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# Journalism Students' Self Reports Of Reactions Evoked By Trauma-related Teaching Materials: Results Of A Pilot Study.

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# Introduction

## Aims of study:

- To test a draft screening questionnaire which gauges journalism students' reactions to teaching materials involving critical and traumatic events.
- Gather evidence about impact on journalism students of exposure to such materials.

# Literature Review

- Professional journalists' self reports and systematic studies evidencing emotional risks associated with reporting on critical and traumatic events.
- Academic journalism courses attempting to mitigate risks associated with such professional assignments.

# Participants

Pilot study conducted at the University of Lincoln, UK, during January and February 2019.

- Total number of journalism student participants was 108.
- 36 were in their first year.
- 37 were second year students.
- 35 were in their graduating third year.
- Response rate is 75%.

# Method and Data Analysis

- Survey instrument is a self-report questionnaire circulated to students at start of full year lectures.
- Participants completed:
  - Demographics (age, gender, year of study)
  - The Impact of Events Questionnaire (IES-R)  
(Horowitz, Vilner and Alvares, 1979; Hyer and Brown, 2008)
  - The Psychological Outcome Profile (PSYCHLOPS Version 5)  
(Ashworth M, Evans C, Clement, 2009)
  - The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)  
(Zimet et al., 1988)
- Data analysed using SPSS statistical software

# Results

19% reported no reactions to any teaching materials

## Teaching Materials Which Evoked Reactions

- 43% cited films/documentaries
- 15% referred to printed media
- 7% cited photos
- 7% reacted to attending news conferences
- 1% social media

None significantly linked to age, gender or year of study

# Results

## Themes Which Evoke Emotional Reactions

- Abuse and violence 24%
- Accidents and fire 19%
- Terrorism 13%
- War 10%
- School shootings 10%

None significantly linked to age, gender or year of study

# Results

## Nature of Reported Reactions

- No reactions 21%
- Distress and shock 18 %
- Anxiety/fear/panic 14%
- Sadness 12%
- Others 5% to 3% each  
(Desensitised, Anger, Helplessness)

# Results

## Degree of Impact on Journalism Students



(Degree of effect statistically unrelated to age, gender, year of study)

# Results

## Difficulties Arising From Evoked Reactions

- No particular difficulties 42%
- Concentration difficulties 11%
- Difficulties with being objective 10%
- Difficulties processing information 10%
- Difficulties remaining positive 7%
- Other difficulties 5% to 3%  
(fear in public places, making decisions, living without fear)

(Degree of effect statistically unrelated to age and gender).

(Third year students report more difficulties with concentration and being objective) (Chi-Square  $p=.018$ )

# Discussion of Results

- Training materials used to prepare students for reporting critical events and trauma do impact upon students in a variety of ways.
- All the same, journalism students in Lincoln, UK appear to be resilient to exposures to potentially distressing teaching materials.
- Impact is typically low level and manageable in all three study years.
- Journalism students at the University of Lincoln adjust to and cope with these exposures and their various personal repercussions.
- Reports of significant personal impact are rare in this sample.
- Reported impact is unrelated to degree of students' perceived social support.

# Limitations of Pilot Survey

- Generalisability of survey findings may be limited by the student sample being recruited from within one university in one country.
- Questionnaire designed for follow-up of trauma survivors (IES-R) is probably not a sensitive gauge of students' adjustment difficulties, if there are any.
- Survey is cross-sectional over three years of study. A longitudinal study would generate information about fluctuations of impact over time.
- No attempt made to follow-up non participating students.



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# Recommendations

## Course Aims And True To Life Scenarios

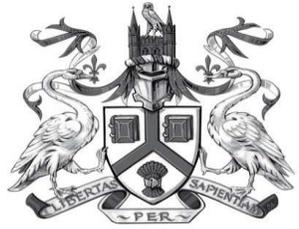
- Pilot survey gives no indication about the extent to which the teaching modules involving exposure to the chosen materials actually achieve the aim of preventing adverse reactions during later career assignments.
- More true to life scenarios involving direct contact with survivors, for instance by interviews, attending enquiries, court sessions etc, may be a better preparation for later challenging career assignments.



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# Recommendations

- This pilot study has established the feasibility of conducting surveys among journalism students to establish possible impact of teaching materials describing critical incident and traumatic events.
- Repeat surveys with improved methodologies is recommended both nationally and internationally, including follow-up of non participants.
- Questionnaires designed to monitor reactions among trauma survivors are probably not sensitive enough to accurately gauge and document students' actual reactions to these teaching materials.



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# Recommendations

## Duty of Care Responsibilities

- Based on survey returns from this pilot investigation, no additional duty of care responsibilities arise for Journalism Departments and Universities for introducing these teaching materials and assignments in course curricula.



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# Recommendations

## Duty of Care Responsibilities

### Vulnerable Students And Non-Participants

- Within the survey participant group, some students' self reports indicate troubled current adjustments, probably unrelated to the teaching materials used in this module.



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## Recommendations

### Duty of Care Responsibilities

These are as for university students generally,  
subject to the following recommendations:

- 1) Journalism students should be repeatedly advised of the possible impact of the materials used for teaching purposes during years of study.
- 2) An input from clinical specialists to staff and students may help clarify risks and preventive measures to minimise potential impact of the teaching materials used.



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# Recommendations

## Duty of Care Responsibilities

- 3) Students should be given the option of not studying this option if they feel course content may disrupt their general life adjustment.
- 4) Discussions should be initiated with students who perform below expected standard, who do not attend lectures or who appear not to function at a level commensurate with their own and Departments' expectations.



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# Recommendations

## Duty of Care Responsibilities

- 5) The purpose of these discussions is to clarify what personal reasons may account for this, whether reactions to critical or traumatic events/ materials play a role in this and to consult with students about what help or support they may find helpful both professionally and personally.