

Mexican Journalists: An Investigation of Their Emotional Health

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Mexican journalists are frequently the victims of violence, often drug related. The purpose of the study was to assess their mental well-being. Of 104 journalists recruited from 3 news organizations, those who had stopped working on drug-related stories because of intimidation from the criminal drug cartels ($n = 26$) had significantly greater social dysfunction ($p = .024$); and more depressive ($p = .001$) and higher intrusive ($p = .027$), avoidance ($p = .005$), and arousal ($p = .033$) symptoms than journalists living and working under threat in regions of drug violence ($n = 61$). They also had more arousal ($p = .05$) and depressive ($p = .027$) symptoms than journalists ($n = 17$) never threatened before and living in regions without a drug problem. These findings provide preliminary data on the deleterious effects of drug-related violence on the Mexican media, amplifying the concerns expressed by journalist watchdog organizations monitoring the state of the press in the country.

Mexico is now a very violent country. Since President Felipe Calderon signaled his intention to dismantle the drug cartels in 2006, more than 34,000 Mexicans have been murdered. The violence has not been confined to internecine warfare among the drug dealers. It has spilled over into civil society at large with a seeming impunity at times that has raised concerns about Mexico becoming a failed state (Kurzman, 2009). Prominent among the many victims of the violence have been journalists. Recognizing the power of the media to inform society, the drug cartels appear to have targeted the fourth estate.

Previous research has shown that war journalists (Feinstein, Owen, & Blair, 2002) and American newspaper journalists (Pyeich, Newman, & Daleiden, 2003) may be adversely affected by traumatic work-related events. What is less clear is the state of mental well-being among Mexican journalists, hence the focus of this study.

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Method

Participants and Procedure

Journalists were recruited from three national news organizations in Mexico. Contact was established with 129 journalists of whom 104 (80.6%) agreed to take part in the study. The reasons for 25 journalists declining to participate were not always known. Eleven (8.5%) stated their work was unrelated to current political or social events in Mexico. The mean age of the 104 journalists was 42.5 ($SD = 10.2$) years and they had been working in the profession for a mean of 14.9 ($SD = 7.2$) years. Seventy journalists (67.3%) were male, 56 (53.8%) were married, and 86 (82.6%) had a university education.

A website was established for the sole purpose of data collection. This methodology has been used successfully in the past (see Feinstein et al., 2002). The language of the study was Spanish. Approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, affiliated with the University of Toronto.

Measures

Individual and work characteristics. Basic demographic data including age, gender, marital status, level of education, and years employed as a journalist were collected. Data pertaining specifically to the drug conflict in Mexico were also derived. Journalists responded yes or no to the following items: (a) did they live in a province affected by drug related violence, (b) had they stopped working on drug-related stories because of intimidation, (c) had their spouses and/or children been threatened by the drug gangs, (d) did they know of a colleague injured or killed by the cartels, and (e) had they been injured in drug-related violence. The amount of alcohol used

weekly was recorded; a unit of alcohol was defined as either a regular-size bottle of beer, glass of wine, or shot of spirits.

Symptoms. Three self-report questionnaires looking at posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and psychological distress were included. All three measures have been validated previously in Spanish. The Revised Impact of Event Scale (IES-R; Baguena, Villarroya, Belena, Amelia, Roldan, & Steig, 2001) contains 22 items and is scored for three subscales: Intrusion, Avoidance, and Hyperarousal. The time frame is the past 7 days and symptoms were related to traumatic events that had taken place in the line of work. Items were scored as 0 = *not at all*, 1 = *a little bit*, 2 = *moderately*, 3 = *quite a bit*, and 4 = *extremely*. Cronbach's α for these data was .93, .93, and .89, respectively.

The Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II; Wiebe & Penley, 2005), which contains 21 mood-related questions, was used to assess depression. The four responses per item were scored in a Likert fashion (0, 1, 2, 3). Cronbach's α was .88 for these data.

The 28-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28; Lobo, Peres-Echeverria, & Artal, 1986) contains four subscales, each comprising seven items, describing symptoms of somatic complaints, anxiety, social dysfunction, and depression. A choice of four responses are provided for each question and scored 0, 0, 1, 1. The subscales scores are summed to give an overall index of psychological distress. Cronbach's α was .84, .87, .83, and .80 for the four subscales in this study.

Data Analysis

Comparisons across the three groups were undertaken with a one-way analysis of variance for continuous variables with post hoc Tukey analyses for between group differences. Chi-squared tests were used for ordinal data. Statistical significance was .05. Comparison groups were journalists who had stopped covering drug news because of intimidation ($n = 26$), those who had been threatened and/or continued to live and work in drug related regions ($n = 61$), and those who were not living in regions with drug related violence and who had never been threatened and whose families had never been threatened ($n = 17$).

Results

Nature of the Threat

Seventy-four (71.2%) of the journalists lived in a province where there was drug-related violence. One quarter of the entire sample had stopped working on drug-related stories because of intimidation or personal safety fears. Three (2.9%) journalists had been wounded in attacks by drug traffickers, 18 (17.3%) knew a colleague who had been wounded, and 51 (49.0%) knew a colleague who had been murdered by the drug cartels.

Of the 65 journalists reporting drug-related news, 35 (53.7%) reported being threatened by the drug cartels. Journalists covering the cartels were significantly more likely to have been threatened than their colleagues working on non-drug-related stories $\chi^2(1, N = 104) = 17.3, p = .001$. The complexity of the journalists' involvement as victims of drug-related violence, however, was shown by the result that of the 74 journalists living and working in regions with drug violence, 21 (28.4%) were not covering drug news. Drug-instigated violence was not confined to journalists working in regions known to have drug-related violence or to journalists covering drug-related news. For example, of the 11 (10.6%) journalists whose families had been threatened, five were not living in drug regions and three were not covering drug stories. On the other hand, eight of 30 (26.7%) journalists not living or working in a region with drug violence had been threatened. Of the journalists not covering drug violence, 10 (25.6%) knew a colleague who had been injured, and 13 (33.0%) knew a colleague who had been killed by the cartels.

Symptom Expression According to Threat

The comparisons across the three groups of journalists are shown in Table 1. Those who were intimidated and stopped working on drug news had significantly more symptoms of intrusion, avoidance, arousal, depression, and social dysfunction than those who continued to report despite intimidation, and more arousal and depression symptoms than those who were never intimidated. BDI-II scores correlated significantly with intrusion ($r = .64$), avoidance ($r = .65$), hyperarousal ($r = .69$), and total GHQ ($r = .74$) scores ($p < .001$ for all). There were no differences in alcohol use, stratified according to gender, across the three groups $F(69, N = 70) = 0.23, p = .792$ for men and $F(33, N = 34) = 0.33, p = .719$ for women, or in cannabis use $\chi^2(2, N = 104) = 2.9, p = .234$. Only three subjects used drugs other than cannabis and all were in the group no longer reporting the drug-related news.

Discussion

The most significant finding to emerge from this study is that one quarter of the journalists studied had stopped covering drug-related stories because of intimidation. This group had more symptoms suggestive of PTSD, depression, and overall psychological distress when compared to colleagues who either continued working under threat in areas where drug violence was common or those who had never been threatened.

A closer look at the mean IES-R scores reveal that the journalists who had succumbed to intimidation had symptoms of intrusion, arousal, and avoidance in the mild to moderate range, but depression scores in the moderate to severe range according to the designated cutoff of ≥ 20 on the BDI (Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996). Depression in turn correlated significantly with all three PTSD symptom clusters and all four GHQ

Table 1
Differences in Symptoms for Three Groups of Mexican Journalists

Variable	Total (N = 104)		Threatened, stopped reporting (n = 26)		Threatened but continued reporting (n = 61)		Never threatened (n = 17)		η^2
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
IES-R Intrusion	1.23	0.95	1.67 _A	1.12	1.10 _B	0.98	1.05 _B	1.05	.07*
IES-R Avoidance	1.17	0.94	1.66 _A	1.08	0.98 _B	0.77	1.11 _B	1.03	.10**
IES-R Hyperarousal	1.28	0.99	1.73 _A	1.18	1.16 _B	0.81	1.02 _C	1.06	.07*
BDI-II	15.13	8.33	20.0 _A	12.18	13.18 _B	5.35	14.65 _B	7.37	.12**
GHQ Somatic	2.54	2.41	3.31	2.48	2.38	2.36	1.94	2.30	.04
GHQ Anxiety	3.11	2.58	3.85	2.94	2.82	2.43	3.0	2.48	.03
GHQ Social dysfunction	1.96	2.19	2.85 _A	2.57	1.51 _B	1.81	2.24	2.49	.07*
GHQ Depression	0.66	1.46	1.62 _A	0.28	0.28 _B	0.86	0.59 _C	1.23	.17***
Total GHQ	8.27	7.34	11.62	9.06	6.98	6.06	7.76	7.49	.07*

Note. Means not sharing the same subscript were significantly different at $p < .05$. GHQ = 28 item General Health Questionnaire; IES-R = Impact of Events Scale revised; BDI-II = Beck Depression Inventory-II.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

subscales, speaking to the psychiatric comorbidity in this sample, a finding consistent with the broader trauma literature in general (Bleich, Koslowsky, Dolev, & Lerer, 1997). It is possible that this combined morbidity influenced journalists' decisions to stop covering drug violence, but the data are associations rather than causal.

The purely descriptive nature of this study does not allow for etiological inference and there are no data quantifying the severity of threat, but it is nevertheless notable that a large group of Mexican journalists continues their hazardous work while living in regions of drug-related violence and subject to intimidation. This may speak to resilience in the face of adversity, and is consistent with the mild level of symptoms on the IES-R and BDI-II.

The fact that a substantial percentage of Mexican journalists show evidence of psychological distress is consistent with data from other groups of journalists whose work entails covering war (Feinstein et al., 2002) or domestic news in generally safe civil societies where coverage of crime, for example, comes with exposure to potentially traumatic situations (Pyeovich et al., 2003). The Mexican journalists' experience differs, however, in one fundamental way from these examples. Unlike the war group, who travel in and out of danger, or local journalists in other countries working in safer environments, most Mexican journalists studied here both work and live in areas where violence is endemic. There is no respite from danger, short of backing off from covering drug-related news, and even this does not guarantee the journalists immunity from the violence that surrounds them in areas where drug cartels hold sway.

These findings should be interpreted with caution because of some methodological limitations. The absence of structured interviews means that diagnoses of psychiatric illness could not be obtained. Although there is a strong correlation between

the results of psychometric inquiry and structured interview, the former have a lower validity (Feinstein & Dolan, 1991). Second, the sample size requires caution in extrapolating the results to all Mexican journalists covering the country's drug-related conflicts. Third, the self-report methodology does not allow one to determine with complete certainty if every journalist had confronted a traumatic event, and verify that IES-R responses were to drug-related violence or to another form of threat. The strong association found between PTSD symptoms and the report of exposure to threat from the cartels to the journalists' and their families' suggests that the focus was on drug-related traumatic events.

Posttraumatic stress disorder adversely impairs quality of life (Zatzick et al., 1997) and can affect family members too (Solomon, Dekel, & Zerach, 2009). The data should therefore come as a wake-up call to Mexican news organizations that all is not well with the men and women who, at considerable risk, bring news of a local conflict with regional implications for all the Americas.

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