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The 2007 Virginia Tech Shootings: Identification and Application of Lessons Learned

Charles R. Figley and Russell Jones

This special issue of *Traumatology* focuses on the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history. It took place on April 16, 2007, at Virginia Tech University. Twenty-seven students and five members of the faculties were shot and killed by Seung-Hui Cho, who also killed himself. Twenty-nine others were injured. Untold thousands were emotionally affected by this tragedy. The coeditors agreed to publish a special issue that would focus on the lessons learned by those who experienced the events first hand—students and faculty of Virginia Tech.

Scope of the Journal and Focus of This Special Issue

Traumatology is a scholarly, professional, international journal that publishes original research, theory, practice, and essays relevant to better understanding and helping the traumatized, especially during and immediately following a disaster such as the Virginia Tech shootings. In doing so the journal intends to bring fresh new ideas about the challenges and the opportunities of traumatic events for individuals, groups, families, communities, and cultures.

The focus of this special issue is on how members of the Virginia Tech community of faculty and students from a variety of disciplines experienced, responded to, and considered—personally and professionally—the horrific and tragic event and its aftermath. Thus, the first part of each article is on authors' personal recollections and reactions; the second part is on the lessons learned, including how their own field of study informs these lessons.

As coeditors of this special issue, we invited key faculty members and students who assumed important roles in the wake of the shootings or due to their area of expertise placed them in a useful position to critically assess the event. Recognizing that

their submission would go through the normal journal review process of blind (to authorship) review through Sage Publications' Scholar One Web site for the journal, each author was asked to address at least three questions associated with the tragedy:

1. What did you see and experience—both personally and professionally?
2. What did you do in your role as a faculty member or student, including what went beyond your typical role?
3. What are the lessons learned from this tragedy, with special reference to your field and area of expertise?

We knew that timing was important: not too soon as to further traumatized those still emotionally raw from the experiences and still mentally processing the events and consequences but soon enough to enable the authors to accurately summarize their experiences, formulate the answers to the central questions, and feel that they had benefited from the writing exercise. From all accounts from our authors, we believe that the overall process was personally useful.

Timing was important in terms of the first anniversary, April 16, 2008. We and the authors worked hard to meet the various deadlines so that the issue would be published prior to the first anniversary because they are especially important in gauging the progress of healing and because the overall mission of this special issue is to promote healing within the Hokie Nation.

Overview of the Articles in the Special Issue

Following this introduction, there are 11 articles written by 27 Virginia Tech students and faculty

members and 1 article written by a reporter who covered the shooting for the local newspaper and had taught in the public schools in Blacksburg. Blacksburg is the little community in Virginia that is home to Virginia Tech. Each article followed a similar structure and was reviewed blind to authorship, as is the usual peer review process with this journal.

The first article, written by E. Scott Geller, an Alumni Distinguished Professor of Psychology, places the shootings in both personal and professional context. Dr. Geller's area of expertise is workplace stress. As with all the articles in this special issue, Professor Geller reviews the events of April 16 and his personal reactions then and afterwards. He was struck by the effectiveness by which leaders effectively guided the campus through the dark days and the spontaneous outpouring of support worldwide. Geller identifies the utility of certain intervention strategies that are useful in increasing active caring in the wake of community disasters such as the Virginia Tech shootings. Such efforts in promoting predisaster proactive interpersonal communication for safety, security, and human welfare would tend to decrease similar tragedies. Professor Geller offers a model that he calls the five person states (depicted in Figure 3). He suggests that it influences the person's willingness to actively care for the safety, security, and health of others.

The next article is by Margaret L. Keeling and Fred P. Piercy, who are both professors in the Department of Human Development at Virginia Tech. Dr. Piercy is the Department Chairperson. Both tell different stories of their experiences, because Dr. Keeling was in her office at Virginia Tech and Dr. Piercy was a member of a site visit team at the University of Minnesota. However, their emotional responses and perspectives about lessons learned are mostly the same. Because both are counselors skilled in crisis intervention with individuals and systems, they had prepared and delivered mental health training for Indonesian practitioners responding to the tsunami a few years ago. Thus, they were able to provide sessions for students and faculty within days and talked about what they did and how they felt doing it. Among the lessons learned from the tragedy is that the survivors often occupy multiple roles that generate a variety of dilemmas that must be appreciated and addressed.

The next article, "Helping in the Wake of Disaster: A Graduate Student's Perspective in the Aftermath of the VT Tragedy," was written by a psychology

Virginia Tech doctoral student, Matthew Yoder. He first shares his own personal experiences during and immediately following the shooting. Ironically, he was evaluating a community-level intervention for disasters 2 hours from Virginia Tech. He explains how he and his fellow psychology doctoral students were fortunate enough to work in the "frontline" with mental health service providers and to witness a variety of efforts—from both outside and within the Blacksburg community that had varying levels of effectiveness. He was able to share some data regarding the Cook Counseling Center service utilization in the wake of the shooting and compared it with the previous year. It illustrated, however, that "In the first 48 hours after the shooting, numbers were low but increased significantly thereafter." The lessons Mathew shares are that community disasters—no matter the cause—stimulates (a) the strong desire to help, (b) nuances of social support, and (c) community resilience and healing. He recommends that practitioners "pause and reflect before rushing out to help."

The next article, "Loneliness and Belonging: A Reflection on the Meanings and Values of Social Networks in the Wake of the Virginia Tech Shootings," was written by Curt Gervich, a graduate student in environmental design and planning. After telling his own personal experiences with the shooting he focuses on the lessons he had learned from it all. His experiences started to unfold that Monday, April 16, while having lunch and unfolded before his eyes as he watched television and checked online. It was distant to him then. This quickly changed when he discovered an acquaintance had been killed in the shooting. He draws on his personal and professional interest in social networks, social capital, and community in applying it to the Virginia Tech tragedy. He discusses the implications of weak ties being strengthened in the wake of a catastrophe. The Virginia Tech shootings led him to appreciate the utility and practical applications of social networks, community, and social capital to prepare for, manage, and recover from disasters such as this one. He published a useful essay about his personal experiences in the July 20, 2007, issue of *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

The next article, "**From Individual to Community: The 'Framing' of 4-16 and the Display of Social Solidarity,**" is by James E. Hawdon, who is a Virginia Tech Sociology professor and expert on violence, social control, social capital, and crime. Dr. Hawdon

described what he and his sociology colleagues experienced as the tragedy unfolded, as he and his colleagues were able to see emergency response teams arriving on campus, following various rumors. Throughout his description he applies sociological insights regarding the relationships between tragedies and social solidarity that helped to clarify his own experiences and the behaviors of the Virginia Tech community. He points out that the tragedy provides a good example of community solidarity, pride, and mutual support, response that was represented by the phrase, "We are Virginia Tech; we will prevail."

The next article, "A Narrative of Personal Experiences and Recovery Efforts Carried Out in the Wake of the Virginia Tech Shootings," is by Christopher S. Immel and James M. Hadder, who are PhD students in the Department of Psychology at Virginia Tech. They first describe how they became aware of the emerging crisis on campus while attending class. Theirs is one of the most gripping descriptions from a student's perspective of this tragedy. They detail their effective guidance to professionals who were providing crisis intervention to the survivors as well as their work of putting their training into action by completing a needs-based assessment of university community members. They recognized, in their concluding remarks, what a profound event they had survived and how they had thrived as people by acquiring an extraordinary education and growth—both personally and professionally.

In "Anger, Aggression, and Psychology: Personal and Professional Reflections on the Virginia Tech Tragedy," David Cox, another psychology doctoral student at Virginia Tech, provides his perspective on the tragedy. His day on April 16 was similar to any other, dropping his daughter off at day care. He received a phone call from his wife about the shootings. He was especially shocked because it was happening in a place he would least expect violence, compared with the urban area of his origin. His area of research was on psychophysiological responses to anger and the treatment of anger disorders. His article is an effort to link his experiences—what he saw and felt—with a functional research paradigm that included anger, aggression, and violence. As a budding scholar, his interest is integrating physiological, social, and intraindividual factors that guide behavior. No small task. His article is an initial step in that journey.

In one of the most unusual articles in this collection and certainly the one with the most coauthors, Computer Science Professor Edward A. Fox and fellow members of his department apply their

considerable Internet technology expertise in trying to understand the response during and following the shootings. In "A Digital Library for Recovery, Research, and Learning From April 16, 2007, at Virginia Tech," they provide a progress report in their efforts to create a digital library that could serve as an important resource for those who wish to learn from this shooting and possibly use it as a source of psychological healing. They draw on texts, images, videos, and other digital files uploaded from the Internet to design and illustrate their library. Of special interest here is their effort and success at gaining permission for personal information from Web 2.0 sites, applying state-of-the-arts software (e.g., data/text mining, social network analysis, and information visualization methods) to provide a new kind of service to the public, fellow computer scientists, and especially to social scientists concerned about traumatic events as either practitioners or scientists.

Donna Alvis-Banks, a local *The Roanoke Times* reporter who covered the shootings and is a former teacher at the Blacksburg High School for 6 years, wrote a highly personal and moving article, "When Hometown News Becomes Worldwide News." Writing with a journalist's voice, Ms. Alvis-Banks shares her own personal experiences and how the day of the shooting unfolded: racing to campus to cover the unfolding tragedy almost minute by minute. She had many years of experience covering extremely sad and terrifying events. As she says early in her essay, she makes a living by describing events, "But on April 16, there were not words to describe the tragedy or to bring humanity to an inhumane act." Throughout her article she discussed the dissonance between those who cover and those who are covered in news events. She offers here a remarkably balanced and useful perspective on the importance of responsible journalism in covering traumatic events. This is one of the reasons why she was named to one of the most prestigious fellowships in journalism, the 2007 Dart Center Ochberg Fellow.

Another extremely personal article is written by two colleagues in the Virginia Tech Horticulture Department, titled "Personal Reflections on the Virginia Tech Tragedy From a Victim's Spouse With Commentary by a Close Colleague." A French Instructor, Jocelyne Couture-Nowak, wife of first author, Jerzy Nowak, was killed by the shooter while protecting her students. Jerzy tells of his experiences in the wake of the shootings and prior to learning of his wife being murdered. His friend and colleague, Professor Richard Veilleux, provides useful commentary

throughout the article. Veilleux stepped in to serve as acting head of the Department for Professor Nowak while he was away on leave until the fall semester began. Together they reflect on his (Nowak's) and his youngest daughter's posttraumatic and secondary traumatic experiences, focusing mostly on the interface between family and his profession. Toward the end of their article, in an effort to apply their field of research, they link plant stress to a more generic biological pattern of adaptation to extreme situations by comparing the role community played in his and his family's posttraumatic adaptation to everyday life, to the alliances plants form with soil microorganisms that help them to withstand stresses.

The final article, written by the coeditor of this special issue, Virginia Tech Psychology Professor Russell Jones, provides a fitting ending for the collection. Aptly titled "4-16: Who's Looking Out for the Kids?" Professor Jones describes his personal experiences with the April 16 shootings and how he was able to organize not only his trauma research team into an effective response to the tragedy but also help guide the university and most of those who were willing to help. Out of necessity he developed a working model to guide mental health efforts in both the

university and local community and the steps in designing and administration of a needs assessment. In the section on lessons learned he emphasizes (a) the need for existing infrastructure and partners, (b) engagement of strategies based on our best science, (c) training in disaster behavioral health, and (d) engagement of initiatives directed toward people of color. His conclusion in the final article in this special issue seems fitting for this introduction: that through all the tragic events and their consequences wisdom emerges. "We explained this finding by reports from participants stating that they felt they had gained a greater ability to deal with difficult situations, had a greater purpose in life, and experienced higher levels of spirituality and religion." He was explaining the reports not of those who had survived the shootings but of those who had survived Hurricane Katrina.

We hope that you embrace and appreciate the wisdom of the articles in this special issue; they are acquired through both scholarship and fellowship, through analysis and emotion. We dedicate this special issue to those who lost their lives as a result of the horrific deaths on April 16, to their families and friends who will miss them terribly, and the entire Virginia Tech family and community.