

Vicarious Trauma Among university students: A case study of USIU.

Joseph Njoroge Kinyanjui

1. Introduction

The investigation is purely exploratory, hence the limited number of respondents (21). We hope that the result will justify conducting an investigation with a much larger sample.

As an institution, there have been attempts to investigate students' learning or educational effectiveness. Most of these attempts focused on pedagogy and the use of resources to maximize learning. Little has been done to investigate psychological causes that might hinder or affect learning. We intend to address this dearth of inquiry into the psychological 'contributors' for poor learning.

Though there could be other psychological causes of poor learning, vicarious trauma seemed useful given the series of ritual killings that rocked Kenya in the wake of the government crack down on illegal extortion groups.

The article reports on the results of the investigation, discusses these results and makes some suggestions on the way forward as informed by the findings.

2. Problem Statement

When we witness the traumatization of others, there is a likelihood we will also get traumatized vicariously. Given the amount of violence that is featured in our media, does watching, listening or reading about gory, violent events psychologically affect or traumatize students in a university setting? This is what we hope to investigate. Specifically, we intend to find out whether partaking of these violent scenes via our senses has traumatized students at the United States International University. If the students are traumatized, does this affect their studies?

A UNHCR (1995) document describes vicarious trauma thus:

Secondary trauma is the term that describes the range of psychological and physiological effects seen in those who work intensely with traumatized individuals. Experts have referred to these effects as vicarious trauma, burnout, exhaustion.....
p.27

Though students do not work intensely with victims, they invariably get exposed to scenes of victims of violence lying in pools of blood dead or maimed. Does watching such scenes repeatedly have an effect on the students? This is what we intend to find out.

The information generated by the research will assist us develop strategies for assisting those who might be affected.

3. Conceptual Framework

The Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM IV) describes people with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as individuals who have “experienced, witnessed” (our underlining) events that threatened their lives or integrity, as well as the death or injury of others. They responded to this threat to self or others with feelings of “intense fear, helplessness, or horror”. It is this witnessing that we wanted to investigate. Based on the DSM’s description would witnessing traumatic events on the electronic and print media elicit similar responses?

Figley (2005) describes care givers who suffer compassion fatigue as a result of, “...helping people in distress...The helper, in contrast to the person(s) being helped, is traumatized or suffers through the helper’s own efforts to empathize and be compassionate.”

If a professional “helper” is traumatized by witnessing the suffering of others what about students? Our contention is that they will be affected and it is this that informed our desire to investigate the vicarious trauma phenomenon.

Silver et al (2002), worked with the victims of the September 11th terrorist attack on the US and asserts that, “Other studies have shown that simply watching traumatic events on TV can be traumatic to some, especially those individuals who had pre-existing mental or physical health difficulties or had a greater exposure to the attacks.” It seems witnessing traumatic events, no matter whether one is witnessing them in the safety of their homes can be traumatizing, especially when they have other pre-existing psychological and health factors.

4. Hypotheses

- I. There is a relationship between witnessing violence via the media and getting vicariously traumatized.
- II. There is an effect on learning from watching frightening and violent scenes on the media.

5. Methodology

A qualitative analysis of questions (see *Appendix*) was done. We interviewed twenty one students. These were both graduates and undergraduates. The undergraduates included all the four years from freshmen to seniors. Both genders were also represented.

6. Results

100% of the respondents agreed with question 1(see *Appendix*) that they consumed information from the print and electronic media. On question 2, whether there were things they had rather not see or hear, 85% said there were. Child molestation ranked highest with 23% saying they had rather not watch or hear about such cases. It was followed by rape, murders, dismembering “chopped up bodies” which scored 19%. Others major events they did not want to see were motor vehicle accidents, and pornography. Some of the views of the 15% who were undisturbed by watching everything include, “I like to hear everything even if it is negative or traumatizing”.

On question number 3 on how they felt after watching or hearing about killings, murders and so on, most said that they were affected in this order:

Scared/Terrified/Very bad: 48%;
Fear: 23%;
Sad/ Regret, Sorry: 28%;
Anger: 19%;
Terrible/Disturbed: 14%.

Some of the respondents' responses were in more than one of the above categories. Some of the comments they made include: "I have nightmares that can last for three days", "I feel like crying" and "When I hear it does not affect me as much as when I see it".

Had this made the participants not to want to watch the news? This was dealt with by question number 4 and 52% responded in the affirmative. Some said, "I'd rather not know" or "Some pictures are very painful". Others, that is, 42% said that it had not stopped them from watching. They said, "This knowledge is good for me to know what is happening" and "There are other things to watch on TV e.g. movies etc".

Question number 5 was, "If you are not moved, would you say you are becoming "hardened"?" and 39% said that they had become harder. One commented, "I have numbed myself to the extent that I would rather not feel". Another noted: "Yes, basically coz, am getting used to the violence and the crime and all the bad news". And another: "It has become the order of the day". The other 61% said that they had not become hardened but rather they were affected all the time. One said, "If you've got a conscience you have to be moved".

On question 6 regarding whether what they watched and read in the media affects them in class? 52% said no. Some of their comments were:

"Not really, I feel safe when I am around class"

"I guard against watching very violent programs"

"I distance myself from it"

The remaining 48% agreed that they were affected. Their comments illustrate were as follows:

"I don't feel like going out as much due to fear"

"For several days I keep thinking about it"

"Some applications learnt in class directly reflect what is happening".

Question number 7 was asking, how experiencing the violence on TV and the radio impacted on their daily life? 10% said that they were not affected. The rest 90% said it had affected their daily life. 42% of these made comments like:

"I am more careful"

"Can't trust anyone".

"Difficulty opening up to people"

21% said they traveled less and tried to get home early. 26% "I get nightmares" or "I live in fear". One said, "I get angry and violent with those around me". Another noted: "I question many things".

7. Discussion

85% of the respondents said there were things they had rather not see or read about. This clearly shows that they find watching or reading about certain events unpleasant or obnoxious, hence the desire to avoid the unpleasantness.

This was borne out by their responses about how they felt after watching. Nearly a half felt scared, terrified and "very bad". The others had a slew of other negative emotions that they said they felt. Watching or reading about violence has an effect even if one is not a victim directly. When one is inundated by such scenes day in day out, how will it impact their psyche?

Consequently, 52% of the respondents did not want to watch or read about such events. The others felt they had to watch if they wanted to find out what was going on. They did not have a choice. Others decided to watch TV but ensure they chose only entertaining programs like movies.

Notice that 61% of respondents said that they were affected and had not become "harder". The remaining 39% said they had actually become "harder". We wonder what prize they will pay for this "hardness". This "hardness" can only be achieved by dissociating from what is going on around us, especially if it is painful. It means that we do not psychologically process these events. They remain unconscious and fester only to manifest in destructive ways or even through psychosomatic illnesses. One might also become callous in their attempt to shield themselves from experiencing any painful feelings.

48% of the respondents agreed that watching or reading about the violence affects their concentration in class. Of the 52% that said they were not affected, their comments were most revealing. Some actually felt safe in class. It is like this was one of those places that they could relax compared to the maelstrom of turmoil going on elsewhere. Others said they guarded against watching anything violent which in effect negates their assertion that they were not affected. Probably this can be explained by the phenomenon of dissociation mentioned above. This is a defense mechanism that might be useful to rely on the short-term. However, on the long term it has adverse effects on its users as they lose touch with reality.

90% agreed that watching and reading about violence had an impact on their daily life. One respondent said that she was affected more by watching than by reading about it. This seems like a useful thing to research on. Does what we see traumatize us more than what we hear, read about or access through our other senses?

The results clearly show that indeed the students were affected by watching or reading about violent programs. These negative effects permeated their lives and actually 48% affected most of them in the classroom.

This clearly, was a very small sample, as such, there is need to investigate further using a bigger sample. Research on professions in the frontline of helping for instance, the police who collect the "pieces" after grisly murders, and the medical personnel that deal directly with unseemly situations might prove instructive. They may all be suffering quietly from the effects of vicarious trauma.

8. Conclusion

United States International University might do well to come up with strategies to address the vicarious trauma of their students. Maybe some kind of regular 'communal' debriefing sessions could be conducted for the students to help them process the trauma and continue to live full lives. Other learning institutions, in Kenya, would also benefit from similar undertakings.

The media needs to be sensitized to package the news in less gruesome ways. Media practitioners need to be sensitized on the effects of disturbing scenes on viewers.

If indeed individuals can be traumatized just by witnessing the traumatization of others, how can people witness such scenes daily and continue to thrive psychologically? How do they continue functioning as healthy human beings? We have in mind here, professions like in medicine nurses, doctors and the police. It is imperative that this be investigated to come up with ways of helping these individuals to continue functioning and in a healthy manner.

9. Way Forward

A much bigger survey is called for to find out what the situation is like among the Kenyan population, especially the population that has access to print and electronic media. Our police force is a case in point. They are the ones that "collect the pieces" so to speak and get the brunt of all the violence in its rawness. They are routinely accused of callousness, and being indifferent. Is this their way of coping? How does it manifest itself among the people? Does it cause apathy or feelings of helplessness? How do we explain a small group of criminals taking the rest of the population hostage? Maybe this proposed research might shed some light on these questions. This is necessary in order to suggest ways of militating against the situation.

In our case as a university, this study will stimulate discussions that will generate suggestions on different ways of dealing with the problems. Either, the university might take a more active stance and initiate coping programs spearheaded by its counseling center or it might come up with a more generalized approach that will

involve the whole university community. That there is need to find out the effects of witnessing the victimization of others is not in doubt.

We will also be able to suggest to the media houses to be responsible when delivering news. The university might also establish a way of communally debriefing those affected on a regular basis.

10. References

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