

A person wearing a white lab coat and blue gloves is walking away from the camera down a brightly lit hallway. They are carrying a large, full red plastic bag in their right hand. The hallway has white walls and a light-colored floor. The person is wearing dark pants and blue sneakers.

# Another Bloody Clean-Up: The Experiences of Trauma Cleaners in South Africa

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## Abstract

South Africa has one of the highest violent crime rates globally, where physical and emotional trauma is used in homicides and suicides. While this is apparent to the ordinary South African, what is less clear is what happens after the police and forensics have done their job at a crime scene: Who cleans up the bloody mess? In South Africa, as in many other nations, trauma cleaners restore the scenes where homicides and suicides have been committed, and where industrial accidents have taken place. Little to no scholarly research has been conducted on the experiences of the cleaners of trauma scenes. Cleaning up these scenes consists of labour charged with violence that most cannot countenance, but which the cleaner must face. Drawing on 13 qualitative interviews,

this article explores the challenges of cleaning up a site where violent and/or traumatic acts have occurred, and how the cleaners develop strategies to cope with their own concomitant trauma. The cleaners are exposed to various health and safety issues, as well as the emotional trauma associated with cleaning up horrific accidents and crimes. Findings show that trauma cleaners emotionally distance themselves from the violence to which they bear witness and use emotional labour, spirituality, humour, and debriefing as coping strategies. In its conclusion, this article suggests a greater acknowledgement of trauma cleaners' responsibilities and recommends that proper physical and emotional training is necessary to ensure their wellbeing.

## Introduction

Trauma and cleaning are two distinct and uniquely intertwined concepts relevant to South African life. The interrogation of trauma cleaning – the marriage of these two concepts – is novel. The job of a trauma cleaner involves the clean-up of violent scenes where suicides, homicides, attacks, industrial accidents, or unattended deaths have taken place, as well as other cleaning jobs including biohazard spills, general disinfection, and, more recently, Covid-19 disinfections. Trauma cleaners clean up industrial accidents where sewage pipes have burst, hoarders' homes with years' worth of rubbish, and biohazard spillage. They clean, scrub, and disinfect every surface that needs it. This job is essential to the process of restoring an environment and cleansing its spirit.

Trauma cleaning is a grim job that is traumatic, bloody, risky, and unpredictable. It is a physically and emotionally challenging job that requires careful consideration of trauma and triggers, and one that not many people want to do. Trauma cleaning is particularly relevant in South Africa – a country with one of the world's highest violent crime rates. Recently, the South African Police Service, in collaboration with StatsSA, has published the country's crime statistics for 2019/20. These statistics show an increase in violent contact crimes, including murders, sexual offences, and robbery, with aggravating circumstances. Most notably, murder rates have increased from 21,022 in 2019 to 21,350 in 2020 (SAPS, 2021). In the first few months of the Covid-19 pandemic, almost 1,800 suicides occurred in South Africa (Besent, 2020). These statistics are glaring. We all watch television and are aware of the protocols that follow a crime or trauma scene: the police are called in, the medical team attend to the victims or bodies, and the forensic team details and notes the scene's intricacies. Television, however, does not privy us to the clean-up of that crime scene. From the blood, the maggots, and the stench that follows: who cleans it? While sometimes the victim's family, friends, or acquaintances may clean up the scene, it may be too traumatic for most people, and they may rely on external help from a crime scene clean-up company.

This article aims to demonstrate, through in-depth interviews, the challenges and coping mechanisms of cleaning up trauma. We begin with an overview

of how and when data were collected, followed by a discussion of the different types of cleaning duties that trauma cleaners perform. Hereafter, the physical preparation and labour involved in the clean-up of trauma scenes are outlined. Finally, the emotional preparation and the challenges and coping strategies involved in a trauma clean-up are discussed, including emotional labour and dissonance, spirituality, humour, and debriefing.

## Methods and Study Participants

Through a Google search, two trauma cleaning companies with franchises across South Africa were selected. Both companies have specialised in a range of trauma cleaning for more than five years. Company A, 'Sunshine Cleaners' (pseudonym), have 10 franchises across South Africa, while Company B, 'The Cleaning Angels' (pseudonym), have 12 franchises. The franchises' owners were contacted and virtual interviews with 13 trauma cleaners were conducted during April and May 2021. Interviews were conducted on Zoom, recorded, transcribed, and thematically analysed.

The conducting of interviews via online platforms was an unexpectedly positive experience. While research on online interviews indicates that they can come with challenges such as technical difficulties, noisy environments, and a lack of privacy, we did not experience any of these challenges. We conducted our interviews more than a year after the start of the

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Covid-19 pandemic. All the participants were stuck at home and were delighted to share their views on working as trauma cleaners. For us, the online setting enabled participants to be more upfront in sharing their stories, as most interviews lasted around an hour. We also did not experience any challenges regarding internet connectivity or problems utilising Zoom. Most participants had flexible schedules and the interviews were conducted at a convenient time.

Regarding ethical protocols, all the participants received a consent form via email before the interview. This consent form included the details of the study: explaining that participation was voluntary and that all data would be treated as confidential. Participants were also informed that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identity, as well as the identity of their company. Given that the sharing of experiences of cleaning up trauma could be sensitive, the details of a counsellor were also provided in the consent form. Once participants connected on Zoom, we reminded them about the aims of the study, as well as the ethical protocols. Participants gave verbal consent to start the interview. A total of 13 interviews were conducted: 11 of the participants were white women, and 2 were white men. Table 1 below provides a summary of the participants' profiles:

**Table 1: Participants' Profiles**

Pseudonym	Geographical Area	Company name (Pseudonym)
Anna	Johannesburg	Sunshine Cleaners
Mary	George	Sunshine Cleaners
Samantha	Mbombela	Sunshine Cleaners
Yolandi	Durban	Sunshine Cleaners
Rose	Gqeberha	Sunshine Cleaners
Belinda	Pretoria	Sunshine Cleaners
Patricia	Cape Town	Sunshine Cleaners
Patrick	Cape Town	The Cleaning Angels
Melissa	Cape Town	The Cleaning Angels
Johan	Pretoria	The Cleaning Angels
Henriette	Pretoria	The Cleaning Angels
Lizette	Johannesburg	The Cleaning Angels
Stella	Centurion	The Cleaning Angels

### Cleaning Job

When the cleaners arrive at a trauma scene, the victim's body has already been removed. All that is left is the evidence of a crime or traumatic event that must be cleaned. The intensity and duration of the cleaning job are linked to the type of crime or trauma. For example, the cleaning up of violent farm attacks was described by Belinda as particularly horrific, given that they are 'done with a lot of anger and violence' and that 'there is usually a lot of blood everywhere'. Patricia also added that the cleaning up of such trauma is challenging as she needs to ensure that there is 'not a drop of blood left behind', adding: 'The scene must be cleaned to perfection.'

Similarly, the cleaning up of violent break-ins is also challenging. Rose described how she was called in to clean up the trauma caused by a violent burglary where the victim was bludgeoned to death:

'This old gentleman was in a wheelchair. They broke in and murdered him. It looked like a bloodbath from one point of the house to the other end of the house. They were running through his blood. A job like that is horrific. We had to clean up everywhere.'

We even had to pick up his dentures from the floor that the police left behind.'

This cleaning job was not easy for Rose as she could see the trauma that the victim experienced, a victim she described as 'vulnerable' and 'incapable of defending himself.' These sentiments were shared by other cleaners who had to clean up the trauma of violent burglaries.

Cleaning up suicides is another task that many cleaners experience as difficult and traumatic. All the participants said that the cleaning up of suicides has increased since the Covid-19 pandemic started. While the cleaners do not necessarily know who the victim was, it remains a difficult job to clean up a suicide, given that they often wonder: 'what drove a person to do this to themselves?' Interestingly, it appears that men and women commit suicide differently. Yolandi describes: 'Men go out with a bang. They usually shoot themselves and it is blood and brain matter everywhere. On the ceiling, everywhere. Women mostly slit their wrists in the bath or drink pills. It is easier to clean when a woman did it.' Other cleaners shared similar views on gender and suicide.

Unattended deaths – which refers to deaths in which the body is not found for days, weeks, or months (Aftermath, 2021) – are another challenging part of a trauma cleaner's job. A decomposing body releases bacteria and toxins that can harm humans and cause significant physical damage to the property. Anna explained:

'The worst is an unattended death, especially when the body is starting to decay. A few months ago, we did an unattended death. The victim was found after a week. We were sliding in this victim's bodily fluids. The smell was the worst. Flies everywhere. Maggots. You name it.'

While the body had been removed before Anna had to clean the scene, the stench and the remains from the bodily fluids were particularly unpleasant and challenging. Several other cleaners described cleaning up an unattended death scene as 'the worst', 'really gross', and 'requir[ing] a strong stomach'. At these scenes, trauma cleaners need to disinfect,

sanitise, and thoroughly clean surfaces, as well as remove infected furniture from the premises.

Cleaning jobs also involve the cleaning up of industrial spillage or dirt. As Mary described: 'There was a burst pipe of sewerage and I had to clean up the sewerage things. It was a *shit* show, you know.' Similarly, Samantha was called in to clean up the toilets of male factory workers, where the 'faeces solidified'. These types of jobs are both physically and olfactorily challenging. Other jobs include helping families clean up, improving properties that hoarders have neglected, and making homes liveable again. Cleaning up hoarder homes can involve unexpected findings. As Patricia recounted: 'I once found a dead cat under piles of rubbish and old magazines. It was dead for months.' In essence, a trauma cleaner's job is unpredictable. It contains a range of cleaning tasks that are violent and non-violent, but that have potentially hazardous consequences to individuals and society if not taken care of. Cleaning up a scene also requires physical preparation, training, and attention to detail.

### Physical Preparation

Trauma cleaners need to adhere to specific regulations when they clean up a scene. Personal protective equipment such as a hazmat suit, gloves, gumboots, and respiratory masks are mandatory to protect the trauma cleaners and prevent cross-contamination. Other items include scrubbers, cloths, buckets, mops, brushes, sponges, and other tools such as saws, knives, and ladders to cut away infected areas on carpets and furniture and to reach ceilings. Once the cleaning is done, contaminated items are put into biohazard boxes that are incinerated.

Special cleaning chemicals are required to clean up blood, bodily tissue, and fluids, as these may contain pathogens such as Hepatitis A and B, HIV, and MRSA. The next step is to inspect the type of infected surfaces to determine which chemicals and equipment should be used.

Yolandi explained:

'You see what has been infected, and then you decide, okay, the mattress needs to be incinerated, wrap it up, get it out the way. Is the blood dry, is

the blood still wet, is it gooey? You need to use specific chemicals and techniques for different surfaces. You look at the floor. Is it tiles? Is it carpet? Is it wooden floors? Parquet floors take forever because the blood seeps in there and we have to remove it and get it incinerated.'

Participants described that although they went through some form of training when they bought the franchise, there is no formal training or a training manual for trauma cleaners in South Africa. The training they receive is usually a five-day course where mock scenes are created with pig's blood. The owner of the company then teaches them proper cleaning methods, how to use equipment and chemicals on specific surfaces, and how to use personal protective equipment. The lack of formal training in trauma cleaning is not unique to South Africa. In the US and Europe, trauma cleaners also do not receive formal training. In the US, trauma cleaning firms need to be registered at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA, 2021). They also need to have proper biohazardous waste disposal documentation from licensed medical waste transportation and disposal firms. This is something that the trauma cleaning industry may consider in South Africa. However, beyond the lack of physical training, what is particularly worrying is the lack of emotional training associated with the job.

### **Emotional Preparation**

### **Emotional Labour and Dissonance**

*'You are dealing not with something but with somebody.'*

Across many sectors, there are behavioural and emotional cues that employees ought to follow. Work that requires a close connection to the dead, death, or to the scene at which a death occurred can be particularly emotionally taxing for some. Doctors and police officers need to speak with compassion and empathy when engaging with victims and their families (Du Toit, 2012; Waters et al., 2020). Trauma cleaners, too, are expected to present particular emotions and to behave in a specific way when at a clean-up, similarly to employees in other service sectors such as healthcare and hospitality (Funk et al., 2020). These employees engage in

emotional labour that refers to the management of expressing appropriate emotions while suppressing inappropriate ones while doing a job. The term 'emotional labour' was first applied to air cabin crew who need to suppress negative feelings to create a proper mood in others (Hochschild, 1983). Similarly, trauma cleaners engage in emotional labour by being sympathetic and empathetic to the victim or victims and their families. For example, Anna and Lizette echoed similar views that they don't show 'disgust' or 'repulsion' when cleaning but try to remain 'neutral' and 'professional' at all times.

In this regard, Mary approaches cleaning up trauma as 'just another mess' to clean while she is on-site. Mary consciously employs this position – that cleaning is physical and an ordered process – as she believes that, at her core, she is a sensitive person who 'cries for no reasons at all' in her everyday home life. Therefore, despite being a sensitive person, Mary understands that she must go into an operational mode when she is on the job. The language that Mary uses indicates that she compartmentalises her emotions to 'make it through the scene'. This shows that Mary has the propensity to feel – to be empathetic and sympathetic to the victim – but insists that too much emotionality on the trauma scene would affect her ability to complete the job at hand. Mary notes that 'the trauma scene is personal until I get there and personal after I leave', adding that when she puts on her protective clean-up gear and picks up the chemicals she uses to clean, it becomes 'just another cleaning job'. In this way, Mary emotionally distances herself from the trauma to cope with the job.

Emotional distancing is not unique to trauma cleaners' jobs. Nurses and other health care and service employees also use emotional distancing to protect themselves from emotional arousal, burnout, and exhaustion. In essence, emotional distancing is a self-controlled protective strategy to remain neutral (Kim et al., 2020). In this regard, Patricia confirms that she emotionally distances herself from the trauma of cleaning up by saying: 'it's a willing decision you're making of not getting involved emotionally.' Interestingly, Patricia, who worked as a police officer in the forensics department for 21 years before becoming a trauma cleaner, said that one cannot be trained for emotional distancing, but that it is 'more a thing of

mentality' and that 'one needs to be made for it'.

Henriette echoes Patricia in her notion that her 'personality is not wondering and ruining over [a] situation', by suggesting, instead, that trauma cleaners should put their 'head down and do the job'. Adding to her words, she emphasises that a trauma cleaner must not sit and wonder, 'Why? What's the ... if there's an emotion caught there ...'. She trails off and concludes her point: 'we don't go there'. It appears that trauma cleaners consciously decide to set aside their emotions when cleaning up trauma. Henriette suggests that cleaners should develop, to a point, an ignorance of their emotions to complete the job at hand. Patrick builds on the sentiment described by Henriette and other trauma cleaners that the job of cleaning trauma scenes should be performed while utilising a 'form of desensitization'. However, contrary to Patricia's suggestion that trauma cleaners should have a certain mentality, Patrick states that developing desensitization to trauma comes with 'experience and time'. In this way, while acknowledging the embedded personality of a crime scene, he resonates with the need to desensitise yourself from the job at hand.

Despite trauma cleaners' use of emotional labour to emotionally distance themselves from a scene, emotions are sometimes triggered and carried home with a cleaner. Following a trauma scene, Henriette, for example, notes how she often leaves feeling frustrated and helpless because she cannot change the situation, and that this frustration could be carried

home to her family. Luckily, she has a supportive partner who gives her space to debrief. She notes how her partner allows her to cry and let the emotions out. Hence, the emotional toll of having to express and suppress emotions can be difficult. In the emotional labour literature, service employees often engage in either surface acting or deep acting. Surface acting occurs when felt emotions and expressed emotions are not aligned (Ogunsola et al., 2020). It appears that some trauma cleaners use surface acting to cope with trauma cleaning, by hiding felt emotions and expressing emotions that are deemed professional and neutral. Another coping mechanism that trauma cleaners use is spirituality.

### Spirituality

Spirituality is often used as a coping mechanism by employees in stressful jobs and to promote workplace well-being (Kutcher et al., 2010). For example, nurses often rely on prayer to cope with the emotional aspects of treating ill patients (Baskar and Indradevi, 2021). Spirituality also appears to be important for trauma cleaners to decrease depression, stress, and burnout. Trauma cleaning is a very intimate and personal experience. While it involves the cleaning up of bodily fluids, the scrubbing of floors, the application of chemicals, and the intense physical and emotional labour of the clean-up crew, a more spiritual, deeply personal face to trauma cleaning exists. Trauma cleaning, essentially, comprises the cleaning of death, or at least, the gruesome aftermath of a violent one. Across populations of people, death has meaning as it is a time for mourning, for the community, for prayer – not simply for the life or lives lost, but the circumstances that surrounded the death and the scene on which the traumatic event occurred. Developing on the latter, Johan notes that when a violent incident occurs at a particular site, 'a lot of things happen in the spirit [of a place]'. When cleaning up a violent crime scene, one can feel that 'something is not right'. Johan adds:

'We also clean the places spiritually. On that basis, we are a Christian business. So, we pray, specifically, at these places where there was death. We clean the atmosphere around the ground where it happened. The physical side is just one part of it. Because [the] emotions that the victim has stayed behind. One part is the traumatic event in the

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time, but there can also be something that stays behind in the spirit there, and that harasses people for a long time.'

Thus, spirituality is used not only as a coping mechanism but also metaphorically to cleanse a space of the trauma that occurred. For example, Patrick and his wife Melissa clean up violent crimes by removing all the physical evidence that a crime has occurred, but also spiritually to restore the atmosphere. Patrick notes that spiritual cleansing at trauma clean-ups is especially important when 'blood has been spilled' at the scene of either a horrific, bloodied suicide or a homicide. These instances are particularly traumatic and need spiritual intervention due to the nature in which these scenes are created. Patrick emotively states the following:

'To see the brain matter splattered all over the ceiling – if you start thinking how that happened, what the person had to go through to be able to take his own life because it is the most unnatural thing to do is to commit suicide. Everything in us – the animal instinct, the inherited instinct is to survive, so you will do everything to survive. To override that basic instinct in a person must take a lot of influence – be it natural or spiritual – but some hectic instinct has to come through to give up that primal instinct of survival. I wonder what this person has to go through to put a gun to the head and blow their brains all over this place.'

We have all heard the saying: one should leave a place cleaner than how one found it. This line is particularly important in the context of spirituality in trauma cleaning. In this way, just as emotional labour is used to hide emotions, prayer is used to return a sense of dignity and life to the affected place. Furthermore, prayer functions to comfort the victim's kin and the cleaners who labour at the scene. This is an important procedure in the clean-up process as it helps cleanse the aura and the integrity of the space. Mary suggests that, without it, some cleaners have reported having taken 'spirits home with them'.

Henriette also mentions that the clean-up aims to 'bring and restore peace' which involves making sure that the 'atmosphere is clean and calm'. In this way, Henriette alludes to the entirety of what it is exactly that is being cleaned. The spiritual element to trauma

cleaning expands the role and the realm of cleaning, begging us to interrogate the act of cleaning as a spiritual practice. Spirituality also connects trauma cleaners from different franchises. When a quotation for cleaning has been approved in one trauma clean-up company and the trauma cleaners get the go-ahead to clean a particular scene, the relevant team sends a message notifying their network of cleaners in South Africa to hold them in prayer as they embark on this new clean-up. They also attempt to 'sensitize people locally to pray and cover us when we go there'. Through this, the cleaners insinuate that the clean-up is a communal effort that requires the spiritual support of all those willing to give it.

While there may be criticism of the intrusion or imposition of an anonymous team of people praying over a scene, Henriette emphasises that her trauma cleaning team do not go into trauma scenes and start 'Bible-bashing'. Instead, Henriette notes that they do not proclaim it publicly, and only include nearby people in the prayer if they ask to be involved. Whether it involves the trauma cleaners in prayer or on-site family and community members, she believes that prayer is healthy for the potential betterment of the affected communities. This sends a message to the affected community that a single death affects everyone in that community. This coping strategy – to rally the community to prayer – is an interesting technique. It places the responsibility for the future health and wellbeing of a space into the hands of the people who, in one way or another, determine the context and circumstances of the space. Another important aspect of trauma cleaning is the usage of humour.

### **Humour**

There are many different coping strategies used by trauma cleaners to deal with what they see, smell, and experience at trauma scenes. While the spiritual side of trauma cleaning is evident and vast in its reach, humour is used by some cleaners during clean-ups as a strategy to cope with stressful work situations (Romero and Cruthirds, 2006). Research on humour in the workplace indicates that it benefits employees by decreasing stressful situations and burnout (Mathew and Vijayalakshmi, 2017). At crime scenes, humour was not expressed concerning trauma scenes 'at the expense of the person that passed [a]way'. Instead,

Mary said light humour was made of a scene where there was a 'burst pipe of sewerage. They had to clean up the sewerage, so they talked about it as a *shit* storm, you know. So, they use humour to get over the seriousness of this'. Thus, one of the benefits of workplace humour could lead to team cohesion and relationships among colleagues during difficult tasks (Sacco et al., 2021).

Humour can be a productive tool to cope with gruesome scenes, but it often can be inappropriate. Stella notes how she knows that 'other people [make] jokes on scenes and stuff but I don't do that'. By stating that others might find humour where she does not, she insinuates an opposition to the use of humour. Stella understands that there is a 'thin line between a well-timed, well-crafted joke and being insensitive'. Similarly, Patrick takes the trauma scene very seriously. On humour, he has this to add:

'You also don't want to desensitize yourself or your people to the actuality of what has happened there. You need to be very careful that you don't contribute to the desensitization of horrific perpetrations. It remains a horrific thing for someone, someone, to shoot somebody else. It remains a horrific thing for a father to kill himself or hang himself in front of his children... It is not acceptable for someone to shoot a child with a stray [bullet]. So, no, I will not joke about it.'

In the above statement, Patrick emphasises the severity with which he treats crime scenes and the trauma embedded within them and, in so doing, dismisses the use of humour as a coping strategy. He mentions that most people live in a 'cocoon' and 'do not know what is happening in society, and the violence that goes with that'. Building onto this, he concludes the interview by stating that the greatest disadvantage of his career is seeing the incredible, insane violence about which many never have to think. Finally, debriefing is a much-needed strategy used by trauma cleaners.

### Debriefing

Debriefing is fundamental to processing a potentially traumatic event or incident. After completing a clean-up, some trauma cleaners 'come home and write a full report'. Johan explains that debriefing

requires trauma cleaners to answer: 'What did they see? What happened? What did they smell? And so forth.' Patrick notes the importance of this process by stating that: 'You don't even know the things you have seen that are affecting you until you start writing about it.' Henriette points out that after around five-to-seven trauma scenes, the team practices breathing sessions to manage its collective mental wellbeing. She continues to say that colleagues who might seem sad or express their sadness about a scene are probed by team leaders and asked if they are okay and coping. These cleaners also offer external counselling with a professional therapist to those affected by the trauma. On the topic of debriefing, Mary notes that she 'talk[s] to God'. Almost as if putting herself back in that car, she recalls herself leaving a crime scene and spending time 'talking to God and thanking him for getting me through it without any emotions.' She mentions that she finds herself speaking about that specific incident days later with God, repeating to Him: 'I need to debrief. I need to debrief.'

### Conclusion

This study has investigated the multifaceted ways in which trauma cleaners cope with the physical and emotional challenges of the job. Each cleaner presented uniquely personal views on the circumstances and the contexts that determine their relationship with the trauma cleaning. Trauma cleaners use spirituality to support each other when affected by the trauma incident. In addition, some use prayers to cope with the emotional trauma of cleaning up violence. While there is an acknowledgement of the spirit of trauma carried through people who visit the trauma scene, there is a consensus that trauma cleaners should compartmentalise emotions between their professional and personal worlds. Cleaning up trauma becomes 'just another mess'.

Through the varied ways in which trauma cleaners experience the plethora of factors present within a trauma scene, we can better understand this niche profession. It is a new profession, with potential for growth, particularly in South Africa. This study offers a new window for researchers to produce new research in this field. The emotional experiences of trauma cleaners are vast, spanning from emotional dissonance and compartmentalisation, spirituality, humour, and debriefing. While trauma cleaners are restoring the

scenes, they lack a deep acknowledgement from society. There is no uniform physical and emotional training involved in this profession, which leaves one with a gaping wound that cannot heal. A more profound acknowledgement of this profession is necessary where trauma cleaners undergo training and support to cope with the aftermath of cleaning up trauma in South Africa.

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