


# Researching Sensitive Topics in Sensitive Zones: Exploring Silences, “The Normal,” and Tolerance in Chile

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## Abstract

Based on their research experiences, three female Chilean researchers from the capital city and the north of the country reflect on political trauma and violence, poverty and exclusion, and the processes underlying the mobility of Colombian women in Chile's northern border. In all of these research areas, “the sensitive” not only becomes a research topic but also confronts both researchers and participants as the main characters of a particular and socially situated relationship. Through their research experiences, proposals, devices, and several methodological strategies for addressing these issues are critically presented, with an emphasis on what qualitative research makes possible, challenges, questions, and faces.

## Keywords

sensitive topics, researcher position, collaborative writing, cross-autoethnography, reflexivity, Latin America

## Introduction

This piece began to develop when Marcela invited us to participate in a panel entitled “Researching Sensitive Topics: Reflections for Qualitative Research from Latin America” presented at the 11th International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI). From that moment onward, we began to work collaboratively on an issue that we had not deemed a focal point of our work and which, despite our different lines of research, brought us together: How *sensitive* it is to conduct research on our topics of interest in our country.

Thus, we are a group of researchers inspired by collaborative approaches (Richardson et al., 2017) that have shared our research histories and reflected collectively on the recurrences and divergences of our work, guided by collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernández, 2013). This process was later complemented by collaborative writing, which has been very enriching for each of our voices and for our ability to understand and show our context through our research histories.

In this piece, we see three voices that adopt different approaches to research on sensitive topics from a qualitative perspective. One of them refers to how certain methodological decisions and choices are stressed, determining reconstructions of research designs and particular research processes. The second addresses how those who conduct research in the field of social work reflect on the ethical scope of studying subjects

who are poor or facing difficult situations. Finally, the third voice is derived from interpretive autoethnography and performative writing (Denzin, 2014).

We decided to write in the first person, given that we are using “personal stories as windows to the world, through which [we] *interpret* how [our] selves are connected to [our] socio-cultural contexts and how the contexts give meanings to [our] experiences and perspectives” (Chang et al., 2013, pp. 18 and 19). This kind of writing allows us to understand and share how we respond to our sensitive environments, while also enabling us to describe how our sociocultural contexts have shaped our perspectives, behaviors, decisions, and the focus of our research in the current Chilean context.

## On Today's Chile

In the last decade, Chilean students have mobilized Chilean society. Their demands to improve the quality of education and

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make higher education cost free (Aguilera, 2012) have been extended to other fields, affecting and awakening a community that had seemed numb (Salazar, 2012). Garcés (2012) states that “something happened in Chile in 2011 that came to question the achievement levels proclaimed by its political class and to challenge the coexistence of Chileans in many ways” (p. 7). Nowadays, it is feminist demands made by university students that are shaking the country.

In our view, this involvement requires considering some sensitive topics in the country’s research agenda, which remain partially unaddressed: the effects and suffering caused by the dictatorship (from 1973 to 1990); the injustice against those who have historically lived in social vulnerability; and new ways of understanding citizenship, given the large number of migrants currently arriving in the country.

These issues give shape to this article, leading us to problematize and reflect on the relationship that develops between researchers and the researched, particularly when the latter are silenced, vulnerable, or excluded.

### Researching Sensitive Topics

Research on sensitive topics comprises studies that examine potentially delicate issues, since they focus on experiences that are painful or emotional for participants. Studying these topics also causes researchers to be affected by the sensitive contents and meanings of the participants’ experiences. Research on sensitive topics can also be regarded as that which, given the nature of what is examined, involves research processes in which each stage must be carefully designed and implemented, so that the methods employed in sampling, data production and analysis, and results generation take into account the sensitive nature of the research object.

We can trace concerns about sensitive topics in research back to the work of Lee and Renzetti (1990). From the beginning, researchers have regarded “the sensitive” as a characteristic of the research topic or a feature of the research process (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2008). This field of inquiry, also referred to as sensitive *issues* or sensitive *subjects* (Fahie, 2014), can be organized around two main topics: their impact on the actors who take part in the research process and the way in which researchers reflect on how research on sensitive topics manifests itself methodologically.

In qualitative inquiry, the actors involved are both the researchers and their teams, as well as the participants. The consequences of their involvement have been defined based largely on their risks. There are concerns about possible emotional damage or difficulties arising during the research process (Johnson & Clarke, 2003; Woodby, Williams, Wittich, & Burgo, 2011), “research harm” (Bloor, Fincham, & Sampson, 2010), that is, the physical and emotional suffering experienced by researchers, and the implementation of care strategies by researchers (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2009).

Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, and Liamputtong (2008) note that suffering or distress may occur when researching personal experiences such as emotions and suffering (Gabb, 2010; Woodby et al., 2011); when studying deviation, marginalization, and/or social control, as in the case of vulnerable young people (Jansen, 2015); when examining politically complex issues involving people or institutions with power interests regarding research (Chaitin, 2003); and when dealing with sacred elements, which become desecrated as a result of research, according to participants (Armitage, 2008). Overall, working with sensitive topics has important effects for certain ethical and methodological dilemmas of research, which require practices that exceed traditional ethical expectations (Fahie, 2014; Karnieli-Miller, Strier, & Pessach, 2009; Richardson et al., 2017; Swartz, 2011).

Research on how studies on sensitive topics are methodologically influenced by their research objects suggests a positive impact on reflective processes: Sensitive topics enrich data analysis and generate new questions and reflections linked to the topic studied. It has been hypothesized that reflectiveness operates as a care strategy that makes it possible to explore the impact of knowledge construction (Connolly & Reilly, 2007) while paying close attention to how the sensitive influences the research approach adopted.

Research on sensitive topics is not simply circumscribed to a limited number of topics. Rather, it encompasses particular reflectiveness-related processes and dynamics in research, regarding subjectivity and emotionality as elements involved in the production of knowledge. This leads to the problematization of traditional research methods and results in creative new devices tailored to each particular field of research.

### Researching the Sensitive: Researchers’ Experiences

In order to increase reflectiveness in research processes or in the research relationship, each author analyzed her work from the perspective of sensitive research (Fahie, 2014), seeking to answer the question of how the sensitive introduces tension into and challenges research topics, researchers, and the ways in which research processes are implemented. Each research experience was problematized considering the particularity and uniqueness of the voice that each author wanted to adopt.

#### *Marcela’s Voice. Researching Psychosocial Trauma and Collective Memory in Chile: Voices From Silence*

For over 15 years, I have conducted research on issues related to psychosocial trauma (Martín-Baró, 1988) and collective memory (Halbwachs, 1997), specifically examining the events that took place in Chile after the 1973 military *coup d’état*. I have directly studied the experience of exile (Cornejo, 2008), listening in commissions of truth and reconciliation (Cornejo, Morales, Kovalskys, & Sharim, 2013), and the processes whereby each generation constructs memories about the dictatorship (Cornejo, Reyes, et al., 2013; Cornejo, Rocha,

Villarroel, Cáceres, & Vivanco, 2018). I have also supervised and accompanied students' dissertations on the transgenerational transmission of trauma in the third generation of victims of the dictatorship (Faúndez, Cornejo, & Brackelaire, 2014) and on the experiences of the neighbors of a clandestine torture center in Santiago de Chile (Mendoza, Cornejo, & Aceituno, 2019). In addition, as a result of fruitful academic exchanges, I have had the opportunity to learn from the experiences lived in other parts of the world, especially the Holocaust in Europe and the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda (Brackelaire, Cornejo, & Kinable, 2013).

Based on these studies, I have developed views on how the epistemological positions adopted by qualitative researchers are methodologically stressed when the object of study is a sensitive issue. One aspect that has arisen in my research is related to the *complexity of the objects of study* that are built. Studying the effects of political violence during exile, examining the experiences of those who have listened to victims of torture, and examining how people remember what happened during the dictatorship involves tackling politically and ideologically complex issues through situated research (Haraway, 1995). At the same time, it involves situated research processes and researchers. To conduct situated research, it is necessary to be aware of the fact that research always entails a point of view—a variety of perspectives—that must take contextual factors into account. Thus, in the knowledge construction process, it is necessary to take into account the complexity of the positions and the temporal and historical contexts of the topic researched, of those who research, and of those who participate in the study.

This complexity has made it necessary to design and conduct fieldwork in particular ways, for example, using special strategies for contacting and recruiting participants or for building networks with key informants, seeking to overcome barriers of fear, shame, distrust, and social disregard derived from what took place during the dictatorship. During the data production stage, which involves talking about oneself, we have built research settings that allow participants to tell their—painful and sensitive—story to another person. This particular research setting is characterized by the construction of bonds with the participants in which care, respect, trust, and attentive and active listening become extremely important.

If qualitative research and the scientific knowledge generated through it arise from the meeting and dialogue between researcher and participant—this being the meeting where performative texts naturally occur and where the world of the participant merges with that of the researcher (Denzin, 2001)—conducting qualitative research on sensitive topics requires the inclusion of special features in the design and implementation of that relationship.

Professionals who worked during the dictatorship treating traumatized people developed the concept of “committed relationship” (Lira & Castillo, 1991), emphasizing the need to recognize the social and political dimension of the person as a first necessary element for working with traumatic experiences. Therapeutic work required a psychological,

political, and social alliance to adopt a nonneutral ethical position against damage and the violation of human rights. Lira (1996) highlights these therapeutic encounters as historical events, since the subjective dimensions of the context are commonly shared by patient and therapist. In the field of research on psychosocial trauma and collective memory, *meeting the participants* has also become a sign of commitment and historicity, albeit in a different way. With regard to commitment, there have been many participants who, during the first contact, express their surprise and delight that someone is interested in these issues. It is implicitly assumed by the participants that if anyone is interested in these issues, it is not only because they are considered to be important but also because the researcher is committed to giving them a voice and condemns the damage suffered. Academic research, when asking participants to tell these often untold stories of pain and suffering, recognizes injured people from its own position in society.

Similarly, the historical contexts of the researcher and the participants become relevant when studying these issues. I produced information about generational memories of the dictatorship (Cornejo et al., 2018) around the time of the commemoration of the 40th anniversary of the military coup. This brought the memories of those times to the fore through a large number of press and television reports, many cultural activities, and a day of commemoration. Many participants, older than me, felt the need to insist that they were “speaking out to let people know, because I lived it” when sharing their stories of the dictatorship. They established and verbalized the generational gap as a way to situate history and their stories within what is told. As Denzin (2001) points out, the performative encounter between researcher and participant, between their worlds, configures an important historical context; in our opinion, this becomes relevant when studying collective memory and trauma. Following De Gaulejac (1999), the function of historicity can be understood as the ability of individuals to integrate history and their own history, identifying and understanding the ways in which they act upon them. In my research, asking the participants to tell these sensitive stories allows them to work on their lives as they try to establish connections between their personal, family, and social histories, thus giving them a historical and situated character. Sensitive topics become historicized when they are brought to the sphere of research.

A feature of studies on sensitive topics is that they may have *effects on the researcher* (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). What is clear, and what I have personally experienced as a researcher, is that working on such topics generates certain emotions that resonate within me because of the participants' stories. What I have researched has had an impact on me, challenging and adding some tension to my research. When working on these sensitive issues, there is a tension between who the researcher is, the researcher's own positions as a citizen, the scope of the researcher's work, and the usefulness of research in academic—and also human—terms. My subjectivity as a researcher is jeopardized not only because what I hear from

participants affects, excites, and shocks me as a researcher but also because as a citizen I have my own personal and family histories as well as my own positions in relation to social histories. A concept that I consider to be relevant in this regard is “empathic distress.” Advanced by LaCapra (2001), it designates a particular position that researchers have to adopt in order to gain access to the participants’ stories related to traumatic experiences in specific social and political situations. This position entails listening in a way in which trust and belief in what is expressed by the participants prevail over certain emotional experiences of discomfort.

Given these tensions, I have developed certain methodological strategies in the design and implementation of my research. These strategies, which we call “listening devices” (Cornejo, Besoain, & Mendoza, 2011), attempt to respond to the sensitivity of my area of research. They provide certain tools (researcher’s reflexive notebook, transcriber’s notes, and inter-analysis meetings, among others) that systematize researchers’ and research teams’ reflexivity and subjectivity in relation to the area and the sensitive objects that they are studying. The idea of these devices is to enable researchers to be reflective when engaging in systematic and systematized work with the subjectivity that characterizes qualitative studies. Building on the logic or epistemological foundations of qualitative research, these listening devices have been created and recreated according to the tensions that have emerged from working with the sensitive in my research: the complexity of my objects of study, the construction of complex research problems, the peculiarities of the meetings with participants, and the effects that these elements have generated in researchers. Additionally, these devices make it possible to add complexity and analytical weight to the results generated, thus also allowing the research process to be a source of information about the object of study. Listening devices make it possible to incorporate assumptions concerning subjectivity (Bott, 2010), critical reflexivity (Mao, Mian, Chovanec, & Underwood, 2016), triangulation (Flick & Röhsch, 2014), and the quality of qualitative studies (Roulston, 2010).

Considering the multiplicity of the other’s word and its polyphony (Bakhtin, 1986), listening devices allow me to listen to the voices of both participants and researchers—two sides of the performative meeting (Denzin, 2001) in which knowledge is constructed in qualitative research. They address the need for reflexive strategies in qualitative research, especially “perspective taking” (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017), by encouraging researchers to take into account multiple perspectives regarding the topic and context studied.

The sensitive and complex nature of the issues that I study involves asking questions and examining research problems in which silence, silencing, the unspoken, and denial of what took place have prevailed. Trauma has caused some words to go missing—words that cannot be said because saying them involves a working through of what happened that has not always been possible. The environment of political threat and fear that the systematic violation of human rights created in Chile (Lira & Castillo, 1991) made it difficult to talk about

these issues, not only for those directly affected but also for the whole of society, even after the dictatorship ended. Understandably, this difficulty also affected research. Taking into account all the implications of the sensitivity of my research topics allows me to adopt a different, careful, and committed way of addressing them, through which they can be discussed.

### *Gabriela’s Voice. An Involved Voice: Challenges and Critical Perspectives of Face-to-Face Research*

This reflection took place some years ago, when I asked myself: “How do social workers do research?” (Rubilar, 2013). Thus, I initiated a research practice linked to a field that promotes reflection on the research work of authors from different disciplines (Castillo, Valles, & Wairneman, 2009).

To answer this question, I have followed the guidelines of the biographical–narrative approach (Arfuch, 2002; Bertaux, 1997). This theoretical–methodological perspective has allowed me to construct 43 testimonies of Chilean social workers who reflect on their research and the implications of their work in the first person. In this regard, my studies aim to analyze the research conducted by practitioners of this discipline in Chile. Therefore, face-to-face interaction takes on a dual meaning, since it refers both to our interaction with social workers who do research and to that which they conduct with the people who participate in their studies. The reflections presented here reflect the challenges and scope of all these studies as well as the interactions established as part of them.

The process of constructing the testimonies of social workers who do research has allowed me to gain in-depth knowledge about the work they perform, the topics they research, and the questions they ask themselves (Rubilar, 2015). Over the course of this study, I have also observed my own research practice (Riessman, 2015).

Their stories and my own self-interview have enabled me to visualize a particularly sensitive way to examine the processes of research and how researchers relate to the subjects with whom they work (Corbin & Morse, 2003). In these stories, some dimensions of analysis have emerged around two questions that challenge my research work: why do we study what we study? and what do we do with what has been researched?

Why do we study what we study? One element that binds together the subjects studied is that they stand for social and individual ailments and also for situations that pose problems or inequities. Usually, these topics are conceived as complex issues that require the analysis, observation, and participation of a variety of actors.

Social exclusion, a lack of opportunities, the situation of persons who commit crimes, neglect, violence, and substance abuse, among other issues, are regarded as *big problems* by social researchers (Chomowicz & Canniffe, 2007).

This means recognizing that the research conducted by social workers is diverse and heterogeneous. Therefore, it contains a variety of experiences that deserve to be heard. The issues studied are related to the interests and priorities not only of researchers but also of agents and agencies that finance

social research; thus, certain issues are prioritized, while others remain invisible and are sometimes difficult to address in regular research programs (Bogolub, 2010; Richardson et al., 2017).

The influence of the institutions requiring research is also thematized in this study as a source of ethical issues when professionals consider the impact of their research on the lives of their subjects (Boixadós, Fernández, Alegre, & de Vicente, 2014).

Based on our analysis of the research testimonies provided by social workers, we can assert that the responsibility for the situations studied rests with the researchers themselves, who seek various ways to communicate and make visible what is discovered. This allows us to define this type of research according to the ethics of responsibility and in reference to a research consciousness that is historically “situated” (Haraway, 1995).

This responsibility becomes more explicit when we observe how knowledge is acquired from a reflexive research position and when we become aware of its possibilities and limitations, especially when working with fragile or vulnerable subjects. In this context, the social workers involved in this type of research describe certain processes whereby the leading role in the generation of knowledge is returned to those who have lost it.

In this analysis, I wanted to go beyond the existing consent forms and protocols, drawing attention to a particular way in which interactions between researchers and the researched are generated. Hence, there is an emphasis on face-to-face relationships, a key practice for addressing aspects regarded as intimate by subjects or examining painful conditions that they have experienced (Ellis, 2007; Richardson et al., 2017).

Face-to-face interaction involves not just a form of intersubjective interaction: “To face” the other is the position that should be adopted by someone who takes responsibility for the processes generated, the results of his or her research, and its “behind the scenes” events (Castillo et al., 2009). In this regard, special attention is paid to what has not been recorded at the end of a project and which usually stays in the private sphere, in the researchers’ own lives and experiences.

This line of thought is in line with the views advanced by Bhattacharya (2007), who claims that a conception of ethics as situational and not universal has methodological consequences that require contingent approaches, emergent designs, and critical reflections about the task itself and the way in which research is practiced and developed.

Based on this relational conception, Adams (2008) and Ellis (2007) call for constant vigilance regarding ethical issues in research, given that this is a place where we will never know the results of our decisions a priori and where questions are constantly emerging—as they have in this study.

This must certainly be the case when one considers that much of the research conducted by the social workers that we have examined deals with sensitive or painful issues that have affected individuals and communities, sometimes for a long time, especially those harmed by situations of poverty, violence, or a lack of recognition (Corbin & Morse, 2003).

The effects of working with pain have been better addressed in connection with the professional helping relationship (Flores, Miranda, Muñoz, & Sanhueza, 2012), a concept which emerged from social work research. Therefore, reflection and analysis linked to this relationship constitute a field for exploration that is problematized in this article following the guidelines for the study of sensitive topics.

Malacrida (2007) reports how the topics studied and the research activities conducted can emotionally affect all of the participants, including the researchers. She draws attention to the effects that an emotionally demanding project can have on the values and views of researchers, especially when it comes to difficult stories that involve the vulnerability of the subjects, the cruelty of social systems, and the unpredictability of life. Her research topics coincide with those studied by the social workers who have taken part in our research, and her perspective is consistent with the emotional dimension surveyed in this approach. My work, in all of its dimensions, involves the participants—social workers who conduct research and the people enrolled in their studies—and entails allowing ourselves to be affected by the testimonies obtained within the context of our study, either emotionally or in connection with the participants’ beliefs.

The biographical approach followed in preparing these testimonies emphasizes the importance of recognizing and knowing the historical–biographical coordinates of where each researcher stands and the generational moment to which the study belongs. Reflexivity and self-awareness in the research process become a key dimension of analysis, being present in the multiple phases of research (Leibovich, 2000), enhancing and fostering the production of critical, reflective, and innovative knowledge.

In this way, questioning the meaning and usefulness of what is researched requires researchers to be aware of their position as such and of their “radical responsibility,” which is acquired after approaching and listening to the experiences of subjects. This is related to the notion that the act of listening to subjects’ explanations makes researchers “responsible” for their research.

What do we do with what has been researched (or what is not done)? The latter question derives from the above and from what I have observed in the testimonies of the social workers who conduct research. In their stories, they suggest that research is also a form of intervention and a way to denounce situations that sometimes fail to even emerge.

The suffering and hopelessness associated with extreme poverty, the feelings of impotence and frustration derived from social inequality, the lack of opportunities available to people, and the discretionary functioning of some social services constitute the shared issues and concerns of these professionals who conduct research.

By voicing these concerns, research subjects explicitly convey their need to be heard but also make researchers responsible for channeling what has been “narrated” in areas other than those where research is encouraged and conducted. In this regard, Boixadós, Fernández, Alegre, and de Vicente (2014)

mention the benefits that research can bring to the researched by restoring the power of the most vulnerable. The authors emphasize that, for this goal to be achieved, researchers must be competent and aware of the scope of their work and its effects on others.

In this overview of research, we seek to highlight the ability to listen to what the people being studied tell us. Adams (2008) refers to this listening as a “narrative privilege,” referring to the power of the researcher when he or she represents the voice of the participants.

Why get involved? This is one of the questions that social workers I have researched ask themselves, which sometimes leads them to compare their research practice with the work of other researchers. In their view, the key difference is that that they get the chance to visit the participants’ houses, who tell them their stories, complemented by photographs, letters, and other biographical materials.

The biographical elements present in the lives of the subjects studied connect us to the origins of a profession and a craft that has among its entitlements the “action of visiting” (Illanes, 2006; Shaw, 2015), which includes not only the possibility of entering the privacy of families, especially poorer ones and those in need of assistance, but also the ability to question those aspects of the social order that have been naturalized.

That restless spirit of transforming (and problematizing) the social is one of the disciplinary foundations of social work, a profession born at the dawn of the *social question* as a discipline ready to analyze the social problems of its time (Álvarez-Uría, & Parra, 2014; Shaw, 2015) and whose research practices prompt questions and inquiries, posing challenges and opportunities such as those presented here.

### ***Pamela’s Voice. Walking in the Shoes of Colombian Women Refugees Asking for Safe Haven in Her Border Town in Northern Chile***

Looking for answers, tired of not finding my way in research, restless and eager for research experience, I constantly linked research to previous life experiences, which led me to ask myself, “And now what?” What will I do with that knowledge obtained after a PhD thesis about human rights in Chile, trauma, and the loss of illusions, as well as a life based on the political movements before 1973 (Zapata, 2008)? What could I do with the suffering and social injustices brought to the surface by interviews at a time when research on sensitive topics such as the consequences of the coup was virtually nonexistent?

For this reason, I started going to the ICQI in 2009, the safe space where I rewrote my PhD thesis based on the question, “Where am I (in my fieldwork)?” There, my position in the field of research changed radically, which initiated a process that I call a “decolonization” of my brain, whereby I managed to speak up using my own voice through *writing*. My research sought to focus on the words of the participants as the experts of my research projects, leaving room for feeling and reflecting

on the historical, political, social, and cultural context in which I was conducting research.

The question about where I was (in my fieldwork) involved asking myself: *Who am I? Who am I in relation to the other?* The idea of *the other*, far from me, with their particular problems and life experiences, was closer to me in terms of my standpoint of conducting qualitative research in a human way (Pelias, 2014). Then, I developed a process to add color, accent, and meaning to my second-language voice: the Latin American voice of a qualitative woman researcher from northern Chile (Zapata-Sepúlveda, 2015a).

Nowadays, my voice works on regional topics addressing the problems faced by Colombian women who emigrate to Chile (Zapata-Sepúlveda, 2015b; Silva-Segovia, Ramírez-Aguilar, & Zapata-Sepúlveda, 2018) and the violence and social injustices linked to the everyday practices of Chilean society. In doing so, I have become interested in finding ways to generate new spaces in academia for thinking about social transformations, breaking the glass that keeps us from connecting our lives with what happens out there. In this regard, I understand qualitative research, and especially the act of writing, as a way of doing research (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), as a way of living (Richardson, 2014), and as a weapon against injustice. This is a knowledge reconstruction process aimed at connecting various audiences in Chile and abroad with sensitive topics derived from fieldwork experiences in a human way while also involving the people who participate in my research project. In this case, the silenced voices of Latin American women who, like me, are living in the outskirts of my town in northern Chile.

This work is based on a larger research project entitled *Processes Of Integration of Foreign Migrants in the far North of Chile*, where I am currently working (as of 2018) with women from Colombia living with and without residence permits in the border city of Arica.

Based on a critical ethnographic design (Conquergood, 2002) that employs interpretive autoethnography (Denzin, 2014) as a reference framework, in this article, I discuss my experiences of fieldwork using multimethod strategies. The questions that have guided my research are why do Colombian women arrive by land in Arica, how do they do so, and what do they bring? My research also takes into account their reflections about the host society regarding the topic of border integration at the northern end of Chile.

Four years ago, I attended an inspirational three-word workshop led by Richardson (2014). There, I wrote a text in three words about significant moments of my fieldwork with Colombian women and the study of their memories in their country and in Chile. By interrelating political, cultural, social, and personal aspects of their life experiences in Chile, I was able to link those women’s life experiences with myself, that of a Latin American woman who has lived as a foreigner in other countries, sharing my feelings with them and accessing the experiences that motivated them to leave their country. So, I chose to write a poem placing myself as a traveler, a Latin American woman of color. This is how I am viewed by others

sometimes when I am in *anglo* places. In this regard, it was an experience that involved linking facts and human meanings in writing, challenging traditional notions, and promoting imaginative reconstructions.

I regard these three-word texts as an experimental kind of writing because they allow me to reach international audiences by connecting my voice and my feelings with my fieldwork experiences with Colombian women. Using this experimental text, I invite others—the audience—to share, feel, imagine, and live experiences connected with their selves through their own experiences and biographies.

As we experimented in the three-word workshop led by Richardson (2014), our group of qualitative researchers from various countries wondered why we should use three words and not four or five. After completing the first exercise, we realized that the simplicity of the three-word limit forces researchers to connect with and evoke their research experiences in an intimate and sensitive way while also communicating their ideas in a powerful and performative manner.

An approach of this type, a kind of postmodern take on qualitative research, is novel in my Latin American context. Also, when I read out a text using the three-word rule, I am able to feel and receive feedback from the audience, which expresses the power behind this kind of text. In this case, about trauma in Colombian women refugees or those asking for safe haven.

#### Colombian women and insensitive borders

The trauma lives  
next to you  
next to me  
I see it  
the trauma lives  
There, here, us  
My body feels  
My body resents  
My body suffers  
You the unfair

Memories, suffering, sadness  
Truth, justice, reparation  
Avoidance, solitude, resting  
Reparation as healing  
Inscribed in them  
Resting as forgetting  
Forgetting as impunity  
Impunity as injustice  
Injustice as indifference  
Then everything changes  
Regional north Chile  
The new stories  
New traumatic processes  
And then again  
The same look  
The same rejection  
Present of violence  
Problems, prostitution, drugs

In her eyes  
Her tired eyes  
Her sad smile  
Her cautious attitude  
Her ashamed look  
Like this, sideways  
  
You who forget  
You the indifferent  
Perpetuated in silences  
In ungrateful silences  
In unpunished silences  
In painful silences  
In my society  
Make them go  
My Colombian friends  
Stories of injustice  
A violent past  
A survived past  
An unjust present  
My Chile today

Prejudice and indifference  
The husband stealers!  
The job stealers!  
Political refuge Chile  
Arica Tacna Border  
Sovereignty as violence  
Violence as prejudice

This writing has allowed me to be empathic and enabled me to understand Colombians' reasons for coming to Chile and living a life of resistance here as survivors. They arrived because of the persecution and violence in their home country, the murder of relatives, a permanent history of violence in Colombia since the 1960s, and other borderline experiences. This violence is often perpetuated by the "host" country, which suspects them, creating a stigma and producing retraumatization. Therefore, everything that makes me feel relieved regarding specific aspects and experiences of forced migration is hampered by current immigration policies, as a result of which, for example, the last permanent residence visa in Arica was approved in 2012 (Zapata-Sepúlveda, 2016).

Overall, saying all this in three words allowed me to move beyond traditional reports, which do not include the feelings behind the words of the women studied. I write from my emotions, biography, and memory, and this allows me to connect with the audience in a human way, sharing the feelings, and meaning associated with my fieldwork experiences differently. This approach enables me to evoke memories that can be linked to the audience's experiences, apart from situating the researcher's voice within fieldwork in a way that sheds light on trauma based on his or her own experiences.

So, I find meaning in the experiences of the women studied and in my own experience as a researcher studying them, from an emotional personal perspective. The text as a poem, as an experimental kind of writing, emerges as the result of a methodological decision based on interpretive autoethnography (Denzin, 2014), reflecting the transformation that the researcher experiences in his or her life by examining other people's lives. In my particular academic context of northern Chile, sharing this kind of work represents a departure from the traditionally promoted empathy toward the life experiences of the women studied. This kind of writing is sensitive by nature, capturing emotional dimensions. Following Pelias (2014), I am trying to write poetry, hoping this will elicit feelings in the audience regarding the phenomenon described.

## Concluding Remarks

In this article, we have discussed *the sensitive* in research from two main perspectives: On the one hand, the topics we research are sensitive (psychosocial trauma and torture, poverty and exclusion, and irregular immigration), issues that are mentioned but not addressed with the necessary depth in today's postdictatorial Chile. On the other hand, the unusual traits of our research processes—qualitative studies, conducted by each of us in our academic settings in which we ask hurt people to

share their experiences with us—are also sensitive in the sense mentioned by Dickson-Swift et al. (2008), who understand the sensitive both as a feature of the topic researched and as a peculiarity of the research process.

Reflecting on *the sensitive* in our research has also brought back the question posed by Brayda and Boyce (2014) regarding how the sensitive nature of research affects the researcher. These authors provide an answer that is mostly based on collected data. We have chosen to extend it to the whole research process, taking into account all of our different approaches, based on the assumption that all the stages of the research process entail challenges and difficulties that must be tackled when studying sensitive topics. For us, working on sensitive topics has meant abandoning a familiar and tested way of conducting research to adopt another one in which we, as researchers, have our emotions, strengths, and contradictions in mind when conducting our studies. Research has added tensions and challenged our biographies, transforming our ways of working.

Our way of conducting research has been challenged by the need to consider particularities that reflect both the topics we study and the epistemological and methodological possibilities of qualitative research: how we approach and invite our participants during the contact and recruiting stage, how we construct relationships with them so they can share their stories within the framework of data production, and how necessary it is to adopt ethical considerations when analyzing and reporting our research results. All of these are factors that affect us as qualitative researchers. These elements shape our ways of doing research, as the possibilities afforded by qualitative approaches appear to facilitate the inclusion of the sensitive in the research processes that we design and implement and in our way of being researchers. The qualitative becomes sensitive and the sensitive becomes perceptible from the point of view of the qualitative.

Sensitive topics have affected our work, and we recognize their enormous potential for transformation in the subjects linked to them, eliciting an active, reflective, and committed way of generating knowledge. Thus, sensitive research also opens up the possibility of a debate on ethical issues and on our responsibility regarding the subjects with whom we work, which implies taking into account the effects and implications of investigating sensitive issues. Again, the field of the qualitative broadens and makes it possible to look at the sensitive from methodologically appropriate perspectives. For instance, this involves modifying the processes we carry out in the multiple stages of the research process, from the generation of research questions to publication in various formats, as is the case of intercultural research according to Richardson et al. (2017). Studying topics such as psychosocial trauma, poverty, and migration with qualitative methodologies makes it possible to foreground the sensitive in research processes and employ it to inform our understanding of these phenomena.

Our studies are different and come from different disciplinary traditions and trajectories, like our procedures in research. And these differences are also reflected in the way we write. The voice of each researcher presents in this article echoes the

listening and the voices of other researchers. These echoes foster the emergence of new ways of addressing sensitivity and reflexivity in connection with various professions, backgrounds, and issues. Thus, they encourage us to promote more collaborative ways of working with other researchers, leading to the exchange of experiences and learning based on the reflective processes conducted when studying sensitive topics. At the same time, qualitative research makes it possible to link and integrate a variety of perspectives, thereby adding density to the research process and to the findings made about the objects and subjects studied.

According to Caretta (2015), this collaborative exercise can be said to be powered by the multiple subjectivities and positions adopted by the researchers involved in the research process. All those who take part in scientific studies—researchers, participants, and audiences of research—thus constitute a framework that reflects the complexity and sensitivity of the topics studied.

The approach that we adopted in this article involved analyzing our sensitive research topics and our qualitative research processes from the perspective of each researcher and sharing our voices in writing, taking into account the importance of writing as qualitative research (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005). Writing in the first person involves adopting that position and taking that risk. Far from being a spontaneous task, this has required establishing differences with a learned model. Moreover, when first-person writing is done collaboratively, it acquires new forms, new openings, and new reflections. This approach is aimed at producing a connection between the experiences of those who take part in research, the researchers who listen to them, and the audiences who read about the work conducted. In addition, this approach increases the visibility of the participants' silenced or overlooked sensitive experiences, which illustrates the role of qualitative research as an agent tasked with drawing attention to and voicing said experiences.

This collaborative writing also strengthens the results of research, leading to greater reflexivity, higher analysis density, better approaches to our objects of study, and improved research questions. Pooling writing practices can be understood with reference to the concept of co-constructed autoethnography (Ellis, 2007), collaborative autobiography (Lapadat, 2009), collaborative approaches (Richardson et al., 2017), collaborative engagement (Mao et al., 2016), and collaborative reflexivity (Finlay, 2012). Our exercise can also be understood as a *cross-autoethnography*, where sharing, collective learning, and discussions about our practices and qualitative research reflections allow us to conduct research by writing about the processes and objects that demand our attention in this sensitive case.

However, such a situated research position and its associated approaches to work and writing entail certain difficulties, especially when adopted in academic spaces such as universities, leading to various implications, limitations, and challenges. These challenges involve returning to the fundamental epistemological, ethical, and political commitment of qualitative research, as pointed out by Denzin



(2014), “While constant breaks and ruptures define the field of qualitative research, there is a shifting center to the project: the avowed humanistic and social justice commitment to study the social world from the perspective of the interacting individual” (p. 1123). According to this author, researching sensitive topics in our contexts is a challenge that bursts into a normalcy that goes beyond the interests of social science researchers, who tend to strive for neutrality in their approach to social issues and problems.

As pointed out by Finefter-Rosenbluh (2017), we can learn from one another by taking advantage of the experiences of other qualitative researchers, as the available perspectives about our work are multiplied when we adopt a more reflective approach. With the reflections included here, we want to reiterate the intentional and situated nature of the research we practice and the sense of responsibility that it acquires when we acknowledge that the sensitive not only includes the issues researched but also engages researchers and participants as actors in a particular and socially situated relationship. We want to invite readers and researchers to discuss sensitive topics in connection with the situated research conducted in particular contexts, taking into account the point made by Brayda and Boyce (2014) regarding “culturally sensitive research” or, as we have labeled it, research on sensitive topics in sensitive zones. Our research topics—psychosocial trauma and torture, poverty and exclusion, irregular immigration—are sensitive topics in our contexts and, in this regard, sharing our reflections about how their sensitive nature has affected our research processes and ourselves as researchers also becomes a challenge and an invitation to continue thinking and working collectively.

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