

**“It can feel like an abusive relationship”:
A Sensory Psychosocial Investigation of Frontline
Domestic Violence Shelter Workers’ Experiences**

Cristina Ariza (Trent University)

Abstract

In response to the call for a sensory exploration of law, crime, and justice, this article draws on phenomenological research conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) and provides a psychosocial case study of the sensory effects that frontline domestic violence (DV) shelter workers face. Shelter workers implement and make tangible the plans and missions made by leadership and statute to provide support, as part of the process of justice, for victim-survivors of DV. They provide a hands-on, often intense practical and emotional praxis in an environment that aims to promote a feminist and empowerment ethos, working at the intersections of crime and justice. Psychosocial criminology framings give insight into how the crimes experienced by shelter residents can affect the workers tasked with aiding their recovery from DV. New conceptualizations made possible by this interdisciplinary approach provide a means of critically examining the convergence of value betrayal and burnout experienced by workers at the frontline.

Keywords: burnout, domestic violence and abuse, emotional labour, emotion work, frontline justice, psychosocial, shelter workers, vicarious trauma

Introduction

This article uses a specific case study of frontline domestic violence (DV) shelter workers’ workplace experiences to illustrate how an interdisciplinary framework can lead to new conceptualisations, which in turn may provide new insights in the field. The case study uses an interdisciplinary psychosocial criminological framework and focuses on the workers’ embodied experiences. The Hothouse Effect, Carecapitalism, and Visceral Justice are provided as fresh inter-disciplinary conceptualisations, which provide greater insights when considering

a sensory criminology for those working at the inter-sections of crime, protection, and redemption.

The essence of this article rests on how, in their role as advocates for justice, frontline shelter workers experience a range of sensory impacts. The eroding effects of crime are communicated sensorily through the relational practice inherent in the dynamic between a worker and a shelter resident. This sensory impact includes the visceral responses of workers and how these impacts are navigated to create meaning and recovery – both of which contribute to Visceral Justice.

This article begins with an overview of DV laws and crimes in the UK and considers the essential role of shelter workers in the sector. It then introduces the central concept of Visceral Justice – visceral in the embodied, affectual, and sensory sense. Visceral Justice is the feeling that victim-survivors experience when the subjugation enforced by violent and abusive dynamics dissipates and survivors are able to, as one study participant termed it, “walk tall again.” Visceral Justice is felt by the survivor and for the survivor by their worker. Following this, DV shelters are outlined as the site of enquiry and the reader is familiarized with the overarching psychosocial framing of this paper.

Phenomenological interviews and surveys formed the basis of data collection for this investigation. Using Constructive Grounded Theory, the overarching theme of betrayal and burnout emerged, which were interpreted as comprising the two main themes of Carepitalism and the Hothouse Effect. Carepitalism refers to systemic factors that impact shelter worker praxis, which is enacted within the often highly emotionally charged Hothouse environment. The affective motivations for maintaining workers are outlined with their voices and experiences, illustrating both the delights and challenges in achieving Visceral Justice. The main argument made here is that it is imperative to attend to the sensory aspects of frontline DV shelter working experiences, as it will be through a deeper understanding of the demands of their relational praxis that we can start to provide more understanding and support for those that provide this vital work.

DV Laws, Crimes, and Workers

In the UK, domestic violence and abuse is defined as any single act or pattern of controlling, coercive, or threatening behaviour, violence, or abuse that is used to gain or maintain power and control between people who are personally connected (i.e. intimate partners or family members aged over 16) regardless of gender or sexuality. DV encompasses physical, sexual, economic, psychological, and emotional abuse, and includes cases where such behaviour is witnessed by a third party, such as children (Home Office, 2022b). DV is a nuanced and complex experience, and is challenging to define universally. It is a crime – by statute – across all continents, with a handful of countries in North Africa and the Middle East being notable exceptions. A substantial element of the pervasive nature of DV across cultures is that it is a highly gendered issue, disproportionately affecting (cis)women. Similarly, it is pertinent to note that some groups, such as racially, socio-economically, LGBTQ+ minoritized women or those lacking full citizenship rights, are more vulnerable and face additional barriers in seeking help and achieving justice (Femi-Ajao et al, 2018; Jayanetti & Savage, 2023).

Campbell's work (2021) poignantly yet convincingly shows how continued activism has had little or no impact on the prevalence of DV nor on the reality of professionals' work. Although feminist groups continue to challenge gender inequalities, the DV response has become increasingly professionalized and mainstreamed. Campbell's scholarship exposes "an exhausted and divided sector" (2021:2), where frontline DV workers are expected to promote values such as collaboration, solidarity, and empowerment, despite severe limitations and restrictions imposed by the accountability demanded by new public management and legislative frameworks, within which shelters operate (Fauci & Goodman, 2020; McDonald, 2005).

Correspondingly, the number of DV charges authorized by the Crown Prosecution Service have continued to decrease over the years and are now down to 50% of what they were in 2015 (Grierson, 2023; Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2022), despite steadily increasing DV crime figures (Jayanetti & Savage, 2023). The justice that is achieved in purely criminal justice or prosecution terms remains insufficient. However, there are other forms of court-led justice that

may occur, such as civil remedies, protective or non-molestation orders, and family law actions, which provide forms of justice for victim-survivors. For victim-survivors residing in shelters, their caseworker – the DV shelter worker – will be a key ally, resource, and advocate in securing these forms of justice.

Other ways in which frontline DV workers fit into obtaining justice for their residents include achieving justice through emotional and psychological healing, providing the safety and stability required to rebuild a life, reaccessing education or employment, and securing children's education and childcare. Similarly, workers provide awareness and education around DV and often facilitate the growth of new and positive networks and communities for their residents. For many victim-survivors of DV, escaping, cutting ties with their perpetrators, and becoming independent is a form of justice; a Visceral Justice.

Introducing Visceral Justice

One of the main forms of justice DV shelters work toward is conceptualized here as Visceral Justice. Leaning into the psychosocial scholarship of Affect Theory (Massumi, 1995), affect refers to both an embodied intensity (emotional effect) picked up from events, places, and/or other people as well as the form – or content – this takes. Affect refers to those internally-generated understandings, viscerally transmitted through all the senses that remain hard to articulate, yet inform how humans are moulded by their environment.

Somewhat paradoxically, Visceral Justice is the form of justice that only becomes apparent when it is denied – or violently and abusively betrayed, or ripped away. A large portion of the frontline shelter role is to create safety for shelter residents. This includes the sense of emotional and cognitive, as well as physical, safety. In attending to the traumas of their residents, many shelter workers experience vicarious trauma (Beckerman & Wozniak, 2018; Hendrix et al., 2021; Voth Schrag et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2020). It is additionally argued here that, in the same way that traumas can be communicated across individuals, so can the feelings of justice – both denied and gained.

Justice is important to sustain safety, trust, and peace within and between individuals. This form of justice feeds directly into the fundamental human right of freedom from fear. In this sense, Visceral Jus-

tice could be understood as analogous to racial justice. Both are forms of justice that contend with the legacies of social, economic, political, historical, and rights-based discrimination; justice that works to remove systemic barriers and promote equality and equity. Within the DV sphere, Visceral Justice is a tangible form of justice relating to experiences and feelings of repowerment and equality, as much as justice achieved through the criminal justice system or the law for their residents. Repowerment is distinct from empowerment, in that it refers to regaining what was lost or taken – a form of retribution. Simply put, the DV perpetrator did not win. Visceral Justice is the sentiment and strength, so beautifully captured in Maya Angelou's 1978 poem *Still I rise*.

These are the very freedoms from fear and oppression that are denied through acts of DV and abuse – the very freedoms shelter workers work so hard to restore for shelter residents through their advocacy, counselling, practical, and social work. From interviews with frontline shelter workers, it emerged that the process of achieving Visceral Justice was, for workers, as important for their own meaning-making and motivation as it was in achieving forms of justice for their residents. Frontline DV shelter workers have to navigate the affective impositions of vicarious trauma, feelings of betrayal (from the wider sector), and burnout – all of which are discussed in greater detail below. Added to this, working towards Visceral Justice under neoliberalism exerts an additional toll on workers emotionally, physically, economically, and affectively. The impacts of a neoliberal bankrupting of social justice (or working under austerity measures in an already desperately underfunded sector) creates further barriers for workers in delivering quality social services (Hendrix et al., 2021; Morley & O'Bree, 2021).

Shelters as a Site of Enquiry

DV shelters provide emergency temporary housing for victims fleeing domestic violence—the vast majority of whom are (cis) women and children. Shelter services provide advocacy and casework for victim-survivors, often including therapeutic as well as legal, social, and economic support. The terms advocate, caseworker, support worker, and keyworker are used interchangeably in the field. Here, the term 'worker' is used to denote the role all titles encompass.

Simply put, shelter workers plug the gap between criminal justice, social, and protective services by meeting the legal, social, physical, and psychological safety needs of their victim-survivor residents.

Frontline shelter workers form the largest employee cohort within these specialist organizations. They occupy the lowest paid positions, yet they are the ones who carry out the work by implementing and making tangible the plans and missions made by law and leadership. It is they who enter into relational, repowering, rights-based work at the intersections of crime, law, and justice with women and children who are often left with no other direction in which to turn. They provide advocacy and allyship through the multifaceted socio-legal services and systems (Pless et al, 2023).

The DV frontline workforce is primarily (cis)female and ethnically diverse, and it is a workforce noted for its dedication to ending violence against women and children. However, it is also a workforce that, while providing vital services, endures difficult occupational stressors about which little is known (Pless et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2022).

Framework: Psychosocial Criminology

Psychosocial studies provide an interdisciplinary approach that aims to connect many of the common concerns and traditions of the social, political, and psy-sciences. Presenting itself as an approach rather than any neatly-defined discipline, psychosocial studies contain a rich heritage that is best defined in terms of a community of disciplines (Frosh, 2019b). This community includes critical and liberatory psychology, feminist and womanist theory, queer, postcolonial, and critical theory, anthropology, and sociology, among others (Baraitser, 2015). Criminology is also increasingly expanding into this interdisciplinary field. As Jones advocates throughout his scholarship on psychosocial criminology, in order to understand how society functions, “it is imperative to understand the interactions between social structures and the subjective worlds of individuals” (2019:22). Following Jones argument, ‘social structures’ encompasses socioeconomic, political forces, cultural constructions as well as the institutions which shape society.

Psychosocial framings are offered as a conceptual starting point from

which to explore understandings of the particular forms of crime and justice arising from DV. As McClanahan & South (2020) advocate in their call for a more critical criminology, it is time for the field to move away from the ocularcentrism of much research and expand understandings to include embodied interpretations as a means of grappling with the texture and intensity of affective spaces of crime and justice. Personal (or lived) experience is greatly valued by the psychosocial framing, though it carries the awareness that the subject account in any subjective experience can be a precarious one (Frosh, 2019). Through illustrative case studies – where a case can be understood as an individual, a group, or a community with aligned theoretical frameworks – psychosocial studies can bring the embodied and sensory subject to life. Here, the site of inquiry is London-based (UK) DV shelters, with the experience of shelter workers as the illustrative focus.

Methods

This article is based on a larger graduate project that was finalized in 2022 in London, UK. The research involved five in-depth, semi-structured interviews that aimed to capture participants' perspectives regarding their experiences of working in frontline DV services. The hour-long interviews were then transcribed and formed the focus of analysis. In addition, targeted online surveys with current workers (N=15) were conducted. All interview and survey participants worked or had worked for a minimum of two years in frontline DV services and were unknown to each other. Each participant worked or had worked for at least one of the major UK shelter organizations.

Ethical clearance was obtained for the project from the university (*UK University – name removed for anonymity*). All participants are referred to by their pseudonyms and survey participants as 'SPnumber'.

Table 1: Pen portrait of in-depth interview participants.

Nina
Had come to the UK from Eastern Europe as a youngster. At the time of interview, she had just resigned from her current role, which she had worked during the pandemic and was about to start a similar role within a different organization. She was self-funding an IDVA ¹ course.
Lucia
Originally from South America, Lucia had been a shelter worker for many years. Staying at the same organization, she had recently transitioned to her new role of IDVA in fall 2020. She was working full-time while completing an MA in a related field. Lucia identified as a survivor of DV.
Jenni
Originally from Northern Europe, Jenni had worked as a shelter worker at the height of the pandemic, recently moving to a more senior frontline position within the same organization. Jenni had previously worked in children's services and held an MA in Law and Human Rights.
Tanya
Had worked in three larger London (UK) shelters prior to moving to a smaller, independent organization. Tanya had worked the shelter worker role for many years, during this time had qualified as a Social Worker and had returned to work in DV services, and was now in a frontline management position.
Tabsira
Worked in DV services for many years first, as a shelter worker and advocate and then within management. She now works for local government DV support commissioning services.

¹ IDVA = Independent domestic violence advocate course, the only specific qualification for DV frontline workers in the UK. IDVA's are the only recognised profession within the frontline DV sphere.

Methodology

Constructive Grounded Theory (CGT) originated in Sociology, yet welcomes Critical Psychology, feminist framings, Queer Theory, Affect Theory, and anthropological and feminist perspectives. With this, CGT posits itself as ‘a flexible toolkit’, aiming to produce fresh ideas and challenge ‘accepted truths’ (Charmaz & Henwood, 2017). CGT has established a reputation as a method for social justice and critical enquiry (Charmaz, 2020). Succinctly put, CGT allows for theories to be co-constructed by the research process, participants, and data, rather than research questions being approached with a pre-existing ‘theory’ (Charmaz & Henwood, 2017). The foundations of this provision sit on the simultaneous data collection and analysis of CGT, where each step informs the next by contrasting “data with data, data with codes, codes with codes, codes with categories, category with category, category with concept” (Charmaz & Henwood, 2017:240). Hence, CGT is an abductive and reiterative process. This complements the psychosocial spirit of resisting any prescribed way of researching (Frosh, 2019b) and has allowed this research to be adaptive. A critical feminist approach is added to this theoretical underpinning, aiming to challenge power relations involved in understanding the site of frontline DV work and highlighting “silenced topics and silenced voices – and the importance of identifying multiple alternative narratives” (Harel-Shalev & Daphna-Tekoah, 2021:213).

Initial coding was completed for all interviews and surveys. Following the iterative process of CGT, any emerging insights from interviews were included in subsequent interviews. The survey questions remained the same throughout, and they, too, were coded following CGT principles with their data incorporated into the analysis. Once the data collection had been completed, 32 major themes were identified. Axial coding then commenced to identify connections between the codes.

Following this, the final phase of coding was completed, collapsing the original 32 themes into an overarching theme of betrayal and burnout, which comprises the systemic theme of Carepialism and, in turn, influences the highly sensory situational theme of the Hothouse Effect.

The Motivations of Visceral Justice

In light of the complexities faced by workers, it is worth paying brief attention to how they find meaning and motivation in their roles. This is an area worthy of much deeper exploration than this case study permits, as it potentially holds rich insights into how positive affect and resilience may interlink.

Despite the challenges faced working within the DV shelter system captured below, there were also many positive moments of healing and justice shared by participants. In considering the following examples, the positive affect, which works to maintain strength and hope for workers, comes from achieving a Visceral Justice. When asked about the substantive meaning of their professional role, all responses held the same sentiment: that helping victim-survivors break ties with damaging pasts and rebuild new presents and futures was justice. The perpetrators failed.

I could see our woman grow wings, the ability – the smiles. You know. They start walking tall and straight, you know ... how it's just amazing. It's just amazing. (Nina)

Nina describes seeing women heal, gaining back their confidence and finding their voices. She captures how the ability to smile and walk tall resonated in her. As SR8 described it:

Helping them realize that they are not mad, or a bad parent or to blame for the abuse is incredibly rewarding. Knowing you may have played a part in that recovery is a joy, and it's why I continue in my role. How privileged are we that those who have been so abused, choose to tell us those stories and still have belief that someone cares and will support them. (SR8)

For SR8, the privilege they felt at having witnessed someone else's change was powerful. They speak of what it feels like when someone trusts them in their role, and the altruistic joy they experienced. Similarly, SR12 speaks of how positive, tangible transformations are observed:

Seeing a child who arrived at the refuge angry and aggressive become playful and pleasant. Watching a mother start to believe in herself. (SR12)

Tabsira also spoke of joy and shared affective encounters of human connection:

Working with residents ... kids in the office ... moments of joy in difficult situations that side was great ... seeing women blossom after a while coming out of terrible circumstances. (Tabsira)

It cannot be stressed enough how important the work of women's shelters is, as sites of activism and justice as well as of recovery and rehabilitation. Experiences of Visceral Justice such as those illustrated above signify a move away from the fear and instability inherent in domestically-violent situations, reconnecting workers with their vocation.

The exploration into the intersections at which frontline DV shelter workers practise their craft provides deeper details about their challenging encounters with the reverberations of justice work. It illustrates the alternating angles of Visceral Justice and its importance, as well as the challenges workers face in achieving this sensory justice.

The Sensory Effects of DV on Shelter Workers

All interview participants' narratives contained an often returned to arc of the feeling of betrayal by the wider sector they were employed in. This betrayal was mercurially sensed, implicit rather than explicit, often sitting at the edge of experiences.

The betrayal was a crumbling ideological – not interpersonal – one. Workers experienced a disjuncture between the feminist values promoted and the values espoused by the sector, including at times from the wider organization. This experience of betrayal(s) strongly contributed to feelings of burnout. All participants pointed to how, when their faith in the principles – which had originally led them to this form of vocational work – were deceived, their affectual resilience was deeply and negatively impacted. Once their spirit was subdued, other symptoms of burnout compounded.

It's easy to get burnt out. To become really incredibly cynical really, really quickly. Because as much as we are there to support. We have a role that's really challenging And I think if you're not feeling supported and rewarded in other ways ... (Tanya)

Carecapitalism is conceptualised as the working conditions faced when taking care of business becomes the business of care; in other words, the eroding effects of neoliberalism within the sector and how it has tangible effects on the role. This appeared as intimately interwoven with the overarching experiences of betrayal and burnout and compounded the Hothouse Effect.

The Hothouse Effect is termed ‘situational’, as it refers to the unique challenges that workers navigate when the workplace is also a (communal) home. This relates to how the physical space – the house – shapes the worker experience psychosocially. The metaphor of the ‘Hothouse’ illustrates how a physical space (such as a house) can contain and trap (negative) energy, intensifying its effects and the resulting impacts on worker praxis.

Betrayal and Burnout

Betrayal and burnout were intimately interwoven throughout all of the themes and subthemes. While they are presented here, in turn, a deeper reading illustrates how intertwined they are, with one rarely occurring without being closely followed by the other. As the reader moves through the themes, betrayal and burnout echo throughout.

Betrayal

Betrayal can be defined as an act or actions that violate trust and confidence within a relationship, producing psychological conflict for the individual. Here, the relationship was the one between the worker, their employing organization, and the wider sector. A deep, yet tender sense of betrayal concerning a lack of feminist values espoused by the organizations emerged as an overarching and intermeshed theme.

The feelings of betrayal experienced by the frontline workers can also be expressed as value hypocrisy (DesAutels, 2019) – where the constant juxtaposition of the values presented and the values experienced in the reality of the job are jarringly at odds for the worker. Wang & Seifert (2021) term this ‘mission drift’ – a damaging inconsistency between what an organization proclaims as its principles and behaviours and what their workers actually experience when working within that organization:

On many occasions, I felt that my work wasn't valued. It became

a huge effort to ... pay so much for childcare and transport, to carry out so many tasks – many of them stressful – for so little reward ... I expected that a feminist organization would be more understanding and supportive of my personal situation, as a single mum. (SR7)

SR7 refers to the expected feminist values of respect, care, and equity. This seems particularly poignant when considering the growth of the sector out of the women's movement (Campbell, 2021).

As Jenni pinpointed it:

I think it really is put across as an organization for women by women, which is great. But ... you need to actually make sure that you are an organization for the people that work for you as well, not just for the survivors, which is where I feel like there's an issue. (Jenni)

Jenni neatly juxtaposes the values of the organization and sector with hers and SR7's experiences. The issue – or betrayal – is that she doesn't experience the organization supporting workers in the way workers are expected to support residents within a trauma-informed approach. Yet, all are equally women. In this sense, when something is an issue, it is under dispute, unsettled. Jenni depicts a sense of disquiet, unease, and discord. As she added:

When you're supporting that many women that all live together that are all processing going through the worst experience of their lives ... It's going to be a really rough environment. (Jenni)

Jenni describes how the environment is “*really rough.*” In this, she refers to the heightened tensions and emotions arising for residents who are still in the middle of the “*worst experience of their lives.*” Jenni captures both the sensory and the visceral; the effects of DV do not stop upon entering a shelter – it is precisely because so many women are processing trauma at once that the environment becomes rough or abrasive. As SR11 succinctly expresses it, “*the work in practice* [a.k.a. as it plays out and is performed] *is intense.*”

Tanya took this further. She, like others, highlighted the exploitative aspects of the frontline shelter worker role: How workers wear the multiple hats of trauma-informed counsellors, advocates, keyworkers,

home maintainers, allies, protectors, and occasionally, doulas, all with ever-diminishing resources, time, training, and organizational support. As Tanya captured it, “*It can feel like an abusive relationship.*”

Burnout

Burnout remains a high and pernicious risk for all those working in frontline crisis services. Vicarious trauma, post-traumatic stress, physical and emotional exhaustion, cynicism, stress, and the negative effects on the worker's own private relationships all contribute to the worker's experience of burnout (Beckerman & Wozniack, 2018; Voth Schrag et al., 2021).

Additionally, the pressures of low-wages, poorly resourced, high-stress working conditions, and job precarity are all direct contributors to forms of burnout commonly found among this frontline workforce (Ellis & Knight, 2021; McDonald, 2005; Voth Schrag et al., 2021). Symptoms of burnout also include tension headaches, irritability, sleep disturbances, loss of motivation and ability to focus, increased anxiety and/or depression, a depressed immune system, and gastrointestinal problems (Beckerman & Wozniak, 2018; Schiff & Lane, 2019; Voth Schrag et al., 2022). These are all sensory experiences. The psychosocial framing of this article advances that burnout is a sensory phenomenon, as it is a physical and psychological one. Consider the following:

Some of the trauma for us, as workers, I think, is really toxic in the system. That you feel it, and what exactly are you gonna do with it? Because you're listening to experiences of violence and abuse on a ... on a daily basis ... there is something about the responsibility of it. (Tanya)

Tanya speaks of feeling the toxicity of trauma. She pinpoints the daily narratives of violence and abuse that she listens to, and with them, the affective sense of responsibility to support residents. A touching question sits in the middle of Tanya's statement: What are workers to do with all the pervasive, harmful, insidious – toxic – feelings that make up their affective realm in those moments?

Similarly, Nina described being overwhelmed and feeling impending

doom, anxiety, and bewilderment going into work:

I found myself literally having a loud conversation with myself on the way from [the] tube station to the shelter because I was so anxious ... another emergency that I have to drop everything and deal with? It literally affect me.. erm, erm, ... mentally ...So much unhappiness, so much crisis ... I was literally afraid to take [answer] my phone. ... And then when I open my work phone there are like 13 unanswered calls, 25 messages on one platform, and 20 on the other one, and I'm unable to get through them, they don't make any sense.... (Nina)

The constant onslaught and overwhelm that Nina describes is an emotional experience strongly linked to burnout. Heightened anxiety in work situations, as well as the sleep disturbances described shortly, are embodied experiences, yet psychosocial in presentation. Nina describes having to have a loud conversation with herself – verbalizing her private (psychic) thoughts to marshal her feelings in order to meet her social care or working responsibilities.

Compounds of Carecapitalism

The Business of Care

Embedded within the experiences of betrayal and burnout is Carecapitalism. Carecapitalism is described as the working conditions faced when taking care of business becomes the business of care; in other words, the eroding effects of neoliberalism within the sector and how it has tangible effects on the worker, hindering the production of Visceral Justice.

As Nina summarized it:

This is like two different parallel lives going on. One is the charitable non-profit work you do when you help victim-survivors of DV. And the second one is this corporate life and that kind of machine ... this pressure from top management. (Nina)

SR12 added:

Being held responsible for vacant rooms and sometimes being forced to take in unsuitable residents so rooms are not empty,

like this is a business. (SR12)

As both excerpts show, this form of social justice work is often held in an uncomfortable parallel with the business side of the organization, creating additional unwelcome pressure and responsibility. This splitting of loyalties diminishes the energy and attention available to workers, making it even more difficult for them to nurture the safe and stress-free environment needed for Visceral Justice to be achieved.

Interview participants all reflected on the disconnect between the business and the care side of their roles. This is a form of affective dissonance, where, while the importance of the organization was appreciated, the need for ‘efficiency’ overshadowed the care and support values of the sector. Within Carepitalism, constant cost-cutting and diminishing budgets resulted in experiences of increased workloads and, ultimately, less capacity to work towards the justice aims that were the motivating force for joining the sector (Morley & O’Bree, 2021). These all contributed to additional emotional work that workers needed to engage in to efficiently perform the emotional labour inherent in the role.

Emotion Work

The interconnected themes of emotion work and emotional labour were featured strongly throughout the original data. ‘Emotion work’ refers to the emotional support workers provided to residents, such as counselling, advocacy, and motivational support. It is considered a vital component in crafting Visceral Justice. ‘Emotional labour’ (Hochschild, 2012) refers to the work involved in managing one’s own emotions to meet employment requirements.

I don't think you can prepare for the emotional toll it takes to work with that many people who are in crisis. You're just thrown in and expected to be this nice, positive person that's there to help and will do everything. What really happens is that you have people crying, talking about sexual, physical, or emotional violence every single day. (Lucia)

It is expected that emotional labour produces positive, or at least protective, results (Ward et al., 2020). For example, while counselling

and advocacy work can be emotionally demanding for the worker, it is expected that the positive results of justice and healing will counteract any negative experiences as social and health aims are achieved. Yet, as Jenni summed it up: “We are unheard, we are under-valued. We are exhausted.”

The final theme of the Hothouse Effect elaborates on how the unique physical environment of the shelter worker – the safe house or shelter – impacts the worker experience.

The Hothouse Effect: Vicarious Trauma and the Smallest Room in the House

*** Please note, this section contains accounts of stillbirth, suicide attempts, and self harm***

Vicarious Trauma

Vicarious trauma refers to the range of psychosocial symptoms, such as demoralisation, compassion fatigue, musculoskeletal tension or withdrawal, and anxiety that can be experienced by workers who are exposed to, and empathically engage with, other people's traumatic experiences. The links between burnout and vicarious trauma are substantial (Beckerman & Wozniak, 2018; DesAutels, 2019; Ellis & Knight, 2021; Schiff & Lane, 2019), as is their connection to the sensory.

Vicarious trauma is a relatively well-researched aspect of frontline DV service provision, seen similarly in law enforcement, social work, and aligned health and protective services working with forms of child and adult abuse (Beckerman & Wozniak, 2018; Schiff & Lane, 2019; Voth Schrag et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2020). This trauma is understood as being a form of second-hand post-traumatic stress, which is experienced by witnessing, hearing details of, or otherwise being exposed to, another person's traumatic experience. As Tanya shared:

It's such an emotional job. Even though, you know, we're good at detaching, but actually, it's the stuff underneath all of that trauma, that you might not actually even realise you're starting to feel burned out. (Tanya)

The challenge with burnout and vicarious trauma is that they are often not initially recognized due to their insidious nature. Tanya was

only aware at the fringes of her senses of the vicariousness, of the ‘stuff’ underneath the trauma witnessed. To provide two powerful examples of this, consider the nightmares described by Lucia and Jenni:

She had a stillbirth. And then at the hospital, they realized that it was honour-based violence ... modern slavery, domestic abuse all of that happened to the poor girl. And it was her love [for] that baby. Imagine a picture of the dead baby, the stillborn lying on her ... she would come to me and ... I would see that picture. It was her WhatsApp picture as well. And no matter who told her, please take this picture off. She wouldn't. Because, she said, I love it – it's the only picture I have of my baby. I just spent a few hours with my baby in my arms. Wow. That. Oh my god – I was having nightmares about this. (Lucia)

After one of the clients attempted suicide, for example, I think I dreamed about that for a month, just because her story is terrible; we should have seen it coming, like you get very affected by it ... in the refuge worker position, because you're so close to them all the time. That affected me a lot in terms of, for example, having nightmares. (Jenni)

For Jenni, the nightmares developed out of crisis managing a resident's suicide attempt as a trauma response to DV, and the sense of guilt that it “*should*” have been anticipated. For Lucia, the experience was starker; she describes recurring visual exposures to a mother's highly traumatic grief. This serves to illustrate how complex, and insidious, vicarious trauma can be. Moreover, both of these examples illustrate the affective terrains, including grief, that workers need to navigate, and how this takes on an embodied form of images, sensations, emotions, and imaginings entering into workers' dream states. Consider Lucia's assertion:

I had one service user they shouldn't have accepted her there. But anyway, they did. ... the amount of times I saw her self-harming – there she was bleeding on the CCTV cameras the night before ... No, you are not paid enough to deal with this. (Lucia)

This comment by Lucia captures the essence of the worker position;

this is a complex role, requiring a range of skills, knowledge, awareness, and dexterity – a “phenomenal skill and knowledge base”, to use Tanya’s term. This also points to the emotional labour and emotion work needed in the interactional and interpretative nature of this work, which involves, as one participant in Ellis & Knight’s 2021 study termed it, “entering into someone else’s horror” (p.3574).

The Smallest Room in the House

In an attempt to maximize bedspaces, staff offices in shelters are, in Tabsira’s words, “*often the smallest room in the house*”, cramped spaces that can contribute to the Hothouse Effect. As Tanya and Jenni both explained, these small offices can work to contain trauma. Clients bring their trauma and offload it to workers in the office, workers who are already juggling stressful and conflicting demands.

You know, often our offices are small, and you've got the women coming in with trauma, or their goals need to be done quickly, because it's a really important goal for them And I think all of that combined ... within that environment, just makes that it can change your mood ... the atmosphere ... really, really quickly. (Tanya)

When working in the shelter, your office is in the house. So it's so easy for people to just walk by and sit there for half an hour and talk which is lovely, but it does really affect your workday because you have a lot of other stuff that you need to do as well. ... What really happens is that you have four people crying to you talking about sexual violence or physical violence or emotional violence every single day ... (Jenni)

All interview participants commented on how their praxis was often impacted by the limited physical office space available for them to work in. Cramped, crowded, and claustrophobic working conditions are more widely associated with adverse psychosocial effects for workers (Herbig et al., 2016). Similarly, several participants voiced that there was often ‘no respite’ from the constant demands of the communal household when at work. Though humorously stated, SR9’s comment contains a serious undertow:

Trying to encourage 6 or 7 families to get on living together

when none of them would choose to do that! (SR9)

SR9's comment also picks up on some of the additional work that running an under- resourced building entails. As Lucia reflected:

I didn't have the knowledge of how much maintenance I would need to do ... the shelter was very old, we didn't have a budget for a big renovation. So, every time something falls apart, every time the washing machine stops working, every time the alarm goes off and all that. (Lucia)

Run down houses constantly in need of repair. (SR12)

As Tanya graphically and sensorally described it:

You'll be expected to change rooms, you know, clear rooms and get them ready for the next stay. Like, I don't quite think they told us that actually, you know, washing down walls and skirting boards and getting slime [mould] off ceilings, putting your hands in bins and there's maggots everywhere. You know that stuff. (Tanya)

This resulted in what Lucia simply, but powerfully expressed:

I was tired ... so tired of face to face, being there physically in the environment. For me, the environment – that house – affected me so much. And I didn't expect that. (Lucia)

With her “*tired ... so tired*” Lucia captures one of the main sensory impacts of working at the intersections of Carepitalism, crime, and care: The deep fatigue that arises from meeting the multitudes of affectual (as well as physical) demands, while feeling betrayed and burned out.

Conclusion: Implications for Justice

This article provides a detailed case study of how, by using a psycho-social criminology framework, new ways of understanding the sensorial interaction shapes the experiences of crime, what McClanahan & South term “the texture and intensity” of the affective spaces of crime and justice (2020:13). Similarly, this paper performs a side-step from traditional criminology by considering sensory experiences as valid sites of enquiry, rather than, say, a result of an encounter (Young, 2015).

This case study shows how, by moving across and outward from interconnected disciplines, opportunities for new conceptualizations become possible. In considering conceptualizations such as Visceral Justice, Carecapitalism, and repowerment, more critical and nuanced investigations and discussions become possible. Psychosocial criminological research provides insights into the lived experience of those working within the challenging remits of law, crime, and justice. Here, it has provided avenues for deeper exploration into how affect can be passed from victim-survivor to worker as well as from the wider political and organizational stage to the worker, and how these all interplay in the specific site of DV frontline work. Most importantly, in an instance such as this, a psychosocial sensory criminology can provide routes to increased support for those working towards justice and, ultimately, the victim-survivors of crime.

The implications of such a sensory criminology for justice are three-fold. Firstly, it makes explicit the emotional and embodied that is often latent, though rarely made explicit in much criminological research. Secondly, this foregrounding of the psychosocial allows for new conceptualizations and vocabularies to emerge. It invites those engaged in the field to think differently and, crucially, to communicate and build on new insights. This integration of sociological and psychological perspectives allows for greater understanding of human worlds (Jones, 2019). Finally, and specifically for the field of DV frontline praxis, a sensory, psycho-social criminology amplifies the voices and experiences of workers. The ultimate aim of those working at the frontline is to achieve justice, including visceral and social justice. Yet, shelter workers also need support in order for them to aid in crafting much-needed Visceral Justice for victim-survivors of DV.

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