

RUNNING HEAD: SENSE FROM THE SENSELESS: UNDERSTANDING HOW JOURNALISTS MAKE SENSE OF EVERYDAY TRAUMA

Sense from the senseless: Understanding how journalists make sense of everyday trauma  
by  
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### **Abstract**

A significant body of research documents the experiences of war correspondents and the impact covering conflict has on them. Far fewer studies focus on the impact that covering everyday trauma has on journalists. This Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) explores, at an idiographic level, the life worlds of six journalists from sub-Saharan Africa, and how each of them makes sense of the everyday trauma they experience in their work. The findings show that in each journalist's case, witnessing others' pain and trauma had a life changing impact; that empathy helped them cope with what they saw and experienced; and that they shared a tolerance for risk-taking. Journalists are the eyes and ears of the public. The study suggests that if journalists have the necessary emotional tools to cope with the stress they encounter in their work, everyone benefits: the journalists, their media organizations, the people whose stories they tell, and society. It is therefore important to take journalists' emotional coping strategies into account, so as not to cement the notion that feeling numb in the face of emotional trauma is simply business as usual.

*Key words:* Journalism, trauma, empathy, emotions, emotional tools, coping mechanisms

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Chapter 1: “You see a picture, I smell, I see, I feel” .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction .....	1
Phenomenon of Interest.....	3
<b>Chapter 2: Literature Review.....</b>	<b>6</b>
Overview .....	6
Journalists and Trauma.....	7
Coping and Resilience .....	13
Empathy.....	18
<b>Chapter 3: Research Methods .....</b>	<b>22</b>
Research design.....	22
Overview of Phenomenology .....	23
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.....	24
Data Collection, Data and Data-gathering Tools .....	30
Sample .....	30
Research Procedures and Conduct .....	31
Semi-structured Interviews.....	32
Standard for Evaluation .....	34
Method of Analysis .....	35
Cross-cultural Interviewing in a Language other than English.....	39
<b>Chapter 4: Findings .....</b>	<b>40</b>
Participants’ Narratives .....	40
<b>Chapter 5: Discussion Of Findings.....</b>	<b>47</b>
Summary.....	47
Trauma as a Catalyst in Life Change .....	53
Empathy as a Signifier of Resilience .....	57
The Ineluctability of Risk .....	61

Relevance and Significance of the Study .....	63
Limitations.....	65
<b>Chapter 6: Conclusion.....</b>	<b>66</b>
Summary.....	66
Suggestions for Further Research.....	71
<b>References.....</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Appendix.....</b>	<b>i</b>

## **Chapter 1: “You see a picture, I smell, I see, I feel”**

### **Introduction**

Below me at the bottom of an embankment lay several people who had been crushed when the commuter bus they were travelling in rolled down a steep incline. “So many lives changed in an instant,” I remember thinking, and, “I don’t want to do this anymore.” My mouth was dry. My legs trembled. I wanted to cry.

Covering fatal traffic crashes was by no means my first contact with everyday trauma as a journalist based in Durban, South Africa, in the late 1980s. As a general reporter I had to cover every story assigned to me by the news editors, including crime and court-related and political stories. There were the so-called happy stories too of course. Yet it was a bus crash – one of several road crashes I had covered as a reporter by then – that made me feel ill to my core.

On that particular morning, another journalist who had already made his way down to the wreckage of the bus registered my distress. He ran back up the embankment, and walked me down towards the crash scene. I recall trying to explain to him what had happened in the moment. “Do your job,” he said. And I did. Clement was a far more seasoned journalist than I was when we covered the bus crash, now more than 20 years ago. When he told me to get on with it, he was not being unkind. I believe he understood that the scene below me was too difficult to take in, make sense of, and translate into a radio and television news story that may not even make the evening news. We never spoke about what happened that morning.

I think it was the first time that I truly experienced with a deep sense of shock how radically finite human nature is. We all die. And while I would go on to report many more tragedies that involved the death or near-death and pain of people over the course of my career as a journalist, it felt like a Heideggerian feat of constantly catching myself from my own uncertainties. I was

equipped with the journalism tools to do my job, yet had nothing to catch me from what felt like an endless falling into the world (Heidegger, 1953: 2010). It was also the start of a journey that would see me focus my research for this study on gaining a deeper understanding of the personal meaning and sense-making journalists employ when covering everyday trauma as part of their work. How do they make sense of what they see and write about when confronted with trauma?

Every day, the world over, journalists cover such everyday traumatic events experienced by individuals or communities. It is what journalists do; during their lifetime in the profession, the majority of them will do so over and over again. Journalists, like emergency responders, are privy to violence, loss, devastation and ruin. Yet unlike emergency responders, their role is primarily to enlighten and educate consumers of news – to bear witness to the events so as to inform others.

I work in the field of media development at the moment, and not as a journalist. This work takes me to Africa often, where I spend much of my time working closely with journalists. It was during one such visit to Kenya that a discussion of the relative merits of understanding the essence of how journalists make sense of public tragedy, and where it fits into the public realm, sparked the idea for this thesis. While journalists are expected as watchdogs to translate our worlds and reflect it back to their audiences, squarely fixed in the public's gaze, my questions were: what is this experience like for them, what do the experiences mean, and how does it impact their work? I was thinking of the post-Presidential Election violence that tore through Kenya in 2007/08, but also of the many traffic crashes on Kenya's roads that maim and kill daily – all stories covered by the media.

I focused my study on the life worlds of six journalists from sub-Saharan Africa: three from Kenya, two from South Africa, and one from Zimbabwe. I used Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore, at an idiographic level, the journalists' lived experiences. The correlative findings of this study showed that for each of the six journalists interviewed, witnessing the pain of others' trauma had a life changing effect. All six had been marked in some way by the stories they had covered. Drawn to the element of risk in their work, the participants in the study described how in spite of placing themselves in harm's way, they had an overriding sense of acting as professional and objective witnesses who tried to make empathic meaning of others' trauma – unemotionally, but not emotionlessly. In reference to a photo he had taken, one participant said: “You see a picture. I smell. I see. I feel” (Participant B, 2012). Making sense of how these participants tried to make sense of what they had seen made me think that even as the trauma they witnessed was not their trauma per se, the mere act of witnessing it had made it theirs.

In contrast with the significant body of research documenting the impact of war, conflict and other major tragedies on journalists, few studies focus on the impact of traumatic stress on journalists, like the six participants in this study, who write about everyday tragedy and trauma. It begs the question whether enough is being done to equip journalists in newsrooms with the necessary emotional tools to cope with the traumatic stress they encounter in their work. Not to wear their hearts on their sleeves, but to understand the emotional risks associated with their profession, to equip them with the necessary psychological tools to manage their emotions when confronted with trauma, so that ideally they can produce the stories that need to be told in a compelling way, while not focused on themselves.

### **Phenomenon of Interest**

For the purpose of this study I used the phrase *everyday trauma* as the phenomenon of interest, to set it apart from the kinds of trauma witnessed by the journalists who cover wars and

other forms of conflict. It is by no means meant to denigrate or make light of the personal tragedy and trauma suffered by people during conflict, but a way to acknowledge the implied or perceived asymmetry within this particular contract. Within the context of the journalists covering wars and conflicts, the trauma they witness is often unrelenting, sustained and intense. The context for the everyday trauma I chose to explore in this study encompasses the many acts of crime, the car crashes that kill or maim, the diseases that strip people of dignity and life, the suicides, and many more stories that journalists cover, if not every day, then periodically and cumulatively.

What is meant by the phenomena of trauma and everyday trauma? The six journalists who participated in my study referenced trauma in ways that spoke to its psychological definition as an “extremely distressing or emotionally disturbing event” (Larrabee et al., 2003, p. 353). They recalled how they remembered the survivors of such events; how they still think of them. They also remembered those who had died. How they had to make tough ethical decisions in covering such stories for news. One journalist in particular spoke about how she felt as though there was something missing in telling the story. Sociologist Arthur Frank coined the phrase “hole in the telling” to describe the “chaos experienced in the attempt at trauma narrative” (Larrabee et al., 2003, p. 354). I felt this reflection of telling others’ stories of trauma particularly relevant, given that in effect, journalists engage in trauma narrative every time they tell the story of others’ pain and suffering.

Dworznik and Grubb (2007) wrote that these everyday stories are “emotionally battering stock and trade of news”, yet “surprisingly” the emotional consequences and psychological effects these situations may have on those who cover them are often not taken into account (p. 190). As part of my research I discussed the authors’ finding with a media expert in Kenya, who

agreed with the authors, says that in the Kenyan context, trauma is not considered a threat, nor is it recognised as an issue of concern in the country's newsrooms (H. Mwangi, Executive Director, Media Council of Kenya, personal communication, March 20, 2013). Kenya is not alone in facing this challenge. Chris Cramer, an editor with Thomson Reuters, noted that "it has taken the media industry far too long to realize that it is perfectly natural for journalists, like other people, to feel the effects of trauma" and that it is a topic "worthy of debate" (C. Cramer, 2003, as cited by Massé, 2011, p. 1). The news media play a pivotal role in society, helping to shape views and acting as a catalytic determinant of societal responses to the events that play out online, in print, over the airwaves and on our television screens minute by minute. Within this societal context, Ernest Waititu, a Kenyan journalist and media development expert (and now a member of my thesis advisory committee) summed up the need to deal with the psychological fallout of traumatic stress in newsrooms as urgent. "How do we hope to serve the public and consumers of our stories responsibly, professionally and ethically, if we are in a sense ourselves ill?" (E. Waititu, personal communication, May 2012). This was an important question, as part of my research would touch on the notion of journalistic objectivity, and whether traumatic stress impacts it. If journalists are themselves traumatised, how can they objectively report on others' trauma?

Yet even as the participants in this study acknowledged the need to pay attention to the impact of traumatic stress, several noted that to own up to being affected by what they had witnessed would be tantamount to admitting being weak. It was as though by acknowledging that they themselves had suffered trauma, they would be pegged as damaged goods and not cut out to do their jobs. This went hand in hand with their drive to take risks in getting their stories, even as they understood the dangers associated with such risk-taking. For me, this translated into the

notion that as long as traumatic stress is not considered as having the potential to impact journalists both professionally and personally, it remains the elephant in the room – the one story no one wants to tell.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Overview**

Although journalists and especially combat journalists have historically faced physical and security threats, it was the kidnapping and murder in Pakistan of Wall Street Journal Daniel Pearl that saw newsrooms begin to take their journalists' safety and security more seriously (A. Cooper, 2006, as cited by Massé, 2011, p. 5). At the same time, newsrooms were also paying more attention to the psychological effects of covering trauma, driven in part by a movement to reform the news media "through education, intervention and advocacy", and a push to instill a "culture of caring within the journalistic community" (Massé, 2011, p. 5-6). It is a drive beset by tension. Critics claim that "news media staff and management, who are prudent, dutiful, and ethical, reflect the enduring tenets of responsible journalism" (p. 6). However, as Massé noted, even as they go about their work professionally, meeting deadlines, journalists, "like other people, have varying thresholds when it comes to confronting trauma" (p.2). And while most people who experience traumatic events "are somewhat able to go on with their lives without becoming haunted by the memories" it does not mean that these experiences go "unnoticed" (Van der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996, p.5). I spend much of my time working with journalists in sub-Saharan Africa. I see how these regular "local" journalists go out on a limb to do their work, yet receive little to no support in coping with the traumatic stress endemic to their work. Given the potential for health and emotional problems for journalists who confront trauma in their

work, it is important that their experiences not go unnoticed. Such personal consequences of doing one's job constitute a high price. Three areas of inquiry therefore contributed to my literature review. I explored journalism and trauma; the coping mechanisms and strategies and notions of resilience of the journalists who experience the trauma of others; and the role of empathy in helping journalists cope with their experiences of trauma. Pivotal to my study were the motivations, coping skills, behavioural characteristics, and training of journalists who cover traumatic events.

### **Journalists and Trauma**

A growing body of research today explores the impact that reporting on traumatic events has on journalists, more specifically Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) within the context of journalism (for example Dworzniak, 2006; Feinstein & Nicholson, 2005; Freinkel, Koopman & Spiegel, 1994; Pyevich, Newman & Daleiden, 2003, Massé, 2011; McMahon, 2001; Newman, Simpson & Handschuh, 2003; Simpson & Boggs, 1999). Anthony Feinstein, professor of psychiatry at the University of Toronto and author of *Journalists under fire: The psychological hazards of covering war* (2006), is quoted in an online interview as saying that “war reporters have significantly more symptoms of depression, PTSD and anxiety” than do regular local reporters. However, Dr. Feinstein noted that he had recently completed a study on local journalists working in countries such as Mexico, and that these journalists’ “level of exposure to violence may be just as high as journalists who go off to Iraq” (A. Feinstein, 2013, as cited by DeFraia, 2013). Add to Mexico the many other countries where conflict and violence is integral to daily life, whether motivated by politics or crime, and one can assume that many journalists around the world do not necessarily have to travel very far to encounter traumatic events. From the perspective of the six participants in this study – all of whom have covered traumatically

violent events that affected them deeply – it is clear that traumatic stress is not necessarily confined to the journalists who cover stories from the frontlines of combat.

In an article focusing on how journalists and photographers make sense of what they see, Dworznik's (2006) research also shows that war correspondents in particular are significantly more susceptible to post-traumatic stress and depression than "reporters who have never been on the battlefield" (p. 534). War correspondents or journalists who cover combat have long been in the public gaze, as in spite of the high price they can pay for doing this work, including death, they continue to shine a light on the injustices of the world, often defying what feels like logic as they do this work.

Dworznik & Grubb (2007) wrote that over and above the studies that specifically explore PTSD as an outcome, research that focused generally on journalists' reactions to trauma also revealed a prevalence of trauma-related symptoms and compassion fatigue (p. 193). The compassion fatigue thesis is most often used as an argument that "media reports and television scenes of human suffering have a diminishing capacity to mobilize sentiments, sympathy and humanitarian forms of response" (Cottle, 2009, p. 348). In the context of Dworznik & Grubb, compassion fatigue referenced a blunting of emotions in the responses of journalists who are exposed to traumatic stress – burnout in other words. The authors noted that "journalists with greater exposure to traumatic events evidenced more negative views of the world and their profession" (p. 193). PTSD is understood as a range of symptoms directly as a result of physical and emotional harm. A second set of symptoms due to indirect exposure to harm, in other words, those who witness trauma, is identified as Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder (STSD). While a growing body of literature recognises PTSD as a risk associated with journalism, the focus on STSD and the associated risks is still embryonic. As Simpson & Coté (2006) pointed out, by

virtue of being at the scene of a traumatic event, by talking to or photographing people who have suffered trauma, journalists suffer in much the same way as police officers and other emergency service responders.

Literature also shows that relatively inexperienced journalists new to the profession are the ones most likely to witness trauma (Amend, Kay & Reilly, 2012; Dworznik & Grubb, 2007; Maxson, 2000). Dworznik & Grubb (2007) cited a study by Simpson and Boggs (1999) in which the journalists, photographers and editors they surveyed said that they had not been prepared for their exposure to trauma when sent on an assignment. Often, the youngest or most junior reporters are “casually” dispatched to cover such disturbing events as fatal traffic crashes (p. 193). It suggests that “traumatic wounds may be inflicted at the doorstep of one’s career” (p. 193). Few journalists will cover wars, mass killings or major catastrophes, but they will have to report on someone’s personal tragedy and most likely be faced with very tough ethical decisions (Boyeink & Borden, 2010; Tait, 2011). Participant B in this study commented: “It hardened me, but psychologically, it messes you up.” (Text line 15). Every day, the world over, journalists cover everyday events that span the broad spectrum of personal and public tragedy. Every traumatic story also presents ethical choices that go beyond the legalities of what may or may not be published: who to quote, what to write about, and what to show.

In spite of a growing body of evidence that speaks to the impact of trauma on journalists, it still remains rare to hear of a journalist having received trauma training, being debriefed or receiving assistance in dealing with the often painful after-effects associated with reporting on traumatic events (for example Amend, Kay & Reilly, 2012; Buchanan & Keats, 2011; Simpson & Boggs, 1999). “Reporters, photojournalists, engineers, soundmen and field producers often work elbow to elbow with emergency workers ... While public-safety workers are offered

debriefings and counselling after a trauma, journalists are merely assigned another story.” (A. Tompkins, 2001, as cited by Hight, J. & Smyth F, 2003). Amend, Kay & Reilly (2012) citing Beam & Spratt (2009), referenced a study of 400 journalists that found that a third felt ill-prepared or not at all able to cope with the “victims of violence or trauma” (p. 236). Overall, journalists also felt “unprepared to deal with the emotional and ethical issues related to covering trauma” (p. 236). It seems that the duty of care towards the very people charged with the duty of being caretakers of the public interest still lags, with little or no guidance from their newsrooms (Amend, Kay & Reilly, 2012; Brayne, 2006; Buchanan & Keats, 2011; Simpson & Coté, 2006).

Given both the potential of emotional and ethical ramifications of reporting others’ pain, Brayne (2006) stated that “it is imperative that journalists grasp how much their profession matters, and how it needs to rethink itself” as “trauma awareness and a true understanding of the psychological consequences of violence and tragedy are very new” (p. 3). Compounding the emotional and ethical impact of traumatic events are rapidly evolving internet communications technologies, with journalists increasingly being “able to cover violence, suffering and chaos from the center of the crisis” (Dworznik, 2006, p. 535). Beyond the initial adrenalin flow and sense of purpose that comes with getting and filing a story, media convergence is making for tighter deadlines, fiercer competition and greater public scrutiny and commentary. It raises the stakes of reporting on tragedy or other distressing events, as the immediacy of news allows for less breathing space to step back and think a story through. Journalists reporting from the centres of the crises they are covering are also increasingly involved in cross-platform content production: being interviewed while at the scene, filing their own reports, while updating their news outlets’ social media sites or pages. It is a daunting task to do well and more so to do right by those affected directly by traumatic events.

Complicating matters is a belief that seems to linger in newsrooms that owning up to psychological distress will somehow mark the journalist as weak, and that this will lend itself to them feeling stigmatized (Matloff, 2004; Ricchiardi, 2001). Or as a Kenyan journalist, now retired, put it to me: “If you wanted to do this, you did it. You didn’t complain. This is how you earned your stripes” (M. Odero, personal communication, March 19, 2013). This mirrors the perception that if you want to survive as a journalist, you need to put your emotions aside, or bury them altogether. It was interesting to note that one of the participants when asked about her response to covering painful stories said that she knew instinctively not to panic and that she did not become “hysterical” – suggesting that hysteria was the natural outcome of experiencing an emotional response.

This tough-it out response echoes what many studies have shown – that a culture of machismo is still prevalent in newsrooms (Massé, 2011). Another participant noted that this is what journalists are taught in journalism schools – you check your emotions at the door if you work as a journalist. “Why? Because you have to. That’s what they teach you at university. Keep a distance. Stay focused. So that you can tell the story from an outsider perspective, someone looking into the picture, not being part of the picture” (Participant S, text lines 441-442). Yet, increasingly, there is an acknowledgment that journalists are not emotionless detached observers and that burying their emotions may not be the best way to cope with trauma, contributing to the macho myth that still pervades newsrooms (Massé, 2011). My own experience bears out that the journalists I know or work with understand that their stories, when about traumatic events, will cause pain, suffering, and maybe even shame, not only for those who have survived a tragedy, but sometimes, for themselves. While they will write and talk eloquently about the trauma of others, they seldom broach the topic of the impact it has on their own lives.

Terry Anderson (2011) recounted the following of war correspondent Robert Fisk: “I often wondered where Fisky put the pain. I know he felt it, had seen him wince, seen the anger in his eyes as we watched the bodies pile up at the scene of some bombing or pointless fire fight” (T. Anderson, as cited by Massé, 2011, p.21). In spite of their diverse opinions about how to handle their emotions, the journalists who participated in this study, although not war reporters, all shared a common experience – while trying to not to let their emotions get in the way of focusing on their stories, all seemed to have experienced intense emotions. What had happened to these emotions? Where did they go? How did these emotions manifest? A significant body of work documents the desire by media practitioners that emotional trauma be acknowledged as part of improving trauma journalism coverage (Massé, 2011). Why then is there still such a pervasive sense that emotions have no place in the world of journalism?

Research suggests that a wish for ethical practice and thoughtful behaviour has partly driven the trend in the field of journalism education to train journalists to deal with trauma – others’ and their own (e.g. Brayne, 2006; Kay, 2002; Rees, 2007). Adams (2008) argued that “if we learn to think, feel, and interact with society via narratives, we also learn ethical ways of being with others, “correct” and “appropriate ways that serve as foundations for many of our interactions” (p. 175). The author wrote that by using stories as “equipment for living”, they become tools to understand, negotiate, and make sense of situations we encounter and experience (p. 175). For the field of journalism, this translates into how news can tie the victim and the public together constructively through the rigour of thoughtful reporting practices (Gabriel, 2004; Simpson & Coté, 2006).

## **Coping and Resilience**

On April 15, 2013 two explosions near the finish line of the Boston Marathon in the US killed three people and injured and maimed scores of bystanders. Boston Globe photographer Jon Tlumacki had been assigned to cover the race for the sports department. Four hours into the event, his assignment changed abruptly when the first bomb went off. Capturing the images of the aftermath of the two bombs, Tlumacki, a photojournalist for more than 30 years, told a Toronto Star journalist that “he had cried, but worries more about when he has more time to think” (Rankin, 2013). His reaction was clear; he took photos. His response to what he had witnessed speaks to his concern of how he will make sense of what feels like the inexplicable in the future.

Working with young journalists has in part driven my interest in how they describe the successes and failures of their coping strategies and techniques when confronted with traumatic events. Coping in this instance refers to “cognitive and behavioural efforts to master, reduce, or tolerate the internal and/or external demands” created by stressful transactions (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Lazarus & Launier, 1978, as cited by Folkman, 1984, p. 843). Folkman built on her and noted coping theorist Richard Lazarus’ argument that the “theoretical separation of coping efforts from their outcomes is necessary if the coping construct is to be used to predict outcome, because when coping is confounded with outcome, any use of coping as a predictor is tautological and meaningless” (p. 844). Folkman wrote that coping therefore is viewed as having two major functions: “the regulation of emotions or distress (emotion-focused coping) and the management of the problem that is causing the distress (problem-focused coping) (p. 845). Lazarus (1993) framed the coping process as a set of metatheoretical principles. Of importance to this study is Lazarus’ argument, who along with Folkman (1984) developed the hypothesis

that “coping thoughts and actions under stress must be measured separately from their outcomes ... as there may be no universally good or bad coping processes, though some might more often be better or worse than others” (p. 235). Other principles relate to allowing researchers to measure “both consistencies and inconsistencies in the way individuals cope over time and across stressful encounters” (p. 236), and the need to “describe what a person is thinking and doing in the effort to cope with stressful encounters” preferably longitudinally (p. 238-239). From the perspective of this study, these principles were important, as I was not concerned with the perceived successes or failures of the journalists’ coping strategies, but rather whether they believed that they had managed to regulate their emotions in relation to the stressors they experienced in covering trauma. I wanted to understand what coping means to the individual; how she or he would define coping and whether each journalist has particular strategies to deal with traumatic events.

Reporters and editors are so busy meeting daily deadlines that they have never taken time to recognize that they, too, can suffer from the cumulative emotional strain that comes with tragic stories. Too many come to believe that feeling distant and numb and groaning about their job is a normal state of affairs. In reality it may be the result of a psychological reaction to the pressures of dealing with death and destruction. (Lachowicz, 1995, as cited in Simpson & Coté, 2006, p. 49)

If journalists are indeed the eyes and ears of the public, actively engaged in truth-telling, and acting as a channel for information vital to the public, it is important to take their coping strategies into account, so as not to cement the notion that feeling numb in the face of emotional trauma is simply business as usual. How corrosive an influence is emotional blunting and

numbness? Can journalists report accurately and engage with their stories fully in a way to tell the truth, if their emotional responses have been eroded through exposure to trauma?

Much concern has been expressed over the impact of news coverage of violent and traumatic events on those who consume news. Yet, journalists and other media professionals witness and produce this news daily; images that most likely cannot be erased from the minds of those in the business of producing news. As a fellow-journalist and now a colleague working in the field of media development remarked: “Typically, now, if there is a car accident, I won’t rush to it. People rush to look and see the body. I don’t want to see the body. It feels strange and weird. Why don’t I want to see the body? It’s something holy, the sanctity of someone who has just died which I am invading. If I were not a journalist, I would not go there. What is lying there is a dead body. I don’t have to see it to understand it” (I. Jooste, Internews Kenya Country Director, personal communication, April 17, 2013). Massé (2011) noted that “trauma risk awareness for journalists is an emerging twenty-first-century issue” (p. 146). What distinguishes whether the media can help in the healing process following a tragic event, or whether harm is done, are the practices and methods of reporting that journalists enact (Kay et al., 2011). “The public is often angry or bitter about news coverage that tramples and feeds on the raw emotions of people in trouble” (Simpson & Coté, 2006, p. 236). Simpson & Coté wrote that it is however possible to tell the stories of life's worst experiences in a way that serves the public interest and good. By sticking with the traditional values of reporting – accuracy and truth-telling, playing the role of watchdogs of society and the public good, and respecting the voices of those whose stories are told – thoughtful reporting practices can bring those affected directly by trauma and the public together positively.

Some critics argue that “new attitudes and empathic approaches are unnecessary”, especially not if journalists are trained in ethical approaches to responsible journalism (Massé, 2011, p. 6). However, a significant body of research shows that well-trained, professional journalists can and do succumb to traumatic stress (for example Amend, Kay & Reilly, 2012; Buchanan & Keats, 2011; Dworzniak & Grubb (2007); Massé, 2011; Simpson & Boggs, 1999; Simpson & Côté, 2006). Kay et al. (2011) suggested as one intervention that journalists incorporate an ethic of care that forms a foundation for ethical decision-making, along with characteristics of empathy and positionality, and that they use reflective practice as a tool to evaluate their actions as a way to understand how they do their work. Navigating the landscape of interviewing people who have been traumatized can be difficult, and depending on how journalists manage the storytelling process, all have the potential to contribute to the media’s power to heal or do harm. Jooste’s recollection about what she perceives to be the sanctity of people who have died illustrates her reflective thoughts on the impact of being exposed to others’ suffering. Her thoughts also speak to the potential benefits of training journalists to fully understand the impact of trauma journalism.

There is a wealth of meaningful anecdotal evidence related to the difficulties of working in journalism, especially within the context of “a workplace culture that promotes suffering in silence” (Ricchiardi, 1998; Simpson & Boggs, 1999, as cited by Buchanan & Keats, 2011, p. 128). The authors noted that more importantly, how journalists cope should be taken into account, as “habits of coping can become either helpful or a hindrance for journalists’ psychological and physical health” (p. 128). Many factors influence how people cope: their personal contexts and history, whether they have experienced trauma before, whether they are new to their profession, or seasoned journalists, and the context of the traumatic events that they

are covering. Drawing broad conclusions however when exploring how effectively people cope should be avoided, especially given “how participants may want to be seen by us as researchers especially if they believe that they need to comply with ‘dominant cultural scripts concerning coping through self-reliance, support seeking . . .’” (Gottlieb & Coyne, 1996, as cited by Buchanan & Keats, 2011, p. 128). The authors argued that this is particularly relevant in view of journalists’ workplace contexts, which often encourages a culture of silence when it comes to discussing the impact of traumatic stress (p. 128). It was an important caveat with regard the interview process for this study and a timely reminder of our collective humanness.

Massé (2011) quoted Dr. Anthony Feinstein as stating that for journalists covering traumatic events, the “most common categories of ‘presenting categories’ were anxiety, sleeplessness, and recurring (disturbing) images” (p. 151). However, Dr. Feinstein noted that in his interactions with journalists “most are remarkably resilient after trauma coverage” (p. 151). Resilience is a deeply complex adult response that cannot be attributed to single ways of coping or “maintaining equilibrium” (Bonanno, 2004, p. 25). Bonanno argued that there are “multiple and sometimes unexpected pathways to resilience”, listing them as: “hardiness”; “self-enhancement”; “repressive coping”; “positive emotion and laughter” (pp. 25-26). Within the context of coping strategies in the face of traumatic stress, these considerations led me to take into account the potential role of empathy in how journalists manage their emotions.

Literature points to the potential for problems when journalists are ill-prepared to cover traumatic events. This can include a lack of sensitivity, ethical violations including misrepresentation, and an inability to move the coverage of trauma and violence beyond the events themselves to write meaningful and compelling stories for the public good (Amend, Kay & Reilly, 2012; Dufresne, 2004; Fullerton & Patterson, 2006; Walsh-Childers, Lewis & Neely,

2011; Maxson, 2000; Simpson & Coté, 2006; Sykes et al., 2003). If not dealt with appropriately, the inability to manage emotional trauma poses a real threat to journalists, with the potential to impact their personal and psychological, and professional sense of well-being, with consequences for the industry itself. The knock-on effect of this is that stories and interviewing techniques of journalists who cannot cope with the trauma they witness may well impact those who consume the news, and critically those who survive the actual traumatic events.

### **Empathy**

Empathy is a concept generally understood to mean the ability to identify with and understand somebody else's feelings or difficulties, and is considered a vicarious response to viewing others' distress. For the purpose of this study focused on trauma journalism, I used empathy as defined by Simpson and Coté (2006) "as a way of thinking that enables an individual to get a better understanding of the feelings and experiences of another person" (p. 102). The authors argued that "the journalist absorbs the trauma effect in the same way that a family member shares the emotional upset of a person who has been severely hurt" (Figley, 1995, as cited by Simpson and Coté, 2006, p. 44). It is this effect that drove my interest in exploring empathy within the context of journalism and from a phenomenological perspective, "not as a matter of judgement, reasoning or ideation in general", but as a "founded experience" (Moran, 2000, p. 176). I wanted to understand whether empathy plays a role in how journalists manage their emotions in covering traumatic events, even as research shows that contemporary journalists demonstrate an increased awareness of trauma and its impact on individuals and the communities they serve.

Kinnick, Krugman & Cameron (1996) noted that the empathy/altruism literature frequently defines compassion as an emotional response that results from empathy, used

synonymously with the construct of sympathy. Researchers, however, have found it difficult to empirically isolate compassion from empathy, while distinguishing between empathy and interpersonal behaviours such as sympathy and pity is difficult (Davis, 1990; Kinnick, Krugman & Cameron, 1996). What is clear from the substantial empirical evidence is that witnessing someone else's pain and trauma leads to "negative affect, including feeling upset, distressed, or morally outraged" (Kinnick, Krugman & Cameron, 1996, p. 688). Whether springing from compassion, sympathy or empathy, it was an important reminder that journalists absorb the trauma effect much the same as other people do. And, as the journalists navigate a difficult landscape when covering traumatic events, I was aware that as a researcher, with my own experiences of working as a journalist, I too brought the baggage of my own emotional distress to the conversation with the participants in the study.

Simpson and Coté (2006) wrote that empathy resides in the "moral realm" and is linked to personal integrity (p. 10). "Knowledge about trauma comes from psychology, psychiatry and other physicians and is applied in diagnosis and treatments by psychiatrists and other physicians and the therapists in psychology" (p. 10). The authors pointed out the obvious: "that journalists are not physicians and therapists, and they don't know the science that goes along with it" (p. 10). It is therefore not surprising to learn that journalists will question why they should know about emotional trauma. In response to this dilemma, Simpson and Coté (2006) argued that "one doesn't have to attend medical school to be able to respect the suffering of another person ... empathy and sensitivity are human not medical traits" (p. 10). This knowledge can help journalists write about trauma in their work, without being specialists in the medical domain. Gaining insight into journalists' perceptions of empathy in relation to their work through this study will help raise awareness of the difficult emotional territory that journalists regularly

navigate. It will also hopefully contribute to a growing body of work to improve trauma journalism coverage by examining whether empathy can play a role in resilience as a coping strategy in the face of journalists' own trauma, while covering the trauma of others.

The ethical complexities that come with reporting on others' pain, and even the shame and moral confusion, have been discussed at length in popular literature and the media. Amend, Kay & Reilly (2012) specifically looked at how obligations that collide with ethical responsibilities can impact journalists' sense of self. Exploring how journalists make sense of others' tragedies also compelled me to look at empathy within the context of journalists' identities, their perceived roles as storytellers, analysts, historians, witnesses and caretakers of the public interest, from the point of view of how it influenced them. Kay et al. (2011) referred in their study to a "transitioning role" for journalists (p. 449).

In the past, journalists did not think much about the impact of their coverage. They pushed such thoughts aside in an effort to be tough, professional and objective.

The movie image of the hard-bitten reporter is a cultural icon. But these findings, which emerged from the creation of a reflective practice space, suggest that this stereotype is starting to change. (p. 449)

Kay et al., 2011, wrote that the coverage from the 2010 earthquake in Haiti transcends their data, finding a higher level of "empathy and a higher awareness of ethical boundaries" in reporting (p. 451). Studies also link this transitioning role with an emerging transition in the professional identity of contemporary journalists. By openly discussing the impact of traumatic stress, the participants in this study provided a glimpse into such an emerging transition – from being removed to being engaged – and addressed many of the stereotypical views of journalists who go about their work as detached observers.

Amend, Kay & Reilly (2012) quoted a journalist in their study as saying that he found that he could no longer convince himself that what he was doing “was actually doing something of good for the community”, having experienced a deep sense of moral conflict in not being able to reconcile the goals of journalism with the violence and trauma that he was covering (p. 239). Jooste (2013) described her reaction to covering conflict in South Africa as feeling as though she did not belong. She questioned her “right to be there”, even though this feeling was entirely divorced from her role as a journalist that she understood passionately. “My first thought was that it was invasive. Perhaps one is overly reliant on the role, which is to be a witness, even as it is so important to be a witness” (I. Jooste, Internews Kenya Country Director, personal communication, April 17, 2013).

It is as though the impact of the trauma the journalists witness is in conflict with their perceived role, something which is increasingly being debated by those who advocate for an enlarged role for journalists, and those who maintain that journalists should not become part of the story. This is not a new debate, but it does speak to the gaps that remain between evidence and practice. Some media houses continue to balk at the notion that journalists covering traumatic events need the special tools to cope with emotional and traumatic stress. Most often, finances and legal concerns dictate what newsrooms can bear in terms of support to their journalists. One key issue that emerged from my literature review included a growing body of research documenting the need to understand that journalists absorb trauma in much the same way as others who witness traumatic events first hand – they are human after all. Another issue was that resilience in the face of trauma encompasses many different pathways to coping, which is a complex mechanism and does not automatically predict a positive outcome. Additionally, a

groundswell of scientific and anecdotal evidence shows that increasingly media practitioners recognise the role of empathy as one way to manage emotional and traumatic stress.

The key themes that arose from my literature review framed the objectives of this study, which was anchored in my research question: how journalists make personal sense of everyday trauma in their work. The objectives of the study therefore were: to gain insight into the impact of covering everyday traumatic events on six sub-Saharan journalists; how they had coped with what they had witnessed, and what their coping mechanisms are; and whether empathy in any way played a role in managing their emotions and impacted their perception of what it means to be a journalist.

### **Chapter 3: Research Methods**

#### **Research Design**

Choosing phenomenology helped frame the “centrality of the human context in understanding the human experience” for this study (Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 2).

Phenomenology is grounded in the notion of the Husserl’s lifeworld that refers to the “everyday experiences that we live” (p. 2). It is an approach that argues that we need to continually examine and re-examine our biases. For this study, phenomenology as described by Willis (2007) was a way to gain a deeper contextualized understanding of how journalists perceive and experience the phenomenon of human trauma of others (p. 32). The value of employing a phenomenological approach therefore lay in being able to gain a deeper insight into how journalists make sense of emotional trauma from their perspectives, in a pre-reflective way that takes place before language takes over – the psychological and emotional reaction before the response. It therefore seemed like the most natural landing place for this study.

## **Overview of Phenomenology**

Merleau-Ponty (1962) defined phenomenology as “the study of essences” (p. vii); the essential elements or building blocks of a phenomenon without which we would not recognize phenomena (Van Manen, 1990). Simultaneously a philosophy, an approach and a research method or practice, it is a way to study how things present themselves to humans through experiences, and a means to get to the truth of phenomena (Moran, 2000; Sokolowski, 2000, p. 2).

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) was the first to conceive of phenomenology as a “new way of doing philosophy” at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Moran, 2000, p. 1). Firmly grounded in Western philosophy, phenomenology insisted on a return to a form of radical philosophical questioning, to systematically see the world as it is, and “uncover the structures [...] of lived experience” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10). Phenomenology does not generalize, nor does it look to the factual; rather it seeks to describe the experiential meaning of lived meaning as an unbiased way to study things as they appear (Van Manen, 1990; Sokolowski, 2000). Fundamentally, phenomenology is about the “intentionality of consciousness”, which presupposes that the one who experiences and the experience itself are inherently connected – “they cannot exist apart from one another (Hammersley, 2004, p. 816). By using this approach the researcher crafts an understanding of the experiences of others through interpretation, which is presented in a way that others may also make meaning of this experience. A good phenomenological text therefore helps us “see” something not immediately apparent before, and one that can enrich our understanding of everyday life experience (Van Manen, 1997). It is therefore a way to learn about others by listening to their descriptions of what their subjective world is like for them, focused on the meaning of their experiences.

Husserl's lifeworld is a key concept for phenomenology, as it comprises the world of objects around us, as and how we perceive them in an entirely humanly relational way (Finlay, 2009). Certain core characteristics span the different forms of phenomenology: it is "descriptive, explores the intentional relationship between persons and situations, [...] and uses phenomenological reductions (Giorgi, 1989, as cited by Finlay, 2009, p. 3). The author points out that the hermeneutic and idiographic approaches of IPA argue that the use of phenomenological reduction may be less central (Finlay, 2009.) Certainly, Smith (2008) described IPA as "inductive" in nature (p. 43). However, all variants of phenomenology share this focus on describing lived experience, recognizing the embodied, inter-subjective lifeworld.

Within a social science paradigm, the phenomenological approach allows the researcher to pay particular attention to how people experience the world (Hammersley, 2004, p. 815). Doing interpretative phenomenology, however, ensures that there is no judgement or attempt on the part of the researcher to clarify why people experience their worlds the way they do; even as the subjects themselves do not experience the event neutrally or in an isolated way.

### **Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

The following authors guided me in choosing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the most appropriate way to gain a deeper understanding and sense of how journalists make meaning of trauma of others' in their work: Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, Michael Larkin and Mike Osborn (2007); Max van Manen (1990); and Linda Finlay (2009). Given the topic of my research, IPA was a good fit. It allowed me to focus on how the individual journalists made sense of what can only be described as painful experiences of witnessing the pain of others. The approach also made it possible to interpret their sense-making in a way that let me tell their story to the reader through the use of their own powerful and authentic

narratives. Personally, IPA was also an entirely transformative process. Through the use of reflexive writing and thinking, it shone a light on my own experiences as a journalist: how I had failed, and how I had coped, all the while giving me deeper insight into what the participants themselves experienced as they sought to make sense of what often feels like senseless tragedy.

IPA is considered a relatively recent qualitative approach with its roots in psychology, and is used widely within the health sector. However, researchers in the human and social sciences are also starting to use this qualitative approach with its “important theoretical touchstone” – that of phenomenology, which was Husserl’s attempts to “construct a philosophical science of consciousness” (as cited on the IPA website). “IPA is primarily concerned with trying to understand lived experience, and how participants themselves make sense of their experiences ... centrally concerned with the meaning which those experiences hold for the participants” (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009). Employing this approach allows the researcher to explore individuals’ perceptions or accounts of their experiences, not the experiences themselves, in other words how the experiences are perceived by those perceiving them. IPA recognizes that accessing the personal world of the participant cannot be done directly or completely, given the researcher’s own notions required to make sense of the other’s personal world. This is defined as interpretative activity, underpinned by the theory of interpretation.

Smith (2008) summarized IPA as a naturalistic, inductive, qualitative methodology that focuses on the lived experience of the participant as a way to make sense of the meanings of events or experiences to the participants themselves. It is an approach comprising dual components: interpretative and idiographic. It is not concerned with the discovery of general or universal laws, and concentrates on the unique experiences of individuals, rather than broad generalizations about human behaviour. Following Edmund Husserl’s “going back to the things

themselves”, it epitomizes a reflexive turning inwards, away from the objects of the world, and towards our perception of those objects (p. 3). However, intentionality links the perceiver with the perceived. It is an attempt to offer a detailed analysis of the elements of the reflected personal experience – the subjective experience of the social world. IPA is neither eidetic, nor transcendental. It is concerned with the interpretative, which includes hermeneutics of identity and/or empathy, the hermeneutics of questioning and/or being critical, which combine as understanding. Finally, there is the double hermeneutic (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Van Manen, 1990). This is when the researcher tries to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their experiences.

Smith (2008) described IPA as “strongly idiographic”, intensely examining one case to the point of “gestalt”, before “moving to a detailed analysis of the second case, and so on” (p. 41). The author argued that IPA is suitable for small samples, and even suggests that if the researcher finds one case particularly compelling, to stick with it, rather than “rushing to analyze further cases” (p. 42). It is an “interrogative” approach that seeks to contribute to psychology, by “illuminating existing research” (Smith, 2008, p. 43), and is characterized by intentionality (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2008). This is based on Heidegger’s argument that the “person is always and indelibly a ‘person-in-context’” (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2008, p. 106). The authors argued that people do not “occasionally jump out of an isolated subjective sphere to impose meaning on a world of otherwise meaningless objects” (p. 106). From this perspective, it is impossible for people to choose on a whim to engage or disengage with their worlds.

Eatough & Smith (2006) cited the work of the philosopher Peter Goldie (2002) in describing the intentionality of feelings as a “feeling towards, a thinking of with feeling that is directed toward the object of one’s thought” (p. 484). In building on this premise, the authors

defined emotions as “complex” because of the diverse elements that form them (p. 485).

Emotions are “episodic and dynamic” in that they “can come and go over time in a dynamic” way, and are “structured” as they “form and integral part of the evolving order of thoughts and feelings, actions and events” that form the “lifeworld” of the person (p. 485). The researcher therefore attempts to understand what the emotion feels like for the participant within the context of her or his life, and everything that may involve.

Heidegger (1962) asserted that humans’ subjective experiences are impossible to free from their social, cultural and political contexts, as they are embedded in their worlds – a concept described as “situated freedom” (Leonard, 1999, as cited by Kay, Lopez & Willis, 2004). This model underpins interpretative phenomenology, and speaks to the notion of bracketing.

Bracketing, or *epoche*, as it is also known, is understood as the process whereby the researcher aims to bracket or suspend previous assumptions or understandings to be open to the phenomenon as it appears (LeVasseur, 2003). The author noted: “... perhaps bracketing, in a sense of suspending theories and assumptions, can be perceived as another figure of what interpretive phenomenologists have called the hermeneutical circle”, with each circle opening “new horizons and possibilities” of understanding (p. 418). An important concept articulated by Heidegger (1962) is that of co-constitutionality, which indicates that the “meanings that the researcher arrives at in interpretative research are a blend of meaning articulated by both participant and researcher within the focus of the study” (Kay, Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 730). This is a fluid process, open to change, yet bounded by each participant’s unique contributions to the situation of discussion.

One of the differences between descriptive and interpretative phenomenology is how bracketing is handled. In the descriptive tradition, researchers try to put aside their biases so as

not to affect the study, while interpretative phenomenological researchers see biases as essential parts of the study. Interpretative phenomenologists therefore advocate that pre-existing personal experiences and prejudices be acknowledged, given their profound influence on both the understanding and interpretation of a phenomenon (Kay, Lopez & Willis, 2004; Patton, 1990; Penner, 2008). Finlay (2008) argued that the process can generate “uncertainty and confusion” given the propensity for mistaking bracketing “as a straightforward method of setting aside assumptions” and “acknowledging subjective bias towards establishing rigor and validity” (p. 3). Critically, the phenomenological “attitude” is not a process of “suspending researcher presuppositions”, but rather one “in which the researcher opens themselves to be moved by an Other” in favour of a “relational context” (p. 3). Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) argued that bracketing and fore-structure are linked and that it helps the researcher “see a more enlivened form of bracketing as both a cyclical process and as something which can only be partially achieved” (p. 25). Heidegger saw fore-structure, or past experience, as critical to perception within the context of time, as “fore-structure ultimately links the past, present and future” (Jones, 2001, p. 72). Time influences how we construct “reality”; we interpret the world “through the temporality of our existence”; this counters objectivity, “encompassing instead a circle of understanding” (p.72). Gadamer (1975) agreed that “our fore-conceptions cannot be forgotten or transcended” as described by Heidegger’s hermeneutic shift; “all that is asked [is to] remain open to the meaning of the other person or text” (Gadamer, 1975 as cited by Finlay, 2008, p. 8). In striving to make meaning of others’ lived experiences, it is important to understand the role of one’s own assumptions and pre-notions in interpretative research, including being aware of the potential pitfalls they may pose. From the point of view of bracketing, it does not mean that fore-

understanding does not exist, or is not relevant; rather in IPA it is about paying close attention to the other to the point of being able to put one's own pre-existing concerns aside.

IPA let me focus on the individual experience of the journalists participating in the study, allowing me to capture individual variants between them (Finlay, 2009). My research question focused on “personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context, for people who share a particular experience” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 45). Very specifically I wanted to understand how journalists make sense of the other's trauma that they see in their work. It was not without its challenges though, as it is a methodology that demands rigour in helping the participants describe their experiences as directly as possible, and explaining the facets of these experiences in such a way that their lived experiences – their life worlds – are revealed.

Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) argued that experience itself is “tantalizing and elusive” and is in a sense “never accessible” (p. 33). The authors concluded that “because IPA has a model of the person as a sense-making creature, the meaning which is bestowed by the participant on experience, as it becomes and experience, can be said to represent the experience itself” (p. 33). This translates into recognition that experience is understood based on the meanings ascribed to them by the participants in a study. As an idiographic approach, IPA demands that participants' experiences be examined in detail, case by case. Only then, wrote Smith, Flowers & Larkin, does the researcher “cautiously move to an examination of similarities and differences across the cases” to produce “fine-grained accounts of patterns of meaning for participant reflecting upon shared experience” (p. 38). The aim of this rigorous process is to “parse the account both for shared themes and for the distinctive voices and variations on those themes” to help the reader of the study see how the cases “can shed light on the existing nomothetic research” (p. 38). Ultimately, although the specifics with regard the experiences of

the individuals are unique, the aim is to provide insight that may “take us into the universal, because it touches on what it is to be human at its most influential” (p. 38). In this study, the elements explored included journalists’ experiences from their unique perspectives of what impact trauma had on them, how they made sense of these experiences, their emotional responses, and how they managed their emotions when confronted with traumatic events – all very universal human responses to pain and suffering of others.

### **Data Collection, Data and Data-gathering Tools**

Finlay (2008) wrote that in gathering and analyzing phenomenological data, the researcher should be open to surprise and whatever may present itself, throughout the entire research process, from beginning to end. For Wertz (2005), this openness to discovery in phenomenological research translated into an “attitude of wonder that is highly empathic” with researchers trying to leave their “own world behind and to enter fully, through the written description, into the situations of the participants” (p. 172). As the researcher, I used purposeful sampling and semi-structured interviews as a way to gain what I hoped would be a deep-level access to how the participants perceive and make sense of the trauma that they had witnessed or experienced in their work. In addition, along with other phenomenological gathering of data, I employed “memoing”, described by Groenewald (2004) as another important data source: researcher’s “field notes” to record what I saw, heard, experienced and thought during the course of collecting my data and reflecting on the process (p. 14).

### **Sample**

The IPA approach encourages that studies are conducted on small samples, given how long the detailed analysis of each case and transcript can take (Smith & Osborn, 2007). “It is committed to the painstaking analysis of cases rather than jumping to generalizations”, in other

words, that which makes it idiographic in nature, rather than nomothetic (p. 55-56). Following this guidance, and wanting to “say something in detail about the perceptions and understandings of this particular group rather than prematurely make more general claims”, I chose to interview six participants (p. 56). Noting that this small number of participants can be thought of as “sacrificing breadth for depth”, it is however done with “a commitment to a detailed interpretative account” of the participants’ meaning-making of their experiences (p. 56). By employing purposive sampling, I focused on finding a homogeneous group for whom my research question would be significant, namely journalists, who live and work in sub-Saharan Africa, and who have all at some point in their careers covered traumatic events. Table 1 illustrates the gender component of the sample, as well as the participants’ ages – both range and mean.

Table 1

*Participant Information*

Gender	Male	3
	Female	3
Age in years	Range	28-55
	Mean	34.50

**Research Procedures and Conduct**

I chose to focus the study on journalists who live in Africa, and work for African media houses or corporations as permanent or contract staff, or as freelancers. It was both an idealistic and pragmatic decision. Idealistic, in that my sense is that overall, newsrooms in sub-Saharan

Africa are struggling with the duty of care of the journalists who work for them; pragmatic, because I would be able to interview the participants face to face as I would be travelling to Kenya and South Africa. There was one exception: a freelance journalist working in Zimbabwe, whom I could not meet face to face. All the participants were approached by phone and email, receiving my formal invitation to participate in the study, as well as the consent form to conduct the research, which they signed.

Given the topic of the study, prior to each interview, I was careful to ensure that the participants understood what the focus of my research was. In addition, I underscored that they could end the interview at any time if they no longer wanted to discuss the issues or if it made them feel uncomfortable in any way. I also shared with them the essence of my questions, so that they were aware of the overall focus and direction of the interview. This was done out of ethical concern that the participants did not inadvertently suffer harm not intended, by reliving sensitive issues related to the trauma they had witnessed.

### **Semi-structured Interviews**

Consistent with IPA, I chose to conduct my research using semi-structured interviews to strive for a full, rich account that allowed me the flexibility I needed to explore interesting areas as they cropped up (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Five of the interviews were recorded in full. The interview with the Zimbabwean journalist was a combination of a transcribed text (verified by the participant) based on an interview using Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and the journalist's responses to my question by email. It is enormously difficult to connect by phone or using VoIP with people in Zimbabwe. Not only is it extremely costly, but the connectivity is unreliable with many breaks in the calls and general voice distortions. Security remains a concern, because of the potential of the monitoring of phone calls by the security apparatus.

My semi-structured interviews consisted of a set of guiding questions. The questions related to the participants' sense of being a journalist, what they thought of as ethical and professional journalism, what they thought constituted traumatic events for them, their experiences of traumatic events, how they coped with it and wrote about it, and what feelings this engendered.

I know five of the participants personally. They were comfortable in the interview setting, with an immediate rapport established. With the one participant who was unknown to me, I had to ensure that I established a rapport before proceeding. Part of this process included my explanation why I was interested in researching the phenomenon in question, and a bit of my own background working as a journalist. However, having said this, in spite of knowing the other participants, I also prefaced the interviews of an explanation for the sake of consistency, why I was interested in this focus area for my study as explained in the preceding section.

I let myself be guided by the participants' answers and let them share new directions as they emerged. Also, throughout the process I was acutely aware not to be too caught up with my observations of the participants at the expense of being open to their stories – this meant occasionally making notes in an unobtrusive manner, as reminders of the moment of the interview, or when something they said or did felt important and out of the ordinary (Finlay, 2009). The process meshed with what Smith & Osborne (2007) viewed as allowing the respondents to be the “experiential experts” on the subject (p. 59). And in a sense it mirrored the same pattern I would have followed, albeit without the rigour required by scientific research, were I conducting interviews for long-form journalism stories.

All the interviews were transcribed and subjected to a detailed qualitative analysis, bearing in mind throughout that I was engaged in both the linguistic and psychological

interpretation of the responses of the participants (Schleiermacher, 1998, as cited by Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). I also took my observations during the interviews into account, as they rounded the analysis out. I had informed the participants that even though I was recording the interviews for the sake of accuracy, I would take additional notes.

Finally, I had asked all the journalists to provide me with a story they had written or photos they had taken that illustrated for them their understanding of trauma within the context of their work. This was an important addition to help me understand their unique and particular circumstances and contexts. Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) suggested including objects as illustrative tools as a way to “further explore the available cultural resources for making sense of the topic in hand” (p. 73). The three Kenyan journalists all provided stories they had written or photos they had taken, as did the Zimbabwean journalist; stories they felt best illustrated a moment where a story had a profound impact on them. One South African journalist referenced specific stories, giving detailed descriptions, while the other gave a detailed description of a photo that someone had taken of her, and which she felt captured the stress of covering traumatic events. In both instances, I was able to find stories that they had covered as journalists online.

### **Standard for Evaluation**

The value of a phenomenological study lies in a reliable presentation of the phenomenon in question, while honouring actual, individual examples that illustrate it. In this respect, Wertz (2005) wrote that “phenomenology is more hospitable, accepting, and receptive in its reflection on ‘the things themselves’ and in its care not to impose order on its subject matter (p. 175). Critically, the author points out that “psychological realities need not be constructed; they have essential features that can be intuited and described” through interpretation that is

“descriptively grounded” (p. 175). When presenting the research, readers are also given the opportunity to decide whether the analysis is solid.

Employing phenomenology is a scientific process that applies method in a “systematic, critical, general and potentially intersubjective” way that requires “critical thinking” (Wertz, 2005, p. 170). In addition, four checks or “qualities to help the reader evaluate the power and trustworthiness” of a phenomenological study are: “vividness, accuracy, richness and elegance” (Polkinghorne, 1983 as cited by Finlay, 2008). Phenomenological research therefore is not a free for all that allows the researcher unchecked freedoms; rather, it is a process that demands rigour and scientific methods.

### **Method of Analysis**

Given IPA’s strong idiographic approach, I started with a detailed examination of each transcript of the participants, to the point where I felt I had mined each set fully. Smith (2008) referred to this as having achieved “closure or gestalt” (p. 41). My interest about each participant’s psychological world – how each of them made sense of their experiences of trauma – was an integral driver throughout the process. Although I refer to the process of analyzing the transcripts in the plural for the sake of expediency, it should be noted that all the analysis was predicated on a case by case process.

Smith & Osborne (2007) also pointed out that during this process, “meaning is central” (p. 66). This meant that I had to adopt what the authors referred to as an “interpretative relationship with the transcript” (p. 66). At all times, the goal was to attempt to understand the meanings, which could be complex, rather than measuring how often constructs cropped up in the transcript.

It was an intense process that required multiple readings of the transcripts. In addition, after several readings, I went back to the original recordings to remind myself of each participant's voice, tone, as well as silences and other sounds. Having made notes during the interviews as part of my observations helped me gain a deeper sense of the interviews, and triggered my own memories of the actual conversations.

In addition to reading each transcript several times, I followed the guides for analysis as described by Smith & Osborne (2007) and Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009). The right-hand margins in each of the participant's transcriptions were used to "annotate what is interesting and significant about what the respondent said" (Smith & Osborne, p. 67). It was helpful to know that in analyzing the data, some annotations could be "attempts at summarizing or paraphrasing, some will be associations or connections that come to mind, and others may be preliminary interpretations" (p. 67). The initial level of analysis involved three steps. The first readings involved making "descriptive comments focused on describing the context of what the participant" said, in other words, the "subject of the talk" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 84). The second reading was focused on "linguistic comments" to explore "the specific use of language" (p. 84). The third set of readings delivered the "conceptual comments focused on engaging at a more interrogative and conceptual level, in other words, interpretative" (pp. 84, 88). Before completing this process, I used what Smith, Flowers & Larkin refer to as "deconstruction"; a strategic process to "de-contextualize" each participant's narratives by taking a few paragraphs from each of the transcripts, and reading them "backwards, a sentence at a time" to gain a sense of the individual words used (p. 90). This was to check whether I had indeed managed to get close to what the participant was "actually saying" (p. 90). Although

intense, the process helped take me from the obvious to the implied, and let me engage with the data in a way I could not have imagined prior to this exercise.

Once the process of reading and re-reading of the transcripts were completed, I returned to the beginning of each participant's transcript to start the process of capturing themes as they emerged. Using the notes I had made during the previous readings of the transcripts, I started the process of "mapping the interrelationships, connections and patterns between" my exploratory notes (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 91). The authors described this as a "process that represents one manifestation of the hermeneutic circle" whereby the "original whole of the interview becomes a set of parts" as I conducted my analysis (p. 91). This in and of itself was an interesting journey, as it felt as though I was venturing into personal uncharted territory, as every step in the process of analyzing the narratives took me "further away from the participant" while including more of myself as researcher (pp. 91-92). Having worked as a journalist, it felt like the antithesis of everything I would be doing, were I interviewing someone for a news story.

However, what was comforting was to take it back to the notion of the "hermeneutic circle, where the part is interpreted in relation to the whole; the whole is interpreted in relation to the part" (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 92). It meant that ultimately, the themes that were emerging would be representative of each of the participant's "original words and thoughts", but would also include my own interpretation as researcher (p. 92). It was a process that allowed me to capture my understanding of the participant's understanding of the phenomenon of trauma that each of them had experienced in their work as journalists. Table 2 illustrates the process of listing initial themes for one case study, and identifies in chronological order a list of themes based on the sequence in which they appeared in the transcript, as suggested by Smith & Osborne (2007).

Table 2

*Initial List of Themes from the Transcript of Participant B to Illustrate Analysis*

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Sense of breaking – from the work and the self (metaphoric)  
Lack of control over memories  
Emotional consequences of witnessing others’ trauma  
Sense of being haunted  
Lack of control over emotions  
Desire to help  
Hardening of self  
The pain of others’; the pain of the self  
Sense of exhaustion linked to constant struggling with self  
Anger towards self  
Frustration  
Need for relief from pain and brokenness  
Questioning of self  
Judgement of and anger towards others  
Fear  
Clear sense of role; understanding of and embracing responsibilities  
Strong sense of self  
Hopelessness linked to personal intervention  
Compassion and empathy  
Risk and willingness to take more risks  
Disgust linked to regret and emotions  
Guilt and shame linked to inability to help  
Desire to go back to before when was “happy”  
Linked to time – in the moment  
Anticipation  
Desire for justice  
Living with consequences

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*Note:* Table adapted from Smith & Osborne, 2007, pp. 70-71.

The next step involved looking for connections across the emergent themes and how I thought they fit together (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). It was a necessary part of the analytic process that would guide me to identifying the super-ordinate themes, and involved a specific series of steps. (See Tables 3, 4 & 5 in Chapter 5: Discussion of findings).

“Abstraction” meant “identifying patterns between emergent themes” eventually leading to “super-ordinate themes” (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 96). “Subsumption” was the “analytic process similar to abstraction”, but involved emergent themes “acquiring super-ordinate status” to “bring together a series of related themes” (p. 97). “Polarization” involved looking for seeming contradictions, or “oppositional relationships”, by exploring “differences instead of similarities” between emergent themes (p.97). “Contextualization” was a way to look “at the connections between emergent themes” to “identify the contextual or narrative elements within an analysis” (p. 98). Finally, I examined the emergent themes “for their specific functions within the transcript” as a way to gain deeper insight into the data (p.98-99). The next step involved bringing everything together in a way that allowed me to push to the next level of interpretation, finding a balanced place between “a hermeneutics of empathy” and that of “a hermeneutics of suspicion” (p. 104). As a novice researcher using IPA, I am aware of my own limitations in this process, and discuss this further in Chapter 6 under the heading: Limitations.

### **Cross-cultural Interviewing in a Language other than English**

One participant chose to speak Afrikaans during the interview. Although fluent in the language myself, it concerned me initially, as it meant that I would possibly have to make translation-related decisions that could impact on the quality and accuracy of the participant’s

responses (Birbili, 2000 as cited by Liamputtong, P., 2010). Critical to this argument is how the researcher sees her own world, and that of the participant, and the political implications of using language to construct self and the other (Liamputtong, P., 2010). The challenge is to achieve “conceptual equivalence of comparability of meaning (Phillips, 1960 as cited by Liamputtong, P., 2010). However, given that I was schooled in Afrikaans, and had worked as a journalist in the language, I understood intimately the cultural context of the participant, as well as the lexicon, and the emotional and contextual connotations and values ascribed to the language.

As IPA requires verbatim transcriptions, I analyzed the participant’s interview in Afrikaans, as I felt that this honoured her contributions best, as I wanted the reader to fully grasp the meaning that her experiences of having covered traumatic events held for her.

In presenting the findings however, I chose to employ “free translation”, as I am comfortable with the language, and was confident that I would not lose the intended meaning of the participant’s contributions (Birbili, 2000, as cited by Liamputtong, P., 2010, p. 215).

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

### **Participants’ Narratives**

The data were derived from interviews with six participants, all of which happened in places of their choosing – in other words, places they felt comfortable to talk openly with me about their experiences. This included the one participant from Zimbabwe who was partly interviewed using VoIP. The interviews lasted between approximately 30 minutes and one hour each, depending on each of the participants. The following is a sample of each of the participants’ descriptions of how they made meaning of witness and experiencing the trauma of others. This is simply a presentation of the data. It is not overlaid with interpretation. It captures

their words verbatim to give the reader insight into how the journalists described their own, deeply unique and personal experiences of the phenomenon of seeing and experiencing others' trauma and how it affected each of them. All participants were assured of their anonymity, however, for the sake of context I am including a short factual contextual preamble to excerpts from each of their interviews, to give the reader a sense of the individual interviewed.

Participant B is a photojournalist in his late 20s, who recently took a break from working in a newsroom. He has worked in the field of news photography since 2006 and lives and works in Kenya. Apart from covering crime, he also covered the 2007/08 post election violence.

**Excerpt 1:** It's where I live. You see a picture. I smell, I see, I feel.

**Excerpt 2:** There was this crackdown. I saw executions, saw violence, and I was covering the 'who, what, when, and where'. And tomorrow, there would be another event.

**Excerpt 3:** In 2006, the first image I shot is still in my mind. A man was shot and he was bleeding. As a Christian, all I could think of was to say let's pray as I stayed with him. But I felt such guilt. The cops threw the body in the car, he bled to death. He stretched out his hand to me, asking me to stay. And they let him bleed to death. I could not do anything. I asked myself, should I have consoled him?

Participant R is a 20-something Kenyan journalist who works as a freelancer for several media outlets, and is in the process of establishing her own news blog.

**Excerpt 1:** It's really hard talking to people who have gone through traumatic

experiences. One, to let them relive the trauma. And for them to trust you enough to tell their story without portraying them as a victim, or culprit, or even sub-human ... [words tail off]

**Excerpt 3:** At what point, what I did became real. I knew, seriously, what I'm doing is not just a story [pauses] I am dealing with people's lives. [Pause] It stopped being a dream. This is reality. I just felt pressure. And, oh, oh, do not screw this up, do not screw this up. Be objective. It's an inward fight [pause] I, I, [pause] I need to do this versus I don't want to do this." (Interviewer: How do you feel about being a journalist?) "At times I wonder, what does this mean? I call myself a writer sometimes. It's storytelling. Just different. We're all telling stories, in a different way. So what is it that makes me a journalist [pauses, laughs] journalist, the word is so weighty, it has so much obligation to society. It's like a pressure in my head. I keep hearing, don't screw this up. Get it right.

**Excerpt 4:** I had never done a story about GBV [gender-based violence]. There were too many emotions involved. Women were crying. I kept thinking: I can't do this right now. I could not do it. It was too much to take in. [Very long pause] Even just thinking about it tires me.

Participant I is Kenyan radio journalist in his early 30s, who works for an established radio station. He has been a journalist for close on a decade and covers general news, with some specialized focus on health and political news.

**Excerpt 1:** Unfortunately I heard some gunshots. I did not know they were gunshots, but

had to run to that place to see. When I arrived at the place of the scene, I found the Sheik already shot dead [pause] he had wounds all over, his stomach, his chest. And his wife was also crying in the car and this Sheik was lying dead, still intact in the van.

**Excerpt 2:** It was a scene of an accident, it happened along Nairobi Mombasa road, where a van carrying 14 passengers, perished, all perished after the vehicle travelling in crashed with a trailer. All of them died. It was really so [inaudible word]. I feel so sad. Seeing those bodies. How the bodies scattered all over the road. Some hands were chopped off. Some [pause] have no legs. It's really, it really makes me, it really makes me feel as though I'm haunted. It's a crazy thing, a crazy scene. I did the story. I interviewed the family. I even shed tears because of what I witnessed, so sorrowful, so sad, to see bodies of passengers lying on the road like that. I did the story. There was no way you can go back without the story.

**Excerpt 3:** First of all, I am a Muslim. And being a Muslim, when you see people dying, because those are the traumatic situations, when you see people dying. It's not for any; it's not for no reason. When I see bodies, people dying, I know they've died for a reason, that it is the plan of God almighty. That when the person was created, his life was planned to come to an end. So when I see a person dying in a road accident, I know it was destined for him or her that this is going to be your end in the world. It also helped me to shape myself to be ready, because I know, anytime. It gives me courage. It inspires me.

Participant M is a seasoned high-profile journalist in her 50s, working in the media since her early 20s. She lives and works in South Africa. Her work has taken her to many parts of the world. Her interview was conducted in Afrikaans, and this is a free translation of the text.

**Excerpt 1:** You prepare yourself beforehand that people suffering from kwashiorkor and who are starving will look bad, but I never realized the smell of death, and people who have died and have not been buried. It was awful. Both the cameraman and I wanted to throw up at times. The suffering was simply indescribable. The worst was a small children's ward – a prefab building – where children were lying next to children who were already dead, or were dying. It was hard. Because you still have to switch the sun gun on and do the story, because you have to be back at the plane at a certain time, as we had to leave at a certain time. The smell, the unbearable smell of death.

**Excerpt 2:** “A bus that was overfull ran off the road near Leeu-Gampka, and every person on that bus was dead. We were the first on the scene. And it's a story. And ... then you get the facts: where was it going, who was on the bus, who was the owner of the bus? And then the human element. What was the question again? Oh, the loss. People crushed on the road. A person should always have respect for the feelings of others. They have relatives. They are someone's child, sister, wife, mother or father ....

**Excerpt 3:** The moment that I am on the scene of a disaster, a family murder, then I feel nothing. Then I do my job. I will think about it often, long afterwards. But while I am doing the job, I put the emotions aside.

Participant Sa is a South African journalist in her 30s who quickly rose to a senior position as news editor for a tabloid newspaper. She has now taken a break from the 11 years in the newsroom and hard news. She wants to eventually focus on writing about food as a journalist.

**Excerpt 1:** ... and that mother, while she is talking, she does not cry, but the tears keep running ... not howling or crying, but the tears, while she sits and talks with you, they just kept running down. And I think that was something that really touched me.

**Excerpt 2:** You have a sense of total honesty of realization of ... this is terribly sad and that you are as much a part of the story ... of the bigger story ... that people that don't get the same job opportunities in South Africa and he has to go overseas to make money to feed his family and you are part of the country and part of the story and you are part of a soul that died. You did not know the guy; you did not know the mother. But there's a little bit that is [pause] it's gone.

**Excerpt 3:** I was too young. When you're young you don't realize a lot of stuff. Now when I think about it, oh my goodness, but at that age, you just get down and grovel, and you think, this won't happen, they won't really shoot you, but they could have, they could have.

Participant Sa is a freelance Zimbabwean journalist who works for several media outlets. Given the political situation in the country and the very tight, some would say draconian controls of the media; he only files stories under an assumed name for reasons of personal safety. Anonymity with regard this study was critical to protect his identity.

**Excerpt 1:** At the same time what can one do when they see well-trained police officers in anti-riot fatigue brutalizing a group of women? Is that not a story? The challenge there is how a journalist can get enough evidence of the brutality, without exposing oneself to danger, and lives to publish the story. It is for this reason that one of my mentors used to say, ‘there is no story that is worth your life.’

**Excerpt 2:** If you go out to get the story, you get to the house, and everyone is calm, watching TV and being entertained. Then you tell them you’re a journalist, and the moment you start your questioning [pause] prompt answers with the interview [pause] they have to tell you something deep in their minds. And when the interviewee breaks down, it’s not because the journalist has asked the questions, but because they are reliving the experience. And you cannot just abandon them [pause] you still have to get the story. That is very traumatic to the journalist as well.

**Excerpt 3:** What has been most disturbing is that my source insists on being quoted in stories that put the army in negative light. In Zimbabwe, this giving of publicity and naming of the source may be fatal. This is the case, with me even if my source consents to being quoted in the article. So I have to take the unpleasant decision of denying him that publicity and put my pseudonym to the fore instead. This is what I call “first do no harm” in action. But this decision has to be taken after a careful assessment of the danger.

## Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

### Summary

The six participants were all asked to talk about their experience of seeing the trauma of others, how they coped with the experience, what guided them, how it affected them or influences their emotions, and what it meant to be a journalist. Although the discussions were wide-ranging, and even though their individual experiences of witnessing the trauma of others were diverse and unique, the participants' responses clustered around three themes. The themes are: 1) Trauma as catalyst in life change; 2) Empathy as signifier of resilience; and 3) The ineluctability of risk.

Prior to identifying the super-ordinate themes, I first looked across the cases for patterns, which I clustered as themes, checking them against the actual words of the participant (Smith & Osborne, 2007, p. 72). Methodical steps that included analysis, and checking that the themes connected, allowed me to identify emergent themes. Table 3 illustrates the result of this process working with one participant's words.

Table 3

*Themes Related to Emergent Themes from One Participant*

Themes	Page/text line	Key words/phrases
Questioning the self		
Sense of breaking	1:1	It broke me as a person ...
Hardening	2:15	It hardened me.
Internal struggle	2:17	It was more personal.
	2: 21	I ask myself, can't you see ...
Empathy		
Compassion	5:54	All this blood, the cries ... I get very

		emotional when I think of it.
Desire for something better for others (for example justice)/resilience	2: 19	Now I want healing. I want reconciliation
Desire to make a difference	3: 25	How do we heal and ensure that it does not happen again.
	7:69	Rabble-rouser, hero, activist ... there is the person who says things.
Hope/resilience	7:70	...but there is hope where I come from.
<b>Undesirable feelings</b>		
Guilt	2:13	I could not do anything. I asked myself, should I have consoled him?
Anger at self	3:29	I'm still angry. I am an angry person.
Anger at other (judgement)	3:31	I hate politicians. I can't stand them. At all.
	1:10	In most newsrooms, no one cares about emotional stability
Shame	3:33	The violence. So why can't we change? Why can't we see? Are we all blind? That's our problem. Are we blind? Yeah.
Helplessness/lack of control	2:16	... a child raped, crimes by adults, adults killed, even children. The victims are children.
Feeling haunted/sense of dread	1:5	I would go home and the violence would come back to me.
Fear	6:58	I can have a tremble. In the moment, you can become the victim.
Frustration	7:72	How can this happen to innocent

		people?
Sympathetic to risk		
Willingness to engage	4:35	... I shouted, stop this, stop this, as the person was being killed.
Regret at not taking more risks	4:39	Maybe I would have taken more risks.
Lure of risk	2:21	And so the only thing to do was to go to the streets ...
Understanding of personal experience/effect of trauma		
Understanding consequences of witnessing others' trauma	5:49	Anger. Disgust.
Desire to return to times before experienced others' trauma	4:43	I was very happy ... my entry into journalism was entertainment.
Embracing responsibilities	5:47	I was everywhere, I was everywhere. I was not afraid.
Sense of exhaustion	7:75	I work so hard. I work too hard. My doctor has told me my body is almost broken.
Living with consequences	3:30	My work is driven by anger and frustration.
	7:67	I think I was fortunate that I covered history ... I used to cry, but I had to do this.
	7:77	Trouble follows me, I don't look for it.

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*Note:* Table adapted from Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 100.

Heidegger’s “circularity of understanding” was a crucial part of the next step in the analytical process (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2008, p.167). Constantly moving between the parts and the whole in the interviews the method requires of the researcher to “enter into the hermeneutic circle” in such a way that “fore-knowledge of the phenomenon” is used to establish a “proper perspective with which to approach the phenomenon” (p. 167). The authors warned that this does not come easily, or automatically, and requires a constant referencing of the text and “other possible theoretical approaches” to find the right perspective for the analysis (p. 167). It is only “once the explicit awareness of the phenomenon to be studied is arrived at, and the angle of approach settled” that the analysis begins, and meanings emerge (pp. 167-168). The researcher is responsible to show that the analysis and meanings are relevant. Based on this principle, I checked whether the super-ordinate themes recurred across the sample, as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4

*Recurring Super-ordinate Themes for each Participant*

Super-ordinate themes	B	R	I	M	S	Sa	Present in over half of the sample?
Trauma as catalyst in life change	Yes						
Empathy as signifier of resilience	Yes						
The ineluctability of risk	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

*Note:* Table adapted from Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p. 107.

Within the context of phenomenological theory, the life world comprises fundamental features such as “a person’s sense of selfhood, embodiment, sociality, spatiality, temporality, discourse and mood-as-atmosphere” (Ashworth, 2003, 2006 as cited by Finlay, 2008, p. 2). These “interlinked fractions” combine to “act as a lens through which to view the data” (p. 2). Applying this guidance, I strove through my data and findings to illustrate and describe the journalists’ lived experiences of covering others’ pain in a way that would contribute toward our understanding of their human experience.

From the perspective of journalism, and specifically photojournalism, Keats (2010) wrote that from a “narrative constructive perspective, traumatic stress is seen as a language-centered, contextually situated, and embodied experience” (p. 234). It builds on the idea that people organize their experiences in coherent narratives to construct meaningful accounts (Neimeyer, 2000, as cited by Keats, 2010). It is particularly useful lens through which to view and gain insight into how journalists use language and storytelling processes, and is “especially relevant when research shows how journalists and photojournalists who witness violence and trauma are affected by symptoms of traumatic stress to varying degrees” (p. 235). Table 5 illustrates the structure of this interpretative analysis through the lens of IPA and acts as a guide to cross-reference themes and sub-categories in the discussion of findings.

Table 5

*Compositional Structure of IPA Themes from the Study of Six Participants*

Thematic Level	Code/ Thematic Hierarchy	Themes
Super-ordinate themes	1	Trauma as catalyst in life change
Master theme	1.1	Emotional consequences
Sub-categories	1.1.1	Sadness
	1.1.2	Anger
	1.1.3	Guilt/Shame
	1.1.4	Anxiety
Master theme	1.2	Effect on life
Sub-categories	1.2.1	Sense of gain
	1.2.2	Sense of loss
Super-ordinate themes	2	Empathy as signifier of resilience
Master theme	2.1	Identifying with the trauma of others
Sub-categories	2.1.1	Relationship of self with others
	2.1.2	Living the other's pain
Master themes	2.2	Values
Sub-categories	2.2.1	Focus on truth-telling, accuracy,
	2.2.2	balance
	2.2.3	Faith in others (religion)
		Faith in self
Master themes	2.3	Coping
Sub-categories	2.3.1	Physical symptoms
	2.3.2	Education/training
	2.3.3	Sense of role and responsibilities
Super-ordinate themes	3	The ineluctability of risk
Master themes	3.1	Lure of danger
Sub-categories	3.1.1	Willingness to place self in harm's way
	3.1.2	Fear

*Note:* Table adapted from Knight, Wykes & Hayward, 2003, p. 215.

### **Trauma as a Catalyst in Life Change**

The six participants' narrative accounts of the impact of witnessing the trauma of others indicated a significant emotional impact on their lives (Table 5: Code 1.1). Even for those who had tried to be mentally prepared for what they would see and experience, it still came as a shock. All spoke about or to the emotional consequences these experiences presented: feelings of sadness (Code 1.1.1), anger (Code 1.1.2), guilt (Code 1.1.3), shame (Code 1.1.3), self-doubt (related to Code 2.2.3), and even disgust with the self (Code 1.1.3). Participant R recounts how she felt intense guilt and shame at interviewing people on the scene "like a vulture, an insensitive bastard" (Code 1.1.3: text line 137), thinking in the moment "maybe I should change professions" (Code 1: text line 141).

At the individual level the experience of seeing others' pain was lived with an acute sense of an emotional response that manifested physically (Code 1.1 & 2.3.1). "Both the cameraman and I wanted to throw up at times" (Participant M, text line 375). Participant R describes her intense fear when she had to cover a bomb blast in downtown Nairobi on May 29, 2012. "I was trembling. I could not hold my camera properly" (text line 146). "I was stammering. My brain froze. It was as though it coughed and died" (Participant R: text line 147). "I wanted to flee from the scene" (Participant R: text line 148). Participant B noted: "Actually, I remember someone fighting, cutting someone so bad. I froze. I could not look at the blood [...] the blood was jumping" (text line 52). The other participants recounted similar feelings anxiety that manifested as confusion, horror, and physical trembling at some scenes (Code 1.1.4 & 2.3.1).

All six participants also recounted instances in which they actually cried at the scene, felt like crying, or cried afterwards (Code 1.1.1). It is well known that crying is closely associated with sadness, but is also common in situations where sadness is not the overriding emotion, and

can be used as an emotional tool to manipulate others (Vingerhoets et al., 2000). Within the interviews however, crying seemed to link directly to feelings of sadness (Code 1.1.1) brought on by what the journalists were seeing and experiencing, or high levels of intense emotion (Code 1.1). Participant B describes it as “I used to cry, but I had to do this” (text line 67). Participant S referred to it as one of her biggest challenges when covering traumatic events, to “not also cry” (text line 440). Participant I’s memory of a traffic crash that killed all the passengers of a commuter bus: “I shed tears because of what I witnessed [pause] so sorrowful, so sad, to see bodies of passengers lying on the road like that” (text line 539).

Other emotional consequences described by the participants centred on feelings of anger (Code 1.1.2) at the other. Frustration often fed these feelings, according to the majority of the participants. Embedded in these feelings was a sense of implied judgment, perhaps best illustrated by Participant B who on occasion during the interview poses a question to the hypothetical other/audience in reference to what he had witnessed: “Can’t you see?” (text line 21) and then turns the question on himself: “Are we blind? Yeah.” (text line 33)

A sense of emotional numbing (Code 1.2.2) was also prevalent in the responses of the majority of the participants. This particular response is closely linked with Table 5, Code 2.3, Coping. All six participants were very clear about their roles and responsibilities in their capacity as journalists (Code 2.3.2 & 2.3.3). Participant Sa explained that for him he has noticed that if he is “standoffish” in his stories and approach to the people whose stories he is retelling as a journalist, “this has helped me be a journalist” (text line 351). Participant M stressed her detachment from what she witness on several occasions. In one response she noted: “The moment that I am on the scene of a disaster, a family murder, then I feel nothing. Then I do my job” (text line 418). She explained this within the context of “never becoming hysterical” (text

line 416). Participant B noted: “Over time we think it’s normal” (text line 14) ... “it hardened me, but psychologically, it messes you up” (text line 15).

Several participants spoke about feeling afraid at some point; experiencing fear. The fear they spoke of always related to being afraid of something: being killed (Participant B: “I did not want to become a victim myself” [text line 40]); being beaten up by a crowd (Participant Sa: “I was very scared” [text line 309]). Moran (2000) references Heidegger in stating that fear is about something or “about some possibility”, unlike anxiety, which is “precisely anxiety over nothing”, showing up “precisely in the way in which we are free to choose and take hold of ourselves” (p. 241).

Threaded throughout the interviews were references to deep levels of anxiety experienced by the participants. However, as Lazarus et al., (1985) pointed out: “a person who experiences anxiety or fear is not necessarily disturbed or neurotic” (p. 773). I therefore do not infer any psychological consequences from this observation, beyond that which the participants chose to share during the interviews. One participant named the consequences of his emotional distress as “depression” (Participant B: text line 5): “I was depressed. I had depression.”

Stolorow (2011) likened emotional trauma as producing “an affective state whose features bear a close similarity to the central elements in Heidegger’s description of anxiety” (p. 42). He writes that this is accomplished “by plunging the traumatized person into a form of authentic Being-toward-death” (p. 42). Moran (2000) wrote that to “understand the manner we relate to Being”, we have to examine how “we relate to Being” (p. 237). Depending on the lives we lead or the situations we find ourselves in therefore can have a profound influence on our understanding of our experiences.

Consider Participant R's response when I asked her what she felt when she thought of covering a traumatic story (Codes 1.1; 1.2; 2.1 & 2.3).

Even as I think of doing the follow-up [a laugh that ends up as a long drawn out wail].

It's easier not to. But I do. (Text line 166) I have butterflies in my stomach.

[Pause] (Text line 167) Sometimes it gives me a runny stomach. (Text line 168)

It's like a burden I am walking around with. It's really uncomfortable. I feel like I want to cry. (Text line 169) It's physically exhausting. It makes me nervous. It makes me anxious. (Text line 170)

For Participant R it was as though she was re-living the trauma of making meaning of someone else's trauma. And it leaves her deeply anxious (Code 1.4). She is contemplating what Moran (2000) describes as a moment where she is "authentically" herself, while in a state of anxiety, as though contemplating her own death (p. 237). Participant R is not alone in carrying this feeling of dread within her, a sense of lingering anxiety and of being haunted by what they had seen. Participant S notes: "... you think, this won't happen, they won't really shoot you, but they could have, they could have" (Code 1.1.4: text line 514).

Anxiety and its manifestation points towards what Stolorow (2011) describes as the failure of a "fundamental defensive propose of absorption in the everyday world of public interpretedness" (p. 42). It is as though Heidegger's "Being-toward-death has broken through" (p. 42). Emotional trauma can have a profound influence on our understanding of our own experiences, leaving the individual no longer safe in the comfort of the everyday world, cast adrift, estranged, or cut off. It is a sense of being deadened, an emotional blunting, summarized by Participant B as being broken.

All six participants struggled in varying degrees to make meaning of what they had seen, even as they translated it into news stories. Although I did not ask them directly whether living through these experiences had changed their lives, the participants shared a sense of the life-changing affect of having seen, up close, the pain of others. I had asked whether their experiences had changed the way they wrote about, portrayed, or thought about the people they had covered as journalists. All six participants felt that their portrayal of victims did not change significantly because of their own experiences. However, indirectly, it profoundly changed their lives. In four instances participants had taken a break from working in newsrooms and covering general news, changing their focus: one shifting her focus to also include softer news such as lifestyle and agricultural news; one focusing more on peace advocacy journalism; one wanting to focus on writing about food; and one writing about public health (Code 1.2).

Participant S explains a deep sense of loss (Code 1.2.2) she experienced when covering one particular story: "... and you are part of a soul that died. You do not know the guy. You did not know the mother. But there's a little bit that is [pause] it's gone." (Text lines 483-484). As she tries to make sense of the trauma of a mother, and what she feels as a part of her "soul" dying, it speaks to the splintering of the "absolutism of everyday live", her "embeddedness" of her existence, and the "indefiniteness of its certain extinction" (Stolorow, 2011, p. 44). Her sense of loss, although relational as part of a bigger whole of being in the world, is also profoundly isolating. It sets her apart in a way that is singularly lonely.

### **Empathy as Signifier of Resilience**

Participant Sa described the process of interviewing people who have survived traumatic events as something that traumatizes him. "The moment you start your questioning [pause] prompting answers with the interview [pause] they have to tell you something deep in their mind

(text line 290)When the interviewee breaks down [...] they are reliving the experience. And you cannot just abandon them; you still have to get the story” (text line 291).

Journalists are professional storytellers. They engage their audiences’ attention and emotions by presenting the facts of real-life events in a narrative form (Duncan, 2012). Duncan pointed out that this can leave the journalist and the “bereaved” “bruised by the interview (p. 590). This is especially the case if the journalist is empathetically engaged in the process. Stolorow (2011) described this emotional attunement as the individual connecting with another by “virtue of our common finitude”, to counter “emotional trauma, with its accompanying feelings of singularity, estrangement, and solitude” (pp. 64-65). Participant Sa recounted covering the story of a friend’s daughter who had been mauled by dog. “It really hurt me” (Code 2.1: text line 285); “It felt like my own daughter. Even if it was my friend’s child. It felt like my own daughter” (text line 286). For several of the participants in this study, it is a feeling that persists, long after the actual event. They remember the moments, the people, the feelings. As Participant Sa noted: “Even as I talk about this now, I am affected by the memory (Code 2.1: text line 287).

Consistently, within the interviews, the six participants referred to the principles of their trade – truth-telling, accuracy, balance – as being the very things that helped them cope during the lived moment of telling the story of others’ pain, as well as afterwards (Code 2.2.1). “Being accurate also helps the journalist cope with stress” (Participant Sa: text line 257). It was as though by focusing on the who, what, when, where and why of basic journalism, helped them navigate the most difficult moments, and kept them centred. Participant Sa noted about the ethics of covering others’ trauma: “... I’ve never written a story [where] I could not have looked

the other person in the eye, or what I would have written [about myself if I had experienced it].

(Code 2.2.1: text line 493)

In relation to other guiding principles, three of the participants specifically mentioned their religious faith as pivotal to coping with the trauma of others (Code 2.2.2). Participant B noted: “I am a firm believer in God. Not religion. Just God. That has been my moral compass” (text line 71). At the same time he was very clear of his belief in his own abilities: “People trust me. They have faith in me. They respect my decisions. It’s a blessing. Because if I call someone, they will come” (Code 2.2.3: text line 78).

Resilience for the purpose of this study was explored in relation to coping with the experiences of witnessing other’s trauma as part of the participants’ role as journalists. I did not explore recovery from a clinical symptomatic perspective, for instance depression, PTSD or STSD. Rather, I explored resilience within the context of pertaining to the ability of the participants to “maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning” in relation to the highly disruptive events they had been exposed to in their work (Bonanno, 2004, p. 20). Participant M explained her resilience in coping with trauma within the context of empathic engagement with the people whose stories she had told that is both ontologically linked to the notion of how we live in the world, and temporal as it relates to her being-in-the-world.

There is a set of journalistic rule that you have to follow, because this is what you’re taught. What really helps me in such times of crisis is to tell the story with compassion, not cold, not clinical, even as you tackle it as a case study and while running with the story, you are still a human being, and you still have a heart. I was lucky to have been raised in a home with strong moral values and that my

faith is strong, because there are moments when all you can say is, dear God, how is it that it can happen that people suffer so much? (Text line 397-399)

Resilience is a deeply complex adult response that cannot be attributed to single ways of coping or “maintaining equilibrium”; rather Bonanno (2004) argues that there are “multiple and sometimes unexpected pathways to resilience (p. 25). Bonanno lists these as: “hardiness”; “self-enhancement”; “repressive coping”; “positive emotion and laughter” (pp. 25-26). Could it be possible that empathetic engagement with the other would fit within these pathways? Within the interviews, the participants consistently noted empathy for others as helpful, either directly or indirectly, in coping with the unfolding trauma they were seeing as journalists.

From a narrative-constructivist perspective, Dworznik (2006) argued that the participants in her study were “more emotionally involved in and affected by trauma events” than they let on, yet seemed “able to cope with their exposure by reframing their experiences as lessons learned, goals fulfilled, and personal achievements” (Dworznik, 2006, as cited by Keats, 2010).

Participant R recounted how she was talking to herself as she was covering a bomb blast in downtown Nairobi in 2012. “I was speaking to a security guard. But I felt so guilty interviewing him, and not giving him the space to process what had happened. I kept thinking, maybe I should change professions. It just felt insensitive. It felt immoral to talk to people at the moment. I was filled with disbelief at myself, and really had an inward fight. I kept asking myself, how do people do this?” (Code 1.1.3 & 2.3.3; text lines 139-145). She thought back of this experience as a profound lesson, and one that would influence her view of the self, and how she thought of her role.

### **The Ineluctability of Risk**

The emergent theme of risk and its inescapable lure (Code 3) for five of the participants came as a surprise to me. Even though from an analytic perspective, Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009) wrote that “there is no rule for what counts as recurrence”, risk-taking came up time and again at a broad level within the interviews, even as I bore in mind the dynamic relationship between “convergence and divergence, commonality and individuality” (p.107). I did not ask specific questions related to risk, yet consistently, five participants referenced risk-taking in recounting their experiences, not only during distressing events, but even beyond (Code 3.1).

A solid body of literature has documented risk-taking among journalists who cover combat extensively (for example Backholm & Bjorkqvist, 2010; Boyer & Hannerz, 2006; Kay, 2002; Dworzniak, 2006; Dworzniak & Grubb, 2007, Feinstein & Nicholson, 2005; Feinstein, Owen & Blair, 2002; Newman, Simpson & Handschuh, 2003). However, I was not expecting risk-taking to feature as strongly or even at all in the interviews with the participants who all worked or had worked as general reporters and had not been assigned to cover a war, or had gone off to cover one intentionally. An example of this was when one participant remarked, out of the blue, and completely unrelated to what he was talking about (the first time he understood that he was a journalist, and showing me photos he had taken for the entertainment section of the newspaper he was working for): “You know, something about me [pause] I like danger. I liked being there (Code 3.1: text line 45). I let him continue in what felt like a deeply reflective moment for the participant. He then told me about the moment that he understood how to get a good photo when people were being tear-gassed, was to run towards the police and not away with the others. “... when the police throw teargas, people run away [...] when I go behind the people, I would get good photos” (Code 3.1.1: text line 47). Participant B understood the risks

involved, yet he was driven to get “good photos”, running directly towards danger – armed security forces. Risk-taking is often associated with irrational behaviour, or even ignorance (Lupton & Tulloch, 2002). However, in the cases of the participants in this study, ignorance was not factor; denial perhaps, in that although they knew the risks associated with their actions, they might not fully have believed, in the moment, that they themselves could suffer harm. And while a significant body of research has focused on “people’s perceptions of risk”, very few studies have focused on exploring the “meanings given to voluntary risk-taking” as in the example given by Participant B (p. 113). Although entirely beyond the scope of this study, it is an area worthy of further investigation, given the myriad examples of journalists who put themselves in harm’s way in ways that often feel and seem inexplicable, even to themselves, and the paucity of empirical evidence to explain the phenomenon.

Participant S recounts how she covered a story that had her “jumping” between the police and a community that was up in arms about a small child that had been raped and killed. “It’s a crazy situation, and at one stage I found myself with the community and I had this cop point his gun at me, and I realized he does not know that I am a journalist ...” (Code 3.1.1 & 2.2.3: text line 509-511). Even as she understood that she was crossing the line between adversaries, she continued to put herself in harm’s way to get her story, denying her own safety. From a cognitive perspective Participant S’s social construction of reality was shattered; it was entropy writ large as in the moment, the system that allowed her to do her work as a journalist, failed her (Vizeu & Correia, 2007). It spoke to the suspension of doubt, which above all is a strategy for survival. It was also not the last time she would put herself in harm’s way.

Participant R was the one individual who seemed most risk-averse throughout her interview. She referred several times to being overwhelmed by the demands her work required,

as though she felt that she was not up to the task. “There is only so much that I can do. The community was looking to me for solutions [pause] which I did not have (Code 1.1.4; 1.2.2; 2.1.1; 2.2.3 & 2.3.3: text line 106). Yet in 2012, when a bomb blast ripped through a market in downtown Nairobi, she ran to the scene, against what she felt were her instinctive reactions. “First of all, I was very apprehensive of going to the site. I was literally scared. But I lied to myself. Do I want to be there where bullets are flying? No, I don’t” (Code 3.1: text lines 134-136). From a narrative-constructivist perspective, Participant R was, even as she was experiencing the stress of placing herself danger by running to the scene minutes after a bomb had gone off, organizing her experience in a coherent narrative as a way to make sense of what she was about to witness, and recalled during our interviews.

### **Relevance and Significance of the Study**

Three clear super-ordinate themes emerged from this study. Trauma had a catalytic life-changing impact on the journalists who participated in the study. All six placed a high premium on empathy, and how they perceived its influence in their coping strategies, how it helped them manage their emotions, and how it potentially helped them recover from the stress of covering the trauma of others. All six participants also, in varying degrees, showed a willingness to voluntarily place themselves in harm’s way, taking personal risks to get their stories.

Cottee (2011) quoted the war correspondent, Chris Hedges, as saying that “the rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug” (Hedges, 2002, as cited by Cottee, 2011, p. 440). This mirrors the well-documented responses in both popular and academic literature by many journalists who have covered combat during their careers. Yet few studies explore the comparatively routine world of reporters who cover everyday trauma, let alone the phenomenology of risk that may be present, or not, in reporters who never make it to the

frontlines of military combat. Although small in scope, recent studies are starting to focus on this phenomenon and its impact on the reporters who are often among the first to respond to disasters and tragedy (Massé, 2011; McMahon, 2001; Simpson & Coté, 2006; Smith, 2008). Although I had not initially set out to explore risk as an element of journalistic engagement, it was one of the striking findings that consistently presented thematically across all six cases. Of particular relevance, given the findings of this study that showed a tendency by all six participants to engage in risk-taking, is the potential to explore further the meaning that taking risks, voluntarily, hold for journalists who cover traumatic events.

Also of significance and relevance is Duncan's (2012) argument that the professional principles of journalism that espouse "accuracy, veracity, precision and attention to detail" are of critical importance when journalists cover tragedy (p. 591). It is a burden of responsibility that cannot be taken lightly, and one that was highlighted by all the participants within the interviews. Without fail the participants referenced accuracy, balance and truth-telling as key to their work and ability to function well. Although all six participants were very clear in identifying what they believed their roles and responsibilities were, a few did question whether they should not have adopted a more active participatory role. This is a topic beyond the scope of this thesis, but one that demands further exploration, given the trend in the media industry for journalists to adopt a more participatory stance when covering the news.

Within the context of cultural studies, Boyer & Hannerz (2006) argued that there is "no news without 'culture'", while acknowledging the "shifting sands" upon which journalists and their "cultures of expertise" stand in times of "intense marketization, communicational innovation, and enhanced translocal social relations" (pp. 6-8). The authors recognized that even as the future of journalism is not certain, it cannot be denied that "the future lives and crafts of

journalists will have implications for all of us” (p. 6), as journalists translate and filter much of the knowledge of the world through their work. The question for me, as researcher, was whether journalists’ capacity to fully comply with the stringent professional requirements their craft demands related to accuracy, precision, attention to detail and truth-telling was compromised if they were traumatized by the trauma of others. If they were emotionally blunted as a result of emotional experiences, what impact did this have on their ability to objectively ply their craft, and how did they engage with those whose stories they are telling, if they themselves were in pain?

### **Limitations**

I believe that a limitation of this study is that I am not a psychologist. My major in psychology at the under-graduate level hardly equipped me to hold forth on the psychological effects that everyday trauma may have on journalists. In addition, I am a novice IPA researcher. However, through the lens of IPA, I strove at all times through my data and interpretations to present in as clear a way as possible the viewpoints and experiences of the participants themselves, so that the reader could gain a deeper insight into the lived experiences of the journalists who shared their thoughts and feelings so openly with me.

Another limitation was the geographic location of the participants. I could not meet the Zimbabwean journalist face to face, and had to rely on VoIP technology and email. It was also not possible to do second face to face interviews with the other participants, because of their geographic locations: Kenya and South Africa. Ideally, follow-up interviews could have contributed additional phenomena for analysis, or “longitudinal, before-and-after phenomena” as described by Smith, Flowers & Larkin (2009, p. 53). I was also very aware of the potential for doing harm during the interviews, and may have erred on the side of caution in probing the

participants' experiences. However, all six the participants have to be credited for being open and willing to engage in a discussion, which in many instances brought back painful memories, and reminders of the traumatic stress they had experienced in the course of their professions as journalists.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

### **Summary**

Seeing and writing or portraying the everyday trauma of people and their pain had a profound impact on the six journalists who participated in this study. Several spoke about the pain they themselves experienced in covering the tragedies of others. In one instance, a participant described what sounded like profound grief for a small child who had been severely mauled by a dog. One participant had tears in her eyes when she spoke about covering the story of a little girl who had been raped by a neighbour. I observed in another participant, how, while recounting her memories of a particularly horrific bus crash, she lost track of the original question. It was, as though for a moment, she was back at the scene of the crash.

Setting out to understand how journalists make meaning of the everyday trauma they cover, I was prepared to find that it would have an impact them. My first finding showed that indeed, seeing the trauma of others and translating it into news had a profound and life changing effect on the participants. Four of the participants had at some point taken a break from reporting general news, and three were no longer engaged in covering hard news. Instead, they had chosen to broaden their areas of specialisation, focusing on softer news, or taking a break from traditional journalism altogether in at least two instances.

The second finding was that empathy played an important role in all their lives. Walking in the other's shoes, as one participant described it. Repeatedly, they recounted how they felt the pain of the people whose stories they were covering, and how this influenced their emotions. In some instances, their emotions manifested physically. They shook with fear; their mouths were dry; they felt nauseous to the point of throwing up. They cried. In all instances, they linked these visceral feelings with still being able to then carry on doing their jobs. As IPA is not an approach that looks to cause and effect, my findings with regard empathy and resilience do not have a predictive value. However, my findings did suggest that the participants consciously or subconsciously, whether they named it as such or not, placed a high value on being empathic.

What surprised me most was my third finding, which was the prevalence of what I describe as the ineluctability of risk – the attraction danger held for five of the participants who participated in this study. The participants did not conform to the iconic image of the war reporter; they had all worked as general reporters and journalists when they witnessed the traumatic events. Yet, five of the participants referred to the risks they had taken in covering news stories, and even how they deliberately sought out risk and took chances. Even the one participant who seemed most risk-averse mentioned how against her better judgement she had run to the scene of a bomb blast. I did not focus on risk-taking in the interviews; the participants referenced it, often out of context. It was as though they were compelled to tell me about the risks they had taken, even though unsolicited.

Although not an emergent theme, memory also played a role in how the participants remembered their experiences. A few particularly brutal scenes haunted some of the participants. Some of them stayed in touch with one or two of the survivors of some of the traumatic events

they had covered. For the most part, they said that they chose not to consciously dwell on the details of the events.

All the participants displayed a strong sense of self and identity, both personal and as journalists. They were passionate about the profession, understood deeply their roles and responsibilities as caretakers of the public good, but were also critical of the fact that no one had ever helped them cope with the stress of covering traumatic events.

The daily news and long-form journalism have long brought home the emotional impact of war on the journalists who cover them. Yet the journalists who cover the everyday trauma of our daily lives, still stand in the shadow of their fellow scribes. There is still no systematic and systemic attempt to ensure that the duty of care be operationalized.

Journalism somehow fosters a culture where the individuals engaged in this work don't often talk about their experiences. They may simply be too exhausted, too distressed, or afraid that they will be seen as not able to rise to the occasion demanded by their profession. But journalists talk often about the pain of others. Many articulate their pain through the writing they do, or the images they produce. And they will often recount heartbreaking stories they have covered. Journalists after all are human. Whether their own or not, they feel pain. But they don't often talk about their own personal pain as a result of others' suffering.

By not taking the impact emotional trauma has on the lives and identities of the people who bring us the news seriously, we not only do the journalists a disservice, but also the people whose stories they tell, and the audiences who consume the news. Research shows that providing professional counselling as part of the duty of care as employers, benefits both employer and employee, as journalists usually respond by producing more sensitive and compelling journalism. Perhaps, it should start at an educational level, where journalists, along with the

basics of their profession, are also trained in dealing with trauma: how to manage it and how to write about it. Increasingly, in sub-Saharan Africa, media councils and media development organizations are paying attention to this. There are many examples of this work on the sub-continent, but the one that immediately comes to mind is the work being done by the Media Council of Kenya to train journalists in coping with trauma.

In addition, there is abundant literature available to guide journalists in this field, but mostly the manuals focus on security – an equally important aspect of journalism – and not necessarily on trauma and the care it requires. The Columbia School of Journalism’s Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma remains the go-to organization for journalists, educators and researchers interested in this field. Universities are increasingly including this the field of trauma and journalism in their journalism curricula. But again, these steps are not systematically and universally embraced. I would hope that this small study contributes in some part to the overall duty of care of journalists, rather than what still feels like a dereliction of duty.

My findings have no predictive value in the sense that one can extrapolate that all journalists will react and respond in the same way as the participants did to the everyday trauma they encountered, wrote about and captured with images. But I hope it allows the reader a glimpse into the emotions that these six individuals have and how they viewed the survivors of the tragedies they covered as journalists, as well those who died. Their testimonies and witness accounts of painful events, not only for those directly affected by events, but also their own pain, speak to journalists who often went above and beyond the call of duty to get the best stories they possibly could. While this is a reflection of their voluntary risk-taking, it is also a reflection of their dedication to their craft.

All six participants also placed a high premium on empathy. Participant B recounted a vivid memory:

In 2006, the first image I shot is still in my mind. A man was shot and he was bleeding.

As a Christian, all I could think of was to say, let's pray as I stayed with him. But

I felt such guilt. The cops threw the body in the car. He bled to death. He

stretched out his hand to me, asking me to stay. And they let him bleed to death.

(Text lines 12-13)

Throughout the retelling of this story, Participant B twisted his hands, and jiggled his legs. He also got up and sat down, as though propelled from his chair, which I interpreted as a reflection of the physical impact the memory of this story had on him.

In my conversation with Jooste (2013), she remarked that what she remembered from one particularly horrific scene she had witnessed after a politically motivated attack in South Africa was a half-eaten discarded piece of pink jam and coconut confectionary. In what she described as a possible defence mechanism, it was as though her memories of the horrific scene of bodies and blood crystallized around this brightly coloured piece of cake. And the feet of the people who had been murdered, but never their faces. (I. Jooste, Internews Kenya Country Director, personal communication, April 17, 2013). Her memory resonated deeply with me, as I recall vividly covering the politically motivated violence driven by apartheid in KwaZulu Natal in South Africa in the late 1980s. I was wholly unprepared as a young and inexperienced reporter to truly understand the horror and wholesale slaughter of people to which I was witness. It left me reeling emotionally. Like Jooste, I remember only fractions of scenes. I too struggle to think of the people's faces.

There is one exception: it is the face of an elderly man who was dressed in a suit for what was to be an Easter weekend home. He died, along with some 50 other women, men and children in a horrific bus crash in what was then known as the Transkei. As I write this, I see him so clearly. He looked as though he was sleeping.

I think I will live with the fear for the rest of my life that in my storytelling, I did not fully honour him and the many other people who had died so senselessly and needlessly whose stories I had to tell. I wish I had known more. And better.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Three areas related to the findings in this study in particular lend themselves to further research. The first is the enduring impact and effects of everyday trauma on journalists and its potential to interfere with their professional and personal lives. Cait McMahon, a psychologist with a degree in theology focused her doctoral research on the “positive outcomes of traumatic exposure that result in dramatic enhancement of the individual” (Massé, 2011, p. 164). “One of my hypotheses is that negative effects and growth and resilience often sit side by side in a person, as they are actually different constructs – it is not necessarily either/or” (C. McMahon, as cited by Massé , p. 164). Although there were distinct differences in the responses of the participants, five of them displayed a struggle with the effects of the trauma: guilt and stress that manifested as a fixation on the sadness of what they had witnessed. A similarity in the findings were references to how exhausted they felt in covering such events, with Participant R noting that even thinking about specific traumatic stories during our interview made her feel tired. The six participants’ experiences shared striking similarities in depth and intensity that captured many of the negative emotions associated with witnessing the pain of others: fear, anxiety, anger, and exhaustion. Although all six participants had experienced everyday traumatic events

intensely, their overall take on the distress they had experienced was that they had survived it. This nod to resilience raises the question whether the lasting effects of traumatic stress brought on by covering everyday trauma can also provide opportunities for personal growth.

The second area that lends itself to further research relates to the section in my findings that speak to the ineluctability of risk. What struck me while analysing my findings was that there were no pat answers to explain why all the participants voluntarily chose to take the risks they did in performing their duties as journalists. I felt that their capacity to put themselves in harm's way could not simply be ascribed to a sense of duty, ego or competitiveness. Participant B saw the risks he took in 2007/08 to document the post-election violence in Kenya as having given him the opportunity to be part of the country's history. Participant Sa summed working up in Zimbabwe this way: "If you are doing a political story, which is not on bended knee, doing a story is like a clown in a circus walking on a tight rope ... It is a minefield, which can be life-threatening" (text line 212). Participant S however noted that even though she had taken risks to get a story, it has changed how she reacts in her personal life, having herself been a victim of an armed robbery in a store.

If I am in a shopping center robbery, I don't do anything. I just go down. I will never play the hero. People are too gun-happy. As a journalist ... don't get involved, because you are already involved, simply because you're there. It's too dangerous. No story is more important than a human life. Never ever. Don't be a hero. Don't be a reporter. Get down, and then write the story afterwards. (Text line 515)

It is interesting that at least four of the participants referenced the dictum that no story is worth a life, yet, consistently, while on assignment, they took risks that placed them directly in

harm's way. It is as though there is a disconnect between what they know to be good for them, and what they then do, in the moment.

The third area that I felt lends itself to further research is the role that empathy plays in the coping mechanisms and resilience of journalists who cover everyday traumatic events in the course of their duties. Massé (2011) wrote that the debate on such issues as emotional engagement in reporting and trauma counselling for journalists increased in 2005, after the South Asia tsunami on December 26, 2004. "It was as though this tragedy brought heightened attention to controversial topics rarely discussed openly in newsrooms in previous years" (p. 109). There is still much that needs to be done in this regard, especially in terms of buy-in from newsrooms globally. "The need to understand the issues from the victim's point of view is critical. That requires education. It really should be part of every journalism program" (G. Hoff, as cited by Massé, 2011, p. 159). Although not predictive, the findings of this study do lend themselves to being read in light of the universality of human emotions as experienced by all six participants. The participants' emotional responses – fear, anxiety, sadness, feelings of loss, anger and frustration, even depression – all seem to stem from their ability to feel empathy with the people whose stories they covered. Hoff pointed out that how journalists handle the considerations they make every day as they seek to report on the news is important, as it "can increase or alleviate the trauma of the victim and his/her family" (G. Hoff, as cited by Massé, 2011, p. 159). It can also alleviate the personal pain that often goes hand in hand with emotional stress. Journalists who experience traumatic stress and struggle with its attendant emotional responses and distress do not make for business as usual. Rather, by being psychologically prepared, journalists will be able to make the necessary connections with people and communities, to tell the compelling stories that can make a difference, and maintain their humanness while doing so.

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## **Appendix**

### **Interview Guide: Journalism and Trauma**

Time of Interview:

Date:

Location:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee (e.g. general or specialist reporter):

Number of years in this position:

Name of media house/freelance:

Relevant personal information (e.g. gender if relevant):

#### **Brief description of this project:**

*The purpose of this research is to gain an understanding of the emotional effects journalists experience when they cover traumatic events and how journalists make sense of the profound challenge posed by telling the story of the private experience of public tragedy.*

(Thank the interviewees for their participation, assure them of confidentiality, ensure the release form is signed, and remind them that they are being recorded and that they can withdraw at any point during the process.)

**Background information related to covering trauma as a journalist (central question):**

1. What are the main challenges you face when covering traumatic events, such as physical and sexual abuse, other forms of violence, crime, fatal and crippling traffic accidents, and conflict and war?
2. Can you think of a story that you wrote that illustrates where you handled the situation well, and you felt that you could cope with the situation.
3. Can you tell me about a story where you felt that this was not the case; that you did not cope with or handle the traumatic event you were covering well?
4. What does a journalist do, who in your opinion exemplifies the term “professional and ethical journalist”?
5. What is easy about being a professional journalist?
6. What is difficult about being a professional journalist?
7. Can you give me an example of what this looks like to you – both easy and difficult?

**Questions related to the coping mechanisms and strategies journalists may employ when writing about trauma:**

1. How do you write about trauma? I.e. what is a guiding principle for you when you have to tell the stories of people affected by tragedy and trauma?
2. What makes a story a “story about trauma”?
3. What *don't* you do as a journalist when writing about traumatic events and the people affected by it?
4. Can you give me an example/examples from current and past experiences?
5. What did you notice about yourself during this experience?

6. What did you feel?
7. What did it make you think, or think of?
8. What *do* you do as a journalist when you write about traumatic events and the people affected by it?
9. Can you give me an example/examples from current and past experiences?
10. What did you notice about yourself during this experience?
11. What did you feel?
12. What did it make you think, or think of?
13. Has this made you do things differently as a journalist?
14. Do you think back about the stories you have written and the people you wrote about?

**Illustrative:**

Can you please share with me a photo or personal image that belongs to you, or a story that you have written that illustrates for you when you handled the telling of a story of a traumatic event well, and demonstrates a personal sense of learning and growth? Can you also share with me a photo or personal image that belongs to you, or a story that you have written that illustrates the opposite, in other words, ones that you feel show a lack of coping, despondency and maybe make you feel traumatized still?

*Thank the participant. Remind them that based on the results compiled from these interviews, you will be writing a research paper that could inform potential training of journalists in the future.*