

RADiOFiLM

Working with victims of conflict,
human rights abuses and trauma

Getting the Story

IMPACT RESEARCH BRIEFING #1:
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GETTING THE STORY

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Radio Film is an independent, multi-award winning, internationally-focused film production company based in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. We seek to bring thought-provoking human stories to diverse audiences and to inspire positive change.

In the summer of 2017, we were joined by Dr Ellie Smith, an international human rights lawyer with over 20 years of experience of working with victims of war crimes and mass atrocities.

The primary purpose of our collaborative project is to enable a thorough exploration of the various ways in which journalistic and filmmaking communities worldwide engage with victims of gross human rights violations, and the potential effects of that engagement on the journalists themselves, their working practices, the survivors, and the resulting film or written piece.

Getting the Story is the first in a series of Radio Film briefings aimed at sharing our learning and experience with the international documentary community.

1.2 Purpose, scope and application of this briefing

While many filmmakers and journalists feel driven to tell the stories of victims of conflict or gross human rights violations, the nature of abuses suffered by victims, together with the impact of those abuses on victims, can present particular challenges to filmmakers in eliciting a full, coherent, chronological and accurate account of events. In order to work effectively with victims, filmmakers and journalists should be aware of these potential challenges, and need to develop strategies to cope with them if and when they arise.

Victims of atrocities may be unable or reluctant to relate their experiences to filmmakers and journalists for a number of reasons. This briefing describes:

- (1) factors arising at the time of the abuse that can affect a victim's ability to provide a full account of their experiences;
- (2) barriers arising in the aftermath of the abuse that may render victims unwilling to speak about the abuses suffered; and
- (3) the victim's psychological traumatic response to the events in question, which may affect their ability to remember an event in part or in its entirety.

This briefing also considers the effects of sexual violence, as an exacerbating factor in a victim's ability to speak about their experiences, and offers thoughts on specific areas where filmmakers and journalists will need to develop considered strategies in their approach to interviewing and working with victims.

A separate briefing on the related issue of fact-checking and the need to establish the veracity of statements and memories of victims affected by trauma will be the second in this series. These issues are therefore not encompassed here.

Significantly, victims of conflict or gross human rights violations may be psychologically vulnerable, and filmmakers and journalists should approach them with care and sensitivity. **This briefing does not address issues surrounding the physical and psychological safety of victims.** Before working with vulnerable survivors, filmmakers and journalists should ensure that they are equipped to do so in a way that does not jeopardise the physical or psychological safety and wellbeing of victims.

If in doubt, consult a psychological professional with relevant experience.

There is currently very limited written guidance available that relates specifically to safe working practices for engaging with vulnerable survivors of atrocities. In relation to working with victims of sexual and gender-based violence, however, see:

WITNESS [Ethical Interviews with Survivors of Sexual and Gender Based Violence](#)

General guidance on subject safety is available from the following sources:

DOC SOCIETY [Safe and Secure Handbook, 2017](#)

DOC SOCIETY [Safe and Secure Protocol, 2017](#)

DOC SOCIETY IMPACT FIELD GUIDE [Consider Your Subjects](#)

BBC [Editorial Guidelines: Working with Vulnerable Contributors](#)

Film productions teams and journalists should also consider their training needs, with particular reference to working with traumatised victims.¹

1.3 Definitions

For the purpose of this briefing, the term ‘trauma’ means an adverse psychological response to an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events.²

While posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is one of the most commonly diagnosed mental health disorders in victims of atrocities,³ the diagnosis itself comprises a collection of symptoms that can vary between victims. As a result, it can be difficult to draw any specific conclusions about the impact of PTSD on the ability of victims to recall and speak about their experiences. Reference here is therefore to specific symptoms of trauma rather than to clinical diagnoses, although some of the symptoms identified will form part of the diagnostic criteria for PTSD.⁴

¹ Radio Film offers training and support in interviewing and working with psychologically vulnerable victims of war and gross human rights violations. For further information please contact andy@radiofilm.co.uk.

² A similar, although not identical definition is used in Caruth 1996, p. 91. The definition is adjusted here to the specific context.

³ See, for example, Modvig and Jaranson 2004, p. 43.

⁴ For full diagnostic criteria and features, see American Psychiatric Association (APA) 2013, pp. 271-276.

2. Challenges in eliciting the full story

2.1 Barriers arising at the time of abuse

The nature and form of abuse suffered by a victim, together with the context in which abuses were perpetrated, can affect a victim's ability to provide journalists or filmmakers with a full, detailed and coherent account of events.

A victim's account may be incomplete, for example, where they have been subjected to forms of sensory deprivation such as blindfolding or hooding, where attacks occurred at night and in the absence of lighting, or where victims suffered lapses of consciousness. A victim's difficulties in constructing a complete account of events might be further hampered where they experienced disorientation, confusion and extreme stress at the time of the event(s).

Victims may also experience difficulties in providing a complete account where they have been held by perpetrators or have otherwise been under their sole control for a significant period of time. This might include, for example, victims who were child soldiers, or girls and women held as domestics and/or sex slaves. In these circumstances, journalists and filmmaker should be aware that the victim's ability to accurately recount specifics of individual events can be affected by factors such as drugging, as well as repeated or similar abuse experiences involving multiple perpetrators. In the latter case, journalists and filmmakers should also be aware that victims may unintentionally generate a composite narrative, which combines elements from any number of similar abuse experiences into a single and specific event.⁵

The broader context of the crime may also be relevant to the completeness of a victim's account. Where, for example, abuses arose within a context of prevailing malnutrition – where conflict has interrupted domestic agricultural activity, where livestock and/or crops have been destroyed or stolen, or where victims have been forced to leave their homes to seek safety and food is not readily available – issues such as starvation or vitamin deficiency can impair memory.⁶

Finally, where victims have suffered significant head injuries, they may experience some level of memory impairment,⁷ and so again may struggle to provide a full account.

Strategy Recommendations

- In the majority of cases, gaps in a victim's account that arise in these circumstances cannot be filled by the victim themselves.
- In order to obtain a broader and more complete picture of events, journalists and filmmakers should consider speaking to multiple victims and witnesses.

⁵ Herlihy et al. 2002, p. 326.

⁶ International Rehabilitation Council for Torture Victims (IRCT) 2007, p. 16.

⁷ IRCT 2007, p. 16.

2.2 Barriers arising after the abuse but before interview with filmmakers

i. The impact of shame

While shame can prevent many victims from speaking about their experiences of abuse, its impact is particularly inhibiting in cases involving rape and other forms of sexual violence.⁸

In many societies sex remains a taboo subject. For men and boys, rape can be interpreted as a diminution of masculinity and is rarely articulated.⁹ For women and girls, the disclosure of sexual violence to the victim's family or community may have devastating consequences for her marriage, leading to ostracism from the family, destitution and impoverishment, as well as social exclusion within the victim's community.¹⁰ In cases of unmarried rape victims, sexual violence may reduce a victim's prospects of marriage.

Social ostracism or cultural isolation may also exacerbate any trauma response of the victim, compounding a victim's difficulties in speaking about her experiences.¹¹

In other cases, victims may use local or regional euphemisms when speaking about rape or other forms of sexual violence. These euphemisms typically will not directly reference any sexual element, yet their meaning is widely understood within the community. Women and girls may, for example, refer to themselves as being 'married' to a member of a military group, where they may, in fact, have been taken against their will from their family, retained as the 'property' of the individual concerned and subjected to multiple rapes. Others may describe, for example, a physical beating in which their clothing became dishevelled, or regaining consciousness after a beating to find that their clothing was torn.

⁸ Clinical research with victims of trauma shows that those with a history of sexual violence experience greater levels of shame when compared with victims of non-sexual violence, assessed by reference to a 25-item scale investigating characterological, behavioural and bodily shame, and considering experiential, cognitive and behavioural components of shame within each of the three identified domains; Andrews et al., reported in Bogner et al. 2007, pp. 75-81; See also Herlihy and Turner 2006, p. 85.

⁹ See, for example, Peel 2004, pp. 61-70.

¹⁰ See for example United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, Toronto, 9th – 12th November 1997, Gender-Based Persecution: UN Report of Expert Group Meeting, UN Doc. EGM/GBP/1997/Report, para. 41.

¹¹ According to the Istanbul Protocol, the UN-endorsed manual for the effective investigation and documentation of torture, 'psychological consequences...occur in the context of personal attribution of meaning, personality development, and social, political and cultural factors', Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2004), Manual on the effective investigation and documentation of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/training8Rev1.en.pdf. Accessed 30 July 2014; see also IRCT 2007, p. 24.

ii. Trust

Gross human rights abuses can shatter their victims' beliefs about the world and their faith in human nature. This intense psychological crisis typically leads to very pronounced difficulties in trusting others,¹² and this is particularly the case for individuals who are asking them to relate painful or traumatic experiences.¹³ Journalists or filmmakers approaching victims, especially without any considered strategy or awareness of this issue, are likely to encounter significant problems in eliciting a full account of the events suffered.

iii. The use of interpreters and intermediaries

Victims may be willing to interact with filmmakers or journalists on the condition that their anonymity can be assured, or may otherwise seek to avoid drawing attention in their home countries or communities to their engagement in a film or journalistic project. This is particularly likely where victims either wish to prevent their families or communities from learning of their experiences of sexual violence, or where victims fear retaliation against themselves or their families because of their engagement.

Where filmmakers or journalists are unfamiliar with the area or country that they are seeking to report on, they will often use local intermediaries to provide both links and access to potential victims and witnesses. While intermediaries can clearly provide beneficial access, filmmakers and journalists should also be aware that concerns about confidentiality and the fear of retaliation may inhibit some victims and witnesses from coming forward. Moreover, in cases of sexual violence in particular, victims who are concerned about the possibility of their families or communities learning of their experiences may limit their reporting solely to their non-sexual experiences of abuse.

In addition, where filmmakers are working through interpreters, difficulties may arise where the interpreter is from the same community as the victim and there is a fear of a lack of confidentiality.

The third briefing paper in this series will focus on working with intermediaries.

¹² For a detailed exploration of the notion and nature of personal core assumptions and their role in the formation of traumatic response, see Janoff-Bulman 1992, pp. 3-25.

¹³ Herlihy and Turner 2006, p. 84.

iv. Silencing and a dominant narrative

In the aftermath of conflict or other grave and systematic human rights abuses, recovering communities or peoples, through the telling and retelling of events, can generate a shared or group understanding of the events that took place, and this may become the dominant narrative. This is an essential aspect of group healing and identity rebuilding, but it can also have the effect of stifling or silencing an individual narrative that does not fit or is otherwise inconsistent with the emergent shared narrative.

This is particularly the case where the emergent dominant narrative is a heroic one, where the affected community portrays itself as brave fighters and survivors.¹⁴ In such circumstances, shame may prevent victims who do not consider their role to have been brave or heroic from speaking about their experiences, and a vital aspect of the account is lost. Dominant narratives of this type also typically revolve around the role of male members of the community, and as a result, the narratives of less dominant groups, including women and victims of sexual violence, are effectively silenced. Without the narratives of these less dominant groups, any account gleaned by filmmakers or journalists is likely to be incomplete, and lacking a very human context.

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¹⁴ Grunebaum and Henri 2003, pp. 103-104.

Strategy Recommendations

- Journalists and filmmakers should factor in extra time in the development stage of their work to build and foster relationships of trust with victims.
- In the case of rape and other forms of sexual violence, journalists should adopt gender-appropriate interviewing wherever possible. Most women survivors (although not all) prefer to be interviewed by another woman. A preference is less pronounced in the case of male survivors. In both cases, survivors should be offered a choice of male or female interviewers where available.
- Time should be taken to understand any local euphemisms for sexual violence.
- Thought should be given to the interview location: a victim who does not feel safe is less likely to talk about their experiences. The location should be discrete, accessible to the victim and make them feel comfortable. Do not draw attention to the fact that you are there.
- Where possible, use interpreters from outside of the victim's community, in order to minimise fears that the victim's engagement with the project will become known within his or her community.
- Journalists and filmmakers should conduct thorough training with interpreters and intermediaries in the issue of interviewee confidentiality. The victim should also be assured that all team members recognise and understand the need for confidentiality.
- Consider what measures you are able to offer the victim to protect their anonymity. Are you in a position to provide any other form of protection?
- Journalists and filmmakers should develop a strategy to ensure that a full range of views and experiences are scoped and sought. In the case of less dominant groups, access might be sought through the identification of local intermediaries, including NGOs active on the ground.
- Intermediaries should be identified with care in order to ensure that any political, social, cultural or religious affiliations they may have do not negatively affect perceptions of the filmmakers and journalists within the affected community or erode any position of trust.

2.3 The impact of trauma

The ability of victims to construct and articulate a full and coherent account of events may be affected by the psychological impact that trauma has had, and continues to have, on their memory.

Not all victims will be suffering from trauma at the time that they speak to a journalist or filmmaker. For those who are, however, this is likely to affect the quality and nature of the account they are able to give.¹⁵ In addition, filmmakers and journalists should be conscious that while victims may be free of trauma by the time they are interviewed, many may still have suffered a trauma response at the time of the event, and as a result, could experience difficulties in remembering the event in its entirety and with coherence.

Trauma responses differ between individuals, and the impact on memory can therefore vary enormously. While filmmakers and journalists do not need to be experts in trauma, an awareness, at least, of the possible *impact* of trauma on the victims' memory may be helpful in eliciting the story in a way that is both productive for the filmmaker and also safe for the victim.

A victim who is suffering from symptoms of involuntary avoidance, for example, is likely to experience forms of psychogenic amnesia,¹⁶ and as a result, aspects of the traumatic event, or the event in its entirety, may simply be unavailable to them for as long as he or she experiences those symptoms.

Similar challenges arise for victims who dissociated at the time of the event(s), effectively producing a level of amnesia for some or all of the traumatic event.¹⁷ Significantly for filmmakers and journalists, dissociation – and hence gaps in memory – can also occur with memories of the event and during times of stress or high arousal,¹⁸ including where a victim is asked about their experiences.¹⁹

¹⁵ A cross-sectional survey of a population-based sample of over 1,300 victims conducted in the Former Yugoslavia ten years after the conflict there found that a third of those sampled had suffered from PTSD, with 22% of the study sample experiencing current PTSD symptoms (Basoglu et al. 2005, p. 585). In a randomised study into the mental health status of 400 victims of the Rwandan genocide, researchers found that over half of the victim population still had PTSD symptoms ten years later, while 60% suffered from major depression (Brouneus 2010, pp. 419-420).

¹⁶ Herlihy and Turner 2006, pp. 85-87.

¹⁷ Weiss et al, cited in Bogner et al. 2007, p. 75.

¹⁸ This has been noted, for example, in the context of the UK domestic asylum system during the conduct of asylum interviews by Home Office representatives, Bogner et al. 2007, pp. 77-78.

¹⁹ Ibid.

For victims suffering from autobiographical memory impairment, by which normal memory processes essentially failed at the time of the event(s) concerned, a victim's memory may be fragmentary or non-existent.²⁰ Filmmakers and journalists should be aware that in such a case, these "hidden memories" can arise in response to triggers or reminders of the event, including when they are questioned about it. Because of this, different aspects of their experiences may arise depending on the questions posed, and a particularly considered approach to interview would need to be developed and pursued.

By contrast, victims who suffer from regular flashbacks of an event, such that they regularly relive their experience, are likely to have a better-than-normal memory of what they experienced or witnessed.

Victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence are particularly prone to difficulties in speaking about and producing a coherent and complete account of their experiences. In addition to issues of shame, which have already been discussed, avoidance symptoms are significantly more evident in victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence than in victims of non-sexual trauma.²¹ Victims of sexual violence also experience more dissociation symptoms, a higher PTSD symptom count and greater difficulty in disclosure when compared to victims of non-sexual trauma.²²

Strategy Recommendations

- Victims may be psychologically vulnerable. Ensure you are equipped to interview them in a way that is safe for them.
- Memories may arise in the victim with questioning. Before interviewing a victim, journalists and filmmakers should give particular thought to the questions they are going to ask.
- If the information sought is already available from other sources, is an interview with a potentially vulnerable victim necessary for the project?

²⁰ Herlihy and Turner, for example, observe that 'when someone is interviewed and asked about an experience that was traumatic, and has only, or largely, memories of this fragmented type, they are unlikely to be able to produce a coherent verbal narrative, quite simply because no complete verbal narrative exists.' Herlihy and Turner 2006, p. 86

²¹ Van Velsen et al. 1996, p. 188.

²² See, generally, Bogner et al. 2007; Ramsay et al. 1993, pp. 5-58; see also Lecic-Tosevski and Bakalic 2004, p. 97.

3 Summary of Key Points

- A number of factors, including those which relate to the context and nature of the abuse as well as the clinical impact of the abuse on the individual, can affect a victim's ability to speak about the abuses they have suffered or witnessed. As a result, they may be unable to provide filmmakers or journalists with an articulate, coherent, chronological and complete account.
- This presents particular challenges for journalists and filmmakers, requiring informed, safe, creative and thoughtful approaches to how accounts can be obtained.
- Such approaches might include adjustments to the mode of questioning, the manner in which information is sought, or the pursuit of additional lines of questioning or investigation.
- Many victims of trauma may be vulnerable. Interviewing should be done with great care and with the necessary preparation and skills. If in doubt, consult someone with psychological expertise.

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