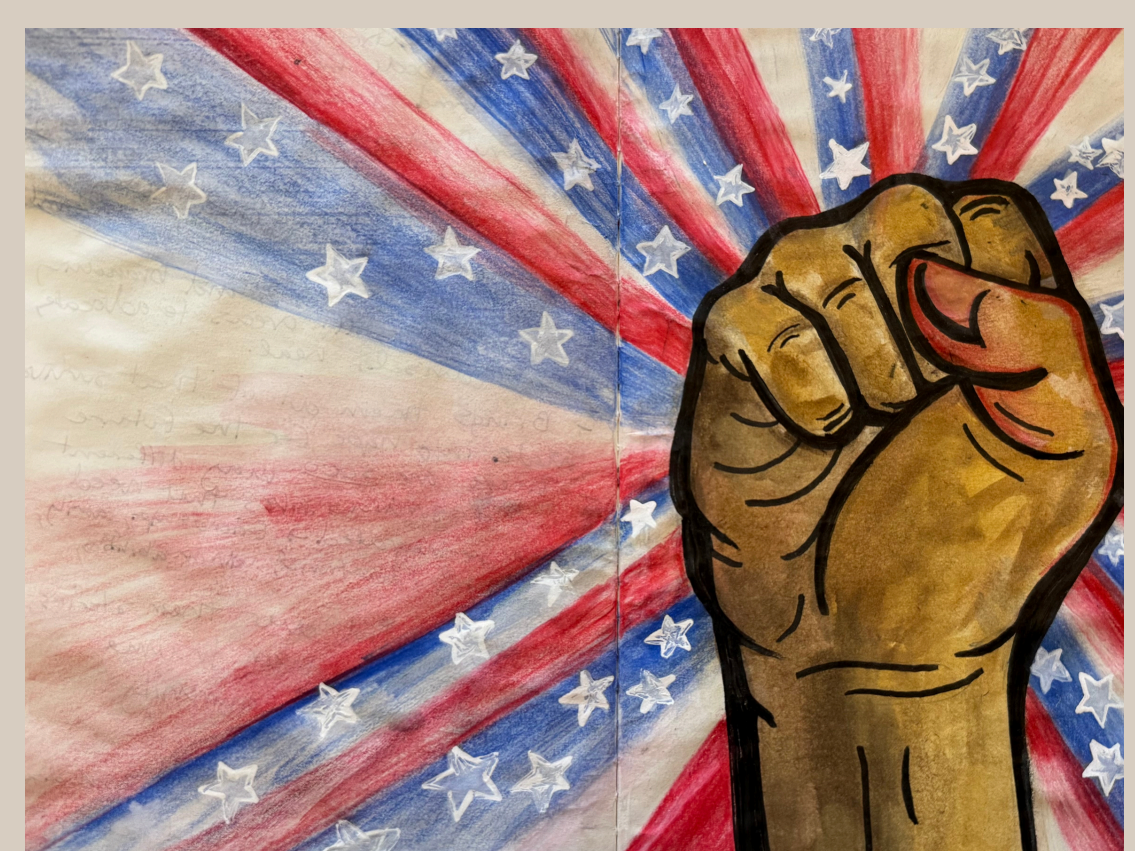
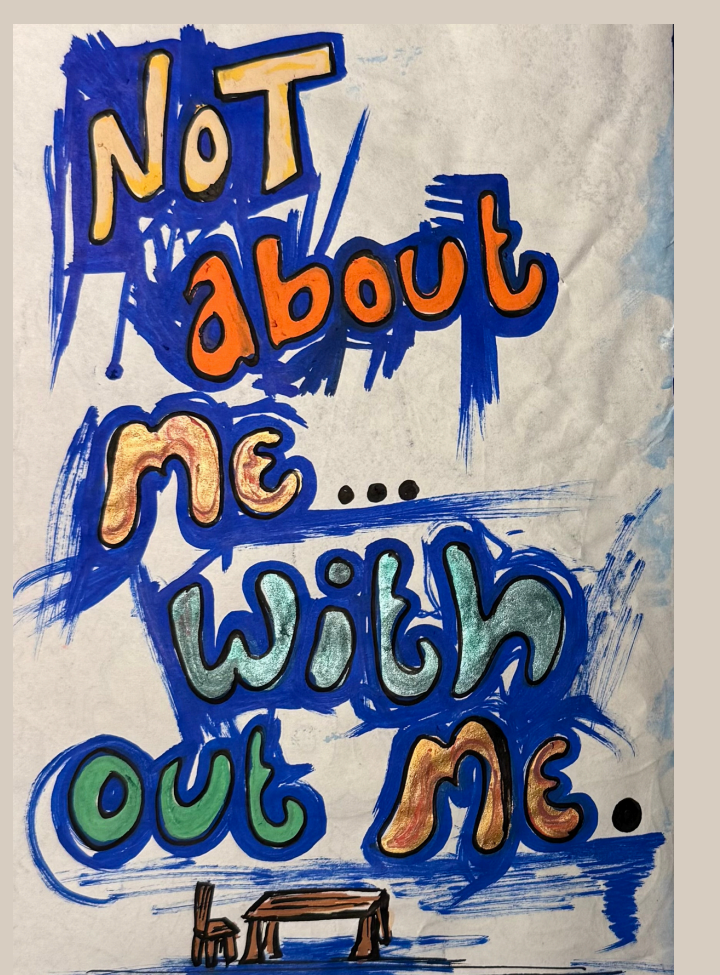
- Limited scholarship addresses how graduate students can be supported in trauma-related qualitative research beyond traditional self-care and supervision approaches.
- Reflexive art journaling remains underexplored as a creative, structured practice that may protect against vicarious trauma while fostering epoché, empathy, and resilience.

(Berger, 2015; Bird, 2018; Darawsheh, 2014; Hays & Singh, 2023; Gibson, 2018; McNiff, 2011; Moran & Asquith, 2020; Nikischer, 2018; Potash, 2019)

Recommendations

- Introduce art journaling early to establish a sustainable self-care rhythm and schedule processing time after interviews or supervision to prevent emotional overload.
- Ensure art-based methods align with research goals and ethical standards.
- Create collaborative debriefing spaces for teams to reflect and build resilience.
- Develop training models that promote creative, trauma-informed reflection in graduate programs.

(Gibson, 2018; Nikischer, 2018)



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