

Breakout

Interviewing victims, survivors
and people experiencing trauma

Interviewing the survivors, the victimised and traumatised

Make some clear statements about the confronting nature of the material, and how students can take care of themselves. Make it clear that the classroom setting is not a therapeutic environment and is not the place to reveal sensitive personal information. Experience in the violence against women (VAW) sector tells us that people who make personal revelations in the classroom can be left feeling unsupported and exposed. Alert students to the student counselling resources available at your institution. Emphasise the need for respectful debate and argument, even when people strongly disagree. Discussion is encouraged, but respect is not negotiable

When we report VAW we are often going to be interviewing sources who are not always polished, professional or experienced with media organisations, and who are in a position of powerlessness. Sometimes their credibility will be under attack.

Often, the victims and survivors of VAW will still be at risk. They are the victims of trauma, and that means that special ethical considerations arise. We must not exploit their vulnerability. We must not further rob them of power.

It is very understandable and appropriate for journalists to be wary of interviewing vulnerable and traumatised people. However, we need to properly understand our ethical duties.

It is important that journalists not shy away from their core duty of telling stories. The failure to credit and seek out the stories of victims and survivors is one of the reasons that VAW has been under-reported in the past.

Research (Muller, 2011) involving the experience of other trauma survivors, such as from the Black Saturday bushfires, confirms that responsible reporting can be of great benefit to them. It is a powerful form of acknowledging their experience and giving them the power to shape the story. This too is part of a journalists' task – giving voice to people who have important stories to tell.

Failing to interview victims and survivors because of our own discomfort is not desirable. So too, of course, is interviewing them in ways which adds to their trauma, puts them at risk or fails to tell their story and give them voice.

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ACTIVITIES AND TRAINER NOTES	SLIDE NO. & MATERIALS
<p>Informed consent</p> <p>The notion of informed consent is vital. Consider whether the person is in a position to give you that informed consent. Do they understand what they are doing?</p> <p>The ethical code gives us some guidance in what to do and what not to do. A touchstone of all professional ethics is the idea of informed consent. If we are interviewing someone, we must be sure that we have their informed consent, just like a doctor must have informed consent from the patient before proceeding with treatment</p> <p>This means the journalist has a duty to take care to inform the source about the impact of the story. If time permits or in seminars, discuss some ways in which this might be done. For example, take along a copy of the publication the reporter is writing for and show how similar stories have been treated in the past.</p> <p>Journalists should ask themselves whether people have been fully informed of the consequences of what they are doing. If they have, and they understand what they are doing, then they are able to consent to the interview.</p> <p>The four abilities model of consent is a test that journalists can use when deciding whether a potential subject can provide informed consent. It requires an assessment of the capacity of the subject, while also holding the journalist accountable for the truthfulness and thoroughness of the background information provided.</p>	<p>3</p>
<p>Trauma</p> <p>If the trauma is fresh, it may be difficult for the journalist to judge whether the person is able to give consent. Some extra precautions may be necessary, such as making sure support people are present, or giving the subject extra opportunities to comment on the way their material will be used.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some things journalists should consider in interviewing traumatised and vulnerable people include: • involving experts, advocates and support organisations that have the interview subjects’ best interests at heart • taking extra care to make sure the interview subject feels comfortable, for example having a female present • taking extra care to explain your purpose in seeking the interview • particularly if the person is still traumatised at the time of the interview, you might consider checking back with them before publication or broadcast. <p>The safety of the source is important. This has implications for when and how you do the interview, and how and whether you identify your source. Think about whether they are at risk of being seen by the perpetrator, for example.</p> <p>If you are interviewing someone who is a victim/survivor of VAW, they have already been robbed of power. An interview style that recognises this is important. If you give the subject some power over the direction of the interview, you are more likely to get a good result.</p>	<p>4</p> <p>5</p>

Types of questions

Consider the kinds of questions that you can ask - open, closed and “no question”. Each has advantages and disadvantages, but open questions leave most power in the hands of the interview subject.

Best Practice: The best practice is to place power in the hands of the victim/survivor while retaining the ability to conduct the interview productively. Open questions should predominate. Some language, that is likely to offend or traumatize, should be avoided.

Best Practice: The questions. Run through these examples with the students. Can they add to either good or bad things to do in these interviews?

Summary and conclusion: It is important to do these difficult interviews, but we need to keep these points in mind

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