

# EXPERIENCE AND PERSISTENCE OF CAMPUS SEXUAL ASSAULT INVESTIGATORS

by

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(Under the Direction of Chris Linder)

## ABSTRACT

The 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter* (U.S. Department of Education, 2011) sparked a change in how staff in higher education managed sexual misconduct cases. In many institutions student affairs trained professionals became campus sexual assault investigators. Most investigators entered the new role with little or no training in understanding their response to secondary trauma. This phenomenological study focused on the experience of nine student affairs trained professionals in a campus sexual assault investigator role, and how those professionals experienced their response to secondary trauma. The researcher used a framework of vicarious trauma to understand the participants' responses to secondary trauma, how their various training programs prepared them to understand their response, if at all, and how they persisted as investigators. The results of the study include suggestions for preparing professionals exposed to secondary trauma, ways to support professionals experience vicarious trauma or other secondary traumatic responses, and an understanding of a cycle of self-care for campus sexual assault investigators.

INDEX WORDS: VICARIOUS TRAUMA, COMPASSION FATIGUE, SECONDARY  
TRAUMATIC STRESS, BURNOUT, STUDENT AFFAIRS, STUDENT  
SERVICES, HIGHER EDUCATION, TITLE IX, SEXUAL ASSAULT,  
SEXUAL MISCONDUCT, INVESTIGATION, INVESTIGATOR,  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iv
LIST OF TABLES .....	ix
LIST OF FIGURES .....	x
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
Problem Statement .....	2
Purpose of the Study .....	4
Significance of the Study .....	5
Researcher Perspective .....	7
Theoretical Framework .....	9
Brief Overview of the Study .....	9
Chapter Summary .....	12
2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	13
Campus Sexual Violence and Title IX.....	13
The Trauma of Sexual Violence .....	18
Vicarious Trauma.....	22
Learning to Create Systems of Support .....	31
Student Affairs Professionals.....	34
Chapter Summary .....	37

3	METHODOLOGY .....	38
	Paradigm .....	39
	Methodology .....	40
	Participants.....	42
	Data Collection .....	46
	Data Analysis .....	49
	Chapter Summary .....	53
4	FINDINGS .....	54
	Understanding How Investigators Respond.....	55
	Understanding How Investigators Process Their Responses.....	75
	Understanding How Investigators are Prepared to Respond .....	87
	Chapter Summary .....	102
5	DISCUSSION .....	103
	Accidental Intervention.....	104
	Discussion .....	106
	Cycle of Self-Care.....	110
	Implications for Practice .....	112
	Limitations and Future Research .....	116
	Conclusion .....	118
	REFERENCES .....	120
	APPENDICES	
	A Recruitment Materials.....	131
	B Interview Protocols .....	135

## LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1: Study Participants and Selected Demographics .....	45

## LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Venn Diagram of Possible Responses to Secondary Trauma .....	24
Figure 2: Chapter Four Flowchart.....	55
Figure 3: Lucy’s Reflection Photo of Her First Case .....	70
Figure 4: Lucy’s Reflection Photo of Her Most Recent Case .....	93
Figure 5: Cycle of Self-Care .....	111

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

It happened over my kitchen sink. The weight of being one of two investigators on a sexual assault case. Her face as she told her story. His face as he learned of the accusation against him. My heart broke for them both. These were students from my university. Both were people for whom my education prepared me to have empathy, but in the role of a Title IX investigator, I was to be stoic, impartial, and cautiously empathetic. Finally, it was too much to hold in. So, one night, after my alma mater's football victory against our rival, I cried over the sink as the adrenaline from the game dropped and the alcohol lowered my inhibitions. I cried from the sadness of bad things done to and by good people. I cried from the memories of helping loved ones through their journeys post-sexual assault. This was my first experience with an adverse reaction from my role as a sexual assault/Title IX investigator, my first encounter with secondary trauma. Other incidents followed, including the need to leave work mid-day after a gruesome investigation left me unable to focus on any other tasks, mood swings at home that frustrated my loved ones, and an avoidance of work when I didn't have the heart to face my cases.

*Secondary trauma* is defined as the reaction of a skilled helper to hearing firsthand accounts of the trauma of others (Lynch, 2017; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Pearlman & Caringi, 2009). Secondary trauma may have no impact at all, but it can also lead to a reduction in empathy (Frey, Beesley, Abbot, & Kendrick, 2017; Turgoose &

Maddox, 2017), symptoms of burnout (Canfield, 2005; Marshall, Gardner, Hughes, & Lowery, 2016), and/or symptoms of trauma and coping within skilled helpers themselves (Lynch, 2017; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Pearlman & Caringi, 2009). My research into the topic and my own experience as a sexual assault investigator has led me to focus on vicarious trauma as a lens for understanding individuals' responses to secondary trauma. *Vicarious trauma* is a response to secondary trauma in which trauma symptoms transfer from the client to the skilled helper (McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Pearlman & Caringi, 2009). While extensive research in the counseling field has investigated vicarious trauma and related concepts (Furlonger & Taylor, 2013; Jenkins, Mitchell, Baird, Whitfield, & Meyer, 2011; Parker & Henfield, 2012; Pearlman & Caringi, 2009), little research exists on its impact on higher education professionals, including those responsible for sexual assault investigations (Lynch, 2017).

### **Problem Statement**

Title IX, the focus of an April 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter*, prohibits discrimination based on gender in higher education or in other activities receiving federal funding (Edwards, 2015; Tani, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). A Dear Colleague Letter is a letter issued by a federal department encouraging affected colleagues in the associated field to follow new guidelines or regulations (Funk, 2001). Agencies that receive funding from the federal office that issued the letter view the letter as a directive (Funk, 2001; Tani, 2017). The April 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter*, issued by the U.S. Department of Education, clarified expectations for campus reporting of sexual violence, including sexual harassment, stalking, and sexual assault. The Department of Education expected higher education institutions that receive federal funds—which

includes all institutions that accept students' federal financial aid—to improve violence reporting methods, grievance procedures, and campus support for victims of sexual violence (Edwards, 2015; Tani, 2017). The initial release of the letter included an unstated, but expected, short timeline to complete an investigation to meet the needs of the Office for Civil Rights. The department later clarified this timeline to be 60 days from the initial report of sexual misconduct (Edwards, 2015; Tani, 2017).

In the summer of 2017, the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) began rolling back the requirements of the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter* to provide universities more flexibility in handling cases (Brown, 2017; Mangan, 2017). The National Association of College and University Attorneys interpreted the intention of the roll-back not as a lessening of the duty to prevent sexual violence or adjudicate cases, but as an opportunity to build adjudication and reporting systems that fit an institution's culture and structure (Brown, 2017; Kelderman, 2017; Mangan, 2017). Neither the original 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter* nor the 2017 documents specified who in the institution should serve in an investigatory capacity.

Student affairs and counseling-based professionals are predisposed and motivated to create positive change in their institutions and to step forward to do the tough, emotional work on campus (Day, 1994; Epstein, 2004). When the U.S. Department of Education released the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter*, calling for higher standards in investigating campus sexual assault, many institutions moved student affairs professionals into the roles of Title IX coordinators and investigators (Jones, 2014). Student affairs professionals possessed the skill set to work with students in trauma (Reynolds, 2011; Reynolds & Altabef, 2015); however, they often lacked the training to

process their own responses to secondary trauma (Lynch, 2017). The associated trauma from working with victims of sexual assault and respondents was a heavy burden to bear, with potential long-term negative effects (Canfield, 2005; Epstein, 2004; Iliffe & Steed, 2000; Jones, 2014; Voth Schrag, 2017).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The present study is a phenomenological exploration of the response to secondary trauma occurring among student affairs professionals working with Title IX and sexual misconduct cases. Many counselor preparation programs include coursework addressing individuals' responses to the trauma of others (Parker & Henfield, 2012; Protivnak, Paylo, & Mercer, 2013; Sommer, 2008). However, student affairs preparation programs and professional development trainings offer little in the way of information or support regarding responses to secondary trauma (Lynch, 2017). Following the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter* (U.S. Department of Education, 2011), student affairs professionals placed in the role of investigators thus had minimal training in this area and lacked even the language to discuss how investigating impacted them (Jones, 2014; Lynch, 2017; Reynolds, 2011; Reynolds & Altabef, 2015).

The purpose of this study is to examine how student affairs professionals respond to secondary trauma as Title IX/sexual misconduct investigators, using a framework of vicarious trauma. The study focuses on the phenomenon of the secondary traumatic response itself, without the use of specific research questions. Secondary traumatic response is a broad concept that impacts people in a variety of ways, including creating vicarious trauma (Canfield, 2005; Epstein, 2004; Iliffe & Steed, 2000; Jones, 2014; Voth Schrag, 2017). Phenomenology focuses on the emergence of the essence, or epoché, of



the research topic (Heidegger, 2013; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Moustakas, 1994; Stapleton, 1983). Without specific research questions, the epoché of the phenomenon can emerge through guided conversations, allowing the dynamic variations of the experience to arise naturally, without the interruption of an agenda beyond the discovery of the participants' experience of their response to secondary trauma.

### **Significance of the Study**

Traditionally trained student affairs professionals are rarely exposed to the concept of secondary trauma and therefore may be unprepared to process their response (Jones, 2014; Lynch, 2017; Reynolds, 2015). For Title IX investigators, repeated short-term exposure to persons with sexual assault trauma develops into a connected series of traumatic exposure (Baligad, 2016; Conley & Griffith, 2016; Jones, 2014). Literature exists on the impact of long-term exposure to patients' trauma among therapists and counselors (Canfield, 2005; Iliffe & Steed, 2000; McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Schauben & Frazier, 1995), teachers (Stasio, Fiorilli, Benevene, Uusitalo-Malmivaara, & Chiacchio, 2017), police officers (Turgoose & Maddox, 2017), and other helping professionals (Frey, Beesley, Abbott, & Kendrick, 2017; Remer & Ferguson, 1995; Webb, 2015). However, student affairs literature rarely addresses this topic (Lynch, 2017). Instead, the majority of student affairs preparation and professional development programs focus on situational triage, referral, and micro-skill development (Protivnak, Paylo, & Mercer, 2013; Reynolds, 2011; Reynolds & Altabef, 2015), while Title IX and investigation trainings focus on policy and procedure (Baligad, 2016; Lake, 2017).

Some student affairs professionals thus become Title IX investigators without proper preparation or language to manage their responses to secondary trauma (Baligad,

2016; Lynch, 2017; Reynolds, 2011; Reynolds & Altabef, 2015). Additionally, student affairs-trained supervisors of Title IX investigators may not be prepared to support staff who are repeatedly exposed to secondary trauma (Baligad, 2017; Conley & Griffith, 2016; Day, Lawson, & Burge, 2017). Investigators may need time to process a case following an interview, experience psychosocial symptoms (e.g., feel mistrustful of male co-workers, fear walking alone at night), or miss work to remove themselves from the environment associated with the case (Choi, 2017; Coles, Astbury, Dartnall, & Limjerwal, 2014; Frey et al., 2016; Samios, Rodzik, & Abel, 2012; Schauben & Frazier, 1995; Turgoose et al., 2017). Given the potential for student affairs professionals to experience adverse responses to secondary trauma, such professionals must be able to initiate self-care, practice healthy coping methods to separate from the workplace and situation, access a supportive environment, and develop a lexicon that enables them to understand and describe their experience (Epstein, 2004; Guthrie, Woods, Cusker, & Gregory, 2005; Jones, 2014; Lynch, 2017; McClellan, 2012; Simms, 2017). Those who encounter vicarious trauma must take particular care to make time for such activities to minimize the negative impact of these experiences on their personal and professional lives (Jenkins et al., 2011; Marshall, Gardner, Hughes, & Lowery, 2016; Parker & Henfield, 2012).

Outside of Title IX, secondary trauma also consistently impacts student affairs professionals who participate in crisis response teams, on-call duty in housing, and regular work duties ranging from responding to reports of sexual assault or suicidal ideation to supporting students dealing with personal or family trauma (Lynch, 2017; Marshall et al., 2016; McClellan, 2016; Parker & Henfield, 2012). This study will benefit

the field of student affairs and student affairs professionals themselves by identifying necessary skills to include in Title IX trainings, student affairs preparation programs, and continued professional development opportunities. Coursework and trainings must prepare helping professionals to understand and articulate their secondary traumatic responses, engage in appropriate self-care, and more effectively supervise staff dealing with trauma-related situations.

### **Researcher Perspective**

Being an investigator is simultaneously draining and energizing. It means helping students through terrible things, but also seeing them emerge from these difficult times and move forward with their lives. I have left work early to process new information in a case, unable to focus on anything else; cried over the terrible things I've seen and heard in a case; and forced myself into a place of numbness to get myself through a case—and I know I'm not alone (Jones, 2014; Marshall et al., 2016). The continued exposure to the trauma of students affects student affairs professionals at various levels (Lynch, 2017; Marshall et al., 2016; Parker & Henfield, 2012).

When my employer offered me the opportunity to become an investigator in 2014, neither the Title IX training I received at the time nor my previous training prepared me for my response to the secondary trauma associated with being an investigator. The word I used to describe my response was *burnout*. But I felt burnout when I worked in orientation after a 121-hour work week; I felt burnout at the end of the school year after countless programs and banquets. As I cried over the kitchen sink, overcome with emotion after showing a victim of sexual violence the secret video taken by their assailant, “burnout” felt like an inadequate term to describe my experience.

Burnout is a valid response to secondary trauma, but the concept was inadequate to capture my experience and personal response to secondary trauma. In my initial research on the topic, I came across the terms “compassion fatigue,” “secondary traumatic stress,” and “vicarious trauma.” Each of these terms led me down a path to better understand my experience. I focused my initial research, and subsequently framed my study, on vicarious trauma because it most accurately described my response to secondary trauma. This study investigates the under-researched phenomenon of student affairs professionals’ responses to secondary trauma, an issue that affects not only Title IX investigators, but also student affairs personnel in on-call, crisis management, and other trauma-related roles (Lynch, 2017). I researched this topic for self-healing, to normalize my experience, and to help the field of student affairs more effectively prepare current and future professionals.

My personal experience with sexual assault includes both being a friend of survivors and being a survivor myself, though one who was not able to identify my experience in college as assault until I had the definitions that exist today. These experiences unquestionably impact my lens on the subject. My experiences have motivated me to process my own responses to secondary trauma to become a stronger, more intentional investigator. Some counselors working with trauma victims experienced similar traumatic incidents in their past (Baird & Kracen, 2006; Beausaert, Froehlich, Devos, & Riley, 2016). These counselors may display signs of vicarious trauma or other secondary trauma symptoms; however, research has demonstrated that altruism motivates them to better serve their clients by using their own experiences to work through and past their re-traumatization (Baird & Kracen, 2006; Beausaert et al., 2016; Jenkins et al.,

2011). Throughout the research process, I used a video research journal to reflect and re-center myself on my study when my own past experiences or issues of secondary trauma impacted my perspective. This step ensured that I stayed congruent throughout my study. *Congruency* is achieved by maintaining my charted path in my study by staying true to my chosen paradigm, methodology, and research design (Jones, Torres, Armino, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The concepts of burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress, which describe the impact of working with trauma victims on skilled helpers, are connected with vicarious trauma. These concepts are not mutually exclusive (Baird & Kracen, 2006), and both researchers and participants often use the terms synonymously. Multiple workplace and life stressors influence the onset of burnout and compassion fatigue. Vicarious trauma provided the framework for exploring the impact of secondary trauma on Title IX investigators in the present study. Vicarious trauma focuses on both the immediate and extended response to secondary trauma (McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Pearlman & Caringi, 2009).

### **Brief Overview of the Study**

This study is a phenomenological exploration of campus sexual assault investigators' responses to secondary trauma, through the lens of a constructivist paradigm. Using a constructivist paradigm, researchers co-construct data through shared meaning making, or looking at the experiences of self and others to understand the collective experience (Guido, Chávez, & Lincoln, 2010; Mertens, 2010). The shared and linked experiences appear in phenomenology as the essence or epoché (Heidegger, 2013;

Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Moustakas, 1994; Stapleton, 1983). As the researcher, I am the primary research tool in the study, in that my thoughts, feelings, interpretations, and self-identity are integrated into its findings (Mertens, 2010). I used this paradigm and methodology to find the epoché of the collected experiences of Title IX investigators regarding their responses to secondary trauma. The study included nine participants to reach saturation in the emergence of the epoché (Mertens, 2010; Stapleton, 1983). Eight of the nine participants are current investigators, and one is a recent retiree. I conducted the research interviews in October and November of 2017.

### **Study Boundaries**

To research how well prepared Title IX investigators at U.S. institutions of higher education are to handle their responses to secondary trauma, I recruited participants who had received traditional student affairs training. All participants held at least one graduate degree in student affairs or higher education administration, had investigated a minimum of two cases, and had served as an investigator for at least 12 months since the release of the April 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter*. I conducted a two-part, single-session interview with each participant, consisting of a pre-interview reflection and discussion of their investigatory experience followed by a traditional, semi-structured interview. I analyzed the data through coding to identify shared experiences or themes that emerged from the participants' narratives about their secondary traumatic responses (Mertens, 2010; Moustakas, 1994).

### **Notes on Language and Definitions**

Secondary trauma refers to the impact on skilled helpers of assisting survivors who have experienced trauma firsthand. The skilled helpers' internal or external

processing of these interactions constitute their response to secondary trauma. Secondary trauma may have little or no impact on a skilled helper; alternatively, it can lead to burnout, compassion fatigue, and/or vicarious trauma. This study focuses on Title IX investigators' responses to secondary trauma.

Scholars, lawyers, and higher education practitioners refer to sexual violence in multiple ways. The fluctuating terms of sexual violence, sexual misconduct, sexual assault, and sexual harassment point to the lack of consistency in language and support the systemic issue of the rape culture in society (Baligad, 2016; Edwards, 2015). All of these terms are part of the Title IX investigation portfolio and I use them interchangeably, recognizing that their interpretation may vary based on readers' paradigms surrounding sexual violence.

Title IX investigators and researchers use an array of terminology rooted in the legal system to label the students involved in sexual misconduct processes and to describe their experiences (Baligad, 2016; Lake, 2017). The person who experienced the sexual misconduct, commonly referred to as the victim, is known as the complainant in the context of most investigations. The person accused of sexual misconduct is the respondent, or colloquially, the perpetrator or rapist. I use *complainant* and *respondent* most often as these terms do not assign blame or assume victimization, which is appropriate since an investigator is seeking the answer to that question. Additionally, the term *egregious* describes the intensity of sexual violence within a case (Baligad, 2016). The term is commonly used in Title IX procedural trainings, and it permeates the participants' language as well as my own.

### **Chapter Summary**

As a Title IX investigator, I experienced negative responses to secondary trauma, and through conversations with friends and colleagues I learned that my situation was not unique. Sexual assault is a traumatic experience for those involved, and the repeated involvement of an investigator in multiple cases inescapably impacts the investigator's life. Through this phenomenological study, I attempted to understand that experience; to discover whether, how, and why the response to secondary trauma affects investigators; and to learn what support systems are in place within oneself, at home, and in the workplace. Allowing the epoché of the participants' responses to secondary trauma to emerge through the study acknowledged the investigators' individual journeys while also illuminating their common experience. The following chapter provides brief information on Title IX and campus sexual misconduct investigations and reviews the literature exploring the breadth and complexity of secondary trauma responses, including how student affairs professionals become responsible and receive preparation and training for investigating and adjudicating sexual misconduct cases.



## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature surrounding sexual violence, Title IX, and vicarious trauma, and existing research on student affairs professionals who serve in investigatory roles, provide a context for understanding the response to secondary trauma in sexual misconduct cases. Little research has directly addressed this combination of topics (Lynch, 2017), but a review of existing studies can help connect the complexities of trauma, its effects on those involved in cases of sexual assault, the role of student affairs professionals in investigating incidents of sexual violence, and the ways investigators learn to mitigate their responses to secondary trauma.

Investigators rely on systems of support, both internal and external, to work through vicarious trauma and continue to support the students involved in Title IX cases (Epstein, 2004; Jones, 2014). To illuminate the complexities of investigating participants' responses to secondary trauma, I begin by defining campus sexual assault and explaining the implications of Title IX. I subsequently review the literature on vicarious trauma and its related concepts in greater detail, including an overview of the research on how investigators are prepared, by institutions, graduate education, or professional development opportunities, to understand their own responses to secondary trauma.

#### **Campus Sexual Violence and Title IX**

On April 4, 2011, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights released a *Dear Colleague Letter* clarifying how the 1972 Title IX education amendment,

which prohibited discrimination based on gender, applied to sexual violence in educational settings. The U.S. Department of Education (2011) defined sexual violence as “physical sexual acts perpetrated against a person’s will or where a person is incapable of giving consent due to the victim’s use of drugs or alcohol” (p. 1), or due to the victim having intellectual and other disabilities. Additionally, the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter* identified “rape, sexual assault, sexual battery, and sexual coercion” as acts of sexual violence (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, pp. 1-2), and required schools that receive federal funding to provide a safe, non-hostile environment for students both on and off campus. In addition to laying out guidelines for the environment and student safety, the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter* clarified the 2001 Office of Civil Rights regulations on grievance and investigation procedures for Title IX cases.

### **Pre-2011 Campus Sexual Assault Reporting and Procedures**

Prior to the issuing of the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter*, the structures and processes in place to report sexual misconduct on college campuses were generally housed in student conduct or related offices, which often lacked built-in support systems for complainants (Holland & Cortina, 2017; Tani, 2017). These processes were typically lengthy, inconsistent across institutions, and not well promoted or supported by faculty and staff campus-wide (Christensen, 2015; Holland & Cortina, 2017; Tani, 2017). Available training for conduct hearing boards and officers in adjudicating sexual violence cases often blended with the full spectrum of student misconduct training (Baligad, 2016; Holland & Cortina, 2017; Tani, 2017). This lack of focused training reduced consistency in the handling of cases, complainants’ experience with the process, and the outcomes of cases (Holland & Cortina, 2017; Tani, 2017). Embedded in the student conduct model,

which involves a variety of students and staff members, adjudication processes for sexual violence did not provide strong levels of confidentiality (Baligad, 2016; Tani, 2017). Yet perceived confidentiality is vital in encouraging complainants to report a matter as private and personal as sexual assault (Baligad, 2016; Christensen, 2015).

When institutions lacked campus adjudication processes altogether, they relied on law enforcement to investigate and handle crimes of a sexual nature (Holland & Cortina, 2017; Tani, 2017). Police investigatory structures were difficult to navigate, highly public, did not always cover the breadth of definitions of sexual violence, and could take years to complete (Edwards, 2016; Holland & Cortina, 2017; Tani, 2017). Additionally, with respondents often released on bond and still attending classes, complainants had little choice but to continue their education in a potentially hostile environment (Holland & Cortina, 2017). Sexual violence conduct processes housed in student affairs offices worked to minimize interactions between the parties involved by offering to adjust student schedules, provide alternative housing options, and/or place a no contact order between the two parties (Baligad, 2016; Tani, 2017). When campus or local police investigated cases, these protections were generally unavailable, adding stress to the students attempting to continue their education (Holland & Cortina, 2017).

Complex reporting structures often dissuade students from reporting sexual violence (Holland & Cortina, 2017). Survivors underreport sexual assaults to campus officials due to a variety of external and internal pressures: fear of being stigmatized as a victim, confusion resulting from the role of alcohol or drugs, messages based on religion, a desire to forget the incident or put it in the past, relationships between complainants and

respondents, and complicated adjudication processes (Best & Jun, 2017; Holland & Cortina, 2017; Voth Schrag, 2017).

The low rate of reporting compared to the estimated statistics of actual incidents has sparked advocates and activists to raise awareness of sexual assault in institutions of higher education (Campbell & Wasco, 2005; Edwards, 2015; Tani, 2017). Local activists have focused on changing institutional environments, supported by national advocates working in Washington, D.C. to incite federal change (Campbell & Wasco, 2005). Title IX focuses on preventing discrimination based on sex or gender, and sexual assault disproportionately affects women and transgender persons: one in every four college-aged women and one in two transgender persons, compared to one in 33 men, are sexually abused or assaulted (Tani, 2017; Voller & Long, 2010; Voth Schrag, 2017). In this context, Title IX emerged as a central piece of legislation, used in multiple legal cases regarding campus sexual assault, to provide safe, supportive campus environments for all students (Campbell & Wasco, 2005; Edwards, 2015; Tani, 2017). The collective efforts of advocates culminated with the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter*, which standardized processes across institutions to simplify reporting and adjudication procedures (Tani, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

### **Post-*Dear Colleague Letter* Title IX Investigation Procedures**

Following the issuance of the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter*, required Title IX investigation procedures included notification of the complaint to involved parties in a timely manner, completion of investigations within 60 days when possible, equal and impartial treatment of both the complainant (victim or survivor) and respondent (perpetrator or assailant), use of the standard of a preponderance of evidence to decide

the outcome, and appeal procedures for both parties (Carroll et al., 2013; Tani, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). To provide consistency across cases, every campus was required to identify a Title IX coordinator responsible for implementing Title IX on campus, developing educational programs on the topic of sexual violence, and creating and coordinating grievance procedures for complainants (Carroll et al., 2013; Tani, 2017). Individual colleges and universities interpreted the complexities of the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter* differently, leading to a variety of investigatory models (Carroll et al., 2013; Fink, 2017; Tani, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

According to the *Dear Colleague Letter*, Title IX investigators must be properly trained to work with sexual violence cases (Baligad, 2016; Fink, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). However, OCR did not identify what the training should entail or who is qualified to be an investigator (Carroll et al., 2014; Edwards, 2015). This lack of specificity left a great deal of interpretation up to the institutions.

As a result, a variety of Title IX investigatory models emerged across academia. Some colleges chose to identify a single Title IX coordinator to handle cases from start to finish (Baligad, 2016; Carroll et al., 2014; Lake, 2017). Other institutions developed more complex systems involving deputy Title IX coordinators, multiple recruited investigators, and independent hearing boards (Baligad, 2016; Fink, 2017; Lake, 2017). Recruited investigators could include student affairs professionals, who either self-selected or whom other professionals nominated to assist with the caseload of the Title IX coordinator. Such investigators need to be trained in how to handle grievance procedures, work with trauma victims, determine credibility, run an investigation, properly weigh evidence, remain impartial, and understand cultural differences surrounding sexual

violence (Edwards, 2015; Henry et al., 2016; Lake, 2017; Tani, 2017). In addition, investigators must understand their own motivations in participating in the Title IX process and maintain an awareness of any personal trauma they have experienced, which an investigation may trigger and which may affect their efficacy (Day, 1994; Jenkins, Mitchell, Baird, Whitfield, & Meyer, 2011; Mousilo, Calhoun, & Gidycz, 2011).

### **The Trauma of Sexual Violence**

Sexual violence and campus investigations are unquestionably traumatic for the complainant; the respondent; their friends, family, and witnesses; and the staff involved in the investigation. Recent data estimates that one in four women, one in 33 men, and one in two transgender students are survivors of sexual violence on college campuses (Voller & Long, 2010; Voth Schrag, 2017). These statistics support research findings that college-age individuals are at high risk to experience sexual violence (Holland & Cortina, 2017; Voth Schrag, 2017).

### **Hegemonic Masculinity**

Despite the demonstrated prevalence of sexual violence on campus, societal influences continue to normalize hegemonic masculine behavior through social media, entertainment, news, politics, and expected gender roles (Giraldi & Monk-Turner, 2017). In the research literature, scholars refer to the influence of hegemonic masculinity and predominant gender roles as a “societal rape culture” that perpetuates, supports, and in some cases praises the normalized behavior of sexual violence (Giraldi & Monk-Turner, 2017; Pascoe & Hollander, 2016). Music, television, and movies portray college life as rife with drunken sexual interactions, idolizing masculine figures who dominate women (Burgess & Burpo, 2012). Recent news stories and the #metoo movement demonstrate

the rise in sexual violence and discrimination against women in entertainment, politics, and the business world; however, various men in powerful business and political positions have sought to marginalize and combat those stories, reinforcing the grip of hegemonic masculinity on society (Landler, 2018; Mahdawi, 2016). This societal norm impacts both complainants and respondents, as complainants adjust to and even expect misogynistic behavior from their peers and other men and respondents are blind to their own misogynistic behavior (Holland & Cortina, 2017; Pascoe & Hollander, 2016).

### **Complainants**

Complainants are the victims of sexual violence, exiting the experience with some form of trauma (Holland & Cortina, 2017; Voth Schrag, 2017). Signs of trauma displayed by complainants may include denying the incident by suppressing it, feeling fearful of others, experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), performing poorly in school, undergoing personality shifts, and displaying signs of depression (Holland & Cortina, 2017; Voller & Long, 2010; Voth Schrag, 2017). Complainants who formerly exhibited an upbeat personality may become quiet and withdrawn, altering friendships and their college experience (Holland & Cortina, 2017).

Prior to the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter* and the strengthening of Title IX, some universities had created support systems for complainants within the campus counseling center or a victim advocate services office, but the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter* specified the need to increase the awareness, accessibility, and efficacy of these services (Baligad, 2016; Edwards, 2015; Tani, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). The wider availability and accessibility of trauma services has helped to normalize the counseling experience for complainants (Best & Jun, 2017; Holland & Cortina, 2017). However,

expanding students' use of these services to aid in trauma management requires colleges and universities to earn the trust of those in their care (Holland & Cortina, 2017).

### **Respondents**

The accusation of sexual misconduct or related behavior can also be traumatic for respondents. While some respondents are aware of the seriousness of their actions, others may be unaware of their violation prior to the investigation, due in part to the perpetuation of rape culture (Christensen, 2015; Pascoe & Hollander, 2016). Statistically, 98% of respondents identify as cisgender men (Pascoe & Hollander, 2016). Conditioned by rape culture and the systemic adoption of sexual violence as a societal norm in media, news, and music, these men may not understand the definition of sexual misconduct (Christensen, 2015; Giraldi & Monk-Turner, 2017). Rape culture blurs the definition of sexual violence for many young men, as Pascoe and Hollander (2016) observe:

Because of this definitional blurriness, a range of behaviors that fall between the categories of rape and not-rape are available to enact male dominance while still allowing men to preserve their identity as non-rapists, and perhaps even allowing them to shame other men for being rapists. (p. 71)

Young men may experience cognitive dissonance in an investigation in response to the juxtaposition of their own blurred definition of sexual violence with their institution's definition of sexual misconduct (Pascoe & Hollander, 2016; Tani, 2017).

Additionally, the expansion of complainant rights under the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter* dwarfed the rights of the respondent, despite the call for equal and impartial treatment (Christensen, 2015; Sullivan, 2015; Tani, 2017). Many institutions overcompensated in supporting the complainant by barring respondents from campus,



outside of academic activities, during the investigation period (Christensen, 2015; Sullivan, 2015). Not only did these respondents experience the trauma of the accusation of sexual assault, but their institutions treated them as guilty before completing their investigation (Christensen, 2015; Pascoe & Hollander, 2016; Sullivan, 2015). Since the release of the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter*, the Office of Civil Rights has provided additional, supplemental documentation to clarify and reinforce the need for impartial and fair treatment of respondents (Christensen, 2015; Tani, 2017). Additionally, colleges and universities have begun creating positions to support respondents during these investigations (Christensen, 2015; Pascoe & Hollander, 2016).

### **Secondary Impactees**

Some researchers have focused on supporting skilled helpers (Bartoskova, 2017; Canfield, 2005) or the families of complainants (Remer & Ferguson, 1995) in coping with the consequences of secondary traumatization. Investigations into the experiences of those who comprise the complainant's support system have demonstrated the breadth of sexual violence's impact, beyond complainants and respondents (Choi, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2011; Remer & Ferguson, 1995). Participating in investigations repeatedly exposes Title IX investigators to the trauma of all case participants, accumulating in multiple responses to secondary trauma (Canfield, 2005; Choi, 2016; Jenkins et al., 2011; Turgoose & Maddox, 2017). For such individuals, vicarious trauma is a potential side effect of the compounded trauma as well as any triggered trauma from the investigator's own past experience (Jones, 2014; McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

### **Vicarious Trauma**

Vicarious trauma is defined as the “negative transformation in the helper that results from empathic engagement with trauma survivors and their trauma material, combined with a commitment of responsibility to help them” (Pearlman & Caringi, 2009, pp. 202-203). Vicarious trauma develops as a result of repeated exposure to those who have experienced extreme trauma (Jenkins et al., 2011). Those experiencing vicarious trauma may adopt the victim’s negative emotions and distress and develop symptoms of their own, including feelings of burnout, doubts about their ability to perform in their chosen profession, and/or a resurrection of past personal trauma (Furlonger & Taylor, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2011; Parker & Henfield, 2012). Because sexual violence is a traumatic experience (Edwards, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2011), university officials working with Title IX cases may be predisposed to experience vicarious trauma.

Scholars in the counseling field have studied the impact of clients’ trauma on counselors, lending validity to the concept of vicarious trauma (Jenkins et al., 2011; Pearlman & Caringi, 2009). Additionally, the same research validates the application of vicarious trauma to practitioners outside the counseling field (Jenkins et al., 2011; Parker & Henfield, 2012). In multiple studies, the concept of vicarious trauma was foreign to or did not initially resonate with study participants (Furlonger & Taylor, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2011; Parker & Henfield, 2012; Pearlman & Caringi, 2009). Instead, participants initially described their response to secondary trauma as burnout, but through subsequent reflection transitioned to articulating their response with more accurate terminology.

Student affairs research on practitioners’ reactions to working with students in trauma has primarily focused on the concept of burnout (Guthrie et al., 2005; Marshall et

al., 2016). Few student affairs graduate or professional development programs incorporate a focus on secondary traumatic response, including vicarious trauma, leaving practicing professionals without the language to accurately identify or express their reactions to students' trauma (Lynch, 2017; Protivnak, Paylo, & Mercer, 2013; Reynolds, 2011; Reynolds & Altabef, 2015). This lack of appropriate language prevents student affairs professionals from properly addressing their responses to secondary trauma (Pearlman & Caringi, 2009; Protivnak, Paylo, & Mercer, 2013).

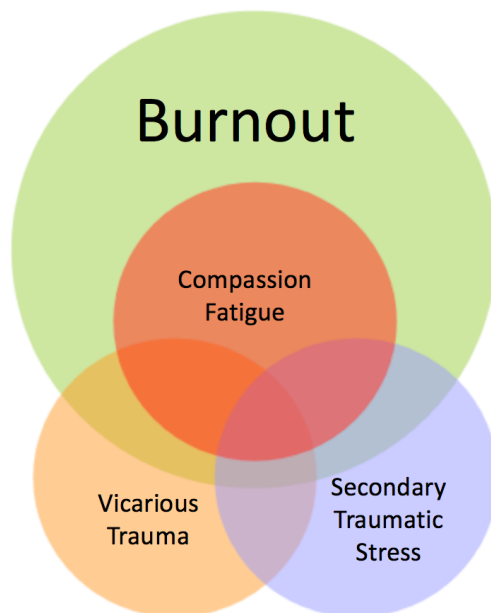
### **Vicarious Trauma: History and Alternative Definitions**

The concept of vicarious trauma first emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). Growing from an understanding of professional burnout, the term more accurately described how trauma patients impacted their counseling professionals. Since then, researchers of burnout and vicarious trauma have developed additional terminology to describe the various levels of impact on life, career, and self. In the literature examining the impact of trauma on helping professionals, scholars often use the terms *burnout*, *compassion fatigue*, *secondary traumatic stress*, and *vicarious trauma* interchangeably. However, there are distinctions among these terms that lie in their counseling and psychological roots.

Among practitioners, *burnout* is the term most commonly used to describe the response to secondary trauma. Discussions of burnout often lead to revelations of vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress, as these concepts are interrelated and overlapping (see Figure 1) (Canfield, 2005; Frey, Beesley, Abbot, & Kendrick, 2017; Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). In my initial research, I explored this terminology to better grasp my own response to secondary

trauma, as a means of developing strategies to manage my response and persist as an investigator.

Figure 1: Venn Diagram of Possible Responses to Secondary Trauma



**Burnout.** Professionals working with trauma victims often experience burnout symptoms, representing an exhaustion of self and resources in response to high stress situations (Canfield, 2005; Marshall, Gardner, Hughes, & Lowery, 2016). Burnout leaves professionals feeling fatigued and frustrated by the work environment in response to “unrealistic, excessive demands on personal resources” (Guthrie et al., 2005, p. 111). A loss of self-esteem is the most reported symptom of burnout, and research identifies feelings of burnout as inversely proportional to the perception of self-esteem (Stasio, Fiorilli, Benevene, Uusitalo-Malmivaara, & Di Chiacchio, 2017; Marshall et al., 2016).

Existing research has connected burnout to multiple professional stressors (Canfield, 2005; Stasio et al., 2017; Kiyimba & O’Reilly, 2016; Marshall et al., 2016; McClellan, 2012; Parker & Henfield, 2012; Turgoose, Glover, Barker, & Maddox, 2017;

Turgoose & Maddox, 2017). The counseling and student affairs literature has consistently identified the following professional stressors:

- Excessive work hours, including working beyond a 40-hour work week (Marshall et al., 2016; McClellan, 2012). For professionals working with trauma, this includes heavy, unbalanced caseloads focused on high amounts of trauma (Parker & Henfield, 2012; Turgoose et al., 2017; Turgoose & Maddox, 2017).
- Work/life conflict or having to choose work over personal and life activities to manage workload, often decreasing time spent on activities that reduce stress (Marshall et al., 2016; McClellan, 2012; Stasio et al., 2017).
- Supervision issues, in which a supervisor is unsupportive or does not understand the stress involved in working with trauma (Baird & Kracen, 2006; Canfield, 2005; Furlonger & Taylor, 2013).
- Loss of passion or losing sight of the personal motivation to be a helping professional due to the accumulation of previously mentioned work stressors, casting doubt on the helping professional's ability to do their job (McClellan, 2012; Parker & Henfield, 2012).

Burnout affects professionals in multiple high-stress fields and is prevalent in occupations including student affairs administration (Marshall et al., 2016), teaching (Parker & Henfield, 2012; Stasio et al., 2017), school counseling and mental health professions (Canfield, 2005; Parker & Henfield, 2012; Turgoose et al., 2017), law enforcement (Turgoose & Maddox, 2017), and research transcription (Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016). Additionally, burnout occurs in a significant proportion of those

working with sexual violence cases due to the high stress of the work and the secondary impact of the trauma (McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Parker & Henfield, 2012; Schauben & Frazier, 1995; Turgoose et al., 2017).

Scholars examining sexual trauma and burnout have called for more specific terminology, because burnout is a symptom of a variety of stressors across multiple fields (Canfield, 2005; Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016; Marshall et al., 2016; Parker & Henfield, 2012; Stasio et al., 2017; Turgoose et al., 2017; Turgoose & Maddox, 2017). Due to the broad impact of burnout, over time researchers have developed additional terms to better describe the various sources of burnout in diverse professions. Specifically, researchers use the terms *compassion fatigue*, *secondary traumatic stress*, *vicarious resilience*, and the previously addressed *vicarious trauma* to capture the variable impacts of trauma.

**Compassion fatigue.** Empathy and compassion are limited resources of the human psyche (Turgoose & Maddox, 2017). Compassion fatigue occurs when a skilled helper's empathy for clients begins to wane as the amount of information and time spent in traumatic or empathetically draining situations becomes overwhelming (Frey et al., 2016; Turgoose & Maddox, 2017). For example, British police officers working with victims of rape became less supportive and responsive to victims after prolonged exposure to multiple cases (Turgoose & Maddox, 2017). The extensive contact with trauma victims altered the officers' affect and reduced their available empathy over time. Initially the officers identified the feeling as burnout, but further research and discussion revealed compassion fatigue as a more descriptive diagnosis.

Compassion fatigue closely relates to burnout, but adds specificity to the concept as it focuses on the reduction of empathy (Choi, 2016; Turgoose et al., 2017; Turgoose &

Maddox, 2017). Not all those who experience burnout have compassion fatigue, but those experiencing compassion fatigue by definition are displaying signs of burnout (Choi, 2016). Like the British officers, Title IX investigators may experience compassion fatigue in relation to the students involved in an investigation, exhausting their empathy and undermining their ability to maintain impartiality in the case (Baligad, 2016; Choi, 2016; Jones, 2014).

Compassion fatigue explains the reduction of empathy that can lead to greater stress and a loss of passion in response to one's case load (Frey et al., 2016; Turgoose & Maddox, 2017), but it does not address additional adverse reactions to working with trauma victims (Baird & Kracen, 2006; Choi, 2016; Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016). While supporting students and staff through multiple roles drained my empathy, compassion fatigue did not explain the personal symptoms of trauma I was displaying, including my emotional outburst over my kitchen sink. The concepts of secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma address not only the reduction of empathy and other symptoms of burnout and compassion fatigue, but also the helping professional's personal reaction to the trauma (Baird & Kracen, 2006).

**Secondary traumatic stress.** Secondary traumatic stress refers to helping professionals' psychological responses to being exposed to others' trauma (Baird & Kracen, 2006; Choi, 2016; Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016), which can alter their perceptions of the world. Secondary traumatic stress is distinguished from compassion fatigue and burnout by its attention to helping professionals' immediate emotional, psychological, and physical responses to others' trauma (Baird & Kracen, 2006; Choi, 2016). Similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), helping professionals with secondary traumatic

stress react negatively to environmental factors; perceive danger in the world where it may not exist; and experience fatigue, social withdrawal, and depression (Baird & Kracen, 2006; Canfield, 2005). While vicarious trauma is an adaptation of feelings and trauma symptoms over long-term exposure, secondary traumatic stress refers to the initial reaction of trauma without the adaptation to cope (Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2015).

The literature on secondary traumatic stress expands the understanding of vicarious trauma, referring more specifically to the broader, immediate psychological and life impacts of the traumatic experience (Bird & Kracen, 2006; Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016). Secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma conceptually blend in the scholarly literature, and researchers often use them interchangeably. However, professional counselors and therapists define vicarious trauma as an expected response in the long-term to the exposure to traumatic material, where secondary traumatic stress is an immediate psychological reaction that parallels PTSD (Baird & Kracen, 2006; Canfield, 2005).

### **Vicarious Resilience**

In contrast to vicarious trauma, research on *vicarious resilience* focuses on the high a helper can achieve from assisting trauma survivors (Frey et al., 2016; Simms, 2017). Those experiencing vicarious resilience recognize the challenges of working with trauma victims, the need for support, and the rewards of helping people through such a difficult period in their lives. Therapists who display signs of vicarious resilience and growth focus on the positive aspects of life and feel connected with and grateful for family and friends (Simms, 2017).



Just as vicarious trauma parallels the trauma experienced by clients, vicarious resilience mimics clients' growth. For example, counselors working with victims of sexual assault from the initial incident through recovery may experience vicarious resilience as the client adapts to and overcomes the past trauma (Frey et al., 2016; Simms, 2017). However, in contrast to counselors, the role of Title IX investigators limits the time frame and manner in which they engage with trauma victims. Investigators focus only on the traumatic event and not on the students' recovery from the trauma. As a result, they are less likely to benefit from students' transformation and resiliency (Best & Jun, 2017; Coles, Astbury, Dartnall, & Limjerwala, 2014; Henry et al., 2016; Jones, 2014; Simms, 2017).

### **Vicarious Trauma and Sexual Violence**

Research on secondary traumatic responses, specifically vicarious trauma, in connection with sexual violence also exists outside of higher education and student affairs (Choi, 2017; Coles et al., 2014; Frey et al., 2016; Samios, Rodzik, & Abel, 2012; Schauben & Frazier, 1995; Turgoose et al., 2017). Police officers (Turgoose et al., 2017), trauma therapists (Schauben & Frazier, 1995), social workers (Frey et al., 2016), and even transcriptionists (Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016) experience secondary traumatic responses to sexual violence, including vicarious trauma. Prolonged exposure to multiple incidents of sexual violence increases the likelihood and intensity of secondary traumatic responses, leading professionals to either experience burnout or develop enhanced coping skills (Frey et al., 2016; Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016; Turgoose et al., 2017; Turgoose & Maddox, 2017).

Following the conceptualization of vicarious trauma, researchers in psychology and counseling began to investigate the pervasiveness of secondary traumatic responses among helping professionals. One branch of this work focused on counselors working with victims of sexual violence, validating the impact of long-term exposure to sexual violence trauma on helping professionals (Schauben & Frazier, 1995). More specifically, some researchers explored the influence of personal experiences of sexual violence on helping professionals' secondary traumatic responses in sexual misconduct cases (Frey et al., 2016; Furlonger & Taylor, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2011; Samios et al., 2012). Various studies have yielded mixed, at times contradictory findings that neither confirm nor deny a correlation between a helping professional's own experience with sexual violence and the triggering of vicarious trauma (Baird & Kracen, 2006; Samios et al., 2012; Schauben & Frazier, 1995). However, studies have found that helping professionals who self-identify as survivors of sexual assault use their experience as motivation to support other trauma victims, demonstrating an increased capacity for empathy through understanding (Furlonger & Taylor, 2013; Jenkins et al., 2011).

Caseload is the most cited variable connected to vicarious trauma among helping professionals working with sexual violence (Canfield, 2005; Choi, 2016; Frey et al., 2016; Samios et al., 2012; Schauben & Frazier, 1995). A high caseload can undermine a professional's capacity for empathy and resiliency (Choi, 2016; Frey et al., 2016; Schauben & Frazier, 1995). The stress of high caseloads parallels findings that increased and/or excessive workloads can cause burnout and compassion fatigue among student affairs professionals (Burke, Dye, & Hughey, 2016; Day, 1994; Marshall et al., 2016; McClellan, 2012).

Title IX investigators' responses to secondary trauma may be compounded when investigatory caseloads and the workload of a full-time job push personnel beyond their capacity (Jones, 2014). Unfortunately, reducing caseloads or adding more investigators are not feasible solutions for most institutions, which are often strapped for resources and already struggling to keep up with the number of investigations (Baligad, 2016; Edwards, 2015; Lake, 2017; Tani, 2017). Training or professional development programs must therefore prepare investigators to cope with their responses to secondary trauma (Baligad, 2016; Lake, 2017; Reynolds & Albatef, 2015).

### **Learning to Create Systems of Support**

Helping professionals who work with sexual misconduct cases may subconsciously develop the right coping skills and support systems to understand their reactions to secondary trauma (Epstein, 2004; Furlonger & Taylor, 2013; Guthrie, Woods, Cusker, & Gregory, 2005). A commitment to self-care is crucial in finding systems of support both internally and in the community. Examples of self-care include knowing when to step away from the work, spending time with loved ones, working out, and utilizing other coping mechanisms that provide helping professionals with time away from trauma situations (Epstein, 2004; Guthrie et al., 2005; Jones, 2014). With an investigator's commitment to self-care comes a level of self-knowledge, knowing when to say no, recognizing when to take a break, and learning to reflect on and identify their personal motivations for being an investigator (Day, 1994; Guthrie et al., 2005; Jenkins et al., 2011). Additionally, investigators need to be intentional in deciding when to spend time on the investigation and when to prioritize other primary job functions (Guthrie et al., 2005; Jones, 2014).

## **Systems of Self-Support**

Investigators improve their response to secondary trauma when they create support systems that allow them to intentionally disengage from the work and the process (Frey et al., 2017; Marshall et al., 2016; Turgoose et al., 2017). The literature on responses to secondary trauma focuses on self as the key component in coping, where one relies on one's own skillset and ability to create support systems (Choi, 2017; Coles et al., 2014; Frey et al., 2016; Samios, Rodzik, & Abel, 2012; Turgoose et al., 2017). Self-support systems range from the mental to the physical, from escaping into a novel to going for jog. The foci are separating from the situation, finding time to exert mental or physical energy to release tension or frustrations, and reflecting on the experience as an investigator to understand its personal impact and monitor changes in one's own affect (Best & Jun, 2017; Choi, 2017, Frey et al., 2016).

Researchers recommend that helping professionals use reflection and mindfulness techniques as systems of self-care (Frey et al., 2017; Guthrie et al., 2005; Jones, 2014; McClellan, 2015). For investigators, these techniques include taking time to understand how their investigative and professional roles influence the self and available support systems. They may also include refocusing on the direction of the case and determining the path forward when their response to secondary trauma distracts them from their purpose as an investigator (Frey et al., 2017; Guthrie et al., 2005; Jones, 2014). In practicing mindfulness, professionals learn to focus on their existence without judgment and absorb the details of the situation to re-center the self (Burke et al., 2016).

The added stress of cases going beyond the university and into the court system compounds the need for investigators to find systems of support outside their own self-

reflection (Guthrie et al., 2005; McClellen, 2012;). Time with loved ones and friends distracts investigators from cases, providing an essential break that may alleviate symptoms of secondary trauma (Guthrie et al., 2005; Jones, 2014; McClellen, 2012; Parker & Henfield, 2012). Likewise, time with co-workers and supervisors empathetic to the investigation experience can help normalize the experience for helping professionals and provide additional systems of support (Choi, 2017; Furlonger & Taylor, 2013; Parker & Henfield, 2012).

### **Systems of Support in the Workplace**

The workplace environment impacts the coping capabilities of the investigator (Burke et al., 2016; Choi, 2017; Furlonger & Taylor, 2013; Turgoose et al., 2017). Part-time Title IX investigators have two campus roles: their day-to-day job and their role as an investigator. Supervisors of both roles need to be cognizant of the impact of working with trauma victims, as direct supervisor support allows time for important self-coping practices (Choi, 2017; Furlonger & Taylor, 2013). This may include leaving work early after an investigation, processing without breaking the bounds of confidentiality, or other gifts of time and listening to help with coping.

Title IX coordinators can assist in creating an environment in which investigators can come together to reflect on case details and the personal impact of investigating student trauma. This creates opportunities for a shared experience and reminds investigators that they are not alone in their journey (Canfield, 2005; Choi, 2017; Turgoose et al., 2017). Additionally, free access to campus or community counseling resources for staff can provide confidential opportunities for traditional methods of processing (Simms, 2017; Turgoose et al., 2017).

Current literature on student affairs graduate programs, Title IX trainings, and professional development opportunities for student affairs professionals, which are the focus of this study, does not highlight the development of skills to manage responses to secondary trauma (Lynch, 2017, Reynolds, 2011). Yet professionals' knowledge of and access to such intentional interventions reduces the likelihood that they will experience vicarious trauma or other heightened responses to secondary trauma (Choi, 2017; Simms, 2017; Turgoose et al., 2017). Student affairs professionals who take on the role of Title IX investigators thus need proper training in how to respond to secondary trauma.

### **Student Affairs Professionals**

Student affairs professionals serve in a wide variety of student support roles, in which the need for counseling skills varies based on their functional area and degree of direct student contact (Rhatigan, 2009; Strange & Banning, 2015; Thelin & Gasman, 2011). To train professionals to work in these various areas, graduate preparation programs seek to provide baseline knowledge of student development and a general understanding of campus administration (Rhatigan, 2009; Thelin & Gasman, 2011). Student affairs professionals responsible for implementing Title IX receive specialized training on Title IX policies and procedures from their institution and through specialized training seminars (Baligad, 2016; Sokolow, 2015). Further professional development may be offered through professional associations, opt-in training programs, informal or on-the-job training, supervision, or self-driven education (Dungy & Gordon, 2011; Herdlein, 2004; Protivnak et al., 2013; Reynolds, 2011; Reynolds & Altabef, 2015; Thelin & Gasman, 2011).

### **Training to Respond to Secondary Trauma**

Student affairs professional training does not explicitly prepare professionals to cope with secondary trauma (Lynch, 2017). While research shows that various graduate preparation and professional development training programs cover some self-care topics, most training omits the key skills required to handle one's own response to secondary trauma when working with sexual assault cases (Burke et al., 2016; Canfield, 2005; Choi, 2017; Frey et al., 2016; Samios et al., 2012; Schauben & Frazier, 1995). This finding is unsurprising, as graduate course instructors largely focus on the broad set of skills needed to perform various functions, or in the case of Title IX trainings, investigations, in student affairs (Baligad, 2016; Lake, 2017; Protivnak et al., 2013; Reynolds, 2011).

However, the incidence of exposure to student trauma, and therefore the likelihood of secondary traumatic response, increased among student affairs professionals as a result of the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter* and the shifted reporting structures for sexual misconduct (Jones, 2014; Lynch, 2017; Protivnak et al., 2013; Tani 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Although student affairs professionals are not and may not want to become trained counselors, the psychological needs and concerns of both students and professionals often present themselves outside the counseling center (Lynch, 2017; Protivnak et al., 2013; Reynolds, 2011). As student affairs professionals assume investigator roles, their lack of training in establishing systems of self-support to cope with the trauma of others threatens to undermine their effectiveness in these roles.

### **Student Affairs Professionals as Title IX Investigators**

When the U.S. Department of Education (2011) released the *Dear Colleague Letter*, many campus administrators turned to student affairs professionals to serve as

Title IX coordinators and investigators, adapting their workloads to incorporate conducting investigations or creating whole new departments to abide by the new federal guidelines (Baligad, 2016; Lake, 2017). Prior to adding these duties, some student affairs professionals already faced issues of over-taxing workloads, long hours, inadequate compensation, limited advancement, and a loss of passion (Jones, 2014; Marshall et al., 2016). In such cases, the added pressure of investigating Title IX cases exacerbated existing symptoms of burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma (Burke et al., 2016; Jones, 2014).

Investigating added the stress of needing to accommodate students' availability, which often led to working late at night and on weekends in investigations lasting for as many as 60 days (Baligad, 2016; Jones, 2014). In response to their new responsibilities, some investigators began to display symptoms of collateral damage, including burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma (Jones, 2014). For some of these professionals, the emotional toll of investigating sexual violence cases led to "physical illness, damaged relationships, and [an] impact on family life" (Jones, 2014, p. 175). Their systems of support often faltered as they sought to protect their loved ones from details of the cases weighing on them while also trying to care for themselves (Baligad, 2016; Jones, 2014; Lynch, 2017).

Students who experience sexual violence or the trauma of participation in a case often have access to counseling services through the university; however, staff members had no such convenient resource available to them as the Title IX procedures rolled out (Jones, 2014). As student affairs professionals adapted to the stress, they therefore sought out their own systems of support. For some, this meant leaving behind their Title IX



responsibilities or the field as a whole, while others searched for campus resources and adapted their prior schemas to support their own transition (Guthrie et al., 2005; Jones, 2014; Marshall et al., 2016).

### **Chapter Summary**

Drawing on the research literature reviewed in this chapter, the present study explores how student affairs professionals serving as Title IX investigators understand their response to secondary trauma. The incidence of sexual violence on college campuses led to the increased regulations of Title IX outlined in the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter*, prompting student affairs professionals to assume investigative roles that increased their exposure to victims of trauma. Given the lack of training to prepare student affairs professionals to respond to vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, or secondary traumatic stress, professionals in investigatory roles currently need to learn the breadth of responses to secondary trauma on their own. This study explores the paths of the participants to inform the preparation of future investigators.

### CHAPTER 3

#### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore, through the framework of vicarious trauma, the epoché of the response to secondary trauma among student affairs professionals who investigate Title IX violations on college campuses. The *Dear Colleague Letter* released in April 2011 set in motion more intentional, enhanced processes for investigating Title IX incidents on college campuses (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Many campuses, already short-staffed, turned to student affairs professionals to take on the burden of investigating sexual misconduct. Yet few of these institutions or professionals anticipated the personal toll that would result from dealing with such traumatic subject matter (Epstein, 2004; Jones, 2014).

A potential side effect of the repeated exposure to secondary trauma that occurs in sexual assault investigations is vicarious trauma. While counseling professionals have heavily researched vicarious trauma (Furlonger & Taylor, 2013; Jenkins, Mitchell, Baird, Whitfield, & Meyer, 2011; Parker & Henfield, 2012; Pearlman & Caringi, 2009), little research exists on how vicarious trauma and other responses to secondary trauma directly impact student affairs professionals, particularly those conducting sexual assault investigations (Lynch, 2017). This study focuses on the epoché of the participants' responses to secondary trauma through the framework of vicarious trauma, allowing the essence to emerge through collected interviews.

## **Paradigm**

A constructivist researcher seeks to discover how the research participants construct their realities and their truths (Guido, Chávez, & Lincoln, 2010; Mertens, 2010). Researchers employing a constructivist paradigm delve into shared meaning making related to the research focus, taking into consideration the meaning making of the researcher(s). The researcher captures enough data to saturate the study with a “balanced representation of views” (Mertens, 2010, pg. 11), with the goal of raising awareness of the research focus for the field and the participants: this is the axiology of constructivism.

The nature of reality, or ontology, as viewed through the constructivist paradigm is defined by the participants’ construction of reality, along with the socially constructed reality of groups (Mertens, 2010). The epistemology of the constructivist paradigm places the researcher at the center, as it is the researcher’s lens that interprets the data. The researcher is therefore not separate from the study, and an objective view is not feasible due to the intimate nature of the paradigm. By eliciting the participants’ truths, the researcher constructs and interlinks values and findings through their own lens (Guido et al., 2010; Mertens, 2010).

My decision to utilize the constructivist paradigm, paired with phenomenology, emerged from my desire to discover the truths behind investigators’ responses to secondary trauma. The participants’ individual stories created a collective view of secondary trauma responses among student affairs professionals who serve as Title IX investigators. Their truths, as well as my own truth, merged through the research to convey the epoché of the study.

### **Vicarious Trauma as a Frame**

In the initial phases of this study, I focused primarily on vicarious trauma and less on the other interrelated concepts mentioned previously. Through conducting the literature review, my definition and interpretation of vicarious trauma morphed into an understanding of both the response to secondary trauma and the coping skills created to prepare oneself for repeated exposure. As a result, the framework through which I conducted the data collection and analysis for the study drew upon my understanding of the breadth of vicarious trauma. I sought to interpret the interplay of burnout, compassion fatigue, secondary traumatic stress, vicarious resilience, or the lack of response to secondary trauma within both the standard definition of vicarious trauma and the one I had developed.

**Secondary paradigm.** For me, the constructivist paradigm was not a natural fit. As an engineer, an innate post-positivist paradigm that urged me to seek out a single truth was always juxtaposed with the constructivist approach, which allows individual truths to emerge and tell their own story (Mertens, 2010). As an investigator who experienced vicarious trauma, *my* truth drove my purpose in performing the study. My framework of vicarious trauma, grounded in my affinity for finding a single truth, to reinforce my truth, permeated my interviews and data analysis. While I fought my instinct to justify vicarious trauma as the single response to secondary trauma, tenets of my search for a single truth nevertheless emerge in my methodology, data analysis, and findings.

### **Methodology**

A single event, or phenomenon, is in and of itself its own reality, influenced by the “other” realities of the subject and the researcher. The essence of a phenomenon is the

reality constructed through and by the collective parties that experience it (Heidegger, 2013; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Moustakas, 1994; Stapleton, 1983).

Phenomenology began with Husserl's and Heidegger's (Heidegger, 2013; Stapleton, 1983) reflections on being and consciousness. The foundation for phenomenological research emerged from the independent, but not mutually exclusive, works of Husserl and Heidegger and their concept of *epoché*, or essence.

*Epoché* refers to looking at a single event in its purest form, setting aside outside influence, and simply being with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Ultimately, phenomenology is about the essence of the studied phenomenon—a moment, an experience, a feeling, a bounded event. The researcher is interested in the story of the participants, and the story surrounds the phenomenon. Interviews with research participants are the primary method used to gather data.

Additionally, as the researcher is the primary tool in a phenomenological study, researchers themselves must reflect on the interviews and the phenomenon, taking time to journal, in order to understand the *epoché* of the research (Larkin et al., 2006; Moustakas, 1994). First-person accounts of a phenomenon preserve the clarity of the *epoché* and participants' experiences. Understanding the researcher's lens is essential in phenomenology because the research findings combine the participants' and the researcher's interpretation of the phenomenon (Larkin et al., 2006).

This was not a study of a day in the life of a Title IX investigator, but a method to understand the impact investigating had on participants and their response to secondary trauma. The study used vicarious trauma as a framework for the research, focusing the participant interviews on the *epoché* of their response to secondary trauma in the

investigation process through the lens of vicarious trauma. I introduced participants to the concept of vicarious trauma during the interview, where it blended into the conversation and gave the participants new insight into their experiences and stories.

Seven of the nine participants were unfamiliar with the term, and the introduction of vicarious trauma unintentionally transformed pieces of the interview into an intervention that allowed some participants to reframe their experience. To maintain trustworthiness, I did not include the altered framework in the phenomenological coding, as it was not part of the participants' original story. Chapter Five discusses how the introduction of vicarious trauma altered the perspectives of some participants both during and following the interviews.

### **Participants**

For this study, I recruited trained and experienced student affairs professionals who served as Title IX investigators on their respective campuses. Each participant held at least one graduate-level degree from a student affairs preparation program. I chose only those with this background to understand the impact preparation programs and professional development trainings had in preparing the participants to respond to secondary trauma.

I defined "experienced professionals" as those who had served as investigators for a minimum of 12 continuous months in their career and had investigated at least two cases. The time and case requirements ensured that all participants had experienced the full cycle of an investigation as well as reflection time to understand the impact, if any, of the process. I chose to focus solely on Title IX investigators, as opposed to Title IX

hearing board members or coordinators, in order to collect data from a group that had comparable experiences and interactions with complainants, respondents, and witnesses.

The study included both part-time and full-time investigators. Part-time investigators held another position at their institution outside the Title IX office (e.g., Director of Orientation, Academic Advisor, Assistant Director of Student Activities) and investigated cases as needed by the institution. Full-time investigators held primary campus roles investigating potential violations of Title IX. Based on the guidelines of the Office of Civil Rights and on university regulations, investigators are required to take an impartial, confidential position and do their best not to react to statements or share their findings outside the bounds of confidentiality of the investigative report and reporting structure (Edwards, 2015; Lake, 2017; Tani, 2017). The criteria for participant selection allowed a focus on the investigation experience itself and minimized additional influences on the studied phenomenon of response to secondary trauma.

### **Recruitment**

I used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to recruit participants. These methods of sampling are useful in phenomenological research to find participants who can speak to the experience and non-experience of the phenomenon (Jones, Torres, & Armino, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Purposive sampling allowed the intentional selection of participants who investigate Title IX campus incidents. Snowball sampling increased the sample size beyond the initial purposive sample identified, by encouraging recruited participants or other colleagues to identify potential participants they believed might be able to contribute to the study (Jones et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I recruited participants through professional and social media networks. I created a Facebook post that provided a link to an interest survey, which explained the study's purpose, confirmed the qualifications of prospective participants, and inquired about additional potential participants (Appendix A). Following completion of the survey (n=27), I purposively selected 12 potential participants to provide a mixture of representation by gender, level of experience, region, and school type. All participants (1) graduated from at least one student affairs or higher education graduate-level preparation program, (2) had at least 12 months of experience as a Title IX investigator, and (3) had completed a minimum of two investigations.

I contacted 12 potential participants to invite them to participate in the study, detailing the data collection methods and timeline. Nine participants responded to the follow-up email and scheduled an interview. For seven participants, I used either a conference call or web-based video chat to conduct the interviews. Two participants were located within driving distance, and I met with them in person for their interviews.

### **Participant Information**

All study participants (see Table 1) were professionals in either traditional student affairs roles with part-time investigator responsibilities or full-time investigator positions, with at least one graduate degree focused in student affairs. In their investigatory roles, investigators met with all parties involved in a case to create a collective narrative of evidence related to the events in question. Parties included the complainant(s), respondent(s), named witnesses, and responding campus personnel. Depending on their institutional procedures, investigators either recommended an outcome for the case based on a preponderance of evidence or provided the report to the Title IX coordinator to



Table 1

*Study Participants and Selected Demographics*

Pseudonym	Title IX Role	Time Post-Master's Degree	Time as Investigator	Institution's Investigator Model	U.S. Region	Institution Type
Diana	Part-Time	6-8 Years	3-4 Years	Dual	South Atlantic	Private
Jack	Part-Time	12+ Years	3-4 Years	Dual	South Atlantic	Private
Katie	Full-Time	9-11 Years	3-4 Years	Solo	South Atlantic	Public
Lucy	Part-Time	6-8 Years	1-2 Years	Dual	Mountain West	Public
Martha	Part-Time	12+ Years (Retired)	5 or more Years	Solo or Dual	South Atlantic	Public
Rockford	Full-Time	6-8 Years	1-2 Years	Solo	Mountain West	Public
Veronica	Full-Time	3-5 Years	1-2 Years	Dual	West South Central	Public
Wes	Part-Time	6-8 Years	3-4 Years	Dual	South Atlantic	Private
Will	Part-Time	9-11 Years	3-4 Years	Solo	Mountain West	Public

determine the outcome. I did not include interested participants from campuses where the investigatory model utilized personnel who were not student affairs-trained (e.g., lawyers, former or current law enforcement, professional counselors) to investigate cases, as the study focused on understanding the preparation to experience secondary trauma provided by student affairs preparation and professional development programs.

All study participants were current investigators with the exception of Martha, who recently retired. I did not intentionally limit the study to those currently in the role; however, all of the people who completed the interest survey, and therefore comprised my pool of participants, were active investigators. The impact of this factor is discussed in Chapter Five.

### **Data Collection**

I used the data collected in this study to understand the phenomenon of responses to secondary trauma among campus sexual assault investigators. I interviewed participants about their experience and kept a video research journal to monitor my personal reflections throughout the process. I collected data in two parts:

1. a. Responding to prompts, participants reflected on and portrayed their experiences as an investigator using their preferred medium (e.g., music videos, Twitter- length reflections, collages of images).
- b. Participants discussed their reflections in a semi-structured initial interview.
2. Following the discussion of the reflections, we moved into a more traditional semi-structured interview [primary interview] designed to connect to the epoché of vicarious trauma.

Interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes in length. I was the sole interviewer and met with the participants in person, by phone, or via video chat. I used two audio recorders to record the interviews, and I took notes during the interview process. Following each interview, I recorded a video journal entry to reflect on the interview and note trends arising in the data. The interview protocols are available in Appendix B.

## **Reflection Exercise and Interview**

Qualitative research explores data collection methods beyond traditional interviews. So-called non-traditional methods allow researchers to access data from different angles and perspectives, often using artistic expression, place, or memories to trigger more effective responses (Anthamatten, Wee, & Korris, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Torre & Murphy, 2015). In this study, I asked participants to reflect on their responses to their first and most recent investigations prior to our scheduled interview. Participants chose their preferred medium to complete their reflection, but I prompted them with several examples, including creating drawings, using photographs, or writing brief Twitter-length reflections limited to 140 characters. The reflections received were as diverse as my participants. Wes chose to provide Web links to music videos, Martha and Diana sent me Tweets, and others pulled images off the Internet either as singular responses or as collages.

To enhance the study, the reflections were multi-purpose. For the participants, the reflections reconnected them to the breadth of their experiences as investigators and their emotional journeys related to their responses to secondary trauma. For me, the reflections provided examples of how the participants both responded to secondary trauma and interpreted that response. For both of us, discussing the reflection provided an introduction to the topic and permitted the preliminary establishment of trust before delving into the second part of the interview.

Prior to meeting each participant, I sent instructions asking them to reflect on their experience as an investigator using the medium of their choosing (Appendix B). I asked the participants to create two reflections: one that represented, as far as they could recall,

how they felt following the completion of their first case, and another that represented their feelings following the completion of their most recent case. I asked the participants to allow a total of 15 minutes to complete their reflection but encouraged them to take as much time as they needed to complete the activity. When meeting with each participant, I began the discussion with the following prompts:

1. Please explain both reflections to me.
2. Why did you select the images/words/music you chose?
3. What is the difference between the two reflections?

All participants indicated they had difficulty with the reflection activity due to a lack of prior reflection on their part. Several participants indicated that the reflection exercise took longer than the prescribed 15 minutes as they searched for the right words or images to accurately represent their experiences. Following the discussion of their prior experiences, we transitioned into a more traditional semi-structured interview to explore the epoché of secondary traumatic response through their experiences.

### **Primary Interview**

Researchers utilizing a constructivist paradigm conduct interviews to seek the collective truth of their participants (Jones et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Phenomenological studies typically use semi-structured interviews to effectively explore the phenomenon under study and its relationship with the participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This interview method allows participants to tell their individual truths in the overall story of vicarious trauma while allowing a collective truth to emerge among them (Jones et al., 2013).

I chose this method to focus on the phenomenon of the response to secondary trauma through the framework of vicarious trauma. The conversational structure of the interview allowed me to hit desired talking points while building rapport with the participants and enabling their stories to emerge (Appendix B). In other literature surrounding vicarious trauma, participants often used other words for the phenomenon (e.g., burnout, stress, exhaustion), and recognized vicarious trauma as the concept emerged through the interview process (Bartoskova, 2017; Parker & Henfield, 2012; Pearlman & Caringi, 2009). Just as important as the emergence of the phenomenon is the non-emergence of the phenomenon, where participants' resources or experiences already prepared them for their response to secondary trauma (Jones et al., 2013).

I chose my interview questions to step into the experiences of the participants and probe more deeply into their response to secondary trauma (Jones et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My protocol guided our conversation; however, I often diverged from it to explore a participant's perspective or experience. Before each interview concluded, I confirmed that I had addressed all questions within the protocol to maintain consistency between interviews. The interviews revealed variations of the response to secondary trauma ranging from minor irritation to self-diagnosed vicarious trauma.

### **Data Analysis**

I began my data analysis by using a research journal throughout my process, creating memos as I wrote my prospectus and evolving to video journaling during interviews and data analysis (Jones et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I had the data transcribed by a transcriptionist. Following each interview, I forwarded one of the two audio files to a transcriptionist, receiving a transcription seven to ten days later. Once I

received the transcribed data, I performed a member check. The member check consisted of emailing the unedited transcript to the participants and asking them to make comments or edits as they saw fit, using the Track Changes feature of Microsoft Word. After receiving the member checked transcription back from each participant I spent time listening to the interviews, both on their own and while reading along, to gain a deeper understanding of each participant's experience.

In my review of the transcripts, I coded the data with colored tabs and notes in the margins, searching for themes and the epoché (Jones et al., 2013; Saldaña, 2016). I noted significant statements regarding participants' responses to secondary trauma, methods of self-care, and relevant preparation or training, aligning commonalities and roughly coding the data. Next, I grouped the rough codes from the initial step to bring the dozens of individual codes under broader categories. The primary codes that emerged were coping, professional impact, training, personal impact, burnout, separation, and vicarious trauma.

Rereading the transcripts, I applied the broader categories, seeing how they flowed and connected across interviews. Finally, I spent time reflecting on the interviews and codes to identify emergent themes to address in the findings of the study, as the collective epoché emerged through the analysis (Jones et al., 2013; Stapleton, 1983). This process began when I received my first transcript member check and ran concurrently with the interviews and member checks that followed.

### **Rigor**

The triangulation of data through a research journal, data collection, and member checking increased the goodness and rigor of my data (Jones et al., 2013; Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, by consistently reflecting on my process through video journaling, I remained attuned to my own presumptions and experience with vicarious trauma to ensure congruence with the research and my methodology.

I utilized multiple methods to increase the trustworthiness of my results. I clarified the perspective that I, as the researcher and instrument, bring to the study by understanding my own subjectivity, checking my emotions and biases during the interviews, and practicing reflection following interviews and during the coding and analysis processes (Jones et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, as part of my data analysis, member checking added reliability and the research journal added congruency. *Congruency* refers to maintaining my charted path in my study by staying true to my chosen paradigm, methodology, and research design (Jones et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The research journal helped me identify when and how I strayed from my charted path and allowed me to recognize how I corrected my course to stay within the initial intent of the research.

**Video research journal.** I maintained a video research journal to process any triggering of my vicarious trauma, to reflect on data collection and analysis, and to maintain congruency during my study (Jones et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The journal was a valuable tool in understanding how I made decisions in the data collection process, how I guided and altered the interviews in discovering the epoché of the phenomenon, and how my own perspectives on the data emerged, all of which allowed me to make self-corrections to maintain goodness in the research. As the research tool, my experience in the research process, and the intimate connection between myself, the topic, and my participants, was a primary focus of the journal.

I recorded video journal entries after each interview and throughout my writing and analysis to understand moments of clarity and confusion, process my experience, understand how the experience personally affected me, and re-center my study on the focus of the phenomenon (Jones et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, I watched the videos after I identified my themes to see how the themes developed in my own thoughts and experiences in parallel or opposed to those of my participants (Saldaña, 2016). The videos provided an invaluable record of my evolution as a researcher, my understanding of the topic, and the influence of my vicarious trauma framework.

**Member checking.** I used member checking to reconnect with the participants to garner their reflections on the interviews (Jones et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My participants and I held intimate relationships with the data and each other as the understanding of their response to secondary trauma emerged from our time together. Following the receipt of my transcriptions, I forwarded the documents to my participants and asked them to read through the transcript and make notes using Track Changes. All nine participants returned the transcript. Four participants made minor edits or added clarifications, and one participant, Veronica, made notes redirecting some of her comments toward vicarious trauma, based on an increased understanding of the term following a post-interview period of self-reflection. The other four participants responded to the member check email by approving the transcript with no additional notes, comments, or edits. Understanding my thoughts along the way, their thoughts in the interview, and how the two intermingled via member checking was essential to establishing the validity and trustworthiness of my study (Jones et al., 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).



### **Chapter Summary**

Through the creation and execution of the study, I gained an intimate understanding of both the response to secondary trauma and my framework of vicarious trauma. By conducting a multi-step interview process with nine student affairs professionals from across the U.S. who serve as Title IX investigators, I learned how their responses to secondary trauma framed their experiences as investigators. Prompting the participants to engage in reflection exercises allowed me to develop a familiarity with their subjective experiences. Semi-structured interviews exposed the epoché of their secondary traumatic response. The following chapter explores the participants' experiences, their understanding of their own secondary trauma, and their perspectives on how their education and professional roles prepared them to understand their response to secondary trauma.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

*“Out of the darkness and into the light. Wisdom gained but guilt and fear remain. Is justice truly served? Has learning taken place?” – Martha, study reflection*

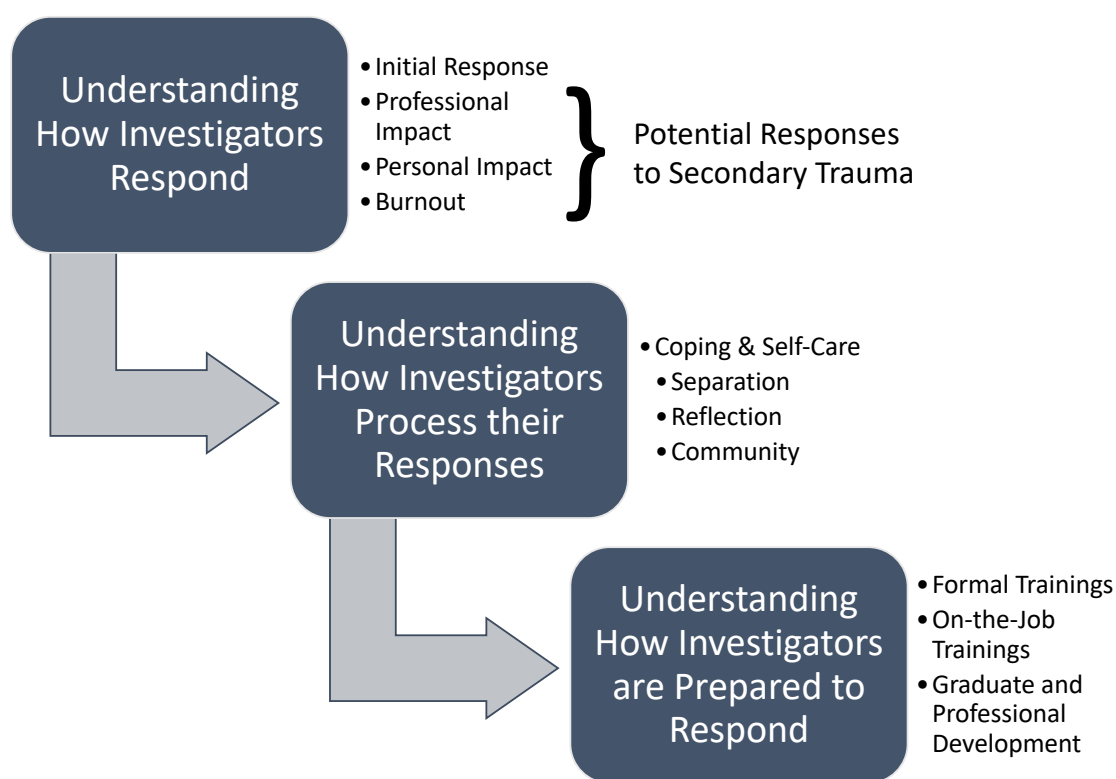
During the Fall of 2017, I interviewed nine student affairs professionals acting in either part-time or full-time roles as campus sexual violence or Title IX investigators, seeking to understand their experiences and responses to secondary trauma. Investigators act as neutral fact gatherers on their campuses to create a narrative of reported cases of sexual misconduct. For study participants, the investigation process included reviewing evidence and interviewing involved parties. The participants traveled a variety of paths to become investigators and their experiences in their investigative work differed. Yet all participants reported similar responses, though of various intensities, to the secondary trauma from their cases.

In this two-part study, part one was a reflection exercise designed to illuminate how participants' responses to secondary trauma evolved over time. Participants reflected on their responses to their first case and to their most recent case. The participants' responses to their first case centered around emotional intensity. Responses regarding

their most recent case commonly focused on policy and procedure, along with increased confidence in their investigation and coping skills.

Part two of the study, the interview, built on the rapport and understanding established through the discussion of the reflection exercise to explore the participants' experiences as investigators and their responses to secondary trauma. The data emerged in three primary segments: understanding how investigators respond, understanding how they process their responses, and understanding how they were prepared to respond (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Chapter Four Flowchart



### **Understanding How Investigators Respond**

Being an investigator influenced the study participants both professionally and personally. Their initial responses to secondary trauma were spurred by the cases

themselves. Each case and experience resulted in significant moments that prompted powerful responses from the participants. Rockford described his early experience:

My first case was a pretty intense one . . . there was a lot of emotions on my end . . . I always thought of myself as being someone who was objective, and it really challenged me to be fair and impartial.

Rockford's experience of being taken off guard by the initial realities of being an investigator was not uncommon. While thoroughly trained for his role in working with Title IX, Rockford's training did not prepare him for how the facts and details of the case collided with the emotional reactions of the individuals involved.

You go through case studies and you kind of try to prepare yourself for it, but when you are hearing another person talk about being sexually assaulted and seeing those emotions, it takes it to a whole other level. And so, I was stunned. The details also overwhelmed several other participants, who experienced a conflict between their innate response of wanting to provide care for a student and the neutral response needed to be an effective investigator.

Veronica compared her previous role as a resident director to her current role as a full-time investigator by evaluating the level of detail needed from students. Veronica explained that as a resident director, her focus was on supporting the student, but as an investigator, her focus was on obtaining the details of the incident. She learned how to ask intimate and sometimes invasive questions of an already traumatized student. Transitioning into an investigatory role required professionals to elicit a level of detail they had never before encountered in their job duties. The role itself was fraught with

potential trauma triggers, including in-depth details of sexual violence and working with already traumatized individuals.

The interviews also revealed how the type and egregiousness of sexual misconduct impacted the study participants. In the interviews, several participants used less emotional language to describe the effects of their most recent case compared to their first case. When probed on why their language shifted, they noted that the type and severity of the sexual violence played a part, alongside their increased experience. Reflecting on why she had a stronger response to her first case than her latest case, Diana said:

The first one was . . . just so egregious in what happened and even the [veteran investigator] that I was teamed up with saying, that was one of maybe three cases that she had ever done in which that person was so clearly preying on another person.

Diana reported that her recent cases have been less impactful, as they primarily involved unhealthy relationships and stalking, and in her view, “stalking is not as heavy . . . or . . . burdensome as [being] sexually assaulted in a dark corner.” However, domestic and dating violence have a different effect on Veronica, who noted that “some [cases] can be a little more egregious . . . especially dating violence and domestic violence sometimes take a greater toll on me.”

Lucy described her reaction to her second case as less emotional than her response to her first case. She attributed this to a combination of the type and severity of the cases and the amount of investigatory experience she brought to them, noting:

I'm a very empathetic person by nature. I just naturally connect with people, but I don't know if it's because I had been through [investigating] before and kind of knew what to expect and I knew how to separate myself a little bit better, or if it's because . . . this case was just not as awful as the first one was, but I just didn't get the same kind of overpowering emotion. I have to believe that it's kind of a combination of things.

Later in the interview, Lucy reported that she experienced vicarious trauma as a response to secondary trauma in her first case as an investigator, which was a violent case involving forcible penetration. When I asked why she identified her response as vicarious trauma for only that one investigation experience, she explained, "I think it's because of the types of cases they were, to be honest. I think that if I went through another one similar to that first one, [I] would. . . experience vicarious trauma again."

Katie worked with sexual violence in varying capacities for nearly 10 years, most recently as a full-time investigator. She felt most impacted by what she described as the "*Law and Order*" or "heinous" types of cases, and she observed how these types of cases affected new investigators and could predict longevity in the field:

It's not for everybody; it can be shocking. People deal with the details of everything that a Title IX case could potentially encompass, the graphic nature of pictures or videos or stories. You know, needing to ask the questions about those details if they haven't come out because you need to get at every little piece of the puzzle as best as possible. Some people aren't comfortable asking those questions or looking at those things. So, I feel like easing into it to see how you do is

important to see if you can handle it, because that's probably going to be a good determination of how long you can last in it.

When I asked Lucy what she would share with future investigators during their training, her response reinforced Katie's comments:

I would make sure that they know that they're going to hear more detail than they ever imagined. . . . you're going to hear everything, and . . . I knew I would hear the story, but I don't think that I realized the depth of the story that I would hear and the detail, and I think that's really what affected me with that first investigation.

For those investigators who were able to "last in it," as Katie says, the details, severity, and type of sexual misconduct cases influenced their responses to secondary trauma, and the effects of these cases were apparent in both their professional and personal lives.

### **Professional Impact of Investigating**

Participants adjusted their work lives in positive and negative ways to incorporate the requirements of being an investigator. Participants often extended or altered their workdays to meet the demands of an investigation and conform to the 60-day time limit originally mandated by the Office of Civil Rights in its 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter*. Interviewing students involved in cases meant accommodating their availability, which often led to late afternoon or evening investigations. Martha describes how she was impacted:

It would definitely remove me potentially from day-to-day responsibilities or having to add on additional hours here and there to either conduct interviews or change my schedule up in order to . . . make sure that the amount of time was

spent to try and get as much information as we could. . . . a lot of that was spent either early mornings, late nights, going into the office on the weekends.

Additionally, investigators tried their best to predict the length of time needed for an interview, but some investigators, like Veronica, found themselves scheduling two hours for an interview that ended up lasting for six hours. Jack investigated a case that went well beyond the expected 60-day time frame because of cross-accusations and fluctuations in the narratives from all parties, which required weekly involvement and stretched the case out for nearly a full academic year. Jack describes how this case affected him:

And again, I think so for burnout, for me, would be just exhaustion, not being able to really give your best at everything that you need to do. There are probably some things that I put off, honestly, in my actual job to get this case done.

In order to make this and other cases work, Jack reported, he:

spent a number of hours writing reports really late at night because that was the only time that I could write reports. Or following up on other work late night because that was the only time I could do that. And from a personal toll that takes on family and your general health, you reach a point where you're giving more than you were ever expected to give.

Jack is grateful for the support he received from his institution and supervisors, since he felt he was not performing as his best self in his full-time campus role:

I had supervisors that understood what I was going through, but . . . you're making choices . . . and responding to people later than you would . . . it's just not the best version of yourself.



**Part-time investigator benefits.** As a part-time investigator, Lucy finds that the intermittent intervals of her cases allows her to be flexible at work when investigating, knowing that the situation is temporary:

My two roles are completely separate. My regular 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. job has nothing to do with Title IX. . . . It's not an overwhelming number of cases that I do, . . . it's not a huge time commitment, so I've been able to balance, but sometimes I would have to shuffle things around or stay later to make sure that work was getting done.

Wes is fortunate to work at an institution with enough part-time investigators that he is able to turn down cases, when necessary, in order to work within the limitations of his residence life job.

I think the only real difference about the work is I suspend normal operations in order to make the Title IX case the priority. I would never take on a case if I knew that I was going to be on call, or if I knew that I had a massive work thing happening or if I knew I couldn't take myself away from the day to day.

When Diana first became an investigator, she had the flexibility to fit the cases into her schedule.

I started doing it at a time when I had more time professionally . . . my days were not so busy that I couldn't take [the time] to go investigate. When I got busier, I was still positioned in a way that . . . I could choose that balance for myself.

However, as the years passed and Diana's responsibilities increased, her loyalty to the mission of Title IX on her campus drove her to continue her involvement, even though it added stress to her work demands.

**Full-time investigators' identity.** The full-time investigators were all housed in different areas of the institution: Katie was in the civil rights and equity office, Will was in business services, and Rockford and Veronica were located within their respective divisions of student affairs. All of the full-time investigators reported feeling disconnected from their previous training and work in student affairs, due to their separation from former colleagues and a lack of positive student interaction in their current roles. Veronica's and Rockford's lack of a peer group motivated them to seek connections. Veronica noted that she was able to establish professional connections more naturally in her prior residence life role.

To maintain the student affairs professional aspect of their identities, Will and Katie intentionally sought opportunities to stay involved in the field. Will missed the daily interaction with his colleagues, but despite a divide between his department and student affairs, he sought to maintain a connection through student affairs-focused committee work:

I am no longer a part of student affairs, that identity was huge in my life from essentially the start of my career . . . it's something that I miss and I'm still connected to student affairs in ways. I'm part of our [crisis response] team and I still have connections and committee involvement in student affairs.

Will also enjoyed making positive connections with students by leading bystander intervention trainings and other trainings regarding sexual misconduct prevention.

Similarly, Katie sought out other opportunities to help her to stay connected. Several times during her interview, Katie mentioned her joy in teaching a first-year seminar at her institution and how this role connected her with her student affairs history.

This opportunity also allowed her to connect with students in a positive manner outside of investigations.

Rockford also made some of these connections, but he continued to look for more opportunities to recreate the positive student interactions of his previous, more traditional student affairs career:

I do miss having those positive student interactions . . . in student conduct where when [students] come into the office, they may be nervous or scared but when they leave they're like, "Wow, that wasn't as bad as I thought. Wow, that student hearing officer was actually a pretty nice guy." And you really don't get that in Title IX—in an interview meeting and you're not supposed to, and I acknowledge that. But yeah, I do, I do miss that.

As the sole investigator for his campus, Rockford noted, he often lacks the time and opportunity to re-connect to his student affairs roots.

**Positive professional impacts.** In response to the question of how their role as an investigator has impacted them professionally, participants reported receiving positive recognition, gaining new skill sets, and increasing their awareness of appropriate interpersonal behavior. For part-time investigators, their secondary position accorded them greater status and recognition of their expertise in discussions related to sexual misconduct. Diana reported that being a part-time investigator legitimized her statements in discussions related to sexual assault, bystander intervention programs, and prevention programs, allowing others to hear and respect her voice when her full-time role did not necessarily convey expertise in Title IX. For Wes, the opportunity for professional development and recognition was part of his motivation for taking on a part-time

investigator role. Wes explained, “I viewed it as a way to make myself a little bit more distinctive professionally, give me a chance to work in the university as an enterprise, very differently from what I had done in the past.”

In addition to the increased professional exposure afforded by her full-time investigative role, Veronica reflected on key skill sets that will be beneficial when she decides to further her career:

The other professional development I gained through doing Title IX investigations is learning how to be diplomatic . . . how do you navigate interacting with people that typically are upset in some ways . . . how to de-escalate a lot of people . . . how do you get them to still feel comfortable sharing their experiences without them feeling like you’re attacking them.

Other participants mentioned similar skill set development, and noted that they became more process oriented and policy focused as a result of their investigative work. Diana increased her professional awareness and her recognition that when dealing with personnel matters, everyone has their own truth and their own side of the story, and stories will rarely align 100%.

From altering their work schedules to supporting their career development, the role of an investigator affected the professional lives of all the participants. Moreover, these professional impacts bled over into their personal lives, shifting their behavior, altering relationships, and at times creating dependence on unhealthy habits.

### **Personal Impact of Investigating**

Much of the personal impact of being a sexual misconduct investigator involves the development of coping responses and skills. Most participants experienced changes in

their personal behaviors as part of their initial response to secondary trauma. Katie (and her husband) recognized her irritability during an investigation. “I can become very serious and my husband has said he has to give me buffer time when I get home, whether it’s an hour . . . of just decompression where it’s just, you do what you need to do.”

Will reported experiencing many sleepless nights when he first began investigating, as case details swarmed in his head. Veronica reported a similar experience and turned to exercise, namely running, to distract her thoughts from the day’s case(s). Almost all participants reported increasing their alcohol consumption both when they started investigating and more recently, when tough cases appeared on their agenda. Martha recalled, “There were cases that I lost sleep over . . . that kept me up. There were cases that after a hearing I would come home and have to have a drink, that just left me so exhausted physically and emotionally.”

**Emotional response.** Nearly all the participants described having emotional reactions to their cases, either of empathy for the students in the case or in response to their early experiences as investigators. Veronica’s initial response to becoming an investigator was rooted in both her own emotions and those of the students:

I didn’t really expect all of this. I expected some of the emotions, but I don’t think I really had thought ahead of what it would be like still having to ask questions, knowing the person I’m interviewing was also emotional but still needing to get the information . . . [to] write my report.

These emotions compounded until they interfered with Veronica’s personal life, manifested in apathy and tears:

I didn't want to do anything . . . I just wanted to sit in my apartment and do nothing. . . . I took on more things that people were saying to me during the investigations so that became more of like a focal point . . . and I just remember thinking, I want to cry.

Veronica's recognition of how investigating affected her prompted her to develop a variety of coping mechanisms, from consuming alcohol to running.

Other participants also had emotional responses to investigating. Diana described the heaviness she felt in response to her first cases as:

An inability to forget it, an inability to move on from it. The need to process it, to reflect, to share, to tell somebody else so that you don't feel like you're the only person that holds it. To kind of work through feelings of disbelief. . . . It felt burdensome.

Diana recalled that she would often go home after a case, drink an alcoholic beverage, and discuss the case with her partner to process her emotions.

***Emotional responses in home life.*** Investigators' emotional responses often surfaced at home and with their families. Will said, "I found myself prioritizing a lot over family stuff, taking time out of the weekend to work because I couldn't get to it during the week." As a father of young children, he explained that it "sucked" to miss time with them for work that was so emotionally exhausting. Additionally, Will leaned on his partner and her experience in higher education to absorb some of his emotions, a strategy also mentioned by Martha, Diana, and Jack.

Katie's emotional responses also carry over into her home life. The details of cases often stick with her even after she gets home, affecting her mood. "You hear the

details and they're shocking. . . . there are things that you'll think about, I might go home and still have that on my mind and thinking about that." Katie is grateful that her husband, a police officer, understands when work follows her home. He gives her space when she comes home to allow her to decompress, because:

I can be very short and pointed when I get home and maybe that's the way I'm experiencing it. I don't want to say I'll bite your head off type situation, but certain things could put me in a bad mood.

Over time, Katie and other participants learned to balance their experience and emotional responses with their families.

*Setting boundaries at home.* Unlike other partnered participants, Rockford chose not to bring his work home, after going through a difficult period for his family:

I don't talk about work at home. When I initially started doing investigations, one of my struggles was I brought my work home physically, mentally, and emotionally, and I was noticing the impact that that had on my wife. I'm not bringing the negativity into my wife's life because it was difficult for a little while, and I didn't want for that to continue in our life.

Rockford described how a particular case affected his emotional state and overtook his life:

I was seeing the change in behavior in myself, I was seeing that I was much more irritable. I was sleeping a lot more, I was not as communicative and outgoing, and I was seeing this change in my behavior. And I started thinking more about it and then there was one incident where . . . it was a date night and I took the day off work, my wife did as well, and I was just checking my phone and just getting all

worked up over something that I didn't need to and I let that ruin the entire night. And sometime after that I just thought about it like, Wow, I let that impact a night . . . for us to get away from everything . . . I just made it about me and my attitude and I don't do that, that's not who I am.

Before Rockford learned to manage his emotions as an investigator, he witnessed the impact on his personal behavior and on his wife. His solution was to create intentional boundaries between home and work to prevent future intrusions. While many participants reported responses to investigating that were physically and emotionally draining for themselves and their families, however, not every participant felt these effects.

***Wes's controlled response.*** In contrast to the other participants, Wes reported developing extensive coping skills in response to his previous career experiences, and as a result he did not let investigations deeply affect him:

I really think that it's just a totally separate mindset . . . I'm not a person who is anxious and awake at night [thinking] I could have done more or whatever; that's a waste of time. I lay down and I go to sleep.

Wes was unique in reporting a lack of emotion in his response to his investigative work, but he processed his experience in an attempt to understand why this is a societal issue:

So as an asexual man . . . I don't experience sexuality and the kind of sexual violence that this stuff is doing, I don't have that kind of drive . . . that kind of understanding of the world . . . but like, trying to understand the kind of power dynamics and things that happen around people's sexual violence is really kind of messed up.



Wes was the only participant who disclosed that they were asexual. While other participants seemed to accept that sexual maleficence is a part of society, because Wes does not participate in the sexual part of society, he was able to take a more objective view of sexual activity and the power dynamics intertwined in both consensual and non-consensual acts. Wes' role as an investigator exposed him to a darker side of sexuality and power dynamics, which lay bare research questions beyond the scope of this study.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from Wes, Lucy is all too familiar with the power dynamics of sexual assault. Through understanding her own experience of trauma, Lucy's personal response to secondary trauma led to a very positive outcome and helped her to process her own past.

**Dual identity: Investigator and survivor.** Early in her interview, Lucy identified herself as a survivor of sexual violence. She believed that being an investigator helped her better frame her own experience and be less triggered by discussions of sexual violence in the workplace. Her role in investigating incidents of sexual assault transferred the power in these contexts back into her hands:

I am actually a stronger and more resilient person at this point from having gone through it . . . it used to be that I was very triggered whenever sexual assault or sexual violence was discussed or referred to in any manner and I'm really not anymore. I don't want to say that I've been desensitized, but I think it's that I know how to process and compartmentalize a little bit better than I used to. And I think the fact that I do feel like I've been able to help people has kind of helped me process my own trauma.

Figure 3: Lucy's First Reflection Photo



The first photo Lucy used in the reflection exercise represented her journey and the way she used her personal experience to become a stronger investigator:

But then, ultimately, we have the rain in that picture (see Figure 3) and to me, the rain, even though it can show sadness or emotion, for me it was somewhat cleansing because it helped me process my own past and my own history, and to kind of feel I was doing something to help even though I couldn't take away what had happened and I couldn't change the past, I still felt in my small way I was contributing to assisting the person in this incident.

Lucy's experience was unique among the participants, and it documented how the response to secondary trauma can materialize through the lens of an individual's prior encounter with sexual violence.

Throughout my conversations with the participants about how investigating impacted their personal and professional lives, one word emerged repeatedly: *burnout*.

By focusing on burnout, we began to explore how investigators understand the stresses of investigating and interpret their responses to secondary trauma.

### **Investigators and Burnout**

In their interviews, all participants reported experiencing symptoms commonly associated with burnout: fatigue, frustration, reduction of affect, feeling overwhelmed, and practicing avoidance behaviors. These symptoms stemmed from high caseloads, egregious cases, longevity of cases, and factors outside of their investigatory duties. Full-time investigators reported experiencing burnout especially quickly, as they were based in small offices of one to three people.

Rockford summed up the experience of full-time investigators attempting to manage multiple cases and navigate the climate of the institution and beyond:

It's just because I'm burned out, I'm just tired . . . everything kind of gets to you.

It's almost the perfect storm of . . . the political climate on the larger scale [and] on the institutional scale. And then you have . . . all these other responsibilities, and it gets to you.

The sheer volume of cases produced negative emotions for Rockford, and he identified burnout as his primary response to his recent Title IX work.

Will and Veronica also reported experiencing burnout due to extremely high caseloads and lengthy interviews. In addition to investigating, Will managed all other aspects of his institution's Title IX office, and "for so long it was just such a fire hose of cases to manage, it was just not sustainable." Will identified this time as burning him out as both an investigator and a manager, noting that his staff also showed signs of burnout due to the exhaustive aspects of investigating and the high volume of cases they

managed. In Veronica case, she reported, “I don’t think it’s like emotional exhaustion; it’s just like I seriously can’t keep up.”

In addition to struggling with the volume of her caseload, Veronica experienced burnout after a single day of work when an expected two-hour interview went on for nearly six hours, leaving her emotionally drained and stressed over the shift in expectations for her day’s accomplishments. She believed the burden of both the large number and extreme intensity of these cases exacerbated the stress, creating the need for a release. Veronica was “getting better at telling my supervisor when . . . I need a break . . . where it’s getting to the point . . . [of] knowing when I’ve done too many.” However, even after intentionally creating opportunities to relieve her burnout symptoms, Veronica returned from days off not feeling rested because of the job demands prior to leaving and after she returns.

**One case is enough.** For Jack, a single case was enough to push him beyond his limits. During Jack’s interview, he focused heavily on his most recent investigation, which lasted nearly an entire academic year, involved dozens of witnesses, and featured fluctuating and inconsistent accounts from both the complainant and respondent. During the case, Jack felt, “annoyed, frustrated, and exhaust[ed] definitely, probably overwhelmed.” In Jack’s interview, he repeatedly emphasized the effect of the length of the case and the need to keep up with complex and constantly changing details.

Multiple areas in Jack’s life compounded his burnout, and he eventually shared his troubles with his Title IX coordinator during the course of the investigation:

Emotionally, I was probably stressed during that time a little bit, and I shared that with our Title IX coordinator and said, this is where I was, there were some

external things happening beyond this investigation that were having an impact personally and professionally. That's our daily lives; we have to learn how to work through that.

Jack did not identify the personal stresses that added to his feeling of burnout, but he did share that when he accepted the case, he was initially able to adjust his schedule to accommodate the investigation. However, the case extended well beyond the anticipated investigation timeline and impacted his professional role more than he expected:

You're so exhausted and of course . . . I'm doing this on top of the job I do at one of the busiest times of the year for my role, you're already exhausted and tired and stressed and then you add on this madness, and so . . . I spent several times venting to our Title IX coordinator and I just would say, you're killing us . . . you're burning out the people that are trying to help, and that was probably my biggest frustration.

Jack's experience with this case clouded his perspective on his entire investigatory career. Burnout was his primary response to the demands placed upon him as a part-time investigator, demonstrating how a "simple" case can evolve into a complex situation. Since the case concluded, Jack asked his Title IX coordinator not to assign him another case for "a while," noting that he would even consider resigning from his investigatory role if it would not create a hardship for the coordinator and other investigators.

**Vicarious trauma.** Lucy was the only participant who initially described her experience using more specific language than burnout, identifying her experience as

vicarious trauma without needing an explanation of the concept. Lucy's first case was fraught with emotion (see Figure 3):

[the photo] I chose was the black and white of somebody walking through the rain and it's very stark and it's just one person out there. So they're very alone and I think that was a really good reflection of that very first investigation . . . I was overwhelmed by empathy, I found myself feeling very emotional, feeling—connecting very much with the victim in that particular case. It was an awful story. . . . it shook me a little bit. . . . I felt very isolated because you really can't discuss these cases with anyone and I had all of these feelings and I didn't know how to process and I didn't know how to let it out.

Lucy's first case overloaded her capacity for empathy and triggered multiple emotions.

Lucy received training on vicarious trauma several months after her first case. As she grasped the concept of vicarious trauma, she better understood her response to secondary trauma in her first case. She appreciated having language more specific than “burnout,” as it normalized her experience and reassured her that others respond emotionally to cases as well. Lucy reported that she experienced vicarious trauma only in her first case, observing that “since [the first case], I don't think I've experienced much vicarious trauma, if at all. . . . I was more resilient and therefore didn't experience the same level of emotion.” Like other participants, Lucy learned from her experience, creating stronger systems of self-care and support to become a more resilient investigator.

### **Understanding How Investigators Process Their Responses**

Long before I broached the questions regarding self-care with the participants, they began on their own to discuss how they sought ways to separate themselves from the thoughts or emotions of a case or utilized other coping mechanisms. Participants chose when and how to implement coping mechanisms. Their journeys involved creating a personal self-care system that allowed them to persist in being an investigator.

#### **Coping and Self-Care**

For Jack, his ability to cope and create boundaries limited his response to secondary trauma:

You hear some really upsetting things or you hear some alleged activities that you've never been exposed to and you've got to just develop a sense of—a filter or a shield or something to kind of get you through that.

Self-care and coping skills were mutually reinforcing as participants established practices that fostered separation, reflection, and understanding.

**Paths to separation and community.** For all nine participants, finding the ability to separate from their cases, whether through getting a cup of coffee, going for a run, diving into another work task, or taking time away from the office, was a key coping mechanism. As Martha explained:

I would need to leave and go walk around, go get a cup of coffee, go decompress, even seek out another member of the dean of students' staff and even debrief with them a little bit . . . just to process my reaction and my emotions.

Katie achieved separation by focusing on aspects of the university outside of her role. She used the opportunity to connect with students and flex her student affairs skill set:

It's kind of self-care, pursuing outside interests. I'll still teach a freshman seminar course . . . to see another side of the university, rather than being in my little area doing solely Title IX work.

The definition of separation was different for each participant, encompassing both physical and psychological variations.

Wes became an investigator with pre-developed coping skills as a result of his previous work with students in trauma in higher education. Separation was a key component in his primary role, and he rolled it over into his secondary role as an investigator. In Wes's first case, he traveled to a remote campus to do the investigation. The drive gave Wes and his co-investigator about 40 minutes to leave the work behind:

My first case, I . . . had to travel significantly in order to get to the place where we had to do the investigation. Because of that, I really viewed it as a separation of my work life, a separation of what's normal for me . . . I feel like the conversations that we had in the car were somewhat related to the investigation but also somewhat just totally not.

Wes recognized the benefits of the separation the drive provided in his first case experience. As a result, he has incorporated a separation from cases on his primary campus into his work as well:

I know that I give myself more breaks when I'm doing a case because you can't [jump] back in to getting work done. . . . the driving was really helpful for me



because with that, I just went right back in because I had that 40 minutes to take care of myself and process through whatever I needed and then I could just go about my life. But when I've done interviews closer to where my office location is, I do need a little bit more of that separation. . . . I go to my apartment, and that's . . . where I'll read or I'll watch bad pop videos on the Internet.

***Trial and error.*** Other investigators developed their coping skills and ways of separating through trial and error. Veronica initially struggled with separating because she took on her new role as a full-time investigator at a new institution. She took up running as a hobby to escape her thoughts:

I think initially [my processing] was good, but then I did realize later on, [with] something more emotional or I could not get out of my mind, I pretty much had to go run, and I hate running, I don't want to run, it's not my thing, but it was the only thing I could do to stop thinking about something.

Veronica's previous separation technique involved socializing with her peer group, something she had to take time to develop at her new institution:

I'm paired with part-time volunteer investigators, they've become my friend group . . . a consistent happy hour with someone that I worked with during an investigation and also feels similar isolation or frustrations.

While Veronica's new friend group was beneficial, however, it became imperative for her to identify peers who would let her escape instead of inquiring about her work with sexual assault, which prevented her from leaving the work behind. All nine participants commented on the voyeuristic interest expressed by peers and colleagues in

their investigations. Veronica summed up her need for friends who would allow her to separate from the topic:

I think I end up utilizing [time with friends] as . . . my escape from what I do, but also realizing that I think other people find the job more fascinating. I feel like typically they're like, oh, I want to do more, or like, How's the week going? or like, What's going on with this? . . . I might want to vent about the frustration of my job, but not the ins and outs.

While Veronica's work with sexual misconduct intrigued her friends and colleagues, she and the other investigators did not want their personal lives consumed by the topic. However, through her friends, Veronica figured out how to separate when she was alone and when she was with her community, which allowed her to thrive as an investigator.

***Trusting the instinct to separate.*** Participants utilized the strength of home and work communities, along with individual time, in a desire to create a sense of control and escape. In addition, participants learned to balance other life variables with the stress of investigating. Lucy's multifaceted approach to self-care at home was clear when she described how her need for self-care and separation extends beyond being an investigator:

I am good at recognizing when I'm feeling at my limit. I'm good at recognizing when I'm there and . . . I either get out and I go for a walk or I read or . . . just plop down in front of the television for a few minutes and completely let myself zone out. I don't have any one thing that I do that makes me feel better, it's just more knowing when to separate myself from the situation and take care of me for a while.

Lucy's approach was not unique among the participants as a way to escape their responses to secondary trauma. When asked about her approach to self-care outside of work, Katie responded, "spending time with my husband, visiting family, trying very hard not to look at my email or look at things work related when I'm not at work." Similarly, in addition to working out in the campus recreation center and going for walks on his urban campus, Rockford focused on his home life as his primary means of separation:

We have a life, we have a house, and doing the house-y chores and mowing the lawn and I really enjoy that stuff, [it] makes you feel like I'm not this investigator dealing with all of these sex assaults and dating violence.

For Will, his drives to and from work were important times to process his reactions, but he admitted that as much as he tried to avoid it, he still brought work home with him:

I wouldn't say it's easier to compartmentalize but I think I do a better job of compartmentalizing. Certainly cases oftentimes will come home with me and I'm thinking through things either on my drive in or as I'm getting ready in the morning or going to bed at night or whatever. My level of insomnia is much less nowadays.

All participants discussed how they attempted to separate their home and work lives, often using home life as a needed separation from work. However, participants also identified a need for longer breaks when greater separation is required. Will recognizes when he is having a poor response to secondary trauma and takes action:

I think that that's when it becomes clear to me that I need to go do some self-care and take care of me, whether that's get to the gym and work out or go spend an entire weekend with my family and not worry about work for the two days and really give myself the mental break to come back to it, so that I'm giving everybody that equal level of care and response as they walk in the door.

The discussion of separation and self-care inevitably returned to the participants' roles and the importance of creating separation in order to become a stronger professional. Katie enjoys her role as an investigator and is motivated in her work by her inquisitive nature and the challenge of implementing self-care:

what keeps me in it is . . . having a very specific, defined role. That is both positive and negative because that's what you do all day every day . . . so you have to find a way to be more well-rounded in other areas, whether that's teaching . . . or somehow being involved so you're not so consumed in it to keep the balance. But . . . I think that investigative piece still intrigues me.

The participants used themselves and their community to begin understanding how being an investigator fit into their many life roles.

***Escaping into work and the office community.*** While at work, the need to complete work tasks often prevented participants from being able to separate for long periods of time. Similar to Wes's mini-retreats to his apartment or Martha's coffee breaks, participants dove into social media breaks or conversations with colleagues as a means of separating themselves from their work. Their community of friends and co-workers became their method of escape, whether online or in person.

Katie switches between cases and takes time away from her desk to take a break:

I switch gears to cases so often, I start on one and then I switch to another and then I'm updating with another and I just keep going back and forth, but sometimes I'll . . . probably surf Facebook a little bit and things like that throughout the day just to break it up for myself, mentally. . . . or get up and walk around, start a conversation with our administrative assistant. I'll go to lunch with people who don't work in my area so I can hear what's going on outside in different areas of campus.

Lucy, Martha, and Veronica were fond of taking coffee breaks with colleagues. In addition to achieving a physical separation, Martha would shift her focus to her professional association involvement to gain a sense of control and escape the combined pressure of being an investigator and fulfilling her primary role.

Veronica had days at work where she relaxed her normal determination and focus as a way to recuperate:

It happens fairly frequently where . . . I just need a break from this, even if that's a day, an extended period of time, or just one of those days in the office where like I'm doing things but I'm not . . . I have to recharge.

Katie also used a "zoned out" approach to achieve separation, "I have to do things that are more mindless, that don't take a lot of brain power. . . . I've had to become a lot more attuned to myself and making sure that I'm not taking things out on other people." The term *avoidance* paralleled the concept of separation in several interviews. Initially, participants used *avoidance* with a negative tone, but as they continued to share their narratives, they explained that the avoidance they experienced was a necessary derivative of separation that supported their own mental health.

**Finding a place to reflect and process.** For investigators, reflecting on and talking about their emotions and experiences in an investigation released the burden of investigating by sharing the pain and trauma. Reflection with partners, family members, co-workers, or supervisors created a bond and support system that helped to ease this burden and heal their wounds. Investigators delicately shared information to protect their students' confidentiality and to protect their confidantes from exposure to too much detail and tertiary trauma.

***Processing with their community.*** While all participants used their friends and family as a way to separate from the process, most also used these connections to help them find support from a comforting voice. Wes took on the role of an investigator with a preexisting support system in the form of weekly phone calls with his parents. He used the time to catch up on their lives and receive needed feedback on his actions or validation of his motives.

Martha leaned on her partner to process her experiences when he saw how she was responding to her cases:

My spouse saw the impact that it had on me as far as changes in sleep patterns, my emotions, and certainly being very supportive and listening to me. Listened to me vent, but it was a lot to ask . . . since of course they're very much removed from the situation, but . . . they could say, ooh, aww, wow, that's crazy, and be that person that agreed with you even . . . when you didn't have any other person to listen.

Diana echoed Martha's need to have someone validate her emotions and thoughts through the acts of processing and understanding, explaining, "sometimes you just need

to be heard . . . to put it out there. . . and be like, this is why I'm kind of feeling a little quiet, this is what I'm thinking about right now."

However, Diana chose to limit any detailed discussions so as not to overburden her partner with the details of a case or risk triggering a response to tertiary trauma at home. She relied on other family members who understood the process and would not assume the burden of the information:

My sister works on a college campus but . . . has a very different role and so she finds it interesting, she's very intrigued by this whole process and how it's done and why, and I talk to her because she just finds it interesting. I'm able to put it out there and she's genuinely listening, [where] my partner is like, Oh my god, another one!

*Benefit of a shared experience.* For the participants who work in a dual investigator model, their partnership with other investigators brings fresh eyes, motivation, and interest in the role, which helps keep them motivated and staves off the effects of secondary trauma. For example, Wes's long car ride gave him and his partner time to reflect on the case and its personal impact, and provided them with time to separate from the case. Wes recalled, "I needed that car ride to make me realize that this work wouldn't be like soul crushing."

For Jack, the benefit of having a partner is that "you always have someone that you can process with yourself. We processed . . . as we were going through the last investigation, and that was helpful to have someone [who] understood where you were." For full-time investigators, their immersion in the role can be exhausting, and while time

spent with part-time investigators may be refreshing, having someone who understands the depth of the burden was necessary.

Veronica reported feeling isolated, as she had only a small cohort with whom she could share information and fully process the situation:

You're pretty much isolated . . . I have two people that I could give full-on details to because my supervisor is going to read the report and then also the other full-time investigator sometimes will check in, or we'll pop in with each other just to see tactics or just like, hey, I need help on this. Or just, this investigation sucks.

The collegiality between investigators seemed to be an important aspect of this work, regardless of the relationship of the various roles (part-time vs. full-time or veteran vs. novice). The bonding that occurred as a result of the shared experience emerged as a necessary coping mechanism.

*Supportive work environments.* Reflection with officemates revealed the level of support participants felt from their supervisors and institutions. While Rockford created his own self-care culture, others found that their supervisors and institutions strongly encouraged them to take time for themselves. Katie was grateful for the support she received. "My supervisor on our staff was very supportive; I was very thankful of that at the time to have their support, and also our Office of Legal Affairs." Veronica openly discussed cases with her supervisor, who paid close attention to her stress levels, noted her caseload and types of cases, and checked in regularly for support. Wes and Jack praised their open relationships with their supervisors and Title IX coordinators and the support they received regarding their need for self-care.



*Benefits found in self-reflection.* Despite the benefits of self-reflection and processing, not all participants took the time to reflect or received training on the importance of reflection. For several participants, the preparation exercise for this study was their first opportunity to reflect. Lucy explained in detail how the study and the time spent in self-reflection benefitted her:

I think about that first case a lot, but not about how I felt during it; that was actually good for me to go back and process that because I've gotten over it, I'm not carrying around a bunch of emotion, but it was also nice to almost have an outlet for it . . . to be able to say, these are the emotions that I feel, and this is like the representation of it now, it's being let go and it can just go away. . . . good self-care is really important. I haven't been the best at it, but I think that reflection that you had me do was actually super helpful . . . How am I seeing my emotion right now? or How am I feeling and really sitting with it and processing through it? . . . I wish that somebody said you have to do this.

The study helped Lucy process her emotions and highlighted the need for built-in reflection in training and professional development for sexual misconduct investigators.

Although Katie did not have the same level of trauma to process as Lucy, she also found the exercises and conversation helpful when she was asked what advice she would give to future professionals:

The one piece that could be useful is talking about the self-care and talking about reactions and how personally I would handle certain things . . . I think just the process of interviewing itself is helpful in revealing some areas where I could work on things.

The guided reflection exercise allowed participants to gain a better understanding of their experiences as investigators. However, as the participants described, self-reflection alone was a necessary but not sufficient method of coping, and was therefore often combined with advice from peers, friends, and mentors.

### **No-Win Situation**

Through both self-reflection and discussions with others in their community, participants identified an important paradigm for being an investigator: no one wins. This theme emerged consistently and in multiple ways. Several participants had to learn how sexual misconduct investigations affected all parties and altered lives—including their own. For Diana, a mentor put it into context for her:

I remember very early on I had a conversation with someone . . . and she's like . . . just so you know, you can do this thing around Title IX perfectly and it will still feel awful. It will still feel awful no matter how well you did it. And that has been helpful to me, being like, that was shitty, but it was still important, and I still think it was done well.

Similarly, Will recalled how a fellow investigator helped him reach a clearer understanding of his work:

The investigator I worked with at my former university, she told me that the reality of the job is that 100% of the time, 50% of the people you're working with are not going to be happy with your decision and . . . it just really kind of put it into context.

These words of advice combined with their own emotions helped the investigators recognize the importance of the work they were doing and the need to treat everyone in the case fairly.

Through such realizations and the development of coping skills, the study participants persisted as investigators. To strengthen their coping skills, investigators underwent trainings of varying rigor that prepared them to become investigators and to learn to process their own responses to secondary trauma. The skill sets produced by each type of training increased the investigators' confidence, coping abilities, and understanding of self.

### **Understanding How Investigators are Prepared to Respond**

Title IX investigator trainings vary by institution, but the 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter* (U.S. Department of Education, 2011) and follow-up documents were consistent in highlighting the need for annual training to prepare investigators. Participants' formal training varied from institutionally developed solutions to using various higher education professional organizations for on-site or conference-style seminars. Overall, most of the formal training focused on policy and procedure, and only two of the participants received guidance on their response to secondary trauma. The most-cited preparation for managing these responses was pure experience, both as an investigator and in other situations that involved working with students in trauma. Participants addressed whether and how their graduate work or other student affairs professional development avenues contributed to their ability to process their response to secondary trauma.

### **Formal Investigator Trainings**

Following a discussion of the various concepts surrounding their responses to secondary trauma, I asked each participant to reflect on how they were prepared, starting with their formal training. Formal training encompassed both on-campus training with their Title IX coordinator and fellow investigators and workshops offered through professional associations, such as the Association of Title IX Administrators (ATIXA) and Academic Impressions, a higher education professional education company. Typically, participants first responded to this question by detailing their formal training and its focus on policy and procedure.

When I clarified that I was focusing specifically on their preparation to respond to secondary trauma, only two participants, Lucy and Will, were able to identify topics beyond a basic tenet of self-care. According to Wes:

I went through ATIXA training and it was never about any of that stuff. I went through the two-day training . . . and I feel like I know how to take notes and there's nothing about the psychological impact that can happen as you are taking notes.

When asked how she was prepared to process her response to student trauma, Diane replied:

I don't think we are trained to do that . . . I have had a lot of trainings on how to support others, but have I ever been talked to about how do we deal with [our own response] individually in formal training? No.

Although the formal trainings did not address this primary issue, they were beneficial in instructing participants on the details of policy and procedure, which participants

identified as a coping tool to focus on in order to avoid a negative response to secondary trauma.

Rockford did not feel the formal trainings covered the full spectrum of skills needed for being an investigator “because when they talk about being an investigator, they tell you that you’re going to be fair and impartial, that you’ve got to be neutral, and saying it and thinking it is one thing.” Rockford believed that his formal trainings taught him practical skills, but the impartiality advanced in investigator trainings did not prepare him for the emotional effects of his job. “I definitely think the trainings prepare you, but . . . [it] is totally different . . . having the students just bawl their eyes out, talking about . . . the worst day of their life.” Rockford’s perception emphasizes the lack of attention to the human dimensions of an investigator’s work within formal training settings.

In his reflection exercise, Will echoed Rockford’s views, recalling the emotions he experienced during his first case:

A lot of the images or the words that I was using to search were frantic, stressed, confused, struggle, because the first time I was thrown into the world of investigating Title IX, you go and you get your training and you feel like, okay, I’ve got this, and then all of a sudden you have real people standing in front of you with real issues.

His training was inadequate to prepare him to cope with the human dimension of his cases. “Most of my formal training has been through ATIXA and I think they highlight [self-care], I don’t know that they do a good job of digging into [self-care] as a meaty topic.”

**Positive formal training.** Martha felt well prepared by her institution when she began adjudicating sexual misconduct cases in the early 2000s. She discussed how training continued to improve throughout the focus on Title IX in the early 2010s:

The institution also did a good job of better preparing and training adjudicators . . . We went through the video series that was offered by [ATIXA] . . . we would meet . . . to process a lot of information, make sure folks were comfortable with vernacular, asking questions in appropriate formats.

She continued to discuss detailed forensic-level trainings and visits to the local emergency room to understand the process complainants go through for forensic kits, informally referred to as “rape kits.” Martha believed her training “was very, very detailed and very specific,” yet it only focused on the adjudication process, not on the investigators or their preparation to respond to their own needs or care for themselves:

There needs to be identified—at least one, if not multiple ways that self-care will be a priority, it has to be. And really finding that ear, whether it is a therapist or the supervisor or the dean or whatever to process things with so that you’re not self-flagellating and knowing that you’re doing the best with the information that you’re given and the framework that you have to use.

Martha’s comments took a turn similar to those of other participants in recognizing the need for formal training not only to help investigators investigate well, but also to create practices that will sustain them in the field.

**Little to no formal training.** Diana asked for more detailed training when she first became an investigator, and her formal training experience was the opposite of Martha’s training. Diana told her Title IX coordinator:

I really want to be trained, I want to know what I'm doing, I don't want to just walk into it. And she was like, absolutely, absolutely, we will make sure you have what you need, we'll make sure that you know what you're doing and . . . that was not the case at all. There was some training . . . but I'm not sure it even occurred before my first case. When I say trial by fire, I mean . . . you've been assigned to this thing and . . . learn as you go.

Diana's formal training advanced through ATIXA and Academic Impression seminars, but the novice-level training and casual presentation of complex and emotional material left her unimpressed. To accentuate her dissatisfaction with her formal training, in reflecting on her first case, she noted that her training did not prepare her for the breadth of emotions she faced in becoming the arbiter of another's trauma. "I have never received any kind of training, of now you have this thing and now it's yours and you have to hold it somewhere, somehow and that's not addressed in how to do that."

**Vicarious trauma training.** Lucy and Will were the only two participants who identified a familiarity with vicarious trauma from their formal trainings. Will's training on the topic involved a speaker discussing how secondary trauma can affect others. Will said he could "see how people [experience] vicarious trauma," but he did not self-identify with the term during our interview. He does believe he experienced a response to secondary trauma, but not to the point where he underwent his own trauma experience.

Lucy attended a vicarious trauma-focused workshop at her institution, which her Title IX coordinator organized as a supplemental and voluntary training.

Actually, the best training [was when] . . . the Title IX office brought in somebody who was a vicarious trauma counselor, like psychologist, and she did a

whole training on [vicarious trauma] and then she led us through yoga as a way to process through your own trauma and it was amazing.

We went on to discuss why the training was beneficial. Lucy explained:

Prior to that . . . I didn't have a lot of experience with processing my own vicarious trauma; in fact, I did a really bad job of it . . . because when I'm looking at my experiences with . . . students in crisis . . . I would be very present with them, help them get what they needed, make sure that they were taken care of, and then after they leave I would just feel a wreck. It's really been over the last couple of years that I've figured out how to really manage and balance it better.

When asked about her Title IX coordinator's motivation for providing training on vicarious trauma, Lucy said, "I think that it was more that she recognized that we all go through vicarious trauma at some point and thought it would just be helpful for us."

Formal trainings frequently focus on process to help investigators conduct strong investigations and achieve the most accurate outcomes. However, apart from Will and Lucy, none of the participants received formal training to prepare them for their own response to secondary trauma. Unanimously, the single best preparation identified by the participants was experience.

### **On-the-job Training**

The first part of my interview with each participant engaged them in a reflection exercise, which focused on their response to their first case as an investigator and to their most recent case. Eight of the nine participants used more emotive language to describe their first than their most recent case response, whereas self-confidence and a focus on policy and procedure imbued their responses to their most recent case. Jack was the only



participant who did not display this pattern, due to the level of burnout he experienced in his most recent case.

When I asked the participants how they accounted for the change, their inevitable response was time, experience, and an increase in coping skills. As Rockford said, “There are some things they can’t teach you and some things come with practice and come with experience and there are some things it just has to come naturally.” Will’s attributed his greater ability to cope and his competence as an investigator to experience:

In the beginning it was . . . more about me and my experience, versus now it’s more about the process and having been through that, understanding how I respond to that, really trying to navigate that . . . I think it’s no less complicated . . . it’s just more manageable through experience.

Participants commonly acknowledged the complexity and emotions wrapped up in a case, but as they developed as investigators, they learned to better manage their responses to secondary trauma.

Figure 4: Lucy’s Reflection Photo of Her Most Recent Case



Lucy's reflection exercise on her most recent case visually demonstrated the confidence she gained through experience as investigator:

It's a thick rope and it's strong and that kind of represents how I felt in that process because even though it was tough, I felt very confident, I knew exactly what I was doing, you know, I had been through this before, I knew that I was asking good questions, I knew that I was following all protocols, and I just knew that I was doing the right thing. (see Figure 4)

When asked about the effectiveness of her Title IX training in developing her response to trauma, Lucy said:

I think it was helpful, but it was also more academic, and it wasn't as hands-on and practical as just doing it and learning from experience. And I do think that it was probably more of the time I had in the field rather than the educational piece.

Through Lucy's experience, she increased her confidence as an investigator and shifted her paradigm of her own experience with sexual violence.

The theme of confidence developed over time and on the job permeated the participants' interviews. Katie observed, "I feel a lot more well trained and knowledgeable now as far as the amount of time that I've had doing the investigations." Rockford accentuated the need for experience as part of training models, noting, "I think the only way for one to gain competence is to do more investigations and to find one's style. [With] more investigations, I was able to feel more confident and comfortable with the process."

**Learning from experienced investigators.** Participants in a dual-investigator model found that in the beginning, working with a more experienced investigator

supplemented what their formal training lacked. Wes was very appreciative of his time with his partner:

You can't really prepare yourself until you're actually doing a case for the types of questions about human behavior that you have, and I depended on my partner, who was a more experienced investigator, to help me make sense of not only our policy and what we were investigating, but also the kind of decorum that is necessary for performing these investigations.

Diana and Veronica also praised their initial partners for their patience and willingness to teach new investigators. Diana worked with an experienced investigator who allowed her to process her emotions following what she described as an egregious case. Veronica was paired with another full-time investigator to learn the complexities of the institution and how to adapt to a professional role that involved full immersion in investigations.

**Prior crisis work background.** A common thread that emerged during data collection was the benefit of working with crisis management earlier in one's career. Six of the nine participants currently or previously worked in residence life or student conduct, where they regularly intervened with students either in immediate crisis situations or by providing support following crises. All six regard these experiences as extremely beneficial in developing their coping skills and preparing them to respond to secondary trauma.

Rockford highlighted the skills he acquired working in residence life:  
you really never know what to expect and see trauma on a spectrum, and it provides you with a solid foundation on how to respond to different types of

trauma and how really to think on your feet. That really taught me how to deal with trauma, how to process trauma afterwards, how to support students in trauma, and the importance of being okay not fixing it right now but connecting the students to the resources that can provide the resources to fix or to get the appropriate help.

Additionally, Rockford spent time working in student conduct and believes his student conduct experience was his best training to be an investigator, both in terms of understanding the investigative process and in providing him with a skill set for responding to secondary trauma that complemented the skills he gained in residence life.

Similarly, Will's reported that his residence life training helped him learn to think on his feet, manage his emotions, and adapt to fluctuating circumstances:

I look back to my housing training as some of the best crisis management training I ever got, and being able to respond to whatever takes place within the confines of your residence hall . . . some of that resiliency comes in because you're responding to duty calls at 2:00 a.m. or 3:00 a.m., and being able to manage that helps significantly in general, and really being able to think on your feet and keep things moving however we need to through that process because it's inevitable you're going to get a curve ball.

Residence life experience helped these participants develop a skill set for dealing with students in crisis, but the support provided by residence life staff looks different from the support required of an investigator, as Veronica explained:

In res life, most of the time I can be that support person or do more of the care and concern piece. . . . I want to show some sort of support and . . . maybe the most I

can do in this situation is make sure that [there is] someone following up with this student.

Wes attributed his skill in handling his response to secondary trauma largely to his career in residence life. The challenges he encountered in his residence life role, which encompassed working with students facing crises ranging from petty theft to sexual assault and student death, prepared him for his role with Title IX. According to Wes, once you have experienced a student death and have been the person to communicate the loss to the student's friends in the emergency room, managing your response to secondary trauma from a sexual assault case becomes much easier.

For the six participants who had prior experience with crisis management, exposure to these functional areas began primarily during their undergraduate and graduate careers. All participants completed graduate preparation programs focused on student affairs, participated in Title IX-specific trainings, and continued their education through professional development opportunities.

### **Student Affairs Training**

The student affairs mindset was intertwined in the daily agendas and motivation of the participants. They all believed their backgrounds and training in student affairs made them better, kinder, and more empathetic investigators. When I asked whether their student affairs- focused training, both graduate preparation and professional development, directly prepared them to handle their own responses to secondary trauma, the participants' responses were as follows:

Diana: It didn't.

Veronica: My own response? I don't think I was.

Katie: You know, definitely not my master's program.

Rockford: My graduate program did not assist with how to respond to trauma.

During our conversations, the participants acknowledged that not everyone would know of their need for training, particularly during their time in preparation programs. Martha noted that early in her career, the average student affairs professional would not have been exposed to high-level trauma. However, the current educational climate increases the chances of interacting with students experiencing trauma and the possibility of a related response to secondary trauma (Jones, 2014; Lynch, 2017; Protinivak, Paylo, & Mercer, 2013).

**Transferrable skill sets and juxtaposed agendas.** The participants' student affairs graduate preparation programs focused on building their skill sets to become successful administrators. Some of their programs included training in various people management skills, including counseling-based knowledge of crisis management. For Jack, these skills made him a better investigator:

The heart of the profession is, how do you treat and advocate for people who may not have anybody to do that for themselves? And I think all of that prepared me in the role of [an investigator] . . . I'm here to try to give each party in the case a sense of, you're being treated fairly because I'm coming in here and I'm not judging you right now.

For Wes, both his law school experience and student affairs preparation blended into a unique skill set that served him well as an investigator:

I think my professional education . . . helped people zero in on me as a possible investigator even at the beginning, again . . . having a counseling degree and

working with clients and doing stuff that probably is not normal for most people to talk about, but having it be in a professional context kind of makes it safer I guess. And the legal training through [my] law school really helped me frame questions.

Their people-focused training allowed the participants to connect more effectively with the students they were investigating.

However, the student affairs skill set was juxtaposed with the unbiased, neutral tone expected of the investigators. Jack found investigating counterintuitive to his student affairs training. “What we’re trained to do in the field is be empathetic, compassionate, caring people and then you can’t do that in these investigations, at least you can’t come off as doing that.”

For Wes, the conflict came as he was learning to understand his role as an investigator and draw the boundary between being perceived on campus as a student affairs professional and, separately, as an investigator:

And as a student affairs person, I want to see everything through; there’s a responsibility that some of us feel to making sure that the product is as good as it can possibly be and we’re putting our name on it and this different stuff, but that’s just not the case with the work related to Title IX. And I came to that realization on my own, but I came to that realization because of the observations I had of the other people around me doing the same work.

Diana had to learn this lesson too, and accurately described why a dichotomy of self must exist to be an effective investigator:

In terms of student affairs, we're . . . survivor-oriented. But what I have found is that I have to trust the system . . . that folks will have the support they need because . . . I can't play the role of both the compassionate support person and of the investigator.

Diana believed that compassion and empathy lend themselves to potential bias in an investigator, a thought commonly expressed by the participants. This view produced a deeply-rooted struggle between being true to oneself and the student affairs profession while also carrying out the responsibilities of a trained investigator. This struggle can cause internal conflict as investigators strive to balance their empathy with the requirements of the investigative role.

**Functional culture.** Student affairs professionals evolve in a culture in which one learns self-care more by example than through formal training. Will believed he was fortunate in his student affairs career to have supervisors and mentors who valued and emphasized self-care early on, helping him to establish more effective habits and recognize when he is out of his normal, healthy routine. Martha noted that she did not always have strong role models at her institution for practicing self-care, and felt the expectations for long work hours encouraged her to develop unhealthy behaviors. She did have a positive role model for a brief period, but not long enough for Martha to absorb her healthy habits.

Throughout the interviews, participants shared numerous examples of attempted self-care, but in most cases their organizational culture did not create an atmosphere that supported the development of thriving, healthier behaviors. Rockford did not have support for self-care and fought his administration for additional time off and the right to



not answer emails and phone calls 24/7. For him and others, feelings of burnout and poor self-care became lunchtime conversations or fodder for happy hours, instead of discussing the root cause of the symptoms. Veronica believed that connecting her problems with burnout was easier than understanding why professionals need self-care. “I think we rely more on just, oh, I’ve been really busy, I had all these interviews and then I had this report I needed to write and less like, this is specifically why [we are experiencing burnout].”

Diana connected the need for training on self-care and response to secondary trauma with the recognition of why such focused trainings were not part of the larger student affairs training agenda:

There have been more of those conversations. If you wanted to apply some of the faculty/staff programs, you could apply some of those: stress management, healthy eating, moving—greater activity in one’s life, that could—you could apply those to general well being. I think they’re talking more about mindfulness. But I think so many of the people in our field who are not doing investigations or are not doing crisis intervention or response wouldn’t necessarily understand the need or desire for that training or information.

Many professionals do not view the ability to respond to secondary trauma as a needed and universal skill set (Lynch, 2017); therefore, graduate and professional programs often leave out the subject despite the benefits for those working with trauma.

Jack highlights the need for such training to support the emotional stability of those working with trauma:

Things are going to come up . . . there [are] better things that we can do to prepare as [professionals] for this from an emotional standpoint, there [are] better things that we can do in how we approach things. . . because when we approach more complicated cases, how do we make sure that we're being as thorough as we can be, as detailed as we can be, and not get to the point where you get jaded?

However, the study participants did not become jaded; they persisted. They utilized their education and experience to build a set of coping skills to move themselves through the vicarious effects of trauma to become better investigators. The culmination of their experience was their determination to keep pushing forward to support the students, institutions, and process.

### **Chapter Summary**

Through my participants, I learned that being an arbiter of knowledge can be hard and burdensome. Investigators who became a vault, with no outlet or release, are eventually bound to overflow. Through this chapter, participants developed techniques of coping and self-care, which allowed them to persist as investigators. The following chapter focuses on the lessons learned from these nine participants and the implications for practice and future research.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

*“That’s what they don’t tell you about the job,  
who supports the support workers?”*

– Beth Latimer, *Broadchurch* (Chibnall & Williams, 2017)

During breaks from my data analysis, I watched the third season of the British crime drama *Broadchurch* (Chibnall & Williams, 2017). The season focused on a rape case, with a surprising storyline highlighting the vicarious effects of secondary trauma on the detectives working the case and the sexual violence advocate working with the survivor. The parallels between the TV characters’ experiences and those of the study participants enthralled me. The storyline helped raise public awareness of how sexual assault affects the helpers in the process.

In the show, both the detectives working with the case and the sexual assault advocate working with the survivor experienced responses to secondary trauma, which affected their professional and personal lives in different ways. Beth, the support worker, reached out to her estranged spouse for support and a comforting ear. The detectives, Miller and Hardy, relied on support from each other. Miller needed Hardy to both hear and assist her in processing her emotional reactions to the details of the crime as well as her frustrations with the investigation. Hardy needed Miller to help him adjust his level of

empathy for the survivor, as his primary coping mechanism was a focus on procedure.

The characters' varying responses to secondary trauma reflected the oscillating levels of intensity found among the study participants.

The participants' individual journeys and experiences speak for themselves. However, I had a difficult time letting go of my own experience and allowed my lens of vicarious trauma to influence my study. During the course of my interviews, I was responsible for an accidental intervention, in which I inadvertently introduced new language for the participants to use in interpreting their experiences. An understanding of my lens and intent provides vital context for reading the discussion and implications of the study.

### **Accidental Intervention**

During my interviews, I introduced seven of the nine participants to the terms *vicarious trauma* and *compassion fatigue*. This revelation altered the emergence of their truth and the epoché of the study, as it shifted their understanding of their experience. My intent in introducing more specific language was to explore the lexicon of responses to secondary trauma, beyond the concept of burnout. The conversation that followed included how the participants related to vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue, and how these concepts were relevant to the field. While the results of this portion of the interviews highlighted various responses to secondary trauma, it was outside the realm of phenomenology for me to alter the participants' language. Through my accidental intervention, I shifted the study to be about the language rather than about the participants' experiences.

My vicarious trauma framework also influenced my initial data analysis, where I prematurely interpreted my participants' responses to be vicarious trauma—again, focusing on language over experience. For this phenomenological study, I removed the analysis of the intervention results from the findings to focus on their words instead of mine. However, I imbued tenets of my lens in this chapter, as the vicarious trauma framework is part of my reality as the primary research tool.

### **Intervention Outcome**

As the literature predicted, most participants initially identified their response to the secondary trauma they experienced as an investigator as burnout (Canfield, 2005; Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016; Marshall et al., 2016; Turgoose & Maddox, 2017). After we discussed the various concepts related to a response to secondary trauma, participants articulated the benefits they saw in the expanded lexicon. Will, who received vicarious trauma training prior to his interview, acknowledged the need for investigators to “[normalize] the trauma. I think [the training] has been helpful in investigating and just working through these cases.”

Veronica described why she connected with the concept after reviewing her transcript during the member check phase:

I feel like with vicarious trauma . . . that I do like the term, I think it . . . encompasses everything because . . . a lot of it is you as an investigator processing everything that's been shared with you and . . . almost going through the same processes as the students.

Similar conversations with other participants focused on the benefits in discussing their experiences with more targeted language. The limited language of “burnout”

marginalizes the investigators' experience, while the expanded lexicon helps normalize their various responses to secondary trauma.

Despite exceeding the boundaries of phenomenology, the accidental intervention resulted in rich conversation on vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue with the participants. Further, more formal research is needed to examine the lexicon of investigators and others in their response to secondary trauma. The discussion of the study's findings focuses on the phenomenon of the participants' experiences; however, my vicarious trauma framework influences the chosen language and recommendations. Through our conversation, the participants and I explored their responses to secondary trauma, how they learned to understand and cope with these responses, and why they persisted as investigators.

### **Discussion**

When creating the study, I hypothesized that everyone in a Title IX investigator role experienced some form of vicarious trauma. Through conversations with colleagues and faculty, I expanded my research to focus on the response to secondary trauma of Title IX investigators. The participants responded to secondary trauma in various ways. Throughout the interviews, patterns emerged regarding gaps in preparation, the importance of self-care, and the need for community.

The study participants agreed that their formal education developed their helping skills, which provided the necessary skill set to be effective student affairs professionals and investigators. Additionally, they noted that their Title IX-specific trainings provided them with the policy and procedural knowledge to be effective investigators. However, most participants identified a gap in their training and preparation regarding how to

respond to secondary trauma, or how to hear stories of heartbreak, pain, and violation and process those stories.

As Diana explained, “I have never received any kind of training, of now you have this thing and now it’s yours and you have to hold it somewhere, somehow.” Research suggests that graduate preparation programs and professional trainings do not include a focus on secondary trauma because not every professional encounters enough secondary trauma in their career to justify training them en masse (Lynch, 2017; Protivnak, Paylo, & Mercer, 2013). However, research has also identified an increase in exposure to secondary trauma in multiple functional areas, including Title IX (Lynch, 2017). While the argument for expanding training is not the focus of this study, the study does provide evidence that providing training on the response to secondary trauma benefits Title IX professionals.

Two study participants, Lucy and Will, had received training regarding their response to secondary trauma, namely vicarious trauma. This training helped them put their responses in context, establish better self-care practices, and learn to reflect on each case to understand how the students’ experiences affected them. While this is a small sample, it demonstrates the effectiveness of such training on the investigators’ ability to understand their response to secondary trauma.

The other seven participants all mentioned a desire to learn more about their response to secondary trauma and agreed it would be a beneficial topic for future Title IX investigator trainings. Investigators can apply the concepts of burnout and compassion fatigue to their experience; however, secondary trauma is only one variable out of hundreds in the field of student affairs that can lead to burnout or compassion fatigue.

Leaving investigators with over-simplified concepts to describe their response to secondary trauma marginalizes their experience. Introducing the concept of vicarious trauma will help normalize their response to secondary trauma and may spur additional conversations on how to cope with their response through their community and practices of self-care.

Community was a necessary coping mechanism for all nine study participants. The participants relied on family, co-workers, and friends both as an escape from investigating and as sounding boards to process their responses to secondary trauma. Trauma counseling literature highlights the benefits of community immersion as a tested and proven coping mechanism for secondary trauma (Bartoskova, 2017; Burke, Dye, & Hughey, 2016; Furlonger & Taylor, 2013). How the participants immersed themselves into their communities varied. For some, community was simply a means to escape, forget about their investigator role, and root their existence in another aspect of their life. For others, their community provided a second set of ears to help them process and reflect on how they respond to secondary trauma.

The strength of the participants' ties to their community affected their response to secondary trauma. Participants with an established network demonstrated less severe responses to secondary trauma than those without pre-existing support. For example, through his career in residence life, Wes created a support system of colleagues and family with whom he processed his experiences. Wes worked at the same institution for over six years, enabling him to establish a network of co-workers that was readily available for support. In contrast, Veronica started a new job as a full-time investigator at a new institution, separating herself from existing networks of family and friends, which



she believes accelerated her response to secondary trauma. Veronica explored methods of self-care while she built her community at her new institution, ultimately relying more on her community than herself to get her through tough times.

Despite Veronica's preference for community, her journey through self-care highlighted the importance of self-care among investigators. Veronica shifted her coping techniques through trial and error in order to be her best self at work. Initially, she turned to running and alcohol to manage her response to secondary trauma, but she now relies on her network of support:

I've gotten better with how I process things . . . I don't even know the last time I went running because I haven't ran in forever. . . . I go to happy hour at 4:00 p.m. every Thursday with the same person, it's on our schedule . . . we're going to have drinks and we're going to both talk about our week . . . and process our jobs.

Participants' methods of self-care evolved in parallel patterns. Self-care in this context refers to the ability to reflect on, process, understand, and sometimes escape one's response to secondary trauma (Choi, 2017; Coles, Astbury, Dartnall, & Limjerwala, 2014; Frey, Beesley, Abbott, & Kendrick, 2016; Lynch, 2017; Samios, Rodzik, & Abel, 2012; Turgoose, Glover, Barker, & Maddox, 2017). All participants discussed how graduate preparation programs and professional trainings give a cursory nod to self-care—some more than others—but noted that these programs consistently fail to convey a genuine understanding of why self-care is important or when professionals need to utilize self-care skills.

This is not to suggest that training programs teach the wrong content, but that content on the need for self-care among investigators and student affairs professionals is

missing from these programs. Nevertheless, the participants learned how to care for themselves through their experience as investigators and other career exposure to secondary trauma. They learned to rely on their community when their self-care practices were not enough. Through these experiences, they built a skill set that allowed them to continue serving as investigators.

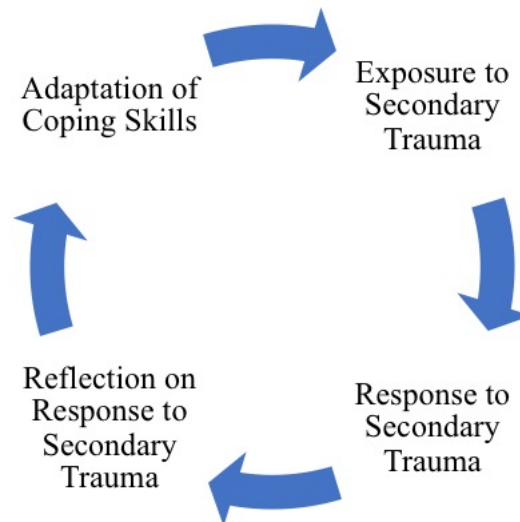
### **Cycle of Self-Care**

Through this study, I sought to understand the phenomenon of the response to secondary trauma in Title IX or campus sexual misconduct investigators. While I approached the topic seeking to let the epoché of the research emerge, my lens of vicarious trauma interwove itself into the interviews and data analysis. My expectations surrounding the essence of the participants' responses to secondary trauma were rooted in vicarious trauma: sadness, negative impacts on professional and personal lives, and the difficulty of an oversaturation of sexual misconduct. While we discussed those topics, the essence for the nine participants emerged in their resiliency and adaption of self to persist as an investigator. Through our conversations, the participants and I discussed the realities of working with Title IX and how they persisted in their roles in spite of, or because of, their responses to secondary trauma.

A cycle of self-care (see Figure 5) materialized during my data analysis. Through repeated exposure to secondary trauma, the participants developed coping skills to attenuate their response. Exposure to secondary trauma led investigators to experience a varying set of responses that ranged from having lingering thoughts about a case to compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma. Reflecting on their responses, investigators adapted their coping mechanisms to improve their self-care amid an investigation and

minimize their vicarious response. Future exposures to secondary trauma reignited the cycle, and the participants noted that over time and with additional experience, their adapted coping techniques minimized the intensity of their vicarious response.

Figure 5: Cycle of Self-care in Response to Secondary Trauma



The cycle of self-care parallels the assessment cycle frequently used in student affairs. The assessment cycle, simplified, involves collecting data on an intervention, analyzing the data to identify ways to improve the intervention, planning and executing the intervention using the outcomes of the data analysis, and repeating the cycle to continuously improve the intervention's effectiveness (Schuh, Biddix, Dean, & Kinzie, 2016). Analogous to the cycle of self-care, this cycle analyzes an existing response or outcome, determines how to improve upon the outcome, and repeats the pattern with potential gains.

Professional preparation and development programs in student affairs regularly embed the assessment cycle in their curriculums (Herdlein, 2004; Reynolds, 2011). The similarity of the language in these cycles creates a level of comfort and familiarity with the cycle of self-care, potentially increasing its effectiveness in training professionals to

develop stronger systems of self-care when responding to secondary trauma. Embedded in the cycle are the various coping techniques used by the participants. While the *self* in self-care is highlighted, the importance of community infiltrated many of the coping techniques used by participants. Investigators should not be expected to develop their methods of self-care alone, but should have support from the institutional community to discover their best and most effective methods of self-care.

### **Implications for Practice**

In the interviews, I asked study participants what advice they would give new investigators. Overwhelmingly, they wanted new investigators to understand that the investigation does impact the investigator and to recognize that they are not alone in their response to secondary trauma. Additionally, they would advise new investigators to seek out and define their own forms of self-care, and to create time and space for self-care in their professional and personal settings. To aid in this, Title IX coordinators, professional development trainers, and faculty need to modify their practices and trainings regarding secondary traumatic response, to better prepare new and current professionals to understand their own response.

### **Preparation for the Response to Secondary Trauma**

At a minimum, Title IX trainings need to address vicarious trauma and related concepts surrounding the response to secondary trauma. The focus of Title IX trainings is primarily policy and procedure, not the investigator. This is understandable given the litigation that often surrounds campus cases and the need to follow procedure to reduce institutional risk.

However, Lucy and Will demonstrated the benefits of their training on vicarious trauma in normalizing a professional's response to secondary trauma. It is important for professionals to know they are experiencing a normal response to their repeated exposure to trauma. To help prepare future investigators to understand how they respond to secondary trauma, trainings could include demonstrations in which participants practice working with students in crisis. The real-life scenarios may trigger a response to secondary trauma in a safe, protected environment, where the facilitator can debrief the participants and discuss not only how they handled the situation, but how the situation made them feel. For investigators, this early training would expose them to secondary traumatic responses, provide experience in investigating and monitoring how they respond, encourage them to reflect on their response, and allow them to develop strategies to persist as investigators.

The need for such knowledge expands beyond Title IX trainings, as student affairs professionals in many functional areas increasingly work with students experiencing trauma (Lynch, 2017). Protivnak, Paylo, and Mercer (2013) identified student affairs functional areas where counseling skill sets would benefit practitioners most; however, the study does not take into account the continued rise of student mental health issues. There is an increasing need for counseling skills among all practitioners as the potential for exposure to secondary trauma proliferates. Integrating vicarious trauma into existing conversations on self-care provides a means to prepare all professionals to cope with for their future responses to secondary trauma.

### **Training to Practice and Model Self-Care**

Professional preparation and development programs often discuss the importance of self-care, but fail to make the connection between why professionals need self-care and how to develop one's own system of care. A key contributor to the participants' persistence in their investigative roles was a set of trial and error of coping skills in determining how to care for themselves. Wes and Will learned self-care through their previous experiences, which minimized their response to secondary trauma. But Veronica and Rockford had to experiment with methods of self-care after becoming investigators began to impact their personal and professional lives. Self-care constantly evolves as stressors in life and work fluctuate. Including methods of self-care and encouraging the continuous exploration of self-care in training and preparation programs would provide future investigators with an existing self-care skill set to minimize the effects of their response to secondary trauma.

Campus administrators can carry this notion beyond the classroom or educational sessions into the workplace as a whole through continued professional development and modeling of positive self-care behaviors. When staff feel supported regarding their own self-care, they tend to stay longer, reducing turnover and being more productive (Burke et al., 2016; Choi, 2017; Furlonger & Taylor, 2013). Additionally, the participants demonstrated that community-based elements are essential to success in self-care. Will was fortunate to have strong professional role models regarding self-care, which prevented him from feeling guilty when he took time for himself or his family. Now, Will prides himself on his self-care and on being a role model for his staff in their own self-care. This positive attitude and focus on both self and staff should be applied in all

workplaces, not just those working with Title IX, to create an embedded sense of self-care in the workforce.

### **Transferability**

Most student affairs professionals have the potential to encounter students experiencing suicidal ideation, mental health issues, grief and loss, parental divorce, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual assault—all traumatic experiences with associated secondary traumatic responses (Jones, 2014; Lynch, 2017). Volumes of research surrounding the response to secondary trauma address many of these issues (Canfield, 2005; Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016; Marshall, Gardner, Hughes, & Lowery, 2016; McClellan, 2012; Parker & Henfield, 2012; Stasio, Fiorilli, Benevene, Uusitalo-Malmivaara, & Di Chiacchio, 2017; Turgoose et al., 2017; Turgoose & Maddox, 2017). The findings of this study may be transferable to other contexts, within and beyond the college campus, in which practitioners encounter secondary traumatic responses. As the participants noted, exposure to secondary trauma can occur in multiple campus roles. Administrators should identify which professionals experience repeated exposure to trauma and create professional development programs to provide them with the language to accurately discuss the experience of secondary traumatic response and create coping mechanisms.

### **Focused Recruitment**

In this study, Title IX investigators with residence life or student conduct backgrounds experienced a less intense response to secondary trauma than those without professional experience in those areas. According to the participants, the exposure to students in crisis occurs frequently in those functional areas, which supports the creation of coping skills to process secondary traumatic responses. Intentional recruitment of

professionals with backgrounds in these functional areas may therefore increase longevity and persistence in the Title IX investigator role. At a minimum, professionals with these backgrounds can be invited to participate in investigator training programs to discuss their exposure to secondary trauma and how they developed their skill set surrounding self-care.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

Literature on how student affairs professionals experience secondary trauma is only beginning to emerge (Lynch, 2017). Further research will strengthen the ability of student affairs professionals to create effective resources for those dealing with secondary traumatic response. Additionally, future research can normalize the response to secondary trauma and justify the need to include secondary traumatic responses in training and preparation programs. The limitations of the study and directions it introduces for future research provide access to expand research on how student affairs professionals respond to secondary trauma.

### **Measurements of Response**

The demographics of the participants limited the findings of this study. All participants persisted as investigators, which omitted the experiences of those who left their investigator roles. The cycle of self-care is based on pushing through and building strong resources, but what happens when those resources fail? This study did not investigate that question.

Additionally, I use no official measurement of trauma experience in the study, only self-identified and researcher-framed responses. Further studies should implement quantitative and qualitative measurements of secondary traumatic response to formally



measure whether and to what extent study participants experienced a response. The Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) assessment is a tested and proven quantitative tool that measures the level of compassion fatigue, burnout, and the response to secondary trauma in participants (Stamm, 2010). A mixed methods study utilizing the ProQOL could better explain results, rather than relying on the researcher's or participants' interpretation of the response to secondary trauma.

### **Research in Other Functional Areas**

Opportunities exist to repeat the study focusing on other types of trauma, and the professionals who work specifically with the population experiencing that trauma, to identify whether the cycle of self-care exists for professionals besides Title IX investigators. The study participants and the research literature identify the potential impact of secondary trauma in roles and functional areas outside of Title IX, along with the development of coping skills that were directly transferable to their Title IX role (Canfield, 2005; Kiyimba & O'Reilly, 2016; Marshall, Gardner, Hughes, & Lowery, 2016; McClellan, 2012; Parker & Henfield, 2012; Stasio, Fiorilli, Benevene, Uusitalo-Malmivaara, & Di Chiacchio, 2017; Turgoose et al., 2017; Turgoose & Maddox, 2017). Further research could affirm the connection between these various roles and justify the inclusion of secondary traumatic response in professional preparation and development programs.

### **Alignment of Resiliency and Persistence**

To balance vicarious trauma, the literature focuses on vicarious resilience, the positive response to working with individuals confronting trauma, as the helper's response parallels the growth and resiliency of the client over time (Best & June, 2017).

Investigators do not experience long-term exposure to students in crisis and therefore are unable to witness the students' resilience phase. However, the cycle of self-care demonstrated by the study participants reflects their paths of resiliency based on their own vicarious trauma. Does a relationship exist between vicarious resilience as described in the counseling literature, and the resiliency that emerges from vicarious trauma in the cycle of self-care? Do professionals who experience repeated exposure to secondary trauma and learn to thrive experience an indirect form of vicarious resilience? These are fruitful questions for future researchers to explore.

### **Conclusion**

Being a Title IX investigator repeatedly exposes professionals to students in crisis. The U.S. Department of Education's 2011 *Dear Colleague Letter* expanded the responsibility of educational institutions to provide a safe environment and improve investigatory procedures. The increased demands on the institutions led to student affairs professionals stepping into new investigatory roles, often with little or no training on the impact of secondary trauma.

This study explored the responses of nine investigators to secondary trauma through a framework of vicarious trauma. Through a learned understanding of self and community, the study participants grew in their self-care skills to persist as investigators. It is my hope that future investigators will benefit from my research, and that these findings will help them understand their own experiences and response to secondary trauma. Instructional designers of Title IX trainings and self-care programs need to incorporate vicarious trauma and its related concepts into future interventions to

normalize the response to secondary trauma. We must take care of each other. We are the support workers, and we are the ones who support the support workers.

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APPENDIX A  
RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

**Recruitment Email**

Dear fellow investigator [insert name if available]:

My name is Jonathan Duke, and I am a third-year doctoral student in UGA's Ed.D. in Student Affairs Leadership program. Additionally, I am the Associate Director of the University Center at Emory University, where I serve as a Title IX investigator since 2014.

For my dissertation, I am conducting a qualitative research study to understand how student affairs trained professionals who serve as Title IX investigators experience, if at all, levels of vicarious trauma. It is my hope that this study will help prepare practitioners to better understand the impact of trauma; find safe, effective methods of self-care during an investigation; and provide resources of support to both the Title IX Coordinator and investigators' supervisors. To help me with this research, would you be willing to participate in the study? The time commitment is targeted for a few hours, consumed by a few emails back and forth, meeting to interview for 1-2 hours either in-person (preferable) or via video chat, and time to review the transcription of the interview a few weeks later. Preferred participants will have (1) graduated from a student affairs or higher education graduate-level preparation program, (2) at least 12 months experience as a Title IX investigator, and (3) completed a minimum of two investigations. If you are

interested, please click on the link below and fill out the interest survey or reply to this email. [insert link]

Thank you for your time and consideration in this manner. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions or concerns about the study, and I look forward to hearing back from you by [insert date]. Additionally, please feel free to forward this information to fellow investigators at your institution or others in the state of Georgia whom you believe may hold interest in participating.

Sincerely,

Jonathan R. Duke

[insert my contact info]

### **Follow-Up Email**

Dear [insert name]:

Thank you for taking my last email. As a reminder, I am performing research on the experience of student affairs trained professionals who serve as campus Title IX investigators, focusing on sexual misconduct involving students. I am asking for investigators to complete the interest survey by [insert date]. The survey may be found by visiting [insert link]. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to reach out.

Sincerely,

Jonathan R. Duke

[insert my contact info]



### **Recruitment Social Media Post**

Friends and Colleagues - For my dissertation, I am conducting a qualitative research study to understand how student affairs trained professionals who serve as Title IX investigators experience, if at all, levels of vicarious trauma. It is my hope that this study will help prepare practitioners to better understand the impact of trauma; find safe, effective methods of self-care during an investigation; and provide resources of support to both the Title IX Coordinator and investigators' supervisors. If you are interested in participating, please click the link below. Additionally, please feel free to share this post/link with any colleagues, or share names with me, and I will reach out directly.

Thank you!

### **Recruitment Web Form**

Name:

Email:

Institution:

Institution's City and State:

Title/Department:

Do you hold a degree focused in student affairs or higher education administration?

(Yes/No)

If Yes, please list your degree(s) and applicable institution(s).

What is your campus role with Title IX?

How long have you served in the Title IX related role?

If you have investigated Title IX cases, how many cases have you investigated?

- Not Applicable
- 1
- 2-3
- 4-5
- 6 or more

APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS  
**Reflection Exercise Protocol**

**Initial email.**

Dear [participant name],

Thanks again for taking the time to participate in my study on [insert date and time]. This email contains your reflection activity to complete and send to me prior to our meeting on Friday afternoon. The reflection will allow us to begin our discussion surrounding your investigatory experiences. First, please choose a method to use in your reflection. Below are three reflection suggestions, but I am open to other methods you find the most comfortable for your reflective practices:

- Draw a picture (Gather 2 sheets of paper and a set of crayons/markers/colored pencils).
- Take photos or download images off of the web.
- Write a twitter-length (140 character) reflection.

To better understand your experience as an investigator, I would like you to reflect on your first case as an investigator and your last case. Using your chosen media, reflect on each of these experiences individually such that you have two distinct reflections. The first is, to the best of your memory, how you felt and processed the experience following your first case. The second is how you felt and processed the experience following the most recent cases. While you have full freedom in your

reflection, I do ask to refrain from symbols/drawing/photos that directly identify you or your institution. If you choose to use these symbols, please indicate any portions you would prefer not to be published. Please take 15-20 minutes to complete this exercise, and feel free to take more or less time as needed. During this time, you may be triggered by your reflections. You are welcome to stop or take a break at any point in the process. Additionally, if needed, please reach out to your local community resources, including any faculty/staff counseling program or your campus counseling center for support.

When completed, please scan or take a photo of your reflections and email them to me before our interview. Additionally, you will find a copy of the consent form attached. Please review the form, and I will have copies for you to sign when we meet. Finally, please contemplate on a pseudonym you would like to use during the interview to protect your anonymity. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you, again!

Jonathan

### **Interview questions.**

To better understand your experience as an investigator, I asked you to reflect on your first case as an investigator and your most recent case. Thank you for taking the time to illustrate your experiences. Let's discuss your drawings before stepping into the next step of the interview. As a reminder, if at any time you need to take a break, please let me know and we can do so. [Interviewer will use the prompts, and then follow-up questions and probing to gather more detail]

1. Please explain both pictures to me.

2. Why did you select the imaging you chose?
3. What is the difference between the two pictures?
4. How did illustrating your experience make you feel?

### **Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

Again, Thank you for your time and energy to participate in this conversation about your experience as an investigator and how you've been affected. I have several questions to guide our discussion, but they are just that, a guide. I may ask some questions to further understand your statements and experiences. If at any point you need a break as we will be discussing some tough topics, please let me know and I'm happy to do so. Let's get started:

1. What motivated you to become a Title IX investigator?
2. How have your duties as an investigator impacted you professionally?
3. How have your duties as an investigator impacted you personally?
4. [Describes vicarious trauma] How have you experienced vicarious trauma, if at all, as an investigator?
5. How were you prepared, if any, to handle vicarious trauma through education or professional training?
6. What do you do for self-care in the midst of an investigation? Following an investigation?
7. How has your self-care altered during your tenure as an investigator?
8. How do you keep motivated, professionally and personally, as an investigator?

Thank you for your time, honesty, and transparency in the interview. I will have the interview transcribed in the next two weeks, and I will send you a copy giving you time

to review the transcript and make any amendments, strike outs, or notes. In the meantime, or during the review, please reach out with any questions or concerns. Thank you, again, and I'm looking forward to continue working with you.