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Social Impacts of Fear: An examination of the 2002 Washington, DC sniper shootings

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Perspiring after a long, grueling basketball practice, bundled up in sweatpants and hooded sweatshirt, I was prepared to face the bitter cold wind that awaited me outside the gymnasium. All of the other players had hurried to go home, since the practice was extra long and tiring as our coach wanted to punish us for a previous loss. After using the restroom, I realized I was the only person left in the building. Tossing the sack of basketballs over my shoulder, as it was the captain's duty to take care of bringing basketballs to practice, I put my hood up and then stopped before I stepped outside. It was at this moment that I realized that this was not the same night as it had been before. How could I have been so stupid? Did I really just forget all about it? What was I going to do now? I had broken all of the rules and plans to which people in our area had now grown accustomed. I had gone outside, at night, alone.

The sniper shootings had been occurring for the past two weeks. They started one day down county, with five shootings occurring within hours of one another. After another string of shootings with the same rifle fire and attack style, panic had ensued around Montgomery County, Maryland, which was my home at the time. The shooters had begun communicating with the county police department, sending messages where they referenced themselves as "God," and telling the police they had no chance of solving the crimes. Some of the shootings had occurred across the state border in Northern Virginia but others happened right down the highway, only 20 minutes away from where I stood that night. The sporadic geographic nature of the shootings left millions of residents in fear for their own well-being. Specific behaviors had been adopted by most, and passed around as common knowledge by now. People had begun to skip work, especially after the shooting and injuring of one man on the public bus system in our county. It was normal now to walk quickly (or to run) between rows of cars, barely dodging a scraped knee or bruised leg on the license plate covers of cars in parking lots, anything to keep out of plain view. I often found myself making strange and sporadic movements when jogging from basketball practice, school, or out to the mailbox from my garage, as if to throw the snipers off if they were aiming at me. Going to the grocery store was especially frightening; the idea of standing by one's trunk for several minutes while putting bags of groceries into the car almost seemed absurd. Was food really worth leaving oneself out in plain view for the snipers to have an easy shot? The casual walk out to the car from school had turned into packs of friends moving quickly together, walking one another from car to car until the last brave soul ran over to his or her car alone. Where would the snipers strike next? How were they pulling off these crimes in the midst of the largest manhunt in United States history? Wouldn't someone see where the shot came from next time?

With all of these images and questions swirling in my head, I took a deep breath as I was about to break the most important safety rule for the very first time, "Never go outside by yourself; always travel in groups!" Without a cell phone or any other means of communication, I considered staying in the building

until one of my parents grew concerned at home and came to the gymnasium to look for me. That could take all night, I thought, and briskly shoved the door open and began running as hard as I possibly could toward my lone car under the parking lot lights. Running down the long walkway to the parking lot, I began moving strangely, bopping my head this way and that, stepping side to side while running. The basketballs, which were in a sack and slung over my shoulder, were hitting my back very hard. I was glancing around frantically, noticing all of the dark spots beyond and around the parking lot, prime locations to stand with a deadly assault weapon. Then there was the sweeping baseball field next to the parking lot. My heart began racing uncontrollably as I imagined the headlines in the paper the next morning, "Teen killed in sniper-style shooting at secluded middle school parking lot." How had I been so stupid? Why hadn't anyone waited to go out with me to the parking lot?

Just as I neared the beginning of the parking lot, my foot hit a rock and I slipped momentarily. The sack fell off my shoulder, spilling the basketballs all over the south corner of the lot. Not feeling I had any other choice, I recklessly chased after the basketballs, shoving them back into the sack. One ball bounced over the curb and down into the dark field; this one I decided was lost forever and did not even consider giving chase. Running to my car, I scraped the paint around the keyhole in the process of jamming the key in its place, tossed the sack into the backseat, and drove off with my head down by the wheel and out of view. Upon arriving home, I found myself in the normal routine of running from the end of the driveway into the garage. Did it not occur to me that if the snipers were at the school after my basketball practice, chances were that they could not also be stationed a few houses up or down the street aiming at my driveway? Such thoughts were too complex for this given moment; I just wanted to make it safely into the only haven of comfort, inside the walls of my home.

Long after the sniper suspects had been arrested and prosecuted, I look back on this night that will always remain a vivid memory, and wonder whether I overreacted in this situation. Obviously, an outsider would probably remark "Yes," given the miniscule probability that the snipers would have been positioned at such a specific point at a specific time on this given night. Moreover, with such a large radius of land in the entire Washington, DC metropolitan area, the millions of potential human targets, and the fact that the last shooting to occur in Montgomery County had been 11 days prior, what was the real possibility that one lone high school male would cross paths with these killers? In all actuality, I feel that my fear was not a gross overreaction. On the contrary, my fear for my own safety and survival were very real; my mind was conditioned and convinced that my life was at risk that night.

How had two men working together with one sniper rifle succeeded in planting seeds of fear and distress within the hearts of millions, given that they "only" killed ten and injured three within a metropolitan area estimated to have a population of over five million? What had contributed to their ability to petrify both myself in a northern Montgomery County parking lot and millions of others in a fifty-mile radius? Was it really just the fact that the killings had occurred in various, un-patterned locations, or was the snipers' ability to frighten an entire region of the nation strengthened by some other force? Murderers, rapists and armed criminals live among the common population constantly, inflicting, abusing and harming innocent people every single day. Why is it that people do not hide and shy away from public in the midst of the possibility of meeting one of these criminals in the street? What common bond did I share with perhaps an old woman in Fairfax, Virginia or a 5th grade boy in Bowie, Maryland that would cause all three of us to stick within the safe confines of our homes to avoid these shooters?

This anecdote and other experiences were reality for me and millions of other citizens within the Washington, DC metropolitan area during October of 2002. During this month, the nation's capital and surrounding areas were terrorized by a spree of random shootings known as the 2002 Washington, DC sniper shootings. John Allen Muhammad and his friend Lee Boyd Malvo were the two men responsible for the string of shootings that left ten dead and three wounded. Starting on October 2 with a murder in a grocery store parking lot and culminating with the arrests of Muhammad and Malvo on October 24 at a highway rest stop, the "Beltway Snipers" dominated television newspapers and all media sources throughout the area as each attack brought more attention (Wikipedia 2006). The snipers, using a car with holes bore in the trunk, would fire shots with a professional rifle at random people, often fatally to the head.

The focus of this thesis is to examine newspaper content and reporting throughout the sniper shootings,

and to draw connections between how crime and terrorist events are reported and how individuals and communities react and respond. I will show that the media, through its' style and content of reporting, directly contributed to the heightened levels of fear and behavioral change exhibited by the citizens of Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, DC during the sniper shootings. In addition to examining media coverage, I also draw on a set of in-depth interviews with a sample of citizens who lived through the shootings. I use these interviews to further illustrate the impact the media had on people's responses to the sniper shootings.

This study and critical analysis of media content is essential to understanding why and how communities and individuals respond to crime and human-made disasters in the various ways they do. If an understanding of individual and community response is cultivated, changes can possibly be made to alleviate the often exaggerated measures and stress to which people subject themselves. Whether or not these modifications will need to come through media reform or not, the acknowledgement of a culture of fear (Glassner 1999) ever present in our communities is incumbent to making positive change. Substance abuse, drastic behavioral change, and mental and psychological stress all may result from heightened fears caused by terrorist acts such as the 2002 sniper shootings. Preventing these social problems is in the best interest of the United States; these problems represent direct threats to the well-being of the American public. Therefore, it is a fruitful and responsible scholarly exercise to examine media coverage and to explore its' possible contribution to the problems and behaviors that are affecting Americans in the wake of criminal and terrorist activity. Given the importance of these issues, my thesis is focused on answering two key research questions:

1. How did the media portray the 2002 Washington, DC sniper shootings?
2. Did media consumption lead to behavioral change among individuals?

Literature Review

Over the past several decades, technology has evolved at amazing speed, and access to real time, 24 hour per day information has become common and expected. With the Internet, cable news, radio, cellular telephones, blackberries, pagers and laptops, information and news events are spread rapidly between individuals, communities and nations. With such widespread access to technology in the United States, television news networks reach hundreds of millions of viewers in homes across the country. Often, violence is what is depicted on these millions of television screens, coming in the form of news, movies, television shows, and even commercials (Glassner 1999: 44).

Many social scientists and journalists alike have adopted the stance that this "overload" exposure to media violence is directly correlated with violence in reality, or, the brutal nature of crime in real life is being motivated and is stemming from our exposure to brutal television (Schorr 1993). While this argument is strongly opposed by some, the idea that violence on television has an actual effect on people's actual behaviors continues to be a source of scholarly and popular debate.

Some scholars have argued that violent television programming is causing individuals to believe they are living in an unsafe world where they have become vulnerable (Klinenberg 2001). More specifically, viewers begin to believe their neighborhoods, communities, and cities are far more dangerous than they are in reality, causing a variety of preventive behaviors including purchasing of locks, guns, and watchdogs (Gerbner 1992). These measures are meant to alleviate fear and anxiety. Further, these fears convince the individual to harbor feelings of control in some situations yet helplessness in other situations (Gerbner 1992).

While those most physically able to defend themselves take preventative measures in response to media-induced fear, the elderly tend to remove themselves almost completely from the supposed threats outside their front doors (Klinenberg 2001; Warr 1993). Consistent exposure to media creates an enlarged and heightened sense of potential victimization among less physically able groups, such as the elderly (Gerbner 1992). A rather vicious cause and effect cycle takes form among the elderly; the more intake of violent television programming, the more likely they might physically and mentally deteriorate as a result of fearfulness to leave their homes (Warr 1993).

In news reporting, one violent news story often triggers false data to be presented, many times perpetuating the idea that a particular crime occurs more frequently than it does. For example, more than five hundred stories in newspapers focused on workplace violence during 1994 and 1995, stating that 2.2 million people are attacked on the job each year.

Further research into these claims yielded actual results of 1 in 114,000 working people being murdered each year (Larson 1994). Additional studies showed 90 percent of workplace murders occurred when someone attempted a robbery, whereas the news perpetuated the idea of high frequency co-worker homicides (Larson 1994).

Why then is the media portraying violence and presenting problems at levels that do not actually match reality? Why did two-thirds of Americans believe crime rates were rising in the 1990's when they had consecutively fallen throughout the decade (Glassner 1999)? According to Klein and Nacarrato (2003), the media portrays stories and events that they believe will be most popular with the public. It is far more captivating to hear statistics of thousands at risk of drive-by shootings, rather than listening to an isolated case of one such shooting. Rather than misrepresenting these trends, the portrayal of actual data might give Americans an increased sense of control; if we know the rates and trends of a particular criminal behavior, we feel that we have an ability to assess where a particular risk may exist. Such beliefs might be coping strategies; believing victims are part of a trend might normalize and allow for better comprehension amongst traumatized relatives. Or does constant fearfulness and worrying simply seep out all optimism for a healthy future for people (Glassner 1999)? Glassner's (1999) work on the ways that the media serves to perpetuate fear helped illustrate the incredible power of the media in shaping perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors. Is being fearful of crime rational? Most research to date recognizes that there is a relationship between the amount of media one is exposed to and one's behavioral responses.

Warr (1993) found that 38 percent of people (comprised of black and white respondents) "very/pretty frequently" worry that themselves or someone in their family will be sexually assaulted or raped. Beyond mental worrying, what physical actions are taken in response to fear of crime? How serious are the effects of fear of victimization as a result of amassed exposure to the media? In light of convincing data that suggest that much of the media's portrayal of frequency and likelihood of crime occurrence is inaccurate in reality, it still results in the harboring of actual and anticipated fear (Silberman 1978). What is most important is the empirical value of anticipated fear; regardless of an actual threat, the belief of threats can induce and create rigid and extreme preventative behaviors (Garofalo 1981), such as purchasing locks and remaining isolated in one's own home. "Personalization" of an image of crime is created through consideration of perceived prevalence, likelihood, vulnerability and consequences of crime (Garofalo 1981).

Of particular interest in this study is the ways that individuals and communities respond to the fear of crime, which is largely cultivated through media consumption. According to Dubow (1979), specific responses to fear of crime may be organized in the following categories: avoidance, protective behavior, insurance behavior, communicative behavior and participation behavior. Avoidance represents general actions taken to decrease exposure to crime while protective behavior increases resistance to victimization such as carrying a weapon (Dubow 1979), and is considered the most prevalent action taken among surveyed citizens. Large percentages of survey respondents emphasize simple avoidance behaviors of certain areas or the purchasing of locks as most common (Biderman 1967). Said differently, people are not passive in their fears of crime. Instead, they tend to engage in particular actions that they believe will help keep them safe in the face of danger.

Also of interest is the process of communication behavior, or the sharing of information and emotions related to crime with others; such behaviors are accomplished within the realm of media (Dubow 1979). Likewise, participation behavior, or "actions in concert with others which are motivated by a particular crime" are important in media; the actions of others to prevent crime which are documented in media often empower viewers to take similar action.

Indeed, most current research on responses to fear of crime reveals not necessarily incapacitation as mentioned with elderly, but rather uneasiness and distrust (Garofalo 1981). Behaviors are adopted which do not paralyze an individual or create a sense of helplessness, rather these behaviors create a sense of control and informed decision-making during an overwhelming situation or time period (Garofalo 1981).

The 2002 Sniper Shootings

On the evening of October 2, 2002, the lone murder of a man in a grocery store parking lot would spark the beginning of the Washington, DC sniper shootings (Wikipedia 2006). Ultimately killing ten people and wounding three, the two snipers would terrorize the

citizens of Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia.

As the sniper shootings continued and citizens became increasingly fearful for their well-being, they began initiating all types of behavioral changes (Coppola 2004). These modifications, included using different gas stations than one normally used, avoiding stores and shopping centers located near highways and even staying at home except when absolutely necessary to leave (Coppola 2004). Other modifications included running or weaving through parking lots and avoiding outdoor activities all together (Coppola 2004). In addition, often parents drove children to school rather than allowing them to walk (Williams 2004).

Beyond behavior modification, physical evidence of fear and stress of the shootings resulted in hospital workers in the Washington, DC area displaying significant levels of acute stress disorder (Grieger 2003). Similar responses were observed in the days and months after the September 11 terrorist attacks, when thoughts and worry about additional attacks were prevalent. According to Vlahov (2002), 28.8 percent of Manhattan residents reported increased use of cigarettes, alcohol or marijuana in the months following September 11. While these actions were not necessarily preventative or actions that made an individual feel safer, they represent coping behaviors related to the fear potential physical harm can cause.

Much data reveals that the majority of people in the Washington, DC metropolitan area received their information about the sniper shootings through media sources, such as television and newspaper. A vast majority of both women, 91.1 percent, and men, 83.9 percent, used the news to obtain information during the sniper shootings (Zivotofsky 2005). Studies also indicate that 71 percent of citizens watched or listened to the news more than usual during the weeks of the sniper shootings (Coppola 2004). Clearly, this shows that media was contributing to citizen's understanding of the sniper attacks and interpretation of the events. Modification of behaviors was an inherent result of perceived risks caused by the snipers; 76.3 percent of women modified their normal action of filling gas at the gas station; and many other significant numbers of men and women changed behaviors such as eating out, going shopping, and driving in general (Zivotofsky 2005).

The Washington, DC sniper shootings inflicted much fear and anxiety among the citizens of the metropolitan area. In response to these fears and stress, many citizens employed new behaviors or modified existing patterns of behavior. With only thirteen people directly harmed by the snipers (ten killed, three wounded), why were millions of people so fearful for their lives? What caused this behavior of millions while a miniscule number of people were affected?

Methods

Two main research questions guided my research:

1. How did the media portray the 2002 Washington, DC sniper shootings?
2. Did media consumption change behaviors among individuals?

In order to answer the above questions, I conducted a content analysis of media coverage of the sniper shootings, as well as 10 in-depth interviews with residents who lived in the Washington, DC metropolitan area at the time of the shootings. Below I detail my methodological approach for this thesis.

Newspaper Article Content Analysis

Because the media is such a significant source of information for most Americans, particularly during times of disaster, I began my research with a detailed look at how the sniper shootings were portrayed to the public.

I analyzed a set of newspaper articles that focused on the shootings spanning the entire three weeks of news coverage. I collected the newspaper articles using the LexisNexis academic search database. My search query consisted of looking for newspaper articles in "Washington, DC news sources" from October 1, 2002 through October 31, 2002, searching for the combination of key words including sniper, fear, and beltway. The search resulted in a total of 968 related articles. In order to generate a useable dataset, I employed a random retrieving pattern of articles to equal a final total of 30 articles for analysis. Because the sniper shootings occurred in a three week time period, I decided to code roughly one article every day from these weeks, to portray media encompassing the entirety of the shootings. The articles predominantly came from the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Times,* and a few articles also came from Cox New Services.

Semi-Structured Individual Interviews

To examine the effects of the media consumption and behavioral change during the 2002 Washington, DC sniper shootings, I interviewed a sample of 10

individuals regarding their experiences. The purpose of these interviews was to gain a more depth understanding of the ways that media consumption may affect people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors during times of disaster. There are many past research studies to take into consideration when constructing a sampling frame for a study such as this. Much disaster research to date indicates significant differences in risk perception among diverse demographic populations in the United States. Some studies have found that individuals of varying occupations report different levels of risk perception (Lamson 1983). Researchers have argued that individuals with lower income or of lower socioeconomic status report the highest levels of concern during technological hazards (Pillisuk et al. 1987). Other extensive disaster research revealed that women often perceive disaster threat more seriously than men (Fothergill 1996). Klinenberg (2001) shows that elderly populations perceive risks differently due to different levels of media exposure.

With respect to these potential differences among populations, I selected a purposive sample of five males and five females, with two males and two females who were 65 or older at the time of the sniper shootings. The other three interviewees of each gender varied in ages from 21 to 57 years of age. Although my sample size is small, it allowed me to compare the responses of men and women and younger and older participants to the sniper shootings. I found the interviewees partly through personal contacts and also through snowball sampling. The majority of interviewees identified themselves as White/Caucasian with the exception of one woman who identified herself as half Sri Lankan, half White. All senior citizen respondents had children and grandchildren at the time of the shootings, but only two other interviewees under the age of 65 had children during this time. Besides one single woman and the two college-aged men interviewed, all other respondents were married at the time of the shootings.

Educational attainment ranged from only some classes in high school to undergraduate degrees with extra training such as nursing school. All four of the senior citizens interviewed (two male, two female) are retired and were retired at the time of the shootings. All other interviewees currently work or are full-time students at local universities. Occupations and past occupations of the respondents included: social worker, chemical laborer, grocery store manager, professional website Blogger, undergraduate student, and even a medical secretary.

During a ten day period, I informally interviewed ten individuals living in the greater Washington, DC metropolitan area. The majority of these interviewees (8) lived in a rural suburb town, Damascus, located in central Maryland about 40 miles from downtown Washington, DC, but only 17 miles from Rockville, Maryland, the site of multiple murders during the sniper shootings. These Rockville shootings represented the closest attacks to Damascus during the shooting spree of October 2002. The other two interviewees not living in the Damascus area were from Reston, Virginia and Silver Spring, Maryland. Both of these sites were much closer geographically to the shootings, with the Silver Spring resident living only a few blocks from a couple of the shootings.

A wide-ranging set of open-ended questions, which were developed after completing the literature review and content analysis portion of this study, were used throughout the interview process. The focus of the interview questions was on media consumption, reaction to the shootings, routine/behavior changes in response to the shootings, and general feelings about the attacks. All interviews were conducted between December 25, 2007 and December 31, 2007. The interviews ranged in length from 30 to 90 minutes. All interviews were conducted in the homes of the interviewees except for one interview that was conducted in a restaurant in Damascus, Maryland.

Data Analysis

Newspaper Articles

The coverage of the sniper shootings in Washington, DC newspaper sources emphasized feelings of powerlessness and helplessness through redundancy of these tones. Constant reporting of coping strategies of other citizens perpetuated feelings of desperation, thus likely motivating readers to take similar actions. The dominating theme of the Washington, DC newspapers was one of vulnerability and fear; a dangerous environment was portrayed for readers.

After the first day of shootings, the crimes were "apparently random," but very quickly, readers were reminded that "nothing like this has ever happened" before (Moscoso 2002). On this very first day, reporters chose very explicit language to describe the murder scenes, describing one victim leaning on a van, "smearing it with blood" (Moscoso 2002). Such language depicts a fearful scene for readers and reinforcing the murders' significance.

Images of a "cold blooded killer" whom "elude[d] police" and "prowled peaceful sidewalks" hardly promotes calm, logical judgments of risk perception among citizens (Washington Post 2002). Titles touting that "Everyone is a victim," and "Anxiety" becomes part of daily routine, and the constant use of "fear" such as "fear seeping into" resident's lives in multiple newspaper titles during the month of October all contributed toward feelings of helplessness, stress, and fear (Sorokin, Thomas-Lester, Irvin, 2002). With "fear" taking its' place in titles in half of the 30 articles examined, there is no mystery as to why people became fearful for their well-being. From my sample of newspaper articles, language seemed to remain consistently "negative," however future research might endeavor with a focus on whether or not language becomes more fear-provoking as a stressful, dangerous event continues to plague citizens.

Another powerful pattern in the articles was the encouragement of readers to change their behaviors in order to cope during the shootings. The ideas for behavioral change were often introduced through stories about things that fellow citizens were doing to protect themselves during the shootings. The amount of reporting focused on citizens' behaviors was astounding. With only seven out of 30 articles strictly reporting on developments in the shootings, the remaining articles focused on strategies for changing daily routines and people's personal experiences and responses to the shootings. An abundance of quotations, anecdotes, and observations flooded readers with all kinds of coping ideas, making it likely that people who were not changing their daily routines in response to shooters were likely influenced to do so eventually. Some articles talked of how to wedge oneself between gas pumps to stay out of sight; others suggested carrying portable radios to monitor developments in the case (Washington Post 2002).

A variety of potential new behaviors were introduced through personal quotations: walking faster, walking in zig-zag patterns, observing gas stations to gauge safety levels, never becoming stationary in public, abandoning public transportation, and driving children to school. Through the media coverage, readers are confronted with these behaviors and forced to consider adopting them (Nearman, Johnson, and Witt 2002). The newspapers spared no expense in sharing and justifying extreme behaviors like purchasing and wearing body armor while pumping gas (Sorokin 2002). Reading about others' new behavior modifications made these behaviors socially acceptable and psychologically reasonable.

The constant reiterating of themes of helplessness sends the reader looking for ways to take back control. Accounts of citizens saying "If it's your time to go, it's your time to go," and quotes of religious leaders commenting on life's fragility, or news agencies suggesting reduction of coffee intake while driving as to reduce stopping for restrooms – one cannot help but feel powerlessness when assessing these stories (Johnson, Harris, Pressley 2002). As a parent, these feelings only seem to be exacerbated when anecdotes of parents making children sit away from car windows when driving and closing window shades of children's bedrooms at homes grace the headlines (Edwards 2002).

The newspaper articles were a fountain of stress and worrisome banter at times. Used primarily during the sniper shootings for purposes other than reporting the shooting developments, the articles themselves ironically included quotes of concerned citizens who felt that "we really can make it worse by having the TV on" (Edwards 2002).

Interviews

After completing the content analysis of media coverage, I began conducting the qualitative interviews with the 10 participants in December 2006. Upon completion of the qualitative interviews, I transcribed all interviewee responses verbatim. After finishing the transcriptions, I grouped responses to questions into categories based on similar themes. After searching for themes in the data and grouping responses into categories, I began searching for various factors that helped explain people's perceptions of and reactions to the sniper shootings.

The most prevalent themes that emerged that influenced interviewees' mental, physical, and social responses to the impending sniper threat included levels of media consumption and behavioral changes influenced by respondents' closeness to the shootings. Such examples of closeness include geographical location to the shootings, or personal connections to victims. In addition, demographic characteristics, including both gender and age, affected the responses of the interviewees. From my comparison of interviewee responses, the general trends are that increased levels of media consumption led to more changes in interviewees during the sniper shootings, and increased geographical as well as relational closeness to the actual shooting

scenes or victims also contributed to higher levels of stress and behavioral change.

Additional trends emerging from my interviews include the collective sense of sympathy and understanding for those who chose to participate in changing physical behavior during the shootings. Whether the interviewee changed daily routines or not in response to the shootings, the majority of respondents reported that these behaviors in others were both justified and understandable often given their geographical location. In this following section, I will explore the various interviewee responses as related to the aforementioned themes, comparing and contrasting responses to the influences mentioned above.

Media Consumption and Increased Stress

Consuming media, whether through watching the news on television or reading the newspaper, was positively correlated with the levels of mental, physical, or emotional stress emphasized by interviewees. The more media interviewees were exposed to, the more often those interviewees expressed frequent concern, worry, and routine or behavioral change in response to the sniper shootings. For example, one male college student reported that he watched 30 minutes per day of news television during the sniper attacks, and also responded that he "really didn't change [his] behavior at all" during the sniper shootings. A second male college student interviewee reported watching television news up to three hours daily and reported two serious instances of "feeling in danger" and changing his daily routines in response to these feelings. Both college students lived in the same geographical area at the time of the shootings.

This pattern emerged in other comparable interviewees as well. The interviewee living in Reston, Virginia (closer to the actual shootings than those living in Damascus) reported watching television news "hardly at all, anytime," and that she "didn't feel worried at all anytime," and "never felt the need to change routines or worry for her safety." Conversely, another female respondent who watched television news at least two hours per day remarked that she was "creeped out," and that the shootings "scared [her] quite a bit."

Other cases of higher media consumption leading to higher levels of emotional and mental stress are evident throughout the interviews as well. Regardless of media intake, nine of the ten respondents reported watching television news "more than usual" during the time period of the sniper shootings, which fits with prior research findings. Clearly, all respondents were watching television for updates on the shootings, and reported this in the interviews. However, it was the respondents who consumed the most media, particularly through television broadcasting, who reported the most extreme fears and levels of behavioral change.

Closeness to the Shootings, Behavioral Change, and Emotional Effects

Beyond media consumption and its varying effects on interviewee response, interviewees' closeness to the shootings also had a strong influence on routine changes during the shootings. The respondents from the Damascus, Maryland, a town 15 miles from most of the shootings, reported that they predominantly did not change their behavior in attempt to feel safer.

When asked about changing their routines, most of the respondents from this region only mentioned such affects as feeling more alert or aware of their surroundings. Beyond that, they reported very little behavioral change. Indeed, most continued normal activities but did so with a sense of heightened alertness and cautiousness. One college student in Damascus noted his hyper-alertness while in public:

> *I don't think I changed all that much. I guess I was just more cautious when I was outside, I was probably just more cautious, looking around and stuff.*

Similarly, an elderly man from the Damascus area noted what a significant change he had undergone in terms of being on the lookout for things out of the ordinary:

> *The only thing I did differently, which I had never done before in my life, I became observant while I was at shopping centers, and looked around, before I got out of my vehicle. I was looking for anything out of the ordinary.*

As a result of the feelings of fear and worry, some took comfort in the safety of their loved ones. An elderly woman commented on her husband's abilities as a former police officer, and how that helped her to feel more secure and thus less likely to drastically change her normal routine:

> *Being an ex-policeman, I feel like my husband knew what to look for. I was fearful but I don't think it stopped us from doing things all together. I was more alert and*

looking around for unusual things, but I don't know what I would have done had I seen anything.

While these responses certainly illustrate the heightened sense of awareness and fear that all interviewees expressed, other respondents, including those living closest to the actual shootings as well as two cases in Damascus reported more dramatic routine and behavioral change. One Damascus college student recalled his feelings of fear that culminated one late afternoon at a shopping mall closer to the Rockville area of the shootings.

I walked out in the parking lot and no one else was around. I felt like I was being watched, and I felt like I was in danger. I was further south and closer to the shootings area, so I was no longer isolated. At that moment I was scared and I jogged to my car.

An elderly man told me about how he watched approaching vehicles with great suspicion during his daily errands:

When I would go to the mailbox, I would watch every car and truck coming down the road toward me. I would watch the passenger side of the vehicle, I felt like the driver was just shooting people. It got my imagination running wild; I was prepared to dive on the ground if I saw any unusual movement from a driver or passenger. If I was somewhere else, like the shopping center, I was looking all around. My antennas were up the whole time.

One interviewee who lived in the Silver Springs area of Maryland, which was much closer to the sites of eight of the shootings, discussed how she changed her routine when it came to putting gas in her automobile:

I was very scared to fill my gas tank. During the next three weeks, I filled my gas tank only once. I only filled it early morning, and when I was pumping, I was looking around and making sure I was aware of what was going on around me. I would stand behind my door but I also crouched down while the gas was pumping. I also would not go out for anything unnecessary. Shopping and going out for fun; I just did not do these things during those weeks.

The above quote is likely indicative of the approach that many individuals living in the Washington, DC area took to pumping gas during the time of the sniper shootings, given that four of the thirteen victims were shot while putting fuel into their cars. It is important to note that the two interviewees reporting dramatic change were the two strongest outliers of media consumption in comparison to other Damascus interviewees. The college student and the older man both reported watching three to four hours per day, the highest amounts of media consumption of all interviewees. Perhaps their media consumption explains their extreme behavioral changes, given their far distance from the shootings, living in Damascus.

Beyond the scope of geographic location or media consumption, two respondents' shared a particular closeness to the sniper shootings. One male respondent in Damascus and the female respondent living in Silver Spring both had personal friendships with victims of the shootings. These instances, clearly impacting the respondents more so than other interviewees, had a profound influence on their perspectives of the shootings, but most importantly, on behavioral changes. The man living in Damascus noted that this development made him feel more vulnerable and was a cause for more alertness. In the following quote, he notes one particular change, but only engaged in this behavior after the murder of his friend.

Every time I was pumping gas I was looking all around at roof tops and across the streets.

The respondent in Silver Spring also noted her distinct friendship with one of the victims.

Then on the news we saw his picture and he was the victim at another gas station. I was really close to his wife for many years. She was a great friend and I also knew her mother.

As noted previously, this respondent also avoided going out, and sat in her car and hid behind the door while pumping gas. Clearly, there were different factors which contributed to respondents behavioral changes; media consumption, geographical location and even personal ties to victims.

Collective Understanding

While some of the respondents did not report making significant changes in their daily routines in the face of the sniper threats, all interviewees noted that they saw this behavior in other citizens on the local and national television news programs. Respondents listed the following behavioral changes that they had heard about through various media outlets, as reporters attempted to convey potential responses to the sniper threat:

- Crouching down, sitting inside one's car, or standing behind car doors while pumping gas

- Running, weaving, or bopping up and down while jogging/running through parking lots
- Crouching down in seats while riding city buses

In discussing behavioral and routine changes, respondents often reflected upon whether or not these actions among their peers or themselves were rational. Many respondents felt the behaviors of others were irrational and exaggerated and felt it was of no use to act in such ways. Likewise, many respondents felt that the act of staying inside or avoiding public spaces was equally ridiculous and unnecessary. Any number of reasons might explain this collective view of behavioral change as unnecessary. Perhaps enough time has past to skew the actual fear of those weeks during 2002, or maybe respondents really did think of these changes as irrational. Another explanation is that the Damascus respondents shared a similar geographic location and further distance from the shootings.

Even though these respondents from Damascus were skeptical regarding the levels of avoidance and extreme fears of those who lived through the sniper shootings, the interviewees were in agreement that had the sniper shootings been closer to their homes, they most likely would have modified their daily routines and activities to a much greater extent. A single woman exclaimed:

> *I wouldn't have even gone out of house had it been here!*

Similarly, a married man living in Damascus commented:

> *I would have been more cautious and definitely more scared had shootings occurred in our town.*

It is impossible to know if these changes would have been at the level of other citizens' who they deemed irrational and ridiculous. Many interviewees expressed understanding as well for citizens living near the shootings outside of recognizing they would have changed their own behaviors had shootings occurred in their area of Damascus. One female senior citizen in Damascus noted:

> *Well if that makes people feel better, than it's okay to change routines.*

Another Damascus citizen expressed similar sympathy for other community members.

> *I think it was definitely reasonable and even if they were over-reacting I think it was reasonable.*

Gender and Age

As prior research has indicated, both age and gender are important demographic factors that affect individual response during times of disaster. Upon implementing these considerations in my purposive sample of interviewees, I wanted to see if these trends held up with my respondents. Age was one distinct difference with respondents, as two of the five men I interviewed were over the age of 65 at the time of the shootings, as were two of the five women. My results from examining interviewee response from age were inconclusive, as I feel many factors influenced these respondents beyond the scope of age.

For example, both of the elderly men I interviewed lived in the suburban town of Damascus, yet one reported three to four hours of television consumption daily, while the other reported only one hour of television consumption daily. The former reported some of the most drastic routine change and anxiety while in public of all interviewees. Conversely, the latter reported no changes and adopted a stance of strength and unwavering confidence during the shootings. Perhaps a larger sample of respondents may have allowed for better analysis of different age groups, but in this case, media consumption differed between the two elderly men, just as much as their routine changes and response differed. Similar findings were the case for the two elderly women as well.

Gender differences were much more distinct and pronounced. While no conclusive results indicated different routine change or physical responses between males and females, it was the general roles and stances they adopted during the shootings that were highlighted. More specifically, females tended to take on the role of the caretaker, as the males tended to exhibit the protector role in ensuring their families' safety. For example, one woman noted her daily phone calls to her son, who happened to work in the area of many of shootings:

> *Many times, I called my son and asked, could you wait and go to Rockville another day instead of today.*

For males, they often voiced their concern regarding ensuring family safety. One respondent voiced his anger towards the emphasis of law enforcement officers on looking for a particular vehicle, which turned out to be a false lead.

> *I remember at the time being angry with the authorities, especially Chief Moose and Doug Duncan the county executive. Every time they opened their mouths, they were*

saying white box truck and part of my anger is that if they were just zeroing in on this, they are not protecting my family. The snipers were caught in Frederick in a blue Chevy Caprice; I have a son and daughter in Frederick. I have another son who has his own tow-truck business and he was in Rockville all day every day.

These responses clearly demonstrate the difference in primary concerns of male and female respondents during the shootings. While women may tended to do the worrying and comforting of other family members, men tended to primarily focus on preventing injury or harm to their loved ones, which fit very closely with more traditional gender roles that we often see in larger society during non-disaster times. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that these roles might be amplified during a time of perceived uncertainty and crisis.

Conclusion

In this study, I have examined the 2002 Washington, DC sniper shootings. Throughout my research, I sought to address two primary research questions:

1. How did the media portray the 2002 Washington, DC sniper shootings?
2. Did media consumption change behaviors among individuals?

I first conducted a newspaper content analysis of prominent Washington, DC newspapers. From this analysis, I outlined specific themes which emerged from the newspapers' coverage of the sniper shootings. Next, I interview a sample of ten private citizens to better understand their reactions and responses to the shootings in correlation with their media consumption. Upon completion of these interviews, I gathered my data to examine whether or not relationships existed between the nature in which the shootings were reported in the media and how individuals in the Washington, DC community responded.

The analysis of newspaper coverage and in-depth interviews of responses to the shootings support the cases previously made within the scholarly community regarding media exposure and behavioral change. The media showed a very grim picture of the risks and dangers that citizens faced. Living in the Washington, DC area, I related to the personal experiences conveyed in the articles. In retrospect, I realize that much of my behavior modification and psychological stress was irrational; however the media made my actions seem rational.

The issue with the media coverage is that it over-published and over-emphasized the feelings citizens were experiencing to the point that they were messengers of gossip and irrational behavior to the rest of the population. The affects of this media overexposure could have been the cause or a contributing factor for the widespread behavior modification that resulted. After all, reporting that citizens are experiencing sleeplessness, nightmares, forgetfulness, lack of concentration, and anger could induce more cases of such behavior (Washington Post 2002).

Interviewing citizens most directly affected by the Washington, DC sniper shootings revealed many feelings of worry, anxiety, and fear. These feelings were often portrayed through the changing of daily routines, more mental alertness, or avoidance of areas all together. My interviews revealed the relationship between media consumption and changing of behaviors and routines. The respondents' supported the notion that increased levels of media during those October days often lead toward more exaggerated responses for safety, both physically and mentally. In addition, respondents' closeness to the actual shootings or the victims also affected the respondents' reactions to the on-going threat caused by the snipers.

Clearly the media, both in newspaper and television form, affected the interviewees who consumed the most print and electronic media. The media influenced their physical routines, mindset, and feelings toward the incidents throughout those three weeks in October. While my respondents were digesting the Washington, DC area media, they were simultaneously incorporating this information into their daily actions.

The overarching affects on individuals of the Washington, DC sniper shootings were widespread, immense, and overwhelming. With ten people perishing in a metropolitan area of over five million, a large portion of those five million felt personal risk. The media coverage accurately fulfilled the claims scholarly works have been drawing from research. While large percentages turned to media for information gathering, I now understand what the media supplied them. With dominating messages of helplessness and coping in the newspapers, an educated prediction I can make is that media exposure during this time lead to both behavior modification and fear for one's well-being.

Recommendations for Future Research

My content analysis and comparison to scholarly works focusing on the sniper shootings surely warrants further study into the relationship between one's psychological and physical responses to a disaster, and the nature of how it is reported in the media people consume. There is an obvious correlation between the themes and messages portrayed by the Washington, DC newspapers and the behaviors and responses exhibited by its readers and surrounding public, just as scholarly research suggested.

However, with my research moving out of content analysis and into personal interviews with people living through this event, there appears to be a strong relationship between the media's content and the personal response to it. After documenting media's direct content and word choice, I moved forward to examine the personal affects, if any, this media had on citizens. My research has revealed multiple factors which can influence a citizens' response to perceived danger. Levels of media consumption, geographic closeness to the crime scenes, and personal ties to those directly affected or victimized by a threat all influence the level and intensity of response to perceived threat. Further, my research reinforced differing responses by interviewees varying in both age and gender.

These findings can motivate and encourage even broader research endeavors which ask: In addition to word choice and choice of content, how else does the media cultivate and perpetuate fear and response through its reporting of crime and disaster? What other factors can contribute to the perceived level of threat in citizens during an on-going threat? With my research, further examinations can address the problems of irrational stress and fear taking hold on individuals in the wake of perceived threats.

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