WHEN MORALITY MATTERS MOST:
INTERVIEWING CHILDREN AT THE SCENE
OF A SCHOOL SHOOTING

A Dissertation in
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Abstract

This paper explores the lived experience of parents, children, reporters and editors at the scene of a school shooting. From the lived experience of parents and children, seven themes emerged: confusion, communication/how found out, waiting, reunion, interactions with the news media, loss of trust in the news media, and social media. From the lived experience of reporters and editors, six themes emerged: how people found out/first few hours, conflicts of interest/overlapping roles, difference between locals and out-of-towners, newsroom dynamics, relationship between media and subjects, and accuracy. Drawing from these lived experiences and existing journalism ethics guidelines, a new set of ethical guidelines for reporting from an acute, single-event traumatic event such as a school shooting is proposed. A module to help train journalists about trauma and how it affects their subjects is also provided.
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When Morality Matters Most: 
Interviewing children at the scene of a school shooting

Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem

(Fig. 1-1: Alexis, third-grade student being interviewed immediately after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary; Photo credit: CNN)

We all remember seeing it: Alexis, a third-grade girl being interviewed for a live TV news broadcast immediately after the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, CT, in December 2012 (CNN.com Blogs, 2012). Cars and emergency vehicles in the background, people milling around. Alexis, wearing a grey gymnastics hoodie and a headband, stands by her parents. She seems calm, occasionally making eye contact with the camera, answering questions as if she was talking about a field trip to the zoo. But in reality, she was recounting details of what she saw and heard and felt while people were being killed nearby. The reporter puts a hand on her shoulder, leans in and asks, “Are you ok right now?”

In many ways, that seems like a ludicrous question. How can she be ok? She has
just experienced an extremely traumatic event. Whether or not she seems calm, she is a third-grade girl with coping and cognitive skills appropriate to her age. She will struggle to make sense of what happened the same way that the adults will. She will feel the loss of school friends and community members. She will experience mental health effects typical after trauma (Terr, 1981; Terr, 1991; Falasca & Caulfield, 1999; Goodman et al., 2002; Ross, 2003; Simpson & Coté, 2006; DSM-5, 2013). She may experience atypical mental health effects such as Acute Stress Disorder (ASD) or perhaps Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In that moment in time, minutes after the shooting occurred, the reporter should have weighed the benefits of getting a survivor on camera for a nation craving information against the child’s well-being, privacy and ability to respond given the circumstances (Teichroeb, 2006; Fullerton, 2004).

It’s my contention that colleges and universities need to do a better job training journalism students with the kinds of knowledge and skills needed to make sound ethical decisions during high-stress and highly traumatic incidents such as mass shootings. This dissertation’s purpose is to unpack the elements of child development and psychological trauma that are relevant to the relationship between journalism and child victims of traumatic events. The goal is to establish ethical norms that can inform journalism practice and to prepare curricular recommendations for scholastic journalism programs and newsrooms to train journalists about the role of trauma in tragedies and to develop trauma-informed curriculum.

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), there are thirteen types of trauma that can affect children: Community Violence, Complex Trauma,
Domestic Violence, Early Childhood Trauma, Medical Trauma, Natural Disasters, Neglect, Physical Abuse, Refugee Trauma, School Violence, Sexual Abuse, Terrorism, and Traumatic Grief (2017). Covering traumatic events such as these is a normal part of a reporter’s duties and is often assigned to the newest reporters who not have been properly trained on the effects of trauma exposure on their sources (Fullerton, 2004). As a result, intrusive interviewing techniques that are common practice in reporting may be detrimental to the health and well-being of their interview subjects (Simpson and Coté, 2006). The detrimental effects on reporters themselves have become better known in recent years as the industry dedicates time and resources to training reporters on the effects of trauma exposure on their own mental health (Amend et al., 2012). But there is very little empirical research on the effects of interviewing on the subjects themselves, and especially on children (Libow, 1992; Fullerton, 2004; Mackay, 2008; Moeller, 2002; Slopen et al., 2007).

Trauma can be either an event (i.e. something that happens to a person) or an outcome (i.e. a person experiences trauma symptoms). Traumatic events can be long-term and ongoing (e.g. childhood neglect, abuse) or single-event, one-time experiences (e.g. dog bites, car accidents). Of the thirteen types of trauma listed above, two are directly relevant to this research (NCTSN, 2017):

| Complex trauma | Describes the problem of children's exposure to multiple or prolonged traumatic events and the impact of this exposure on their development. Typically, complex trauma exposure involves the simultaneous or sequential occurrence of child maltreatment—including psychological maltreatment, neglect, physical and sexual abuse, and domestic violence—that is chronic, begins in early childhood, and occurs within the primary caregiving system. Exposure to these initial traumatic experiences—and the resulting emotional dysregulation and the loss of safety, direction, and the ability to detect or respond to danger cues—often sets off a chain of events leading to subsequent or repeated trauma exposure in adolescence and adulthood. |

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| School violence | Includes fatal and nonfatal student or teacher victimization, threats to or injury of students, fights at school, and students carrying weapons to school. Formal definitions of school violence range from very narrow to very broad. The Center for the Prevention of School Violence, for example, defines it broadly as "any behavior that violates a school's educational mission or climate of respect or jeopardizes the intent of the school to be free of aggression against persons or property, drugs, weapons, disruptions, and disorder." Click here for more information on community violence. |

Table 1-1: Definitions of trauma

School shootings have been selected as the lens through which to study children, trauma and journalism in this research because they are one-time, highly traumatic events, their prevalence, the consistent presence of children and the fact that they warrant a lot of media attention. The kinds of trauma that may be experienced during and after a school shooting as well as how potential trauma from a school shooting differs from long-term traumas (such as ongoing child abuse or neglect) will be explored in depth in Chapter Two.

When reporters arrive at the scene of a school shooting it is very chaotic. Reporters need to quickly acclimate to the school setting, the location of the shooting, the location of the police and rescue base operations, the people who were most affected by the shooting and the people who might be available for interviews, all while being surrounded by people crying, by noise, panic, sirens, injuries, vehicles, smells and sounds associated with tragedy. Finding their bearings is not easy (Libow, 1992).

At the same time, the reporters are under pressure to gather as much information as they can as quickly as possible to get stories out to the public. There are pressures to be first and best. News editors and directors checking in on progress. Calls to get to press now. These kinds of pressures increase the reporter’s sense of urgency and force decision-making to be faster than it might normally be.
This is understandable. School shootings are panic-inducing situations for everyone involved. They are times when the public turns to the press to tell them what is going on, confirm or clarify rumors, identify victims and suspects amid the chaos. It is a daunting but essential responsibility.

However, there are times when making decisions too quickly can lead to unanticipated long-term damage for the reporter, the rescue workers and police, and for the school personnel and children and families involved. Despite the chaos, despite the pressure, despite the important role of informing the public, reporters need to be able to stop, slow down, and think things through before making decisions about conducting interviews.

The police and rescue workers have designees to talk to reporters, which makes things easier (although sometimes more frustrating) for reporters. If the school leadership is not directly involved themselves, they are often available for interviews as they work to calm victims, families and restore order. But there are no designated spokespeople for the victims or their loved ones, and these are the people reporters sometimes want to talk to the most. Through interviews, I collected and analyzed the ways journalists said they made ethical decisions on the job. These reports were considered within traditional ethical frameworks, models and codes to see if something can be learned to inform the applied question of how we should be teaching and training future journalists.

Victims of school shootings are those people who were killed or injured or witnessed the violence as well as all of the other people in the school at the time and their closest loved ones. Primary victims (those killed, injured or witnesses) and secondary
victims (everyone in the school and their closest loved ones) are well established in the trauma literature and all of these people are at high risk of being retraumatized or suffering long-term trauma effects such as PTSD (Hoven, 2003). To be clear: it is not just the ones who were directly killed or injured, or those who witnessed the attack, who are at risk.

Deciding which victims or loved ones are “ok” to interview is a process that requires careful, calm, informed deliberation. It is not a decision that should be made in the chaotic race to be first and best. The possible long-term consequences are too great. Getting a scoop should not put mechanisms in place that can put a human being at risk for PTSD.

Adding complexity, it is a very difficult process to figure out what “ok” means in these cases. Trauma wears many masks. There is no one single reaction that identifies a victim who is coping “well enough” to be interviewed versus one that indicates a victim is struggling too much. In fact, as will be explained in Chapter Two, sometimes the victims who appear to be fine (i.e. calmer, more composed and less emotional than the others) are more traumatized than their crying, screaming, clinging peers (Libow, 1992; Ochberg, 1996). Reporters who are trying their best to make thoughtful, caring decisions might approach these victims for an interview thinking they are safe to talk to without realizing that what they perceive as “ok” might actually mean that person is deeply traumatized and dissociating or in shock (Simpson and Coté, 2006).

Similarly, complex trauma, as defined earlier in this chapter, is complicated and multiplied by each individual’s life experiences (NCTSN, 2017). The 1995 National Comorbidity Survey reported that more than half of females (age 14-24) and two-thirds of males (age 14-24) in the U.S. have been exposed to one or more traumatic event (e.g. rape,
molestation, physical attack, combat, etc.) (Kessler et al., 1995). A 2013 updated version of this survey reported that more than 60% of children aged 13-17 reported at least one traumatic event (e.g. rape, kidnapping, car accident, witnessing a death, etc.) and 4.7% met the criteria for PTSD (McLaughlin et al., 2013).

The compounding effects of experiencing multiple traumas, big or small, can affect the level of trauma that is experienced in a school shooting (US Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2006; Simpson and Coté, 2006). For example, a child who has witnessed domestic violence in the home and who is then present at the scene of a school shooting might experience trauma completely differently than a child who has not lived with domestic violence. A child who has been in and out of the hospital repeatedly because of a serious medical condition might experience the trauma differently than a child who has not had those experiences. A child who has been diagnosed with oppositional defiant personality disorder or depression might experience the trauma differently than a child who has not (Gerrity & Folcarelli, 2008). The reporters on the scene will have no idea about any of this. There is no way they can tell what a child’s background has been or how the child might be experiencing the current situation in light of previous traumas.

Background

Adults

An important aspect of this study is the emphasis on children’s abilities to cope with traumatic events and how this affects their ability to participate in interviews
afterward. Jennifer Longdon, a shooting survivor who is paralyzed from the waist down, participates in media interviews about gun violence and advocates for legislative and policy changes. She was profiled in Mother Jones Magazine (Follman and West, April 2015) and spoke at a journalism conference about covering gun violence. Jennifer was very open about her experience with the shooting and about how media interviews, even years after the shooting, leave her traumatized for days. Jennifer’s story is used here to illustrate an adult’s ability to cope with trauma and interact with the media, and to lay the groundwork to contrast it with children’s abilities.

In 2004, Jennifer and her fiancé pulled into the parking lot of a fast food restaurant for dinner and were caught in crossfire. Jennifer’s fiancé was shot in the head and suffered profound cognitive damage. Jennifer was shot in the back, was hospitalized for five months and is paralyzed from the chest down.

More than ten years have passed since that night but Jennifer, rather bluntly and forcefully, told a gathering of journalists and academics at a Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma workshop that talking to reporters about the incident, even all this time later, causes her PTSD to flare for several days and she self-medicates by drinking heavily. In the following passage, Jennifer explains what it was like to go through the interview process for the Mother Jones profile. Mark and James are the Mother Jones reporters who interviewed her.

*Although Mark and James were very gentle, they asked very probing questions, pieces that many times I'd like to not think about on a regular basis, and certainly it awakened some PTSD.*

*The way that I describe it often is when you come and ask me to tell my story, however gently you're asking me, there's a part of me that hears, “Hey Jen, would*
you do me a favor, would you open an artery so we can watch you bleed?” We're talking about the night that my entire life changed. I was shot and I thought I died. My fiancé was shot in the head. I lost a big part of him and we don't talk a great deal about that, and I care not to.

But every aspect of my life changed that night, and to drag it out and sit and play with it hurts. I drank pretty heavily for a couple of days after that.

(Fig. 1-2: Jennifer Longdon, shooting survivor. Photo credit: WRTV6 in Indianapolis, Indiana)

Jennifer is an adult who has chosen a life in the spotlight. She routinely talks to reporters, gives public speeches, serves on local and regional political committees and commissions and teaches about gun violence, gun rights and disability rights. Despite the toll it takes, Jennifer has chosen to be immersed in work related to the tragedy that left her paralyzed.

Jennifer was chosen as the “face” of the adult victim in this case because she is able to carefully and thoughtfully explain what happened, the aftermath, and her thoughts and feelings related to the event. She is a willing and able participant in helping us understand
how her life has changed and the kind of repercussions she still suffers. You can see and hear Jennifer tell her story in this interview with Mother Jones (2:20) (Follman, 2015).

**Children**

Jennifer is a counterpoint to the population that will be the focus of this dissertation: children. In direct contrast to Jennifer, children rarely choose to put themselves in the public eye or act as spokespeople and advocates. In the case of school shootings, they are thrust into the spotlight after horrendous tragedies and focused on intently by the media and the viewing public. As will be discussed in Chapter Two, the younger a child is, the less developmentally capable they are of understanding what happened in a traumatic event or of understanding their reaction to it.

Children from age 7-12 are learning how to think concretely, which includes some logical thinking, but only applied to things that are right in front of them (Davies, 2004). Ask a child of this age what they saw, heard or smelled and they can use some degree of concreteness to explain things. Ask them the same question about something that happened one hallway over and they literally may not be able to respond at all or may make up a story in order to please the questioner (Terr, 1981; Krähenbühl & Blades, 2005; Simpson and Coté, 2006). The NCTSN supports this in their recommendations to reporters covering traumatic events: “Generally, children being interviewed try to be helpful to reporters. When discussing a loss or reliving an event, they may be concerned about doing a good job and may provide information they believe the reporter wants to hear, rather than their true thoughts (NCTSN, 2017).
Children are not mature enough to consent to participation and are wholly unaware of the kinds of long- and short-term consequences they may face as a result of the trauma and participation in an interview (Stover & Berkowitz, 2005). Even the “safe” fallback position of obtaining guardian permission is highly questionable because in mass shootings involving children, the guardians are also in a heightened state of emotional arousal and might not be capable of understanding the potential short- and long-term consequences to their children as a result of participation in media interviews (Libow, 1992; Simpson and Coté, 2006). Guardians are entirely focused on finding their children, determining if they have been harmed and getting them home.

Decades of research have focused on two areas that are relevant to school shootings: developmental psychology and psychological trauma. Both of these fields have changed dramatically over time. What was “known” twenty years ago is very different from what is “known” today.

For example, it has only been in recent years that researchers are beginning to unpack and understand the complexity of the role, consequences and nature of how PTSD affects adults. PTSD was added to the DSM-III in 1980 and was controversial at first (ptsd.va.gov, 2015). Understanding its effects on children is still in its infancy. Criteria for diagnosing children with PTSD were only added to the DSM-5 in 2013 (ptsd.va.gov, 2015).

Research on trauma and PTSD appears to show that traumas as big as mass shootings or as small as fender-bender car accidents can “stall out” in the brain without being fully processed into long-term storage, keeping those incidents ready to be triggered and to flare, causing emotional and psychological distress (Ochberg, 1996; Garbarino,
It appears that many people do not fully understand how childhood traumas have affected them until they are adults and can make connections between their emotions, physiology and behaviors that lead to informed insights (Teicher, 2000). The path to healing these traumas could be months or years of intensive, specialized therapy. The path before healing can be wrought with self-medication, difficulty with relationships or instability in certain aspects of life (Gray et al., 2010; Hodges et al., 2013; Connor et al., 2015; Greeson et al., 2013; Langley et al., 2015).

Assuming that obtaining permission from children or guardians in the aftermath of a mass shooting makes it acceptable to interview children is unwise because there is little chance that the journalist, the guardian or the child has the necessary knowledge, skills or abilities in the moment to make that decision for the simple fact that most people are not experts in trauma.

School shootings serve as a particularly powerful focus because they involve the most innocent of victims: children. It seems like it should be accepted as standard practice not to interview children at the scene of school shootings, yet many journalists still do (Jemphrey & Berrington, 2000; Germer, 1995; Ochberg, 1996; Heher, 2000; Maguire et al, 2002; Ross, 2003; Hollings, 2005; Simpson & Cote, 2006; Zenere, 2015). It is this contradiction that I will explore in depth in this dissertation.

**Conceptual Underpinnings**

The conceptual underpinnings of this study stem from two disciplines: journalism
ethics and psychology. The journalism ethics questions are normative and applied: why, why not and how. The psychology questions are rooted in the signs and repercussions of trauma and the effects children’s psychological development have on how they respond during and after trauma exposure.

Trauma has been selected as the lens through which to study the phenomenon because it is inherently rooted in psychological, physiological and developmental processes. Correspondingly, this study is interested in individual differences experienced by the children, families and reporters who interact. It is from the narrated lived experiences of these individuals that broader understanding of journalism practices during school shootings will emerge.

As such, some societal-level constructs will be utilized as frameworks through which to understand the data and the phenomenon. For example, understanding the community that surrounds the scene of a mass shooting is important to understanding the behaviors, choices and reactions of the people within it. Similarly, trying to understand each individual’s place in the broader society will be important to understanding the stories they disclose during the interview. Finally, the end goals of this project are to inform community- or societal-level structures such as journalism preparation programs and training opportunities. So, while this study is psychological by nature, it will contain sociological frameworks and goals.

It is also important to understand that this study is grounded in the United States journalism system. Standards and ethical norms and the results will not be generalized beyond this country or others with similar liberal media models. Similarly, while this study
uses school shootings as its research focus, the findings may not generalize to other forms of mass shootings or other locations or situations that involve ongoing gun violence such as conflict zones. However, the results may be applicable to other school violence incidents or other single-episode potentially traumatic events such as car accidents, natural disasters or the death of a loved one, with proper consideration of population and culture (McCloskey & Walker, 2000; Perry, 2007; Caffo et al, 2005).

Deuze defines ideology as “a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular group, including – but not limited to – the general process of the production of meanings and ideas” (Deuze, 2005). He concludes that a shared occupational ideology among workers in similar types of societies allows the workers to self-regulate the rules, norms and cultures of that occupation. Although the question of whether or not journalism is, indeed, a profession, is far from settled, having codes of ethics is one of the markers of an occupation evolving into a profession.

The field of journalism has quite a few codes of ethics, which might apply broadly to the whole profession, such as the one from the Society of Professional Journalists (2014), or to specific subgenres, such as the one from the Radio, Television, Digital News Association (2015). This study could inform efforts to professionalize journalism by contributing to the existing codes of ethics, adding more specificity and a deeper understanding of the reasons the guidelines are suggested.

There are two main focuses within journalism ethics that are important for this study. First, there are the normative questions, why or why not. Specifically, should journalists interview children at the scene of school shooting? If so, why? If not, why not?
Second, I am interested in an applied ethics question: how. How should we be teaching and training future journalists to make sure they are adequately prepared for working in potentially traumatic situations. What do they need to know to make sure they can do their jobs well without causing unforeseen or unwarranted harm?

From a psychological perspective, there are two aspects that are relevant to my target population: trauma and developmental psychology. First, there is no doubt that mass shootings are extremely traumatic events. Since the effects of trauma exposure can be serious and long-lasting, a thorough understanding of the nature of trauma is important. Second, a close look at the developmental markers and abilities of children is important to understanding what children can handle, how they might react to a potentially traumatic event, and to evaluate appropriate reactions at the scene. This is coupled with an understanding of how being interviewed helps or hurts children and the possible long-term psychological and developmental effects of prolonged trauma exposure or retraumatization.

**Journalism Ethics**

This study incorporates a variety of philosophical frameworks as well as various aspects of journalism codes of conduct. This study is not intended to focus on, advocate for or further define any particular ethical framework. Instead, different frameworks are used as appropriate to make sense of the particular issues at stake.

In this study, the working definition of journalism ethics is the ways and means journalists make decisions about reporting on traumatic events. These ways and means may
include things like discipline-specific codes of conduct, workplace codes and standards, consultation with editors, directors or colleagues and personal moral beliefs. Part of this study involves collection and analysis of the ways journalists say they make ethical decisions on the job as a means to better understanding what journalism ethics means to working professionals.

**Scholastic Journalism**

In this study, scholastic journalism will be defined as college- and university-based courses, workshops, camps, internships, fellowships, apprenticeships or other training. It is understood that scholastic journalism typically includes secondary school programs, but they are outside of the bounds of this project. Instead, this study aims to inform the ways in which college curricula might be adjusted to include more trauma-focused training.

**Trauma**

Trauma is at the heart of this study. A traumatic event is broadly defined in the DSM-5 as “actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violation” that results in specific behavioral or emotional changes (American Psychological Association, 2013). The specificity of what is defined as a potentially traumatic event and the resulting behavioral and emotional changes and outcomes including PTSD will be explored in depth in Chapter Two.

Although my broader research interests are in how being interviewed after
traumatic situations affects children, for the purposes of this study the scope will be limited to school shootings as one narrow type of traumatic event. Future research could include the effects of interviewing after a variety of potential traumas such as natural disasters, domestic violence or car accidents.

It seems clear that exposure to a school shooting is likely very traumatic for adults, as well as children. Researchers have found that merely being in the same building as a school shooting, even if not in close proximity, is potentially very traumatic (Pynoos et al., 1987; Ehrenreich, 2001; Simpson and Coté, 2006). Similarly, the parents and siblings of children who were at the scene are also potentially traumatized (Libow, 1992; Ochberg, 1996; Simpson and Coté, 2006). This is an important distinction in this research because ethical considerations about who it is acceptable to interview should not be limited to only those people most directly impacted as victims or witnesses. Instead, the utmost care should be taken regarding all students in attendance as well as their closest family members.

**Developmental Psychology**

The basic idea of developmental psychology is that development is a result of the interactions/transactions between a child and their environment. Children begin developing in a number of areas from the time they are conceived and transactions such as life experiences, nutrition, engagement with others and stimulation affect children’s emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and psychosocial development. Children’s development will be explored more fully in Chapter Two.

It is generally accepted that children’s brains are more malleable than those of
adults. Therefore, negative experiences such as traumatic events may affect a child’s brain far more than if an adult experienced the same traumatic event (van der Kolk, 2001). A range of psychiatric symptoms and disorders in childhood and adulthood are associated with chronic childhood trauma, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic anxiety, borderline personality disorder, destructive behavior, substance use, suicidality, self-mutilation, somatization, sexual behavior problems, dissociative disorders, and learning disorders (Terr, 1991; Perry, 1999; Ross, 2003; van der Kolk et al., 2001).

Given the seriousness of the possible consequences, it is easy to see how important it is to understand how actions surrounding potentially traumatic events might also affect development. This research will explore how reporters’ actions at the scene of school shootings might affect children’s exposure to trauma, increased effects from trauma and possible long-term consequences. This leads to the three research questions for this dissertation:

**Research Questions**

1. What do journalists consider important when making ethical decisions in potentially traumatic situations?

2. What do journalists need to know about trauma to make informed decisions about interviewing at the scene of school shootings?

3. What should be covered in college journalism curricula and workplace training to better inform journalists about how their work can impact the people affected by a potentially traumatic incident?
To answer these questions, I will do a case study based on one school shooting and will interview students who attended the school when the shooting occurred, their parents, personnel from the school, reporters who worked the story and mental health experts. The names of the school, location and participants have been disguised to maintain a level of confidentiality.

The school shooting selected as the case study occurred at Bradford-Mitchell School (this is a pseudonym, will be referred to as BMS) in Small City (pseudonym). In the early months of 2014, at 7:45 a.m., a twelve-year-old boy, who will be referred to as “The Shooter,” walked into the school gym before school began and opened fire on students who were sitting on the bleachers. Two students were injured but survived, an eleven-year-old boy named Noah and a twelve-year-old girl named Kaylee. Noah was shot in the face and neck, Kaylee was shot in the arm and chest. The Shooter fired three shots then stopped shooting, put the gun on the gym floor and was peacefully contained by school personnel until the police arrived.

The BMS shooting was selected because it occurred within a three-year window ensuring some of the students who were involved would still be attending the school or living in the area and available to be interviewed. I also excluded shooting incidents that only involved adults. The data collected from the interviews was used to write two lived experiences: one from the perspective of the students and parents and the other from the perspective of reporters and editors. The goal of these lived experiences is to shed light on what it is like to experience a school shooting from those directly affected by it and those tasked to work it.
The data collected from the interviews was also used to construct a new set of ethical guidelines for reporters about how to make decisions at the scene of a school shooting. The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma has several sets of guidelines that provide direction for journalists in situations involving trauma. Their guidelines were used as a starting point and a coding mechanism in this project. The new guidelines I am proposing build on theirs by narrowing the focus to the hours and days following an acutely traumatic event involving children and including information about children’s development and reactions to trauma.

Although the Bradford-Mitchell shooting itself may not be generalizable to the greater population, the effects of trauma on children can be. Interpersonal, community and violent trauma have been widely studied and much is known about how children are affected. This study adds the dimension of how reporters interviewing children after a violent trauma might affect children’s well-being. The results can be used to inform practice at future school shootings of course, but may also be used to inform best practices regarding interviewing children at any potentially traumatic event.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Journalism Ethics

This is a study about journalism ethics and uses theory drawn from trauma studies and child development to extend current ethical guidelines. In this chapter, I will introduce aspects of these theories that will inform my research questions and data analysis.

Ethics courses are becoming more standard as part of the college curriculum so journalists who have a college degree from a journalism or mass communications program most likely have been exposed to ethics to some degree. A 2015 study on communication ethics in the curriculum in colleges and universities in the U.S., Canada and Puerto Rico found that 52% of undergraduate programs surveyed reported having stand-alone ethics courses and 62% reported having ethics modules in other communication courses (Swenson-Lepper et al., 2015). A similar study by Christians and Lambeth in 1994 reported that 39% of U.S. communications programs offered stand-alone ethics courses and 81% included modules in other courses. A 2012 survey measuring priorities in the journalism curriculum found that 58% of respondents indicated one course including law and ethics needed to be included, the highest percentage of all core areas, while only 29% felt that a stand-alone course in ethics was necessary (Blom & Davenport, 2012).

Additionally, ethics are conveyed in the workplace through official sources such as codes of conduct or codes of ethics and through on-the-job training. But context is important and there is wide variation in how on-the-job ethics decisions and training occur. For example, two recent studies have shown that ethical decisions are made on a case-by-
case basis but stem from influences at the individual, group, community and societal levels (Berkowitz et al., 2003; Hill, 2005). Because of the complexity of influences that affect decision-making, it challenges the notion that journalists are solely autonomous moral agents (Meijer, 2001; Berkowitz, 2003; Housley, 2008; Koljonen et al., 2011; Zelizer & Allen, 2011) or trainable to be rule-following and code-abiding employees (Hanson, 2002; Hill, 2005; Keith et al., 2006; Linderud, 2009; Hettinga & Hardin, 2010). Also, a 2003 survey showed that on-the-job ethical norms at small, community news organizations can vary dramatically from those at large, national news organizations (O’Brien, 2003). Issues considered taboo at the national organizations (e.g. participating in local governance) are sometimes encouraged and supported at small community organizations.

This begs the question about what the goals of ethical training are and which strategies currently being employed are effective. Why do we think journalists need to be ethical decision-makers and how can we tell if an individual has the proper tools to make the kind of decisions we need them to? How do journalists know there are ethical dimensions to the decisions they are making? Some aspects of journalism ethics are more salient than others and will be explored more fully: minimizing harm, interviewing/reporting in traumatic situations, writing about victims and reporting that involves children.

**Minimizing Harm**

Minimizing harm is traditionally identified as one of the bedrock ethical values in journalism. It is addressed directly in many professional codes of conduct and its spirit is
present in many philosophical frameworks (e.g. NPAA, 2017; SPJ, 2014; RTDNA, 2015).

The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) has an entire section of the code with specific recommendations dedicated to minimizing harm that illustrates its importance to the field, but it can also be argued that many aspects of the code from the other sections also connect to the central idea of minimizing harm: to the public, to the journalist, to sources, or to journalism as an industry. Calling attention to the presence of minimizing harm in other sections is important to this study because it is the underlying theme of the research questions: how to minimize harm to children in the wake of a school shooting.

One provision under *Seek Truth and Report It* is “Be cautious when making promises, but keep the promises they make.” This provision can be interpreted as minimizing harm to sources through exhorting the journalist to take extra care in thinking through the consequences of a promise before making the promise. This could be important when reporting at the scene of a school shooting because families that have been interviewed might request that the journalist tell them if there is any word about their child. Though it might seem like the humanitarian thing to do, there are procedures in place for notifying families. Straying from these procedures can cause more chaos in an already chaotic environment.

Similarly, a provision under *Act Independently*, “Avoid undercover or other surreptitious methods of gathering information unless traditional, open methods will not yield information vital to the public,” can be interpreted as minimizing harm to journalism as an industry by encouraging journalists to avoid certain behaviors that could call their integrity or that of their news organization into question. Minimizing harm to the
journalism field is frequently brought up in ethical discussions especially in light of high-profile lapses. When researching the impact of the media on survivors of the 1996 Port Arthur massacre in Australia, McLellan (1999) found that the unethical and immoral actions of a few journalists problematized the public’s relationship with the press and impacted the larger body of reporters’ ability to report the story. McLellan’s subjects reported that “deception, duplicity, lies and offensive suggestions were used to cajole or coerce potential interviewees or to gain access to “off-limits” areas” (p. 60).

Most relevant to this research, however, are the guidelines addressing reporters’ interactions with children and in high-stress environments. Provisions specifically mention using “heightened sensitivity when dealing with juveniles,” avoiding “pandering to lurid curiosity,” and balancing “the public’s need for information against potential harm or discomfort” (SPJ, 2014). These provisions provide excellent advice for reporters and, taken together, form a solid recipe for decision-making.

A weakness of the SPJ provisions (and some may say a strength) is their vagueness. It is left to the reporter to decide what “heightened sensitivity” means, so even if a reporter approaches a school shooting knowing they need to show heightened sensitivity, there are no clear directions about how to put it into practice. Does it mean they should avoid talking to children altogether? Does it mean they should avoid talking about sensitive subjects with children? Does it mean they should only talk with children if their guardian is present? All three of these solutions could be deemed ethically sound depending on the individual journalist’s moral code, workplace context or motives.

A moral theory similarly to minimizing harm is the ethic of care, which implies that
how we treat other living creatures carries moral significance (Sander-Staudt, 2017). It came to the public’s attention mainly through the writings of Carol Gilligan in the 1980s as a means of exploring morality that was different than the universal, objective, rules-based morality found in deontology. Gilligan worked with leading moral philosophers in the 1970’s and began to question theories on the basis that they were normed on white, college-educated men and did not address how women think and make decisions. Central to Gilligan’s theory is the focus on relationships and decision-making in the context of others. Her criticism of rules-based, universal, objective morality centers on the idea that it only addresses others in the sense of right and wrong, rules and authority. She characterized her theory as an ethic of care versus an ethic of justice. An ethic of care seems to parallel journalism’s call to minimize harm because both focus on the impact on others, both are utilitarian in their attention to consequences. The next section will discuss the complex decisions involved in interviewing after major traumas and the unintended consequences that result.

**Interviewing/Reporting in Traumatic Situations**

Much has been written in the past two decades about ways to interview victims after traumatic events and the possible positive and negative outcomes. The DART Center for Journalism and Trauma out of the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism has been a leader in sponsoring research and offering training to journalists and they have produced literature with best practices. Their publications and suggestions, rooted in Dr. Frank Ochberg’s work, are the ones cited in most publications and appear to have reached
a threshold verging on universal acceptance. Because this is the heart of this research project and there already exists a set of recommendations and best practices, they are included in their entirety and will be used as a coding mechanism when analyzing data collected from interviews.

There are two sets of best practices deemed most relevant: one focused broadly on journalists reporting from traumatic situations (see table 2-3) (DART Center, 2003) and one focused specifically on interviewing children after trauma (see table 2-4) (Teichroeb, 2006). The guidelines involving interviewing children have been grouped into subcategories by The DART Center as a means of organizing them into important aspects. These groupings have been duplicated here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tips for Interviewing Victims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always treat victims with dignity and respect — the way you want to be treated in a similar situation. Journalists will always seek to approach survivors, but they should do it with sensitivity, including knowing when and how to back off.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearly identify yourself: “I am Joe Hight with The Oklahoman and I am doing a story on Jessica’s life.” Don’t be surprised if you receive a harsh reaction at first, especially from parents of child victims. However, do not respond by reacting harshly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You can say you’re sorry for the person’s loss, but never say “I understand” or “I know how you feel.” Don’t be surprised, too, especially when covering acts of political violence, if a subject responds to your apology by saying, “Sorry isn’t good enough.” Remain respectful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t overwhelm with the hardest questions first. Begin with questions such as, “Can you tell me about Jerry’s life?” Or, “What did Jerry like to do? What were his favorite hobbies?” Then listen! The worst mistake a reporter can do is to talk too much.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be especially careful when interviewing relatives of anyone who is missing, and try to clarify that you seek to profile their lives before they disappeared and not to write their obituaries. If you’re unable to contact the victim or survivor, try calling a relative or the funeral home to request an interview or obtain comments. If you receive a harsh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
reaction, leave a phone number or your card and explain that the survivor can call if
she or he wants to talk later. This often leads to the best stories.

Table 2-1 Tips for Interviewing Victims (DART Center, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General interviewing guidelines for children</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seek permission from a parent or guardian before interviewing or photographing a child.</td>
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<tr>
<td>If that is not possible, try to contact an adult for permission before using material.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exceptions to this, such as breaking news involving a child whose parent can’t be located</td>
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<tr>
<td>or an interview with an older teenager who can give consent, should be discussed with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an editor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed consent means explaining to a parent and child what the story is about and how</td>
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<tr>
<td>the interview will be used (e.g. front-page story, inside feature).</td>
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<tr>
<td>If possible, have a parent or someone the child knows present during the interview.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Find a quiet place for the interview and do what you can to put the child at ease. Be</td>
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<tr>
<td>prepared to spend time gaining kids’ trust by chatting about their hobbies or interests.</td>
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<tr>
<td>With young children, get down to their eye level, talk to their stuffed animals or play a</td>
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<tr>
<td>game.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tell them your name and explain what journalists do in language they can understand.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A camera crew or photographer can show a child their equipment and demonstrate how</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>it works.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make it clear that you are doing a job. Take care not to act as just a friend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain why you want to talk to them, how the interview will be used and when it will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>run (e.g. a daily report appearing the next day versus an investigative series that may not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>appear for months).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remind them that their names or photos will be in print or on TV. Tell them that not</td>
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<tr>
<td>everything they say will be in the story.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give the child as much control as possible over the interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasize that she or he can choose not to answer a question or ask you not to use</td>
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<tr>
<td>sensitive information.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keep your notebook out so your interview subjects can see you are writing down their</td>
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<tr>
<td>words.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tell them they are the experts on their own lives and that there are no right or wrong</td>
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<tr>
<td>answers. Children will try to please you and may say what they think you want to hear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rather than being honest.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ask open-ended questions, such as “What was the hardest part?” rather than questions that deliver their own answers, like “Were you scared?”

Thank the child for helping you with the story. Let her know her contribution was important.

Table 2-2 General interviewing guidelines (DART Center, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewing children at the scene of a crime or disaster</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoid interviewing children at the scene. Realize they are very likely in shock and need comfort, not questioning. “Children are not necessarily OK after a bad incident, no matter how they might appear,” said Roger Simpson, Dart Professor of Journalism &amp; Trauma at the University of Washington, in an article in the Columbus Dispatch in October 2000.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you decide to do an interview, try to talk to the child in a safe place away from the chaos of emergency personnel and other victims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify yourself and try to have someone the child knows there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try not to publish photographs of children without their permission and that of their parents. A photo of an injured child is dramatic and heart-wrenching but can also be hurtful and embarrassing to the victim.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be willing to wait until the parents and child are ready to talk, even if that is weeks or months after the crisis. You will likely get a much better interview.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2-3 Interviewing children at the scene of a trauma or disaster (DART Center, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewing children about previous trauma</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Find out as much as you can about the incident before the interview by talking to parents, counselors, teachers and medical professionals. Obtain documents such as police reports and court records outlining the facts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask parents and others if there are topics or details that are especially difficult for the child to talk about, and be sensitive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let the child and parents pick a familiar setting for the interview. Jane Hansen, a projects reporter at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, recalled how she handled an interview with an eleven-year-old rape victim. Hansen asked to see the boy’s bedroom, where he showed her his Beanie Babies. She shared how her son also collected the furry critters. Then they sat side by side on the hallway floor so he wouldn’t have to look at her as he described his adoptive father’s sexual abuse.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Don’t talk down to children, no matter how young they are. Respect their feelings and their way of recounting what happened. And be prepared to be surprised: Children may not grieve the way you expect them to. CNN editor Kathy Slobogin described in a March 2005 article on the Casey Journalism Center website how a group of kids she was interviewing chatted happily about memories of a young friend who died on a plane that hit the Pentagon on 9/11. When the cameraman suggested the children’s mood didn’t fit the somber topic, Slobogin told him to keep shooting: “‘They’re children,’ I said. ‘This is what they do.’”

Reflect back what a child is telling you and give her a chance to correct errors.

Educate yourself. Talk to counselors, attend education programs, research child trauma through authoritative websites. Consider what questions are appropriate for different ages—e.g. a younger child won’t be able to recall chronological details but can likely describe what toy he was playing with when the hurricane hit.

Children younger than 13 should not be relied upon to provide detailed factual accounts. Use documents and other sources to corroborate whenever possible.

Don’t ask questions that imply blame, such as “Weren’t you wearing your seatbelt?” or “Do you always walk alone at night?” That can make a child feel guilty or expose him to public humiliation.

Be aware that retelling a traumatic event can trigger intense emotions in your interview subject, even years later. Be prepared to deal with strong reactions, or have someone there who can provide support, such as a trusted family member or counselor.

Keep the interview to age-appropriate lengths: thirty minutes for those under age 9, forty-five minutes for children between 10 and 14 and one hour for teens.

Take breaks if a child gets bored or distracted. That may be a child’s way of telling you he is emotionally drained.

Don’t use information that would embarrass or hurt a child—even with her permission. Kids will tell you just about anything, but that doesn’t mean you have to print it—e.g. bedwetting problems or illegal drug use (unless such detail is central to the story).

Ask if the child has any questions before you leave. Thank her for her help.

Check back with parents and older children after the interview and let them know how quotes will be used and when the story will run. Send them copies of the story.

Table 2-4 Interviewing children about previous trauma (DART Center, 2013)

Confidentiality
Learn to use state and federal public-disclosure laws. While police or state child-welfare agencies will redact identifying information, documents are invaluable for providing context and establishing patterns in stories on everything from teachers abusing students to teen rape.

Challenge confidentiality rules that do more to hide institutional malfeasance than to protect children. Get your employer’s attorney involved if necessary.

When it’s not possible to interview a victim, work around that by tracking down and interviewing everyone else in the child’s life. Talk to parents, teachers, neighbors, friends, police officers, child advocates.

Be willing to talk to sources as “background only” as a way of gaining a deeper understanding of the problem. Sometimes it’s the only way to find out crucial information.

Interview other children or families who have suffered similar trauma in the past but can now talk more freely (e.g., adults who suffered child sexual abuse; foster children who are now adopted).

Talk to experts who can put a violent incident into context. For example, find out if child abuse rates are going up or down or how many school shootings have happened in the previous five years.

Be clear about your newspaper’s or station’s policy for withholding the names of child victims or juvenile offenders. Most don’t identify child abuse victims except in special circumstances. Juvenile crime suspects are also usually not named unless a defendant ends up in adult court. Explain those rules to sources.

Identifying a child is not always an “all-or-nothing” decision. Sometimes children and their parents will be comfortable with a first name only or a middle name. Consider taking “non-identifying” photos that can help tell the story. Such photos, while far more difficult to shoot, can powerfully convey a victim’s struggles to a reader/viewer.

When a victim and the parents/guardian agree to be identified, clarify exactly what that means. Explain to them the possible ramifications of such a decision.

Just because a victim agrees to be named doesn’t mean you should do it. There may be circumstances where the potential harm is greater than the benefit. In the case of the eleven-year-old boy who had been raped by his adoptive father, Hansen, of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution decided not to name him or use identifying photos, even though both the child and his mother said it was OK. The newspaper decided it wasn’t fair to the boy to subject him to publicity about the graphic abuse—something that could follow
him into adulthood.

Table 2-5 Confidentiality (DART Center, 2013)

Next I will introduce research on trauma reporting. The combination of the journalism ethics construct of minimizing harm with the lack of training or education about trauma, and the potential for negative, lasting or ongoing consequences from being interviewed is of utmost concern to this research. This raises questions about what happens when journalists behave in a way that causes harm in the pursuit of a story. This oftentimes inadvertent harm is a reflection on the increasing number of school shootings, the increasing number of reporters at the scene, and the increasing number of children (and other victims) who can be negatively impacted.

For example, in McLellan’s research, she suggested things that could improve reporting in similar circumstances (McLellan, 1999). Her investigation showed what she termed “incidents of malpractice and voyeurism” among the reporters on the scene that involved behaviors such as pressuring witnesses or victims to talk, bribery, intrusion on private spaces and places, and deception to gain access to people or places (McLellan, 1999, p.68). Her study showed that not all reporters behaved this way and statements from the community and the journalists that she interviewed showed that some behaved with concern, respect and compassion. Similar results were found by Haravuori et al. (2011) in their research into the media and aftermath of a school shooting in Finland where reporters were described as intrusive and insensitive and were criticized for sensationalizing the event (p.70).

Journalists arriving at the scene of a school shooting are faced with making sense of the chaos and it is difficult to prepare in advance for what they may encounter because
all scenes are different. In addition, they face pressure from their editors/producers to get stories out quickly and to continue gathering and reporting information to keep the public informed. Berrington (2003) interviewed journalists who were faced with reporting after the Dunblane school shooting in Scotland in which 16 children and one teacher were massacred. He received these two quotes which sum up the challenges:

“It was a bit of a panic because we were trying to phone the desk and find out what was coming through on the wires. We were going through everything we could find out at the scene to get back to them. It was nerve-racking. No-one really knew the whole picture and we wanted to make sure we weren’t all chasing the same angle on the story” (p.231).

“People don’t understand that you’ve got bosses wanting 600 words by 4 pm. It’s less so in the broadsheets, but in the tabloids there’s a huge amount of competition and pressure on those journalists standing there. They’re just the front line of the huge beast behind them which is telling them to speed up. And that has to be remembered when people criticise journalists for the way they do the job” (p.239).

Compounding the challenges brought by the chaos are the challenges resulting from not having access to official lines of communication from police or school officials. In the case of the Dunblane massacre, reporters were told press facilities would be available by noon on the day of the shooting but the first press conference was not held until 4 pm and official announcements confirming the dead and injured were not made until 10 pm (Berrington, 2003). If reporters rely only on official sources, this example illustrates how problematic it can be. As a result, good journalists hit the ground running trying to learn as much as possible, confirming facts and talking to as many sources as possible.

Another study calls attention to the unexpected results of interviewing children and teenagers after various traumatic events left them injured and requiring hospital interventions (Peterson & Dibbs, 1997). In it, the researchers interviewed children ranging
in age from 2-15 plus their parents or the adult who was with them when the traumatic event occurred to test the accuracy of the recollections of the children. They found that accuracy in yes/no questions was much less than that of open-ended questions and that children and teens were much less accurate when they answered “no” than when they answered “yes,” as illustrated in fig. 2-1 (Peterson & Dibbs, 1997). Their research was intended to inform police and lawyers about questioning techniques for legal situations, but the results can be applied to reporters as well. Since a reporter who is interviewing children and teenagers after a school shooting might be looking to gather facts about what it was like, they may ask lots of open-ended and yes/no questions. These results indicate that the responses should be taken with a healthy grain of salt and not reported as truth. Other studies have reported similar findings (Quas et al., 2000).

Haravuori et al. (2011) conducted a study with students from Jokela High School in Finland where a school shooting took the lives of eight people. They measured how students were approached by journalists and the extent of their media exposure crossed
with trauma symptoms, and found that students reported feeling worse and experiencing more trauma symptoms after being interviewed by reporters. This effect was larger in those who were more severely traumatized and in females. They also found that the students who were more highly exposed to the traumatic event consumed more media reports and from more media sources than those who were less affected or not affected (Haravuori et al., 2011).

A television reporter wrote a reflective piece for *The San Francisco Examiner* after covering a school shooting in Stockton, CA, in 1992 which ties in nicely with this research project. She had two observations that are important because they reflect the pressure she was facing to get a good story and her thoughts as she looked back on how her actions might have affected the children:

*If someone got a kid, she would have to as well. It's the way the game works. You don't want your competition to have any angle you don't have, and crying kids on camera were powerful images. If having your voice heard at a news conference scored points, so did interviewing a child. Your boss would tell you that you "kicked ass." Your resume tape would look terrific.* (Casey, 1992, p. 24)

*Many of the children who attended the school were Cambodian refugees, who endured God-only-knows-what to come to this country. The day before, whatever sense of safety they might have had vanished in a stream of blood and bullets. And here they were being chased by a mob, microphone poles extended like weapons, cameras trained on them, people shouting at them to stop. Some reporters even tried to interview them as they fled, yelling "Did you see it? Did you see it?"* (Casey, 1992, p. 25)

**Scholastic Journalism**

This study will contribute suggestions about how the college curriculum might be adjusted to include more trauma-focused training and information and the reasons why this
is important. Some aspects of scholastic journalism are more salient than others and will be explored more fully: courses in journalism and trauma, textbook coverage of trauma and journalism, workshops or trainings on journalism and trauma, college course training versus on-the-job training.

**Courses in Journalism and Trauma**

Stephen Ward wrote about crisis ethics in 2003 in a piece cajoling newsrooms to prepare for covering crises before the crisis occurs. He wrote, “Crisis ethics is the tendency to make decisions in the middle of a crisis or a breaking story, without preexisting guidelines. It is the tendency to respond to coverage controversies after a problem occurs. Crisis ethics is reactive and opaque to the public. Deliberative ethics is pro-active, principled and transparent to the public” (Ward, 2003, p. 20). I would add to this that crisis ethics also affects journalists by sending them into the field underprepared. If proper training and guidelines have not been established beforehand, the journalist is flying blind, making decisions as they go perhaps without the proper tools to do so in an ethical and moral manner.

As discussed earlier, there are well-established codes of ethics in the field of journalism. These codes are often taught in journalism ethics courses in college programs. Similarly, there are codes of conduct or professional guidelines present in many newsrooms that are made available to staff through training manuals or coaching from colleagues and supervisors. But there is some evidence that these codes are not talked about enough in the workplace for them to become engrained in the daily decision-making or practices of
working journalists (Hanson, 2002; Hill, 2005; Keith et al., 2006; Linderud, 2009; Hettinga & Hardin, 2010). Some journalists report they view themselves as autonomous moral agents (Meijer, 2001; Berkowitz, 2003; Koljonen et al., 2011; Zelizer & Allen, 2011), others argue that the guidelines are too vague and hypothetical to be of use (Marin, 2001; Duffy, 2010; Melki, 2013), others cite the frenetic pace of the newsroom as a reason careful consideration to codes is not possible (O’Brien, 2003; Hill, 2005; Simpson & Coté, 2006; Koljonen et al., 2011).

Ward’s response to these arguments is “Twaddle” (Ward, 2003). He likens the frenetic pace of the newsroom to the frenetic pace of a hospital emergency room or that of air traffic controllers and argues that both professions have and make use of codes and professional guidelines in their daily activities. He also argues that there is enough similarity in the types of stories being covered that the codes are not too hypothetical. Learning to apply them in a particular kind of situation can help when they are being applied to similar situations in the future.

A journalist who is not trained in how to properly interact with and interview victims might cause additional harm or re-victimize the source or the community (Simpson & Coté, 2006; Kay et al., 2011; Melki, 2013). Studies have found that the people most affected by a tragedy often scour the media for stories that will help them understand the event. Constant exposure to images and words related to their trauma might continuously trigger their emotional responses which might lead them to re-experience the trauma and possibly develop mental health issues such as anxiety disorders, depression or PTSD (Pfefferbaum et al., 2002; Galea et al., 2002; Salmon & Bryant, 2002; Thabet et al., 2004;
Maercker & Mehr, 2006; Brayne, 2009; Zelizer, 2011; Melki, 2013).

It is in the study of journalism ethics or advanced reporting courses that we often find training related to trauma. Dworznik and Grubb (2007) found that four schools have modules or sections of classes dedicated to training future journalists about trauma effects on themselves as well as how trauma works in other people and how it connects to the job of reporting. In some reporting classes, role plays are used to simulate the experience of being at the scene of a traumatic event and give journalism students a taste of the experience they may encounter in the real world. In others, victims and survivors are brought in to talk to journalism students about their experiences to illustrate the human element of doing their job in highly emotional and stressful times (Dufresne, 2004; Dworznik & Grubb; Maxson, 2000; Rentschler, 2010).

A 1999 survey by Simpson and Boggs found that nearly half of journalists in their population reported that they were not adequately prepared the first time they were assigned to report about a traumatic situation. A 2007 survey of 623 journalism faculty found that 56% felt that reporting that involved trauma was not covered well enough in the curriculum (Melki et al., 2008). Unsurprisingly, the survey showed that 75% of the 106 accredited journalism schools included reported there was not a stand-alone course in reporting on trauma in their curriculum.

Yet a 2009 survey involving 400 U.S. journalists reported that one-third felt they were not prepared to handle job requirements involving victims, violence or trauma (Beam and Spratt, 2009). And a 1998 study of recent journalism graduates working as reporters showed that only 34% had received trauma training, and that it not only helped prepare
them psychologically, but also that the training helped them produce a better story because they were able to relate to victims and survivors (Maxson 2000).

Yet other studies have indicated that classic classroom pedagogical methods may not be adequate for training journalists how to operate ethically in traumatic situations. Amend et al. (2012) interviewed journalists about their preparation and found some consensus among those interviewed that the most effective trauma training may be encountered on the job as evidenced by these two quotes:

“It’s a learning process. Once you get out there, that’s where you’re going to learn. I think it’s very hard to... I think it’s great to touch base and talk about it in class with the students. But, it’s not the same as being there in that situation. Despite these difficulties, however, the participants did agree increased training and education could be beneficial in preparing young journalists if it is done more effectively.” (p. 242).

“I think it would be good to have post-mortems of news coverage following traumatic events and we say, did we cross the line? What could we have done better? I don’t know if you can really do this in journalism schools because, how can you simulate a traumatic event in a classroom?” (Amend et al., 2012, p. 242)

Yet not covering trauma training in the journalism curriculum is not the answer either. In a 2013 survey, 100% percent of 177 journalism educators reported it was important to teach the students in their programs about trauma and how it affects the community (Weiss, 2013). When the journalist does not have the proper training, the consequences to the journalist and their sources can be serious. In some ways, this goes beyond being simply an ethics issue because it involves long-lasting or lifelong effects that can cause problems involving every aspect of a person’s life. It transcends simply doing the right thing and becomes a dilemma involving two greater goods: a choice made to support the health and well-being of our children, loved ones, colleagues, community
members and citizens versus putting out a good story. This does not have to be a dichotomy. There are ways that journalists can protect sources while also putting out good stories.

**Trauma information in Journalism Textbooks**

Journalism textbooks rarely contain information or guidance about the signs, symptoms, definitions and consequences of trauma. In a scan of 15 textbooks related to news writing and reporting and journalism ethics, four did not include any training or information about reporting about trauma or disasters, four contained fewer than five pages dedicated to the subject, five contained between 17 and 50 pages, and two contained more than 50 pages (see table 1-1). Two of the texts were dedicated entirely to the subject of reporting in traumatic situations so it is not surprising they contained the amount of information they did. It is worth noting that only one text took time to educate readers about the study of trauma from a psychological perspective (Underwood, 2011) and one textbook included a section explaining the psychological underpinnings of trauma from a moral development perspective (Patterson and Wilkins, 1997). None of the other texts studied contained any information related to trauma and its effects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>contained information about the psychological underpinnings of trauma</th>
<th>contained information specific to journalists working in traumatic situations</th>
<th>contained information specific to PTSD</th>
<th>contained information specific to interviewing victims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>An Ethics Trajectory</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Cooper et al., 2008)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond the Inverted</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pyramid (Kennedy et al.,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Similarly, course content and training about interviewing and reporting at traumatic scenes is not common. A 2012 survey of journalism faculty showed that only 12% of journalism schools have a full course in the curriculum dedicated to trauma reporting, 42% of faculty reported they have a session or lecture dedicated to trauma training, but 93% of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>1993</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breaking News (Halberstam, 2007)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronicling Trauma (Underwood, 2011)</td>
<td>23 pages</td>
<td>62 pages</td>
<td>13 pages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics for the Media (Rivers and Mathews, 1998)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism 2001 (Harper, 1998)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 pages</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism in a Culture of Grief (Kitch &amp; Hume, 2008)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Ethics Cases and Moral Reasoning (Christians et al., 1995)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Ethics Issues and Cases</td>
<td>9 pages on moral development</td>
<td>26 pages</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News in a New Century (Lanson and Fought, 1999)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Writing and Reporting for Today's Media (Itule et al., 2006)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1 chapter on disasters, 1 chapter on police/fire</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ethical Journalist (Foreman, 2010)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17 pages</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17 pages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Ethics of Journalism (McBride and Rosenstiel, 2014)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4 pages (on fear)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing and Reporting News (Rich, 2005)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33 pages</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3 pages</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2-6: Textbook references to trauma.
faculty reported their department does not offer training dedicated to trauma or crisis. In comparison, 76% of faculty said it was very important to offer this kind of training (Amend et al., 2012; Weiss, 2013).

**On-the-Job Trauma Training**

I have looked at how trauma training is covered (or not) in the college curriculum, now the focus will turn to on-the-job (OTJ) training. There are many models and formats for OTJ training depending on budgets, resources, expertise, time and a myriad of other conditions.

In a 2009 survey, 400 working journalists were surveyed about their experiences with trauma while on the job, job satisfaction, support from management and career commitment. When asked whether they faced danger while on the job, those who reported being in danger did more stories with or about traumatized victims and felt they were better prepared to handle the trauma than those who did not face danger on the job. But those same journalists were also less likely to view their managers as being supportive and caring about safety and were more likely than those who had not faced danger to say showing signs of their own trauma or stress could hurt their careers (Beam & Spratt, 2009). The conclusion reached by the author was that workplace support, especially by managers, was critical to help journalists cope with the challenges of reporting on dangerous, traumatic events and interviewing victims and survivors.

Some support tactics employed in newsrooms include counseling services, time off, debriefings with colleagues, and bringing in experts to talk about traumatization and offer
guidance about healing. Other suggestions include watching videos, doing self-paced online modules and more formal short courses or seminars on trauma (Corrigan, 2009; Potter & Ricchiardi, 2009).

Mark Brayne (2011), journalist and psychotherapist, argues that there are four reasons all journalists should have trauma training:

1. Understand how and why human beings do the things they do. Especially when they're affected by extreme distress (which is often how we find them on a big story);
2. Do the best possible interviews and practice the best journalism;
3. Tell the story of tragedy and disaster well – authentically, accurately and with respect;
4. Have as vulnerable individuals and human beings, the tools to keep on track and functioning as well as we can, both professionally and emotionally (something you will do well to bear in mind if you do find yourself covering extreme trauma).

Echoing Beam and Spratt, Brayne also argues that the climate of the newsroom is of utmost importance to preparing journalists to face traumatic situations. Having managers be open about trauma and talk about what the reporters might encounter are two strategies he recommends (Brayne, 2011).

Lending support to the need for trauma training is a new subset within the DSM-5 which includes for the first-time vicarious trauma as a precursor for PTSD. It was included specifically in recognition of the accumulated stress caused by repeated exposure experienced by first responders and mental health workers (Curtois, 2013; DSM-5, 2013;
Sweeton, 2014). Since reporters are often described as first responders in the literature (Hight and Smyth, 2003; Potter & Ricchiardi, 2009) those who work beats that include repeated exposure to violent events and who suffer negative effects as a result could be diagnosed with ASD or PTSD (DSM-5, 2013). ASD and PTSD and other relevant trauma-related diagnoses will be discussed in the next section.

The bottom line is that trauma training has not rooted itself firmly in newsrooms yet but there is evidence that it should. Awareness is growing about its importance as more journalists become outspoken about their experiences, more information about trauma and its effects makes its way to the public and more traumatic events are covered. The next section will explore and define trauma, how it manifests itself, how it impacts children and what journalists need to know to do their jobs effectively.

**Trauma**

I will now introduce literature from psychology that is relevant to this study, including definitions of trauma, types of traumatic reactions that are applicable to school shootings, and how children’s developmental levels affect their reactions to traumatic events. It is important to acknowledge that the literature on trauma is extensive. This research will draw only from certain aspects of the trauma literature that are relevant.

**Definition of Trauma/Traumatic Episode**

The DSM-5 uses the terms trauma and traumatic episode interchangeably. A
Traumatic episode is defined as “exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” (DSM-5, 2013). This is the definition that will be used for this study. Of importance is the distinction between actual and threatened trauma, sometimes called primary or secondary trauma, or actual or vicarious trauma. This definition includes people who were in the proximity of a traumatic event even if they were not directly affected as victims. This can include direct experience with the potentially traumatic event, being a witness, learning that the event occurred to a loved one, or repeated direct exposure to details of the event (DSM-5, 2013).

Traumatic events have been typically divided into groups by researchers and practitioners. For example, selected classifications include single-event trauma or ongoing trauma (Stolbach et al., 2013; Lam et al., 2015; Langley et al., 2015), exposure to a single event or multiple events (Kessler, 2000; Gerrity et al., 2008; Trickey et al., 2012; Greeson et al., 2014; Hodges et al., 2013; Scheeringa, 2014), and/or intentional or non-intentional trauma (Trickey et al., 2012; Santiago et al., 2013). For this study, school shootings will be understood to be single-event traumas (or acute traumas) that are acted intentionally and are violent by nature.

There is a new diagnostic category in the DSM-5 which differs significantly from what was included in the DSM-IV and is relevant to this study. The DSM-5 has created a new classification of disorders called Trauma- and Stress-or-Related Disorders (TSRD) of which PTSD is the cornerstone. This differs from the definition in the DSM-4 in that PTSD and other trauma-related diagnoses were previously included under anxiety disorders. The new category of TSRD recognizes that trauma- and stress-related problems can arise from
experiencing a potentially traumatic event and are not solely connected to anxiety disorders (Jones & Cureton, 2014). Since school shootings can obviously be considered potentially traumatic events, the new classification is the criterion that will be used in this study.

In the DSM-5 there are seven categories under TSRD:

1. Posttraumatic Stress Disorder
2. Acute Stress Disorder
3. Adjustment Disorders
4. Reactive Attachment Disorder
5. Disinhibited Social Engagement Disorder
6. Other Specified Trauma-and Stressor-Related Disorder
7. Unspecified Trauma-and Stressor-Related Disorder

Only two of these disorders are relevant to this research and will be defined and explored later in this chapter: PTSD and Acute Stress Disorder (ASD). These can be understood in descending hierarchical order with PTSD being the longest lasting and most severe and ASD having a shorter duration.

When a person experiences trauma, it might manifest itself in many ways that could affect all aspects of life. The following two tables reflect trauma symptoms in adults (see table 2-7) and children (see table 2-8) culled from several sources (Terr, 1981; Terr, 1991; Falasca & Caulfield, 1999; Goodman et al., 2002; Ross, 2003; Simpson & Coté, 2006; DSM-5, 2013) and illustrate how potentially pervasive these symptoms can be. Trauma symptoms will be used as a coding mechanism when analyzing interview narratives in this study.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychosomatic Area</th>
<th>Symptoms in Adults and Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Chronic pain, hyperarousal, flashbacks, headaches, nausea, chest pain, rapid heartbeat, trembling, deliberate avoidance, appetite changes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental</td>
<td>Paranoia, blame, shame, judgment, criticism, polarized thinking, intrusive memories, loss of interest in life, denial, nightmares, sleep disturbances, hypervigilance, changes in attitude, suicidal thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>Fighting, impulsive actions, addictions, violence, risk-taking, self-involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td>Unpredictable emotions, mood swings, irritability, extreme anger/rage, depression, feelings of violation, exaggerated euphoria, powerlessness, heightened anxiety, helplessness, flat affect, panic, irritability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Relationships</td>
<td>Breakups, divorce, decreased interactions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2-7 Psychosomatic symptoms of trauma

Children can display all of the symptoms as adults plus several others specific to their age and developmental level. It should be noted that the younger a child is, the more their trauma symptoms might be behavioral rather than mental or emotional. Although children may experience dramatic emotional upheaval, they are not usually cognitively developed enough to integrate and understand the trauma and its effects or to articulate their thoughts and feelings (Terr, 1981; Terr, 1991; Pynoos et al., 1987). This will be discussed later in this chapter.
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical</strong></td>
<td>Startle reactions, stomach aches, headaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mental</strong></td>
<td>Full and detailed memories of the event (i.e. no denial), night terrors, omens/meaning-making, hallucinations/delusions experienced during the trauma, lack of amnesia, lack of flashbacks, over-generalizations, time distortions, personification of death (e.g. belief in the boogeyman), belief that they can cause death, difficulty concentrating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behavior</strong></td>
<td>aggressive outbursts, repeatedly acting out the trauma in play, temper tantrums, fear-based reenactments, regression to behaviors typical of younger children, school problems, sudden change to being a perfect or bad child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotions</strong></td>
<td>Sudden changes in fears: change, the dark, strangers, being alone, certain foods, animals, locations or people, a sense of profound vulnerability in all living creatures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal Relationships</strong></td>
<td>wish to be reunited with deceased loved ones, exaggerated attempts to protect loved ones</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2-8 Psychosomatic symptoms of trauma in children

Goodman et al. (2002) list the following factors as relevant to how severe a child’s reaction to the potential trauma might be: the child’s experience of the event, their ability to understand the situation, their gender, their functioning prior to the event, how much they worry about others’ physical and emotional well-being, their desire to protect those who are living, changes in loved ones’ roles and expectations, their reactions to changes in
home life, their feelings of being different/alone/isolated, their sense of injustice, and their concern about being taken care of and about the future (Goodman et al., 2002). More recently, Greeson and colleagues coined the term “risk factor caravans” to illustrate the complexity of risk factors that travel with each person and affect how they respond to a given trauma (2014). Different risk factors may impact how the individual experiences the potential trauma as well as impact their healing process afterward. The metaphor of a constellation or caravan of factors illustrates the importance of understanding an individual’s life experiences in the context of trauma (Greeson et al., 2014).

**How Trauma Affects Children’s Development**

Millions of children are affected by trauma each year. These traumas can be seemingly minor ones like a dog bite or a broken leg, to moderate ones such as a car accident, or more severe ones such as a loss of a parent or surviving a major natural disaster. It is generally well accepted that children’s brains are more malleable than that of adults. Therefore, negative experiences such as potentially traumatic events may have the possibility to affect a child’s brain far more than if an adult experienced the same potentially traumatic event (Falasca & Caulfield, 1999; Perry, 1999; Ross, 2003; van der Kolk et al., 2001).

Children also face chronic traumas that are usually hidden from public view but have devastating consequences, such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, rape, physical or emotional abuse, or neglect. These hidden traumas have devastating consequences to a child’s cognitive development and can result in learning disabilities, lower IQ, decreased
attention, behavioral regression, inability to develop secure attachments, delayed identity
development, and decreased ability to distinguish fantasy from reality as well as
psychological and health problems such as eating disorders, asthma, gastrointestinal
disorders and mood disorders (Groves et al., 1993; Trickett & McBride-Chang, 1995;
Perry, 1999; DeBord, 2000; van der Kolk et al., 2001; Gerrity & Folcarell, 2008).

**Toxic Stress**

Toxic stress (Center on the Developing Child, 2017) is a term coined to indicate
the profound negative effects that stress can have on a child’s development. Stress is
necessary to teach children what they need to know in order to function in the world.
Researchers have identified three kinds of stress which impact children differently: positive
stress, tolerable stress and toxic stress (Center on the Developing Child, 2015). Figure 2-3
provides definitions of how each level of stress affects children (Center for Prevention and
Early Intervention Policy, 2015).
When a child experiences a potentially traumatic event, their body’s stress response is activated, which leads to an adrenaline rush, an increase in stress hormones and an increased heart rate. After the potentially traumatic event ends, and if the child is comforted by a caring adult, their stress response decreases and their system returns to normal. If, however, the stress is chronic, as is the case in situations such as abuse, neglect, or domestic violence, the stress response system stays primed and activated, continually flooding the body with adrenaline and stress hormones and triggering an elevated heart rate (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2005/2014). Similarly, if the child is not comforted by a caring adult after a potentially traumatic event or does not properly make sense of and process what happened, they can stay in the heightened stress response state longer than usual. In addition, constant reminders of the potentially traumatic event in a child who is still in the stress response state can activate the stress response system. The stress response is depicted in this image, with the red lines indicating the stress response flooding the person with adrenaline and stress hormones (Fig. 2-4):

![Stress Response Image]

Fig. 2-4 Stress Response (Image credit: Center on the Developing Child)
Constant activation of the stress response system is what the Center on the Developing Child has coined “Toxic Stress” and has been shown to have an impact on the child’s development for the rest of their lives (2015). One of the primary functions in a normally developing child is the production of neurotransmitters in the brain which create the building blocks for learning and reasoning throughout life. The Center on the Developing Child has posited that children who have experienced toxic stress have fewer and weaker neuro connectors, leading to long-term deficiencies in cognitive functions.

A network of strong neurotransmitters is required for a child’s brain to develop in a variety of ways. The brighter areas in Figure 2-7 show this strong network and label the processes that stem from that part of the brain. If the network of neurotransmitters is weakened or disconnected, cognitive functioning in the brighter areas could be negatively affected.

Fig. 2-5 Network of neurotransmitters (Image Credit: Center on the Developing Child)

Finally, this video, shared with permission from the Center on the Developing
Child, depicts the weakening and loss of neurotransmitters in a child exposed to toxic stress (2015).

Multimedia 2-1: Weakening and loss of neurotransmitters (Video segment courtesy of Center on the Developing Child)

**Singular, Acutely Traumatic Events and Stress**

School shootings are included in the category of traumas that are singular, severe events. They do not generally create the same kinds of long-lasting effects that are consistently produced when children experience chronic trauma such as child abuse. But, as discussed previously in this chapter, the effects of severe traumatic events are potentially serious. Most children who experience a school shooting will have a period of extreme distress and may experience some developmental or psychological issues for the weeks or months following the event. Some children, usually fewer than 20% as noted earlier, will
go on be diagnosed with ACD or PTSD.

The facts about chronic abuse and other forms of trauma are noted here, however, because they factor into how a child handles the trauma from a school shooting and how the impact of media attention could affect them: cumulative trauma and Toxic Stress. Reporters arriving at the scene of a school shooting will likely not know anything about the children attending the school and will obviously not be aware of a child’s history of trauma. This seems like an important reason why reporters should not interview children: the effects of cumulative traumas on a child is significant. The effects of being pressured by the media for interviews and re-experiencing the stress and trauma as they answer questions could add to what is already a traumatizing situation.

Given the seriousness of the possible consequences, it is easy to see how important it is to understand how actions surrounding potentially traumatic events might also affect development. Elementary-aged children are still developing many of the complex thinking and reasoning skills needed to understand tragedies and may be more susceptible to ACD or PTSD than older children. They have less developed language and cognitive skills and are not as able to make sense of the trauma or articulate its effects on the emotional, mental or physical well-being (Saakvitne, 1998; Goodman et al., 2002; Salmon & Bryant, 2002).

Reenactments are a common response to a potentially traumatic event in children. These may manifest in their play activities, drawings, conversations, repeated storytelling, repeated questions or behavioral tics (Ehrenreich & McQuaid, 2001; DeBord, 2003). From a developmental perspective, if the trauma is not reconciled through these reenactments or the support given by caregivers, the behavioral representations of the reenactments can go
on to become permanently rooted as an aspect of the child’s personality, may develop into personality disorders or could manifest as psychosomatic health disorders (Terr, 1991).

In table 2-11, children in these developmental stages are working on developing their sense of independence, they are forming their identity, developing a sense of right and wrong and exhibiting feelings of worry and self-doubt. When a trauma such as a school shooting occurs, it can disrupt the child’s ability to work through these milestones and can cause them to regress to previous developmental stages where they become less independent and more reliant on others, may integrate their experience as a victim (or a hero) into their identity, and may become moodier and emotionally unstable. For example, older children are deep into the stages of developing identity and perceptions of the self in context of others. How the child behaved during a potentially traumatic event like a school shooting can affect their self-identity. If they perceive they weren’t as brave as their peers, blame, shame or victimization can become part of their identity unless efforts are made to help them see their behavior differently (Finkelhor, 1995; Salmon & Bryant, 2002).

One hallmark of traumatized children is a change in how they perceive the future. This is integral to both of these developmental stages and a potentially traumatic event can disrupt their ability to think about and plan for the future and in fact they may become likely to see the future as a dark, dangerous place that is full of unpredictable events (Terr, 1991).

Another marker that separates a child’s ability to deal with trauma from an adult’s is that children do not yet possess advanced cognitive skills that allow them to intentionally forget or not think about the event. Researchers have found that children often can recite
clear, detailed accounts of an event in ways appropriate to their age and ability (Terr, 1991; Peterson & Biggs, 1997; Salmon & Bryant, 2002). This is challenging because it means the trauma is rooted in accessible parts of the brain and can be cued to attention easily (Peterson & Biggs, 1997). Children’s ability to distract themselves from the trauma by not thinking about it or thinking about more pleasant things develops as they get older. Older children may have more effective coping mechanisms than younger children (Salmon & Bryant, 2002).

Younger children who are still developing an expanded vocabulary and the ability to talk about their feelings and emotions may not possess the ability to recount the trauma in ways typical of healing, such as talk therapies. These children, when asked in an interview with a reporter, may not be able to articulate what happened, how they felt or what they think about the event. Prompting responses using leading questions can create dissonance in the child’s perception of reality and fantasy and can create the opportunity for them to make things up because they want to please the reporter (Peterson & Biggs, 1997).

On the other hand, not talking through the trauma (or behaviorally processing it if the child is too young to discuss it cognitively) can be detrimental to the child’s development as well. Discussing the trauma with protective factors in place, such as with caring adults or in therapy, allows the child’s support system to correct inaccuracies and to clarify misperceptions (Fivush et al., 1997). It can also help the child express and regulate their emotions related to the event and help the child develop coping mechanisms (Salmon & Bryant, 2002).
Goodman et al. (2002) created a comparison to help adults understand how to help their children negotiate through a potentially traumatic event (see table 2-12). It explains how an adult will perceive and process a trauma versus how a child would process it and provides information related to the child’s developmental capabilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traumatic Event</th>
<th>Adults</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Developmental Tasks and Adjustments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>Adults need to accept the reality of the loss.</td>
<td>Children need to understand the person has actually died.</td>
<td>Understanding can involve believing the death has occurred, understanding the feelings about it and accepting the accompanying changes. For example, a child may need to accept that Dad doesn’t braid hair as well as Mom or the family needed a new babysitter because Mom had to start working to earn money after Dad died.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grief</td>
<td>Adults need to work through the pain of grief.</td>
<td>Children must also cope with the pain of loss and are also faced with future occurrences of feelings related to loss.</td>
<td>Experiencing rather than avoiding feelings is a necessary step. This allows the bereaved to manage and move beyond them. As children get older, their understanding and feelings about the person who died may change and these feelings must also be addressed. Unaddressed feelings at any time can lead to physical symptoms and emotional difficulties, or resurface later. For example, a child may need to tell his mother he will never be as good a baseball player as his older brother who just died.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Loss  
Adults need to adjust to the environment in which the person is no longer there.  
Children are faced with the task of investing in new relationships and developing a new identity based on the loss.  
Realization and understanding occur over time as a death shapes life in new ways. Children face every day concrete changes in routine as well as changes in responsibilities and role. Coming to terms with the differences encourages active control rather than passive avoidance. Whereas a wife may need to take over the family finances, a teenage boy may need a part time job and may develop a strong bond with a coach as a male role model and guide.

Moving on  
Adults must be able to emotionally relocate the person who has died to be able to move on.  
Children accomplish this task by reevaluating the relationship, keeping an internal sense of the person, and continuing with normal developmental tasks.  
Gradually as days and months pass, the intense emotional focus and feelings become less prominent as balance is restored in life and memories are reinforced. There is a re-investment of physical and emotional energy in other aspects of life. This can be seen when a young teen continues to forge strong peer relationships, when a family enjoys a Thanksgiving celebration with talk about happy memories of past holidays, and when children are comforted by realizing they have incorporated qualities of a parent who has died into their own personality or life.

Table 2-9 Comparison of adult and child reactions to trauma
The Effect of Trauma on Cognition

There are some documented effects of trauma specific to children’s developing cognitive abilities as mentioned earlier, and younger children do not have all of the language and emotional skills needed to talk about how they feel. For example, one descriptor commonly used when adults talk about avoidance is “numbness” (i.e. numbing ourselves with alcohol or TV watching, distancing ourselves from the emotion). Younger children do not have an understanding of what feeling numb means and therefore would not be able to say that if asked how they feel (Pynoos et al., 1987). It is possible then that a parent or clinician might miss signs of avoidance because a child cannot articulate those feelings.

As with all communication, there is an encoding and decoding process that involves taking in and being able to understand a stimulus. In order to properly decode the situation, the child must have existing schemata which help them make sense of the information they are receiving. Often the most challenging developmental tasks occur during decoding. Young children encode and remember lots of information about stressful and non-stressful life situations. Yet younger children may not have had enough experiences to make sense of a school shooting and may be very confused about what is happening and why (Salmon & Bryant, 2002). Metacognition plays a role here, as children’s ability to understand their own thought processes develops as they age. Younger children may not be as capable of understanding that they are thinking about thinking and, therefore, may assign meaning to their thoughts that did not exist in reality (Salmon & Bryant, 2002).

In addition, younger children are more likely to take cues from their parents’
reaction to a potentially traumatic event and older children are more likely to take cues from their peers’ reactions as well as their family’s. Depending on the family’s or peers’ abilities to cope and make sense of the situation, this can lead to the child making meaning based on incorrect information or inappropriate or extreme levels of emotion (Finkelhor, 1995).

**Definition of PTSD**

PTSD is defined as a reaction occurring after one or more potentially traumatic events and may manifest as fear-based, anhedonic/dysphoric, and/or reactive/externalizing symptoms (DSM-5, 2013). For a person to receive a diagnosis of PTSD they must meet eight criteria. The point of this study is not to diagnose people with the disorder so the criteria will not be explored in depth. But there are certain behavioral symptoms that are relevant to the kinds of responses that might be seen in school shooting victims and survivors which will be defined and explored.

Within the PTSD subcategory, there are four groupings distinguishing the ways the trauma might manifest itself behaviorally: avoidance, re-experiencing, arousal, and negative cognitions and mood (DSM-5, 2013). The groupings represent kinds of behaviors that may be seen in the weeks, months and years after the event is over. When a person suffers from trauma exposure, they might employ these techniques to alleviate the powerful negative emotions that arise when the trauma memories are triggered. These behavioral classifications will now be defined and will be used as a coding mechanism in this study:

**Avoidance** refers to when a person takes action to avoid things that remind them
of the potentially traumatic event. These can include external/situational reminders, thoughts, feelings or memories.

**Negative cognitions and emotions** refer to when the person experiences a variety of negative thought processes or feelings related to the potentially traumatic event. These can include things like significant decrease in interest in activities, alienation, faulty memory of the event, blame of self or others, faulty beliefs about self, or estrangement.

**Arousal** refers to when the person exhibits behaviors consistent with a heightened fight or flight response. These can include things like hypervigilance, sleep disturbances, self-destructive behaviors, aggressiveness or recklessness.

**Re-experiencing/Intrusion** refers to when the person has recurring memories of the potentially traumatic event. This could include recurring dreams, flashbacks or other forms of prolonged distress.

Research has shown that traumatic memories are stored in the brain in such a way that they can be easily triggered by exposure to trauma-related cues (Foa and Kozak, 1986; Teicher, 2000; Jordan, 2003; Jones & Cureton, 2004; Duckworth, 2012; Turunen, 2014; Friedman, 2015). These memories might be triggered by sights, smells, sounds, words, situations, people or other stimuli (Terr, 1991). When a traumatic memory is triggered it might awaken the same kinds of intense emotions experienced during the actual event, forcing the person into the survival mechanisms of fight, flight or freeze and might cause the person to reenact, re-see or re-feel the traumatic experience (Terr, 1991; Ross, 2003). Foa and Kozak called these “fear memories” (1986). For trauma to be healed, the
components of the trauma memories must be consolidated. Healing from trauma involves decreasing the effect that the trigger mechanisms have on a person’s fear response and learning to manage the emotional response, which allows the person to think about the event without their survival instincts kicking in (i.e, fight, flight or freeze) (Terr, 1991; Salmon & Bryant, 2002).

**PTSD in Children**

The DSM-5 has added a subcategory to the TSRD section specifically related to PTSD in children under six-years-old which recognizes that the way PTSD manifests itself in children is very different than adults. For children under six, the diagnostic criteria are largely based in observable behaviors without the same degree of weight placed on cognitive or language-based symptoms. The kinds of things that can be considered potentially traumatic for children include car crashes, dog bites, tornadoes, physical/sexual/emotional abuse or witnessing violence. It seems clear that being involved in a school shooting either as a primary or secondary victim could qualify as a potentially traumatic event.

Children must exhibit the same four categories above, but their behaviors may manifest in much different ways than adults. For example, a traumatized child who is having nightmares and is reenacting the same activity over and over in play may be displaying re-experiencing/intrusive behaviors. A child who suddenly does not want to play anything and who manifests persistent new feelings of guilt or shame may be displaying negative alterations in cognitions or mood due to a potentially traumatic event.
A child who suddenly refuses to go to a certain place or visit a certain person or who begins to shy away from certain activities may be displaying avoidance behaviors related to a potentially traumatic event. Finally, a child who begins having major temper tantrums, who startles easily or who suddenly has trouble sleeping may be displaying arousal behaviors due to a potentially traumatic event. If a child displays all of the above symptoms, s/he may meet the criteria for PTSD in children under six (Sweeton, 2015).

Research seems to indicate that the closer a child is to the potentially traumatic event, the more likely s/he is to develop PTSD or manifest multiple trauma symptoms (Pynoos et al., 1987; Simpson & Coté, 2006). In this light, it seems that interviewing children after a school shooting might be putting the story ahead of their wellbeing. Being aware of the way trauma works in the human psyche should give reporters enough information to make good judgments about when, where and how to conduct interviews.

Pynoos et al. (1987) conducted a study in the immediate aftermath of a school shooting in Stockton, CA, which is particularly relevant to the present study. They used a PTSD scale while interviewing children who had been in varying degrees of proximity to the playground where the shooting occurred. The scale was normed based on the PTSD criteria in the DSM-3, so it is not usable anymore given the changes to how PTSD is handled in the DSM-4 and now DSM-5.

Their most notable finding was that the relationship between level of PTSD and degree of proximity was significantly correlated, with those being the closest to the shooting experiencing the most severe symptoms (see Fig. 2-2). Of note is that an overwhelming number of students were on the playground at the time of the shooting.
(77.2%) and a majority of those who were still at school but not on the playground (66.7%) showed moderate to severe symptoms of PTSD. The children who were off the school grounds reported significantly fewer PTSD symptoms but it is also worth noting that even students who were not at school because they were absent or had already left (“not at school”) and those who were far away from the school on vacation with their families (“off track”) also showed moderate to severe levels of PTSD, 25.6% and 17.5% respectively (Pynoos et al., 1987).

![Graph showing severity of PTSD by exposure level](image)

*Fig 2-2 Severity of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) reactions by exposure level ($\chi^2 = 61.5, df = 9, P < .0001$).*

Also of note were their findings about the specific symptoms reported by children in each diagnosis level (i.e. mild to severe PTSD). Although their table included responses for all students interviewed, only the symptoms reported collectively by 76-100% of the children (i.e. the most frequently reported symptoms) are shown here (see Table. 2-9). The team reported that sleep disturbances were what most differentiated the children who fell into the severe and moderate categories. They attributed this to the possibility that sleep
disturbances end up affecting the children during the day as well because they are not well rested and therefore struggle with other challenges more acutely (Pynoos et al., 1987).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of children reporting symptom</th>
<th>NO PTSD</th>
<th>Mild</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Severe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>76-100%</td>
<td>none</td>
<td>• Event seen as extreme Stressor</td>
<td>• Event seen as extreme Stressor</td>
<td>• Event seen as extreme Stressor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Afraid when thinks of event</td>
<td>• Intrusive thoughts</td>
<td>• Intrusive imagery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Upset when thinks of event</td>
<td>• Wish to avoid feelings</td>
<td>• Intrusive thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Avoidance of reminders</td>
<td>• Wish to avoid feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Afraid when thinks of event</td>
<td>• Avoidance of reminders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Fear of recurrence</td>
<td>• Afraid when thinks of event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Jumpy, nervous</td>
<td>• Upset when thinks of event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Upset when thinks of event</td>
<td>• Fear of recurrence</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Jumpy, nervous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Bad dreams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Sleep disturbance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Attention difficulty in school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2-10 Types of symptoms reported by children after school shooting (Pynoos et al., 1987)
Table 2-10 is a summary of warning signs that a child’s reaction to trauma may be abnormal (Goodman et al., 2002; Salmon & Bryant, 2002; Gurwitch & Messenbaugh, 2005) and identifies ways PTSD manifests in children.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PTSD Category</th>
<th>Symptoms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Avoidance                     | • avoidance of thoughts, feelings or places that remind the child of what happened  
                               | • numbing or lack of emotions                                               |
|                               | • regression to earlier behavior, such as clinging, bedwetting, thumb sucking |
|                               | • excessive use of alcohol or other substances to self-medicate            |
|                               | • withdrawal from friends                                                 |
|                               | • long-term refusal to talk about the potentially traumatic event         |
| Negative connotations/emotions | • detached from others, social withdrawal                                |
|                               | • extended periods of depression                                          |
|                               | • generalized, vague feelings of guilt instead of sadness or anger connected to the event |
|                               | • inability to be comforted                                                |
|                               | • excessive/uncontrollable grief, crying or a lack of grief, crying       |
|                               | • newly developed fears or worries                                         |
| Arousal                       | • disorganized and agitated behavior                                      |
|                               | • irritability or anger                                                   |
|                               | • nervousness about everyone and everything around him or her, (e.g. when people get too close) |
|                               | • jumpy when hearing loud noises                                          |
|                               | • exaggerated startle response                                            |
|                               | • difficulty sleeping or concentrating                                    |
|                               | • magical thinking                                                        |
| Re-experiencing/Intrusion      | • moments when a child seems to replay the event in his or her mind       |
• intrusion of recurrent memories of the event or repetitive play about the event
• nightmares
• repeatedly telling the story or asking the same questions

Table 2-11 Ways PTSD manifests in children

**Acute Stress Disorder (ASD)**

ASD was first included in the DSM-4 and was meant to be an identifier of how children experience acute stress reactions in the period immediately following a potentially traumatic event and who may be at risk for developing PTSD (Salmon & Bryant, 2002). The definition for ASD in the DSM-5 is the same as PTSD except the symptoms only last three days to one month (DSM-5, 2013). After one month, if the symptoms persist, the diagnosis usually becomes PTSD.

People who may receive a diagnosis of ASD have a lot of the symptoms of PTSD but they do not fully meet the criteria for diagnosis. In criterion B of the ACD disorder, a person needs to manifest nine of the 14 symptoms listed below for this diagnosis:

1. Subjective sense of numbing, detachment from others, or reduced responsiveness to events
2. An altered sense of the reality of one’s surroundings or oneself (e.g., seeing oneself from another’s perspective, being in a daze, time slowing)
3. Inability to remember at least one important aspect of the potentially traumatic event
4. Spontaneous or cued recurrent, involuntary and intrusive distressing memories of
5. Recurrent distressing dreams related to the event
6. Dissociative reactions in which the individual feels or acts as if the potentially traumatic event were recurring
7. Intense or prolonged psychological distress or physiological reactivity at exposure to internal or external cues that symbolize or resemble an aspect of the potentially traumatic event
8. Persistent avoidance of thoughts, conversations, or feelings that arouse recollections of the trauma
9. Persistent avoidance of activities, places, or physical reminders that arouse recollections of trauma
10. Sleep disturbance (e.g., difficulty in falling asleep, restless sleep, or staying asleep)
11. Hypervigilance
12. Irritable, angry or aggressive behavior
13. Exaggerated startle response
14. Agitation or restlessness

**Definition of Retraumatization and Revictimization**

There are two aspects of trauma outside of the diagnostic criteria that are relevant to this study: retraumatization and revictimization.

In their book of the same name, Duckworth and Follette define retraumatization as “traumatic stress reactions, responses, and symptoms that occur consequent to multiple
exposures to potentially traumatic events that are physical, psychological, or both in nature” (Duckworth & Follette, 2011, p. 2). As the name suggests, retraumatization involves the responses or reactions to multiple potentially traumatic events. It is included as an important concept in this study because a school shooting on top of other previously experienced traumas may cause retraumatization, and several researchers have made the point that participating in interviews with the media after a potentially traumatic event might also lead to retraumatization (Ochberg, 1996; McLellan, 1999; Hollings, 2005; NASP, 2006; Melki, 2009; Coté & Simpson, 2000; Tenore & McBride, 2012).

A similar construct is revictimization which is defined as “victimization occurring at different points in time” (Tusher, 2009). It is most commonly used when referring to adult rape victims who were sexually abused as children, but it can involve any type of potentially traumatic event that occurs two or more times. It is included here because it is often used interchangeably with retraumatization as both constructs involve a victim re-experiencing trauma. A person who is revictimized becomes retraumatized because they have experienced multiple traumas (Terr, 1991). For this study, they will be used interchangeably.

Referring back to the quote on page 15 in this paper provides us with an example of what might be retraumatization from media interactions: shooting survivor Jennifer Longdon acknowledges that she drinks heavily for a few days after every media interview about the shooting. She likens media interviews to opening an artery so we can watch her bleed and dragging out her trauma so we can play with it (Longdon, 2015). Similarly, reporter Karen Brown shared a story about a nun she was interviewing for a story about
torture. The nun divulged that after every media interview she needed two days to sit and do nothing to recover from the rebounding effects of traumatization (Nieman Reports, 2009). Stories like these are not hard to find and are used here as a cautionary tale against the hard-nosed approach journalists sometimes take to interviewing victims: pushing their emotions away, putting a microphone in the victim’s face and asking question after question.

This is not to argue that all interviews with victims or survivors might lead to the person experiencing trauma symptoms or elevated stress levels. There is a body of work that confirms that being interviewed can help victims by allowing them to tell their stories their own way or regain control over the trauma that overwhelmed them (Saakvitne, 1998; Salmon & Bryant 2002; Berrington & Jemphrey, 2003; Simpson & Coté, 2006). So, this is not a pronouncement against interviewing victims altogether, but rather a call for journalists to interview children in times and places where it is developmentally appropriate.

**Importance of Avoidance and Dissociation**

Avoidance and dissociation consist of constellations of behaviors that might make a victim seem relatively unbothered by the potentially traumatic event, and responsible reporters who are looking to minimize harm may approach these victims thinking they are the most stable and therefore the best ones to interview. But in reality, the exact opposite might be true.

For the purposes of this study, I will be using what the DSM-5 refers to as
“dissociative symptoms” as my definition of dissociation. It is important to note that there is a section of the DSM-5 dedicated to dissociative disorders, but that is outside of the scope of this project. In this context, I am interested in when people display dissociative symptoms as a means of dealing with a potentially traumatic event, not in diagnosing them with a disorder. Dissociative symptomology is associated with, but not included as part of the trauma- and stress-related disorders which encompass PTSD and ASD, among others. This means they are closely related but not the same thing.

The DSM-5 (2013) states that dissociative symptoms, such as amnesia, flashbacks, numbing, and depersonalization/derealization, can “potentially disrupt every area of psychological functioning” and are experienced in this manner:

a) Unbidden intrusions into awareness and behavior, with accompanying losses of continuity in subjective experience (i.e., “positive” dissociative symptoms such as fragmentation of identity, depersonalization, and derealization) and/or

b) Inability to access information or to control mental functions that normally are readily amenable to access or control (i.e., “negative” dissociative symptoms such as amnesia).

In the time immediately following a potentially traumatic event, dissociation is often manifested as a person seeming “out of it.” When a person dissociates, they distance themselves from the emotions, senses, thoughts, activities and/or people that remind them of the trauma (Terr, 1991). It is the equivalent of turning down the dimmer switch on the lights as the person emotionally and psychologically moves as far away from the intense feelings as possible. Dissociation can be as strong as a fugue state where the person has
lost touch with reality or it can be as simple as a person who seems distant with a far-away look in their eyes or seems to be in a daze. The child who is walking out of the school and is not crying and seems to be rather calm compared to the other children might in fact be dissociating. S/he might be dissociating as a way for their brain to control the overwhelming emotions they are experiencing (Simpson and Cote, 2006).

Avoidant behavior, on the other hand, would begin to be seen in the days to years following the potentially traumatic event. When a person exercises avoidant coping mechanisms, they stay away from things that will trigger the intense emotions from the potentially traumatic event (Terr, 1981; Terr, 1991). The person might avoid people, places, sensory input like smells or sounds, activities, songs or anything else that reminds them of the trauma. If a reporter encounters a child a week after the shooting who never mentions the shooting, does not seem upset compared to their peers, or denies requests to talk to counselors or offers of support, that child may be displaying avoidant behaviors.

What is important about dissociative and avoidant behaviors and what makes them so critical to this research is that they are predictors of developing PTSD (Kleim et al., 2007; McDonald et al., 2013; Marchand et al., 2015). The reporter with the best of intentions who does not approach the crying child and instead approaches the child who seems the calmest may in fact be approaching the child who is experiencing the most severe response to the shooting.

What is important to consider is what “normal” behavior after a school shooting would look like. Crying, screaming, panic, fear and anger are all emotions you might expect to see from children who just experienced a terrifying event. A child who appears
calm is abnormal. A child who is not expressing any emotions is abnormal. Similarly, children who have experienced a sudden trauma such as a school shooting are often able to recount the events in great detail because they lack the cognitive ability to repress or deny the incident. A child who says they cannot remember anything or refuses to talk about the incident may be displaying avoidant or dissociative symptoms. Those are the children who could be at greatest risk of developing long-term psychological conditions such as PTSD or ASD (Peterson & Biggs, 1997; Falasca & Caulfield, 1999; Kleim et al., 2007; McDonald et al., 2013; Marchand et al., 2015).

There is literature in the psychological journals that supports the idea that peritraumatic (i.e. symptoms that occur during or immediately following the trauma) avoidance/dissociation is highly associated with PTSD (Kleim et al., 2007; McDonald et al., 2013; Marchand et al., 2015) and there is literature that questions the link (Meiser-Stedman et al. 2007; Bui et al., 2010). Some of the disagreement stems from the changing definition of dissociation over the past three decades. Its changing meaning can affect interpretations of the results over time. Also at play is the difficulty in measuring peritraumatic dissociation after the fact. Measures rely on self-reported data and clinical observation and evaluation, but without being present to see the dissociation as it is happening, reliability is in question (DePrince et al., 2006; Madan et al., 2015). The Pynoos et al. study (1987) discussed earlier is one of the few examples of traumatic symptoms being measured during the peritraumatic time period after a school shooting.

The literature on the link between dissociation and avoidant behaviors and PTSD in children is less common but the link is still there (Schäfer et al. 2004; (Kaplow et al.
Of note, taken collectively, less than 20% of children in these studies eventually develop PTSD and that number drops significantly as time passes. There are also indications that peritraumatic dissociation predicts PTSD in the shorter timeframe but not the longer one (De Soir et al., 2014) and that avoidant coping and other coping behaviors may act as mediators or moderators of the link between dissociation and PTSD and ASD (Epstein, 1993; Bryant & Harvey, 1995).

Results are mixed about how avoidance and dissociation apply to traumas such as school shootings. Terr (1991) connects avoidant and dissociative symptoms more closely to long-term traumas such as child abuse rather than sudden traumas such as school shootings. But she indicates that the most severe sudden traumas (and a school shooting could arguably be classified as such) can cause children to manifest dissociative and avoidant symptoms. Simpson and Coté (2006) argue that due to children’s and teens’ feelings of powerlessness and helplessness during a trauma such as a school shooting, dissociating themselves completely from the incident may be the best way they can protect themselves. But, as mentioned earlier, avoiding these memories entirely can be a result of not having the needed cognitive development to deal with them and may cause the trauma to stall as a “fear memory” (Foa and Kozak, 1986) or a “fear network” (Schauer & Elbert, 2010). Avoiding these memories without integrating them into normal memory can lead to PTSD (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2004).

Trauma researchers are also investigating with mixed results whether dissociation is actually a severe form of avoidance (Madan et al., 2015; Hetzel-Riggins & Meads, 2016).
People who have distanced themselves from the situation or the feelings involved with the trauma can be understood to be avoiding troubling stimuli. For this reason, avoidance and dissociation will be used interchangeably.

One thing that will be explored in this study is the difference between being interviewed for therapeutic purposes versus being interviewed for informational/media purposes. Since the hallmark treatment for traumatized people involves talking about the event and the sights, smells and feelings associated with it, it naturally leads to the question of why journalism interviews might be problematic. The response again rests in knowledge of the signs, symptoms and effects of trauma and how trauma is healed.

Therapists are trained to create bonds based in trust and safety with their clients. Since fear is at the heart of trauma, feeling safe is paramount to healing. There may be multiple sessions over time dedicated to helping the client feel safe and to trust the therapist before any work is begun on the trauma itself. It should be clear that this is not the way journalists operate when collecting interviews about a news story.

Similarly, the kinds of questions that are asked by journalists related to the trauma are not necessarily bad questions or damaging in and of themselves. Interviews with journalists may in fact be similar to the kinds of conversations primary and secondary victims might have with their family and friends. But it should be noted that these conversations are likely to lead to some degree of re-experiencing the trauma. Re-experiencing in a therapeutic environment can be processed with a person who knows how to handle the onslaught of fears and emotions that may be triggered; a journalist is not likely to know what to do. A therapist is also trained to help the person stay safe while they
re-experience the feelings in the moment and will provide follow-up support to help them in the days and weeks following. A journalist will usually conduct one interview possibly with a follow-up and then have no other contact. The feelings that are awakened from the interviews are left hanging in place, without a concrete plan to help the person if they suffer consequences as a result.

Simpson & Coté (2006) argue that reporters, if they are going to interview children or teenagers, should do so in the company of a person who provides strong emotional support and comfort to the child and in a place that will not trigger re-experiencing the trauma. They also urge reporters to interview traumatized children or teenagers in the company of or under the guidance of a trained counselor or trauma specialist.

**Cumulative Trauma**

Finally, of utmost importance for this study is the relationship of cumulative trauma to a child’s ability to cope and thrive. Cumulative trauma is the accumulation of different ongoing traumas experienced by a person (Anda et al., 2006; Pynoos et al., 2009; van der Kolk et al., 2009; Hodges et al., 2013). Simply counting the number of traumas a person has experienced can be an indicator of their general well-being and of the increasing possibility of negative outcomes in their health (Anda et al., 2006; Hodges et al., 2013), development (USDHHS, 1999; Cloitre et al., 2009; van der Kolk et al., 2009; Sar, 2011; Stolbach et al., 2013) and relationships (Anda et al., 2006; Hodges et al., 2013).

The presence of cumulative trauma in children may increase the risk that a child will respond adversely to additional traumas (Sar, 2011) and has been shown to increase
the number of negative symptoms experienced in childhood and adulthood (Anda et al., 2006; Gerrity et al., 2008; Sar, 2011; Kliethermes, 2014). The number and type of traumas affects the kinds of negative outcomes the child might face (USDHHS, 1999; Cohen et al., 2006; Subica et al., 2012; Jonkman et al. 2013; Stolbach et al., 2013). Cumulative trauma, as a theory and a phenomenon, has legitimacy in the field of psychology (Stoddard, 2014). The effects of cumulative trauma on development and later life wellbeing will be discussed in the next section.

**Developmental Psychology**

The basic idea of developmental psychology is that development is a result of the interactions/transactions between a child and their environment. As mentioned in Chapter One, children begin developing in a number of areas from the time they are conceived and transactions such as life experiences, nutrition, engagement with others and stimulation affect children’s emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and psychosocial development.

Children’s and adolescents’ developmental milestones have been studied for decades and have resulted in consistent markers or milestones that are accomplished at each age group stage. Since developmental milestones have been rather stable over the years they will be shared, but the majority of this section will explore the relationship between trauma and development.

Table 2-11 contains developmental milestones for elementary school-aged children (6-11 years old) and adolescents (12-17 years old), which are the two age groups of interest to this study. The milestones were combined from a number of sources (AACA, 2008;
BCCP, 2014; CDC, 2015) because they reflect the age ranges of school groupings: elementary and middle/high school. Middle and high school are grouped because the developmental tasks being undertaken tend to begin around age 12 and continue throughout adolescence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>6-11</th>
<th>12-17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Social** | • Increased independence from family  
• Increased conflict with family due to increasing autonomy-seeking behaviors  
• Understanding their place in the world  
• Pay more attention to friendships  
• More complex friend groups  
• Want to be liked and accepted by friends, more peer pressure  
• Less focus on self, more focus on others  
• Begin to understand others’ perspectives  
• Rules are important  
• Separation of the sexes in friend groups  
• Greater interest in privacy | • Interest in the opposite sex  
• More conflict with parents  
• More independence from parents  
• Deeper capacity for intimate relationships  
• More time spent with friends than family  
• Developing identity is important  
• Conformity is important |
| **Language** | • Increased ability to express thoughts and feelings through words  
• Speech patterns reflect shift in focus to others  
• Expanding vocabulary | • Increased ability to explain reasons for choices  
• Increased ability to express thoughts and feelings through words  
• Develops personal speech |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical</th>
<th>Cognitive</th>
<th>Emotional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • More aware of body as puberty begins in middle childhood or early adolescence  
• Boys heavier than girls  
• More physical dexterity  
• Refined motor skills  
• Increased coordination | • Mostly focused on present but starting to think about future  
• Rapid development of mental skills  
• Increased attention span  
• Increased attention to logical thinking | • Feelings of awkwardness  
• Worries about being normal  
• Moodiness  
• Sometimes childish responses |
| • Increased concern about personal appearance  
• Growth spurts  
• Sexual maturity | • Improved work habits  
• Increased attention to future school or career plans  
• Increased capacity for abstract thought and complex moral understanding  
• More ability for complex thought  
• Abstract thinking is in place  
• Systematic problem-solving  
• Use of hypotheticals  
• Ongoing synaptic pruning, particularly around the prefrontal cortex area  
• Increased ability to set goals  
• Increased ability to delay gratification in later adolescence | • Sadness or depression  
• Increasing self-expectations  
• Increasing self-doubt  
• Increasing moodiness  
• More stress from schoolwork |
Table 2-12 Developmental milestones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioral</th>
<th>• Signs of body image or eating disorders may begin</th>
<th>• Feelings of love and passion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Fewer expressions of affection toward parents</td>
<td>• Fewer expressions of affection toward parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Possibility for eating problems</td>
<td>• Possibility for eating problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increasing use of alcohol and drugs</td>
<td>• Increasing use of alcohol and drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Increasing experimentation with sex</td>
<td>• Increasing experimentation with sex</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

This chapter has attempted to connect two broad topics, journalism ethics and psychology, to provide scaffolding for an applied and normative proposal for if, how and why reporters should interview children at the scene of school shootings. Through exploring how journalists are currently socialized and trained about journalism ethics and trauma, the groundwork is laid to develop a plan of action to better prepare journalists in the future. And by exploring how potentially traumatic events affect people, with special attention paid to their effects on children and their development, the groundwork has been laid for an argument about why it might be harmful for reporters to interview children after school shootings.

If nothing else, this chapter should illustrate how complex these issues are and that there are no clear "right" and "wrong" answers. There are many factors that go into whether or not it is acceptable to interview a particular child. Things like their history of previous traumas, their support system, their age and developmental level all affect how a particular child will make sense of and recover from the effects of the trauma. The fact that the
reporter does not have access to any of this information is strong evidence that they should not interview children at the scene at all or that they should proceed with extreme caution.
Chapter 3: Method

In this chapter I will discuss the rationale for utilizing a qualitative single case study and methodology, describe the details of the event, include descriptive information about the research participants, ethical considerations as well as data collection and analysis methods, validity and trustworthiness, and limitations and delimitations. I used a single case study of one school shooting to inform my research questions.

Using the dual lenses of journalism ethics and trauma theory, I developed themes to describe and interpret the journalists’, parents’ and children’s lived experiences by using inductive analysis (Thomas, 2006), in a deductive manner (Groenewald, 2004). I first created themes in an organic fashion (e.g., clustering, grouping) by allowing them to emerge from multiple contacts with the data (Creswell, 2008). I then applied multiple frameworks related to the two theoretical constructs of journalism ethics and trauma theory as a means of interpreting and analyzing the themes. I used a semi-structured interview protocol as a way to seek to understand how journalists, parents and children experienced a school shooting from their own perspectives and how they processed these experiences afterward. The study asks the following research questions:

1. What do journalists consider important when making ethical decisions in traumatic situations?
2. What do journalists need to know about trauma to make informed decisions about interviewing at the scene of school shootings?
3. What should be covered in a college journalism curriculum and workplace training to better inform journalists about how their work can impact the people affected by
Design and Methodology

I will use inductive and deductive qualitative research methods to attempt to make meaning from an individual’s or a group’s experiences. In this section, I will define and explain my chosen methodology and describe the study. The methodology choices and rationales conform to the way they are posited in Creswell’s work, “Qualitative Research Designs: Selection and Implementation” (2007).

Single Instrumental Case Study

A case study provides a deep dive into understanding one representation of a phenomenon. While it is not likely possible to collect data on all examples of a particular phenomenon and it is not advisable to collect shallow data on multiple examples, collecting deep data on one can begin the process of making sense of the phenomenon. This study will utilize a within-site approach and an instrumental case to develop theory. The BMS case was selected because it is representative of school shootings within my criteria and is accessible to be studied.

Data collected at a live event would obviously produce the most accurate information because direct observation of the incident, and interviewing while it is fresh, will produce the most factual accounts. I would be able to observe children and reporters at the scene and make direct judgments about children’s levels of trauma and reporters’
decisions and tactics.

However, conducting research at the scene can add to the chaos being experienced by everyone involved and has the possibility of compounding the trauma being experienced in the moment. My presence at the incident might add another layer to the complexities being faced: children’s need for safety, guardians finding loved ones, reporters gathering information, etc. Similarly, seeking interviews with reporters could prevent them from doing their jobs and seeking interviews from children and guardians could further increase their distress.

Data that is collected in retrospect is subject to the participants’ memories becoming less clear and to the effects of the healing nature of time, but it is also less likely to cause further traumatization or distress. As in the expression “time heals all wounds,” traumas that may have been acutely experienced at the time will likely not be recounted in retrospect with as much emotion or distress. Similarly, memories can be exaggerated over time as well, with the emotion and distress described being more than what was experienced in the moment. Both of these caveats illustrate the importance of triangulation and collecting data from multiple perspectives of people directly affected as well as those who served as experts in trauma recovery after the fact and from experts who were not present.

The heart of this study is a single school shooting that serves as a case study. One incident was selected as the focus instead of multiple incidents in order to explore the circumstances and experiences surrounding it more deeply. Four forms of data were used to triangulate the themes that emerged: semi-structured in-depth interviews, news stories,
self-reflective narratives, and social media. Finally, one aspect of the case was privileged as most salient (i.e. the role of journalists reporting from the scene), but other aspects of the case rose to significance as well and will be explored fully in Chapter 4.

**Phenomenology Defined**

In addition to using an instrumental case study methodology, a phenomenological framework will be used to analyze the data with the goal of being able to describe the lived experience of the reporters at the scene and the children’s and parents’ experiences of being interviewed after a significant trauma.

It is my belief that more can be learned about children’s experiences with trauma in the school shooting context through conversations, rather than through more quantitative methods such as surveys or diagnostic instruments because the roles of emotion, nurture and support are so critical. While data might be gathered about these items through a survey, being in the same space and being able to observe emotion and body language during interviews will be important to recognizing and observing if and when trauma and/or emotional or physical pain are still present.

I analyzed the interviews I collected first using the open-coding phenomenological organizational system of horizontalization which allowed meaning to arise from the data in the form of themes, which are also thought of as “structures of experience” (Van Maanen, 1990). As the themes emerged, they began to reflect the experience of the population of interest in the phenomenon. In this case, I discovered themes that will tell the story of the lived experience of being a reporter who is working at the scene of a school
shooting and themes that will tell the story of what it’s like to be a child or parent at the scene of a school shooting who is interviewed by the press. Understanding these lived experiences will allow journalism as a profession and people involved at schools where a shooting has occurred to make more informed decisions.

Next axial coding was utilized on the interview transcripts, news stories, self-reflexive pieces and social media using a variety of theories, psychological symptomology and current ethical best practices indicated by the tables in Chapter Two. Axial coding is the process of looking for patterns in the codes and clustering them together. The results from axial coding illuminate the following: (a) if and how journalists currently adhere to best practices for ethical behavior, and (b) what kinds of trauma symptomology were present in children after a school shooting and how it was impacted by participating in media interviews. The axial coding plan is outlined in table 3.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Coding Scheme</th>
<th>Anticipated Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journalists</td>
<td>Tips for Interviewing Victims (Table 2.1)</td>
<td>Identify if, when, how and why reporters followed the guidelines for interviewing recommended by the DART Center.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalists</td>
<td>General interviewing guidelines for children (Table 2.2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalists</td>
<td>Interviewing children at the scene of a crime or disaster (Table 2.3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalists</td>
<td>Interviewing children about previous trauma (Table 2.4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School personnel, parents, children, counselors</td>
<td>Psychosomatic Symptoms (Table 2.7)</td>
<td>Identify symptoms observed in or reported by children who were interviewed after the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School personnel, parents, children, counselors</td>
<td>Psychosomatic Symptoms Children (Table 2.8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3.1 Axial coding scheme

Taken together, the results of the lived experiences of children and reporters after a school shooting combined with the results of axial coding should provide evidence that will allow for the development of five outcomes:

1. Evidence of the trauma-related impact of media interviews on children.
3. An evidence-based guide for reporters to determine when and if it is advisable to interview children based on the trauma literature.
4. Evidence-based trauma-informed recommendations for training that professional journalists who cover potentially traumatic events should receive on the job.
5. Evidence-based trauma-informed recommendations for content that should be covered in college journalism curricula to properly prepare future reporters.

**Narrative Analysis Defined**

To a lesser extent, narrative analysis was used to code stories collected from the reporters interviewed for this study as well as their previously published self-reflective pieces about the case. These narratives were used to construct a timeline of how reporters learned about the school shooting, how they were called to action, the way they went about
reporting from the scene and the hours that followed.

**Research Setting and Context**

This study focused on a school shooting that occurred in early 2014 at a middle school in Small City in the southwest. Small City has less than 50,000 people and is several hours from other cities, which was a factor in this incident.

The shooting occurred at Bradford-Mitchell School, one of Small City’s four middle schools, before 8:00 am while students were waiting inside the school’s gymnasium for school to start. This was commonplace on days when it was too cold for students to wait outside, as was the case on January 14, 2014. That morning there were several hundred children in the gym on the bleachers. The Bradford-Mitchell School campus is on the very outskirts of town about one mile from the mall, both of which were also factors in this case.

On the morning of the incident, The Shooter was dropped off at school by his uncle. He carried a very large duffle bag that contained the gun he used in the shooting. He walked into the gym and to the middle of the floor facing the bleachers and fired several shots at the crowd. Two of the shots critically injured fellow students Noah and Kaylee as well as slightly injured the school’s security guard. The Shooter put the gun on the floor, put his hands up and was peacefully restrained by a teacher until the police arrived.

This shooting was chosen as the case to study because it meets the following criteria which were delineated to limit the scope of shootings of interest: (1) took place in a K-12 school in the United States; (2) involved a shooter(s) who targeted children, among others; (3) at least two people died or were injured; (4) the motive was not determined to be
something that might have normally involved violence or guns such as drug deals, gang violence or domestic violence; (5) they were intentional shootings; (6) news reports contained interviews with primary and secondary victims. Police investigations showed The Shooter planned the shooting in advance because he had been bullied.

No other studies have been done on this tragedy, so this study will contribute to the growing literature about school shootings in general as well as educate and inform about this shooting in particular. My research begins minutes after the shooting occurred when the first local reporters heard about and responded to the scene.

Sample and Data Sources

I recognize that my decision to interview people who may have been negatively affected by previous interviews seems ironic at best and potentially re-traumatizing at worst. However, I have a master’s degree in counseling psychology and worked part-time for seven years as an in-home therapist specializing in family preservation, during which I treated children and adolescents who suffered from a variety of traumas. In addition, my bachelor’s degree was in early childhood education and I worked as an elementary school teacher for five years, which exposed me to child development issues and needs. Through this background, I am qualified to conduct interviews with potentially traumatized populations in a manner that is age-appropriate and sensitive to signs of distress. I am also prepared to handle traumatic reactions that might be triggered and to assist the interview subject in finding ongoing support.
Research Population

In order to fully explore how media interviews after a school shooting might impact children, a variety of in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted.

From the parents’ and children’s direct recollections and reflections, I learned what behaviors or emotions were observed/experienced in the hours, days, weeks, months and years after the incident and their analysis of how they coped with the trauma. I compared and contrasted what parents and children reported versus what mental health providers and experts reported in an effort to see how well parents interpreted their children’s traumatic reactions and supported them toward well-being.

From the reporters themselves, I determined what the experience was like for them, what factors were at play as they made their decisions about who to interview and heard about their reflections looking back on the incident. I recorded and analyzed stories about the event and looked for patterns that shed light on how decision-making in a highly stressful and traumatic scene compared or contrasted with their decision-making at other types of scenes.

In addition, I interviewed three national experts in the fields of journalism and trauma, two school officials who worked during the Bradford-Mitchell shooting, and four local mental health providers who helped with the aftermath. These interviews will be used to explore noteworthy themes that were outside of the lived experience of reporters, parents and students and to inform and explain the proposed ethical guidelines in my concluding chapter.
Sampling

Purposeful sampling was used in this study in an attempt to recruit participants and sources who could directly contribute to my understanding of the situation. I conformed to Creswell’s recommendation that purposeful sampling includes “different perspectives on the problem, process, or event I want to portray, but I also may select ordinary cases, accessible cases, or unusual cases” (1998, p. 62). To this end, six discrete categories of interviews were conducted: (1) experts in school shootings, trauma and journalism ethics; (2) community mental health professionals who worked with children after the shooting; (3) school personnel working on the day of the shooting; (4) journalists who conducted interviews with children after the shooting, and their editors back in the newsroom; (5) the parents of children who were interviewed after the Bradford-Mitchell shooting; and (6) the children themselves.

Finally, interactions between community members on Facebook posts related to the news stories were also collected and analyzed in order to see if the themes revealed in the interviews were also reflected by members of the general public in public conversations.

Inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Parents and children being interviewed were primary or secondary victims of the school shooting at Bradford-Mitchell School in January 2014
- Mental health clinicians and school personnel were working at or near Bradford-Mitchell School at the time of the school shooting and provided therapeutic services to primary and/or secondary victims of the shooting
- Reporters will have been on-site and editors were working in the newsroom at
the time of the Bradford-Mitchell School shooting

- Journalism ethics and trauma experts will have expertise in journalism, trauma and/or school shootings

**Recruitment**

Recruitment happened in two stages: prior to my arrival in Small City to conduct fieldwork in summer 2016 and while on the ground in Small City.

In the months prior to arriving in Small City, I used internet searches and the Newsbank database to locate and compile news stories about the Bradford-Mitchell School shooting. Each story was examined to identify and compile the names of students, parents, school personnel and mental health professionals who were interviewed and these were collected in a spreadsheet. Quotes from each individual were compiled as well as the names and bylines of the reporters.

I used internet searches and social media to try to identify contact information for the students, parents, mental health workers and each of the reporters. Mental health workers were successfully contacted using email to establish rapport and arrange for interviews. Reporters were contacted using email and direct messages on Twitter. Parents and students were initially contacted through Facebook which proved to be unsuccessful. Further attempts to contact these populations were delayed until my arrival in Small City where I used more personal, local and official means of recruitment, as discussed below.

Multiple attempts by postal mail, email and telephone were unsuccessful in contacting any of the school administrators who were working during the shooting. None
of my attempts to connect prior to my arrival were responded to at all.

After arriving in Small City for the first visit in June 2016, I went to the Reporters Daily Record (RDR), the local newspaper that took the lead on reporting the shooting. Almost all of the reporters and editors who were on staff in January 2014 have since moved on to new jobs. However, the current staff were able to connect me to Ryan, the Managing Editor from the time of the shooting, who was able to connect me with two reporters who were assigned to cover the shooting, another editor, and a local videographer who was stringing for NBC News. In addition, I was able to interview the RDR General Manager who was still working at the paper and three staff members whose relatives were enrolled at the school at the time of the shooting.

The RDR staff also gave me the name and contact information for the mother of one of the children who was shot and I was able to reach out to her for an interview. Ryan suggested I contact a City Council member, Tabitha Denny, who runs a Facebook group dedicated to improving Small City. She gave me permission to post a message to recruit parents and children. It was shared multiple times and resulted in several people contacting me for interviews. I also used this Facebook group during my second visit to Big City and Small City in July 2016.

I visited Bradford-Mitchell School unannounced hoping to talk with the school’s leadership. None were available but two of the school’s janitors let me in and allowed me to leave a note for the principal. In addition, they shared that the person who was principal during the shooting had retired one month prior to my arrival, the person who had been the vice principal at the time had left Bradford-Mitchell for a new job in 2015, and the person
who had been the dean of students at the time had just been promoted to principal. It was she whom I left a note for.

I also visited the School Board offices in Small City unannounced and was told that no school personnel would talk to me without the superintendent’s approval. He was not available to be interviewed during either of my visits to Small City and did not respond to any of my attempts to reach out to him via postal mail, email or phone calls. His staff eventually connected me with the Assistant Superintendent of Special Services who coordinated an interview which also included the newly appointed principal of Bradford-Mitchell School.

Overall, persistence, personal connections, the RDR staff connections and responses from the Facebook group resulted in interviews with 33 participants: three national-level experts, four local mental health professionals, two school officials, 14 editors or reporters, six parents and four children.

**Informed Consent**

Each interview subject was fully informed about the nature of this research project and its possible positive and negative outcomes. Informed consent was obtained only after each participant was made aware of how it could affect them directly as well as the broader goals for journalism preparation and training. All participants’ identities except for the national-level experts will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used in order to protect them from embarrassment or further trauma. The key with participants’ real names and pseudonyms and all study documents are kept in a secured, password-protected file on
a secure online file-access site.

There were two consent periods. The first was from a distance as I reached out to possible subjects to obtain initial consent and determine the time and place for the interviews. Verbal consent was collected. If the interview was conducted from a distance, as was the case with the national-level experts and some of the mental health professionals, that was the only consent process. The second consent period took place when I met with research participants in person to conduct the interviews. This consent process was verbal and took place at a location of the participant’s choosing. This was especially important for the children where a loss of safety and control may have been part of the trauma. Allowing participants to choose locations where they feel safe and comfortable allowed them to participate in the process with a sense of autonomy. Proper coaching was provided to conduct the interviews in locations that are quiet and secluded with as little background noise and traffic as possible. In the case of children, verbal consent was also obtained from the parent prior to conducting the interview.

The consent form was read to the participants at the beginning of the interview and explained in detail. The participants were able to ask as many questions as needed. The parents, children, reporters and mental health professionals were all asked if they were present at the school on the day of the shooting and, in the case of the mental health workers, if they provided services to primary or secondary victims in the aftermath of the shooting. This eligibility confirmation will be included in the consent documentation.
Rights of Participants

All participants were advised that they could choose whether to participate and that they could choose to leave the study at any time.

Data Collection Procedures

The data for this study were collected from the above-named sources who were assured of anonymity. First, the 33 participants were asked to verbally confirm an Informed Consent Form. Then they were given a verbal explanation of the study and its intended goals.

Each interview was conducted in a setting where the participant felt relaxed and comfortable. The participants’ answers to the interview questions were taped as the interviewees spoke, and then transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Each interview lasted approximately an hour. Five interviews were conducted and recorded using an online video conferencing platform called Zoom. The remaining interviews were conducted in person in order to gauge emotional reactions, body language, gestures and other non-verbal behaviors. It also allowed me to ask follow-up questions for further information and to probe for deeper understanding.

I created a list of possible interview questions for each population being interviewed to ensure my research questions were fully addressed. This allowed me some liberty in following the direction the interviewees wished to take the conversation while providing enough scaffolding to be consistent and thorough. I asked the same questions in
each interview although not always in the same order, so I am confident that all interviewees covered the same information.

I began each interview with “safe” questions that allow the participants to open up and feel relaxed. I also reminded participants about potential discomfort they might experience and stressed that they could take a break or stop the interview if it became too stressful. If at any point I felt the interview was causing too much distress, I stopped the interview and gauged whether the participant wanted to or should continue. I drew on my experience as a therapist to determine where the threshold was for “too much distress” for each individual.

Transcription was provided by Rev.com, an online transcription service. Transcripts were saved in the password-protected file-access online service.

Data Analysis

Approach and Procedures

Next I began to listen to recordings of the interviews and read the transcripts in preparation for coding. I made two versions of each transcript by separating only the participants’ section of their interview, deleting my input, and saving them as a separate file. As a result, I had a “Participant only” and a “Full” version of each transcript.

I used NVivo’s Word Count query function on the Participant Only versions of the transcripts to analyze each participant’s most used words. I created Word Clouds for each individual to visually display the participants’ language. Next, I grouped the Participant
Only transcripts by category (e.g. experts, reporters, parents, etc.), ran the transcripts from category through the Word Count query and created a Word Cloud for each category. I then studied the Word Clouds of the individual participants and the categories to see if any obvious similarities and differences emerged.

Next I used NVivo’s Nodes function to go through each interview and identify stand-alone narratives. These were coded for future reference. I then went through each interview, document/artifact, news story and social media post and used inductive analysis to allow themes to emerge. I used the Nodes coding mechanism in NVivo to continually update and add new codes as they emerged. After all the interviews were coded, I went back through earlier interviews to see if any of the more recently added codes were appropriate. Then I went through a process to collapse the codes into clusters of similar meaning, reviewing the interviews and codes again to be sure I had captured the essence of their meaning as accurately as possible.

After the inductive coding process was complete, I began to use a deductive process by applying the theoretical frameworks identified in Chapter 2 to see where and how journalism ethics guidelines and trauma theory applied to the interviews, codes and clusters. Finally, I used NVivo’s Matrix Coding function to analyze the participants’ interviews against the final list of codes and themes to see where patterns emerged.

The Word Clouds, Nodes and Matrix Queries were saved in NVivo for future reference.
Reliability, Validity and Trustworthiness

According to Yin (2011), a study is valid if the researcher has collected and analyzed the data as accurately as possible. The goal is for the findings to mirror and represent the authentic world that has been studied. To this end, researchers should carefully choose research design methods that will promote the validity of their conclusions and assertions.

Guba and Lincoln (1982) contribute four criteria that can be used to judge the validity of qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility refers to the study’s trustworthiness and accuracy from the participants’ perspective. Transferability refers to the extent to which the study’s results could be generalized to other contexts. Dependability refers to the researcher’s ability to identify changes in the research setting that affected the study and to explain their relevance and impact. Confirmability refers to whether the study results can be confirmed or corroborated by others.

I used two techniques in this study to achieve validity and trustworthiness: member checks and triangulation. In this study, member checks included sending transcripts to the study participants for review of accuracy and sending components of the study findings for review and input. Triangulation involved using news stories and social media to see if the themes from the interviews were present in other sources and using multiple categories of interview subjects to see if the themes were present from different stakeholder perspectives.
Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

One possible limitation of qualitative research is observational bias, which is when the researcher’s biases might unconsciously cause them to influence the participants or the results. In this case, because I have a background teaching children as well as working as a children’s therapist. I brought expectations to the table based on my previous experiences and needed to pay careful attention to times they might be influencing my choices.

There are several noteworthy limitations regarding access to key stakeholders in this study. Selection bias is a concern in this research because I was not able to recruit a random sample. Parents and students responded to my recruitment methods out of their own volition, so there was self-selection and self-interest involved in those who chose to participate. As a result, the experiences captured here likely do not represent the full spectrum of experiences from the BMS shooting.

Second, access to most of the school personnel was limited. The woman who was the principal in January 2014 retired one month before I began my fieldwork and was not available for an interview. Also, the man who was vice principal at the time had left Small City for a new job in 2015 and was also not available. I was, however, able to talk to the woman who was Dean of Students at the time, so the perspective of the school leadership is present in this study. I was not able to talk with any of the teachers or staff directly involved in the aftermath or the Superintendent.

Similarly, although I was able to interview one victim and his mother, I was not
able to talk to the second victim or her family members, or the shooter and his family members. These three families likely would have the most to say about the media presence, so it was disappointing to only be able to include the perspective of one family. I was able to interview five students altogether, all of whom had been in the gym at the time of the shooting. My attempts to contact and request interviews with the students who were interviewed by the news media and identified by name were largely unsuccessful. Only one student responded to my request and she declined to participate.

Finally, access to the reporters and editors who worked the story was limited. I was granted full access to the local newspaper and to the newspaper from Big City that covered the story, but my request to interview people from the two Big City TV news stations was denied. I was able to interview one TV news reporter who was from the local affiliate but hers is the only voice representing the TV news industry, therefore my analysis is largely rooted in the perspective of the print newspaper community.

Another limitation was time. This event took place in January 2014 and I did my fieldwork in June and July 2016. Enough time had passed that people’s memories were likely affected and evidence of trauma was likely diluted at best.

**Delimitations**

This study was limited to the Bradford-Mitchell School shooting that took place in January 2014 and the media coverage that occurred during the life cycle of the story. The first news stories were published on January 14, 2014 and the last news stories used in this study were published September 3, 2015.
Chapter 4: Results

There are four sections of results which will be presented in this chapter: (1) the lived experiences of reporters, (2) the lived experience of parents and children in the immediate aftermath of the shooting; (3) evidence of trauma from case study; (4) other noteworthy themes that emerged.

Prevalence of School Shootings

For the purpose of this study, the examination of mass shootings is limited to those that took place on K-12 school campuses in the United States since 1980, and only those that contained two or more deaths or injuries in which children were at least partly the targets. Because there are different kinds of shootings that happen on school grounds, limiting the population to these criteria limits the data set to those that are most relevant to this research project. For example, these limitations remove instances involving domestic violence where an adult romantic partner who works at a school is targeted.

Table 4-1 lists the number of school shootings from each decade that meet the criteria for this study (Wikipedia.com, 2016).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Total Number of School Shootings</th>
<th>Number of School Shootings that Meet the Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010s</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4-1 Number of school shootings of interest to this study
The column with the total number of school shootings demonstrates the increasing prevalence of these incidents since 1980, particularly since 2010. It is also worth noting that quite a few incidents were not included in the column listing my population of interest because though they met the “spirit” of the criteria they did not meet the minimal standards. For example, a middle school student brought a gun to school and opened fire on classmates, but only one person was injured so it does not meet minimal criteria.

**Lived Experience of Parents and Children**

Basic information is included about each participant as well as context information that is relevant to the themes. I have also included my reflections on our interaction. Because this study focuses on the ethics of reporting from the scene of a school shooting, the lived experience pieces will be delimited to include only the time period which could be considered “the scene.” In this case, it will include events and experiences at the school, the mall, the press conference and the candlelight vigil, all of which took place in early 2014.

The reason for defining “the scene” in this manner is that trauma and its effects wear off over time, and students who were severely traumatized the day of the shooting may be much better the next day. It is the actions and decisions of reporters while children are in the midst of the potentially traumatic event that are being examined.
Participants

Danielle is the mother of one of the victims. She is also employed part-time as a news carrier by the local newspaper, RDR. I interviewed Danielle and her son, Noah, together. She was well-coiffed with her hair, makeup, nails and jewelry all attended to. Danielle was composed, angry and intense. Her communication style was direct and open. She was willing to talk about all aspects of the situation and her son’s recovery.

She expressed anger about three aspects of her media interactions: one was when “The Today Show” used deceptive techniques to get her on the phone in the hours after the shooting while her son was still in surgery; the second involved two reporters who would camp out at their house and run up to them as they were entering or leaving to get an interview; and the third was that the media never cleared up the misconception that had been reported widely that her son was the shooter’s target.

Her anger at the shooter and his family was apparent at times, and she was angry about the “injustice” of the financial situation she and her family now face. At the same time, she was gracious and grateful to the Small City community, the doctors and nurses and the school personnel who tended to Noah before the ambulance arrived. The interview was long and both Danielle and her son grew fatigued over time, resulting in a short refreshment break.

Noah is one of the victims of the shooting. He was 12 years old and in sixth grade when the shooting occurred. He was in the gym before school talking with friends in the bleachers. He was shot in the face and chest and suffered severe brain damage as well as loss of vision in both eyes. The damage is obvious when you look at Noah. Part of his head
is indented, there are pockmarks on his face and he wears glasses with lenses so thick they look like magnifying glasses.

Noah and his mother described his recovery as a miracle. The injuries to his brain were so severe that the doctors said he may remain at the developmental level of a toddler for the rest of his life. But Noah defied their predictions and recovered so quickly it was shocking; so much so that his doctors have since presented his case at medical conferences.

![Noah’s x-ray after the shooting](Photo credit: KKEE)

Despite his obvious injuries, Noah was upbeat, smiling and positive throughout the interview. His energy was contagious and he was very likeable. Throughout the interview, he expressed confusion about why the shooter did what he did and anger that he never truly apologized or explained his choices, except for one weak attempt in court.

“That was the one thing, and I started crying whenever that happened. Not because
of terror but because of anger, because you could tell that that was so fake. He went up there, looking down still, and was like "I want you to know I'm so sorry for what I did." It was like, dude. I mean... I wasn't to the point where I'm going to go strangle the kid, but it was just like wow... you're really going to stand up there and fake that you're sorry? Because we've seen the uncle go over there and tell him, into his ear, and we know exactly what he was telling him to say.

Both Noah and his mother talked at length about their faith as the primary reason they have been able to move past what happened.

Jennifer is Brayden’s mother. She had previously worked for the school district running school-based health centers and had helped the psychologist at Bradford-Mitchell write a suicide prevention crisis plan six months before the shooting took place. She was familiar with the school and the staff. Jennifer lives right down the road from the school and was able to get to the school very quickly after the shooting took place. Because of her previous work with the crisis plan, Jennifer was able to talk about both her experience as a mother in this situation, but also about the things she observed related to the way the school handled the response immediately after the shooting.

Brayden was in seventh grade at the time of the shooting and was in the gym on the bleachers when it occurred. He said he was about ten feet away from the victims, saw what happened and said he was friends with The Shooter, Noah and Kaylee. He is also good friends with The Shooter’s cousin. Brayden’s affect was flat during the interview and he did not make good eye contact. He was polite and answered questions, but displayed very little emotion. He was interviewed by one of the local TV affiliate reporters. He said the interview was “out of his comfort zone” but he wanted to do it in order to tell what “actually happened” because he was upset that there were so many rumors circulating on social media.
**Amelia** is Jackson’s mother and is married to a police officer. I interviewed Amelia and Jackson together. During the interview, Amelia was calm and exhibited gentle energy. Her attention was often focused on Jackson in a caring manner, putting her hand on his arm or brushing his hair as he told his story. Amelia said she was glad that Jackson had been interviewed and she was glad he chose to participate in this interview because it allowed her to hear his thoughts and to gauge how he was doing with everything.

**Jackson** was in the gym when the shooting occurred, but on the opposite side, so he was not in immediate danger but he could see everything. He described it like “watching a movie,” because he was close friends with The Shooter and couldn’t make sense of what he was seeing. He said he was both angry and sad in the chaos following the shooting. During the interview, Jackson repeatedly talked about wanting to make sure the people around him were ok. This was an ongoing theme in his story, both in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, and in the days, weeks and months that followed. He attributed this to his faith and because his father is a police officer. Jackson also openly talked about going to a specialized form of therapy afterward which helped him heal. He was interviewed by CNN and expressed anger and mistrust of the media because there were so many inaccuracies reported. He also said he regretted one aspect of the interview because the subject of gun control came up. He viewed this as controversial and did not want to publicly express his views on national TV.

**Sophia** is Olivia’s mother and has also worked in several mental health and therapeutic support offices in town. Because of this, she was recognized and pulled into action to help triage the students as they were being bused to the mall after the shooting.
Sophia was able to discuss the incident both as a mother and as a helper. She provided insight into how the scene was organized, what kinds of support services were available for the students, and how parents and students were reunited. She was composed but emotional during the interview. She cried at one point, and expressed how much pain was still there, and how she had been triggered in the months and years afterward.

Olivia was in the gym when the shooting occurred, but was far away from Noah and Kaylee and did not see them get shot. She saw The Shooter come in the gym, and saw him put the gun down after the shooting, then she left the gym with the other students. She was not interviewed by the media but remembers seeing them everywhere and that it “bothered her a little bit.” But she realized they were just trying to do their jobs. Olivia describes herself as unemotional and that she uses humor to deflect her feelings. Olivia had a number of very serious traumas happen in the months before and after the shooting which left her traumatized and acting out, including self-harm such as cutting. She also described being triggered very easily by loud noises. After the shooting, she said it was really hard to remember what happened and that she forgot parts of it. She expressed frustration that her friends were acting like “big babies,” but she accompanied them to counseling sessions at their request.

Charlotte’s son went to Bradford-Mitchell and was in the gym when the shooting occurred. Charlotte works at RDR, which is where I interviewed her. I did not interview her son. She was at work when it happened, and was able to talk about what was happening in the newsroom, as well as her experience as a parent. Charlotte became very emotional and cried as she told her story.
Suzanne is Charlotte’s sister-in-law and she also works at RDR. Like Charlotte, Suzanne was able to talk about what was happening in the newsroom and what it was like for her as an aunt.

Themes

From my conversations with these six parents and four students, seven themes arose that seemed to capture the experience of living through a school shooting:

1. Confusion
2. Communication/How Found Out
3. Waiting
4. Reunion
5. Interactions with the News Media
6. Loss of Trust in News Media
7. Social Media

These themes are not hierarchical in importance, instead they are arranged somewhat according to timing, with the themes related to the earliest experiences higher on the list and those that arose later in the day toward the bottom of the list. In all, they will tell the story of what it was like as the students and parents first became aware of the shooting through the end of the day.

Some of the themes were more salient to certain participants than others, and I will highlight their experiences by using direct quotes. Similarly, when participants presented an experience that was different from the others, I will also highlight their perspective using
direct quotes. Taken together this process should highlight the spectrum of experiences of all participants.

I kept utterances, stutters and pauses in a lot of the quotes because they speak to the person’s state of mind as they told their stories. For example, all but one of the parents I interviewed cried at certain points. The points when their emotion overwhelmed them is often indicated by long pauses in conversation. Another example with the students is that their pauses, stutters and utterances illustrate points in their narrative where they couldn’t remember something, where they contradict themselves or backtrack, or where emotion overwhelms them.

I realize quotations are often cleaned up when used for publication, but when I read the quotes without these elements, they did not seem like a true reflection of how my subjects told their stories. Part of the purpose of this research is to identify the role trauma played in their lived experience directly after the shooting. The utterances, pauses and stutters are often the places where the deepest unspoken meaning is communicated and where the strongest emotion breaks through. Similarly, they also reflected times when the person retreated back into their memories, re-experiencing the moments they are talking about. I believe that leaving them in place more accurately reflects the pacing, timing, and narrative patterns of each person and shines light on how they are currently processing information as they relive a very traumatic time in their lives.

**Confusion**

Three of the four students I interviewed were eyewitnesses to the shooting and were
in the gym at the time. All four kids expressed confusion about what was happening at first, but for different reasons. I will explain each student’s perspective individually because it sets the tone and context for the rest of the themes. This part of their experience occurred between 7:30 a.m. and 10:00 a.m.

Brayden was confused because he thought it was another drill. The school had held an active shooter drill the month prior in which students acted out the parts from an active shooter drill including the ensuing panic and chaos. When the shooting occurred and Brayden saw who the shooter was, he assumed it was another drill because The Shooter was “in student council and all that.” Presumably it was the student leaders who acted in the previous drill.

Brayden saw The Shooter shoot the gun and then drop it, and saw Noah get hit in the face, put his hands up to his face and fall to the floor. Brayden said he “just sat there” because he didn’t know what to do and his ears were ringing. He said, “It felt like ten seconds, but it was probably just a few, and all at once everyone got up and then ran to the ... their classrooms.” Once in the room, he said everyone had to get under the desks and they turned the lights off and locked the door. He said they were in the room under the desks for about an hour until the police came in.

Brayden is good friends with The Shooter’s cousin who was in the classroom with Brayden during lock-down. He described telling the cousin that The Shooter was the shooter, and learning that the cousin had been with him that morning and had been in the same car on the way to school, but didn’t know about the gun.

Olivia was confused because she is usually tired in the morning. She does not
usually interact with the other students before school. She said she was looking straight ahead when it happened and that she heard a “big bang” which she associated with the gymnasium speakers that are mounted to the ceiling. So she looked up at the speakers. She said she noticed out of the corner of her eye that the other students were leaving the bleachers, so she did as well. Then she saw The Shooter put the gun on the floor, saw Noah lying on the floor, and heard the teachers telling the students to go to first period. So she did. Unfortunately, her first period teacher was not in the classroom so she made her way to a nearby classroom where she was “smooshed” in with a lot of other students. She said “we were waiting there for, like, a long time. And everybody was, like, crying and stuff, and afraid...”

Jackson was confused because he was good friends with The Shooter and couldn’t make sense of what he was seeing. He described it as surreal, like it was a dream or a movie. He said:

*I was on the opposite side of the gym, and so I could see everything that happened. But it was somewhat like watching a movie. Because I was there, and I was just sitting there and watching this all unfold, and just not really knowing what’s happening. Because I knew the shooter personally. I’d say we were friends. We were pretty close. We had quite a few classes together and it was just ... I heard a lot of media talk about how it’s the person that you always least suspect and in that situation, it definitely was... Everything happened and there were sounds of screaming, I remember. And just everybody clambering over each other trying to get away. I can remember just being angry and scared, sad at the same time, just not knowing what to feel.*

Finally, Noah’s experience in the gym was different because at the time he was not cognizant of what was happening. He described a conversation he had with his brother later in his hospital room that explains his experience immediately after the shooting:

*The thing that freaked me out was my brother actually sent everybody out of the room so that it was just me and him and then we were just each there. And then my sister actually came in instead of my dad but it was just us three. And then he was like, "Do you know what happened?" And I was like “the school blew up” because I could have swore I flew*
because... of course you've been there, right? You know how there's a bus stop over there and pretty far away. Not literally but it is a good distance and then there is a fence on the other side of it. I thought I flew out of the school over that fence and so that's why...

I only heard one big boom and I felt myself flying, like not... Yeah and then so that's why I thought the school blew up and then I didn’t hear anything else like people screaming or anything because there was a lot of ringing in my ears, I guess.

But so I was thinking everybody was dead and Ms. Armstrong was like, "Yeah, you were struggling to get out." And that was why I thought everybody was dead so I was trying to get up and see what I could do. If I could like crawl over there or what, I don't know. It was just... it was so fast paced yet so slow at the same time. It was like slow motion, like I couldn't move faster than I thought of. It was crazy, but yeah, it was like..."

The overarching commonality between all four students’ experiences in the minutes after the shooting was confusion. Jackson and Brayden were more acutely aware of what was happening even though they were confused. Olivia and Noah were less aware of what was happening. This part of their experience transpired in less than half an hour, depending on what time each student arrived in the gym and how long they were waiting before the shooting took place. The part of their experience when they were on lock-down in the classrooms took approximately two hours.

**Communication/How Parents Found Out**

Running parallel to the students’ experiences in the gym and on lock down were the parents’ experiences as they learned about what happened. This section deals with the parents’ experiences as they first learned about the shooting.

One of the subthemes of this study that will reappear in multiple sections is the idea of intersectionality. There are many instances where the participants have roles or identities that impact each other. This may be a function of sampling because it was the RDR staff
who helped me get started recruiting participants. It also may be a function of a small town where many people have lived for generations and have multiple roles in the community. How the parents found out about the shooting is a good place to start exploring that intersectionality.

Three of the parents I interviewed were employees of the local newspaper, and two, Suzanne and Charlotte, were in the office when the shooting occurred. Their role as newspaper employees overlaps with their experience as parents. The third parent is Noah’s mother. She was employed as a newspaper carrier and was not in the office at the time. Her identity in this section is solely as the mother of one of the victims.

Similarly, one of the parents, Amelia, is the wife of a police officer so she had access to information the other parents did not. Another parent, Sophia, had worked at several local therapy offices in town and personally knew many city employees, including police officers. Her husband is a teacher at a different school. When she arrived at the mall as a parent, she was pulled into action by the director of a local social services agency and she ended up helping to triage the students as they arrived at the mall from the school. Her dueling roles as scared parent and helper were intertwined.

The final parent, Jennifer, had worked at Bradford-Mitchell helping to establish crisis procedures in case of a suicide and she lived right down the street from the school. We will start with her experiences. She describes the moment she found out:

That morning I was sleeping in with the baby and... I got up to use the bathroom and I looked at my phone and I had a lot of notifications. And I was trying to go through them. I had a... I started with my... voicemails. And I had a voicemail from one of my friend’s... boyfriend... or fiancé... that there was a shooting at the school. And at that moment he was calling again so I switched over and... he was a local firefighter so he told me I needed to... get down to the school or contact the school. And then while he was talking I had a text message come in from Brayden.
So, at that time I kind of went into panic mode... um... waking my husband up telling him that we had to get... go... right... right then. And so, we started heading to the school... um... And the text message was like, "Mom, there was a school shooting. You need to come." I tried calling my parents. I couldn't get ahold of them, so we got in the car and my husband started driving towards the school. And then he said, "No, Mom, don't come. They won't let you come. You have to go to the mall." So we went to the mall. And then there was... there was probably about ten messages where he's like, "Mom, I'm really scared. I love you."

Charlotte and Suzanne learned about the shooting simultaneously from friends, social media and through people calling in tips to the newspaper. Charlotte was confused at first about how she officially learned about the shooting because so many things were happening all at once in the newsroom and her memories were garbled. Her description perfectly captures the confusion and panic felt by the other parents as well:

I was work. I was at my desk. And then I believe my daughter was the one that texted me. She said something about because she went to <the high school> and she's the one that said that "Mom. They said there's a shooting at Bradford-Mitchell." And when she was telling me that's when I starting hearing everybody here. Cause I have that turned on my computer. And that's how I heard it. So then that's when I told Scarlett that I wanted to leave. I wanted to see what was going on. So then I just took off. I didn't have... oh no, shoot. Did my daughter text me or she call me? No, no... Ok I got this mixed up. She did text me, but I didn't have my cell with me. But that's when I heard everybody here, then that's when I took off. And then Scarlett just gave me her cell. So if anyone want to get a hold of me, then they would just call me on her cell.

Suzanne’s experience was similar to Charlotte’s, but unlike Charlotte, Suzanne stayed in the newsroom. She described the chaos that of trying to work through all the phone calls streaming in, monitoring various social media sites, and doing her job. She remembers talking to her mom on the phone and telling her not to post anything on Facebook that she didn’t know was true. Her role as a newspaper employee stayed salient despite the panic she felt not knowing if her nephew was ok. She also described the telephone calls the parents were receiving from the school system, which gave parents instructions to go to the mall, but did not indicate whether or not their child was hurt.
Because Amelia’s husband is a police officer, she found out about the shooting sooner than most of the other parents and she went to the mall to wait for more information. Amelia allowed Jackson to do most of the talking as they were telling the story about what happened that morning, so I do not have much information about her state of mind or how she experienced the news about the shooting.

Sophia was told about the shooting by a friend whose husband is a police officer. Sophia describes getting dressed in a hurry and worrying that her daughters, both of whom attended Bradford-Mitchell, were probably scared. But she said she was in denial until she opened her front door and heard all of the sirens in the distance. She said her knees buckled when she realized it was really happening.

Sophia called her husband who was at work teaching at a different school. He had not heard anything about the shooting. Sophia was able to get to the school before the police barricaded the roads. She remembers this vividly because her husband arrived after she did, huffing and puffing because he had parked far away and had to run to the school.

She describes an interaction with a police officer at the school and what she noticed:

“Right away I went up to the police officer and I said, "Do you know anything?" He said, "All I know right now is that we have the shooter ..." I don't know what word he used. "Contained" or whatever word he used. I said, "Ok, do you know how many people are hurt?" He said, "No." I said, "Ok." He said, "that's all I know, I'm sorry."

The children were all on lockdown. While I was out there, an ambulance left, and it didn't leave with the sirens on. It just left regular. I just thought ... It was strange to me. And then I looked at the whole line of ambulances that were left in the front of the school and I thought either we're really lucky, or we're not very lucky. There is no movement of ambulances. I'm a nurse, so I was just kind of thinking there is no movement, there should be more movement going on.

She described the chaos during the time she waited at the school with a large group of parents. She said some were angry and demanding answers, but of course there weren’t
any. She said the police would tell all the parents to move to one location and then tell them to move to a different location. She said it was confusing and frustrating. She was also surprised at how fast people around the country found out about the shooting. Sophia was at the school before the roads were barricaded, which was likely around 8:00 a.m. While she was there, she received a call from a family member in Denver, and a friend in California, both of whom said it was already on the news there.

Ironically, Sophia happened to be standing next to Danielle when she got the call that Noah had been shot. She heard Danielle scream, "No! No, not my son! Not Noah! No! No!" Sophia describes feeling guilty “to this day” that she didn’t do anything to comfort Danielle. She just looked at her own phone and wondered if it was going to ring next.

In our interview, Danielle let Noah do most of the talking about what happened that day, so I do not have much more information about how Danielle found out other than Sophia’s description. Danielle described that moment this way: “And that's when the principal called me, and I was already at the school when he called me. And then when he told me I needed to get to the emergency room, I was like "Oh my god" and I was lost. I went the wrong direction, I mean I couldn't ... you can't think. Yeah.”

Just like with their children, the common thread throughout the parents’ narratives is confusion and fear. The next theme picks up where this one left off for the parents: waiting.
Waiting

After the initial shock of learning about the shooting and the ensuing panic, what struck me most were the stories the parents told about the time they spent waiting to find out if their child was involved, and then waiting to be reunited with their kids. Of all the topics discussed in the interviews, these were the most emotional. All of the parents I talked to except one got choked up or cried when they got to this part of their story. This is understandable, of course, given how terrifying a school shooting is and how much trauma is involved. What is noteworthy is that these interviews took place two and a half years after the shooting and the trauma and residual emotions were still that easily accessible. Several parents mentioned they thought the shooting was much more traumatic for them than their children and that they felt they were still dealing with the consequences while their children seemed more resilient. That may be true, or it may be that the children were better at avoiding their feelings. It is not my intent to diagnose anyone with a trauma-related disorder, but it was also easily apparent how much trauma is still present.

To make sense of the different ways parents and students experienced waiting, it is

Figure 4-2: Distance from school to mall
important to understand that there were two different procedures in place for the students. Those who had been in the gym and saw what happened were to stay at the school to talk to the police. The students who had not been eyewitnesses were to get on school buses to meet their parents at the mall, which is about 2.5 miles down the road. The group of students who were bused to the mall were reunited much faster than the group who stayed at the school. All of the students I interviewed were eyewitnesses and were supposed to stay at the school. Charlotte’s son, whom I did not interview, was also an eyewitness. So all of the parents involved were in the group who had to wait longer before being reunited.

Sophia was the only parent who went straight to the school. As I mentioned in her introduction, Sophia has work at several therapeutic service providers in town and knows the counseling and health services community in Small City. Because of this, her way of describing her experience is often much different than the other parents. In this excerpt, Sophia describes the conversations she had with her children during the hour she waited at the school. It is poignant and full of emotion, but it is also clear that even though Sophia was panicking and very upset, her interactions with her children were very caring and emotionally stable, and were probably very influential in her children’s ability to cope and recover.

>We stood there. While we were out there waiting, my son called me, and he was at the high school. And he said, "Mom, do you have my sisters," and I said, "I don't." I said, "They're in the school right now." And he said, "Are they ok?" I said, "Son, I'm going to stand here and tell you and believe with everything in me that they're ok, but I don't know." I said, "I don't want to lie to you." I said, "I will call you. You will be the first person I call." He said, "Ok." Then, maybe after about 45 minutes, my first daughter called. She said, and this is just so sweet, she said, "Mommy, something very bad happened, and you need to come to the school." I said, "Honey, I'm already out here, and I know what happened. Are you ok?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Are you with your sister?" She said, "We were standing together, but when we all ran, we separated, and I don't know where she's at." I said, "Was she hurt?" She said, "I don't think so." I said, "Ok." She said, "We're still in lockdown, and
we're not supposed to use cell phones." I said, "Ok, just hang tight. Everybody's here, Dad's here, and we're here, and we're waiting for you." Then, about ten minutes later, my other daughter called me, and said she was fine. Then I knew they were ok.

Throughout the interview, Sophia told me stories like that which illustrated the care and concern she had for her children and the strength and composure she displayed during this incident. But she was also honest about how she was doing personally throughout the waiting period. Shortly after this interaction Sophia was told by the police that she should go to the mall to wait for her children, so she did. At one point while she was waiting at the mall her husband called her to tell her their daughters would not be on the buses because they were eyewitnesses and needed to stay at the school. Sophia said, “That's the second time my stomach and my knees just kind of ... Just like, "What did they see? What did they experience? You know…”

Also, because she had experience working in mental health facilities, Sophia was pulled into action at the mall to help triage the students as they got off the bus, so she was able to describe what the waiting experience was like for other parents as well. Because of her triage duties, Sophia did not get to see her own children until early afternoon, many hours after the shooting took place.

It was interesting seeing them get off the bus, and seeing the teachers. One of the first people to get there was the teacher that helped Kaylee up to the ambulances. She had this look about her. I looked at her, and I said, "Are you all right?" She said, "No." I said, "Do you want to go and, you know, talk to somebody? We have people here." She goes, "No, I'm staying with my kids." I said, "Ok." Later, I would realize why, she sat there, and held this child the whole time.

The kids were getting off the bus, and some of them were upset, the majority of them were just dazed. They weren't crying, but they didn't look, you know... We started separating the kids by grades, you know, because then, the reality came that we had to release them to somebody, and we didn't know who.

It was just such a mob outside, and we didn't want to release the child to an aunt, and then the mom be panicked. Everyone's emotions were so high that it was very easy to upset
people. It was very easy for them to think that we were... us that were in the mall... were hiding something from them. It was just so chaotic.

Charlotte went straight to the mall to wait for her son. She talked a lot about the anxiety and impatience she was feeling because of the uncertainty and the lack of information coming from official sources. What added to her anxiety was that a lot of other parents, like Sophia, were receiving calls or texts from their children because they had cell phones, but Charlotte’s son did not have one so she was left waiting for answers.

She said a pivotal moment for her was when she suddenly realized that she also had a niece at the school. The compounded emotion now attached to worrying about her son and her niece pushed her into heightened states of anxiety.

So then I was thinking, “Oh my God... My niece... She there too.” That's when I started thinking a lot. When I went to the parking lot at the mall, that's when you start thinking everything... When you leave... "I just have to get there," that's your main thing to go and just be there to see what's going on and drove back. But just standing there and waiting, you're just thinking... thinking... thinking... "My niece is there. My son. I hope it's not him. I hope it's not her." Then you would see a lot of people. "Oh, it's a girl. It's a boy. It's two girls. It's a girl." So we didn't know exactly if it's one girl, whatever.

She said in reality she probably only waited at the mall for a few minutes before someone showed up to announce the names of the children who were involved and the names of the children who were witnesses and were still at the school. Charlotte said, “They were real good about that. So there weren't a lot of people like going all wild like trying to bust through the barricades or nothing like that. It was very organized the way they did it.”
On the other hand, Jennifer had a different experience at the mall. She said there were around 300 parents there and many were “frantic” and were crying and screaming and “in a state of shock.” She said there was even a parent trying to drive through the crowd of people in the parking lot.
Eventually, Brayden called to tell her he would not be coming to the mall and for her to come back to the school. Once she was at the school, she waited around 20-30 minutes before she could see Brayden and another ten minutes for him to complete his interview with the police. Jennifer described her emotional state this way: “It was kind of out-of-body experience. Like this wasn't... This couldn't happen. Um... so I was... My mind was all over the place. And I was keeping my mind on everybody else and everything, not trying to think about Brayden, because I knew I would just lose it.”

I mentioned in her introduction that Jennifer had previously worked at the school setting up a suicide crisis plan, so she spent the 20-30 minutes distracting herself by observing what was happening at the school, and to see if the plans she had helped establish were being utilized. She was complimentary about the way the school handled things and
observed school personnel triaging the parents as they were arriving and working to identify the children who seemed to be more traumatized than the others.

Because Amelia’s husband is a police officer, she was privy to information the other parents weren’t. But even Amelia was left in a swirl of uncertainty as she was waiting for Jackson at the mall. She said, “We still didn’t know where they are. We didn’t even know the situation had been contained. We didn’t know anything at the mall.” However, she found out Jackson was fine through her network of acquaintances in an interesting manner:

“They had them on the buses, and we’re waiting at the mall. They were just... There was a policeman that would say, “You get on that bus, you get on that bus. You get on that bus.” The reason he said that they sat there so long is because schools hadn’t started yet and they had not taken roll. They didn’t know what kids they had there, and what kids they didn’t.”

“It turns out that the bus driver was someone that knew us from years ago and he had gotten to Jackson and he said, “What’s your name?” And he stopped and he looked and he said “Jackson, I’m sorry I didn’t recognize you or I didn’t...” Because he was flustered, too. You know what I mean? He went and he got the rest of the names, and then he went back to his seat and he called his wife and he said “Get a hold of Amelia.” That was huge.”

The other students did not have much to say about the time when they were on lock down other than they had to hide and it seemed to take a really long time. But Jackson was still very much in touch with the emotions he and the other students were feeling:

“I got to the class, and we sat there for what felt like forever. I just kept thinking, “Is this a dream? What is happening? How is this happening?” I was just there, just crying, but doing it so nobody can see me. Because I didn’t want ... I wanted everybody else to think that I’m there to protect them. Because I want to make people feel protected and comfortable. I was just ... I didn’t want to cry. I was sitting there just crying.”

Since the other students described the panic, fear and emotion as they were leaving the gym to go to the lock down locations, I imagine they were all feeling similar emotions. The exception to that was Brayden, who found that he was in lock down with one of his
friends, The Shooter’s cousin. He said they spent the time in lock down talking to his friend about what happened.

Noah’s experience with waiting is, of course, dramatically different than the other students because he was waiting in the gym after having been shot. In what I will describe as an impressive level of maturity and insight, Noah thinks the fact that he had to wait so long for an ambulance because the police were still investigating is something he hopes other schools in the future will consider as they make their plans for an active shooter situation. Waiting for help, in his case, was almost deadly. By the time the paramedics arrived, he had lost seven pints of blood. To put that into perspective, the human body only contains ten pints.

Here are Danielle and Noah talking about the impact of waiting so long for help. In this excerpt, Noah says “law” but he means school policy. It is also worth noting that Noah slips from first-person to third-person, which could be indicative of depersonalization.

Noah:  There’s one law that I think shall be taken off. And... that was because... while I was sitting there losing all that blood. Not just in my case, but I'm saying everywhere. If that ever happens somewhere else, hopefully... I'm not... But... if that comes to be... The reason why none of the ambulance, paramedics could go in there was because there was an active shooter. But... I mean... if they were to... If they were to go in there right away, would it... I wouldn't have made it and then that would have been a reason for it. Because it wasn't quick enough. For the same guy it is, but just in any situation, what if that happens again? This person lost so much blood and they can't get in there fast enough to save them because of an active shooter. Which then all... I mean... I mean... to me it looks easy. Which of course it's not, because I'm not in that perspective. But, I mean... maybe we could find something out for the people who are inside like, “Hey, did the shooter put the gun down? Is there only one shooter? Do you know for sure?”

Danielle:  She <the school nurse> said it took them a while to get in there.

Noah:  It took them a long time.

Danielle:  She said, “Oh my God, where’s the ambulance?” You know... You know... She... “We’re going to lose him. He... We... We need to get him to the hospital. So...”
Noah: Nobody could come in and nobody could leave. That's exactly how it was. So if they want to take me... Sorry, active shooter on school property..."

**Reunion**

I have reunion set aside as a separate category even though it is closely connected to waiting, because the support the students receive from loved ones immediately afterward is so instrumental. Being with a caring, safe adult is important to properly process the trauma so that it isn’t stored in the active part of memory as a fear memory. The best thing that can happen after a potentially traumatic event such as a school shooting is for the children to be reunited quickly with safe, caring adults, and then for them to process through the trauma in a manner that is age appropriate.

From my conversations, it was clear that the reunion was very important in this group of students’ recoveries. Each parent was able to name several concrete things they did to help their child and it was clear they were loving families. But it was also clear that the students preferred to avoid the feelings attached to the trauma, and that the parents did not know how to talk to their kids about it.

Suzanne saw her nephew, Mark, shortly after he was reunited with his parents and described those interactions like this:

*I'm sure he saw something. Because later, when they brought him back, I asked him... Because they... The first thing they asked once his dad picked him up, he asked him, "Well, what do you want?" And he goes, "I just want some ice-cream." So they took him for some ice-cream and my brother brought him here so I could see him, and I go, "So how are you doing buddy?" And all he said, he goes, "Well..." He told me, "That's something I'm going to have to live with for the rest of my life. But I'd rather not talk about it." So I go, "Ok. Fine, buddy. Whatever. You know, if you want to talk, fine. If you don't, fine." And that was it. And he really kept to himself. He... he... I'm sure he talked to his mom and his dad about it, but with me he didn't. And I didn't bring it up either. And so... He took it pretty... I'm sure he was shocked like all the other kids. And, um... He's doing fine. Right now he's a..."
He's going to be a sophomore in high school, at the time he was an eighth grader at Bradford-Mitchell. And so, he... He's doing fine.

Charlotte is Mark’s mother. And, as was intuited by Suzanne, Charlotte and her family did indeed talk to Mark about what happened. When I asked Charlotte why she thought Mark got through everything without being too traumatized, she described their family life before the shooting in a way that seemed to set them up perfectly to be able to get through something like this together.

Probably because... I guess you have to have a lot of communication with them. We always sit together for dinner. We always talk a lot. I mean if we are like... um... going to the grocery store and stuff, we bring up any subject. We don't criticize. We like to hear his opinion. And then it's my husband, myself and my daughter. So... he doesn't have another brother. You know... So it's pretty neat because they have their own little world and their opinion. And my daughter and him are the opposite of everything. So I like for them to argue. I like them to talk. And my husband, he's that way. He's not like me. He's a talker. Oh my God, yes. I think... I don't know... Because my son, he is a talker when he gets to know you. He just talks and talks and talks. You ask him something, he's never quiet. He's only quiet when he walks into the room because he likes to see who's there and then you know he can get into the conversation. And my daughter is like the opposite. So I don't know I guess it's his character? Cause he can ask us anything. And it doesn't matter what it is. He's very open to everything. You can ask him anything and he'll tell you what he thinks, his opinion and everything.

Charlotte also mentioned counseling as something that helped Mark. She had him take advantage of the counseling services offered through the school at first because she thought it was important that he process with his peers. Then the family took advantage of counseling services being offered through her husband’s workplace, and she said they got to hear a lot about what he thought. She said it allowed him to stay open longer, and keep communicating, rather than shut down.

When Jennifer finally reunited with Brayden, she talked about the importance of being able to hug him and hold him. She and her fiancé also picked his older brother up from the high school and the four of them went out to eat lunch and just listened to Brayden.
She said he showed them The Shooter’s Instagram account and was talking about everything happening on social media. She said, “Let's turn off all devices and let's get through an hour ... just hanging out.” And they just listened. She said, “And he just… He was… He want… It's like he wanted to talk about it but then he was so confused, too. Like… His ears… He kept saying… I remember he just kept mentioning that his ears kept ringing… He was pretty jumpy, so…” That was the last time for quite a while that they talked about it. Jennifer said she wanted to bring it up but she wasn’t sure what would be helpful and what might hurt him more.

Jennifer mentioned that she was glad Brayden was interviewed by the media that night (and was glad he was being interviewed by me) because she was able to hear more about what he saw and thought. She said he seemed to just want to block it all out and not talk about it anymore, starting that afternoon. She even indicated that after the shooting he no longer wanted to play Call of Duty (a first-person shooter video game) and lost interest in hunting. During our interview, Brayden confirmed his preference to avoid his feelings and move on. He answered my questions and was very polite, but his demeanor was stoic and he displayed very little emotion. This stood out because, of all the students I interviewed, Brayden had the strongest connections with all three people involved: the shooter and both victims. It was more personal for him than it was for the other students.

Of all of the students, Jackson is the one who openly talked about how much he wanted to be reunited with his mom and dad. In fact, Jackson knowingly made the decision to get on the bus and go to the mall, even though he knew he was supposed to stay behind because he was an eyewitness. This is how he told his story:

_I wasn’t supposed to. Because they... The police wanted to talk to some kids about ... That_
witnessed it... That saw everything unfold... And I just kinda wanted to get home. I...
Especially I wanted my parents to know I was ok.

Um... And I got on the bus... And we headed to the mall. And we were sitting in the parking
lot for quite a while. For some reason, we didn’t like... The buses didn’t like... just go. We
sat there for again what seemed like forever... It was... But we were finally on the way to
the mall. ... I was in that mall for a long time. We were all standing in line. And my dad
obviously was like... working at the mall, like... trying to contain everybody and get us out
like... in an orderly... the best manner. And so... I saw him for a second. I don’t remember
if he saw me, but I tried to leave and stuff. And... um... I kinda just pushed my way to the
front so... ah... that when my mom walked in she could see me. And... They uh... She found
me and she had two of our close family friends with her... Um... Yeah... And I was able to
go home.

Once they got home and were talking about it, Amelia realized Jackson had seen it
happen and took him back to the school to talk to the police. Amelia recognized the
importance of providing a safe space for Jackson to process what happened, so she invited
the youth minister from their church to their house, and Jackson, the youth minister and
several friends hung out together in Jackson’s room all afternoon. Amelia also arranged for
Jackson to have private counseling sessions which she and Jackson raved about during our
interview. They helped so much, in fact, that Jackson still occasionally goes if something
comes up that he needs to process. The way Amelia described how they handled the
decision about whether Jackson should go back to school on Thursday says a lot about how
the family communicates. It seems clear that they were openly discussing things as a
family, reinforcing to Jackson that they cared about his thoughts and feelings, but that they
were the ones in charge and would take care of him by providing him the support he needed.

He had gone to that prayer thing on Wednesday night and we went to the town hall
about...And I was mad, too, that they were making them... or... having school on
Thursday. I thought this was ridiculous. But after we heard why... and of course school
counselors had been brought in and they were going to be available and they were really
recommending it. Tom and I decided that it would probably be best. Well after that we went
and had dinner out and Jackson had been to <his counselor> earlier that day. And we
were talking and Jackson was saying, “I’m not going.” And we said, “We’re very
interested in what you have to say about... But ultimately this is our decision if you go or
not. And um... But we are considering your... your thoughts and your feelings and your opinions. Then after... we had been discussing it for quite a while and he was adamant that he wasn’t going. And I said, “What if we... what if you go on to school and I can get you an appointment, another appointment with <your counselor> right after. And so it would have been just the next day and he said, “Yeah, I think that would be good.” And then there was no more argument. He was... But, yeah... He... He still continues to see her, not on a regular basis but when he feels like.

The most emotional and dramatic reunion was experienced by Sophia and her two daughters. On the way to pick up her daughters, Sophia said to her husband, “The little girls we dropped off this morning are not the ones we’re picking up. They have seen something we have never seen, experienced something... I’ve never seen anybody get shot.” Like the other families, Sophia and her husband picked up the girls and their older brother and went out to eat. The act of eating together as a family unit was very important for many of the families as a way to jump start conversation and be together.

Once they reconnected, Sophia realized how cold to the touch her older daughter felt, and noticed that she had blood on her, a terrifying indicator of how close she was to the two victims. Her daughter was one person away from Kaylee and had actually helped her get down off the bleachers after she had been shot. Sophia addressed questions head on, asking her daughters what they saw and if they were scared. After lunch, she had to go back to the mall, so she took her daughters with her. Both she and her daughters talked about the importance of interacting with therapy dogs that had been brought over to help the kids. It was the first time she had seen her daughter smile that day. She described the rest of the day like this:

*My girls were just kind of numb for hours. You know... I mean, we went out, and we ate, and we picked it... my best friend and her daughter that was there, too. And they... they both were just...Just... They... They... You know... All three of them were just kind of going through motions of eating and stuff. But there was no real connection at the time. And I think they were just in shock and trying to process it.*
Sophia said her daughters talked about it daily for the first couple of weeks and then less often as time went by, but that her younger daughter, Olivia, still brings it up from time to time and uses humor either as a coping mechanism or as a distancing tool. When I asked Olivia about that, she confirmed that she uses humor to push away her feelings but also to acknowledge them. I reinforced to Olivia that humor is indeed a good coping mechanism, but that she would need to deal with her feelings head-on eventually to get past the trauma.

*Interactions with the News Media*

I talked to three students who had been eyewitnesses and were interviewed by the news media: Brayden, Jackson and Noah. Overall, this was the hardest group to recruit participants for. The biggest challenge was obtaining any kind of sanctioned access through the school. Because of FERPA and other policies, the school declined to help me connect with students. As a result, I was left recruiting through social media, which is how I was able to interview Brayden and Jackson. I was able to interview Noah because of his mother’s connection with the RDR.

Brayden and Jackson were both interviewed on Wednesday, Jackson at dawn and Brayden at dusk. Both boys said their reason for consenting to be interviewed was the same: to set the record straight. Both boys talked about being frustrated by the misinformation that was being circulated in social media and reported in the news. Brayden said his reason was to tell people “what actually happened” and clear up factual
information, like how many shots were fired and the kids’ names and ages. Jackson said he was angry because he knew The Shooter, Kaylee and Noah personally, and was upset by the “false truths” he was seeing on the news. He observed that the news media did not seem to be searching for the truth. His goal was to clear up the rumors. This is Jackson talking about what he was seeing on the news that made him angry.

Jackson: Yeah, because I was there and I knew what kind of people all three of the people involved were. I knew The Shooter, Kaylee and Noah personally. I just knew what was going on and so it made me angry. A lot of people talking about how Noah was specially targeted and he was not... um... because they were friends. He was... Uh... At first his plan was to target this one guy that absolutely tormented him... Um... And... eventually his plan was to just go in there and shoot blanks. But a lot of people were talking just about stuff that wasn’t true and that made me angry, because like... if you’re going to be telling the whole nation about this stuff, tell them the truth.

Amelia: Yes, they called Noah and Kaylee bullies. You know... They really... And... Noah liked Kaylee and The Shooter liked Kaylee and that’s why he did it. That was all... That was wrong.

Jackson: Yeah. If you’re going to tell somebody something, tell them facts. Do your research. Don’t just accept everything as true. I knew a lot of things that happened that the media reports... Some parts are omitting truths and just different things. Um... Tell the whole story. Don’t just tell the part... Um... that shows your political beliefs or anything else. Tell the story, give the facts and that’s all you need to give.

Brayden and Jennifer were interviewed by a local network affiliate reporter he was acquainted with because she lived across the street from one of his friends. The reporter approached Jennifer at the candlelight vigil held Wednesday evening and asked if Brayden saw anything. When Jennifer confirmed that he had, the reporter asked permission from both Jennifer and Brayden to interview him.

Overall Brayden had an ambiguous reaction to being interviewed. He said the entire thing took less than a minute, and that the only things he regretted were that he stuttered a little bit and that he hadn’t fixed his hair first. But he said his family saw him on TV and said they were proud of him.
The only other thing of note was that, as referred to in the previous section, Jennifer was glad he was interviewed because she and Brayden had not talked about the shooting since lunch the previous day and she was able to hear more about what he saw and thought. Ten days later, there was an assembly where students from another school that had experienced a school shooting came to talk with the students from Bradford-Mitchell. Jennifer said Brayden was more emotional by this time, after the initial shock had worn off, so they intentionally avoided the news reporters waiting outside to talk to people.

Finally, Jennifer indicated she wished the news media had been more involved at times. There was a Town Hall meeting held on Wednesday evening which was attended by several hundred community members. School officials, local politicians, the police chief and the Governor were speaking, and the news media were not allowed in the building. Jennifer said the community members were very angry and upset about things and were demanding answers about new safety procedures they wanted put in place, such as inspecting backpacks and installing metal detectors. Jennifer wanted the media to serve its watchdog role:

*I thought media should be in some of those meetings... um... To be able to express not just what the school wanted to be told, but what parents, you know, parents' concerns were also. Um... What... what was the school district's plan and follow-up, you know? Kinda when media is present there is follow-up pressure... Yeah... accountability of what are you gonna do and are you gonna follow-up on it?*

Jackson and Amelia’s experience with CNN was more nuanced and less positive. Jackson was interviewed at 4:30 a.m. on Wednesday morning in front of the school. Amelia had been approached by her pastor who said the network was looking for someone to interview and he asked Amelia and Jackson to do it. Amelia regretted her decision to participate because she quickly began picking up signals from the CNN producer that left
her feeling like a commodity, and that CNN wasn’t respecting the gravity of the situation.

Here are three things about her interactions with CNN that made her uncomfortable:

*I just felt like there are real people and real hurt and real emotions and I don’t think it was... I think it was more about getting the story and not about connecting with the fact that people are really hurting here.*

*I know the lady... Um... I was talking to her the night before and... um... talking about where we would meet and stuff. And... I was a little hesitant and I remember she was pretty persistent. You know... And then at one time I even thought, “You know... we’re not going to do it.” And she was very persistent. I think that’s what made me think she didn’t care. It was about the story that they’re getting, not us.*

*It almost seemed tabloid-ish because I remember we were... um... standing there waiting... you know... And the reporter is here, but we’re waiting to talk but we can hear them in our ear. And then they did like the lead in... You know... And when they went to the commercial, he said, um... <in a dramatic voice> “When we come back, we talk to a young man who was friends with the shooter.” It was kind of tabloid-ish and we both looked at each other like ...*

Jackson also regrets doing the interview. He said that he didn’t like talking about the shooting, but he enjoyed the fact that other people would hear his input. Jackson’s memory of the interview is hazy. He told me in our interview that he was uncomfortable because the topic of gun control came up and he knew it was controversial and he didn’t want to share his views on national television, but there were no questions about gun control in the transcript of the interview. He also stated that he wished the anchors had asked more questions about what happened rather than stating what they thought they knew. The anchors did ask questions, but not in the open-ended way Jackson was probably expecting, especially regarding what actually happened during the shooting. When they asked Jackson about that, they used declarative statements followed by asking for confirmation. For example, here is a piece from the transcript (CNN, 2014):

*CUOMO: And Jackson, obviously, you were inside the school. You were hanging out with friends. What happened?*
Jackson: He just went in there and just shot really.

CUOMO: Just totally random? No real-time to pick up details of what was happening, right? You just reacted to the sound?

Jackson: Yes, sort of.

CUOMO: Jackson, I'm sure you know the kids who got hurt and you're thinking about them. We're all hoping that the boy who was shot recovers. Do you know the teacher as well who became a hero in this situation?

Jackson: I don't really. I'm in 7th grade, so I don't have any 8th grade teachers really.

Although Sophia and Olivia were not interviewed, they remember seeing the media everywhere following the shooting. Both Sophia and Olivia said they always seemed respectful, stayed a distance from the children at school and the mall, and were not too intrusive during events the community attended following the shooting.

Finally, Danielle and Noah had a completely different experience with the media, which is to be expected given that Noah was one of the victims. It is important to note that no one from their family talked to the media for two months following the shooting. Danielle and her husband stayed with Noah for ten weeks afterward, mostly in Lubbock, Texas, where he underwent many of his surgeries and physical therapy. They were not in Small City and not easily accessible to the news media.

The primary concern for both Noah and Danielle was the misinformation that was reported about Noah that they did not feel was corrected visibly enough in the public sphere, and is still affecting Noah three years later. But Danielle also talked about some surprisingly unethical tactics used in the hours following the shooting and the effect the constant attention had on her and her husband.

She recounted one incident where a nurse came into the room at the hospital while Noah was still in surgery and told Danielle she had an emergency phone call. When
Danielle answered, it turned out to be a producer from *The Today Show* trying to get an interview. Here is Danielle explaining the situation and her state of mind at the time:

*Yeah, in fact, when we were at the hospital, I got a call and they said it was an emergency... that they needed to talk to me. And it was the people from... uh... The Today Show. They said it was an emergency, so I got on the phone...*

*And I was like... I can't even talk ... I was just crying. And I didn't even know ... There were so many doctors coming in the room, you know... Telling us this and that, and I couldn't comprehend or correspond what they were saying. It was just coming in one ear and ... Doctor after doctor after doctor...*

And in this excerpt, Danielle describes the constant attention they were getting and the outpouring of interview requests. During the interview, Danielle’s voice dropped lower and she used force to emphasize just how fatiguing the experience was.

*They called a lot. They called a lot. They wanted to visit with us. I think it was like an NB... uh... Big City station... All of the Small City stations... Um... We had one girl, what was her name that came to the house several times, brought cookies and flowers just to try and meet with us.*

*And they were all very nice and just wondering how we were doing and, you know, what we thought of everything that was going on. And they wanted to interview and interview. I mean it was a constant ... They went to my work. My work had to tell them to leave because they were looking for me and I was in Lubbock, of course. There was media in Lubbock. Um... I mean, from the day it started, you could see they were in vans with these poles trying to see what he looked like.*

*It was awful ... Traumatized. Yeah... Because I mean I understand that they wanted answers right away... But when you're going through what we were going through, I mean I couldn't even think. I was getting texts and e-mails and Facebooking. And for like two or three weeks, I couldn't do it. Because I couldn't think, it was just really hard, you know.*

She said there was one reporter from Big City who would park at their house and chase after them as they entered the house. Danielle would have to shut the door in her face. In what could have come straight from the Society of Professional Journalists’ ethical guidelines, Danielle offered this advice:

*You know everybody has a job to do and they do it to the best of their ability and I understand that. But I think... In a sense, they need to... um... have a little more consideration of what families are going through and maybe set boundaries. And probably*
not try to go up to the family the minute it happens.

Give them some time to absorb and then go out and visit with the family. You can't think when they're asking you questions. I mean it's just impossible ... then you're going to be mad because you're just upset about what happened. Let the family be comfortable, let them absorb, let them talk and communicate and then go out and visit with them.

Because of the severity of his injuries, including having trouble speaking, Noah was simply not able to talk to the media for ten weeks following the shooting. After returning home from the hospital and resuming normal activities, Noah has made himself available to the news media and has done quite a few interviews. He also does personal appearances, such as throwing out the first pitch at a baseball game, and appearing on The Children’s Miracle Network. Upon seeing reporters at the school on the one-year anniversary of the shooting, Noah said, “Of course I’m going to go talk to them.”

He says his experiences have been positive overall but he is continually frustrated by what he perceives as reporters twisting his words. It was the most common thread in the stories Noah told about his interactions with the media and will be explored further in the next section. In his words:

*I don't really mind <doing interviews>. But it's just the fact that the way they change things. I mean I know I bring that up a lot but that's the biggest part of it is that they change it so bad. It's like why talk to me if you're going to make up your own story?*

**Loss of Trust in News Media**

All of the students and most of the parents expressed frustration with the accuracy of news stories following the shooting. As mentioned earlier, Brayden was frustrated that they weren’t getting the facts right and Jackson was angry about things that were reported about his friends that weren’t true. This anger and frustration should not be minimized
because it has had a profound effect that still remains three years later. The effort to be accurate, and the problems associated, will also be explored in the lived experience of the reporters. It was collectively their most profound theme.

For Jackson, the anger and loss of trust has been acute. It was present in his voice and on his face when he discussed it in the interview, so much so that his mother reached out and put her hand on his arm. It seems personal for Jackson, which is understandable given that he had close friendships with those involved. Also at play is Jackson’s need to protect and soothe others. His anger is not directed as much at the reporters themselves, as it is about the effect the inaccuracies have had on people he cares about. Reading back through the transcript that just included Jackson’s part of the interview, it became clear by the number of times he repeated himself, how upset he was. This is a series of excerpts from a seven-minute section of Jackson’s part of the interview after Amelia said “I think Jackson has a real distrust of the media as a result.” During this time period, Jackson spoke more and more slowly, with longer pauses, and his voice got softer and softer until it was hard to hear him. In my opinion, he sounded weary.

_Not necessarily thought about it before. Not necessarily before it happened. But like... Especially during when it happened. When all the people were calling in with false truths. When they were talking about, “This is how it happened... And then this...” And so, like... I have a lot of distrust for the media because... um... because of a lot of that stuff. I don’t see a lot of media searching for the truth necessarily._

_But a lot of <reporters> were talking just about stuff that wasn’t true and that made me angry, because like... if you’re going to be telling the whole nation about this stuff, tell them the truth._

_Yeah. If you’re going to tell somebody something, tell them facts. Do your research. Don’t just accept everything as true._

_And so... I knew a lot of things that happened... that the media report says... Some parts are omitting truths and just different... different things. Tell the whole story. Don’t like... tell the part that shows your political beliefs or anything else. You know. Tell the story,
give the facts and that's all you need to give.

Um... Because... a lot of media is known for... leaving out some of the truth... or different things. Not giving every piece of evidence or something. And just making it look like this is what happened, when it's something completely different.

Uh huh... That a lot of people were more searching for stories rather than what happened. A few of my words were twisted around and different things. They didn’t … Like... what I said was clearly out there, but then ... yeah... because it was live. But they turned it into something that they wanted it to say.

One of the specific issues that came up in almost every interview I conducted was the lingering rumor that had been reported that Noah was The Shooter’s target. There were two explanations that made the rounds in news stories: first, Noah was said to be the one bullying The Shooter; and, second, because Noah, The Shooter and Kaylee were supposedly involved in a love triangle. Neither was true. These rumors were repeated in news stories immediately after the shooting. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News Organization</th>
<th>Rumor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KKEE</td>
<td>There’s been a lot of speculation about whether this was over a girl or bullying but State Police would not confirm that.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCP</td>
<td>Students who knew The Shooter said he was often the target of bullying by his peers at Bradford-Mitchell School, including one who said students would often shout “Shut up!” when he contributed in class and another who said the victim in Tuesday’s shooting was one such aggressor. Another witness, Kimberly Macias, said The Shooter pushed students out of the way until he found the 11-year-old boy, who is in critical condition at a Lubbock Hospital with a gunshot wound or wounds to his face and neck.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Information from nurses treating the boy indicates he was the shooter’s target, hospital spokesman Eric Finley said.

Table 4-2: Rumors about shooting

At the same time, many stories quoted the police chief who said the victims appeared to be random, so there were stories that did not promulgate the rumors.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News Organization</th>
<th>Clarification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABC News</td>
<td>Please keep these children in your prayers as they were shot simply for sitting in their gym waiting to go to class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Daily Mail</td>
<td>The boy, who hasn't been named, was shot in the face and neck and initially told nurses he was the target of the shooting. However, State Police Chief Pete Kassetas said Wednesday that it appeared both victims were chosen randomly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporters Daily Record</td>
<td>He said the NMSP had no idea what the motivation was for the shooting and denied reports that someone had died as a result. Martinez urged media to behave responsibly and be wary of social media. “Hospitals are being quoted when they haven’t released any information to us.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Daily News</td>
<td>“I believe when the incident occurred it was random. The victims were random,” he said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KKEE</td>
<td>“Noah and Kaylee were two purely innocent victims in this case. They were in the wrong place at the wrong time and unfortunately they suffered the consequences of a horrific act,” said Chandler.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4-3: Correct information reported about the shooting

It wasn’t until six months later at the sentencing hearing that factual evidence was presented identifying who the real bully was, but his name was redacted because he is a
minor. Two newspapers and three television stations covered the sentencing but only two included the statement from the Assistant District Attorney that unequivocally stated Noah was not the bully (see the above quote from KKEE on June 12, 2014), one other included a statement that the bully’s name was omitted because he had not been injured, presumably prompting the assumption that Noah was not the bully. And the others used vague terms such as “unidentified bully.”

Noah expressed sadness and he worries that people in the community and students in his school still think he was the bully, and that he can never tell why they are giving him funny looks or the cold shoulder. He said:

_Sometimes, I mean… I'm sure some of the reasons that people are just looking at me and look away… I mean, not saying… just because of that <gestures at his face>. They could be wondering, “Oh what happened?” But, again, that's not counting those few that have heard about that and just like… I'm not going to know if they're going to give me dirty looks or whatever because they don't like me. But that's the problem is media makes their own stories up and then it's basically one for one, one on one._

This fear was confirmed during my interviews because four of the parents and two of the students I talked to all said they were still not sure if Noah was the bully. The only parent and child (Jennifer and Brayden) who did know the truth had attended the sentencing hearing and heard the evidence about the real bully firsthand. Danielle described an encounter from summer 2016 in which a friend of hers asked for the “truth”:

_We went camping last weekend and we stopped over in Rio to... to... to go to the horse races. And one of the little girls that my daughter played softball with, Angel's mom, she said, "You know... I don't know and I don't care ... I just wonder what... what really did happen, if you don't mind me asking. And if you don't want to talk about it, that's ok," No... they have to ask us. Like I said, a lot of people that know us and we're ... We know a lot of people in Small City. A lot of people that know us, know. There's still some people that... you know... wonder... you know... what... what really happened. Just like... Angel’s mom knows me really well. She said, “I don’t care... what happened. What really happened? Because no one’s ever said anything.” And if it was me, I would want something written up (in the newspaper) because I think he deserves that. We deserve that._
When I discussed this with the local media in June and July, 2016, they all agreed that the rumors about Noah should be publicly dispelled, but as of this writing, nothing has been published.

**Social Media**

As you can imagine, much of what my participants knew about the shooting the day it happened came by way of social media. From finding out about the shooting itself, to learning they should go to the mall, to the rumors about who was involved – it was all circulating as fast as lightning in social media. Most of my participants, parents and students alike, talked about the role Facebook playing in the aftermath. There were a few mentions of Instagram, but only in regards to what The Shooter had posted before the shooting. No one mentioned Twitter, Snapchat or any other social media platform.

Sophia also found herself cautioning family members who called her after seeing things posted on Facebook and she said her two daughters were getting all of their information from Facebook as well. She said she was trying to hide the fact that she was watching TV news obsessively, but they were glued to the news they were getting through social media.

In something like a terrible irony, after another school shooting the month before, Amelia remembers posting something about children being allowed to have cell phones in school in case of an emergency, because Bradford-Mitchell students were not allowed. She got a response from a friend who was a school safety officer in Small City telling her that it was better for the children not to have cell phones because they interfered with the police
and rescue people doing their jobs. And students and parents should let the officers do their jobs and take care of things. At the time, a month before the Bradford-Mitchell shooting, Amelia shared her friend’s response because it made sense to her. She remembered this advice on the morning of the shooting itself. But compared to the other parents in this study, Amelia found out rather late that Jackson was safe. The other parents found out much sooner because their children all had cell phones.

Both Noah’s family and Kaylee’s family heard rumors that their child was dead from social media posts, which were re-circulated in news stories. Noah and Danielle told a story about how this affected Noah’s sister:

Noah: *There was one little girl... um... She... She posted on Facebook "RIP Noah." Oooo my sister was...*

Danielle: *It was scary, see, she came from Big City. She ... this was her fourth year. She was starting her fourth year at college and it was earlier in the morning. She came with nothing. Her sandals, her shorts and a T-shirt. And the police stopped her twice, they had to escort her in because she didn't know. And of course, hearing that and seeing that on Facebook, she's flipping out. When she gets here and she's screaming. She was like, "Please don't lie to me. He's gone, isn't he?" and I'm like “No.” And she's goes, "Yes, they are saying it on Facebook. He died and you're just not telling me." It was awful. It was really bad.*

Another issue with Facebook arose for several participants when a Small City-based humor page posted a meme about the Bradford-Mitchell shooting in September 2015. The meme depicted normal school supplies and a school uniform plus a bullet-proof vest. Despite the shooting having happened 18 months prior, Jennifer and Sophia talked about the impact it had on them and their kids to see it made fun of. The site followed it up with several more memes making fun of the people who were commenting that it was inappropriate. The following week they posted a meme making fun of the teacher who had helped Kaylee after she was shot. Kaylee’s mother even posted comments about how
inappropriate these posts were. Jennifer talked about how it brought back a lot of memories and made their feelings rise to the surface again.

Fig. 4-7: Meme about shooting posted on Facebook

A component in the loss of trust in the news media has to do with social media and whether or not the two are being conflated. My participants were certain that they were seeing lots of reports in the news media about the rumors, and it appeared to be broadcast news that were the guiltiest, but it was hard to find evidence of that. This is likely because not every breaking news update has been cataloged or recorded and posted online. While it is easy to search the archives of newspaper stories, it is not as easy to find every broadcast
from TV news crews reporting live or filing updates.

However, what I was able to find was evidence from Facebook that people were talking to each other in the Comments section of news stories and the rumors were flying. My participants were credible and I believe that the rumors were reported in the news media following the shooting. But I also wonder if there is a heuristic happening when people commenting on news stories somehow associate the comments with the news organization itself. Also, in addition to many of the inaccurate statements made by kids in interviews, which were then disseminated in the news, information was taken directly from social media and reported on in the context of news stories. The separation, or lack of separation, between news media and social media was blurry.

**Lived Experience of Reporters and Editors**

**Participants**

Recruiting participants who were reporters or editors was easier than recruiting parents and students. I found the two primary newspapers that covered the story were willing and eager. I was also able to recruit two participants (one full-time and one stringer) who worked for TV news outlets. But the primary TV news station from Big City (pseudonym), which is the go-to place for news for many residents, forbade its employees from talking to me. Therefore, the lived experience in this study fully captures what the experience was like for newspaper reporters and editors, but only partially captures the experience of TV reporters and news directors or producers.
Ryan was the arts editor and acting editor-in-chief at Reporters Daily Record (RDR) when the shooting happened. Because he was the first editor in the newsroom that morning, he took on the primary leadership role assigning stories and facilitating the AP newswire process. Ryan was credited by many RDR employees as the reason their coverage went smoothly.

Scarlett was the business manager at RDR at the time of the shooting and took on a leadership role with Ryan. She says she first called in personnel and got the newsroom staff organized, and then she became the cog in the wheel keeping everything running smoothly by going out into the field as needed.

Isabella was the news editor at RDR at the time of the shooting. Because she is the late-shift editor, she arrived in the newsroom after Ryan had organized the coverage assignments, so she describes her role as primarily managing the people and personalities to keep everyone on track.

Mateo was the photographer at RDR at the time of the shooting. He spent the whole day in the field capturing and feeding images to national news organizations.

Teresa was a reporter at RDR at the time of the shooting. She stayed in the newsroom and focused primarily on the other stories that needed to be covered in the paper, such as the weekly “Pet of the Week” feature. She covered one story on the evening of the shooting and played a support role for other reporters, such as transcribing information being called in. Teresa was somewhat resistant to being interviewed, so her voice is not present in many of the themes.

Maya was a newsroom staffer at RDR at the time of the shooting. She stepped in
as the receptionist and helped field phone calls.

Redford was a digital editor at Big City Press (BCP) at the time of the shooting. He helped coordinate the reporters on the scene and did some editing.

Parker was a reporter for the BCP at the time of the shooting and was sent to Small City for three days with a photographer to cover the story.

Harper was living in Small City at the time of the shooting and called BCP to offer her services as a freelancer. She covered the shooting until Parker and the photographer got to town.

Lillian was a reporter for the Small City bureau of BBB News. She covered the story by herself until BBB was able to fly in reporters from the Big City bureau.

Dylan was a filmmaker who had done some work for the local PBS station. On the day of the shooting he was hired by NBC News to capture video footage until they could fly in their own news team.

Themes

From my conversations with these editors, reporters and staffers, eight themes arose that seemed to capture the experience of reporting from the scene of a school shooting:

1. How People Found Out and First Few Hours
2. Conflict of Interest or Overlapping Roles
3. Accuracy
4. Difference between Locals and Out-of-Towners
5. Newsroom Dynamics
6. Relationship between Media and Sources

7. Ethical Choices

8. Questionable Choices

Although these themes are not hierarchical, they are arranged somewhat according to timing, with the themes related to the earliest experiences higher on the list and those that arose later in the day or in retrospect toward the bottom of the list. In all, they will tell the story of what it was like as the news teams first became aware of the shooting through the first two days.

Some of the themes were more salient to certain participants than others and I will highlight their experiences by using direct quotes. Similarly, when participants presented an experience that was different from the others, I will also highlight their perspective using direct quotes. Taken together this process should highlight the spectrum of experiences of all participants.

Also, as with the parents and students, I left in most of the utterances, pauses and stutters from the interviews. In the case of the reporters and editors, these did not usually reflect emotional re-experiencing, but rather cognitive processing. In asking them to re-tell their experience after the shooting, I am asking them to go back through time and remember details about what they were thinking and what obstacles they faced.

For some, this event was firmly rooted in their memory because it was very
significant in their careers and easier to call up. For others, this event did not register in the top traumas they have had to cover, so they needed to work harder to remember. In both cases, however, the utterances, pauses and stutters reflect their cognitive load in the moment. The longer they paused, the more they stuttered, the more utterances that were present, the harder they were working cognitively to tell their story.

As with the parents and students, when I read their narratives without them, it did not accurately reflect the way I experienced each person’s story during the interview. Because one of my research questions has to do with how reporters made decisions at the scene and what they thought was important, it seemed equally as important that the places where they were highly cognitively engaged and thinking deeply be accurately portrayed.

**How People Found Out and First Few Hours**

The first request I had for each reporter was for them to tell the story of how they found out about the shooting and what they did. These narratives came to comprise the first theme because each person’s story was so compelling on its own that together they captured chaos and the call to action.

Because of their proximity, the team from RDR were the first reporters on the story. Ryan and Scarlett (as well as the ad editor who was not interviewed for this project) were the first people from my participant pool to find out about the shooting. Both had arrived
in the newsroom around 7:00 am. They both said they first became aware that something was happening when they heard sirens racing by their building and vague reports started coming through the police scanner. Without fully understanding what was happening, they both jumped into action in very different ways.

As mentioned in his introduction, Ryan was doing double-duty for the RDR as both the arts editor and the acting editor-in-chief, so his work days in the preceding months started at 6:30 a.m. and ended around 5:00 p.m. when the night editor came in. Ryan said three things happened immediately: the ad editor went to Bradford-Mitchell to find out what was happening, Ryan started calling in staff and he notified the AP affiliate in Bic City that something was breaking. Within 45 minutes, Ryan had a team of five reporters out in the field ready to do stand-ups for national affiliates and provide local commentary. For the first hour, he had conversations with the AP affiliates who were calling for more information and trying to decide if they should send teams, which they did. He then focused on feeding the AP Newswire. He tells this story about what that experience was like:

Because what... because what was happening was... um... I was receiving... um... I was receiving stories. I was receiving images... And I was filing them with the AP so that <the reporters> could stay out. So... so... basically, you know, we, we were receiving calls from... um... um... from some of the morning shows. And in one of the... Well, it's... it's really this tricky thing because... because you get these calls from morning shows or whatever, and then you have to verify that they are or are not your affiliate. (laughs). Bec... because if they're not your affiliate then they have to license the stuff. And so...

I remember Andrew in particular. There's an Andrew in New York and he was on one of the morning shows. He was... he was... he was a backend guy for one of the morning shows. He calls me up. And... and he's... And I was right in the middle of... um... I had finished some cut lines on... on the... uh... images that Mateo had brought in. Uh... Mateo's still in the field. He'd emailed them in. I'd finished the cut lines and I was filing them on the AP wire. And Andrew called in and he was like, "Hey, man. I really need... I really need photos so that we can have something going up. We're... we're about to go live in about this in like two minutes. I need some photos. Can you email them to me?"

I said... I said... Right now, I am uploading them to the AP wire. Do you have access to the
AP wire? And then he said, "I don't know." And then I go... I go... "Are you in the newsroom." (laughs) And he's like, "Yes." I go... I... I... (laughs) And, and I said... Well he didn't know which wires he had access to. And I... and I said... and I told him... and I was like... and I was like, "Maybe..." I was like, "Wait ten seconds." And then the thing confirmed that it uploaded. And I said, "Have one of your people search the slug line Bradford-Mitchell." And then one of his assistants searched it, popped it up on his thing and I was like, "You don't need to talk to me. (laughs) All... all... all the stuff's there in... in your... in your wire. And all the stuff that I could email you is already on its way."

And... and so you have these conversations... and real short conversations like they're... Because all the people that are affiliates and have access, they're just trying to get the media in once you tell them what, what the slug line is... once you tell them... Then they're like, "Oh. Well, ok we can take it ourselves." And, and then the ones that can't do that you figure out really quickly, "Oh. You need a license."

Scarlett’s first thoughts were of the RDR staffers who had children at the school, so she told them they could leave to go find their kids, and she kept an eye on them all day to make sure they were doing ok. She even gave her own cell phone to Charlotte because she realized that Charlotte had forgotten hers that day. She also kept tabs on them in the following days, offering time off or other kinds of support as needed.

Then she began fielding phone calls from national news organizations and helping bring in the reporting team and getting them organized. She also stepped into a supportive role, finding out what equipment the reporters had with them and what they needed, and taking equipment out into the field. Scarlett went to the mall to talk to one of the reporters and the photographer. She said the reporters were stunned by what they were facing and were trying to be as sensitive as possible in asking if they could talk with the parents and students. She described their experience this way:

So... I think that everybody just kind of went in... We got to kind of put it behind us at first, even though we know we're dealing with it. And... it's almost like a shock cloak. Do you know what I mean? It's like... we've got to get this done... We've got to get this out there... We've got to get the information to the people... We're trying to help people as best as we can and... But we've got to get our work done too.

Scarlett also described her experience at the mall as she took in the scene, which
adds an external perspective to the lived experience described by the parents and students themselves:

> So I actually did go to the mall where all the families were. I only stayed there for a few minutes... uh... until I located the reporter that I needed to get the laptop and everything to. And then... uh... I talked with the photographer that was there. He was an employee of ours at the time. I spoke with him for a second, um...

> And then... it was not a good scene. (begins crying) Just... all the parents in panic. No information was being released to them except that they were bringing the children from the school to the mall. Because the... I don't know if you know where the mall is at. And there's not that big of a difference... but they would bus the children. I ge- I think around the back. Take them into the mall. They were doing... they were having to interview the children, to my knowledge, before they released them to their parents. So then there would be groups of kids that would come out at one time. (voice breaks) So, I guess just the... Seeing the... I have young kids. (begins crying again)

> And I had friends, that were there. I was actually hugging Candy when her daughter came out. So... um... I hate to get emotional. (sobs) I'm sorry. But it was really hard that day. (sobs) And I'm sure Charlotte will be even worse. (laughs) I don't know, I just get really emotional... um... just seeing the... the terror on all the... on everybody's face. On all the parents' face. And the wondering and the... You know, is it my child? You know? That kind of thing. Who's going to walk out, what... And then to see the... the excitement and the screaming of when their child walks out, like, "Oh my God," you know, all the praising. And the look... the kids... the look on the children's face. Especially the ones that you knew heard or seen something... Or basically even just hearing... just the scare in their face, of them not knowing, are they going to live or die? Because they were almost pale, you know? So, yeah. I think there was one girl that... one little girl that almost passed out when she got in her parent's arms. She, like, collapsed. So I tried to get out of there, because for one, it was too emotional; two, I think people needed... there was so much, and so many people there... um... I didn't want to be in their way of, you know...

Mateo was the second RDR reporter to get to Bradford-Mitchell. The first (who was not interviewed for this study) sent him information about what was happening at the school and where the police had the perimeters set up. Mateo’s nickname at the paper was “Ninja Reporter” because he had the ability to go to an event, shoot the whole thing and leave without anybody noticing. Mateo says this ability was very important that morning because he needed to get as close to the school as possible in order to get the shots he knew everyone wanted. But this is, of course, in conflict with what the police want, so Mateo
found himself sparring with the sheriff:

*I'm a photographer, so... I got to get close to get my shots. Even with a long lens, I've still gotta get close. And uh... I saw the two perimeters, and the first perimeter happened to be a cop that I knew. A city cop. I've actually been to court on his behalf because he was being smeared by somebody, and I had to go throw in my two cents to defend him. And... So he knew me, and we were tight and he said, “Yeah, sure... Go on... go on up to the tree.” Which is basically up on the campus. And so I got to the second cop and he was stopping me, and I said “Talk to your captain” (gesturing at the first cop). And he said “Yeah, ok, everything’s clear.” So I got up there and I just blended in. Because where I was, once I got on to the campus, I wasn't going to get my shots just standing under that tree.

And I saw a lot of civilians milling about, kids being rushed out... um... Police everywhere. And I walked by dozens of cops, no one said a word. So I just blended in and got my shots. I got right up to the school door... the front door... as they were letting kids out. And, uh, it was... it was real smooth. I mean, my blood pressure never peaked or anything, I was as calm as could be... I just calmly took my pictures and left.

So, it wasn't any great, earth shattering experience, except for the sheriff. The big old fat bald sheriff. Short little guy. He just had a hard-on for me. You know... And instead of doing his job, he was... he was focused on me. I could see it, you know. Told me to “Get the hell out of there.” And I was like, “Ok. I got my shots anyway, I'm leaving.”

So I was walking away, I shot a couple of pictures over my shoulder just to piss him off, more than anything. And sure enough, he followed me off the campus, I was off the campus at this point. And he's threatening me with arrest, I said “Yeah, go ahead, arrest me. (holding his wrists together up in front of his face) Just knock yourself out, have fun.” Yeah, yeah... And that didn't even bother me, I was laughing through the whole thing. Was like “Dude, go do your job.” Every... every... every other cop here is doing their job. Except you because you have got a hard on for me. And it's like, you know who I am. You've seen me before. And it was like why are you... why are you busting my... He was a red neck. You know... He and I had butted heads before, over nonsense. So, it was like “Yeah, ok. Arrest me, or whatever, you know. I'm... I'm leaving.”
Then I got up to the highway where they had set up the official perimeter. There was TV people there and they were all asking me, “So, you got up there?” I said “Yeah.” “How'd you get up there?” I go, “I'm good.” You know. I'm stealth, I know how to do this, I know how to... The key for a journalist is to blend in, and just observe and try to be invisible. You know... with big camera gear, it is always important for me to... especially... try to be uh... as silent as I can be. As... as invisible as possible.

So that's what I applied to this, and it went swimmingly. I had pictures... um... Since I was the only media at... on site... CBS, NBC, everybody picked it up. I mean, it ran nationwide, all my shots. And... um... I actually got hired by Reuters that very day.

Mateo also went to the mall and covered the community events that were being held over the next two days. Many of Mateo’s photos went national and, in fact, a lot of them show up first in a Google images search. It took some investigation to find images that could be sourced to other news organizations even though they were on scene two to three hours later. But it is Mateo’s images that capture the emotion of the moment from the students’ and parents’ perspectives while it was still fresh.

Isabella was the night editor at RDR at the time of the shooting, so she was not scheduled to get to work until 5:00 p.m. that evening. But, by happenstance, Isabella had been called to jury duty that day and so she was awake and at the courthouse when the news about the shooting came in. Isabella has a strong sense of humor and she said she was not used to being up that early and “was kinda mad about it.” She and the other potential jurors were waiting around to see if they would be selected when the shooting was announced.

And this guard comes in and he was very ... I rem- ... I will never get over how calm he was when he said this. He was like, “Oh well, there’s been a shooting at Bradford-Mitchell School. So if any of the parents want to make some phone calls, you can do that.” Because, you know, u-usually when you’re on jury duty you can’t use a phone. Especially in Small City. You can’t take a phone in there. You can’t take anything.

So we were all just kinda like, “What did he just say?” You know, it was ... What I’ll say is he was so calm about it that it was... it ... You know when somebody is really calm and
they say some stuff that’s really bad, it takes you a while to (makes circular gestures next to her head) ... And I was just like, “Well... what the... what the hell,” you know. Because that... that kind of stuff doesn't happen in Small City. It shouldn't happen anywhere but it definitely doesn't happen in Small City. Because you ... I mean you've been ... you've seen it. It’s very like small and... communal... And it’s like everybody knows each other... And... you just wouldn't expect that. They do love guns out there, but that's... that's another... that’s a whole other research project.

Anyway... (chuckle) So I get out of jury duty and my first thought is, “Well, I have to go to work now. (shrugs) Like I can’t ...” (laughs) I have to go to work now.” So I go to the office and... you know... Just like I thought... everybody is... (makes swirling circles above her head) It’s like ... Uh, it reminds me, uh, um ... You know, like ER. So... Somebody comes in on a gurney and everybody’s like running around... (gesturing and pointing in all directions) trying to get like three ccs of whatever. It was just like that. It was like a flurry of activity, but in a good way because everybody was ... Everybody had like ... I guess they’d already discussed their stations... Like, “You handle this. You handle that ... da-da-da-da-da-da-da.”

Isabella and Ryan were used to working together because Ryan handed the paper over to Isabella each evening, so she melded right in to the plan that was already in place. Isabella described her primary role that day as managing people, which will be explored in more depth in a theme later in this chapter. She found out what the reporters in the field were learning, helped them shape their stories and meet deadlines. She also kept reporters on track ethically by weeding out the facts from the rumors. This will also be explored in depth later in this chapter. She spoke very highly of Ryan’s leadership during the situation. If Ryan was the heart and soul during this experience, Isabella was the backbone. This dynamic and their leadership styles will be discussed later in this chapter.

Dylan was on site at the school a few minutes after 8:00. By profession, Dylan is a filmmaker and producer, but he also works for local news organizations on a freelance basis. By happenstance, he was at the grocery store across from the mall when the shooting occurred and he happened to be free that day, so NBC News hired him to capture video until their national team could arrive. Dylan was able to get to the school shortly after 8:00
a.m. but did not have any of his equipment, so he shot everything on his cell phone. His work was used on *NBC Nightly News*, *ABC*’s evening news broadcast and the following morning on *The Today Show*.

To provide context on how quickly the school and police reacted to the scene, the shooting occurred at 7:48 a.m. When Dylan arrived shortly after 8:00, some of the kids were already on buses being taken to the mall and the scene was completely sealed off. The closest he could get was a bridge about a half mile away. This image, taken by a KKEE reporter who was stationed near Dylan, shows how far away they were. The only reporters able to get to the school that morning were the ad editor and Mateo from RDR.

Fig. 4-8: Location where Dylan was shooting footage (Image credit: KKEE)

Because of this and the fact that Dylan did not want to interfere with the evacuation process, he only stayed at the school for about ten minutes. Not wanting to interfere or make things worse was a strong theme for Dylan, and he came back to it repeatedly throughout the interview. He compared what he did as a filmmaker and producer to what
a journalist does. Here are three stories Dylan told about that theme. The first was at the school, the second was at the mall, and the third was an interview in the home of a girl who went to Bradford-Mitchell.

So the bridge... If you're heading north, there's a bridge near the school that you can see. We were off the side of that bridge. It was me and then some other random photographer who had been called... And we were just taking... That's as close as we could get. We could see, and plus we didn't want to disturb... You know, I didn't want to go directly to the school. I knew they were already in... you know... kind of emergency mode.

I hired another camera guy. He showed up and was just like, "Let's shoot everything," And I'm like, "No." Like... "Don't do that." If we did shoot something that I was uncomfortable with giving with them, I didn't hand it over. I just deleted it. Um... as far as people approaching, I actively didn't approach anyone, so much as if I happened to be standing there and they'd say, "What are you doing?" You know... "What are you up to with this camera?" "What are you-, what's going on?" and I... I explained to them...And then... then say it. You know... they'd say no. But I never... I never approached other people because I... you know... I... I tend to put myself in the shoes of that person in that situation. And so I don't want to... You know, if I'm scared that my kid maybe got shot, I don't want some guy being like, "Hey, can I talk to you about it right afterwards?" So... So... Yeah... There was no approaching people from that perspective.

(Sigh) It was... well... it made it easy because... Um... The cameraman I had hired, it was his family. So the mom was... you know... cool with it. She ha... You know... She was comfortable, it was in her own home, and she kind of knew what was going to happen. She knows him and how... you know... how we work. And so... It was... It wasn't as, um... She had some good bites but it wasn't as... kind of heart-wrenching. And we didn't really push it. It was just like... you know... "What did you think that morning?" And I think they used three to five second clips. I mean, it was not a full interview with them from their standpoint. But we did talk to them. And the kids... The girl... It was just... The girl kind of got a little emotional. And... and I kept it... Tried to keep it real light. And then after that I think I wrapped it up pretty quick just because I don't want to put people through that.

Lillian is the only TV reporter represented in this study, and had been on the job six months when the shooting occurred. She is the only reporter at the BBB bureau in Small City. She is also a third-generation citizen, and lived very close to Bradford-Mitchell. She openly says she felt out of her element and uncertain about what to do, and when I asked her to tell her story, she said it was the story of “being alone.”

Lillian was alerted to the shooting first by a colleague at BBB who heard reports
on the police scanner, and second by the police telling her to go to the mall. Her house was less than a minute from the school, five minutes from the mall, but fifteen minutes from the newsroom. In order to get started on the story as quickly as possible, she called the station to ask a colleague to meet her at the mall with her equipment. This was important to Lillian. Because she is the only reporter at the station, she is used to doing everything herself, so asking someone else to help her do her job was noteworthy for her.

So I live right across from the mall and my station was in downtown, so it would have taken me 30 minutes to go downtown to get my camera and come back. So I called the guy at the dispatch and I said that had called me from the station... I said, "Hey," and I never do this, this was the first time I've ever done this. And I was like, "Can you meet... can you grab my camera and meet me at the mall?" Because I always would have gone and... and gotten it. But at this particular time, I was like, that'll save 15 minutes, and at this point I just needed to be there. So those first few minutes at the mall, I was there so quick, it was so stressful because I really wanted to start shooting, and I was helpless without my camera.

Lillian immediately felt overwhelmed when she got to the mall and saw the magnitude of the emotion from the parents. She also knew there were two scenes, the school and the mall, and felt like she should be covering both, but she was alone and she knew she needed help. She called her station assignment manager for guidance. “And I was just feeling so overwhelmed at that point. Because this was an extremely enormous event for one person, and I am my own photographer.” She credits her assignment manager for saying exactly what she needed to hear to calm down and focus, directing her to go to the mall and start working, and that they were sending in a team by helicopter to help.

And so... um... they sent the helicopter down and they sent people in. So I, at that point, was like, ok, that was exactly what I needed hear to just be calm and take it one parent at a time. So I started interviewing parents. Just one after the other, basically. Just... um... You know... I got... you know... very emotional interviews before the students came, because the parents hadn't been united with their s-, kids yet.

So they were just... you know... freaking out. So I found one parent... um... who's amazing and I interviewed her several times after this. Ah... and she did a phone interview with our morning anchor. So right away we had a morning phoner, and then I went for the noon
show and did noon phoner, and I was there when the students came in, and I just kept video and interviews.

Lillian credits her age and the fact that she was local with her ability to get so many interviews. She said she was likely non-threatening which made the parents feel safe enough to open up to her. She directly compared her experience to what she observed after the national media arrived, which will be explored later in this chapter.

There was one more instance when being alone became salient again. She was so busy collecting interviews that her camera battery died. Normally she would have either remembered to bring a spare or she would have gone to get a replacement herself. But because of the scope of the story, and despite the anxiety she felt once again about having to ask for help, she once again called the station to have someone bring her another battery.

Lillian’s day started before 8:00 am and she continued doing reports throughout the day. Her last newscast was on the 10:00 pm news.

Harper was between jobs and living in Small City when the story broke. She was walking the dog when her mom texted her about the shooting. Harper’s mom will be featured in a later section of this chapter that explores overlapping roles and conflicts of interest.

Harper recognized it as a possible career boost and emailed BCP to offer her services as a freelancer. Without waiting for an affirmative, she went to the mall. Halfway there, Redford called to hire her and create a plan. Harper stayed at the mall talking to parents throughout the day, and then covered the press conference that afternoon. She says everything new she learned, she tweeted out and sent to Redford. She described it initially as an adrenaline rush being in the middle of a school shooting, but it quickly became
“sobering” when it sank in that the story was about kids who were so young.

Harper said her strategy was to talk to people who were separate from the others because they are easier to approach. She was sensitive to interrupting people who were already talking and avoided people who were overly emotional. Here is how she described her experience:

*Um... most were pretty willing to talk. I think I only got turned away by one or two people. Most were willing. Most told me whatever they knew, whatever I asked. Even when kids started arriving and I talked to kids and their parents and ... And they were fine with me talking to their kids. And the kids were fine to talk. There was... um... I... I... I think I only talked to three or four kids, because most parents got their kids and took off. So, there weren't a lot of opportunities. Um... but the kids ... The kids were willing to talk. I talked to one who... who... who was in there and saw the shooting and knew who the shooter was. I did not ask his name and I've wondered ... I wondered that day, actually, and in hindsight since, if I should have asked the name. Because we had trouble confirming for sure who it was. It sort of passed around and I've wondered that. But it also ... Talking about a kid. And I wouldn't have published his name anyway. But I wasn't sure I wanted to know, so I just didn't ask. Um, but he ... He told me he saw the boy with the gun and he was in the room and he saw people get shot. And his parents were... um... it probably wasn't the easiest conversation they had listened to, but they also ... I don't remember specifically what they talked about but they chimed in as well while he was talking, of their experiences. With what they had heard. What they had been told. Obviously they weren't there and so they didn't ... But they responded to him.*

Redford was the digital editor at BCP when the shooting occurred. He describes himself as half primary reporter, and half editor. He prefers the term “player-coach” and this type of inclusiveness and team orientation is evident in his story. His leadership style and its impact on the team will be explored later in this chapter.

Redford was alerted to the story either by Harper’s email or by the alert Ryan sent through the AP Newswire. He immediately recognized it as a big story and started pulling a team together. He was in charge of sending people out, coordinating coverage and putting it online. Interestingly, the team’s efforts on this story led BCP leadership to restructure
the newsroom and create a team just for covering breaking news events:

*I think... In this case, this was one of the first times my paper really... thought about a story... getting it online quickly. So running it like a live news operation with multiple reporters. Um... We subsequently built an entire team around them that, which I run based on this. And... It... It happened just by instinct. But this was the first story... um... that that really happened.*

As mentioned above, his first move was to bring Harper on board and then he focused on getting the Big City reporters mobilized and heading to Small City by car. Altogether it took about four hours before any of his reporters were on the scene. He described the morning this way:

*Then just started reporting facts like we always do. Which is as soon as we find something out, we verify it. Um... Then we put it up online, send out breaking news alerts... Um... The reporters are gathering information and I'm sort of the central figure typing it up and putting it online. Um... So aggregating all that reporting. Um... And then once we realized what was happening and we had all... most of the bare bones facts, started reaching out to the people. The families of the kids... The families of... The family of the kid who did the shooting allegedly... I guess maybe at this point he's admitted it. So I don't have to say allegedly... (laughs) Um... Ah... So... And... And then some of the teachers that were there and stuff like that. So... um... using the Small City community the best we could... um... and finding people who knew people. That's kind of what we do. Um... And... And then just piecing it together.*

*And then in the aftermath, going to the vigils and events that were being held for the kids and stuff like that. So that's really where... um... I would say talking to kids really mattered in this particular story. And I didn't... I wasn't a reporter on this one so I wasn't actually doing the talking, just piecing it together.*

*But those interviews were really tough. I remember... Well, I remember just being touched by the notion that this was the moment that shattered some kids' innocence. You know, there was kids in a middle school. Which... And I have a middle school age child. Um... Yeah, and then this event happened, and... um... and changed what they believe is possible forever. You know... We get older we realize this by experiencing it from other things... that it is... But it's really hard when it happens to you especially at that age. Um... You know... And just putting myself in that place. They were in bleachers in a pep rally kind of setting, which we've all sort of been in. Um... And... You know... The last thing you're thinking is some kid is going to walk in with a shotgun. Um... So... Just being really empathetic and compassionate towards what that must have been like and how shattered... I think it's just a heartbreaking situation. Even... you know... stepping back and not trying to psychoanalyze or whatever any sort of... um... impact this may have on a child, but rather just the shame of that. You know... That sense of innocence lost.*
Redford said he was aware from the beginning that this had the potential to be a national story and that the team operated as if it was a fatal shooting. Big City is a bigger, rougher city than Small City, so his team had experience regularly covering violent, heart-wrenching stories. But he took special care with this one because it involved children. He quoted a former editor who said that every editor facing these stories should have children, because it brings a more compassionate eye to the human tragedy that’s involved. He felt the biggest thing they could contribute was giving voice to the pain and panic being felt by the parents.

That's really the best that I think we can do. You know... If we can tap into our... our... you know... our compassionate hearts here. And... and be able to find the right things to go focus on. Because it is a... a puzzle. Each one of these stories is a puzzle. And you start out blank... And then you have to figure out what to do and who to talk to. If you can... you know... try to be brave enough to go into the right places, then you get something that's true. And people... And it resonates with people and then they can understand the scope of the tragedy.

Redford says the Bradford-Mitchell shooting did not carry as much emotional weight for his team as other tragedies had, and that impacted the stories they told. In this passage, he compares Bradford-Mitchell to a road rage incident where one driver shot and killed a four-year-old girl in the backseat of her father’s truck:

There's a picture of... of... like a rescue worker... holding her little body... on the side of the road. Just sort of hoping against hope... that she would live. You know... Dad is standing by... Um... In the middle of the interstate. And, you know, that moment, that... Knowing who those people were... I think it just was one of those that just hammered us. And... um... And then having to talk to the family. Going to the funeral... That little girl's funeral... And... you know... The story... The lead of the story after the funeral or the memorial was... um... you know, the sounds of the mother's wailing. Were the... Were the only sounds breaking through an otherwise silent... funeral. You know... And so you... you... You just feel that sort of weight because of those details. And I didn't have access to them. I think just because in some ways they weren't there. I mean... That... The... The kids lived. Um... It was a tragedy of a different kind... I would say. Well, the kids lived. So we didn't have funerals to go to. We didn't have wailing... I think there was certainly... I empathize or I have compassion for the parents that were standing outside of the school wondering if their child was ok. So there was that... sort of connection to the thing. But it...
wasn't the idea of loss of that scale quite yet. And just sort of... ridiculously absurd loss. You know... Really... Because somebody was driving too fast... Or... You know... This little girl lost her life.

Redford said it was The Shooter’s Instagram account that gave the story the human face for him, because it was there that they started getting the idea that The Shooter was bullied and seemed to be a really sad kid. He said it became clearer that this wasn’t a “gun nut who went crazy,” it was the product of something very sad. The use of Instagram will be explored later in this chapter. The compassion felt for The Shooter and how it changed the story will be explored in the discussion.

Parker was the last reporter from my interview pool to arrive on the scene. He had seen the AP Newswire alerts Ryan had posted and hustled to get to the newsroom early because he wanted the story. It turns out that he beat the general assignment reporter to the newsroom by 20 minutes, so Redford sent him to Small City with a photographer. They stayed in Small City for three days.

As mentioned earlier, Small City is several hours from Big City, so it took quite a while for them to reach the scene. While the photographer was driving, Parker used the car time to recruit sources through Twitter and Facebook. He said he was getting messages from former Bradford-Mitchell students providing names of current students he could talk to and it was in this way that they learned Noah and Kaylee’s names.

When they arrived in Small City, he said they first tried unsuccessfully to talk to people at the school. Then they went to the mall to talk to parents but most had already been reunited with their kids and left. Then they learned about the press conference, so they went there and covered it with all the local and national outlets. Parker said what they learned in the press conference provided them with their agenda for the next two days.
The first thing Parker talked about, and something he was proud of, was their team uncovering the name of the teacher who was credited with taking the gun away from The Shooter. He and his photographer interviewed him at his home. Parker was one of the very few reporters who did because soon afterward, the school system told their teachers not to do interviews. He was also very proud of convincing one of his sources to tell him what The Shooter’s Instagram account name was. It was there that Parker found what turned out to be an ominous message The Shooter posted the Sunday night before the shooting. The ethics of getting into The Shooter’s Instagram account will be discussed later in this chapter.

![Image from The Shooter’s Instagram account](Image credit: BCP)

Fig. 4-9: Image from The Shooter’s Instagram account (Image credit: BCP)

The second day in Small City, Parker and the photographer went to the candlelight vigil where they interviewed visibly upset parents and children. The third day they went to
the school to interview the students going back for the first time. The first passage explains how they decided who to interview and it also introduces the role religion played in this story, which will be explored in the discussion section. The second passage highlights the kind of interviews Parker was doing.

Um..., so before then though, I know that we went to a... um... we went to a... uh... kind of a vigil at the town... at the community center. Um... And there was a very good... uh... mix of kids and... and parents. All kind of... um... visibly distressed and in mourning. A lot of kids crying. Um... A lot of them had seen it happen. Um... I think that our approach... it was me and my... and the photographer... um... And it was... This was a big religious community. Um... They... you know... They took over this... this public square with a... you know... overtly religious ceremony with prayers on behalf of the elected officials and everything. Um... I think kind of our... our general tactic was to talk to the parents first... you know... and ask them if it would be ok to interview the kids. Um... Which always made it difficult, you know... um... because... um... kids, obviously, were... Their parents were, obviously, concerned about... you know... having to relive this just for our purposes and we totally understood that.

Um... I think on that day I interviewed a mom and her daughter. The mot-... the... um... the mom... The daughter had a... a bundle of flowers to bring to her teacher. Uh... And... um... you know... I started talking to the... to the mom and she was visibly... you know... upset. And she said something about how she... you know... was probably not going to even let her daughter go through the whole school day. She just wanted to drop off the flowers and take her back home because she was so afraid on her daughter's behalf. So I interviewed both of them... um... uh... And I think I ended up writing a story kind of near the end of everything where I used their experience at the beginning and at the end saying... kind of talking about... you know... the way it impacted them. Then I said at the end that they couldn't be seen at the end of the day. Um... Implying that she had, in fact, taken her daughter out early out of... kind of... concern and wanting to keep her close.

Another facet of the story Parker and his team introduced was the socio-economic aspect of race and class. They found out The Shooter’s home address and went there to see if they could talk to anyone. They couldn’t, but the images of The Shooter’s house, in a town where working class houses and obvious poverty were the norm, was striking. The impact of race and class on the story will be explored in the discussion.
Finally, Parker talked about what covering a big news story like the Bradford-Mitchell shooting is like. Since he is on Redford’s team at BCP, he did have experience reporting on high intensity, high stress stories. How he described his process says a lot about the kind of reporter that he is, and the intensity with which he works. It sheds light on why Redford described managing him as “reining in a thoroughbred horse who’s running as hard as he can.”

Those environments are so... I mean... I've... I've covered a few pretty high intensity, breaking news situations like that in my three or four years. Those are just kind of sprints. Um... You know... You don't... um... have too much time to plan really... Um... And you kind of just ... I... I don't know... I mean, I had these incredible adrenalin bursts... um... I mean... I've never been... I'm never so productive as I am... am in these environments. Just because I'm kind of... um... voraciously reading everything else everybody's having and beating my head against the wall trying to figure out... um... you know... what... you know... what this story is about and who we need to get. Um... it's a mix of... kind of... on the ground and online sources. Um... So you're kind of like always... kind of like... always
Conflict of Interest or Overlapping Roles

As was the case with the parents, there were quite a few dual roles within the media staffs that could be viewed as conflicts of interest or overlapping roles that created complex intersectionality issues with this story. Small City is a working class town that has families with a long history living there. In almost every interview there was some sort of cross-relationship that came up that could have influenced the people involved with the shooting or the media reporting on it. In this section, I will explore the dual relationships that arose within the media ranks.

First, and perhaps most importantly, the whole RDR staff had multiple dual relationships that were directly connected to the Bradford-Mitchell shooting. The most important one was that Danielle was employed at RDR as a newspaper carrier. The fact that it was her son who was shot was discovered early in the day and became a part of how Ryan and Isabella managed the reporting team. It was also known that Charlotte’s son and Suzanne’s nephew were also involved, as well as one or two other RDR staffers who were not a part of this study.

Ryan started recognizing increased stress from the reporting team as they realized the story was affecting their friends and colleagues, and as they saw the panic and emotion coming from them. They were also fielding tons of requests for information from the national media who had not yet gotten to Small City. The team was feeling very pressured and confused about whether they should focus on their own stories or stop and feed the
national requests. Ryan was also thinking about the ethical dimensions involved since there were so many rumors flying around and their staff could be privy to insider information, so he called the reporting team back to the newsroom for a conference. This is what he told them:

And so... So basically... I... I sat them down. After those questions were raised, I sat them down and I said... I said, "Ok. We're taking a timeout right now and I want you to put all the emotions aside. Because our job right now... is... to... tell the story of the worst day in someone's life. And we have to do that ethically, responsibly and in a way that does not sens... sens... does not sensationalize and is respectful to our subjects." I was like...

And because... because for them... and that's why I... that's why I was trying to step in the middle. For them, there is this really big... you know... the questions that were being directed at them by the national people were trying... were specifically sensationalistic. They were like... Yeah... Yeah... They... and they want to do this stirring people up into a needless frenzy and... and really... It's really difficult in those sorts of moments to keep your center... and... and not let someone from a national organization pull you off track away from the fact that these are human lives.

And so that's... We had that pow-wow and I told them... you know... "You have to realize that a year from now, two years from now... um... the people in New York, the people in California aren't going to be... They... they'll probably not think much of this... But a year from now the people that you're telling their stories, they will." And so... So... So it's like... and... and I think that that was... I think it was really helpful... um... being in that moment. It was really helpful for everyone to kind of come together and then just realize that... Realize the scope of what they were doing because... because it's easy to just get excited and just run with it.

Isabella also dealt with the ethical dimensions of verifying rumors that stemmed from people inside the newsroom. She was the one collecting information from the reporters in the field and helping them stay on track in their assignments. But she also pointed out that the nature of the shooting created conflict within the staff because it crossed over into three beats: crime, education and politics. Those three reporters had trouble finding the boundary between where their stories stopped and the others started. So Isabella was handling conflicts of dual reporting roles and reporters jockeying for good assignments, as well as the unconfirmed rumors they were hearing through the grapevine:
You know... With something like that, you’ve got to be very sensitive because, like I say, Small City is small. So... that also breed rumors. And there was... a lot of stuff being thrown around and a lot of unconfirmed reports. And we were just like, “Well... you know... this is what I heard...” But maybe we should wait a while before we print that because... you know... we don’t have... we don’t know officially yet. Uh... there was just a lot of that. And it was a very long day, and... uh... emotions were high. Not from... not from the... the... I... I didn’t see... like... the family side of it. But just in the newsroom, they were high... like very... you know... tense. When you work with somebody (gesturing with her hands back and forth quickly) in a small environment like that, things kind of get... So, I had to manage people that way... like their emotions... like it just... You know... So-and-so didn’t like that so-and-so was doing this. And, you know... Well, at the end of the day, it was like... we’ve got to get this paper out. We got to get this news out. So... it was hectic but it could have been worse.

The fact that so many RDR employees had children at the school did not, in fact, appear to create as much of an ethical conundrum as you might have expected. Largely because of the way Ryan and Isabella addressed issues head on. As before, Ryan seemed to take care of people’s hearts and minds and Isabella pushed them through the process and across the finish line.

Lillian and her family knew many people involved with the shooting. Dealing with the pressure that comes with reporting on the people you also live with is something Lillian dealt with in all of her stories. Since she was the only reporter in Small City for BBB, she was expected to cover all of the stories: good, bad and ugly. She had a tense relationship with the principal at the time, who Lillian says actually called the police on her when she was doing a positive story about the school’s recovery. She also was faced with making decisions about what kind of story to write when the police chief was arrested for a DUI, something Ryan also talked about in his interview. So, overall, Lillian was acutely uncomfortable with the conflicting relationships and having to write negative stories about the people she lived with, and that was what eventually drove her out of journalism.

So... I went down to <this state> for a job when I was 22. You know... After college. And so they were like... “Oh, and you're a reporter...” You know... And you get a big story in
a small town... That's like your... your time that you live for. That's like the... the time to make it big or whatever.” And when this story happened, it was the opposite for me. It was actually like the worst two weeks of my entire... you know... time. I hated it.

I remember being like... “Can this be over so I can get back to reporting on... normal things? Like...not this?” So I just wanted it to be over. And I did not like it. And some people were like... you know... Chose to turn that into an opportunity. And it's... Actually... It's... I'm not a reporter anymore. So... It's not because of that situation, but it took me like a... I was... Left in October of 2015. So it took another year and half. You... You know... A year and eight months or whatever after that. Ten months. So... it's not like I stopped being a reporter then... But it is kinda funny to look back on now and say, “Oh ok... like when something crazy, big and traumatic happened as a reporter, I did not react how I think a reporter should probably have reacted.” And it was... Just wasn't the right industry for me. And I'm now in another industry that I like a lot better, so I think that is important to add.

So... no... I didn't do any bad stories. I really was a pretty positive reporter honestly. I mean... I was there for The Shooter 's trial. Um... so that was intense... um... about the diary. I'm sure you've heard about the diary and everything. So I was there for that whole testimony and everything. Um... so yeah... I mean... it was... it was interesting. But I... I... ah... I honestly couldn't really report any bad stories because I'm a small reporter, and I ca-... I couldn't really piss anyone off because I ha-... I was... you know... living with everyone. And... um... Honestly, I didn't really... As a reporter, I really only liked doing good stories (laughs) to be honest. Because bad stories were just so stressful. And I just didn't... I didn't like... I didn't like having to report on them basically.

Harper’s mother created an ethical dilemma for how Harper reported the story.

After she had been working on the story for a short time, her mother told her that the shooter was the grandson of her best friend (Harper’s mother and The Shooter’s grandmother were best friends). Harper said that learning that completely shifted how she was reporting the story. As mentioned in the previous section, Harper saw it as a career opportunity, and a way she could boost her portfolio to land her next job. But when she realized who the shooter was, she softened her tone:

And I actually... as the day went on...found out that the shooter was the grandson of one of my mom’s best friends. So... I... I... I never met him. I didn't know his family, just his grandparents. But... um... So... So that kind of added a weird element of... This affects somebody that I know... And... and... and their lives were upended that day as well. So once I had learned that... that also really changed the tone of...

I think I looked more at the big picture of what was coming next. Um... because up to that
point it was just kind of, "Ok. This is ... What is your reaction in this moment? What did you ...?" You know... writing the story that's happening right then. But... And... and then we shifted to... who the shooter was. And I was working with the web editor of the Big City Press and trying to get it confirmed. And they were trying to get it confirmed. And... and then my mom told me... um... who it was and ... So, it became easier to look at. Ok. This isn't just a story about today. This isn't just what the experience is today. It's what went wrong. Because I know this kid’s grandparents. Again, not his immediate family. But it's just one of those ... I never would have expected that from this family. So, something had happened... Um... In the home or in the school. Or... I mean... something broke down. And what did that mean for all of these kids.

Harper was not alone in how she changed her thoughts about the shooting or the way she wrote her stories after she learned The Shooter’s identity. One of the things I noticed immediately was that unlike most school shooters, The Shooter was not villified by the media. There was not the onslaught of media stories showing his picture and talking about mental health issues or demonizing him. I believe that it was the dual roles and overlapping identities in Small City that changed the narrative within two hours after the shooting. This will be explored in depth in the discussion section and leads us into the next theme.

**Difference between Locals and Out-of-Towners**

All of the local reporters I talked to noted differences between the way they handled the Bradford-Mitchell shooting and how they saw the national media covering it. Although Big City being several hours away is not exactly “local,” it was identified by several parents as the go-to place for news. And when I interviewed the Big City-based reporters, they sometimes viewed themselves as locals compared to national outlets and sometimes did not feel like locals because of the distance. For the purposes of this study, the Small City and Big City reporters will all be viewed as locals.
The local reporters were the only ones on-site reporting for the first few hours: at the school and the mall. As was mentioned several times above by different reporters, dealing with the national media was a sizeable component of their job, in addition to capturing the scene, interviewing and fact-finding. Some reporters like Mateo took the time to feed everything he could to the national media. Some, like Ryan, took the time to see if those making requests were affiliates or licensed. Others, like the three primary RDR reporters and Lillian, were excused from interacting with the national media because the newsroom would handle it.

Most of the national media had made it to Small City by the time the press conference was held Tuesday afternoon. Parker remembers specifically seeing *The New York Times* and *CNN* teams there along with others he didn’t mention by name. He also said they were getting lots of requests to do interviews on the national outlets before they arrived on scene. The most noteworthy interaction Parker remembers was being pressured by *The Katie Couric Show* to give up one of the teacher’s name and contact information, because Parker and the BCP team had scooped his story. When I asked Parker if he gave them the info, this was his response:

*(laughs)* You know, I did. But I didn't think <Masterson> would do it. So I... So that's why I... Um... I did. I said... I don't know... I kind of got chewed out by my bosses for doing that but I... I had never... I... I thought that it was kind of an opportunity for me to say, "Hey, look... I mean... This is how crazy (laughs) everything is right now. I just got a call from The Katie Couric Show and here's their number. But in the meantime, why don’t you just talk to me and then we'll get your story out there and then you won't have to deal with anybody ever again." You know... Um... Which was true because you could just tell that he was tired of being bugged. And we... I think we were very deferential to that but... you know... you're also doing your job. So...

For Lillian, she found that her age and what she perceived as a non-threatening way about her gave her an advantage over the national outlets. She said she was able to approach
people and land more interviews because she didn’t make people feel uncomfortable. She said that all changed noticeably once the national outlets arrived. Lillian got scooped by Parker’s BCP team and one of the other Big City TV news teams on the teacher’s interview and it really upset her. In this passage, Lillian distinguishes herself from the Big City press even though she worked for a Big City news station. She made this distinction several times in our interview, being perceived as local was important to her.

It was… I was 22 at the time. Ah… Or no, I was 23. And so I'm just kinda going up to people like… “Hey, can I talk to you?” But then, immediately after the mall when everyone went home… From then on it was extremely hard to get interviews, because everyone clammed up. So when I was there for the initial event… Um… It was kinda like any other day and I was talking to people. But then after that… like that night… the next day… when all the Big City crews came in and the national crews… We had CNN… So when all the people were in town… Um… All the locals were not wanting to do all these crazy interviews… You know… And the trauma had kinda set in later on. But like for that initial scene… Um… It was… I got a lot of interviews.

However, she found that even though she thought of herself as local and non-threatening compared to the national media, the citizens sometimes put her in the Big City box as the “other,” and other times thought of her as a local. In this passage, she distinguishes between her identities when seeking interviews from the families of the two victims:

The whole time I was there, I still remained a reporter in the community. So I wasn't like… too closely tied. Even though my parents are from there. And I… You know… I knew people… But… like… it wasn't… Um… Anything too close. And the bottom line is… Um… These people were not gonna do interviews with… Until they were ready. No matter who it was with. I was still Big City media.

So... I did interview… um… Kaylee, I was the only BCP reporter to interview Kaylee. And… um… I also interviewed Noah. I was the first reporter in <this state> to interview Noah. But it... I... I really... I didn't interview Noah for an entire year. And his mom texted me and said… um… You know... “I want you to be the local reporter that interviews him.” So I came to their house and interviewed him. And... um… I went to Kaylee's home and interviewed her several times. And I... I believe I'm still the only <state> reporter to interview Kaylee.
Ryan had his coaching hat on again when helping his team sort through all of the requests they were getting from national media. Some on his team saw it as their big break and wanted to keep their information close to their vest. But Ryan reminded them that the national media’s attention span is much shorter than the RDR’s and they play a different role:

But there were a couple of people that were... That... That... In the middle of it... Kind of resisted me telling them, "You need to take this aspect of it." Because they wanted... They saw it as their big break. And... and... with those people... S-... S-... see we... Our newspaper has... has... uh... has practice run every year, I call it. But I’ll get to that in a minute. I’ll explain that. But basically, I pulled them aside and I said... I said, "You don't understand. We're on a different news cycle than the national media. We're a daily paper. Which means... if you do this... and feed them... They're going to be over it in like an hour. They'll have all they need in about an hour. And then you can use the next six to seven hours to put together a really compelling story that has some aspect of this story. And we'll split that up... when things... settle down. Everyone is going to get an angle on that story... but you have the benefit of having eight hours’ time to put together something really compelling. And the national media doesn't." And so... and so that gave them the opportunity to go ahead and be in the moment. To be feeding the national media, and then take a step back... take a breather... and then write their assigned... um... aspect of the story.

Redford felt the distance between Big City and Small City and considers himself to be an out-of-towner. He and his team cover breaking news in Big City which almost always involves tragedy of some type. He said he didn’t feel the Bradford-Mitchell shooting the way he felt other tragedies involving children and it affected his choices as an editor. He described that dynamic and the business factors at play this way:

It feels like a team mission. You know... I can remember lots of cases in which... you know... somebody wasn't doing ok. Yeah... Or, you know... Um... Or somebody is feeling it... and then turns... and then we all feel it. And... and... So at least there's somebody not feeling alone. Um... But... Like... Yeah, it happens. It happens.

And it didn't in this particular case. I know that this is one you're researching, but for me at least, the idea that maybe because it was far away and maybe because... It... It... The consequences of it didn't feel so personal immediately. You know... like... The kids lived. Um... And I didn't have access to the intimate kind of stories that we sometimes do.

Um... You know... It... It... Really the thing that hit me in this particular case was the kids
and the innocence lost. It wasn’t... Um... You know... The... The...The loss or the tragedy or the moment of a deeper thing...

< Redford tells the story about the girl killed in a road rage incident here and then finishes his thought about the Bradford-Mitchell shooting.>

It was a little bit different. So the emotional connection to the events was different because the events were themselves a little different. Now I think... Um... Not to... you know... diminish or... Yeah... The scale of that tragedy because it was one. It was built on a whole different other thing.

Dylan noticed differences in how the out-of-towners went about their jobs and was bothered by it. He first noticed it when he returned to the school later in the day to capture video footage of the area or interview people still on the scene. By this time, the national media had arrived and he saw the road leading to the school lined with media truck after media truck. Even though Dylan might technically be considered part of the national media because he was stringing for NBC News, he considered himself to be a local and followed local rules.

So on that... So from the highway down to the school... that little st-... You know, road... Whatever you call it. Was just... At this point now it's just lined up with news media from all over. I mean, it was abuzz. And... um... there was a real strange... scene. I'm... It was... It was strange because the locals still kind of... I mean... we knew each other. (laughs) So we kind of saw what each other were doing and then we saw all these other people around who weren't locals. And there was just a vibe as far as... um... I guess kind of what was allowed and what wasn't. As far as... like... I don't know... Just kind of unspoken... between the local-type people. Because you didn't see them doing a lot of things that I did see the out of town... or that I recognized as out of town... people... doing, you know? Pushing for bigger stories or pushing for more that wasn't there.
At one point the videographer he had hired for the day showed up, and both Dylan and the videographer knew a lot of community members, so they were being offered information. He described one lady and her daughter who were there offering interviews and it turned out that the girl had attended Bradford-Mitchell two years ago, but had transferred to a different school. He felt that their continual offering of themselves to be interviewed was inappropriate, and it felt like a media grab. He noted that it was the out-of-towners who were interviewing them, not the locals. Here is another example of an interaction that left him uncomfortable and illustrates the difference between how he perceived the locals were behaving differently than the out-of-towners:

*So at that point it was like... Um... "Well... oh, you're with NBC news. Do you want... You know like a photo with the kid? I mean, here, we got him... We can look him on Facebook... Here... This is his name..." And I'm like... I was like, "No, I can... I'm not going... Not...*
Just not even going to hear that." You know... And... um... I ended up telling the <NBC News> lady at the end of the day, like... "Yeah... like... This did happen... But I wasn't going to offer that." And she's... She agreed that even if I had... kind of... yeah... didn't have the same... I guess... set of morals in that situation that she wouldn't have accepted anyway. Which was good to hear.

Part of what made the difference between how reporters handled the ethical issues they faced was the pre-existing norms and dynamics in the newsroom. Take the social media dilemma Dylan faced: he declined to use those images while other news organizations used them. Of course, each individual reporter’s ethical and moral beliefs are at play, but there are also norms and standards carried from the newsroom itself. How newsroom dynamics impacted the reporters is the next theme.

**Newsroom Dynamics**

Two newsrooms participated in this study from which I interviewed multiple people, so I began to hear similar stories about their staffing structures, personalities and goals. I also heard enough about Lillian’s experience with the BBB newsroom to represent her experience even though she was the only BBB reporter interviewed. Overall, there was clear evidence that how the newsroom functions on a day-to-day basis, positive or negative, has a direct impact on the reporters’ ability to do their jobs well.

We will begin with RDR since every reporter had pretty much the same story: their newsroom was called a variety of negative terms including “highly unprofessional” and “a shit show.” One of the issues was the high staff turnover rate, which provided a constant state of disruption and upheaval. In fact, when the Bradford-Mitchell shooting occurred, there was no editor-in-chief and they were down a couple of reporters. They had even
changed publishers in the past two years and had restructured the newsroom with a new management structure. Scarlett described the RDR as a “stepping stone” newspaper because they are such a small market, they tend to hire mostly reporters right out of college who build their portfolio and leave.

The turnover was somewhat of an issue for this study because none of the reporting staff who worked the Bradford-Mitchell shooting were still at the paper. Here is Isabella’s perspective on the staff turnover:

But I don’t how fa... How familiar you... you are with... um... (sigh) The turnover... All the turnover that happened. It... The newsroom... But... I mean... Small City isn’t exactly... Or the Reporters Daily Record isn’t exactly a paper where people like stay for a long time. Because... By the end of the year, all the reporters... left. And I remember we... Actually, we got an award for... um... for that paper. The first paper. We got an award. And I was the only one left to claim it... <laughs> But all our names are on it. So... But... uh... yeah...

The consistent message I heard from each person was about problems from personality conflicts amongst the reporting team. Isabella pointed out that these conflicts had already been established long before the Bradford-Mitchell shooting, but they were exacerbated by the stress, pressure and the opportunity provided by working on such a high-profile story. Because there are always multiple viewpoints about a conflict, and to provide as complete a picture as possible, I will allow each reporter’s voice to be heard.

Teresa’s was by far the most critical voice I heard. She was the one who called the RDR “a shit show.” Teresa left the paper very soon after the shooting and has gone on to work for some prestigious organizations. Here is how Teresa described her experience at the paper in general and a conflict that arose from the Bradford-Mitchell shooting in particular.

When I was there... and it's changed... It was literally the least professional newsroom I ever encountered in my life. It was a shit show. It's not anything that should be an example
for anything. Ryan was great... as an individual, and Isabella was great. But that place is hell. And it had horrible employees overall in the newsroom at that time. And so... I'm just... I'm just going to put that out there. Like... and... and... especially if you talk... I'm not going to say who... I'm not going to say who... I'm just going to tell you like... I mean... Ryan is great and he actually feels like a... a... It was astounding that anyone was able to organize the newsroom to do anything productive in the face of anything meaningful, and he managed to do that. And he definitely has some great insights. Um... and Isabella was a great editor, she's a good friend of mine.

I was assigned by Ryan to cover the vigil and that was my understanding. Cover the vigil. And then Ryan went home... And then Jill came in and was flipping out because she said that it overlapped with her assignment. And Ryan had assigned us two different things. But she said, "No... you know... it basically falls into like what I was assigned to write about. You're not supposed to do that." And then... Isabella... um... Isabella's approach tended to be... like... avoid conflict. And she was like, "Just give it to Jill. Give it to Jill." And then I was like, "No. You know what, I'm going to write this." I was assigned to do this, and this is bullshit. And I went there and I saw Jill... at the thing... and gave each other dirty looks... and it was stupid as fuck. But I wrote my story that I was assigned to write. You know... that was pretty much left the next day. She didn't really get on my case. But also... god... I feel like it was days after that I put in my notice and went to a different paper. Well it wasn't just because of... I got a... I got a better job.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Isabella described her role that day as mostly managing people and personalities to make sure the paper went to press on deadline. Plus, there were three beats at the paper whose boundaries were blurry during the shooting coverage, which created conflict. Here is how Isabella described the conflict between Teresa and Jill and the effect it had on her and the team:

With Jill and Teresa... (sigh) They had a very... They had a very... tumultuous... kind of relationship. More from... Jill's side... than Teresa's. You know... They just didn't get along. And... um... So... they... I hate to say it but like they almost... Well... again... Jill instigated it. But it was turning into kind of a rough... you know... Jill didn't like that Teresa was doing this and Teresa was like, "I'm just doing my job." And Jill would... you know... She was very... Jill was very territorial. Which... is admirable in some cases, but today we needed everybody to... <snaps her fingers> You know... So... just a lot of that like... you know... Somebody would get upset and I tried to talk to them or listen to them or give them whatever kind of emotional support that they needed to... you know... get past it in that moment. <Is making pushing motions with her right hand> And then...

Because my thing is like... Look... It's happening now. Cry later. (laughing) Like whatever is going on with you right now, I know it's hard. But get through it now. And then when you get home tonight you can cry all you want. I just... Right now, I need the story. I need you to be done. I need the... Whatever you found out there, I need you to bring it here,
filter it out, write it down. <Snaps her fingers> And then we can be done. You get this over
with. Because our deadline was... Our deadline didn’t change. Um... They didn’t want an
ear... earlier deadline. Or they didn’t give us a later deadline. Our deadline was what it
was. And... I... We were late that night. And... you know... But not because of anything...
like... there wasn’t any late breaking reason. It was just... you know... Dealing with other
people’s personalities, like... <shakes her head>

Mateo also found himself in conflict with Jill at the candlelight vigil that evening.

He was getting shots and directing Teresa about who to get contact information from and
who to interview when Jill arrived. Mateo and Teresa were dating at the time and Teresa
had just started at the RDR, so they had a special bond which should be taken into
consideration. The way Mateo described the encounter illustrates how deep the conflicts
ran:

Yeah... So... um... So that was going on... And Jill was a low talker. And she was ten feet away
from me. And I asked her “What are you doing here? Because Teresa is covering this.” And I
couldn't understand what she was saying, I just threw my hands up in the air, rolled my eyes
and walked away. <Throws his hands up> And somehow... My night editor said...
laughingly... “So you threatened Jill, huh?” I said no. And she's laughing and said “I figured...
But that's what Jill wants to say.” Yeah... Jill was... Jill was a piece of work. She was just... I
don’t know... <shakes head> Either she needs to cut her meds in half or double the dose, I'm
not sure which. <nods> Yeah... And Jill was a problem. The only time my blood pressure went
up... even with the Sheriff threatening my arrest... The only time my blood pressure went up at
all... was Jill.

Ryan’s perspective on the team dynamics was more reserved and more measured.

He chalked up the conflicts on that day to ambition and people wanting to make sure their
pieces got enough exposure. Four sentences were removed from this passage because they
were off topic and the omission is indicated by <...>.

I don't know if you've seen the paper from that next morning. Um... Jessica had a different
angle than Jill. And Jill had a different angle than Amy. <...> But... but basically... so...
so I think after... after... Um... I think a lot of those like, "I'm... Oh... I'm not going to be
able to shine," or whatever. Got... got quenched ... when they saw Isabella ’s first dummy
of the paper. Which had... I don't know... had something like two and a half pages of
coverage. And... and everyone... everyone in the newsroom was spoken for. And everyone
in the newsroom had a different voice on what... what it was.
However, Ryan was aware of the personality conflicts and the division they created in the newsroom. He said he got to know everyone well and was still in touch with the whole news team. He described Mateo and Jessica as “reserved” and “quiet” and that Isabella and Teresa liked giving you their opinions on things. When he was still the only editor in the newsroom, he called the reporting team back to have a talk with them about the chaos and ethical issues they were facing. He described it as taking a deep breath and speaking freely. That talk had a profound impact on the reporting staff’s ability to stay in the field and do good work. When I asked Ryan how he came to have that leadership style, this was his story:

Well, first how did I know what to... tell them? I didn't. I didn't. I... I... I... I... I literally just said, “Timeout. It's time to speak freely because it's chaotic right now.” We need to... just... just have a timeout... To have a breather so that we can attack this... And that wasn't really... like... any sort of... like... It's not something you prepare to think about what you're going to do. So... so... you know... Um... It was really just, "Ok, so timeout. We need to have... We need to bring the volume level down because we know we're doing something like this." Um... But... but... the other is how to... how do I keep my calm center. I guess... I... I blame my... I... I blame my dad on that. Um... He's a retired officer. Um... He's... Uh... He spent many years... um... in homicide and many years in SWAT. And so... I've got... I got to see him come home and talk to me about... heightened situations. And... and... It was less of a... Less of a... Me trying to concentrate on what I'm doing, and more... For me, it was more like, "Oh, w... what would my dad do (laughs)?" Because he w... He was... kind of used to working in these sorts of environments. So... just emulated him.

It is important to mention that every RDR person I interviewed, whether they were reporters or staffers, spoke highly of Ryan’s leadership during the first day of coverage and credited their success to him. I found Ryan to be soft-spoken and calm. He was thoughtful and reflected a long time on the questions I asked him. From our interaction, I can see how he was the calm center of the hurricane surrounding the Bradford-Mitchell shooting. I think it is fair to say based on how the whole team described the newsroom dynamic, that if Ryan hadn’t stepped up and taken control when the story broke, the outcome would have been
much different.

I think it is also fair to say that it was Ryan and Isabella’s teamwork as editors that pushed the reporting team through the chaos and produced a paper that won many awards. The final message, which came from all of the staffers whose family members were directly involved in the shooting, was that the RDR leadership team, including Scarlett, took very good care of them. Each person described their experience as “family” and said their well-being was put before their jobs at the paper. They were allowed to leave to tend to their children’s needs and to take time off as needed. A perfect example of this is that Scarlett gave Charlotte her personal cell phone because Charlotte didn’t have hers that day.

Despite the personality conflicts, the ambition and the chaos, the RDR team pulled through when they needed to. I asked every person if the high turnover rate after the shooting was because of their experience covering it and they all said no. They attributed it to people moving on to other career paths (one is now a novelist and two work in public relations) or to better journalism jobs.

The newsroom dynamic in the BCP was the polar opposite. It was described by several people as the “most professional” newsroom they had worked in and each person described the team effort to cover the Bradford-Mitchell shooting in supportive terms. I talked to three people who worked the Bradford-Mitchell shooting. Two were full-time employees at the time (Redford and Parker) and one was freelancing (Harper).

Throughout Redford’s interview, he talked about the importance of the team. Whatever story he was telling, whichever job he was referring to, the behavior of the team was the central component around which the reporting happened. Here is how Redford
described what it takes to report on a story the magnitude of a school shooting. The two
people he mentions in this passage are his current colleagues, both of whom started after
the Bradford-Mitchell shooting. But this passage captures the essence of the teamwork
Redford described throughout the interview:

I guess... And, I mean... I guess... And it also... Traditionally has maybe been a loner kind
of position. A lot of times it's a night cops position. There's a not a lot of editorial support
in the newsroom. Um... No one even around. So... Yeah... But in the way it's changing is...
At least with us... It's almost always teamwork. When one of these events happens, we can't
do it by ourselves. Um... One person can't. We need... And... and... Just because of... you
know... needing it to be live. You can't be reporting... You know... Having an interview
with a family and putting stuff on the web at the same time. And adding our... And dealing
with editors’ questions. So we... We work as a team and because of that maybe we're able
to lean on each other. Um... But in my case, it just so happens that we have... You know...
At least in their case, two... kind of... you know... emotionally courageous people that are
willing to be themselves in front of other people. Which isn't always the case either. And
so... And we're friends. Um... You know... We would hang out with each other anyway.
So... we do. So... uh... that helps. It feels like a team mission.

Redford alluded many times to the role genuine emotion plays in his teams. He
mentioned being “emotionally courageous” in the passage above. And several other times
during the interview he talked about being able to cry in front of each other. It seemed to
serve two purposes from his stories. First, it built trust. Being able to show true emotion
was viewed as being honest and strong, and those characteristics served as the foundation
of a strong team. Second, it served as a release valve. When someone was overcome by
what they were working on, the team came together to allow that person to decompress
and to support them.

Although many of Parker’s stories were about his own experiences in the field,
when I asked him what his advice would be for other newsrooms facing a school shooting,
he was aware of and thankful for the BCP team supporting him back in the newsroom:

I... Yeah... I think it's good to have someone working the desk. I mean... My experience is
going to be different from like the TV experience. This is what you sounded like... Where
we're not feeding our footage or whatever... um... to any type of... Um... We don't have any major technological challenges between us... you know... giving... We're not taking a lot of video. We're not... you know... streaming it live, high def.... You know... Stuff like that. So... you know... I mean... Everything I... I was able to publish from my computer. You know... um... From my iPad. Um... And/or I was sending emails with copy to my editor. So... so... I can imagine being in... And we've... we've had these experiences... um... You know... in Big City. With really big news stories. But there's something tempering... having... having someone who's just staying at the desk working online sources. And an editor above overseeing to be that stabilizing effect.

I mean... I... You know... The... the... <BCP> was the most professional news operation in the state, in my opinion. Um... With people that... kind of had seen it all before. Um... So I can see there being a way in which if you don't have that factor, everyone just kind of gets worked up in a tizzy and you have some redundancies and some missed communications. And... um... You know... Everyone's just kind of sprinting around. And that's how you miss stuff. Or... or you lose stuff. Or... You know... You... um... You... kind of... miss the big picture. I mean, there's always the... The net effect of someone working the desk or someone overseeing it all is that you kind of can zoom out and see, "Oh, this would be a really neat, easy way to answer this question that everyone is asking." So that can be about stabilizing and also... um... motivating.

Redford agreed with Parker on this point. From his own viewpoint as the person who stayed behind in the newsroom, he saw his role as being an encourager and a coach. He was referring to Parker as the thoroughbred in this passage:

Where we might go out on a scene like this... and... um... Nora or Parker might say in this case, "I just spoke to this girl and she said that so and so was the shooter," and blah, blah, blah. Whatever... And I'm like, "Hold on now." You know... "Is there anything else to sort of support that?" We need to sort of run that through a process. Um... And... You know... He's real excited because he thinks he has something that nobody else does. He's a thoroughbred and he's running as hard as he can and I need to sort of rein him in and say, "Wait a minute." You know... "Let's not do that."

Um... That happens all the time. You need to have people running hard. So... what these guys needed was somebody to say... you know... "That's great... " I'm not sure if this is the phenomenon, but... um... you know... "Great. That's a great piece of information. Now let's double verify it. Let's get that from somebody else or are we willing to take the risk on that information?" Or... um... You know... If there's two people that are competing on the same thing and somebody is elbowing the other person out of the way, as it may be what they're referring to. I don't know. Then you need somebody to take charge. So, in these cases, that central figure is really important.

In Lillian’s case, it is impossible to generalize team dynamics from one person’s perspective. But because Lillian herself characterized her experience as the story of “being
alone,” the team was very important. If you remember from her story above, she was very overwhelmed and feeling like she needed to be in multiple places at once and questioning how she could possibly cover everything. It was a call to the assignment manager who calmed her down and reassured her the cavalry was on their way. Because her station had access to a helicopter, they arrived in Small City much sooner than the teams who had to drive, and they were able to join Lillian at the mall. Here is how Lillian described the relief she felt under her assignment manager’s guidance and when her team arrived:

Exactly, they were amazing at that point. And I... I had remembered that for a long time after. Just like how in that... in that intense moment when you have no idea... It was just a normal day, and then obviously... you know... That's how news works. It just turns chaotic. And my station is amazing under chaotic situations. So... it really like... gave me... you know... correct things to say in that re... and the support. And that's... Because they easily could have... you know... Said something that would've turned me into a panic. And they didn't. And that was good.

**Relationship between Media and Subjects**

One of the factors that affected the reporters’ ability to do their jobs was varying degrees of access to and quality of sources. For example, the travel time to get to Small prevented most reporters from being able to interview parents and students at the mall or at the school. In addition, the three primary families involved, the shooter’s family and the two victims’ families, were not granting interviews. Also, as Lillian indicated, the rest of the families affected were reluctant to provide interviews after the first day. In the absence of first-person accounts and emotional narratives, the reporters were soon left with official statements to work with.

For example, the BCP team decided to focus on secondary sources instead and were one of the few news teams that interviewed the teacher. But then the school system told
the Bradford-Mitchell staff to stop giving interviews so even those dried up. Here is how

Redford described his team’s decision-making when the primary sources weren’t talking:

Yeah... I mean... It certainly changes it all. I mean... if we had access to any of those guys, we would have given voice to a side of the story that I don't think was really in it. I think we did... I think... Maybe it was Kaylee's... Somebody's family did give us a little... um... but... you know... We... we changed direction a little when it was clear that that wasn't going to happen. Or... um... We went and we talked to the teacher who pulled the gun away from The Shooter. Um... I don't remember how... Yeah, John Masterson...

I remember... And we got it early. We were the ones. Anyway... So... We were all in a competitive environment, see. So a lot of the thinking at the time is who else has that... I remember... I... My best friend worked at KKEE, the TV station. I was like, "Oh man, I got this." He's like... later on... You know... "Hey, can I get that number from you?" I was like, "All right." So... um... I remember it as a victory amongst tragedy, I guess. Yeah... and... I found the number. I remember how it went down. And... “OK. We got it, let's go get them.” And they did. They knocked on his door and he talked.

Um... and... that was adding some humanity to what would otherwise been a bunch of facts. And... you know... interviews with the kids and the parents. But non-participants. We previously had just non-participants, as you said. So it's important, I think, if we can. Um... I think this is an increasingly common thing that's happening here. As it does, it's important to provide the stories from inside it because stories are how we develop compassion.

Parker did try to contact The Shooter’s family without success. One thing that was a factor and will be explored in the discussion, was that The Shooter’s family was well off from a socio-economic standpoint, but they were also politically connected. For example, The Shooter’s uncle, who was also his attorney, is a former federal prosecutor. The family’s rights and privacy were well guarded. Here is Parker’s experience trying to connect with the family and the uncle running interference:

So... um... I mean... I mean... It didn't feel like we were harassing... you know... like... harassing the family of... The Shooter or whatever. Um... but it's also the... kind of the... The weird wrinkle in this one... So it does feel like in <this state>, often whenever you've got a massive news event there... there's some political connection (laughs) somewhere. But I think that The Shooter’s dad's brother perhaps, or his mom's brother, was a... a state rep. Does that sound right?

Yeah... I can't remember the name off-hand. If I do, I'll... I'll let you know. I do think I was... um... I asked him... I think we were in touch with him as he was sort of acting as a
liaison. And... um... and I asked him if we could do a... um... an interview with his family. Or... you know... With... someone that... If and when, in fact, they were ready to talk about it... or wanted to talk about it... That we would be the person that they called. And... uh... and he said, "This is an intensely personal experience for me and my family. And you can forgive me for not..." You know. "...being too worried about the story at this point." Which was a signal for me that I wasn't following my... my rules.

I didn't... I mean... I had no intention of... um... I... I feel so badly that it came across like I was being ... You know... I just thought that I... I just wanted to kind of give them my name and number... You know... And let them know... you know... the advantages of talking to us because we could ... I mean... I mean that's the newspaper advantage in any of these situations is that you can get more in-depth than any TV station. You know... And you just try and emphasize that I guess. Um... But yeah... So he... he did say that to me. That he... you know... And he... he ended up not calling us. I don't know if they ended up giving a... giving an interview or not, but at least he didn't give it to us.

The relationship with and access to school personnel was also an issue for reporters. From early in the day of the shooting, the school, with support from police, were blocking press access to the school and the students. The RDR photographer, Mateo, was able to get onto the school grounds because he knew one of the police officers standing guard. But most other reporters were kept a distance of up to half a mile away.

Blocking access continued to be the norm for a year after the shooting as well. Reporters were allowed to line the street leading to the school but they were kept in the parking lot and generally away from where the students were dropped off, and rarely allowed in the building itself. Here is Lillian telling a story about an incident when the principal called the police on her and how hard it was to film anything in the school:

My opinion... um... was... and I don't have any children in the school or anything, but my general opinion was they definitely tried to brush it under the rug. Like... the school did. Like... after it happened, it was like... “OK. Moving on.” You know... Like... it was sensitive... no one wanted to talk about it. No... Like this... this school was hell to deal with basically.

Um... The principal is ru... very rude to reporters. Like... I would be near the school shooting on public land, like a year after the shooting. And the principal... like... called the sheriff on me. And I was like filming... from the thing. And... um... The sheriff came out and was like, “You're fine.” You know... I'm like... Ah... yeah... This principal is absolutely crazy... so... Yes... Oh, it was horrible dealing with the school ... ... horrible. Oh
yeah, they were not... It was hell. I hated it. I actually hated covering the shooting... ah... aside from the victims. I love the victims' families and all that. But... like... the actually school was ho... just a nightmare. And, obviously, any reporter... you don't wanna deal with a (laughs) nightmare, you know?

I would much rather report on something that's... like... not... you know... so hard to deal with. So yeah... um... I did go into the scho... what did I do? Um... oh yeah... I went in the school and filmed the gym... a little later... just to get video. And I had to ask special permission for that. And I had to go in after hours when no student was in the building. And it was... like... solid. Because it... that... Because at this point no one had been let in to get video of the school. So... it took a while for me to even do that which was ridiculous. I was like... I... no student's gonna be filmed... An empty school building... Um... so they... That was kinda hard.

Accuracy

One of the themes that was explored in the lived experience of the students and parents was the loss of trust in the media, most of which was rooted in perceptions of inaccuracy. As frustrating as it was for them, it was also frustrating for the reporting teams. It came up multiple times from reporters who were trying to find out the facts and from editors who were trying to enforce double or triple verification.

Most of the students and parents felt strongly that the news stories were highly inaccurate. But in my two primary news teams, it was only the first day’s coverage that was inaccurate. In RDR’s case, their mistakes were minimal because they only published a two-paragraph story confirming the shooting and the ages of the shooter and victims. It was the ages that were incorrect. The BCP team, however, published two rumors in their first story, which they later retracted, but had already been picked up by the national media and widely reported. Noah was repeatedly misidentified in the press as the shooter’s target either because he was said to be the one bullying The Shooter or because he, The Shooter and Kaylee were supposedly involved in a love triangle. Neither was true.
Having access to sources was not the issue for the RDR team because they were on site at the school and the mall from the beginning. Isabella explained how she led the team when accuracy was at stake which is exactly the plan they followed on day one:

No matter what day it is, your goal doesn’t change. Like... We need to communicate. We need to go and we need to do our best job. We need to make sure all our facts are straight... you know... um... If... It’s what... it’s... What you’re putting in the paper, is it true? Is it... you know...Can you prove this? Do you have anything that's to support this? That kind of stuff... that kind of stuff doesn't change. That's every day.

But especially with... tragedy... you need to have that kind of... sensitivity. It’s like... ok... I want to get my facts straight. But... maybe I shouldn’t put this in right now. Like... this is a side... maybe this is a side B story. I need to save that for next week, or a few days from now. But right now, it’s just the... the quick and hard facts. Like, “This is what happened. This is what we know.” Like maybe for the first day just keep it simple. Just say, “This is what we know right now.”

Ryan and I discussed competing greater goods in this type of situation: getting the story versus minimizing harm. He talked about the issue of sources regretting giving an interview and what a reporter’s duty is in that case. In the first segment, Ryan distinguished between the value of a story with the source’s input and what that story would look like without it, and how accuracy is at stake. In the second segment, he addressed accuracy when the source is in your inner circle.

I would say that... there's a section... there's a section of... journalism in general that you... kinda... can't take care of your subjects. And that... and that is... uh... and... you know... Let me... let me see if I can put this ... Becau... because you're talking about ... Because you have two different things. And that is that you have public record, and you have personal story. And if someone is not gonna give you their personal story, then 100% of the story is going to come from public record. And... and if someone is going to say no to your story, then... then they also give up their right to have any input. And so, if the story is gonna come out and someone hasn't given their consent, or hasn't given at least a statement, then... um... then there's... It's really not something that you can... (laughs) take care of them. Because you can only take care of your subjects if they're consenting. And if they're not consenting then... then that's not something you have the ability to take care of.

Yeah... and that... and I think that..., that perspective is why I kept hammering like, "No. We have to get it vetted." And... and... and that was the... that was... that was our experience, too. And that was the thing... And that was the conflict in the newsroom since we knew Danielle. It was like... "Oh, but we can..." No. (laughs) You know... That... that
was... that was a... that was a... that was a big issue. And... and now... and that's one of the things that, like I said, I carried that from my dad, is that view. That... just because you're friends... doesn't mean that you have consent. Especially... Especially if you're taking a story nationally. (laughs)

When I asked Redford what he would do differently if given the chance for a re-do on the Bradford-Mitchell shooting, he talked about the difficulties of quickly reporting on a big story without access to the facts, and draws attention to problems with how newspapers have traditionally been structured.

Yeah... Well... I... I... (chuckles) I don't know. I mean... What I wish I had known... That's really interesting. I'm not sure I have an answer to that. Yeah... No, it's worth pondering... Uh... No, I don't think I felt prepared. I mean, I think in this case... I... I wish I would have known a little more maybe about these events and focusing more on... um... you know... the details of trying to build who the character was... who had done it. I... I think we just didn't know who he was. We were sort of... We didn't even know it was a kid at first. Um... So... We were blowing up this tragedy without understanding... maybe the complexities of it. Um...

But, in all these cases... you know... I heard a TV guy talking about the Kennedy shooting one time. I was watching the CNN series on the '60s. And I think it was Dan Rather or something. He said... you know... "90% of what we know right away, we don't know. It's not facts. They change." And so, it takes... you know... some time to try to figure out what the hell is right. And... so... That's really tricky. The restraint is key in all these things.

So that's one of the things I would exercise. Yeah... following standard journalistic ethics and procedures and methods when we're doing them really quickly... And that's what we try to do. We try to sort of say, "We're not going to report it if we don't know it. We're not going to listen to a source. We're not going to do any sources. We're not going to make an accusation by somebody who doesn't..." All these things that... um... are easy traps to fall into... We try not to do just because we're going quickly. Um... and so, having somebody in a central position... I would say that structure is really key in these kinds of things. And having somebody with a level head that's... um... thinking through all the information that's coming in and trying to piece together the larger thing is key.

Newspapers aren't set up like that. And they never were. Um... And so... It's a... a... a piece of adapting that needs to happen... um... the breakup of structure of a newsroom... a little bit. Um... But it's really important... Particularly newspapers. I think TV is more set up like this. But for newspapers to try to get it right all the time. It's easy to get things wrong and you can't... Especially on this kind of thing. So... Yeah... don't repeat the rumors. Try to verify. Get second source verification on facts. Um... Those are things we do sort of intuitively, but... uh... it's really tricky. And so... doing all that really quickly while trying to be sensitive to the people that are in these tragedies... Right? You don't wanna... You know... It's very easy to... to let it go to a place... that isn't sound.
Parker was the principle writer of the story that misidentified Noah as the bully. He was very introspective when he reflected on that aspect of his role in the reporting team and echoed Redford’s thoughts:

*I... I know that... a mistake I made... um... was I believed... I mean... When we... when we heard about bullying... um... we wondered... you know... if the... if the person who was shot was targeted in any way. And... um... I don't know whether this like fits in what you're doing, but I know that... um... one thing that happened was we heard two or three different students say that Noah, who was shot and hurt the most badly, was one of the kids bullied... um... And I know that just as evidence of how... um... you know... You're just kind of gathering... like... who would bring up information. I sensed you kind of relied on your editor to... kind of take a deep breath there... And so I'd just send them everything I had... um... You know, second-hand or not... um... or, you know... um... As dam... as damaging as... I mean... Obviously, the kid can't... you know... defend himself in a situation like that. Um... and... uh... I know that I think for a little while that... that fact was in... in the newspaper. And then we ended up taking it out. Um... Which... which was right.

But... um... that's just kind of an example of, you know... um... It's... it's difficult to kind of... um... Take those kind of necessary step... steps backward in the moment, you know. And think, "Well... you know... we can't put that fact in there. I mean, this is... this is a 12- or eleven-year-old kid. Um... you know... He's... he's... he's... We're implying that he deserved any of this." You know...Um... Which I feel... yeah... That... that's kind of... The.... Uh... A point of regret. Um... And so, yes... When you spend three days just kind of sprinting... getting as much as you can... It is... it is... um... um... for me, anyway... um... um... adrenalin-inducing, you know.

All of the reporters I talked to, including the editors, placed a high value on accuracy and getting it right. That much was clear. But mistakes were made, unfortunately, which had a profound effect on the victims and their families which illustrates how important the fact-checking role is.

Additional Participants

I also conducted interviews with people in three categories in order to provide triangulation: national-level experts in journalism ethics and trauma, Small City-based mental health providers, and three reporters who did not work on the Bradford-Mitchell
shooting but have a lot of experience with reporting on trauma. I will introduce them now.

Experts

Roger Simpson, PhD, has taught journalism and journalism ethics at the University of Washington for forty-five years. He was a founding member of the DART Center for Journalism and Trauma and wrote the book *Covering Violence: A Guide to Ethical Reporting about Victims and Trauma*.

Donna Gaffney, PhD, DNSc, is a faculty member of the International Trauma Studies Program at New York University. She has served as a subject matter expert for journalists after many acute potentially traumatic events such as the Challenger explosion and 9/11. She also consults with schools and communities on issues related to children, trauma and interpersonal violence.

Jaime Howard, PhD, is a Clinical Psychologist who specializes in anxiety and mood disorders, and is the director of the Trauma and Resilience Center at the Child Mind Institute. She has expertise in treating PTSD and providing crisis counseling services in the aftermath of acutely potentially traumatic events such as Sandy Hook and 9/11.

School Officials

Leah was the Dean of Students at the time of the shooting and took over as Principal in May 2016. She seemed tense and a bit defensive during our interview, but opened up as the interview progressed.
Brooklyn is the Assistant Superintendent of Special Services in the Small City schools and had started her job one week before the shooting. She knew very few people in town, let alone in the schools, but she took control of the situation and organized the crisis response. She talks fast and is very direct.

Small City Mental Health Providers

All of the mental health providers work for the same Small City agency that provides counseling services as well as a number of other social support services to children in the Small City community. Each person has been assigned a pseudonym because the work they do requires confidentiality. They spoke candidly with me on the grounds that their identities would be kept out of my study.

Caroline is the executive director of the agency and has already made a brief appearance in this study. She was the one who showed up at the mall after the shooting to coordinate the students being reunited with their parents and triaging students who needed additional support services.

Arianna provides a specialized form of therapy that was used to help Bradford-Mitchell students after the shooting.

Natalie coordinates a courthouse dogs program (the dogs provide comfort to people going through traumatic court cases) and conducts group therapy sessions.

Kennedy is a forensic interviewer and worked with some of the children from Bradford-Mitchell after the shooting.
**Trauma-informed Reporters**

**Bella** is a recent hire at RDR who comes to the paper with a background in residential mental health services. She is currently the crime reporter and has covered some deeply traumatic events in Small City, including a man who killed his four daughters and his wife. Bella explained how she thinks her mental health background affects her job.

**Nora and Everly** are recent hires on the BCP team with Redford. Both have extensively covered trauma in their careers at BCP and at other papers. Everly was on staff at the *Hartford Courant* when the shooting at Sandy Hook occurred.

**Additional Themes**

**Evidence of Trauma**

As was discussed in Chapter 3, there are two main reasons why trauma is included as the primary theoretical lens in this study. First, children are exposed to all kinds of trauma in their lives, very little of which journalists will have any knowledge of. Second, the effects of these traumatic exposures can be serious and long-lasting, disrupting normal development for the child.

Although I will not say that being interviewed by the media is a potentially traumatic event in and of itself, I will say that being interviewed, feeling the effects of the constant attention and pressure, and being exposed to the flood of news stories can exacerbate a potentially traumatic event and trigger stress reactions in children. However, although it was not evident in this study, further work needs to be done to determine if, in
fact, being interviewed by the media after an acutely potentially traumatic event can be traumatic itself. Data collection during the potentially traumatic event or very shortly afterward would likely yield results that could answer that question. My interviews were conducted 2.5 years after the shooting, which is too much time to accurately detect a traumatic stress response.

Having said that, however, there was evidence of a traumatic response in many of the parents and students that I interviewed. For example, many of them cried during the interview and they self-reported strong emotions stemming from media interactions that certainly appeared to be a stress response. I observed arousal or re-experiencing, avoidance, crying, and efforts to make changes in their lives to reflect a “new normal.”

First, there was evidence of arousal or re-experiencing of the trauma from the shooting months and years after it occurred. For example, Kennedy and Natalie were able to think of several children and parents that they see as clients or know personally immediately who were still reacting to the trauma of the shooting 2.5 years later. Many are still seeking periodic counseling sessions because of triggers.

One interesting phenomenon observed from the parents I interviewed was that they said they had a much worse reaction to the shooting than their children did. And, of the six parents I interviewed, five cried during the interview. In each case, it was when they started telling the story of what happened. They all said that the memories and emotions came flooding back immediately and became overwhelming. This is a classic example of what happens when a potentially traumatic event is not fully dealt with in counseling or resolved automatically on its own. The memories are such that they are easily accessible in the brain,
are triggered by sensory input, and the stress response follows, flooding the body with stress hormones and adrenaline.

There were three examples that arose of how the students I interviewed re-experienced the trauma up to 2.5 years later. First, which was mentioned by two participants, were the fireworks during Independence Day celebrations. Three students talked about avoiding them because they were triggering a traumatic reaction to the gunfire in the gym. It came up in two different ways from Sophia and Olivia. First, Sophia remembered her daughter being startled and looking shaken during the fireworks. When Sophia asked her what was wrong, Olivia told her it reminded her of the gunfire. Second, Olivia remembered being annoyed or angry by people joking around during the fireworks, saying things like, “Ummm… The Shooter?”

The use of humor in relation to the shooting was both a coping mechanism (when she used it) and a trigger (when other people used it) for Olivia. She was able to provide examples of when other people used humor about the shooting in a way that triggered her emotionally and caused her to go so far as to dislike people. But she also said that she uses humor as a way of distancing herself from the feelings, to “cover up <her> feelings with laughter.”

Combined, these are examples of Olivia actively avoiding a traumatic memory, because that traumatic memory still triggers a stress response. As was shared earlier, Olivia is the student who did not go to counseling on her own after the shooting, but did accompany her friends to their sessions and said it made her feel better to “just listen.” Sophia shared that Olivia experienced three or four major potentially traumatic events
within a timespan of a few months after the shooting, which caused her to experience deep depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and to cut herself for relief. Sophia did take her to counseling at that point, but said “it never worked,” but that the following year in school she seemed much better and began to thrive. Given that information, it would be very difficult to extrapolate how much of Olivia’s traumatic reactions were a result of the shooting or the media attention alone. Instead, it is safer to say that 2.5 years later she was still experiencing serious traumatic stress and would benefit from professional help to resolve it, whatever its origin was.

Finally, Sophia told a story that happened a year after the shooting. She was driving Olivia, her older daughter, and a group of their friends to an event, when they passed an ambulance. This prompted a conversation that illuminated several other things that trigger a traumatic response from the students. Here is Sophia telling the story:

About a year later... My daughter is a cheerleader and I have the... my... car full of cheerleaders, with their big, ridiculous bows, and an ambulance passed by. And someone said, "Every time I hear an ambulance, I get scared." And I said, "You do?" And she said, "Yeah." I said, "Awww." I said "Well, what scares you?" She said, "It reminds me of the shooting." Then... the other one said, "Really?" She said, "I didn't know you felt like that." She goes, "Yeah, yeah." Another one says, "Every time the phone rings in the classroom, it reminds me of the shooting, and it makes me scared." Because she said the phone kept ringing when they were hiding in the dark. Then, another one... another little one says, "It's crazy about the ambulances, because they... they scare me too, and make me feel weird," she said. "But it's crazy, because I didn't hear one ambulance that day in the classroom. But somehow, when I hear them, I think of the shooting." And then, the other one says, "You know, when mama... I had to change the picture on my mom... phone... on my phone of my mom... when she calls me, because when we were on lockdown, she kept calling me, and calling me, and now it reminds me of that." They all still, a year later, have issues.

When The Shooter’s trial was happening in mid-2014, Sophia noticed anger directed toward The Shooter’s family from her older daughter. She distinguished between the two girls saying the older daughter was angry, while Olivia never was. During the trial,
Sophia suggested they make brownies and take them to The Shooter’s grandparents’ house, who lived in the neighborhood. Sophia’s older daughter’s temper flared quickly and she angrily responded that they didn’t deserve brownies. Sophia said that seeing the grandparents’ house was a constant trigger for her older daughter and kept her in that angry state for months after the shooting.

Amelia and Jackson told a story about a church-related haunted house they attended in October 2014. Because it was church-related and most of the scenes were Bible-related, they were wholly unprepared when they entered a room that was modeled off of a school shooting scene, complete with gunshots. Jackson froze, then got very angry. Amelia said the reaction was obvious and visceral in Jackson and noticeably different than what was experienced by the others in their group who had not lived through the shooting. They had to leave the haunted house. Jackson said he was still angry about that even as late as this past summer (2016) and thought the church should have had better sense than to stage that scene in a city that had lived through an actual school shooting.

Jennifer said she has noticed things in Brayden since the shooting that she’s certain he does not realize about himself. For example, she said that when they go to a big place where there is a crowd, Brayden immediately scans the rooms to find all the exits and he seems hypervigilant and on guard looking for danger signs. And, as mentioned previously, Brayden stopped doing activities that were gun-related the day after the shooting, such as hunting and playing first-person-shooter video games. Finally, she mentioned that the year after the shooting, Brayden went through a period of acting out where he was drinking and using drugs and disobeying the rules. She did not feel certain that it was connected solely
to the shooting, but she felt that was a big part of it. If so, it could be a mechanism he was using to avoid going through a traumatic response.

Brayden wanted everything to get back to normal as quickly as possible after the shooting, and did not want anyone talking about it, which is a classic sign of avoidance. He described the students in school who did want to talk about it in disparaging terms such as “crybaby” and said that those students “just wanted attention.” He said they were eventually forced into silence because they would be confronted by other kids (including himself) and told to, “Get over it.”

Although Jennifer said Brayden seems much better now, is getting good grades, is on the football team and was elected a Homecoming Prince, Brayden and Jennifer both said Brayden did not go to any counseling sessions after the shooting. All of the other students had parents who talked with them about it and/or took them to counseling, and so had some sort of support and intervention. Brayden was the only student who seemed to be avoiding the trauma completely.

Finally, Brooklyn and Leah, talked about repercussions from different kinds of drills they had to do in the year after the shooting (e.g. tornado drills), after which they observed traumatic reactions in some of the students. I brought up Brayden’s avoidance as an example of the residual trauma signs I was noticing, and Leah talked about the residual trauma she saw in the students in school and from their parents. It also sheds light on how she experienced the trauma and how she viewed her job in the healing process:

Well... and is he not fine or is mom not fine? The last thing I would have wanted to do is drive up and leave my kid at that building the next day or two days later.

And I worked there, and the last thing I wanted to do was drive up to that building... and stay there. Not that I was afraid... not that I was afraid of... of the shooter... Not that I was
afraid it would happen again. It was just that raw emotion of, "I've just been violated." The one place that... Because our kids aren't safe at home. I mean, not... not as a whole. Our kids come hungry, our kids come homeless, our kids don't have food, our kids have abusive parents.

The one thing that I prided myself on and I think our staff has is that, "You are in a safe and loving environment and this is what we want for you. And somebody just stole that from me and it was one of our own. I've protected you from the outside world... all I can. I can lock the doors. I have... You know... uh... We can shut down... we can lock you down... we're safe. But one of our very own <heavily emphasized>, not only planned it... waited through a whole day because the water main broke and didn't go to school... and still did it."

**Best Case Scenario**

As strange or insensitive as it may seem to call a school shooting a “best case scenario,” I only mean this in regard to the role and impact of the media. It does not reflect on my interpretation of the shooting and the terrifying and traumatic effects on those most directly involved. For the victims and their families, this is obviously one of the worst days of their lives, and always will be.

There were several aspects that combined to make the Bradford-Mitchell shooting a much different media event than other school shootings. As such, this school shooting may not generalize to others, depending on the characteristics surrounding each event. But I do believe that the lessons learned from this event can be applied to other situations, particularly in how reporters interact with victims and their loved ones.

The first aspect is the timing. The shooting occurred before school started at 8 am, so not all of the students had arrived yet. In this regard, there were fewer students present in the gym at the time than there might have been otherwise. Also, the school security guard was in the gym at the time, as were other teachers, all of whom responded quickly. The
staff had just been through Active Shooter training a few weeks before and can be considered reasonably well versed in what to do. Finally, a State Trooper arrived at the school to drop off his daughter off minutes after the shooting occurred, and he jumped right in to help contain the situation.

The second aspect is that The Shooter stuck to his plan. During his competency hearing, it was revealed that The Shooter had planned out versions of what he was going to do. The Instagram photo referenced earlier was a hint about one of his plans. The Shooter was being bullied by one student in particular who was in The Shooter’s homeroom. The Shooter’s first plan, which was supposed to happen on Monday of that week, was to bring a knife to school and stab the boy to death in homeroom. However, there was a water main break on Sunday night which forced Bradford-Mitchell to close on Monday.

The Shooter’s second plan was to bring a sawed-off shotgun to school and shoot three times randomly in the gym. This, it turns out, is exactly what he did. I describe this as a factor in a best-case scenario because it is easy to image that he might have brought more than one gun to school or he might have decided to fire more than three times. If The Shooter had done anything else in addition to what he planned, this might have been a much grimmer situation. As it was, his gun got stuck coming out of the bag, so his first shot hit the floor, his second shot hit the crowd and his third shot hit the ceiling.

The third aspect is that by all accounts, the school handled the situation really well. Perhaps because of the recent Active Shooter training, because a State Trooper was present or any number of other reasons, the students, parents, local mental health workers and most reporters say things were contained and organized. I was not able to interview the principal
or vice principal who were working during the shooting. But from other participant reports, they quickly locked all of the school doors and the principal went out to the drop-off area to redirect cars and buses off the school property. They also quickly differentiated between witnesses in the gym and all other kids, and got the non-witnesses onto buses heading to the mall within an hour. The school district sent out alerts to parents directing them to the mall as well.

There are some interesting aspects to Brooklyn’s involvement with the Bradford-Mitchell shooting which provide context. The biggest was that she had just started the job seven days before the shooting occurred and had not even unpacked her office yet. Since she had just moved to the area, she also did not know many people working at Bradford-Mitchell or in the district and yet she was booted into overdrive to direct the district’s crisis management plan. Here is what that was like from her perspective. This is a long passage because the school’s perspective has not been represented in this study. The story Brooklyn told illustrates quite well how she jumped into action and the scope of the district’s response in the following weeks.

The take-away from this narrative is that Brooklyn’s ability to jump right in and organize the district’s efforts, combined with the decisions made by the school leadership team, turned what could have been a worst-case scenario into a best-case scenario. The plan they implemented could be put in place at other schools in preparation for a school shooting incident, but it is beyond the scope of this project. Some things have been omitted that Brooklyn requested be kept confidential. They are indicated by <...>.

_I got the call at 7:45. I knew that crisis team is part of my job. That's really what it was. I got the call at 7:45 that we had a possible school shooting. I'd been at work early every single day. <...>_
I knew no one. I knew no one. <...> At any rate... um... I get a call and it said, "Mr. Burris asked me to call you. You need to activate the crisis team. We have a possible school shooting." I'm real... I guess I'm either real redneck or real ghetto. I thought, "Well, that's good, because you all don't have one." I didn't say a word. I was like, "Oh, ok." And... um... I called... uh... Marcia, she used to work for us. She was not a counselor. I was like, "Hey, do you know all the social workers?" Girl, this was a God thing. I don't care what anybody's faith was, this was a God thing for me, because I could have never pulled it off. And... uh... When you know no one. My... Literally, I knew four people: my secretary, Denise, Marcia, and the nurse... the Director of Nurses.

I said, "Hey, Marcia, do you know all the social workers?" She said, "Yeah." I said, "Call the department head and call the best of... the best one." She said, "Ok." I called Tara who was like my assistant. I said, "I need you to run up... Are you at work yet?" She said, "I'm almost there." I said, "Yeah, me too." I said, "I don't really know much about our HR Department, but run up there and pull everybody with a counseling license in the district, if they're using it or not." And then, I happened to have Renae's number as our Director of Nurses... Because I didn't know what kind of thing I was going to have to triage. Like, I didn't know... You know... I called Tara and I said, "Hey, I need you guys to all be in my office. Be there at 8:15." Everybody rolled in and I said, "This is what might happen. I'm awaiting word." So I got word. And so, what I did is then we had all the social workers come. And so I had... <...> I called all the social workers. We called in all the school counselors... We did leave two at <the high school>, because we didn't know what kind of fallout there were...

<...>

And... So we got two counselors at <the high school> and I pulled everybody in and I had a meeting. And in like an hour, I'd gave... And I've talked to the people at the <national training center> who've since trained us or trained my team... And I said, "I had to teach the Reader's Digest version of it." And... That's what we did... Is I taught it to them and then we went and met at school. We went and I just... It's hard to stand in front of a group of people you've never seen and be like, "Hey, you all have known me for several days, but just trust what I'm saying and just do what I say." But everybody did. And I just made it just very informational, as... as... as I tried to answer all the whys. Why do we do this? I'm not trying to take over your school. I'm trying to support you so... You know... Because when you get kids back here... The big thing when you get kids back... and... and... and the district's goal is to get kids back as soon as possible...

Because it was what was Leah said. The kids knew the event was over and they knew they were safe. We had to keep going on with that with them. So... um... We... um... I taught the staff what would happen. This happened on Tuesday. The kids came back on Thursday. I said, "The reason we're here is the kids have to see you do it... what you do every single day. We're here to counsel... We're here to help in the office..." I mean, I was pretty much at Bradford-Mitchell... that whole... A whole month and then throughout the semester. I mean... we laugh. I mean... that's really the only people I knew.

And, so... At any rate, I had a great staff that... that really fell into place. We're very fortunate here. We honestly have some extremely skilled elementary counselors and social
workers. We... we really do. Um... It's surprising that in this area where it's hard to find related services people, we... we have some extremely well trained mental health folks that are school-based. It's very unusual... um... really good skills. And we have bilingual folks too, which is a help. So, at any rate, I taught them that. We had a day to plan and get all of our materials together... How we were going to run safe rooms, if you will... Where kids go as groups... Where we were going to do individual counseling... We had a system for teachers. At any rate, we just rolled out a very traditional... Adlerian-based... crisis counseling model. That comes out of the CICM model. CICM doesn't talk about counseling. It talks about crisis management and all the processes.

So we had a lot of information we sent home to parents. And the night prior to the kids going back to school, we had like a town hall meeting, if you will. We pulled in all the community resources... it was huge... that we could, so we could do referrals. A very cool thing that happened, since we had all the counselors and all the social workers pulled, is when I had kids at other schools throughout the district, and there weren't a ton, but there were some who were... scared to be at school or asking questions or freaked out or what you want to call it. I had... um... one community-based agency <...> who would send counselors to go work with those kids. And, so, we didn't have to have that parent permission, because it was going to be a short-term, one-time thing. So we never had to pull our resources. And... So we provided that counseling. It was ongoing... We did individuals, small groups, pairs, we worked with staff... <...>.

So we finished that week... And we finished the next week. And what we had on... like... the... Friday following... like a week and a half out... is we had an in-service day. So what we did is... Already scheduled... There was a state-based crisis team, per se. It wasn't the state-based CICM team, which there is one. We'd of had to have a much larger spectrum of an event... Had either of those students who were injured died, I already was in collaboration with them to come in, because we would have had a much different event at that point. I was already in collaboration with the national trainers who told me, "Yeah, we'll be there. Don't worry." So, but, we had that. So, there were some crisis folks who came in from the state that worked with the staff... on that day. Um... We did a large de-brief, if you will. We went through some counseling. We identified the staff that was most closely involved with the event and as a district we did require them to go to outside counseling. Leah was involved in that. And those... those bills were paid for by the district and someone... And... and then what we did with kids is we maintained it from a school side. We maintained school-based counseling there. And then, for those kids that we felt like really needed it, we made outside referrals. If they continued on with counseling, we met with parents.

The counseling services provided by the school were mentioned by almost every student or parent I talked to, and almost everyone said it was helpful. Even students like Olivia, who did not actually talk to a counselor herself, said it was helpful to go with her friends and just listen. One aspect that was not deemed as helpful from the students’ perspective was what, if anything, happened during homeroom and with their teachers
when they returned to school after the shooting. In her interview, Brooklyn made it clear
that the teachers were supposed to get back to normal as quickly as possible so that the
school could get back to normal as quickly as possible. That was the main goal of the CISM
危机干预 she talked about.

Some students seemed to want the teachers to talk about it more and to be more
comforting in general, while others seemed to want the shooting to never be mentioned
again. This range of reactions is normal and represents the kind of reactions you’d expect
to see from any population after a potentially traumatic event. But it was also clear from
Brooklyn’s interview that the school leadership and her team tracked staff and students
who were struggling and required them to get counseling. They even did home visits for
students they thought were having a particularly difficult time. In all, there was a large
危机咨询团队 on-site at Bradford-Mitchell for about a month after the shooting,
after which they gradually reduced the number of people on-site based on the need.

As Brooklyn indicated, another aspect that made this a best-case scenario was the
support offered by the community. Without being asked, Caroline, the director of the local
CASA agency, went to the mall and began coordinating triage for students who needed
help and the process of reuniting students and parents. Having someone as skilled as
Caroline ready to jump in and take charge without being asked was extremely important.
Without her presence at the mall it would likely have been a chaotic scene. Her team
checked every student getting off the buses for signs of trauma, identified every student
and confirmed they were being reunited with the correct family member to go home.
Without this process, the kids would have been unloaded into the mall parking lot without
any guidance about what to do or how to find their family.

By coincidence, there were two courthouse dogs in Small City for training at the time. Those two dogs combined with the two who are based in Small City (in the photo below) spent time at the mall and the school over the next days and weeks to help the kids. Almost every student and parent I interviewed talked about the importance of having the dogs present. They are specially trained to help people in traumatic situations, and to have four on hand was a stroke of luck. Sophia and Olivia specifically mentioned what it meant for Olivia to be greeted by one of the dogs at the mall. They have a photo of it that they cherish.

Fig. 4-13: Courthouse dogs that helped after the shooting (Photo credit: Assistance Dogs of the West)

From a journalism perspective, the distance from Small City to any major cities and how long it took to get any media teams on site (other than the locals) added to the best-case scenario. The RDR team, Dylan and Lillian, who were the Small City-based reporters in my study, each specifically mentioned that they behaved differently because they
recognized the scope of the pain and trauma on the “real people” they lived with every day. Because they were the only people on site for hours, the media presence was definitely a lot less traumatic than what happened at Sandy Hook Elementary or other school shooting incidents. The national and regional media teams were not physically present in the hours following the shooting when the trauma is most acute. Also, as Lillian and Jennifer each pointed out in their interviews, the parents and students stopped making themselves readily available for interviews after they got home from the mall, and even actively avoided them.

Next, I want to call attention to the thoughtful, ethical leadership styles of Ryan, Isabella and Redford. I was impressed as I talked to them at how person-centered and ethical they are as people and in how they led their teams. In each case, the reporters they supervised also gave them credit for keeping the team on track and functional.

What contributed the most to the topic of this study was how they kept their teams focused on the longer goals: fully-developed stories in the next day’s paper, respect for the people they were trying to interview, attention to verification of the information they were being told. Except for one misstep when the BCP reported on the rumors about Noah, both teams did an admirable job of avoiding the sensationalistic scare tactics that usually seem to accompany school shootings. The BCP team, more so than the RDR team, talked about the pressure to scoop their competitors and get information or interviews others couldn’t. But other than the initial misstep, it did not affect their coverage.

Also, both Ryan and Redford seem to be exceptionally thoughtful, humanistic people, traits they carried into the newsroom. Redford talked a lot about being aware of and supporting his team during potentially traumatic events. It was the thing he circled
back to most often as he discussed this incident and others like it. He talked about seeing journalism’s role as shining a light on societal evils in order to bring about sociological changes. He cited the civil rights movement and Buddhism as guiding factors in how he perceives his job. He also enjoyed thinking about the ethical aspects I brought up and was open to thinking about what his team did well and didn’t do well.

Ryan was very soft-spoken and grounded. While I heard a lot from his reporting team about the personality conflicts that interfered that day, Ryan never pointed fingers or blamed anyone. The way he described the personalities of the team members made perfect sense after I heard everyone else’s perspective. But from Ryan, the descriptions were non-judgmental and focused on each person’s strengths. He was very introspective and enjoyed the ethical questions I posed. The way he described what he learned from his father, a retired State Trooper and SWAT team member, underscored the gently flowing river that represented his leadership style: he kept things moving, kept everyone afloat and nourished them when needed. Perhaps the greatest credit to Ryan’s leadership was from his co-editor, Isabella, who said the RDR should have kept Ryan on as editor-in-chief.

Finally, the fact that no one died in the shooting was what every reporter I talked to cited as the reason the media coverage never skewed too far toward sensational. If Noah or Kaylee had died, several people said their team would have taken a different tone and focus. But because they survived, and because none of the three families, no school personnel, and few community members would talk to them, their stories stayed more in line with factual evidence and updates on court hearings.

Isabella was introspective about that. Because there was so much turnover in the
RDR staff during 2014, none of the original reporting team was still on staff in 2015. As a result, no one carried forward the pain and story from that day and the RDR coverage trickled away. Here are Isabella’s thoughts on that:

But right now, it’s just the... the quick and hard facts. Like, “This is what happened. This is what we know.” Like maybe for the first day, just keep it simple. Just say, “This is what we know right now.” And the next... the next day... and the next week, just keep... keep... you know, keep going into that.

But also, I feel like... um... well, you know... In terms of that... we didn’t really pursue the story after a while. Like... because... you know, it’s like it happened... And then I think we had some follow up stories... And then it kinda just went away. And we did more follow ups, but it was just like... that’s kinda... our s-... you know... It happened here so maybe we should be a little more...

On the other hand, Redford was pragmatic about how it affected his team’s coverage. Both Redford and Parker talked about the limits on what they could get done in the three days Parker and the photographer were in Small City. Redford also talked about the limits on travel his team faces every day because of budget challenges. It has affected the reporting choices they make. In this passage, Redford connects the budget challenges with the fact that no one died:

In any case... I think that it did have a different... Again, nobody died. It didn't have the memorials... It didn't have that. That's such a big part of these stories. It really drags what is a story that ends three or four days of reporting... It turns it into two weeks.

All in all, the distance to Small City, the fact that no national or regional teams were present for the first few hours, and the kind of leadership and ethical attention being paid by the local reporters contributed to this being a best-case-scenario. They did not create the kind of media circus atmosphere that sometimes ensnares school shooting incidents. Which leads me to the next theme: The Shooter was not vilified by the media.
The Shooter was not Vilified

One of the things I noticed immediately upon collecting and reading/watching coverage of the shooting incident, was that The Shooter was handled much differently in the media than other school shooters. It is common for school shooters to be called names, to have dark-sounding labels attached, or to show photos that seem to depict them in the most negative way possible. None of that happened with The Shooter. So I asked each person I interviewed why and there were two primary theories: religion and class/status.

The first thing that happened after the shooting was the religious community began to very publicly say things such as “they are all victims” and “we have to pray for all three families.” These statements immediately began showing up in the comments of news stories posted to Facebook. One of the local pastors gave interviews on Tuesday with these statements. The candlelight vigil was planned and happened Tuesday night with those messages as the primary message. In short, the religious community got out in front of this story very quickly and helped shape the narrative. Redford explains how his team experienced that phenomenon:

*It was recognizable. I think it's interesting, and I'm not sure why. Like you said, but... It seems to me that people who... (heavy sigh) I don't know... Were involved in the sort of the faith movements, for lack of a better word there, really had control of that narrative. And they stepped up... I may be wrong, but it's worth looking into. It seemed like they sort of stepped up and said, "Hey, let's figure out what happened here before we start passing judgment."*

*There was a step in that direction, a public step. And we had that in our story, I think. Um... It certainly felt that way. If we didn't, we should have. Uh... Yeah, there were... There were people saying that... right in the moment. Um... And they were sort of the adults in the room... And... And... there were some adults in the room and they took charge of the conversation. And because of that, I think they... they... controlled... they... (sigh) Yeah, they helped sort of navigate the community's emotions.*

*I don't remember any names. Um... But I do remember... I think if I'm not mistaken that*
The Shooter's family was involved in a congregation. And their pastor... I don't even remember what... what denomination it was. But... but in any case, it seemed like they were... There were outspoken voices in the faith movements... that... were... advocating for sort of restraint of judgment if you will.

This was bolstered by the fact that there were not very many other people talking to the media at that point, and most of the interviews with students contained statements about how nice The Shooter was, so there were no competing messages about The Shooter that the reporters could build on. In fact, in some of the most heated discussions in response to news stories on social media, a few Bradford-Mitchell students chimed in amongst all the angry adult voices to say that The Shooter was their friend and they liked him. Table 4-4 shows examples of the kinds of statements and descriptors that appeared in news stories and on social media on Tuesday and Wednesday:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BCP</td>
<td>1.14.2014</td>
<td>Another student, Gabriella, said she knew the suspect, but didn’t consider him violent. “He really didn’t talk to nobody. He’s quiet and kind of awkward,” she said.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCP</td>
<td>1.15.2014</td>
<td>“He was a nice guy,” Nuno said Tuesday during a community prayer vigil. “I don’t really know why he would do that. I’m just shocked.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daily Mail</td>
<td>1.15.2014</td>
<td>The Shooter, 12, was described as a boy of average height, slightly overweight, with glasses, a bowl haircut and freckles. The baby-faced Small City student who police say critically wounded two classmates when he opened fire in his packed school gymnasium yesterday has been pictured for the first time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNN</td>
<td>1.15.2014</td>
<td>The suspect's parents and grandparents issued a statement Wednesday saying they are &quot;praying that God will be with everyone who has been affected.&quot; The family singled out the two hospitalized victims, in particular.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RDR</td>
<td>1.15.2014</td>
<td>Teddy, a seventh-grader, said he saw his classmate with the gun run into the gym and start shooting. He said he never really talked to the boy, but he knew him. “I first thought it was a drill,” Teddy said. “He was actually a nice kid. I didn’t think he would ever do that.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RDR</td>
<td>1.15.2014</td>
<td>As pastors and community leaders spoke to the crowd against the backdrop of music, they prayed for the wounded and their families, the shooter and his family, and the whole community.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Friends and acquaintances of the victims and of the shooter’s family were among those present at the vigil. Bradford-Mitchell cafeteria cook, Rosanne, said she came to pay respect to children involved in the shooting. “We know almost all the kids,” she said. “I’m hoping it [the vigil] will bring the school kids closer to realize we don’t want anything like this to happen.”

Cris Still, a longtime friend of the shooter’s family, said “I really really just love the family … They’re well-loved by many people.” “It’s painful for all of us.”

Table 4-4: Statements about The Shooter

The photos that were used by the news media to depict The Shooter were all from Facebook or Instagram. Most of them showed The Shooter as a typical middle school boy doing typical middle school things such as wearing headphones or playing video games. Two people who knew The Shooter and his family personally were upset that the media used one image of the family hanging out in the backyard drinking beer and one of The Shooter after a hunting trip. I could not find the image of the family in the backyard, so I’m not sure who used it or in what context. I did find the image of The Shooter after a hunting trip, but it always appeared cropped and only showed The Shooter from the elbows up, so it is not clear that it is a hunting photo. Those two people asked that their names be withheld, but they knew The Shooter’s family personally and professionally. Here is a collage of the images of The Shooter used by various media organizations. The hunting photo is in the bottom right.
Similarly, The Shooter’s parents released a statement very quickly that took a tone of sadness and grieving with the victims and their families and expressed gratitude that The Shooter would go through mental health screenings and support. So perhaps their public presence quieted some of the anger that might have been directed at them or The Shooter.
A common theme was that The Shooter was also a victim and “we” needed to figure out what went wrong, implying that something had, in fact, gone wrong somewhere in his life. If you remember from the previous chapter, this was a strong theme for Harper because her mother was best friends with The Shooter’s grandmother.

One of the things that was mentioned by people who knew The Shooter and his family personally was that The Shooter’s little brother had a congenital heart condition that required frequent surgeries in another state. As a result, The Shooter’s parents were often out of town with the little brother leaving The Shooter and his older brother at home alone or with their grandparents. The theory put forward was that The Shooter felt neglected and was not getting enough attention from his parents. An interesting development happened that made headlines months after the shooting and seems, in hindsight, to support this theory. The Shooter told the sales clerk in a furniture store that he was being bullied and no one listened to him, so he was going to take a gun to school. His grandmother, who had taken The Shooter shopping, told the sales clerk to ignore The Shooter and appeared to discount his statements. From KKTT (KKTT, May 8, 2014), this story listed a number of things that were revealed in a report introduced during The Shooter’s sentencing hearing, providing an overview of the incident:

*Police say the owner of a Small City furniture store knew of The Shooter's plans months before the shooting. She told police the teen said he was tired of being bullied so he was planning to become an advocate against bullying. He was going to saw off the end of his shotgun so he could bring it to school in his backpack.*

*He told her bullying happens every day.*

*He said nobody listens and nobody wants to help.*

*He said he was tired of getting slammed into lockers.*
He said he planned on taking a gun to school and firing it into the air a few times.

He said that would make people take him seriously and listen to him.

He was prepared to go to jail for his actions.

The woman said his grandmother was standing nearby while he said this.

He wanted people to know he’s sick and tired of the bullying culture.

He said he waited until after the holidays to do what he was going to do because his family deserved a happy holiday together.

The woman said she saw several emotions go through The Shooter during the conversation.

She said he seemed fed up, but not dangerous.

She said the store conversation was the first time she’d met the boy.

She said his grandmother looked her in the eye and told her not to believe a word The Shooter says.

She said the grandmother said this several times.

At this point, she said The Shooter said, “See? Nobody listens to me.”

The woman said she assumed the grandmother had heard, based on her final words, and that she would act on the boy’s words.

The other theory that I heard repeatedly was that The Shooter was not vilified because he was white and from an upper middle class family who were well connected and well liked in the Small City community. The image of The Shooter’s house that was published by the BCP team reveals a very nice home on lots of land behind wrought iron gates. It is distinctly different than the majority of homes I saw while visiting Small City, most of which were small, with some obvious signs of neglect, and read as middle class or lower middle class. This is a collage of the kinds of homes I saw in Small compared to The Shooter’s home (in a cropped version of the BCP photo):
I also learned that The Shooter’s father had been a principal at one of the Small City schools before leaving to start his own successful construction company. The Shooter’s mother was an occupational therapist who practiced both in the school district and as part of a private group in town. And The Shooter’s grandfather was a dentist in town. When commenting on The Shooter’s family, most people singled out his grandfather the most positively.

Many of the people who mentioned race and ethnicity did so in an awkward, hushed tone way, such as, “I hate to say it, but…” These comments were not made in anger or blame, they were almost sheepish or apologetic by nature. However, they were also usually accompanied by a statement such as, “I’m not sure what would have happened if this had been a different boy or different family…” The people who said them were from a variety
of ages, races and were both male and female. Unpacking issues of race and class is beyond the scope of this study, as well as the accompanying sociological and social justice issues which would follow. All of the people who confided these messages asked me not to attach their names, so I will not use direct quotes. However, I heard these types of statements from several different kinds of participants who did not have obvious connections to each other that I could perceive, so I have allotted them some credibility and I believe this was a factor in why The Shooter was not vilified by the press.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Limitations

Based on the lived experience of the parents, students and reporters, my discussion will focus on two themes examining journalism ethics.

Ethical and Questionable Reporting Choices

Through the course of my interviews with reporters and editors as well as from the insight provided by the experts I interviewed, there were some things that emerged which could be labeled as ethically questionable decisions. I will briefly identify and discuss some of these choices as a way to lead into the ethical guidelines being proposed in this study. There are always reasons for every choice, of course. This section is not to point fingers or condemn any single choice or series of decisions, it is to examine what decisions were made in this case as a means to see how things might be done differently if a clear and specific set of guidelines was present.

Ethical Choices

I have included specific examples of ethical choices made by the reporters and editors I interviewed. There were many from which to choose. Each example contains the interview source, the way the ethical choice manifested, and a brief explanation of why I believe it represents an ethical choice.

Isabella, RDR editor, directed her team not to use the teacher’s name in their stories because it had not been verified. The RDR team had a lot of inside information because of
the dual relationships they had in the community and were pretty sure he was the teacher who confronted The Shooter. But he had not yet been identified by official sources or verified through other channels. The BCP team ended up scooping the RDR team on this because they got it verified by calling the teacher’s union.

Ryan, RDR editor, views giving people a chance to participate in news stories as a way they can get their story and perspective heard. He recognizes that there are downsides to people participating, of course, but he balanced it by pointing out that without their story and perspective, all the reporters have is the public record which is a very limited window on the situation. He also provided an example about a local politician who had been arrested for a DUI. He had to choose whether to use their file photo or the booking photo. Ryan used the file photo for the initial story and the booking photo after the official was found guilty. His rationale was that the booking photo carries the implication of guilt and he thought his duty was to remain neutral until the court case. Finally, he indicated that he directed his team not to talk to the national media because the kind of questions they were being asked were sensationalistic. He took on the role of fielding national requests so his team could focus on interviewing, collecting information and writing their stories.

Suzanne, RDR staffer, discussed how the RDR editors and publisher had her interests at heart by telling her to leave her job to go take care of her family. Though it can seem counter-intuitive to what a newsroom needs to be doing after an acutely traumatic event, taking care of the employees’ needs allows them to come back more fully able to do their jobs well. Every RDR reporter talked about how this ethic of care made them appreciate their job and colleagues more.
Dylan, NBC stringer, told the story about the out-of-town reporters who seemed to be conducting interviews with people in inappropriate ways such as pressuring students to provide information about the then-unidentified shooter and victims’ names and social media sites. He thought that special care should be used because all of them were so young. And he felt that some of the students being interviewed didn’t actually know the shooter or victims, so it seemed like an invasion of privacy.

Harper, BCP freelancer, talked about her method of choosing who to interview included approaching people who were alone and who did not appear overly emotional. One of the reasons she chose people who were alone was because she did not want to interrupt people who were already talking because she assumed they were discussing what happened. She also only approached people who were not overly emotional because she thought they might be the best ones to talk about the situation. She also discussed how realizing that she had a personal connection to the shooter made her think differently about the kind of story she wanted to write. Realizing that the subjects of stories are always real people who are hurting should impact the way stories are written or constructed. This does not mean people who commit crimes, whether heinous or not, should be treated the same as victims. But realizing that there are often deeper stories to tell and avoiding fear-mongering or assigning labels seems fair.

Lillian, BBB TV reporter, reflected on the weight of using the watchdog role to hold people accountable. She said it weighed on her so much, it was why she left journalism. She thought journalism programs could help by providing ways journalism students could figure out what type of reporting job might suit them best. Not everyone is
equipped to be a watchdog, Lillian’s ethic of care got in the way of serving the public interest at times.

Mateo, RDR photographer, talked about using his longest lens, staying in one spot, and standing as far away as possible when capturing images of particularly traumatic scenes. He said it was about common sense and respecting the people who are going through something bad. He was still able to do his job, but he did it in a way that was as respectful as possible.

Nora, BCP reporter, talked about the healing effect of talking to a victim’s loved ones because it provides them a chance to remember and tell their own stories about their loved one and it allows the reporter to get out of her own head and try to see life from their perspective. Being granted interviews has its own challenges, of course. But once an interview is granted, reporters should approach it as openly, tactfully and gently as possible to give the family the opportunity to take the lead and choose their own voice and direction.

Everly, BCP reporter, discussed how much harder it was for the Hartford Courant to do stories on Sandy Hook than it was for the national media because there was such a need for an ethic of care. She said it was even hard to do seemingly innocuous stories about therapy dogs because the pain was too visceral. She said the national people could pop in and do whatever they wanted without much concern about the impact they were having on the town. But the Courant staffers knew the townspeople and deeply felt what they were feeling. Even though it was a huge story and they had to cover it, their ethic of care for the townspeople and the townspeople’s need for privacy and healing made the job very difficult.
Nora and Everly both talked about how hard it is to write stories about children who have died because it’s hard to truly understand who they were in life without being overly intrusive on their loved ones. They compared writing a compelling story about an adult who died, which they said was relatively easy, to one about a child because when a child dies the story seems to be more about the family’s and community’s reaction to it than a memorial for the child herself. They wanted to get past simplifying the child’s life to soundbites like “she liked math and told silly jokes.” Both were aware and sensitive to how hard it is for the child’s loved ones to talk about it enough for reporters to gain a deep enough understanding of the child’s personality.

Parker, BCP reporter, talked about his ability to get out of his comfort zone, drop all of his walls and throw himself into the emotion being felt by his interviewees. He called it “unleashing his compassion.” He said keeping people at arm’s length emotionally is doing them and the public a disservice. Although not all reporters will have the emotional fortitude to open themselves up the way Parker does, he has written compelling stories that truly capture the emotion of the moment. Being with the people he’s talking to and fully aware of their emotional stories allows him to try and represent their reality as well as he possibly can.

Kennedy, Small City therapist, spent a lot of time with The Shooter’s mother for a few days after the shooting and said the family was not harassed. The phone rang a lot and there were media trucks outside their home, but they were not overly intrusive. This supports what the reporters I talked to said they did, or didn’t do, in this case. Most reporters I talked to said they tried to be respectful of the families involved because of the nature of
the trauma. It was good to hear this validated from a third party.

Jennifer, Brayden’s mom, said that when she was approached by reporters for interviews and she declined, they did not push it. This seems like exactly how this kind of situation should be handled: politely and respectfully.

Leah, Bradford-Mitchell principal, mentioned that no reporters tried to contact her. She was very appreciative of that. She was the Dean of Students at the time, and I wonder if the reporters were trying to contact the principal instead. I know they used the superintendent as a source a lot. Regardless, Leah said she expected the school would be “haunted” by reporters and they weren’t and it was a relief.

Sophia, Olivia’s mother, talked about looking up at one point when she was working triage at the mall and realizing there were several media trucks there. She said the fact that she didn’t even know they were there is testament to how respectful they were being. They stayed a distance away from the kids getting off the buses and out of the way of the triage process.

Redford, BCP editor, empathized with the parents because he has children of his own. He said being able to viscerally feel the panic and fear they must have been feeling helped direct his choices as an editor. He also used those feelings to try to give voice to the parents’ authentic voices.

Although Noah, one of the victims, couldn’t remember many details about the people who interviewed him, he did clearly remember one reporter who came to visit him just to see how he was doing. And, on one visit, she even brought him a box of brownie mix because she knew he liked to bake. This perfectly captures what it is like from the
victim’s perspective. All of the interviews flow together into a river of impersonal, and sometimes frustrating, interactions except the ones where he felt truly cared about as a person. Both Noah and Danielle said they would be inclined to reach out to that reporter for interviews in the future. Side note – there is also an ethical quagmire in providing gifts to potential sources. But, in this case, the reporter wasn’t seeking an interview because this was after the fact. She was just checking in on Noah to see how he was doing. Both Noah and his mom said she never asked any interview-type questions. Caring about him as a person, though, did not need to involve brownie mix. Just stopping by to check on him meant a lot, too.

Donna Gaffney, NYU trauma expert, said children’s authentic voices should be present in news stories, but that children who have been affected by trauma may not be able to communicate and the interview might need to be delayed. Her advice was for reporters to treat the children they are interviewing the way they would want their own children treated. She suggested that interviewing children should go beyond concerns about the safety of the location. She pointed out that some locations are too distracting (like a classroom or a playground) even though the child may feel safe there.

She also said that interviewing children alone is preferable to groups because children tend to talk to each other rather than the interviewer and they might feel uncomfortable talking in front of their peers. She concluded that hours or even days might be too soon to talk to children after a trauma. The most compelling information and stories will come after the child has worked through the trauma with loved ones or professionals. Interview material collected too soon may be full of misinformation or may be superficial.
It seems clear that lots of reporters and editors were thinking about ethics in the moment. Some, like Dylan, had very clear views on whether his actions were helpful or hurtful and made choices as such. Others, such as Ryan, found themselves in positions where they were coaching those around them about what was most important and most ethical in the heat of the moment. There were so many examples of sound ethics at play that this factored into “best case scenario” being one of the themes. It was clear to me that the collective ethical behavior of the two news organizations in my study contributed positively to the way the situation and the story played out.

**Questionable Choices**

The following are examples, descriptions and explanations of questionable choices identified in my interviews.

Ryan mentioned that at one point his reporters got excited about a possible headline that skewed into sensationalistic. He coached them to take a step back and think about if they would want that headline written about them.

Redford talked about the tendency of visual news crews to look for the person that’s hysterical or obviously upset. He indicated he has coached his team at the BCP that they don’t need those images and that, in fact, those people are often bad interview subjects. He directs them to look for a person who was a part of it and is dealing with it, but is not overly emotional. He also talked about the pressure to break stories and scoop competitors. He said they sometimes have to do shallow stories to catch people’s attention. He justified running hard and fast on big stories because it brings eyes to their website and new eyes
could equal new viewers or subscribers.

Caroline, Small City mental health agency director, indicated she saw news stories that communicated a heightened sense of excitement and swirled around the rumors that were circulating. As a result, she saw secondary and tertiary trauma in the families and in the community. She said the media escalated things to an extent, “feeding a hunger” that inadvertently affected the people already traumatized by the event itself.

Caroline, Natalie and Kennedy, Small City therapists, talked about the images that were used of The Shooter. Especially the hunting one and one where he looked “greasy” and had his eyes cast down in a “sneaky” way. They all said they thought the photos used showed some bias by the reporters toward painting The Shooter in a negative light. They said that there were lots of pictures in the Facebook and Instagram accounts the reporters accessed, but they only chose the ones that were the least favorable.

In their interview with CNN, Amelia, Jackson’s mom, remembers hearing the anchor throw to a break before their segment by saying, “When we come back, we’ll talk to a young man who was friends with the shooter.” She said he said it in a very dramatic voice and it made both her and Jackson uncomfortable because they were doing the interview to set the record straight in their minds. They felt unfairly pigeon-holed by that description.

Danielle, Noah’s mom, told the story about The Today Show trying to get her on the phone while Noah was in surgery by telling the nursing staff it was an emergency. This goes well beyond anything that could be considered ethical. I would call this egregiously unethical. She also talked about the reporter who waited for them at their house and then
chased them to the door trying to get an interview. Danielle perfectly captured what it was like trying to think through informed consent when you’re in the midst of an unbelievable tragedy. She said she couldn’t think straight and the pressure made her and her husband angry, in addition to adding to their stress. She said she would have preferred reporters to give their family time to heal and absorb what happened, and once they were comfortable again, to go visit with them to ask for the interview. Finally, she said that reporters came to her workplace to try to interview her and that media trucks were using cameras on poles to try and get images of Noah through the hospital windows. It doesn’t seem too out of the ordinary for reporters to go to someone’s workplace for an interview. But cameras on poles to record through a hospital window? That seems really inappropriate and invasive.

Lillian talked about going into journalism because she wanted to be on TV. While this is not unethical in and of itself, it does highlight a need to train future journalists better about what the job actually entails. Intervening with students who seem to be in it for the wrong reasons (e.g. wanting to be on TV) would certainly be a good first step.

Collectively, the RDR could have done more stories to clarify rumors or provide context. Isabella indicated they stopped writing stories eventually and she regretted not doing it more justice. At the very least, the paper could have given Noah and Kaylee a platform to say they were not bullying The Shooter or involved in a fight over who was dating Kaylee. Considering these rumors are still circulating to an extent, the RDR could still step in and do a real service.

Parker wrote the story that identified Noah as the bully and talked about the dating rumors. This story was retracted the next day, but it had already been picked up and carried
by other media outlets. He also was the one who got a Bradford-Mitchell student to tell him The Shooter’s Instagram handle and to show him The Shooter’s Facebook. He was the one who collected and published the photos and images from Instagram. While this is not unethical in and of itself, and could actually be considered good reporting, it has had a negative effect on the community to a certain extent.

Gaffney provided an example about an interview on a live national TV newscast with three middle-school-aged boys who had just witnessed their friend fall through the ice on a frozen lake and die. The boys were “frozen” themselves, in shock and trauma, and the anchor was aggressively asking them questions. She says informed consent is a two-part process. First, teaching reporters what they need to know about people’s ability to consent after an acutely traumatic event. Second, teaching parents about their own possible traumatic reactions and the possible consequences of providing consent. Danielle also listed a number of things that are questionable, including interviewing child eyewitnesses after a life-threatening event. She indicated she thought interviewing children after a traumatic event was possible if the child is a teenager and not traumatized (as determined by someone other than the reporter) and if the interview takes place days or weeks after the event.

Roger Simpson, journalism and trauma expert, discussed the tendency of some reporters to rush at people and get right in their faces in the race to get the story published. He encouraged reporters to use sensitivity in those situations, especially ones involving children. He suggested approaching slowly and feeling the people out before deciding whether to ask for an interview. In his opinion, the reporter can make a more informed
decision by proceeding more carefully. Roger reflected on his time in Littleton after the Columbine shooting and said the whole news narrative revolved around anger. And he talked about the danger of focusing on “why” questions. He suggested that there are many other narratives the media could focus on instead, especially ones that involve hope, provide educational information about recovering from trauma and things the public could do in their own lives, and stories about how individuals or groups are regaining control or moving forward.

Jaime Howard, children’s trauma and PTSD expert, shared that one of her clients after the Sandy Hook shooting was hounded by the media so much they moved to New York City to get away from it. She described her client’s experience as the world “voyeuristically wanting to know about their lives and not allowing them to move on.” She characterized the media stories after 9/11 and Sandy Hook as “wanting to evoke emotion.” She indicated that journalists need to remember that in an active crisis or trauma situation, evoking emotion can, in fact, cause harm, not just to those directly involved, but to the community as well. She added that asking “what happened” or “how do you feel” after a traumatic event can be harmful to children and adults. She said it is common knowledge in the crisis community that people need to process what happened with safe people and/or experts in order to consolidate it correctly in the brain and memory.

Finally, she told a story about a girl who had an object fall from a building and hit her on the head, causing serious damage. For the girl, the trauma came from seeing it reflected in everyone’s faces rather than from the injury. Howard cautioned that reporters who reflect and exacerbate the trauma in their stories could inadvertently become part of
the trauma itself. She said she would expect that people would have a negative valence toward the media if this happened.

That turned out to be the case for the parents and students I interviewed. Most had a negative opinion of the media afterward, but for different reasons. The students were most upset by what they perceived as “lies” in news stories. The parents were upset by the media’s intrusiveness or by ways reporters conducted themselves which the parents perceived as untrustworthy. The most egregious examples were reported by Danielle as overzealous reporters used multiple deceptive methods to try to get interviews or intrude on the family’s privacy.

In summary, the questionable actions by reporters directly involved with this study stemmed from ambition, mostly. Wanting to scoop other news organizations or advance their own careers seemed to be highly motivational and may have led them to do things they might not otherwise. But there was an equal amount of ethical balance coming from other places in the newsrooms that corrected the questionable actions and pulled everyone back toward doing their jobs as well as they could with the least amount of harm.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

This study endeavored to fill in the gap between ethical guidelines which first state, “Don’t interview children at the scene of a traumatic event,” and then continue with, “But if you do…” The overarching conclusion of this study is there should be a full stop after the first statement: Do not interview children at the scene of a traumatic event. What this study can contribute to the existing literature is why that is important and how it can be taught and applied in scholastic journalism programs and workplace training. I will do this by addressing each research question. It should be noted that research questions two and three will be addressed together because they both speak to educating journalists about the role trauma plays in making ethical decisions. I will provide a module that could be used in college journalism courses or in newsrooms to teach the essentials of trauma as they apply to ethical reporting.

RQ1: What reasons do journalists indicate matter when making ethical decisions in traumatic situations?

The most important theme that applies to this research question is what the reporters said about their relationship to the community, the families directly involved in the shooting, and to each other. Certain aspects will be highlighted below as examples.

Stretching across several themes in the lived experience of reporters and editors was how connected they felt to the community and the importance of being respectful. Almost all of them mentioned this at some point, and it was a strong theme for a few. It affected the decisions they made about doing their job.
One way this manifested was from the dual relationships or conflicts of interest that were present. For example, the fact that Danielle worked for the RDR affected both how the journalists felt about the shooting as well as the decisions they made. Some journalists felt knowing Danielle personally gave them more leeway to report things because they had an inside track while others saw this as a reason to exercise even more care when vetting facts before publishing.

Several journalists knew people directly involved with the shooting (i.e. Danielle or The Shooter’s family) and several RDR staffers had children who attended Bradford-Mitchell at the time. These relationships increased how emotional the situation was which affected their ability to do their jobs. Mateo mentioned he saw reporters crying at the mall and during the memorial service. He said that he had to stuff it down and separate his emotions completely so that he could do his job.

Being local versus an out-of-towner also affected their decisions. The locals all felt an increased responsibility to the people they were reporting about, while the out-of-towners seemed to be more focused on the story. An example might be the RDR’s decision not to publish any information that had not been verified, leaving them with a four-sentence breaking news story on the day the shooting happened. On the other hand, the BCP team was willing to publish rumors, some of which proved to be true (e.g. the shooter’s identity) and some of which proved to be false (e.g. that Noah was the bully).

Dylan remembers watching the out-of-towners do things he thought were unethical, such as looking at the shooter’s social media accounts on Bradford-Mitchell students’ phones and “swarming” parents and children in the vicinity for interviews. And Danielle
and Noah remember the out-of-towners chasing them to the door of their home and using cameras on poles to try to get images of Noah in the hospital.

Additionally, several journalists talked about their values system as the guiding light for how they made decisions in the moment. For example, Ryan credited the stories he heard from his father, a former SWAT cop and State Trooper, about staying calm during crises and remembering to care about the people involved. And those qualities were, in fact, what others credited him with. Redford talked about how Buddhism influences his decisions as a journalist because it increases his awareness in the moment of his actions as a reporter and as a person. The two are not mutually exclusive and it allows him to stay on a more ethical path. Dylan said simply that his morals came from how he was raised and that there are certain things that come before work, one of which is how he treats other people. For him, making ethical choices in the moment did not require conscious decisions, he just “knew” what he should do.

Finally, several journalists talked about this story being a chance to improve their career opportunities. In some cases, such as Parker, this meant running hard and fast to try and scoop the competitors. For Harper, it was initially supposed to be career-boosting until she realized her mother’s personal connection to the shooter’s family, which ended up trumping her ambition and shaping her decisions differently. And for Lillian, she recognized that this should have been viewed as a big career break, but instead she found it very stressful and she made more tempered decisions based on that.

There were several classic ethical dilemmas present in the journalists’ stories. For example, should they capture images of people who are obviously upset? Mateo and the
photographer from the BCP did, while Dylan and Lillian did not. Should they publish private information about the shooter or other minors? The BCP and national news teams did, the RDR team did not. Should they intrude into private people’s lives to get the story? The BCP team did in the case of the teacher, the RDR team did not. Should they sensationalize the story? Arguably, no one did. The fact that The Shooter was not vilified speaks to the restraint the news teams had in this context.

In general, almost all journalists initially said they did not overtly think about ethics in the moment, they just acted. It did come up during conversations with editors and directors back in the newsroom and these conversations affected decisions in the field. Almost everyone was able to explain their personal ethical and moral compass during the interview and connect it back to the choices they made during this incident. So, there were strong examples of both ethical and questionable choices in hindsight, and there were strong ethical and moral platforms upon which many of the journalists in this study were standing.

RQ2: What do journalists need to know about trauma to make informed decisions about interviewing at the scene of school shootings?

RQ3: What should be covered in college journalism curriculum and workplace training to prepare journalists to be better informed about how their jobs can impact the people affected by a traumatic incident?

These two research questions will be addressed together because RQ2 leads to RQ3. The first and most important thing that journalists need to know about trauma is that they don’t know about trauma. By this, I do not mean that journalists know nothing about trauma
itself, because everyone has a basic understanding of trauma’s presence and effects. What I do mean is that they cannot know what kind of traumas might be impacting the children they are covering, aside from whatever is present in the current situation, and children’s experience with previous trauma might be impacting how they are handling the current one.

As noted in the literature review, Toxic Stress is the accumulation of high levels of stress in a child’s life that is not lessened by the support of a caring, safe adult such as a caregiver or a counselor (Center on the Developing Child, 2015). Too much stress in a child’s life that is not alleviated by caring, safe adults can lead to Toxic Stress which can lead to lifelong illnesses, mental health issues and even early death. This is important for journalists to understand because acutely traumatic events such as school shootings are an Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE). Figure 6-1 shows the prevalence of different kinds of ACEs in the general population (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016).

![Prevalence of Individual ACEs](image-url)

**Fig. 6-1: Prevalence of ACEs (Image Credit Center for Disease Control and Prevention)**
Figure 6-2 depicts the relationship between ACEs and poor life outcomes. As the number of ACEs a child has experienced increases, the child may experience an increasing number of poor life outcomes (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016).

![Diagram](image.png)

Fig. 6-2: Relationship between ACEs and poor life outcomes (Image Credit Center for Disease Control and Prevention)

This combination leads to Toxic Stress. The combination of ACEs, poor life outcomes and Toxic Stress leads to what researchers call cumulative trauma, as was introduced in the literature review (Center on the Developing Child, 2015). Simply counting the number of traumas a person has experienced might be an indicator of their general well-being and of the increasing possibility of negative outcomes in their health (Anda et al., 2006; Hodges et al., 2013), development (USDHHS, 1999; Cloitre et al., 2009; van der Kolk et al., 2009; Sar, 2011; Stolbach et al., 2013) and relationships (Anda et al., 2006; Hodges et al., 2013). Figure 6-3 depicts this relationship.
It seems that it should not be worth endangering a child’s wellbeing by increasing or adding to the stress they are experiencing after a potentially traumatic event. A school shooting incident is an ACE. Re-telling or re-experiencing the trauma might exacerbate the stress. The child may or may not already be experiencing Toxic Stress based on their home life and coping mechanisms, of which the journalist has no information. The possibility of the combination of the potentially traumatic event plus dangerous levels of stress and the presence of cumulative trauma leads me to the conclusion that children younger than teenagers should not be interviewed at the scene of a school shooting or other acutely
potentially traumatic events.

This begets the ethical dilemma that underlies this study: how do journalists balance the competing values of informing the public versus minimizing harm to children. The answer is simple: journalists can interview children, just not at the scene or perhaps even in the hours and days following a potentially traumatic event. If journalists are willing to wait until the child has had every opportunity to heal from the trauma through the loving support of caring adults and/or through counselling, interviewing children to hear their stories and inform the public about their experiences is not only possible, it is important.

As was evidenced in the previous chapter, experts will tell journalists that hearing children’s voices is important and that children’s voices are not always given the time and quality they deserve in the public sphere (Gaffney, 2016, personal correspondence; Howard, 2016, personal correspondence; Simpson, 2016, personal correspondence). And that children have agency and oftentimes can decide if and when to participate (Simpson, 2016, personal correspondence). So, children can be interviewed. The real question is when and how.

The first two, and most important, guidelines speak to what has already been covered: (1) do not interview children at the scene of a traumatic event; and (2) it might be necessary to wait hours, and possibly days, following the traumatic event before interviewing children. This leads to two conclusions:

• It may be possible to interview older teenagers both at the scene and in the hours or days following a potentially traumatic event. Discretion should be taken when selecting teenagers to interview. Older teenagers are safer than younger teenagers,
for example.

- Capturing images of the scene, which might include images of children, shows what the experience was like, and is a way of informing the public without directly exposing children to further harm. Care should be taken not to capture images that would cause the children further embarrassment or embed a memory of the worst moment of their lives. Lillian displayed this kind of judgment when she made the choice to take lots of pictures, but not to include children’s faces.

Next, instead of interviewing children, there are quite a few things listed in the guidelines that journalists can inform the public about without increasing harm to children. The public will want to know what happened and will be seeking sources of information and it is the journalist’s job to provide it. None of the following suggestions will come as a surprise to journalists, they are Journalism 101. But since interviewing children can put the children at risk for greater harm, calling attention to alternative solutions can be helpful.

Next, journalists need to do a better job with informed consent. It should not be viewed as a formality, it is a very important step from an ethical standpoint as well as in consideration of the child’s well-being. Seeking permission from someone who knows the child well and can determine if the child is well enough to answer questions is imperative. Remember, the child’s experience with previous traumas and their level of Toxic Stress is invisible to journalists. The only way to identify children who have healed enough from the trauma to be interviewed is to consult with the people who know them best.

However, that conclusion is provided with one big caveat: the child’s caregivers’ wellbeing must also be taken into consideration. As was evident in the lived experience
stories from the parents in this study, they are also traumatized by the event, and may not be able to immediately understand the possible consequences for their child. It is therefore the recommendation of this study that the younger the children involved, the longer the reporter should wait before seeking informed consent. For very young children, it may be years before they are well enough to participate, and seeking consent sooner increases their risk of harm. For older teenagers, their ability to consent and be interviewed may be immediate or a matter of minutes or hours later.

Although journalists are likely to know (or be told) what their newsroom’s policies are about interviewing and publishing information about children, they may not know the policies of the location of the traumatic event. For example, schools have much more rigid policies about protecting students’ identities than airports. Seeking information from official sources can seem very frustrating if the policies are not well understood. For example, Lillian was angry at the school’s refusal to share an uplifting music video they made to help the students recover from the Bradford-Mitchell shooting. What Lillian was probably not aware of were the policies that had nothing to do with the shooting which protect students’ privacy. Parents often have to give explicit permission for their child’s image to be used publicly. If those permissions were not in place, the school would not be able to release the video even if they wanted to. But following potentially traumatic events, privacy is likely to be even more closely protected.

Another area where journalists might be underprepared is understanding what children’s developmental capabilities are at different ages. There is a section in the proposed guidelines that aims to shed light on what age-appropriate interviewing might
look like. Remember, what is at stake is minimizing harm to the child. Even interviewing a young child a year after the potentially traumatic event can carry risks. Minimizing those risks is important.

Using this study as an example, it is clear from the lived experiences of the students that I interviewed that the traumatic effects they experienced were noticeable and serious months and years after the shooting. These students ranged in age from 10-12 when the shooting occurred and were 12-14 when I interviewed them. I used my background and training as a counselor to look for signs of distress during the interview and acted accordingly. But most journalists likely do not have a degree in counseling psychology and may not know what to look for or what to do if they observe distress during an interview.

Referring back to the three levels of stress covered in the literature review, it may not be clear to a journalist when a child’s stress level moves from positive levels to tolerable levels to toxic levels. If the child is avoiding their thoughts and emotions related to the event (like Brayden appeared to be in this study), asking them to talk about the experience could have serious consequences. Similarly, if a child has a history of serious trauma-related mental health issues (such as Olivia did in this study), re-experiencing the trauma during an interview could lead to a spike in their symptoms.

Most children who experience a school shooting will have a period of extreme distress and may experience some developmental or psychological issues for the weeks or months following the event. Reminders of the potentially traumatic event in a child who is still in the stress response state can activate the stress response system. The effects of being pressured by the media for interviews and re-experiencing the stress and trauma as they
answer questions could add to what is already a traumatizing situation and exacerbate negative outcomes for the child’s health, development and wellbeing.

**Proposed Ethical Guidelines for Reporting from the Scene of an Acute Traumatic Event Involving Children**

Based on the results from the interviews and lived experiences of reporters, parents and students, and also taking into consideration pre-existing ethical guidelines such as the Society of Professional Journalists code and the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma guidelines, I recommend the following new guidelines for journalists who are reporting from the scene of an acutely traumatic event involving children, such as a school shooting. Special thanks to the three experts on journalism and trauma that I interviewed, Donna Gaffney, Roger Simpson and Jaime Howard, who weighed in on what they thought should be included in the guidelines.

The guidelines can be roughly chunked into six groupings: at the scene, in the immediate aftermath, informed consent, policies, developmentally age-appropriate guidelines, and debriefing. After I list the guidelines in their entirety, I will offer evidence from this study to support each grouping.

1. Do not interview children *at the scene* of a potentially traumatic event. Remember that days, weeks or years following a potentially traumatic event, retelling the story can trigger a traumatic reaction. If the child or teenager becomes upset or appears distressed, it may be best to stop the interview for a break or finish it another day. The child’s well-being is more important than your questions in that moment.
2. It may be necessary to *wait hours or possibly days* to interview children following the potentially traumatic event.
3. In the immediate aftermath, *instead of interviewing children*:
   a. Use the time to describe the scene and interview official interview sources.
   b. Find people who have experienced something similar in the past who can
tell their story as a means of shedding light on the situation.

c. Educate the public about ways they can help.

d. Educate the public about things they might be afraid of based on the circumstances of the traumatic event. For example, if there has been a cluster of teen suicides, parents will want to know how to tell if their child might be vulnerable.

e. Interview experts. They can help make sense of the situation without endangering any of the people directly involved.

4. **Informed consent is more than just a formality**, it is a very important step from an ethical standpoint as well as in consideration of the child’s well-being.

   a. Interviewing teenagers may be possible in the hours following the potentially traumatic event if they have been judged by a knowledgeable adult to be well enough to interview, with consultation from parents or other adults who know the teenager well and with the teenager’s consent after explaining the possible consequences.

   b. Remember that parents are also affected by the potentially traumatic event. Their ability to consent may be affected in the minutes and hours following.

   c. When asking for consent, explain who you are, what news organization you work for, and how and when the interview material might be used.

   d. Explain to the parent and children what the possible positive and negative consequences might be. It is important for them to consider the full import of their decision to participate. Remember that negative consequences for a child may be different than what you’d expect. Think about what might embarrass or hurt the child. Allow them to ask questions about the possible consequences.

   e. Generally, the older the teenager, the fewer checks need to be in place to assess their well-being. A thirteen-year-old’s ability to make informed consent decisions is different from a seventeen-year-old’s ability.

5. **Know your newsroom’s policies about interviewing children.**

6. Find out the policies about interviewing children if the scene is a school, hospital, daycare or other professional facility serving children.

   a. Be aware that oftentimes, no interviewing or access to children will be permitted onsite.

   b. Requests should be made to official sources on site for assistance identifying teenagers who might be well enough to interview or to identify younger children you can contact days or weeks later to interview.

   c. Be aware that there are likely policies involving confidentiality which may stipulate that they cannot provide names or contact information.

7. **Adhere to the following age-appropriate interview guidelines depending on the child’s age and developmental level.**

   a. The location of the interview is very important. Select a location that is private, safe and is not distracting.

   b. Younger children should have a parent or guardian present who can look out for their best interests. Older children and teenagers might be able to be
interviewed alone if the parent or guardian and the child give informed consent.

c. Younger children should participate in shorter interviews. Plan for less than 15 minutes for elementary-aged children, up to 20 minutes for middle school-aged children and around 30 minutes for teenagers.

d. Interview children individually if possible. Children may focus on each other rather than the interviewer and may be uncomfortable speaking up if their peers are present. It is hard to predict what interpersonal dynamics may be at play.

e. Remind children that they are the experts on their experience and there are no right or wrong answers. The younger a child is, the more they are likely to try and give you the answer they think you want to hear.

f. Children younger than 13 should not be relied upon to provide factual accounts about what happened. Developmentally, they make sense of and heal from potentially traumatic events in a way that does not always adhere to strict fact-based accounts. Sense-making in younger children can include magical thinking, and may overlap reality with aspects of fantasy from other things they have been exposed to.

g. Ask open-ended questions.

h. Avoid “why” questions.

i. Avoid questions that imply blame or could be perceived as judgmental.

j. For younger children, ask one simple, straight-forward question at a time. Teenagers are more capable of responding to multiple questions, but trauma can affect this. It is always better to keep things simple.

k. Reflect back what you heard the child say and give them a chance to correct any errors.

l. Be encouraging, open and interested in what they have to say.

m. Find out as much as you can about the event before conducting the interview.

8. Debrief with the parent and child after the interview.

a. Tell them whether you are likely to use all of their interview or only parts. Explain to them how you will decide which parts to use. If time permits, reviewing the story with them and asking permission to use their input as it is presented is the most ethical approach.

b. Explain to them when and where they might expect to see their interview.

c. Give them your contact information so they can follow up if need be.

d. Get back in touch with them after the interview runs to see how they are doing and give them another chance to ask questions. If the interview is not presented in a manner they expected, they may be feeling angry, upset or violated. Giving them a chance to express their feelings and ask questions can go a long way toward clearing up misperceptions and misunderstandings. It is important to realize that very few children have any idea of how the mechanics of journalism works behind-the-scenes. They will not know about column inches, word limits or time limitations. Helping
them understand your decision-making process can help them begin to rebuild trust.

9. After the initial rush to report the facts when mistakes are inevitable, go back and visibly and obviously correct misinformation. Be sure the public knows when what is known changes. Clarify rumors and misperceptions.

Do not interview children at the scene, and consider waiting hours or days before conducting interviews with children.

Developmentally, after children experience a traumatic event, they need to be comforted by caring adults so that they feel supported, loved and safe. It is in the safety of loving, caring adults that they can heal from the trauma, make sense of it, and put it away into deeper memory storage in the brain. Without this loving, safe bubble in which to heal, the traumatic event could stall in their brains, creating a fear memory. Not fully and safely processing the traumatic event could allow the fear memories to linger for long periods of time, causing the child to experience a heightened stress response and possibly toxic levels of stress.

It was clear from my interviews that 2.5 years after the shooting occurred, each of the parents and students still displayed some level of a stress response when telling their story. Almost every parent cried, for example. Almost every child was still angry. Whether or not this long-lasting stress response had anything to do with the media, the shooting seems to have left a scar that still had not healed for most people.

It was also clear from the interviews that some people actively sought help from therapists and others did not. Charlotte’s family, for example, sought therapeutic support from a variety of sources, as a family and as individuals, and talked about what happened a lot as a family. Charlotte cried during the interview, which would seem to indicate that
despite all the assistance they received, the traumatic memory is still somewhat fresh and easily triggered for her. Many other families indicated they did not take advantage of the therapists who were present after the shooting and quite a few said flat out that they tried to put it behind them as quickly as possible.

Because there was still evidence of trauma apparent from almost every parent and student 2.5 years later, I argue that the immediate aftermath should be dedicated to healing. Victims need time and space to process. Media interviews can be perceived as intruding into this sacred time, forcing issues that victims are not ready to deal with, and taking them away from the safe, loving healing space. Instead, more stories should focus on the importance of healing and on educating the public about trauma, Toxic Stress, and their life-long effects. Propelling victims to seek help and telling them why they need help is a critical role the media could play in the aftermath.

**Immediate aftermath**

Building on the idea that reporters could assist the public by propelling them as much as possible toward help with healing, there are a number of other things they can also do in the aftermath. It was clear from my interviews that many of my participants became obsessed with watching the news for updates. Some parents talked about trying to hide their obsessive news-consuming from their kids, and most of the kids reported increasing feelings of anger and distrust as they absorbed what was being reported. The audience is there and is craving information. What reporters could do, and which would be of huge benefit to those most affected, is educate them in ways they might not expect. Bring in
experts on trauma to talk about what parents might see in their kids, or in themselves, and what they can do about it.

For example, after a school shooting everyone wants to know why. Although this question may not be formally answered until weeks, months or years later, or possibly never, reporters can talk about other school shootings that have occurred and what reasons were uncovered. It can help to provide context and food-for-thought to people who are craving information. Similarly, what could be of extreme value to the victims is hearing directly from people who have also experienced the same kind of trauma. Listening to the stories and taking advice from someone who lived through a school shooting can go a long way toward helping victims identify ways to heal and support services. Hearing a reporter say victims should seek counseling is very different from hearing a survivor talk about how counseling helped them. While victims need to be doing the hard work of healing in the aftermath, reporters should be doing the hard work of educating the public, clarifying rumors, bringing updates and providing ways people can both seek help and be of help to others.

Finally, as was discussed in Chapter 5, the experts in my study all recommended that reporters refrain from interviewing children at the scene (Gaffney, 2016, personal correspondence; Howard, 2016, personal correspondence; Simpson, 2016, personal correspondence). Reporters are generally not trained well enough to tell what kinds of traumatic symptoms a child might be experiencing. Jaime Howard provided therapy for children after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City and after the Sandy Hook school shooting in Newtown, CT. Regarding a reporter trying to determine who is “ok enough” to
interview, she said, “As a trained clinician, I might not know until I got in there and am
talking to the child for a little while, and talking to the parent to understand the child’s
premorbid functioning. So it would be really hard for a journalist to be able to assess who's
up to <being interviewed>” (Howard, personal correspondence, 2016). She encouraged
reporters to allow people to have their emotional moments in as much privacy as possible,
and to approach people for interviews after the immediate stress response has subsided.

Another important aspect to consider is the potential harm critical incident stress
debriefing (CISD) or psychological debriefing can do. CISD is a systematized, seven-
phase, form of small group processing developed in the 1990s to help first responders cope
after a traumatic event. Psychological debriefing is a shorter intervention which allows a
person or small group to process a traumatic event. There are many researchers who
suggest that this form of debriefing can be helpful (Hammond and Brooks, 2001; Mitchell
and Everly, 1993; Mitchell and Everly, 2001), with the caveat that it is provided by a
trained clinician and all of the steps are followed appropriately.

However, recent evidence has been found that this type of debriefing either has no
effect on post-traumatic symptoms or can be harmful (Carlier et al., 1998; Mayou et al.,
2000; National Center for PTSD, 2016; Van Emmerik et al., 2002). Howard talked about
this in our interview saying, “<CISD> is pretty widely condemned as being harmful. You
don't want to encourage people to retell their narrative of a traumatic event before it's had
a chance to consolidate” (Howard, personal correspondence, 2016).

Although reporters conducting interviews should not be conflated with a CISD-like
model of systematized processing, there are some aspects of the criticism that are relevant
here. For example, a reporter asking questions about a child’s experience could veer into
debriefing territory because both are asking the subject to recount or re-tell their story.

In their *Tips for Media Covering Traumatic Events*, the National Center for Child
Traumatic Stress (NCCTS) cautions: “Reporters should bear in mind that reliving painful
events and details, with a focus on loss and suffering, may increase the likelihood of
traumatic reactions months or years after the original events” (NCCTS, 2017). One
criticism of debriefing is that for individuals who are in a highly aroused state in the
aftermath of a traumatic event, the limited amount of processing, verbalizing and re-telling
in short debriefing sessions could cause their arousal levels to increase rather than decrease.
In addition, it can be hard for trained clinicians to detect increasing arousal in short-term
or group debriefing sessions. So, it would be unlikely that reporters would recognize the
symptoms or know what to do in the short contact time that constitutes a typical media
interview.

**Informed consent & Debrief**

Many reporters seem to fall into the rationalization that they got permission from
the parent so it must be ok to interview the children. Informed consent is not just quickly
asking, “Is it ok if I interview you?” It is a process through which the reporter educates
their potential source about the possible positive and negative consequences the source
might face as well as the ways their interview might be used.

It was clear that in the immediate aftermath of the Bradford-Mitchell shooting,
informed consent by the reporters I interviewed consisted of going from one parent to the
next asking to interview their child. It was a rushed and hurried process as they worked hard to gather information so stories could run quickly. There seemed to be little to no educational information provided that helped parents understand the possible consequences of their consent, and many of the parents I interviewed either noticed their children’s angry reactions to their press interactions or felt angry themselves. Better information up front or some type of debrief afterward could have alleviated some of these bad feelings.

Taking the time to go through this type of involved conversation with children at a chaotic scene may seem laughable or impossible. The NCCTS (2017) lists the following as the rights parents and children have when considering whether to consent to an interview. Reflecting on informed consent from the perspective of the interview subjects helps shed light on the importance of this step for reporters.

- Choose whether or not to talk to a reporter.
- Ask the journalist what questions s/he will ask you before agreeing to an interview.
- Talk to one journalist and turn down another.
- Stop the interview at any point.
- Refuse to answer a question.
- Say no to any topic you don’t wish to discuss, without justifying anything.
- Correct an interviewer if his/her assumption about the situation is wrong.
- Postpone talking to a journalist—say “Sorry, not now, but maybe in the future.”
- Be treated with respect.
- Ask to have a friend or parent with you.
- Refuse to be filmed or photographed, even if you have agreed to an interview.
- Ask the reporter to read back your quotes to make sure they are accurate.

It was obvious in my conversations with the students that most of them were angry at the way the reporters used their interviews. For example, Jackson and Amelia talked about how the CNN news team teased their interview before a break by saying something along the lines of “next we will hear from the shooter’s friend.” It made both Jackson and
Amelia uncomfortable at the time, as they had agreed to do the interview because Jackson was an eyewitness, not because he was The Shooter’s friend. Similarly, Noah was very upset that the media chopped apart an interview with his cousin, and used what she said out of context. All of the students either noticed or were upset by the fact that not all parts of their interview were used, leaving them questioning the “truthfulness” of the media.

These types of issues could easily have been avoided if the reporters had done a more thorough job with informed consent at the beginning or had followed-up to debrief later. If the students had been told that only parts of their interview would be used, they would know to expect that when seeing how their interview was published. If the reporters had followed up after the story ran to ask the students what they thought, they might have had a chance to address the students’ anger and mistrust by explaining how journalism works behind the scenes and correcting misinformation.

**Policies**

This section is more straightforward in its recommendations, and could be perceived as common sense. Yet there was evidence in my study that indicates this is important for reporters to understand. For example, by law, school officials are not allowed to release information about their students. There is no chance that a reporter could reasonably expect that a school would provide names and contact information for victims or eyewitnesses, but several reporters did.

Both Lillian and Parker said they thought the school was unhelpful at best, and adversarial at worst. Lillian was somewhat angry at the way she was treated months after
the shooting occurred, for example, because she was not allowed to go into the school to film the gym after hours when no students were around. While technically Lillian probably could have been allowed to film the gym, she needed a better understanding of the policies the school had in place. If there was no policy that prevented her access, she could have pushed the point. If there were policies, she could have planned her stories better to comply with school personnel needs.

Similarly, when Parker was unable to get the school’s participation, he went around them to talk to the teacher’s union to get the names and contact information of the teachers who were involved. That is how he landed the only interview with John Masterson. But while this could be looked at as clever research on Parker’s part, it begs the question about whether this same information couldn’t have been learned and verified through other sources and witnesses. The teachers’ identities were not a secret and their contact information can usually be obtained through public records.

**Age-appropriate interviews**

From a developmental perspective, it is common understanding that younger children have different capacities than older children or adults. So, logically, it should follow that reporters need different techniques depending on the child’s age and developmental level. While most reporters probably have a good grasp on how to interview a five-year-old differently than a fifteen-year-old, many probably don’t have a good understanding of the developmental milestones that matter in this context.

For example, the students at BMS were around age 10-12 when the shooting
occurred. At this age, children are working on developing concrete cognitive skills and developing logic, but they do not have many skills in abstract thinking. This is important to understand because asking a child of that age to tell you what they saw and heard is one thing, but asking them to speculate on reasons why or on things that happened out of their immediate surroundings can be difficult. Children might freeze when asked questions that require abstract thinking because they literally have no idea, or they might parrot back what they have heard others say without really thinking it through themselves.

Similarly, the older a child gets, the more important peer relationships are. Interviewing a group of eight-year-olds together might be appropriate because their attention will mostly be fixated on the reporter, as it is when they fixate on the teacher in school. But interviewing a group of sixteen-year-olds together will be fraught with underlying relationships, rivalries, pressures, bullying, status and embarrassment or shame, which the reporter will likely know nothing about. Sixteen-year-olds might not speak up because they are afraid of what their peers might think of them. Or they might all follow the lead of the person who speaks first out of a need to feel safe in numbers and not stand out.

While it is not likely that reporters will become experts in children’s cognitive, emotional and behavioral development, there are some concrete guidelines that can help navigate these landmines. Interview younger children for shorter amounts of time because they do not have the capacity for long attention spans. Interview older children by themselves so they are free from the pressure of peers listening in. Asking open-ended questions of older children because they have the capacity for abstract thinking and ask
fact-based questions of younger children who can mostly only think concretely.

The ability for concrete versus abstract thinking was evident in the students I interviewed because they could not logically make sense of what was happening. None of them had a mental map that included a school shooting, so Brayden thought it was a drill, Olivia thought it was the speakers crackling, Jackson could not reconcile his friend The Shooter with The Shooter standing in front of him shooting his classmates, and Noah thought the school had exploded. Their brains did not have a way to process this event logically, so it filled in the gaps with other things that could explain it. Similarly, Brayden, Olivia and Jackson reacted to rush out the door to safety only after they saw other people rushing off the bleachers. Before that, they were frozen in time, their brains not correctly processing the danger they faced, and they were literally frozen in their seats.

I also saw evidence that the students didn’t really have a grasp on concrete things such as time. Even though most had a cell phone and were in places where there were clocks or watches present, they had different stories about how long different things took. Their brains were likely focused on dulling the trauma to some extent by dissociating, making time and their surroundings seem surreal. Although children aged 10-12 do have the capacity to report factually on events, experiencing a traumatic event can affect that, blurring things together and filling in gaps in their memory with things that make sense based on their previous life experiences. So even though children of this age typically may be interviewed to report factual information, it is not recommended that they be relied upon to do so immediately after a potentially traumatic event.
Training Module: Journalism and Trauma

It is in the hope of better educating journalists about how trauma affects children based on their previous life experiences, age and developmental levels, that I have prepared the following module about trauma. I believe it can be used in college journalism programs and for workplace training. It is copyrighted under a non-commercial Creative Commons license which allows it to be used widely. It contains the following information:

- Definition of Trauma
- Adverse Childhood Experiences
- Toxic Stress
- Long-term Trauma versus Single-event Trauma
- Emotional Trauma & Mental Health
- Self-check Quiz about Trauma
- Primary & Secondary Victims
- Dissociation
- Compounding Trauma
- Retraumatization
- Avoidance
- The Myth of Catharsis
- Ethical Guidelines

http://personal.psu.edu/ssk168/DissertationDefense/

It is my recommendation that journalists refrain from interviewing children at the scene of a potentially traumatic event, or possibly even in the hours or days following. It
may be necessary to wait weeks, months or years to interview children depending on their individual ability to heal from the trauma and stress involved. I also recommend that journalists use discretion when interviewing teenagers, and they are careful and mindful about seeking informed consent, with the knowledge that caregivers can be just as traumatized as their children. Finally, I recommend that journalists learn about and use developmentally appropriate interviewing techniques in order to minimize harm.

In short, it is the conclusion of this researcher that it is possible that journalists can both inform the public and minimize harm to children, but that the wellbeing of children throughout life should take precedence over getting the interview. There are many other ways the story can be told without putting children at risk and I hope that a deeper understanding of the effects of trauma on children may increase journalists’ awareness and change their decisions while reporting from the scene.
References

Note: Certain citations have been withheld from the reference list in order to protect confidentiality of sources.


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Hettinga, K., & Hardin, M. (2010). Student Editors Need Help in Learning How to Use...


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CONSENT FOR RESEARCH
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: *When Morality Matters Most: Interviewing children at the scene of a school shooting*
Principal Investigator: Shannon Kennan
203 Carnegie Building
University Park, PA 16803
814.822.0037
skennan@psu.edu

Advisor: Patrick Parsons
814.863.5678

We are asking you to be in a research study. This form gives you information about the research.

Whether or not you take part is up to you. You can choose not to take part. You can agree to take part and later change your mind. Your decision will not be held against you.

Please ask questions about anything that is unclear to you and take your time to make your choice.

Throughout the consent form, “you” always refers to the person who takes part in the research study.

1. **Why is this research study being done?**
This research is being done to investigate the impact of journalists interviewing people during very traumatic situations. I am interested to learn whether your presence has an effect on your interview subjects and, if so, what that effect is.
I am asking you to be in this research because you reported from the Bradford-Mitchell School shooting in January 2014, which was chosen as the case study. A school shooting is being used as the case study because it is a traumatic event that attracts a lot of media attention and lots of people are interviewed, but a different kind of traumatic event such as a natural disaster could also have been chosen.

Approximately 20-30 people will take part in this research study. Most will be from the area around the school and will include journalists, school personnel, mental health workers, parents and children. Several experts in the field of journalism and trauma will also be interviewed, these people reside in different parts of the country.

2. **What will happen in this research study?**

Your participation will consist of one interview which could last anywhere from 30-90 minutes. Before the interview, I will first explain the research project, the risks and benefits of participating, and I will ask for your consent to participate. It is important for you to know that you can choose not to participate and that you can choose to withdraw from the interview at any point and for any reason. Your participation (and your child’s) is entirely up to you.

These interviews and this research project are part of my PhD program and my dissertation research. After conducting all of the interviews, I will be looking at what each person said in comparison to what others said to look for patterns. These patterns will form the basis for two things: (1) recommendations to improve the journalism curriculum in colleges; and (2) recommendations for changes to policy for if, when, how and why journalists might conduct interviews in very traumatic situations.

3. **What are the risks and possible discomforts from being in this research study?**

There is a risk of loss of confidentiality if your information or your identity is obtained by someone other than the investigators, but precautions will be taken to prevent this from happening. The confidentiality of your electronic data created by you or by the researchers will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.
To maintain confidentiality, I would like to assign you a pseudonym. The pseudonym will be used in all documents related to this project in order to protect your privacy as much as possible. What pseudonym would you like to use?

The most important risk related to your participation is the risk of retraumatization. Because the shooting was a very traumatic event, remembering it and talking about it could cause you to feel stressed, upset, depressed or anxious. Feeling this way is normal when talking about an event like this because it was so scary at the time. But if your feelings begin to feel more than you are comfortable with or can handle, please let me know immediately.

Just so you know, I have a master’s degree in counseling psychology and I will also be gauging the amount of stress I feel that you are under. If I feel like the interview is getting to be too much for you to handle, I may also choose to end the interview in order to protect your well-being. I have also collected a list of names and organizations in Small City where you can go for help if you need follow-up support.

4. What are the possible benefits from being in this research study?
   4a. What are the possible benefits to you?

   By contrast, there is evidence that indicates that being interviewed can help people by allowing you to tell your story your way. Some people believe that not talking about it can be detrimental to your well-being because talking about it can help move where the traumatic memory is stored in the brain into a place where it is more locked away in “long-term storage.” It can also help you express your emotions related to the event and help you develop or improve coping mechanisms.

   4b. What are the possible benefits to others?

   The biggest goal of this study is to protect the wellbeing of people involved in traumatic situation, especially children. Through changing professional journalism practices and college journalism curriculum, it is my hope that more journalists will perform their jobs more informed about the role trauma plays in people’s lives and the risks that are created by interviewing people in traumatic situations.

5. What other options are available instead of being in this research study?

   Don’t forget that you may choose not to participate in this research.

6. How long will you take part in this research study?
If you agree to take part, it will take you about 30-90 minutes to complete this research study.

7. **How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected if you decide to take part in this research study?**

    Efforts will be made to limit the use and sharing of your personal research information to people who have a need to review this information.
    - A list that matches your name with your pseudonym will be kept in a password protected file in a Penn State file storage service called Box.
    - Your research records will be labeled with your pseudonym and will also be in Box.

    In the event of any publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

    I will do my best to keep your participation in this research study confidential to the extent permitted by law. However, it is possible that other people may find out about your participation in this research study. For example, the following people/groups may check and copy records about this research.
    - The Office for Human Research Protections in the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services
    - The Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies) and
    - The Office for Research Protections.

    Some of these records could contain information that personally identifies you. Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private. However, absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

8. **What are your rights if you take part in this research study?**

    Taking part in this research study is voluntary.
    - You do not have to be in this research.
    - If you choose to be in this research, you have the right to stop at any time.
    - If you decide not to be in this research or if you decide to stop at a later date, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled.
    - If I feel like the interview is getting to be too much for you to handle, I may also choose to end the interview in order to protect your well-being. I have also collected a list of names and organizations in Small City where you can go for help if you need follow-up support.

9. **If you have questions or concerns about this research study, whom should you call?**

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Please call the head of the research study (principal investigator), Shannon Kennan at 814.822.0037 if you:
  ▪ Have questions, complaints or concerns about the research.
  ▪ Believe you may have been harmed by being in the research study.

You may also contact the Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775, ORProtections@psu.edu if you:
  ▪ Have questions regarding your rights as a person in a research study.
  ▪ Have concerns or general questions about the research.
  ▪ You may also call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to offer input or to talk to someone else about any concerns related to the research.
  ▪ Have questions, complaints or concerns about the research.
  ▪ Believe you may have been harmed by being in the research study.

INFORMED CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN RESEARCH

Tell the researcher your decision regarding whether or not to participate in the research. OR Your participation implies your voluntary consent to participate in the research. Please keep or print a copy of this form for your records.
Appendix B: Informed Consent: Parent/Student

CONSENT FOR RESEARCH
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: When Morality Matters Most: Interviewing children at the scene of a school shooting
Principal Investigator: Shannon Kennan
203 Carnegie Building
University Park, PA 16803
814.822.0037
skennan@psu.edu

Advisor: Patrick Parsons
814.863.5678

We are asking you to be in a research study. This form gives you information about the research.

Whether or not you take part is up to you. You can choose not to take part. You can agree to take part and later change your mind. Your decision will not be held against you.

Please ask questions about anything that is unclear to you and take your time to make your choice.

Some of the people who are eligible to take part in this research study may not be able to give consent because they are less than 18 years of age (a minor). Instead we will ask their parent(s)/guardian(s) to give permission for their participation in the study, and we may ask them to agree (give assent) to take part. Throughout the consent form, “you” always refers to the person who takes part in the research study.

1. Why is this research study being done?
This research is being done to investigate the impact of journalists interviewing people during very traumatic situations. I am interested to learn whether their presence has an
effect on their interview subjects and, if so, what that effect is.

I am asking you to be in this research because the Bradford-Mitchell School shooting in January 2014 was chosen as the case study through which to study this impact and you were identified by name in news stories written in the days following the incident. A school shooting is being used as the case study because it is a traumatic event that attracts a lot of media attention and lots of people are interviewed, but a different kind of traumatic event such as a natural disaster could also have been chosen.

Approximately 20-30 people will take part in this research study. Most will be from the area around the school and will include school personnel, mental health workers, parents and children. Several experts in the field of journalism and trauma will also be interviewed, these people reside in different parts of the country.

2. **What will happen in this research study?**

Your participation will consist of one interview which could last anywhere from 30-90 minutes. Before the interview, I will first explain the research project, the risks and benefits of participating, and I will ask for your consent to participate. If the interview will be with your child, I will ask for your consent and your child’s assent. It is important for you to know that you can choose not to participate and that you can choose to withdraw from the interview at any point and for any reason. Your participation (and your child’s) is entirely up to you.

These interviews and this research project are part of my PhD program and my dissertation research. After conducting all of the interviews, I will be looking at what each person said in comparison to what others said to look for patterns. These patterns will form the basis for two things: (1) recommendations to improve the journalism curriculum in colleges; and (2) recommendations for changes to policy for if, when, how and why journalists might conduct interviews in very traumatic situations.

3. **What are the risks and possible discomforts from being in this research study?**

There is a risk of loss of confidentiality if your information or your identity is obtained by someone other than the investigators, but precautions will be taken to prevent this from happening. The confidentiality of your electronic data created by you or by the researchers
will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

To maintain confidentiality, I would like to assign you (and your child) a pseudonym. The pseudonym will be used in all documents related to this project in order to protect your privacy as much as possible. What pseudonym would you like to use?

The most important risk related to your participation is the risk of retraumatization. Because the shooting was a very traumatic event, remembering it and talking about it could cause you to feel stressed, upset, depressed or anxious. Feeling this way is normal when talking about an event like this because it was so scary at the time. But if your feelings begin to feel more than you are comfortable with or can handle, please let me know immediately.

Just so you know, I have a master’s degree in counseling psychology and I will also be gauging the amount of stress I feel that you are under. If I feel like the interview is getting to be too much for you to handle, I may also choose to end the interview in order to protect your well-being. I have also collected a list of names and organizations in Small where you can go for help if you need follow-up support.

4. **What are the possible benefits from being in this research study?**
   4a. **What are the possible benefits to you?**

   By contrast, there is evidence that indicates that being interviewed can help people by allowing you to tell your story your way. Some people believe that *not* talking about it can be detrimental to your well-being because talking about it can help move where the traumatic memory is stored in the brain into a place where it is more locked away in “long-term storage.” It can also help your child express their emotions related to the event and help them develop or improve coping mechanisms. This is also true for the adults being interviewed as well.

   4b. **What are the possible benefits to others?**

   The biggest goal of this study is to protect the wellbeing of people involved in traumatic situation, especially children. Through changing professional journalism practices and college journalism curriculum, it is my hope that more journalists will perform their jobs more informed about the role trauma plays in people’s lives and the risks that are created by interviewing people in traumatic situations.

5. **What other options are available instead of being in this research study?**

   Don’t forget that you may choose not to participate in this research.
6. **How long will you take part in this research study?**

If you agree to take part, it will take you about 30-90 minutes to complete this research study.

7. **How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected if you decide to take part in this research study?**

   Efforts will be made to limit the use and sharing of your personal research information to people who have a need to review this information.
   - A list that matches your name with your pseudonym will be kept in a password protected file in a Penn State file storage service called Box.
   - Your research records will be labeled with your pseudonym and will also be in Box.

   In the event of any publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

   I will do my best to keep your participation in this research study confidential to the extent permitted by law. However, it is possible that other people may find out about your participation in this research study. For example, the following people/groups may check and copy records about this research.
   - The Office for Human Research Protections in the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services
   - The Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies) and
   - The Office for Research Protections.

   Some of these records could contain information that personally identifies you. Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private. However, absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

9. **What are your rights if you take part in this research study?**

   Taking part in this research study is voluntary.
   - You do not have to be in this research.
   - If you choose to be in this research, you have the right to stop at any time.
   - If you decide not to be in this research or if you decide to stop at a later date, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled.
   - If I feel like the interview is getting to be too much for you to handle, I may also choose to end the interview in order to protect your well-being. I
have also collected a list of names and organizations in Small where you
can go for help if you need follow-up support.

10. **If you have questions or concerns about this research study, whom should you call?**

Please call the head of the research study (principal investigator), Shannon Kennan at
814.822.0037 if you:
- Have questions, complaints or concerns about the research.
- Believe you may have been harmed by being in the research study.

You may also contact the Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775,
ORProtections@psu.edu if you:
- Have questions regarding your rights as a person in a research study.
- Have concerns or general questions about the research.
- You may also call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to
  offer input or to talk to someone else about any concerns related to the research.
- Have questions, complaints or concerns about the research.
- Believe you may have been harmed by being in the research study.

**INFORMED CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN RESEARCH**

Tell the researcher your decision regarding whether or not to participate in the research.

OR Your participation implies your voluntary consent to participate in the research.

Please keep or print a copy of this form for your records.

_____ Yes  _____ No

**Optional Storage of Video Recordings for Future Research**

In the main part of this study, we are collecting photos and/or audio/video recordings that
contain identifiable information from you. If you agree, the researchers would like to
maintain these photos and/or audio/video recordings for future research or to be used in
publications or at presentations.

- Any future studies may be helpful in understanding the impact of journalists
  interviewing people during very traumatic situations.
- It is unlikely that any future studies will have a direct benefit to you.

Your photos and/or audio/video recordings will be labeled with your name or pseudonym,
whichever you chose as your identifier.

- These recordings will be stored in a password protected file in a Penn State file storage
  service called Box.
- The length of time they will be used is a minimum of three years or until the research
  project is complete.
• You will be free to change your mind at any time.
• You should contact principal investigator if you wish to withdraw your permission for your recordings to be used for future research or publicly. The recordings will then be destroyed and not used for future research studies or shown publicly.

You should respond verbally to indicate what you want regarding the storage your photos and/or audio/video recordings for future research studies.

a. Your identifiable photos and/or audio/video recordings may be stored and used for future research studies to learn about the impact of journalists interviewing people during very traumatic situations.
   _____ Yes   _____ No

b. Your identifiable photos and/or audio/video recordings may be shared publicly at presentations or in publications.
   _____ Yes   _____ No
CONSENT FOR RESEARCH

The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: When Morality Matters Most: Interviewing children at the scene of a school shooting

Principal Investigator: Shannon Kennan
203 Carnegie Building
University Park, PA 16803
814.822.0037
skennan@psu.edu

Advisor: Patrick Parsons
814.863.5678

We are asking you to be in a research study. This form gives you information about the research.

Whether or not you take part is up to you. You can choose not to take part. You can agree to take part and later change your mind. Your decision will not be held against you.

Please ask questions about anything that is unclear to you and take your time to make your choice.

Throughout the consent form, “you” always refers to the person who takes part in the research study.

1. Why is this research study being done?
This research is being done to investigate the impact of journalists interviewing people during very traumatic situations. I am interested to learn whether your presence has an effect on your interview subjects and, if so, what that effect is.

I am asking you to be in this research because you are recognized as an expert in subjects
surrounding journalism and/or trauma. The Bradford-Mitchell School shooting is being used as the case study because it represents a traumatic event that attracted a lot of media attention and lots of people were interviewed, but a different kind of traumatic event such as a natural disaster could also have been chosen.

Approximately 20-30 people will take part in this research study. Most will be from the area around the school and will include journalists, school personnel, mental health workers, parents and children. Several experts in the field of journalism and trauma will also be interviewed, these people reside in different parts of the country.

2. What will happen in this research study?

Your participation will consist of one interview which could last anywhere from 30-90 minutes. Before the interview, I will first explain the research project, the risks and benefits of participating, and I will ask for your consent to participate. It is important for you to know that you can choose not to participate and that you can choose to withdraw from the interview at any point and for any reason. Your participation is entirely up to you.

These interviews and this research project are part of my PhD program and my dissertation research. After conducting all of the interviews, I will be looking at what each person said in comparison to what others said to look for patterns. These patterns will form the basis for two things: (1) recommendations to improve the journalism curriculum in colleges; and (2) recommendations for changes to policy for if, when, how and why journalists might conduct interviews in very traumatic situations.

3. What are the risks and possible discomforts from being in this research study?

There is a risk of loss of confidentiality if your information or your identity is obtained by someone other than the investigators, but precautions will be taken to prevent this from happening. The confidentiality of your electronic data created by you or by the researchers will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

To maintain confidentiality, I would like to offer you the opportunity to use a pseudonym. The pseudonym will be used in all documents related to this project in order to protect your privacy as much as possible. Would you like to use one?
The most important risk related to your participation is the risk of retraumatization. Because school shootings are very traumatic events, remembering them and talking about them could cause you to feel stressed, upset, depressed or anxious. Feeling this way is normal when talking about an event like this because it was so scary at the time. But if your feelings begin to feel more than you are comfortable with or can handle, please let me know immediately.

Just so you know, I have a master’s degree in counseling psychology and I will also be gauging the amount of stress I feel that you are under. If I feel like the interview is getting to be too much for you to handle, I may also choose to end the interview in order to protect your well-being. I have also collected a list of names and organizations in Small City where you can go for help if you need follow-up support.

4. **What are the possible benefits from being in this research study?**

4a. **What are the possible benefits to you?**

By contrast, there is evidence that indicates that being interviewed can help people by allowing you to tell your story your way. Some people believe that *not* talking about it can be detrimental to your well-being because talking about it can help move where the traumatic memory is stored in the brain into a place where it is more locked away in “long-term storage.” It can also help you express your emotions related to the event and help you develop or improve coping mechanisms.

4b. **What are the possible benefits to others?**

The biggest goal of this study is to protect the wellbeing of people involved in traumatic situation, especially children. Through changing professional journalism practices and college journalism curriculum, it is my hope that more journalists will perform their jobs more informed about the role trauma plays in people’s lives and the risks that are created by interviewing people in traumatic situations.

5. **What other options are available instead of being in this research study?**

Don’t forget that you may choose not to participate in this research.

6. **How long will you take part in this research study?**

If you agree to take part, it will take you about 30-90 minutes to complete this research study.

7. **How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected if you decide to take part in this research study?**
Efforts will be made to limit the use and sharing of your personal research information to people who have a need to review this information.

- A list that matches your name with your pseudonym will be kept in a password protected file in a Penn State file storage service called Box.
- Your research records will be labeled with your pseudonym and will also be in Box.

In the event of any publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

I will do my best to keep your participation in this research study confidential to the extent permitted by law. However, it is possible that other people may find out about your participation in this research study. For example, the following people/groups may check and copy records about this research.

- The Office for Human Research Protections in the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services
- The Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies) and
- The Office for Research Protections.

Some of these records could contain information that personally identifies you. Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private. However, absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

10. What are your rights if you take part in this research study?

Taking part in this research study is voluntary.

- You do not have to be in this research.
- If you choose to be in this research, you have the right to stop at any time.
- If you decide not to be in this research or if you decide to stop at a later date, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled.
- If I feel like the interview is getting to be too much for you to handle, I may also choose to end the interview in order to protect your well-being. I have also collected a list of names and organizations in Small City where you can go for help if you need follow-up support.

11. If you have questions or concerns about this research study, whom should you call?

Please call the head of the research study (principal investigator), Shannon Kennan at 814.822.0037 if you:

- Have questions, complaints or concerns about the research.
- Believe you may have been harmed by being in the research study.
You may also contact the Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775, ORPProtections@psu.edu if you:

- Have questions regarding your rights as a person in a research study.
- Have concerns or general questions about the research.
- You may also call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to offer input or to talk to someone else about any concerns related to the research.
- Have questions, complaints or concerns about the research.
- Believe you may have been harmed by being in the research study.

INFORMED CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN RESEARCH

Tell the researcher your decision regarding whether or not to participate in the research.

OR Your participation implies your voluntary consent to participate in the research.

Please keep or print a copy of this form for your records.

______ Yes ______ No

Optional Storage of Video Recordings for Future Research

In the main part of this study, we are collecting photos and/or audio/video recordings that contain identifiable information from you. If you agree, the researchers would like to maintain these photos and/or audio/video recordings for future research or to be used in publications or at presentations.

- Any future studies may be helpful in understanding the impact of journalists interviewing people during very traumatic situations.
- It is unlikely that any future studies will have a direct benefit to you.

Your photos and/or audio/video recordings will be labeled with your name or pseudonym, whichever you chose as your identifier.

- These recordings will be stored in a password protected file in a Penn State file storage service called Box.
- The length of time they will be used is a minimum of three years or until the research project is complete.
- You will be free to change your mind at any time.
- You should contact principal investigator if you wish to withdraw your permission for your recordings to be used for future research or publicly. The recordings will then be destroyed and not used for future research studies or shown publicly.

You should respond verbally to indicate what you want regarding the storage your photos and/or audio/video recordings for future research studies.
a. Your identifiable photos and/or audio/video recordings may be stored and used for future research studies to learn about the impact of journalists interviewing people during very traumatic situations.

_______ Yes   ______ No

b. Your identifiable photos and/or audio/video recordings may be shared publicly at presentations or in publications.

_______ Yes   ______ No
Appendix D: Informed Consent: School Personnel

CONSENT FOR RESEARCH
The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: *When Morality Matters Most: Interviewing children at the scene of a school shooting*
Principal Investigator: Shannon Kennan
203 Carnegie Building
University Park, PA 16803
814.822.0037
skennan@psu.edu

Advisor: Patrick Parsons
814.863.5678

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We are asking you to be in a research study. This form gives you information about the research.

Whether or not you take part is up to you. You can choose not to take part. You can agree to take part and later change your mind. Your decision will not be held against you.

Please ask questions about anything that is unclear to you and take your time to make your choice.

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Throughout the consent form, “you” always refers to the person who takes part in the research study.

1. **Why is this research study being done?**
   This research is being done to investigate the impact of journalists interviewing people during very traumatic situations. I am interested to learn whether your presence has an effect on your interview subjects and, if so, what that effect is.

   I am asking you to be in this research because you are employed by Bradford-Mitchell
School. The Bradford-Mitchell School shooting is being used as the case study because it represents a traumatic event that attracted a lot of media attention and lots of people were interviewed, but a different kind of traumatic event such as a natural disaster could also have been chosen.

Approximately 20-30 people will take part in this research study. Most will be from the area around the school and will include journalists, school personnel, mental health workers, parents and children. Several experts in the field of journalism and trauma will also be interviewed, these people reside in different parts of the country.

2. **What will happen in this research study?**

Your participation will consist of one interview which could last anywhere from 30-90 minutes. Before the interview, I will first explain the research project, the risks and benefits of participating, and I will ask for your consent to participate. It is important for you to know that you can choose not to participate and that you can choose to withdraw from the interview at any point and for any reason. Your participation is entirely up to you.

These interviews and this research project are part of my PhD program and my dissertation research. After conducting all of the interviews, I will be looking at what each person said in comparison to what others said to look for patterns. These patterns will form the basis for two things: (1) recommendations to improve the journalism curriculum in colleges; and (2) recommendations for changes to policy for if, when, how and why journalists might conduct interviews in very traumatic situations.

3. **What are the risks and possible discomforts from being in this research study?**

There is a risk of loss of confidentiality if your information or your identity is obtained by someone other than the investigators, but precautions will be taken to prevent this from happening. The confidentiality of your electronic data created by you or by the researchers will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology used. Absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

To maintain confidentiality, I would like to offer you the opportunity to use a pseudonym. The pseudonym will be used in all documents related to this project in order to protect your privacy as much as possible. Would you like to use one?
The most important risk related to your participation is the risk of retraumatization. Because school shootings are very traumatic events, remembering them and talking about them could cause you to feel stressed, upset, depressed or anxious. Feeling this way is normal when talking about an event like this because it was so scary at the time. But if your feelings begin to feel more than you are comfortable with or can handle, please let me know immediately.

Just so you know, I have a master’s degree in counseling psychology and I will also be gauging the amount of stress I feel that you are under. If I feel like the interview is getting to be too much for you to handle, I may also choose to end the interview in order to protect your well-being. I have also collected a list of names and organizations in Small City where you can go for help if you need follow-up support.

4. What are the possible benefits from being in this research study?
4a. What are the possible benefits to you?

By contrast, there is evidence that indicates that being interviewed can help people by allowing you to tell your story your way. Some people believe that not talking about it can be detrimental to your well-being because talking about it can help move where the traumatic memory is stored in the brain into a place where it is more locked away in “long-term storage.” It can also help you express your emotions related to the event and help you develop or improve coping mechanisms.

4b. What are the possible benefits to others?

The biggest goal of this study is to protect the wellbeing of people involved in traumatic situation, especially children. Through changing professional journalism practices and college journalism curriculum, it is my hope that more journalists will perform their jobs more informed about the role trauma plays in people’s lives and the risks that are created by interviewing people in traumatic situations.

5. What other options are available instead of being in this research study?

Don’t forget that you may choose not to participate in this research.

6. How long will you take part in this research study?

If you agree to take part, it will take you about 30-90 minutes to complete this research study.

7. How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected if you decide to take part in this research study?
Efforts will be made to limit the use and sharing of your personal research information to people who have a need to review this information.

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In the event of any publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

I will do my best to keep your participation in this research study confidential to the extent permitted by law. However, it is possible that other people may find out about your participation in this research study. For example, the following people/groups may check and copy records about this research.

- The Office for Human Research Protections in the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services
- The Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies) and
- The Office for Research Protections.

Some of these records could contain information that personally identifies you. Reasonable efforts will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private. However, absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

11. What are your rights if you take part in this research study?

Taking part in this research study is voluntary.

- You do not have to be in this research.
- If you choose to be in this research, you have the right to stop at any time.
- If you decide not to be in this research or if you decide to stop at a later date, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled.
- If I feel like the interview is getting to be too much for you to handle, I may also choose to end the interview in order to protect your well-being. I have also collected a list of names and organizations in Small City where you can go for help if you need follow-up support.

12. If you have questions or concerns about this research study, whom should you call?

Please call the head of the research study (principal investigator), Shannon Kennan at 814.822.0037 if you:

- Have questions, complaints or concerns about the research.
- Believe you may have been harmed by being in the research study.
You may also contact the Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775, ORProtections@psu.edu if you:

- Have questions regarding your rights as a person in a research study.
- Have concerns or general questions about the research.
- You may also call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to offer input or to talk to someone else about any concerns related to the research.
- Have questions, complaints or concerns about the research.
- Believe you may have been harmed by being in the research study.

INFORMED CONSENT TO TAKE PART IN RESEARCH

Tell the researcher your decision regarding whether or not to participate in the research.

OR Your participation implies your voluntary consent to participate in the research.

Please keep or print a copy of this form for your records.

______ Yes  ______ No

Optional Storage of Video Recordings for Future Research

In the main part of this study, we are collecting photos and/or audio/video recordings that contain identifiable information from you. If you agree, the researchers would like to maintain these photos and/or audio/video recordings for future research or to be used in publications or at presentations.

- Any future studies may be helpful in understanding the impact of journalists interviewing people during very traumatic situations.
- It is unlikely that any future studies will have a direct benefit to you.

Your photos and/or audio/video recordings will be labeled with your name or pseudonym, whichever you chose as your identifier.

- These recordings will be stored in a password protected file in a Penn State file storage service called Box.
- The length of time they will be used is a minimum of three years or until the research project is complete.
- You will be free to change your mind at any time.
- You should contact principal investigator if you wish to withdraw your permission for your recordings to be used for future research or publicly. The recordings will then be destroyed and not used for future research studies or shown publicly.

You should respond verbally to indicate what you want regarding the storage your photos and/or audio/video recordings for future research studies.
a. Your identifiable photos and/or audio/video recordings may be stored and used for future research studies to learn about the impact of journalists interviewing people during very traumatic situations.

______ Yes  ______ No

b. Your identifiable photos and/or audio/video recordings may be shared publicly at presentations or in publications.

______ Yes  ______ No
Appendix E: Interview Question: Reporters

These questions serve as the basis for the interview however I will ask follow-up questions as needed to fully explore what the participant is sharing. Items in *italics* are notes for the interviewer. Items in **bold** are questions for the participant.

*Write a description of the environment. Take photos, videos.*

*Complete informed consent.*

So… tell me a bit about your journalism career. Where have you worked?

What are your favorite stories to cover?

Why did you decide to be a journalist?

What do you think of my thesis?

From your perspective what would you add or change? What do you think I need to know in order to fully and successfully address my thesis?

Have you worked at the scene of a school shooting? If so, which one and in what capacity?

What it was like? Can you describe it?

Why did you do what you did? How did you figure out what to do?

How did the chaos affect your ability to do your job well?

How did you know how to handle traumatic scenes like school shootings? Where did you get your training, knowledge or experience? How the heck did you know what to do?

What do you think is the bottom line for journalists to know before reporting from highly traumatic scenes that involve kids?

What do you wish you had known about trauma? About kids? About school shootings?

What rules do you think should be in place to help reporters navigate traumatic scenes and report in an ethical manner?

What gets in the way of reporters being able to do that?
How do you think school shootings compare to other highly traumatic scenes such as natural disasters or major accident scenes? Would the rules for journalists be similar or different depending on the type of traumatic event?

From your perspective, what do you hear from the kids and family members, school personnel or the community about the media presence?

Do you think the reporters generally handle interviews with kids well? Why or why not?

Do specific kinds of reporters or interviews stand out as being better or worse in traumatic scenes for some reason? Why?

Do you think being interviewed generally helps or hurts the kids? Why?

If you could tell the world of reporters how to do their jobs better, what would you tell them?

Thanks so much for talking with me. This really helped me understand what it was like from your perspective. I will be talking to other reporters to hear their perspectives as well. Is there someone you suggest I should talk to?

Any last words of advice you have before we finish up?
Appendix F: Interview Questions: Parents

These questions serve as the basis for the interview however I will ask follow-up questions as needed to fully explore what the participant is sharing.

Items in *italics* are notes for the interviewer. Items in bold are questions for the participant.

*Write a description of the environment. Take photos, videos.*

*Complete informed consent.*

Tell me about yourself. How long have you lived in Small City? What kinds of things do you like to do?

This is my first visit to Small City, do you like living here?

Does your child still go to Bradford-Mitchell? If so, what grade and how old is s/he? If not, what school does s/he go to now and how old is s/he?

How does your child like school?

Does s/he do any kind of after school activities like sports, music lessons or clubs?

What is his/her favorite subject in school?

Was your child at Bradford-Mitchell when the shooting happened? If so, where was s/he?

If not, where was s/he?

Were you there yourself by any chance?

I found you as a person who might be able to be in this study because I read and watched lots of news stories about the shooting and you were interviewed by a reporter. Do you remember that?

So as part of my research project I want to talk with kids who were interviewed after the shooting happened. I’ll also be talking with parents, teachers, school counselors, reporters and a lot of other people. Are you still ok to talk to me about this?

Ok. So, to start with, what do you remember about the day the shooting happened? *(possible follow-ups: where were you in the school, who was with you, do you remember hearing or seeing anything in particular…)*

Did you know any of the kids or teachers who were involved?

What did you do once you figured out what was happening?
Did anyone help you?

Do you remember the reporter(s) coming up and trying to interview you? Tell me about that. What happened?

Do you remember if you wanted to talk to them? Why or why not?

What was it like?

Did they have a camera or a microphone? Did they write down what you said? Do you remember what news organizations they were with?

How many reporters tried to talk to you? How did you decide who to talk to?

How did you feel when they were talking to you?

Did they talk to your friends, too? Your kid’s friends or their parents?

When did you find your child? Was it at the school?

Were the reporters still around after you found your child? What happened?

How did you feel once you found your child?

What did you and your child do at that point?

Were the reporters still trying to interview you? If so, what do you remember about that?

Did you like that they were interviewing you? How did it make you feel?

What did you think about how the reporters acted when they were trying to interview people? Did any of them do anything in particular that you remember that was different? Did you want to talk to some reporters more than others? Why or why not?

Did your child want to talk to the reporters? How many did they talk to?

What do you remember your child saying to the reporters? Did s/he like being interviewed?

Did you like being interviewed?
Did you try to find the stories that had you in them so you could see yourself in the newspaper or on TV?

How did that make you feel?

How did you feel that night after you got home? What do you remember about that night? Did you do anything in particular? Did you and your child do anything together? Do you remember how you felt?

How about the next day? Did your child go back to school? Why or why not?

What was that like?

Did you remember doing anything in particular with your friends that day? How did they seem? Did they seem different than usual?

What about your child? Did they do anything in particular with their friends that day? How did they seem? Did they seem different than usual?

Did you go to work or do your daily routine as usual or was the day different?

How did the teachers seem? What did they do? Did they seem different? Do you remember hearing anything from your child about how the day went?

Were the reporters still around? What do you remember about that?

Did they try to interview you again? If so, tell me about it. What happened?

Did they try to interview your child or his/her friends, too? What did your child think about that? Did they do the interviews?

What did you think about reporters being there on the next day compared to the first day?

Do you remember them doing anything in particular? Where do you remember them being? Where did you see them? Who were they talking to?

Did you want to talk to them again? Why or why not?
When do you think school and home life started to feel normal again?

Were you glad when it got back to normal? Why or why not?

When do you remember that you started feeling normal again? I imagine it must have been pretty tough for the first day or two. How did you feel?

*(based on what the parent says, ask follow-up feeling questions)*

How did you handle feeling scared/sad/mad? How did you help your child get through his/her feelings?

Is there someone who helped you the most after it happened? Or did you do something that helped you feel better?

What about for your child? Who helped him/her? What did s/he do to feel better?

Do you remember if your child seemed particularly upset after the shooting? What kinds of things did you notice?

What worried you the most about your child?

How long did your child’s struggle with feelings last?

Do you think your child’s reaction seemed similar or different than the other kids? How so?

Did you take your child to a counselor? Tell me about that.

What do you remember about the times your child was interviewed by reporters? How did your child react?

Do you think the reporters handled the interviews well? Why or why not?

Did specific reporters stand out as being better or worse for some reason? Why?

Do you remember anything in particular about your interactions with the media that you want to talk about?
How would you describe being interviewed? What emotion words or adjectives come to mind?

Do you think the interviews helped or hurt your child? Why?

If you could go back through time and tell the reporters how to do their jobs better, what would you tell them?

Is there something they did that you think they shouldn’t have done?

What do wish they had done more of? What did they do well?

Is there anything you would change about your interactions with the reporters?

What else do you want to tell me about the shooting, the reporters, your child, your friends or your family?

Thanks so much for talking with me. This really helped me understand what it was like from your perspective. I will be talking to other parents to hear their perspectives as well. Is there someone you suggest I should talk to?

Any last words of advice you have for the reporters before we finish up?
Appendix G: Interview Questions: Students

These questions serve as the basis for the interview however I will ask follow-up questions as needed to fully explore what the participant is sharing.

Items in *italics* are notes for the interviewer. Items in bold are questions for the participant.

*Write a description of the environment. Take photos, videos.*

*Complete informed consent.*

Tell me about yourself. How old are you? What kinds of things do you like to do? This is my first visit to Small City, do you like living here?

Do you still go to Bradford-Mitchell?

If so, what grade are you in now?

If not, what school do you go to now?

What’s your favorite subject?

Do you do any kind of after school activities like sports, music lessons or clubs?

I want to ask you some questions today. There are no right or wrong answers to my questions. This is not a test. Do you know why I’m here today?

I am a student at Penn State University working on my doctorate. Do you know what that means? *(explain)*

In order for me to graduate, I have to write a huge paper based on something I have researched. Do you know what research is? *(Explain)*

Years ago I was a second grade teacher. Then I went back to school and got a degree so that I could work as a therapist for children. I worked with lots of kids from as young as 4 years-old to seniors in high school. I really like working with kids and helping them have better lives.

As I started working on my doctorate, I needed to decide on a topic for my gigantic research paper and I thought I’d like to do something that might help make kids’ lives better. After doing lots of thinking, I decided I wanted to study how journalists do their jobs making stories for the news when it involves kids.

Do you know what a journalist is and what they do? *(explain)*

I decided to think about times when journalists might be working around kids who are
really upset or scared or sad or mad and I thought about school shootings because those are very scary situations that involve kids.

What I want to do is talk to people who were interviewed by reporters in order to develop some materials to help them do their jobs better.

Were you at Bradford-Mitchell when the shooting happened? If so, where were you? If not, where were you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did you see it?</th>
<th>Did you experience it?</th>
<th>Did you hear about it from friends, family or other people?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

I found you as a person who might be able to be in this study because I read and watched lots of news stories about the shooting and you were interviewed by a reporter. Do you remember that?

So as part of my research project I want to talk with kids who were interviewed after the shooting happened. I'll also be talking with parents, teachers, school counselors, reporters and a lot of other people. Are you still ok to talk to me about this?

Ok. So, to start with, what do you remember about the day the shooting happened? (possible follow-ups: where were you in the school, who was with you, do you remember hearing or seeing anything in particular...)

Did you know any of the kids or teachers who were involved?

What did you do once you figured out what was happening?

Did anyone help you?

Do you remember the reporter(s) coming up and trying to interview you? Tell me about that. What happened?
Do you remember if you wanted to talk to them? Why or why not?

What was it like?

Did they have a camera or a microphone? Did they write down what you said?

How many reporters tried to talk to you? How did you decide who to talk to?

How did you feel when they were talking to you?

Did they talk to your friends, too?

Your family?

When did you find your family? Was it at the school?

Were the reporters still there after you found your parents?

How did you feel once you found your parents?

What did you and your parents do at that point?

Were the reporters still trying to interview you? If so, what do you remember about that?

Did you like that they were interviewing you? How did it make you feel?

What did you think about how the reporters acted when they were trying to interview people? Did any of them do anything in particular that you remember that was different or good or bad?

Did you want to talk to some reporters more than others? Why or why not?

Did your parents want to talk to the reporters? How many did they talk to?

What do you remember your parents saying to the reporters? Did your parents like being interviewed?

Did you try to find the stories that had you in them so you could see yourself in the newspaper or on TV?
How did that make you feel?

How did you feel that night after you got home? What do you remember about that night? Did you do anything in particular? Did you and your parents do anything together? Do you remember how you felt?

How about the next day? Did you go back to school? Why or why not?

What was that like?

Did you remember doing anything in particular with your friends at school that day? How did they seem? Did they seem different than usual?

Did you go to classes as usual or was the day different than usual?

How were the teachers? What did they do? Did they seem different?

Were the reporters still around? What do you remember about that?

Did they try to interview you again? If so, tell me about it. What happened?

Did they try to interview your friends, too? What did your friends think about that? Did they do interviews?

What did you think about reporters being there on the next day compared to the first day?

Do you remember them doing anything in particular? Where do you remember them being? Where did you see them? Who were they talking to?

Did you want to talk to them again? Why or why not?

When do you think school started to feel normal again?

Were you glad when it got back to normal? Why or why not?

When do you remember that you started feeling normal again? I imagine it must have been pretty tough at first. How did you feel?

Below is a list of other scary or violent things that can happen. For each question, say “Yes”
if this has happened to you; say “No” if this did NOT happen to you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Were you in a disaster, like an earthquake, wildfire, hurricane, tornado or flood?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you in a bad accident, like a serious car accident or fall?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Were you in a place where a war was going on around you?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Were you hit, punched, or kicked very hard at home?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you see a family member being hit, punched or kicked very hard at home?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you beaten up, shot at, or threatened to be hurt badly in your neighborhood or town?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you see someone who was beaten up, shot at or killed?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Did you see a dead body (do not include funerals)?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did someone touch your private parts when you did not want them to?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Has anyone close to you died?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other than the things described above, has anything else ever happened to you that was really scary or upsetting?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>How much of the time during the past</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1 Little</th>
<th>2 Some</th>
<th>3 Much</th>
<th>4 Most</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>303</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>month…</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>(2x/mo)</td>
<td>(1-2x/wk)</td>
<td>(2-3x/wk)</td>
<td>(almost every day)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 (E3)</td>
<td>I am on the lookout for danger or things that I am afraid of (like looking over my shoulder even when nothing is there).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (D2)</td>
<td>I have thoughts like “I am bad.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (E1)</td>
<td>I get upset easily or get into arguments or physical fights.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (D5)</td>
<td>I don’t feel like doing things with my family or friends or other things that I liked to do.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (E5)</td>
<td>I have trouble concentrating or paying attention.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6 (D2)</td>
<td>I have thoughts like, “The world is really dangerous.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 (D7)</td>
<td>I have trouble feeling happiness or love.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 (D3)</td>
<td>I am mad with someone for making the bad thing happen, not doing more to stop it, or to help after.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 (D2)</td>
<td>I have thoughts like “I will never be able to trust other people.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11 (D6)</td>
<td>I feel alone even when I am around other people.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>12 (D3)</td>
<td>I feel that part of what happened was</td>
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<tr>
<td>13 (E2)</td>
<td>I hurt myself on purpose.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 (E6)</td>
<td>I have trouble going to sleep, wake up often, or have trouble getting back to sleep.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>22 (D4)</td>
<td>I feel ashamed or embarrassed over what happened.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 (B4)</td>
<td>When something reminds me of the shooting, I get very upset, afraid, or sad.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>24(B1)</td>
<td>I have upsetting thoughts, pictures, or sounds of the shooting come into my mind when I do not want them to.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>25 (B2)</td>
<td>I have dreams about the shooting or other bad dreams.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>26 (B3)</td>
<td>I feel like I am back at the time when the shooting happened, living through it again.</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 (C1)</td>
<td>I try not to talk about, think about, or have feelings about the shooting.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>29 (C3/D1)</td>
<td>I have trouble remembering important parts of what happened during the shooting.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>30 (C2)</td>
<td>I try to stay away from people, places, or things that make me remember the shooting.</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 (B5)</td>
<td>When something reminds me of the <strong>shooting</strong>, I have strong feelings in my body like my heart beats fast, my head aches, or my stomach aches.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>33 (E4)</td>
<td>I feel jumpy or startle easily, like when I hear a loud noise or when something surprises me.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>34 (D4)</td>
<td>I feel afraid or scared.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>35 (E2)</td>
<td>I do risky or unsafe things that could really hurt me or someone else.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>36 (D4)</td>
<td>I want to get back at someone for what happened.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>37 (D4)</td>
<td>I feel like what happened was sickening or gross.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*(based on what the child says, ask follow-up feeling questions)*

How did you handle feeling scared/sad/mad?

Is there someone that helped you the most after it happened? Or did you do something that helped you feel better?

How long did those kinds of feelings last?

If you could go back through time and tell the reporters how to do their jobs better, what would you tell them?

Is there something they did that you think they shouldn’t have done?

What do wish they had done more of? What did they do well?
Is there anything you would change about your interactions with the reporters?

What else do you want to tell me about the shooting, the reporters, your friends or your family?

Thanks so much for talking with me. This really helped me understand what it was like from your perspective. I will be talking to other kids to hear their perspectives as well. Then I will using what you said to develop some materials to help journalists do their jobs better.

Any last words of advice you have for the reporters before we finish up?
Appendix H: Interview Questions: Experts

Write a description of the environment. Take photos, videos.
Complete informed consent.

So… can you situate yourself in the world of expertise in journalism, kids and/or trauma?

What do you think of my thesis?

From your perspective what would you add or change? What do you think I need to know in order to fully and successfully address my thesis?

Have you worked at the scene of a school shooting? If so, in what capacity and can you tell me what it was like?

What do you think it’s like for reporters working a school shooting? Why do you think they do what they do?

How do reporters know how to handle traumatic scenes like school shootings? Where do they get their training, knowledge or experience? How the heck do they know what to do?

What do you think is the bottom line for journalists to know when reporting from highly traumatic scenes that involve kids? What do they need to know about trauma and about kids?

What rules do you think they should follow to report in an ethical manner? What gets in the way of them being able to do that?

How do you think school shootings compare to other highly traumatic scenes such as natural disasters or major accident scenes? Would the rules for journalists be similar or different depending on the type of traumatic event?

From your perspective, what do you hear from the reporters themselves, the kids and family members, school personnel or the community about the media presence?

Do you think the reporters generally handle interviews with kids well? Why or why not?

Do specific kinds of reporters or interviews stand out as being better or worse for some
reason? Why?

Do you think the interviews generally help or hurt the kids? Why?

If you could tell the world of reporters how to do their jobs better, what would you tell them?

Thanks so much for talking with me. This really helped me understand what it was like from your perspective. I will be talking to other experts to hear their perspectives as well. Is there someone you suggest I should talk to?

Any last words of advice you have for the reporters before we finish up?
Appendix I: Interview Questions: School Personnel

These questions serve as the basis for the interview however I will ask follow-up questions as needed to fully explore what the participant is sharing.

Items in *italics* are notes for the interviewer. Items in bold are questions for the participant.

*Write a description of the environment. Take photos, videos.*

*Complete informed consent.*

Tell me about yourself. How long have you worked at Bradford-Mitchell? What positions have you held? What kinds of things do you like to do?

This is my first visit to Small City, do you like living here? What should I do/see while I’m here?

Were you working the day the shooting happened? If so, where were you in the school? If not, where were you?

What do you remember about the day the shooting happened? *(possible follow-ups: where were you in the school, who was with you, do you remember hearing or seeing anything in particular…)*

What did you do once you figured out what was happening?

Did anyone help you?

Do you remember when the reporter(s) started coming up and trying to interview you? Tell me about that. What happened?

Do you remember if you wanted to talk to them? Why or why not?

What was it like?

Do you know what media organizations they were with?

How many reporters tried to talk to you? How did you decide who to talk to?

How did you feel when they were talking to you?
Did you like that they were interviewing you?

Do you think the reporters generally handled the interviews with the kids well? Why or why not?

Did specific kinds of reporters or interviews stand out as being better or worse for some reason? Why?

Do you think the interviews generally helped or hurt the kids? Why?

If you could tell the world of reporters how to do their jobs better, what would you tell them?

Did any of them do anything in particular that you remember that was different? Did you want to talk to some reporters more than others? Why or why not?

From your perspective, what did you hear from the reporters themselves, the kids and family members, other school personnel or the community about the media presence?

What do you think it was like for the reporters? Why do you think they did what they did?

What do you think is the bottom line for journalists to know when reporting from highly traumatic scenes that involve kids? What did you wish they knew that day?

What rules do you think they should have followed to report the story in an ethical manner? If you think they weren’t acting ethically, what do you think got in the way of them being able to do that?

Did you read/watch/listen to the stories about the shooting? Why or why not?

How did they make you feel?

How did you feel that night after you got home? What do you remember about that night? Did you do anything in particular? Do you remember how you felt?

What do you remember about reporters being there on the next day compared to the first day?

Do you remember them doing anything in particular? Where do you remember them being?
Where did you see them? Who were they talking to?

Did they do anything different on the second day compared to the first day?

Did you want to talk to them again? Why or why not?

When do you think school and home life started to feel normal again?

Were you glad when it got back to normal? Why or why not?

I know this is tough given the circumstances, but did you notice any reactions from the kids, parents or other school personnel that was a result of the media presence?

Do you have any stories that stand out about a particular reporter or child or the interviews in general?

Is there something they did that you think they shouldn’t have done?

What do wish they had done more of? What did they do well?

Is there anything you would change about the overall interactions with the reporters?

How many of the kids sought counseling? I want to talk with a few local mental health workers about their observations, are there any in particular you’d recommend I talk to?

Do you remember if any kids seemed particularly upset after the shooting? What kinds of things did you notice?

What worried you the most about the way certain kids reacted?

How long did the kids struggle with the incident and their feelings?

Were there any kids whose reaction seemed different than the other kids? How so?

Any last words of advice you have for the reporters before we finish up?

What else do you think I should know? What haven’t I asked?

Who else do you think I should talk to?
Appendix J: Grade-level Recommendations

Building on the proposed guidelines, this chart gives an overview of how the guidelines might map over onto grade levels. Reporters may not know a child’s age, but they may know their grade level. Applying the guidelines in this, more practical form, might help them be utilized in the field. There is still much to be done to test and norm these, so this should be accepted as a beginning, not a final product.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>At the Scene</th>
<th>After the immediate aftermath</th>
<th>Developmental Tips</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K-5</td>
<td>Do not interview</td>
<td>May be interviewed with parent permission and informed consent. Remember that parents are secondary victims and may not be able to clearly think through informed consent. Explain to the parent and children what the possible positive and negative consequences might be. It is important for them to consider the full extent of their decision to participate. Remember that</td>
<td>Select location that is safe and familiar to the child. Have an adult present who can look after the child’s best interest. Keep interviews short, 15-20 minutes is best. Remind child that they are the experts on their experience and there are no right or wrong answers. The younger a child is, the more they are likely to try and give you the answer they think you want to hear. Don’t ask fact-based questions to be used for publication.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
negative consequences for a child may be different than what you’d expect. Think about what might embarrass or hurt the child. Allow them to ask questions about the possible consequences.

Sense-making in younger children can include magical thinking, and may overlap reality with aspects of fantasy from other things they have been exposed to.

Ask one, simple, straightforward question at a time.

Focus on the child’s direct experience.

Don’t ask why questions or questions that require the child to speculate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>May be interviewed with parent permission and informed consent. Remember that parents are secondary victims and may not be able to clearly think through informed consent.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>Select location that is safe and familiar to the child.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Have an adult present who can look after the child’s best interest.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keep interviews short, 20-30 minutes is best.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remind child that they are the experts on their experience and there are no right or wrong answers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Children younger than 13 should not be relied upon to provide factual accounts about what happened.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
ask questions about the possible consequences.

Developmentally, they make sense of and heal from potentially traumatic events in a way that does not always adhere to strict fact-based accounts.

Avoid why questions.

Avoid questions that imply blame or could be perceived as judgmental.

Reflect back what you heard the child say and give them a chance to correct any errors.

Be encouraging, open and interested in what they have to say.

Tell them whether you are likely to use all of their interview or only parts. Explain to them how you will decide which parts to use. If time permits, reviewing the story with them and asking permission to use their input as it is presented is the most ethical approach.

Explain to them when and where they might expect to see their interview.

Give them your contact
information so they can follow-up if need be.

Get back in touch with them after the interview runs to see how they are doing and give them another chance to ask questions. If the interview is not presented in a manner they expected, they may be feeling angry, upset or violated. Giving them a chance to express their feelings and ask questions can go a long way toward clearly up misperceptions and misunderstandings. It is important to realize that very few children have any idea of how the mechanics of journalism works behind-the-scenes. They will not know about column inches, word limits or time limitations. Helping them understand your decision-making process can help them begin to rebuild trust.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School</th>
<th>May be interviewed with parent permission and informed consent. Explain to the parent and children what the possible positive and negative consequences might be. It is important for them to consider the full extent of May be interviewed with parent permission and informed consent. Remember that parents are secondary victims and may not be able to clearly think through informed consent.</th>
<th>Keep interviews short, more than 30 minutes could be fatiguing. Remind child that they are the experts on their experience and there are no right or wrong answers. Avoid questions that imply blame or could be perceived</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| their decision to participate. Remember that negative consequences for a child may be different than what you’d expect. Think about what might embarrass or hurt the child. Allow them to ask questions about the possible consequences. | as judgmental.

Reflect back what you heard the child say and give them a chance to correct any errors.

Be encouraging, open and interested in what they have to say.

Tell them whether you are likely to use all of their interview or only parts. Explain to them how you will decide which parts to use. If time permits, reviewing the story with them and asking permission to use their input as it is presented is the most ethical approach.

Explain to them when and where they might expect to see their interview.

Give them your contact information so they can follow-up if need be.

Get back in touch with them after the interview runs to see how they are doing and give them another chance to ask questions. If the interview is not presented in a manner they expected, they may be feeling angry, upset or violated. Giving them a chance to express their feelings and ask questions can go a long way |
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misperceptions and
misunderstandings. It is
important to realize that very
few children have any idea of
how the mechanics of
journalism works behind-the-
scenes. They will not know
about column inches, word
limits or time limitations.
Helping them understand your
decision-making process can
help them begin to rebuild
dependability.
### Education

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>Mass Communications</td>
<td>Pennsylvania State University</td>
<td>August 2017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.Ed.</td>
<td>Counseling Psychology</td>
<td>James Madison University</td>
<td>May 1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B.A.</td>
<td>Early Childhood Education</td>
<td>University of Richmond</td>
<td>May 1990</td>
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</table>

### Professional Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
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<th>Dates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senior Lecturer, Director of eLearning Initiatives</td>
<td>Penn State University</td>
<td>01/2011 - present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grad Assistant, World Campus Faculty Development</td>
<td>Penn State University</td>
<td>8/09 - 05/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate Director, University Unions</td>
<td>James Madison University</td>
<td>8/02 - 8/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Home Therapist, Children's Services of Virginia</td>
<td>Harrisonburg, VA</td>
<td>5/01 - 8/08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Director, University Unions</td>
<td>James Madison University</td>
<td>9/00 - 8/02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinator University Information, University Unions</td>
<td>James Madison University</td>
<td>8/98 - 9/00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Dean of Student Life and Innovation, Dean of Student Affairs Office</td>
<td>Hampshire College</td>
<td>7/97-7/98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Teacher, Harry E. James Elementary</td>
<td>Hopewell, VA</td>
<td>8/90-8/95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Teaching Experience

- Instructor, Comm 409 online, Mass Media Ethics (PSU)
- Instructor, Comm 410 online, International Mass Communications (PSU)
- Instructor, Comm 405 online, Political Economy of Communications (PSU)
- Developer & Instructor, Psych 669: Career Development (JMU)
- Instructor, BIS 100: Career Exploration (JMU)
- Classroom Teacher, Second Grade, 1990-1995

### Grants

- 2014, $10,000, Center for Online Innovation in Learning Research Initiation Grant, PI
- 2012, $15,000, Center for Online Innovation in Learning Research Initiation Grant, team member

### Publications


### Honors & Awards

- Best Paper, Graduate Students in Communication Annual Competition for "Disclosure & Debauchery: Employer Perceptions of Facebook Profiles," 2009
- Be the Change, JMU Community Recognition, 2007
- All Together One JMU Community Award, 2006
- Student Affairs Integrity Award, 2005
- Outstanding New Professional for Four-Year Institutions in Virginia, VASPA, 2000
- Sallie Mae New Teacher of the Year - Harry E. James Elementary, 1991