



MODULE 11

Reporting on Migrants and Refugees: Dealing with Trauma

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MODULE AIMS

- To understand the complexities of trauma.
- To encourage participants to work as journalists in a trauma-sensitive way.
- To help participants to think about their own involvement and mental health.



LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of this module, participants should be able:

- To identify how trauma can affect migrants and refugees.
→ **Affective LO: Receiving**
- To recognize that a journalist can be affected through a personal involvement.
→ **Affective LO: Receiving**
- To explain how trauma and personal involvement can impact the coverage of migrants and refugees referring to key elements of psychological trauma.
→ **Cognitive LO: Understanding**
- To work with and cover migrants and refugees in a trauma-sensitive way oriented to the TIIM-model and self-protection measures. → **Cognitive LO: Creating**

Outline

The challenges and approaches in covering matters of migrants and refugees, discussed in the previous chapter, are now extended to include ethical, psychological and personal perspectives. Reporting on people fleeing and migrating¹, who have experienced desparate events, or reporting on people living in camps, often in abysmal situations with shortages of food, sanitation facilities or health care, comes with new challenges for journalists. Interviews with, and reports about, migrants and refugees challenge both the involvement and health of journalists. Both aspects require reflection by the journalists. People can be traumatized, which can make interviews difficult and particular attention should be paid to trauma-sensitive coverage. Furthermore, journalists also have to think about their own involvement and mental health.

To understand the challenges journalists face in the context of trauma-sensitive reporting, the term trauma will be introduced and defined first. Moreover, it is important to remember a range of recommended courses of action when reporting about migration and forced displacement because of the trauma aspect. In addition, guidelines about personal involvement and mental health can help journalists to protect themselves in the field.

1 For definitions, please consult the glossaries recommended in Module 2 (European Migration Network, 2018; UNHCR, n.d.; IOM, 2019).



SUGGESTION FOR AN EXERCISE TO ADDRESS THE COGNITIVE SKILLS OF REMEMBERING AND THE AFFECTIVE SKILLS OF RECEIVING:

Use The Guardian newspaper's brief portraits (Tondo, 2019) for a classroom discussion.

Let participants think about the challenges journalists face when reporting on these people, as covered in the article. Collect the aspects and discuss them during the seminar session.

Psychological trauma

The titles of news articles about migrants and refugees are emblazoned with the word trauma: Traumatized migrants, Traumatic experiences of refugees, Survivors of the trauma. But trauma has a specific meaning. Journalists need to use the word carefully and accurately (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). Journalists who know about the term and its meaning additionally know of its relevance in the context of reporting migrants and refugee matters. The term trauma comes originally from the Greek word for 'wound' and, as Dass-Brailsford (2007, pp. 2-3) states, "connotes a physical injury and parallels the psychic wounding that can potentially follow a traumatic episode". Physiological trauma means a bodily illness or injury, while psychological trauma refers to "experiences that place a person's life or bodily integrity in jeopardy" (Ford, 2009, p. 6).

The term trauma is often used exchangeably and its meanings have blurred. While the word can describe an event, i.e. a traumatic event, it can also be the traumatic reaction to those events. The meaning as an event includes "the individual's experience during exposure to the stressor(s)" (Ford & Courtois, 2009, p. 15). The word trauma, understood as mental injury, is caused by one or more traumatic events, whose processing by extreme anxiety or the feeling of helplessness has overwhelmed the individual (Seidler, 2013).

Individual trauma differs from person to person even if "psychosocial reactions to trauma have not changed dramatically across time and culture" (Dass-Brailsford, 2007, p. 3). People react to similar traumatic events in multitude ways and with a variety of symptoms (Storr et al., 2007). Some individuals can cope with trauma, because of protective factors. Others are unable to cope with it, because of risk factors (Ford, 2009). In addition, there is more than one event that can lead to a trauma reaction. There are various types of traumatization such as war or conflict, physical violence, sexual traumatic events (rape, child abuse/sexual abuse), accidents, fire or natural



SUGGESTION FOR AN EXERCISE TO ADDRESS THE COGNITIVE SKILLS OF REMEMBERING AND THE AFFECTIVE SKILLS OF RECEIVING:

Use the text and sources above to design a short 10-minute lecture. The lecture should deal with the term trauma, and the meaning of both trauma and the related term traumatic event in your cultural/country context. The idea is to explain the psychological understanding of trauma in contrast to acute reactions.

Create a short test that asks some of the features of trauma. Multiple choice questions, true/false questions or questions that require definitions of terms are possible tasks.

disasters (Perkonigg et al., 2001). Psychologists distinguish between Type I, a single incident trauma, and Type II, a complex or repetitive trauma. For instance, Type I could be a traumatic accident, a natural disaster or a terrorist attack; Type II ongoing abuse, domestic violence, war or genocide (Terr, 1995). In addition, the concept of sequential trauma may entail constantly recurring various stressful situations. This type is discussed in more detail in the context of migration and forced displacement. Vicarious traumatization² is traumatization of those who are indirectly affected by the traumatic event, such as helpers or journalists (Palm et al., 2004). This type is discussed in more detail in the context of the involvement and mental health of the journalist later in this module.

Trauma, migrants and refugees

Migration and forced displacement can be traumatic. The definition of trauma applies to many mental injuries, which can be caused by a possible traumatic event like migration or forced displacement. There is evidence that migrants and refugees have an increased prevalence of mental disorder; among refugees and asylum seekers, increased post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms were associated with a higher number of traumas (among others Carswell et al., 2011; Ford, 2009; Steel et al., 2009). Brief examples of descriptive statistics illustrate the prevalence:

- In a study about psychiatric comorbidity and health status of Bosnian refugees, who had fled from the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and living in Croatia, and who reported symptoms that meet criteria for depression (39%) and PTSD (26%), 21% of the respondents also reported symptoms comorbid for both disorders (Mollica et al., 1999).

² There are more than 20 English-language terms for vicarious traumatization, e.g. secondary traumatization (Lemke, 2013).

- A study about the trauma experience and mental health conditions among migrants from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea ("food refugees") in China shows PTSD (56 %) and above-threshold scores on anxiety (90 %) and depression (81 %). The migrants reported an average of 12 traumatic events (Lee et al., 2001).
- A systematic review of surveys about disorders in general refugee populations in Western countries shows rates of PTSD (9 %) and major depression (5 %), with a high degree of co-morbidity (Fazel et al., 2005).
- Based on self-report symptom checklists, migrants from Central America, in particular from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala interviewed at the US border in Texas, met the diagnostic criteria for PTSD (32 %), depression (24 %), and for a PTSD/depression mix (17 %). The findings suggest that the mental health issues are responses to violence and persecution (Keller et al., 2017).

Hence, while the percentages for PTSD among migrants and refugees vary, they may in all likelihood suffer from trauma disorders. A study comparing the mental health of various groups of immigrants and native-born residents in Switzerland shows that respondents of each studied group fulfil the criteria for PTSD (by frequency rates): asylum seekers (54 %); refugees (41 %); "illegal migrants" (6 %), labour migrants (17 %); native-born Swiss residents (8%). These rates may lead to the conclusion that the residence status and/or the reason for leaving the home country is already an indicator of PTSD (Heeren et al., 2014). A Brazilian research team has shown that "[t]he prevalence of PTSD among migrants is very high (47%), especially among refugees, who experience it at nearly twice the rate of migrant workers" (Bustamante, et al., 2018). The prevalence rate for PTSD in torture victims is 50-70 % (van Velsen et al., 1996).

A special aspect about the traumatization of refugees is that often it cannot be assumed to be a single traumatization, but a sequential one. In sequential trauma, various traumatic events occur in a particular sequence (Becker, 2014; Keilson, 1979; Zimmermann, 2012). Studies (among other Marshall, 2005; Mollica et al., 1998; Mollica et al., 1999) "have shown that refugees and individuals affected by war and gross human rights violations experience a wide range and high number of traumatic events" (Carswell et al., 2011, p. 107). Migrants and refugees often experience sequential trauma.

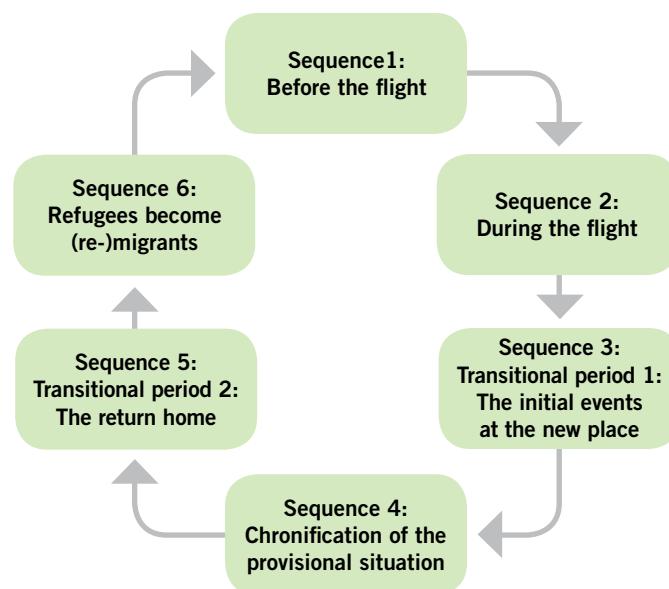
Figure 31 based on Zimmermann (2012) could be applied to current developments: As of the time of editing this module (2020) – people fleeing war and conflict in Iraq, Syria, South Sudan or the DRC might have experienced many extremely stressful events as well as others fleeing terror, like people from Nigeria brutalised by Boko Haram, or persecution or human rights violations such as torture (see Module 3). The thing all these people may have in common is that the first traumatic event occurs before they flee. Before being forced to flee, people may lose friends and/or relatives, see death around them and experience imprisonment, torture, loss of property, hunger, malnutrition, physical assault, extreme fear, rape and loss of livelihood. In the aforementioned study exam-

ining pre-migration trauma exposure of families and individuals at the US border from Central America 83% cited violence as a reason for fleeing their country (Keller et al., 2017). But it is not a new phenomenon. In 1998, for instance, in an Australian study asylum-seekers, refugees and immigrants of Tamil background reported pre-migration trauma as “exposure to ill-health without medical care, lack of shelter, being close to death, forced separation from family members, and the murder or unnatural death of others” (Silove et al., 1998, p.179).

The next traumatic event is the fleeing, which can last days, months or even years, and may also inflict trauma on refugees, but also on migrants, traveling for many additional reasons. During this period, the people are frequently separated from family members or friends, robbed, forced to inflict pain or kill themselves, witness torture or killing, and/or lose family members or friends, who travelled with them. Moreover, they might not know where they are for a while, have lost orientation, or endure extremely harsh environmental conditions. For example, a report from UNHCR and the Mixed Migration Center from the Danish Refugee Council shows that thousands of refugees and migrants die and suffer from serious human rights violations on their journey to the African Mediterranean coast and from West to East Africa (Breen, 2019).

In transit and destination countries, which might be not places chosen by either the migrant or the refugee, people experience another event. They have to adapt to a new place, a new language and new living conditions. Often, their status remains unresolved so they cannot be sure whether or not

Figure 31: Sequence of six potential traumatic events in the context of migration and forced displacement



Source: Own illustration, based on Zimmermann (2012).

they will be allowed to stay in the host country. During this period, their uncertain status could become chronic: The provisional nature of the situation leaves migrants and refugees in a state of permanent insecurity. An extreme example at the time of editing this module, is the Greek refugee camp Moria, where the transitory residents have been waiting for years under particularly difficult conditions for their insecure status to change. Studies from past decades show that the consequences of such conditions can be stressful. Researchers in Germany interviewed adolescents in shelters and found out that young refugees' current (as well as past) living conditions were highly stressful. For the adolescents, the burdens included changes in family structures as well as reversal of traditional roles within the family, e.g. the question which family members handle official correspondence (Gavranidou et al., 2008).

In addition, for some migrants and refugees the trauma continues if they have to return to their country of origin. According to EUROSTAT (2019), from 2015 to 2019, approximately 2 million asylum applications were rejected by member states of the European Union (EU). The return journey could be traumatic. From handcuffing and the separation of new friends or close family in the host country to the fear what the future will be in the country of origin – there is a broad range of factors that can traumatize.

Finally, migrants and refugees becoming migrants again where the returned persons concerned decide to repeat the cycle. Returning migrants or refugees are at risk of having previously aban-



SUGGESTION FOR AN EXERCISE TO ADDRESS THE COGNITIVE SKILLS OF ANALYSIS AND THE AFFECTIVE SKILLS OF RECEIVING:

Present the suggested film elements, which show the potentially traumatized migrants or refugees and the different causes of traumatisation, to the participants. Ask participants – before showing the film elements – to pay attention to what the migrants or refugees tell and what is told about migration, forced displacement and trauma in the films. Let them also ponder to what extent the experience corresponds to the definition of a traumatic event, which is an existential threat that may exceed coping skills.

1. *Reshaping the Trauma of Refugee Children in Lesbos* (National Geographic, 2018) Timecode: 00:00-00:15
2. *Refugees on Lesbos* (Sallet, 2017) Timecode: 02:16-02:26
3. *Outsourcing border controls to Africa* (Schäfer & Schlindwein, 2019) Timecode: 20:10-21:20

Use the film material for a discussion. Discuss the results and impressions. In this context, introduce the term “sequential traumatization”.

done everything in their homeland. On returning, they do not have any basis for their existence, and may also be socially isolated from their families and compatriots (Zimmermann, 2012). Leavers returning home empty-handed might become failures in the eyes of those who stayed at home (Pujol-Mazzini, 2019). This trauma may prompt people to risk the cycle again.

Interviewing migrants and refugees and being trauma-sensitive

As already discussed in the previous modules, it is important not only to talk about, but also talk *with* migrants and refugees. Sometimes the interviews with migrants and refugees are published or broadcast in full, sometimes quotations are published in the context of a report. Each time, however, journalists have to meet migrants and refugees, talk to them, ask questions. A look at the news in Europe since 2015 has revealed making of such interviews and reports (see Module 4). Let's have a look at another case: Remember the photo of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his daughter, Valeria, who was not quite two years old. They drowned on the US-Mexican border, as mentioned in Module 5. Many media outlets posted a video of Óscar's mother, Rosa Ramirez, desperately crying and telling about the last contact with her son and about the dolls of her granddaughter, while flash lights went on and off everywhere. In an interview, Rosa Ramírez told with tears in her eyes how she felt when her son and his young daughter set out on the journey and how she feels now in a house without her son and granddaughter. Journalists asked Rosa several – partly haunting – questions (among others: Renteria, 2019; Thebault et al., 2019; BBC News, 2019). It is well known that questions can shake up traumatic memories. That aspect applies of course not only to the mother of a deceased migrant and his child, but to all migrants and refugees, so it is important to consider which questions are suitable for potentially traumatized migrants and refugees and their families (among others: Hanaford et al., 2016; McMahan et al., 2014).

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (Dart Center), a resource center and think tank for journalists who cover potentially traumatic events around the world, has published a teaching DVD/online film for working journalists and students to learn techniques for an ethical, sensitive and accurate reporting of victims and survivors of trauma in general. In the video, seven families, struck by tragedy, tell of the best ways to ethically treat people, who become the focus of media. It is available in English and Spanish (Dart Center, 2014).³

It is more than just the choice of questions that journalists should be aware of in such personal interviews, as their attitude, behaviour and demeanour also are significant factors. A journalist's prime responsibility concerns the individual facing her/him: the migrant, the refugee, the interviewee, who will be the protagonists of the journalist's story. But some journalists act more like "disaster tourists than migration correspondents", the public editor of the Italian daily La Stampa

3 Further general information on the topic of trauma reporting can be found at e.g. Healey (2019), who is a highly experienced BBC journalist, or Simpson et al. (2006). Roger Simpson worked as a journalist for The Wall Street Journal and the Detroit Free Press and was the founding director of the Dart Center.

Anna Masera was quoted as saying in 2016 (Albeanu, 2016). Focusing on the suffering of migrants and refugees and interviewing them without awareness of their sentiments and mental health, makes reporters appear more like vultures of disaster than reputable and professional reporters. In order not to act like ‘disaster tourists’, journalists must reflect their attitudes in each specific encounter. Is the interviewee a “victim”, unable to change his/her situation? Or a “survivor”, who has mastered a difficult situation? The answers to these questions are relevant for the interviews (Nobel, 2018). But they may also require change in the behaviour of the journalists, as well as in their voice, questioning technique, and perspective on the story.

Furthermore, journalists should consider the question how they can avoid re-victimizing already-traumatized individuals. For example, during an interview, a small detail can trigger flashbacks or other intrusive memories, and journalists need to give the interviewees time to recover (Hanaford et al., 2016). In general, journalists should not forget that the interviewees are not professionals who talk soberly about facts, but people who are at least potentially traumatized.

“A journalist should make every effort to give some control to the person being interviewed – interviewees should understand that they don’t have to answer questions they don’t want to answer, and that they can end the interview at any time. It’s important to reiterate this as it can be difficult for traumatised people to trust others.” (Hanaford et al., 2016)

That’s what Katy Robjant, a consultant clinical psychologist, said in an interview with the Dart Center about reporting on migrants and refugees (Hanaford et al., 2016). It can be important for the journalists to be specific, rather than asking open-ended questions. Hence, the migrant or refugee interviewed can share all the information he/she wants to, without feeling forced to share details the interviewee does not want to even think about (Hanaford et al., 2016). A list of standards for journalists to follow when interviewing trauma survivors from the Journalist’s Resource⁴ also points out that “journalists have a responsibility to do everything they can to avoid exposing the interviewee to further abuse and to avoid undermining an interviewee’s standing in the community” (Nobel, 2018). Therefore, journalists should be aware that migrants and refugees may wish to respond to parts of the story (if possible) prior to release, as this may reduce the impact and possible trauma of public exposure (Nobel, 2018).

Several guidelines and publications⁵ for trauma-sensitive interviews inform journalists how to (re-)act in interviews. We have compiled the following standards called *TIIM – Trauma Informed Interviews with Migrants* for interviews with migrants and refugees (see Figure 32, from relevant guide-

4 The Journalist’s Resource, based at Harvard’s Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, edited a list of standards for journalists to follow when interviewing trauma survivors. The list was originally from The War Horse, a nonprofit news publication focused on covering war, trauma and veterans’ affairs (Nobel, 2018).

5 The Journalist’s Resource (see Footnote 4) is one, another is the set of standards which Dart Center created for journalists to follow when interviewing trauma survivors (Hight & Smyth, 2009). Moreover, the Dart Center’s Interview “Reporting on Refugees: Tips on Covering the Crisis” (Hanaford et al., 2016) and the article “Working With Victims and Survivors” (Dart Center, 2011) also provide more standards for journalists.

lines (Dart Center, 2011; Hanaford et al., 2016; Hight & Smyth, 2009; Nobel, 2018). The guidelines promote awareness that the interviewed migrant or refugee can be traumatized or has similar mental health issues.

TIIM – Trauma Informed Interviews with Migrants

1. **Preparation – Thoroughly prepare interviews.** Besides particular skills (e. g. interview techniques) and understanding of immigration law, statistics about migrants and refugees as well as migration backgrounds, journalists should be aware about trauma aspects. If journalists know about the potential presence of trauma and have informed themselves about it, they have taken an important step in preparation. Be aware of potential gender, language, class, culture or nationality factors that could influence the engagement on both sides.
2. **Identification – Be honest and transparent right from the beginning.** Before asking the first questions, journalists should introduce themselves and their role: “My name is John Doe and I would like to report about migration for the Daily Magazine.” Journalist may receive an abrupt insensitive reaction. But they should not respond in a like manner and keep in mind that the reaction may be due to a traumatization. If a potential interviewee does not agree to the interview, journalists could leave a contact card and suggest to talk later.
3. **Explanation – Keep in mind that your interviewees are rarely media experts.** Journalist should know that migrants or refugees might come from a media culture different to theirs. They should try to explain the media process in their region and how their story, photo and/or footage is likely to be used. Journalists should also explain that the material could be edited before or after publication, may be used several times or may not be used at all. Above all, journalists should refrain from giving abused people the additional burden of an (exclusive) contract. Media contracts are relatively unknown to most and negotiating such a contract – as a traumatized person – can be a burden.
4. **Respect – Always treat the interviewees with dignity.** Journalists should respect the rights of migrants and refugees not to be interviewed, filmed and/or photographed – this means that people should always be asked in advance. Thus, traumatized migrants or refugees may be unable to be interviewed, filmed or photographed – and unable to give informed consent to an interview. Journalists should take that into consideration. People suffering from traumatic situations might not want to talk about their experiences but do so about other issues. Journalists should not press people into an interview, by saying they would help others.
5. **Setting – Feel responsible for a safe space for the interview.** Traumatized people do need to talk about their trauma(s) without unwanted listeners or disturbance. Moreover, journalists should endeavour to give some control to the interviewees. Create an atmosphere in which migrants or refugees understand that they do not have to answer all questions or tell (traumatic) details and that the interview can be ended at any time in case they do not want to talk anymore.
6. **Words – Pay attention to your choice of words.** Journalists should not feign compassion but use considerate terms. The supportive phrase “I’m sorry for what happened to you” rather than the

bluntly “How do you feel?” Journalists should also avoid saying “I understand how you feel.” No matter how well-prepared journalists are, they do not “understand” what a traumatized migrant or refugee has experienced. Moreover, journalists should prefer the term “survivor” instead of “victim.” Migrants or refugees are not “victims” unless they describe themselves with the word “victim”. In addition, journalists should avoid the language of blame: They should be careful of asking “why” questions, “devil’s advocate” questions or questions that suggests that the interviewee could have (re-)act in another way, because refugees or migrants might feel self-blame, guilt and shame.

7. **Time – Take enough time for the interview.** For migrants or refugees, their (potentially traumatic) experience is very intense and personal. Thus, journalists should spend enough time with them. Then migrants or refugees can develop a sense of trust in journalists. That means journalists also need time to listen – actively and non-judgmentally. Over time, the interviewee might be more likely to reveal aspects, about which journalists would not have asked.
8. **Reaction – Be prepared to respond to emotional incidents:** During an interview, journalists may inadvertently mention a detail that triggers a flashback or other stressful memories. The interviewee could become desperate, collapse emotionally or distance themselves. If they show a traumatic reaction, journalists should give the migrant or refugee time to recover. An advice is: “Try to stay calm and keep your actions predictable” (Hanaford et al., 2016). Journalists should offer help, reassure the migrants or refugees that it is a safe situation in a safe location and remind them who they are. After a while, when the interviewee has gathered, journalists can ask: “Are you ready to move on with the interview?” It is also possible to cancel the interview after a collapse.

Figure 32: TIIM – key points to remember



Source: Compilation of guidelines from Dart Center (2011), Hanaford et al. (2016), Hight & Smyth (2009) and Nobel (2018). Own illustration.

After an interview with migrants or refugees, journalists should consider if something has changed for the interviewees simply because the interview has taken place. Journalists should ask themselves who might take care of the interviewees. If the interview was emotionally disturbing, it is important not to leave them on their own. At the same time, the important question arises: How to deal with the desire for personal contact? Moreover, how to deal with the desire of migrants or refugees to be helped? Assistance should be provided so that interviewees can find personal answers to these questions. Some of these aspects also refer to the later discussed aspect of involvement and health of the journalist. Moreover, it is important to let sources – especially when they stay illegally in a country – remain anonymous, i.e. make the decision for themselves if they do or do not want their name to appear in the news media. When writing an article or producing a story, journalists should abide by the interviewees' wishes. This applies also, if prior to publication, migrants or refugees decide not to be identified or reported anymore (Carcamo et al., 2014).

Furthermore, ethical reporting that is sensitive to trauma does, of course, apply the guidelines that were already discussed in Module 10: Source- and fact-checking, wording and perspective should also be balanced in a report about migrants or refugees, so that the publication does not have a negative impact on already traumatized migrants or refugees. Journalists should take into consideration that when first talking to a migrant or refugee, the person may be confused or absent minded. Double-checking of information can ensure accuracy (Hight & Smyth, 2009). People who have experienced trauma and who have been covered in the media afterwards particularly complained about stories with distorted facts, e.g. misspelled names, incorrect ages or chronology of events and dates (Simpson et al., 2006).



SUGGESTION FOR AN INTERACTIVE EXERCISE TO ADDRESSES THE COGNITIVE SKILLS OF CREATING AND THE AFFECTIVE SKILLS OF RECEIVING:

To train participants for the situation of encountering and interviewing migrants, use the roleplay templates provided. Afterwards, let the students talk about their personal experiences during the roleplay. Hand out the list of standards for interviews with migrants and refugees (TIIM) and discuss the rules. To address the affective skills of responding: Let the participants repeat the interview situation – this time, they should stick to the new rules.

Material for roleplay:

Rules: Form groups with four to six participants in each group. One participant should play a refugee, the others play journalists. Distribute prescribed roles and give the participants a short amount of time to read their role. Tell them that they are going to have 15 minutes for the actual roleplay.

Role of a journalist: Your job is to report about the personal situation of a refugee in the refugee camp. Why did she/he leave the home country? What did she/he experience? What was the worst experience?

The outcome of the interview should include direct quotes and, of course, a photo of the person.

Role of a refugee: Have a look at Module 2 and find inspiration from existing testimonials (Infomigrants, 2020; IOM, 2017; Médecins Sans Frontières, 2019). There are descriptions of personal histories of migrants and refugees.

Suggest that the role-players devise a story for their character.



ALTERNATIVE TO ADDRESS THE COGNITIVE SKILLS OF ANALYSIS AND THE AFFECTIVE SKILLS OF RECEIVING:

Show the participants the suggested videos from the Dart Center “Trauma-Informed Interviewing: Techniques from a Clinician’s Toolkit” (Porterfield, 2019) and discuss the individual guidelines for trauma-sensitive interviews afterwards.

Mental health of journalists covering migrants and refugees

Journalists can also be traumatized by their reporting (Feinstein & Storm, 2017). Indirect traumatization may already occur when a journalist is being told the details of a traumatic event – even from a distance, and without direct sensory impressions of the actual incident (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Thus, a trauma only presented verbally may inflict on listeners intrusive memories similar to those developed after an experience of a traumatic event (Krans et al., 2010). As a consequence, symptoms of a trauma can transfer to helpers, relatives or journalists. Reporters can be traumatized by talking to traumatized migrants or refugees. An analysis of several studies on journalism and PTSD shows that there are job-specific risk factors for journalists, e.g. traumatic experiences in the personal history, the severity of traumatic exposure, a low level of social and professional support, and a lack of work experience.⁶ The analysis also shows that coping strategies exist, e.g. social support and a professional distance to the traumatic events – the latter can also be understood as a dissociation symptom (Weidmann, 2008). An example of how journalists reporting on migrants and refugees feel the burden of events is provided by Simon Shuster, reporter for

⁶ But also a longer professional life accumulates more traumatic experiences (Weidmann, 2008).

Time Magazine, the New York based magazine, who mentioned about his experience in the refugee camp of Idomeni in northern Greece: “It was quite shocking for me when I arrived there and saw the conditions – there were numerous scenes that were very painful to watch” (Scott, 2016). Will Vassilopoulos, a Greek journalist who works for Agence France-Presse, described the situation on Lesbos (Greece) in 2016 as “sinister” and “horrible” (Feinstein & Storm, 2017, p. 21). These impressions may not remain without consequences.

Besides PTSD or depression, journalists covering refugees and migrants could also be affected by moral injury (Feinstein et al., 2018), defined as one’s own gross violation of moral or ethical standards. It is also possible to be affected by moral injury by being a (non-)direct witness of misbehaviour (Stein et al., 2012). “[M]oral injury in journalists covering the refugee crisis is associated with being a parent, working alone, no previous exposure to war, a recent increase in workload, a belief that organisational support is lacking and poor control over resources needed to report the story” (Feinstein et al., 2018, p. 4). A significant association can also be found between guilt and moral injury. Journalists who reported about migrants and refugees stories close to home, or who decided to assist migrants – instead of reporting about them, but staying in their role of being a journalist – feel more guilty (Feinstein et al., 2018). There are many moral conflicts, which can make journalists feel responsible for the well-being of their interviewees or the subjects they cover and can bring them into a role conflict, like the above-mentioned case of Simon Shuster, who described that he was mostly switched into a civilian mode and had helped people. He called it “a constant assessment where you have to really stop and think” about what the chief obligation is – either to report or to do humanitarian things (Scott, 2016). This is also like the case involving a Syrian refugee, who was pleading with journalist Jess Hurd to help him, saying “Shoot me, or put me in your trunk” (Hurd, 2015). Likewise, the refugee who furiously approached German journalist Raniah Salloum, and started blaming her for being unable to stop police violence against the refugees (Hanaford et al., 2016).

This also means that journalists always have to be aware of their own role in the context of events: What am I, a helper or reporter? What tasks I do are associated with which role? What exceeds the remit? Where is human action and help necessary? “(D)ata provide preliminary evidence that moral injury may be less likely to surface in journalists if they understand what their professional role is and do not blur the boundaries of what they are expected to do” (Feinstein & Storm, 2017). The case of the journalist Fredrik Örnevall shows which dilemma a reporter can face: Örnevall, his camera operator and his interpreter smuggled a refugee child to Sweden from Greece while they were producing a TV documentary in Greece, broadcast in 2015. Örnevall went to court, where he testified that if he had not helped the boy, it would have haunted him forever (Crouch, 2017).⁷ The case of Alice Petré, migration correspondent for Swedish Radio,

⁷ More tips on mental health care for journalists can be found at Karki (2017) or Hylton (2015).

is another one. When she reported about a family from Afghanistan in Southern Europe, she gave them three times a small amount of money out of her own pocket. But then she changed her mind. She explained:

“He has been writing to me and asking for more money and I told him, ‘I am a journalist, not an activist’. I cannot go over that border again. I did it because I felt very much for the family, but then I realised it wasn’t such a good idea because it raises expectations and I cannot live up to these expectations so I had better stop it.” (Feinstein & Storm, 2017, p. 27)

Journalist Sofia Papadopoulou offered to help a couple in Idomeni camp in Greece: “It was then that I understood it is very hard to abide by the strict journalistic rules learned at school, and that no field experience can be compared with a class lesson” (Fronista & Papadopoulou, 2018). Journalists are well advised to think about their role in the context of the coverage about migrants and refugees and may have to redefine it again and again.

All in all, journalists should be aware they can be personally involved in a great many ways. Journalist should think about how to deal with the situation, and how to protect themselves, before they step into them. They should be aware that reality may be even more challenging than anything they considered in theory. In a tip sheet from Columbia Journalism School, safety and self-care strategies are summarized for journalists, urging them to take care of themselves in the field, and to be prepared, mindful and focused (Hylton, 2015).



SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENT TO ADDRESS THE COGNITIVE SKILLS OF UNDERSTANDING AND CREATING AND THE AFFECTIVE SKILLS OF RECEIVING:

(A) Ask students to watch Simon Shuster’s video report from the Idomeni camp (Shuster, 2016). Assign them to write about not only how trauma and personal involvement can impact the coverage of migrants and refugees but also the possible conflicts the reporter encountered when doing the report and to what extent those conflicts can influence the reporter’s own mental constitution.

(B) If there is an opportunity to give students access to migrants or refugees (through associations or authorities), ask your students to conduct an interview with a migrant or refugee. Otherwise let the students prepare such an interview and develop a personal schedule for such an interview – where they also consider possible complications regarding trauma reactions and own mental health.



RECOMMENDED READING:

Academic:

Fronista, P., & Papadopoulou, S. (2018). Down and out and wet and bedraggled: Navigating the emotional and ethical maelstrom of reporting from the crisis flash-point of Idomeni. In Dell’Orto, G. & Wetzstein, I. (Eds.), *Refugee news, refugee politics: Journalism, public opinion and policymaking in Europe* (127-140). New York: Routledge.

Journalistic:

Shuster, S. (2016, March 24). This 13-Year-Old Girl Stranded in a Refugee Camp Is Praying to Get Out. [Video]. *Time Magazine*. Retrieved May 11, 2020, from <https://time.com/4269714/syrian-refugee-girl/>

Institutional:

Hanaford, A., Hurd, J., Parkinson, J., Robjant, K., Salloum, R., & Gering, J. (2016, February 26). *Reporting on refugees: Tips on covering the crisis*. Dart Center. Retrieved December 18, 2018, from <https://dartcenter.org/resources/reporting-refugees-tips-covering-crisis>

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