

Ali Curran
Organisational Consultant
acurran@chl.ie +353 86 233 2560

Well-Being in the Legal Profession: Vicarious Trauma and the Mitigating Role of Resilience

About the Researcher

Ali Curran is a management and organisational consultant with a specific interest in workplace well-being.

She is a psychologically informed environment (PIE) trainer and group work facilitator, a qualified applied group analytic practitioner and a graduate of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations as an organisational change consultant. Ali is a registered practitioner with the British Psychological Society, a board member of Irish Group Analytic Society and a member of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organisations. She is currently completing a MSc in Organisational Psychology at Birkbeck, University of London.

She works as a consultant in the public, private and charitable sectors and with individual clients.

Research Summary

Purpose of the Study & the Hypothesis

The rationale behind this research is to add to the existing body of empirical data, to inform the understanding of wellbeing in the legal profession and therefore inform the planning of future supports for legal professionals working with trauma.

A growing body of research of well-being within the legal profession (Bulbulia et al. 2015; Levin et al. 2011; Vrkleviski and Franklin 2008) extends the original theoretical construct of vicarious trauma (VT), founded on the study of the effect of trauma on therapists (Branson 2019; McCann and Pearlman 1990; Pearlman and Mac Ian 1995). VT arises as a result of bearing witness to acts of cruelty, abuse and violence which cross the bounds of human respect and dignity (Jaffe et al. 2003). Exposure of this kind is considered an inevitable consequence of being part of the justice system (Maguire and Byrne 2017) and yet, unlike clinical professionals, the same level of psychological support is not embedded in training or practice (Levin et al. 2011; Maguire and Byrne 2017). Specifically, within the legal profession, scholars are attending to a growing body of evidence that job demands are negatively impacting well-being, draining personal resources and being overlooked in the culture of the profession (Chan 2014; Organ 2011).

In adding to this body of research, we are embarking on this study with the following questions to the fore:

- Is vicarious trauma related to wellbeing in solicitors and barristers working with the victims of crime and traumatic material.
- Does resilience moderate the relationship between trauma and wellbeing?
- Is there a higher-level interaction, whereby the trauma / resilience interaction is moderated by role type (i.e. solicitors vs barristers)?

with the intention of proving the following hypothesis:

- Vicarious trauma will be positively related to well-being in that the data will show it has an impact,
- That this negative relationship between vicarious trauma and well-being will be buffered in the presence of higher resilience, and that
- The interaction between vicarious trauma and resilience on well-being will be stronger for barristers versus solicitors who tend to be the first contact with the victim / perpetrator / traumatic incidents.

Data will be collected via a questionnaire which is designed using online platform Qualtrics, it provides a secure online service that follows strict information security standards (ISO27001) and is GDPR compliant. The questionnaire will include three statistically robust and widely used scales:

1. Vicarious Trauma Scale – VTS (Vrklevski and Franklin 2008)
2. General Health Questionnaire – GHQ 12
3. University of Washington Resilience Scale - UWRS (Amtmann et al. 2017a)

Participation & Right to Withdraw

Participation is invited from barristers and solicitors working in criminal, human rights and family law. We are seeking a response rate of 128 participants as a minimum to achieve statistical merit.

The invitation to participate will be circulated to participants who meet the criteria outlining the purpose and format of the study. a consent form and a link to the survey. Participants are asked to indicate willingness to take part in the study by responding to a number of statements which capture their free and willing consent.

The 'submit survey' preference at the end of the survey will also carry details that this is confirming free and informed consent to supply data for the use of academic research and analysis.

The introductory letter to the survey outlines participants right to withdraw from the research. The consent form re-iterates that even post consent the participant can choose to change their mind about participating at survey stage. At the end of the survey, there are two click through options,

1. confirming consent to send the completed survey
2. choosing to withdraw the survey

If participants select option 2 the survey template will be cleared of data and a screen notification will confirm to the participant that their responses have been erased and they have been withdrawn from the research.

There will be no further option to withdraw after the data has been submitted for analysis.

GDPR & Data Security

During data collection and analysis, the questionnaire will be completed via a link to an online survey that is hosted on a separate platform, the organisation domain is not recognised, the names and email addresses are not collected. Invitation to participate will be circulated via the professional members organisations in compliance with GDPR. Participating members will indicate interest and complete the survey without any specifically identifying data being collected by the researcher.

Initially collected data will be stored within a secure Qualtrics account. Any follow up documents will be stored in a Personal Vault, which is a secure space within Premium OneDrive, that offers two step verification account and additional security of locking out after 20 min of no activity.

Any subsequent sharing of the reports or data will be shared in password protected files. All raw data will be deleted after three years of the study.

Data Analysis & Reporting

Data analysis will be done through SPSS 2021 under the relevant item category references and subject to moderated moderation analysis Hayes, A. F. (2015). This model of analysis measures the strength of the relationship between Wellbeing and Vicarious Trauma, and the primary moderating effect of resilience. In addition, it allows for analysis of the effect of a secondary moderator, in this case role type, on the primary moderator.

The data and the statistical description of the analysis will be included in the study which will be submitted to Birkbeck University, MSc Organisational Psychology programme as part of the School of Economic and Human Sciences. Summary findings of the data for the whole project will be shared with the three participating organisations and be made available to the participants.