

# A Collaborative Autoethnographic Exploration of Experiences of Research Psychology Interns

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## Abstract

Navigating the art of theory and practice as three African female research psychology interns in South Africa, we worked in the areas of violence, injury and non-natural deaths which continue to plague the country, including the communities with which we are engaged for research purposes. Noting the scarcity of literature on research psychology internships, we used collaborative autoethnography to explore our lived experiences in relation to the work that we do. Allowing for the elucidation of our collective experiences from our own perspectives, we offer these reflections to inform improved management and coping mechanisms with the challenges and emotional distress that we experienced, and to explore our personal and professional development during our internship. We identified themes of internship characteristics, psychological distress from working with injury and violence data, personal and professional advancement, and collegiality and workplace support. In these themes, we contend that the characteristics and competencies interns need should be complemented with adequate workplace support and collegiality which can aid in coping, particularly in research that deals with sensitive topics.

**Keywords:** research psychology; collaborative autoethnography; internship experiences; distress; coping; community engagement

## Introduction

My positionality as a mother intersects with my positionality as a woman, worker, and team member.

I am a Black, young female who is an aspiring researcher.

For myself, in my specific middle-class Coloured context, where I do not have many responsibilities at home, I would consider these [paid flights, hotels, and meals] as luxuries.

These are our voices and how we position our identity in the work environment. How we identify ourselves is guided by our acquired academic knowledge, and personal and professional traits. Our positionality establishes the identities we hold, which is evident to Soedirgo and Glas' (2020) understanding of positionality in which individuals simultaneously hold multiple identities that interact in contextualised ways. We therefore make meaning from various aspects of our identities, which describe our adopted research, social positions and ontological and epistemological assumptions (Bourke, 2014; Holmes, 2020).

Noting the above, we locate this article within a transdisciplinary space of social and health science research to reflect on practical work experience in real-world environments. Research psychology entails developing “relevant, culturally sensitive interventions, assessments and theories while ensuring that access to psychological knowledge and practices is disseminated among the broader population” (Long & Fynn, 2018, p. 342). We reflect on our experiences as interns and novice researchers conducting research on sensitive topics such as violence, trauma, community issues, burn assault, and injury mortalities, which may be emotionally demanding for researchers. Those engaged in data collection activities such as interviews, workshops and transcribing may be at risk of emotional distress and could, for example, experience anxiety, depression or other stress reactions when recalling or revealing their experiences (Draucker et al., 2009).

By tracking our experience over the course of one year during our internship in 2022, we suggest that these reflections are valuable for our collective meaning-making, pausing on lessons learnt and distilling recommendations for the ways in which internship sites and interns might work with emotionally distressing data. This article also serves to raise awareness thereon, with the intention to reach and benefit those who work in similar research areas of violence, injury, non-natural deaths and impoverished communities. We write this autoethnography as three African female junior researchers who have recently completed our research internships and obtained our master's degrees. In becoming a researcher in the field of psychology, in our experience at our research institute, interns are required to be well into the process or completed a relevant master's degree.

Before starting their internships, Author A held previous experience as a counsellor during her postgraduate studies, Author B's master's dissertation involved student psychological distress research, and Author C conducted research in public and private hospital settings for her master's thesis rooted in the neurosciences. The full-time internships at the research institute were hybrid-oriented owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, and included key performance areas of research and writing, and community engagement. We were each allocated research tasks by our supervisors and senior colleagues which formed part of ongoing larger research projects. There were also optional and compulsory trainings and workshops.

We used collaborative autoethnography (CAE), a qualitative method combining the techniques of autobiography and ethnography, as a means of reflexively utilising our lived experiences to think through the problematics and opportunities offered by research internships that work with emotionally sensitive data. For Chang et al. (2013), CAE involves researchers working together “to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyse and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data” (p. 23–24). Chang et al. (2013, Chapter 1) note that the method of CAE encompasses elements that are represented in its name (collaboration, autobiography and ethnography) and further expound that CAE promotes “self-reflexivity”, “cultural interpretation” and “multi-subjectivity”, by borrowing from the different strengths of autobiography and ethnography.

Our data were generated by each author separately writing out narratives detailing our own personal lived experiences of our internship. Aligning with Wall's (2008) description, we use autoethnographic reflective narratives to elucidate our personal experiences. Our approach resulted in the allowance of narratives to capture personal experiences of our internship, stories, insights and feelings. We had discussions among ourselves and in consultation with co-workers (one author also spoke with her external supervisor), which guided our data/direction of the article. This method allowed us to analyse our beliefs, practices and social experiences, and their influences on our identities (see Chang, 2013). We proceed from the view that it is possible to know ourselves through the theoretical lens of autoethnography (Allen, 2015). CAE was therefore used as the theoretical location weaved throughout our article, as a method of not only data collection but also of analysis and interpretation.

As we reflect on our own lived experiences, broader narratives emerge which can be linked to larger social phenomena (Livesey & Runsen, 2018). Moreover, taking our cue from Livesey and Runsen (2018), we assume that understanding ourselves in relation to the communities with which we interact is only possible through self-awareness, self-examination and self-reflection. CAE allowed us to communicate our own stories of our shared internship as research data. Our stories can therefore be accurately represented as we experienced them, and our voices can be heard. This aligns with the benefit of CAE as identified by Chang et al. (2013) of getting the opportunity to delve into

researchers' subjectivities together. Using this approach to present and analyse our accounts coheres with our desire to share the stories of the internship experience. For Qutoshi (2015), this allows for a highly personalised study to understand societal phenomena such as psychological distress and coping.

Autoethnography makes use of and interprets the "lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social, cultural, and political issues" (Poulos, 2021, p. 4). Attributes of autoethnography include the utilisation of the experiences of the researchers as data and the goal of increasing understanding of social phenomena (Chang, 2013). In this regard, to think with and through our experiences as interns working in projects grounded in violence, injuries and non-natural mortalities, we seek to enhance our own and similarly located researchers' understanding of the socio-economic and political contexts of conducting such research in impoverished precarious communities.

## Emotionally Charged Internship Experiences

Internship programmes are tailored learning tools for students to bridge the gap between acquired tertiary knowledge and work experience (D'abate et al., 2009; Stanley, 2010). Coco (2000) reiterates and defines internships as a training period during which interns engage in the practical application of theories, realise their individual and professional skills and become aware of the constant need for adaptability and creativity in the environment. On the other hand, Moore et al. (2020) noted that interns are vulnerable to emotional distress and burnout. Considering the above meanings, internships provide graduates with entry-level work experience and are central to the development of human capital and the socialisation of learner workers into professional roles (Nkadimeng et al., 2016).

Mseleku (2022, p. 330) found a rise in "work experience-job mismatch", suggesting that it is important for interns to gain the specific skills needed for the job. Internships are not without challenges. Qualitative researchers, and in particular graduate student researchers, studying sensitive topics are at risk for secondary distress resulting from engagement in this type of work (Johnson & Clarke, 2003). It is unclear how graduate students experience the emotional effects of engaging in these types of research project and what steps are taken to address attendant risks. In our case, we took up internships at a research institute engaged with potentially distressing projects which included the data collection of, analysis of and writing on violence, crimes and injury mortalities which we were not fully prepared for at a tertiary level. For two of the authors, an internship was an entry into the research field, whereas for the other author it was a mandatory requirement to be able to register as a research psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (2010). Not every internship site does research in similar areas. This article deals with our experience within this lacuna, postulating that

there is a need for guidance on minimising the risk of potential distress caused by conducting research on sensitive topics.

There is limited literature focused on graduates' varied and complex transitions from universities to internship centres in the field of research psychology. Sims (2019) discusses difficulties in internships for those in clinical psychology, including adjusting to their new role, having to manage stress and feelings, and finding their way with more responsibility. In particular, there is a scarcity of literature in South Africa on research psychology internships. Our hunch is that because research psychologists do not work in the clinical psychology or psychotherapeutic mode, they are perceived to be protected from potentially traumatic emotions. We explore how traumatic content in data collection and analysis might warrant more careful deliberation in research psychology internships.

In South Africa, there are often wide social and economic disparities between the researcher and research participants. This is apparent in the communities with which we engaged during our internship, which were largely composed of informal settlements in which people's basic needs are unmet. This may be attributed to uneven social conditions and related power asymmetries which are largely owing to massive inherited inequities in income, access to healthcare and other social services across race, class and geography which grow out of the country's colonial and apartheid pasts and ongoing racial capitalism (Gilson & McIntyre, 2007; Harris et al., 2011). The country faces inequitable distribution of environmental quality. In this context, most people suffer widespread social inequities such as mass violence, unemployment and urban decay, while also experiencing inferior living environments, poor services and inadequate access to safe water, energy, sanitation and shelter (Fakier, 2018). Although our own histories are tied into this past, as interns, we are privileged as we have been able to graduate from universities, we have opportunities for skilled employment, we live in environments in which our basic needs are met, and our salaries are above the minimum wage in South Africa (Federated Hospitality Association of Southern Africa, 2023). Coming from a position of relative privilege and entering informal communities therefore puts a distance between us and the community members with whom we conduct much of our research.

The work of the research institute in which we interned is grounded in community engagement and violence prevention. The latter involves projects which are heavily reliant upon data collection and analysis of violent cases, injuries and non-natural mortalities from suicides, homicides, drownings, burns, transport-related deaths, electrocution, poisoning and falls, among other things. Although we largely only worked with the data and not directly with injured people, the data could be quite detailed and potentially have a psychological impact on us. South Africa, in particular, is considered one of the most violent countries in the world (Garrib et al., 2011; Matzopoulos et al., 2015; Sherriff et al., 2015).

A study observing manners of death from 2000–2007 in 11 000 South African households found that almost 10% of deaths were related to injury where the cause of death was homicide, road traffic injuries or suicide (Garrib et al., 2011). The overwhelming majority of injury-related deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries (Anjuman et al., 2020) such as South Africa. Given the focus of our work within this research area, there is a risk of experiencing psychological distress as a new intern upon exposure to the data. The data can be detailed or graphic accounts of information about injury or injury mortality cases, in which engagement may be unsettling and requiring a level of coping. Collectively, we drew on accounts of psychological distress experienced when analysing and conducting research in this area. We next discuss our methodological considerations before moving on to our data collection and analysis process. This is followed by a presentation of our themes with the findings and discussion interwoven.

## Methodological Considerations

Having articulated our orientation to autoethnography in the introductory parts of this article, we next think through how we used this method. An autoethnographic approach best cohered with our intent to elucidate our experiences, as we could share our own experiences from our own perspectives. The core driver that informed the start of this project was our collective need to think about our own distress, coping and growth experienced in our internship. We decided to conduct this autoethnography as a group since we had done our internship together at the same institute, albeit working on different projects. We utilised the CAE methodology that involved full collaboration as we were each involved in generating data through individual ethnographies, data analysis, and the writing up of this article (Chang et al., 2012, as cited in Chang, 2013). Chang (2013) contends that CAE improves group interpretation, more than one view is brought to bear and those involved are answerable to each other regarding the process and the resulting outcome. This averts the risk of a single viewpoint that is inherent in a single person's autoethnographic account (Chang, 2013). It is to be noted that because of the nature of the CAE methodology, there is a lack of anonymity, which may have had an impact on both which stories we chose to tell and transparency.

Given the scarcity of research on internships in this field, including from the perspectives of interns, this article deals with this scarcity by providing our experiences of a research internship in psychology as told and analysed by us, as is allowed by CAE. Themes which emerged and were dealt with in this article include internship traits, emotional distress, personal and professional advancement, and collegiality and workplace support.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Drawing on Ngunjiri et al.'s (2010) model for CAE, we each wrote narratives reflecting on our individual experiences separately but ran some of our ideas by each other. In

order to make meaning of our data, we first looked at our data holistically. This included reading through each other's narratives as well as our own while taking note of the topics that were repeated (Chang, 2013). Based on the CAE model, the reviewing of each other's stories first occurred on our own by identifying initial codes, subthemes and themes, and making meaning of our data. We subsequently discussed what we found as a group on Microsoft Teams and in person and compared our codes (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). This was also using thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). We discussed and merged the codes we identified individually then worked collaboratively to identify the subthemes and themes in the data by using Atlas.ti software, which is a qualitative tool that assisted us in generating codes and themes. This helped us to be systematic in our analysis and work more efficiently with the quotes being categorised. We collectively identified subthemes which we grouped into broader themes for analysis and discussion (see Table 1). With regard to refining our analysis, in CAE, we could go back to prior steps, making the process iterative (Chang et al., 2013).

**Table 1:** Subthemes and themes of narratives of internship experiences

<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Altruism and hope	Internship traits
Good intern traits	
Internship excitement	
Support and coping	Collegiality and workplace support
Collegiality and support	
Internship experiences shape professional career	Professional and personal development
Discovered skills	
Professional and personal development	
First-hand experience of trauma	Psychological distress evoked by research
Negative emotional impact of research	
Psychological distress	
Reality of research	Positionality
Overall positionality	
Positionality	
Privilege and positionality	

When identifying codes and themes, we looked at what was most present in and across our data that spoke to our internship experience. We eventually decided on four main themes, each of which was supported by sufficient data. Finally, we allocated themes for individuals to write up before collectively reading each other's work and providing commentary and feedback for further refinement, drawing on the CAE model (Ngunjiri

et al., 2010). Chang (2013) notes that the process of autoethnography can be personalised as desired and that readers decide whether the methodology gains the title of autoethnography. We, therefore, tailored the process to our preferences under the general rubric of CAE. Further benefits of CAE include getting to learn more deeply about oneself and about others, and power being more equally distributed as we all operate in a dualistic role as researcher and participant (Chang et al., 2013). It is further noted that rigour is increased by having more than one voice and viewpoint (Chang et al., 2013). Using Atlas.ti, we generated Table 1, which indicates the retained subthemes grouped by the themes that we identified in our data. In order to delve deeply into our themes, we focused on four of the five themes identified and included some data from the fifth theme of positionality in the introduction.

Ethical approval for this study was attained from the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee of the University of South Africa (NHREC Registration Number: Rec-240816-052; CREC Reference Number: 90335198\_CRECHS\_2023).

We next analyse our primary findings under the broad thematic areas of internship traits, psychological distress, personal and professional development, and collegiality and workplace support.

## Findings

### **Intern Traits: “I Do Not Know What I Expected of this Internship”**

Internship programmes are tailored learning tools for students to bridge the gap between acquired tertiary knowledge and work experience (D’abate et al., 2009; Stanley, 2010). This theme captured our internship journeys as we implemented the knowledge we learnt in academia. In this article, internship traits encompass characteristics held by interns that may be intrinsic (for example, personality related traits) or acquired through learning or experience (for example, community engagement skills). In our context, our internship programme provided an environment for us to acquire certain traits with our already-existing personal traits, and implement knowledge and skills gained from our vocational sites or organisational level (Gillespie et al., 2020). Moreover, supervisors, educators and employers are encouraged to support interns who feel more anxious, and “have lower self-efficacy and emotional intelligence” when embarking on an internship (Gillespie et al., 2020, p. 12). Much of our work included literature searches, data collection and analysis, community-engaged workshop facilitation, writing research articles, reports and newsletters, attending courses for skills development, and engaging in critical reading works. Implementing acquired knowledge with personal traits assisted with engaging in real-life working environments. Through further development and skills gained during our internship, we identified personal and professional traits, as discussed in this article.



In Author C's highlighted traits of altruism and hope, she reflected, "In the year of my internship we were four ladies filled with optimism and altruistic attitudes." She further expressed, "Being able to build with community members around us evoked compassion, empathy and the desire to remain hopeful that we could make a positive contribution, no matter how small." The above reflection is an indication of the traits she had before the internship and later implemented in her community engagement work. Author C's experience is related to that of Phillips (1981) who indicates that directors prefer interns to have professional and personal traits, such as the capacity to function in an organisational structure, openness to personal growth, respect for the client or research participant, personal stability, the ability to take initiative, time management, and high tolerance for ambiguity. Contrasting to Author C, Author B reflected that she gained experience during the internship:

I started my internship at the institute in 2022. It was my first job. We were still wearing masks at the time and the COVID-19 pandemic was very much around. The pandemic's restrictions were in its latter stages though, so I still got a lot of experience in the field. It was a strange time to start my working career. I do not know what I expected of this internship.

Although Author B's first experience of working an internship was during the COVID-19 pandemic, she gained work experience in the research field. In her reflections she illustrates that

time moves, and one moves on to the next task and event, but before you know it, you have collected all of these experiences that in one way or another can shape you to be a better researcher and builds up on your work experience.

From her reflection, it is noted that her internship experiences shaped her research traits. Author A's reflections corroborate the literature on internships being a training period, where interns master the tasks of becoming competent professionals and form personal identities (Anjum, 2020; Coco, 2000).

Author A reflected on the good traits that she acquired before the internship and how she implemented them during the internship: "I am friendly, approachable and as my CV alludes, I have great interpersonal skills." The above quote was an affirmation to herself when she was experiencing challenges negotiating gatekeeping. She reminded herself of her good traits when she was facing adversity, burnout and psychological distress. Agarwal et al. (2020) described burnout in this context as a work-related syndrome marked by emotional fatigue, depersonalisation and a decreased sense of accomplishment. Evidently for interns, the combination of learning a new role, applying newly learnt skills, and having many responsibilities may make the internship an emotionally taxing or distressful experience (Solway, 1985). Newman (2019) considered that interns who survive and thrive during the internship apply effective strategies to cope with stressors. Similar to Authors B and C, Author A gained research traits through her internship experiences, evidenced in her reflection: "Little did I know

that my whole knowledge and experience of gatekeeping will be redefined.” The above reflection concurs with the other interns’ reflections and serves as an indication that the research interns gained new traits, and some were reminded of intrinsic traits that they had already acquired.

### **Psychological Distress From Working With Injury and Violence Data: “I Was Not Ready”**

For many interns, the beginning of the internship year can be extremely stressful as they enter a completely unfamiliar space. In the initial stages, interns often depend on training staff for feedback while they are reinforcing their technical competencies, developing analytical skills, and immersing themselves in the research process (Coco, 2000). We had supervisors and other colleagues to guide us in our internship. Our colleagues provided particular levels of support; however, the actual experiences could still be difficult. Conducting research on sensitive topics and doing community-engaged research can present personal and professional challenges, especially where community members experience significant vulnerabilities (Sunderland et al., 2011). Psychological distress was a recurrent theme emerging from the data analysis. Author A reflected on her experience dealing with authoritative police officers in her efforts to gain access to police data on violence and crime for one of the research projects with which she was involved.

In their eyes, I was a young black female seeking to add work to their already hectic workload. I was taken from pillar to post, time after time, constantly rescheduling and being referred to different staff. I felt like a case no one wanted to handle. I grew tired and discouraged. I questioned myself as a researcher, is it because I am black? Female? Young?

Eventually gaining access to the data, Author A recounts her feelings of distress once she started capturing data related to violent cases.

How was I going to cope with the realisation of these violent cases that are taking place less than 5 km from me? These violent cases affect the very same community members I continuously interact with during interviews or community engagement activities. I felt like I was thrown into the deep end. I was not ready or trained to handle such data and most importantly the realisation of violence in a community I call home. The project team met once a month to discuss the data collection process and challenges.

Tasked with work on a project that examined injuries in South Africa, Author B recalls her experience dealing with graphic visuals of injuries when tasked with doing research on burn victims which included being exposed to photographic materials.

Further, within my internship, I had to do research on negative road traffic outcomes. Some of the sources were more medical in nature and thus contained graphic imagery. I would still try and read the article but would try my best to not actually see the images by covering the images. For a more sensitive person like myself, it is unnerving to see.

I think I remember seeing one of these images at night—I am not too sure, but I am thinking head injury, which can be a shock to the system to see. I think the same thing happened with research on burns [burn injuries] . . . It was more than just words on a page or numbers in a spreadsheet, where you can somewhat distance yourself and work with it as just data. Here, it was being visually shown. I never wanted to see it. It is but a faint memory now, but I think I am just creating a visual in my mind now.

For Author C, the negative emotional effect of capturing data on injury mortalities was clear, not only in her capacity as a new intern but also considering her positioning as a mother of young children. She recounts the first time she worked with injury mortality data:

The first time I received an injury mortality dataset from a mortuary, I froze for a few seconds, knowing I was about to deal with highly sensitive data of deceased people, meticulously detailing the manner of every person's death, where, and how they died, what time, their gender and age. Behind those numbers, I imagined that there was grief, sorrow, pain and destruction; a mother's wailing cries, coffins settling in the earth. I feared for my family, especially my children when I analysed data of children who were similar ages, viciously slaughtered or flung out of cars in traffic accidents.

CAE aided us in the interpretation of this theme as we reflected on our individual experiences which involved aspects of psychological distress. Using CAE helped us to avert the risk of communicating only a single viewpoint with no further support of the shared experience (Chang, 2013). This provides an opportunity to have a greater representation of experiences and more voices represented in this area of research. We noted that Author A was distressed by the realisation of violence in the community in which she resides, while Author B was distressed by the graphic imagery of injuries. Author C suffered distress because of her positionality as a mother and the impact this had on her perception of the data which evoked fear after examining statistics on child injury mortalities. As we subsequently read our reflections in relation to each other, we noted that although we experienced psychological distress differently, we were collectively affected by the research areas on sensitive topics. It is to be noted that others may not experience the same level or any distress in this field and that this is a representation of our experiences.

Internships are crucial training opportunities, and also a key stage to identifying and dealing with work-related distresses to which interns may be susceptible (Moore et al., 2020). Agarwal et al., (2020) described burnout in this context as a work-related syndrome marked by emotional fatigue, depersonalisation, and a decreased sense of accomplishment. For interns, the combination of learning a new role, applying newly learnt skills, having a great number of responsibilities, and working with affectively difficult material may make the internship an emotionally taxing or a distressful experience (Solway, 1985). Newman (2019) considered that interns who survive and thrive during the internship apply effective strategies to cope with stressors.

Solway (1985) defined three main categories of stressor for psychology interns: clinical, institutional and personal. Clinical stress results from interns' transition from a trainee or student role to taking on significant professional responsibilities (Solway, 1985). For example, Author B observed,

In my internship, we worked with injury mortality data and we had to get details of the circumstances surrounding deaths – sometimes you hear the detail of it, which can throw you off. I remember saying that it was sad. It was sad. It is sad.

Institutional stress relates to the internship training context or environment and includes adjusting to new colleagues, organisational goals, administrative policies and procedures, and accessing administrative resources (Solway, 1985). Author B's reflection on adjusting to the work environment is an example of institutional stress. "I am aware that research is often about intense topics—I mean we want to make the world a better place—but I do not know if I expected it to be on this level." This quote could act as an illustration of transitioning from student to researcher.

Personal stress refers to factors indirectly associated with the internship but affecting an individual intern's adjustment (Solway, 1985). Debriefing after such distressing experiences can help to mitigate it.

### **Personal and Professional Advancement: "We Could Apply Our Learnt Skills"**

Internships provide learning tools for students to bridge the gap between classroom learning and real-life work environments in which postgraduate trainees seek to become competent and professional, and form a personal identity (D'abate et al., 2009). Despite the challenges and distressing encounters, we were all able to reflect on the internship site's space for personal development and growth. Author A noted that after numerous frustrations with people who were gatekeeping access to police surveillance data for one of the projects she was involved in, she decided to adopt a new frame of mind:

One morning, I decided to take a different route. I was determined to collect those cases and being black, young and female would not stop me but would encourage me. On that morning, I entered the police station—not as a civilian but a colleague of the police staff. It was 8 am during my working hours, and it was their working hours too. Upon arrival, [my] perspective changed immediately. My attitude changed and so did my approach. I went straight to the office of the commander's secretary and spoke with her as a colleague. I followed protocol and did what was required from me. From now on I would be asking for cooperation.

In the preceding excerpt, we observe Author A coming into her own as a researcher. Here, she discards her student habitus and assumes that of a colleague. Author B reflected on her learning experiences, the opportunity for increased work experience, and the self-affirming discovery of a skill:

. . . you have collected all of these experiences that in one way or another can shape you to be a better researcher and builds up on your work experience . . . I found within my internship that I am really good at proofreading—it felt good to be able to read through work and give little comments on grammar and clarity and add my little contribution because in the grand scheme of things, it is an important skill to have within this field.

Also reflecting on her work with the community, Author C shared her feelings of personal and professional growth, noting that “I enjoyed being able to share conversation, offer support and help where needed, both to the institute, and community members. I felt a sense of professional and personal development with all of the skills development and training opportunities”.

Author C further observed that, even though our altruistic attitudes had reduced, we were still optimistic about the work environment and the support we received, and feeling a sense of professional accomplishment:

We had become more serious, professional and aware of all the challenges working within the fields of injuries, violence prevention research, injury mortalities and community engagement. It helped that we were surrounded with senior researchers, professors and academics who guided us, supported us, involved us in projects and pushed us to become better researchers and writers. During this time, we all obtained our master’s degrees and one of us has enrolled for a PhD. Working in a space that supported postgraduate development and provided real-life working environments with which we could apply our learned skills and those acquired in the field was beneficial to our professional development. Working in a research institute with many types of personalities and organisational structures also developed us personally.

Interns are exposed to opportunities for reflection, interpersonal and specialist skills development, and monitoring of self-growth (Anjum, 2020). The collaborative autoethnographic encounter of writing this article provides an additional opportunity to critically reflect on our internship experience in relation to these areas of development. Ryff and Singer (1996) contend that personal growth involves continual development in the face of new challenges and is an important component of psychological well-being. Personal growth means to be cognisant of one’s thoughts, feelings, prejudices and judgements, and to act with mindfulness in accordance with one’s values and potential (Ryff & Singer, 1996). In their work on intern growth, Levine et al (2006) found that triggers included witnessing unprofessional behaviour, experiencing personal problems, and dealing with the increased responsibilities of the internship. While barriers to personal growth also included overwhelming work, fatigue, and a lack of personal time, they found that fostering supportive relationships, encouraging reflection, and being committed to core values facilitated personal growth (Levine et al., 2006).

Although not all interns have the same experience as us with regard to development, studies have indicated that internship programmes facilitate professional development

after vocational studies. These programmes provide opportunities for interns to gain relevant experience by using theoretical concepts learnt at universities and applying them in real-work settings which have an impact on professional growth (Anjum, 2020). Interns learn skills, develop working habits and gain confidence, all of which are needed for their professional advancement. However, this is dependent on appropriate supervisor feedback which is crucial to upgrading and maintaining performance and learning (Anjum, 2020). We next discuss such kinds of workplace support.

### **Collegiality and Workplace Support: “Connecting as Friends”**

The immense support that staff provided emerged in all our reflections, which is what this theme covers in the context of the workplace. It is to be noted that, realistically, no team is perfect and workplace dynamics are more complex; however, focusing on the data, our reflections firmly highlighted strong levels of support.

Workplace support “in general, reflects the availability of helping relationships in the organisation and the perception among employees about the quality of those relationships” (Gahlawat et al, 2019, pp. 2895–2896). Such support from those who have walked the road and learnt the lessons and could therefore impart their wisdom grounded in experience was invaluable to us. Author A spoke about her experience, where she actively sought support:

I had the documents and the support, I was ready . . . I went to [Name redacted] seeking advice on how to approach this and he looked at me smiled and said, ‘welcome to research, you will find yourself, don’t give up.’

Author B provided some examples of this support:

The staff supported me so well, emotionally and professionally—and answered my one million and one questions from the get go. How do I fill in this form? Please help me write this email . . . On the way to do interviews, in which I had almost no experience, a colleague took me through tips on how to conduct the interview and helped me understand the questions . . . While that may be seen as ‘just part of the job’, she took the time to teach me and she showed care for me as a colleague. On another instance where I was unsure about what was expected of me, I had a late-night call (at least I remember it as late at night) with a fellow intern who could explain to me how to do an exercise with the participants that I would be training, as she had done it a short while before. She could share her experience with me and helped me understand what to do.

CAE allows us to now pass on the advice and lessons learnt to up-and-coming emerging scholars as we are doing in this article, which reflects on the advice. Internships are meant to be learning opportunities, where we can glean from colleagues’ knowledge and expertise. In their research in China, Huo and Boxall (2020) found that there was a relationship between improved social support and greater levels of learning from fellow colleagues.

Support was mutual in our internship. Author C specifically noted that, as interns, we were a source of emotional and practical support for each other:

We formed a bond between us . . . As we started to work on our respective projects, we would often call on each other when we needed assistance and also started to do mental check-ins among some of us when we felt some stress . . . we had loads of fun traveling and attending events, workshops and conferences together. We had become a team, aiming for the same goal to obtain our internship. By the end of the year, we were proud of one another.

This mutuality of support is echoed by Author B in the following excerpt:

Further, even in my intern capacity I was able to provide support to others as well. I too could check emails and forward information I had. I too could provide emotional support. We truly supported each other. It was such a blessing to me.

The reciprocity of support engendered positive affect and highlighted the value of practical support to achieve work-related goals and tasks. This lines up with the definition of collegiately by Khan (2022, p. 319) as “behaviour that encompasses and facilitates a positive productive work environment; the beneficiaries being faculty, trainees, and other important members of a department, university, research or practice”. In addition, Cipriano and Buller (2012, p. 46) observe that “Collegiality is instantiated in the relationships that emerge within departments” and in how those in the department interact, display mutual respect, work collaboratively towards shared purposes, and undertake reasonable responsibilities for the unit’s overall benefit. Collegiality is important for junior researchers and interns as it facilitates their entry into the world of work.

Reflecting on her enjoyment of workplace interactions, Author B shared some of her highlights:

There are so many highlights related to my colleagues, just to name a few: having lunch at the airport with a staff member; a colleague buying me Pringles on the plane; sharing fun things happening in my life and staff being excited for me; selfies; car ride conversations; and walks . . . A point of enjoyment in my internship was that the junior staff could all connect like[as] friends! We had fun together.

Experiences of bonding, having fun, and connecting like friends speak to the concept of workplace friendships which can be a source of workplace support. According to Berman et al. (2002, p. 218), workplace friendships are “nonexclusive workplace relations that involve mutual trust, commitment, reciprocal liking, and shared interests or values”. Colbert et al. (2016) found that friendship was greatly connected to experiencing positive feelings in the workspace. Their findings suggest that supportive or positive relationships in the workplace are very important for employees to flourish. Similarly, Craig and Kuykendall (2019) found that work friends who are supportive are key to workplace well-being. They conclude that because of the benefits of supportive

friendship, organisations should think through how praxis and policies may promote friendly relations.

In her reflection about growth, Author C wrote about the emotional release that she experienced through the practice of debriefing but also pointed out that it was difficult to do. She observed that

As much as the research process evoked distress when I first started the internship, supervisors held sporadic debrief meetings with us to check on our emotional and mental wellbeing. Being able to offload was as cathartic as it was difficult. However, I soon began to feel lighter.

Similarly, Author B reflected on check-in meetings. “In terms of senior staff, I would have useful check-ins with seniors.” Author B confirmed that this included supervisors who were a source of support. Zehr and Korte (2020) found that among intern supervisors was the perception that their role encompassed ensuring students having a positive experience. Social support can be categorised as a type of coping (Stallman, 2020). The check-in meetings were a space for offloading, where social support could be provided. They, therefore, could assist with coping with the distress elicited in our internship. Support has been described here as mitigative of emotional distress. In other studies, there is evidence for social support acting as a protective factor against mental health issues (Nielsen et al., 2019; Sánchez-Moreno et al., 2014) and emotional labour (Hong & Kwon, 2015). Locally, Mathibe and Chinyamurindi (2021) found a positive relationship between more workplace support and better mental health of employees among those working in the public service in South Africa. Although our employment in our internship may not be as intense as social work (Sánchez-Moreno et al., 2014) or healthcare (Hong & Kwon, 2015) as in the aforementioned studies, we share similarities in that we worked with communities and engaged with sensitive or emotional topics.

## Conclusion

This study employed collaborative ethnographic teamwork, not as an accumulation, but rather a composition, crafting the joint navigation of sometimes challenging and distressful real-world research environments (Sørensen, 2007). Through the interplay of reflections, collaborative analysis, and merging of content, edits and cuts in our joint Google document, we transformed individual writing and reading strategies and developed an enriching and collaborative sense of each other’s lived experiences and positioning (Ruth, 2015). Our findings indicate that the work we do in the research field presents a host of difficulties, which may be emotionally challenging. However, by honing in on productive characteristics and experiences and relying on team members, we contend that collegiality can assist in achieving personal and professional development and success in the research internship.

A potential limitation of the study is that the data were based on our personal lived experience in our specific contexts, and therefore may only validate those who may



experience the same phenomenon. Importantly though, while transferable to similar contexts, autoethnography is not meant to generalise but to take ownership of one's life and reality. Further studies should seek to include voices from other internship contexts in South Africa and similar contexts, and should also include more types of data for a layered analysis. We were aware of the nature of autoethnography, where the personal becomes public without anonymisation, which may have had an impact on which stories we shared. We have anonymised to a certain extent where we have used letters instead of our names when providing quotes, however, future studies could be multimodal including autoethnographic and interview data from participants who are not simultaneously authors and can be truly anonymous.

Finally, we recommend that internship programmes with similar research areas consider our experiences to inform their programmes going forward, being cognisant of the needs and goals of both the organisation and the interns to create a well-balanced programme. This means the roles and responsibilities of the internship are clearly communicated. For an easy transition, the interns should foster positive working relationships with the staff to create a healthy working environment. Although academia taught us the ways in which to conduct research, there should be support in the research field that prepares interns for potentially distressing research activities. One way to protect against potential risks of harm could be the implementation of a trauma- and violence-informed care approach which advocates graduate supervision that draws attention to the emotional impact of research on students, providing positive support whether they experience harm or not (Orr et al., 2021). Our hope is for this article to raise awareness in this lacuna. Such recommendations may be productive for the implementation of programmes to facilitate workplace support and coping.

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