This study explored the psychological impact of exposure to work-related trauma among journalists. It was hypothesised that positive associations would exist between (a) exposure and PTSD symptoms, (b) exposure and guilt cognitions, and (c) guilt cognitions and PTSD symptoms, and that the relationship between exposure and PTSD symptoms would be mediated by guilt cognitions. The sample consisted of 50 journalists (response rate = 15%), who had recently been exposed to work-related trauma. They were predominantly male, aged 40 years or older, well-educated, and most had worked in journalism for at least 15 years. Participants completed an online questionnaire that explored their work-related experiences of trauma, PTSD symptoms, and trauma-related guilt cognitions. The findings showed that higher levels of exposure to work-related trauma were significantly associated with higher levels of PTSD symptoms ($r = .36$) and trauma-related guilt cognitions ($r = .29$). Guilt cognitions were significantly and positively independently associated with PTSD symptoms ($r = .12$) and were consistent with partial mediation of relationship between exposure to work-related trauma and PTSD symptoms. This study provides greater insight into the psychological processing of work-related traumatic events among journalists and emphasizes the importance of posttrauma appraisals of guilt regarding their experiences.

There is growing recognition of the emotional cost of routinely reporting on traumatic events. Research has shown that a significant minority of journalists may develop psychological problems, such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), following exposure to work-related traumatic events (e.g., Feinstein, Owen, & Blair, 2002; Pyevich, Newman, & Daleiden, 2003).

Another increasingly recognized posttrauma reaction is trauma-related guilt, defined as “an unpleasant feeling with an accompanying belief that one should have thought, felt or acted differently” (Kubany et al., 1996, p. 429). Cognitive theories of PTSD (e.g., Ehlers & Clark, 2000) have highlighted excessive negative appraisals of trauma and/or its sequelae as being important in the development and maintenance of PTSD. According to Lee, Scrugg, and Turner’s (2001) theory of guilt-based PTSD, guilt arises when the meaning of a traumatic event violates an individual’s rules about the standards of their behavior, evokes feelings of responsibility for harm, when behavior is perceived as lacking justification, or as a result of hindsight bias (Fischhoff, 1975).

Few studies have examined trauma-related guilt among high-risk occupational groups; those that have investigated emergency workers (Jonsson & Segesten, 2004) and military personnel (Kubany et al., 1996). Journalists, however, are a unique cohort, distinct from other high-risk groups in that they often experience or witness traumatic events, but are not expected to intervene. Not having a direct, helping role when attending to traumatic incidents may present journalists with complex ethical dilemmas. For example, morally believing the right thing to do is to provide aid, versus the knowledge that one should remain objective. Ethical dilemmas may result in behavior perceived as violating moral standards. Specific aspects of their job may make journalists more vulnerable to guilt, such as pressure to sensationalize an event or to pressure distressed people to provide an interview. Anecdotally, journalists have reported guilt resulting from their work but no empirical studies have examined guilt among this population.

This study investigated the relationships between work-related traumatic exposure, guilt cognitions, and PTSD symptoms among journalists. Cognitive components of guilt were specifically considered because of the significance of negative appraisals in prominent theories of PTSD. The study tested the following hypotheses: that positive associations would exist between (a) exposure and PTSD symptoms, (b) exposure and guilt cognitions, and (c) guilt cognitions and PTSD symptoms,
and that the relationship between exposure and PTSD symptoms would be mediated by guilt cognitions.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited via a British media organisation (who provided a sampling frame of journalists who reported on news stories both within the UK and abroad) and a journalist known to the research team. In total, 323 journalists were invited via e-mail to participate. Although 112 journalists responded, only 73 respondents met the inclusion criterion of exposure to work-related trauma within the past year, imposed to minimize the risk of recall bias. Due to missing data, multivariate analyses included data from only 50 participants; therefore, our overall response rate was 15%. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Royal Holloway University of London Psychology Department Ethics Committee.

Measures

Exposure to work-related trauma was measured using an adapted version of the Journalist Trauma Exposure Scale (Pyevich et al., 2003). Following feedback from piloting (by journalists from a British media organization) four items were added to the scale; therefore, the adapted version comprised 27 items. Part A, measuring frequency and range of exposure, listed 15 traumatic events (e.g., incidents involving war, natural disaster, or injured/dead children) and respondents indicated the frequency of their exposure to each during work in the past year. Following piloting feedback, the response options were altered from open-ended to categorical where 0 = Never; 1 = Once or twice, 2 = Every few months, 3 = Most months, 4 = Monthly, and 5 = Weekly. Range of exposure was measured by the number of these items identified. Part B, measuring intensity of exposure, listed 12 items describing characteristics of traumatic exposure (e.g., reporting “at the scene”, witnessing death/injury). Respondents indicated which of these they had experienced during work in the past year. The mean of the standardized means of the frequency, range, and intensity subscales represented an overall work exposure score. Pyevich et al. reported that the three subscales of the Journalist Trauma Exposure Scale showed acceptable reliability: frequency of exposure (α = .77), range of exposure (α = .84), and intensity of exposure (α = .63). Internal consistencies in the current study were α = .95, α = .90, α = .70, and α = .94, for the frequency, range, and intensity of exposure subscales, and the total scale, respectively.

Guilt cognitions were measured using the Trauma-Related Guilt Inventory (Kubany et al., 1996). Only the guilt cognitions scale was used in the study due to its centrality to the hypotheses. Internal consistency estimates were α = .82.

Work-related PTSD symptoms were measured using the PTSD Checklist, Civilian Version (PCL-C; Weathers, Litz, Herman, Huska, & Keane, 1993; α = .93). Participants indicated whether the type of trauma was work or personally related. Although requested to respond regarding a work-related trauma, 12 participants responded regarding personal trauma; therefore, these responses were counted as missing data and excluded from the sample.

To ensure potential confounding variables would be examined, participants were also asked about other traumatic experiences, current general mental health, and demographic factors. Participants were asked to indicate from a list of potentially traumatic events (e.g., witnessing traumatic injuries/deaths, physical/sexual assault) whether they had experienced any at work prior to the past year or in their personal life (i.e., outside of work) ever. Current general mental health was measured using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12; Goldberg & Williams, 1988; α = .86). This comprises 12 questions about levels of happiness, depressive and anxious symptoms, and sleep disturbance over the last month. Demographic data included information regarding gender, age, marital status, education, and years working as a journalist.

Results

Participants were largely male (63%), 40 years or older (77%), in a relationship (89%), and had received post-secondary education (i.e., a bachelors degree or higher; 85%). They worked in a wide range of roles, and included managers, editors, technical staff, reporters, correspondents, and photojournalists. The majority had worked in journalism for at least 15 years (85%). Comparisons of available demographic characteristics, with journalists reporting for a British media organization (N = 3,129), showed the study sample was comparable in terms of gender and age but underrepresented less experienced journalists.

Table 1 presents information on the range and frequency of participants’ exposure to work-related trauma in the past year. It shows at least half the sample had covered assignments involving warfare, mass casualties, murder, torture, kidnapped or injured children, and almost a tenth had been exposed to war and murder at least once per month. Data on the intensity of exposure indicated that approximately a quarter of the sample had been verbally threatened or attacked (25%), witnessed injury or death (25%) or a particularly gruesome scene (29%) in the past year. Approximately half had reported from the scene of a traumatic assignment (56%) or interviewed someone in extreme distress (47%).

There were statistically significant positive correlations between work exposure and PCL-C score, r(48) = .36, p = .005, and between work exposure and the guilt cognitions scale scores, r(48) = .29, p = .021. There was also a statistically significant positive correlation between PCL-C and GHQ-12.
scores. A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was carried out with PCL-C score entered as the dependent variable and scores on the exposure and guilt cognitions scale as independent variables. As no additional variables (e.g., previous work or personal trauma, or demographic variables) were correlated with symptoms of PTSD or guilt cognitions, these were not included in the analysis. A decision was made not to include GHQ-12 scores in the analysis due to the overlap between items on the GHQ-12 and PCL-C.

Work exposure was entered as the first step in the hierarchical regression. Exposure to work-related trauma explained a statistically significant amount of variance in PTSD symptoms, \( F(1,48) = 7.03, p = .011; R^2 = .13, \) adjusted \( R^2 = .11 \). Trauma-related guilt cognitions was entered as step 2 in the regression model. The addition of this variable contributed a statistically significant increase in variance in PTSD symptoms explained from 13% to 25%, adjusted \( R^2 = .22, F(1,47) = 7.59, p = .008 \). This indicated a large effect size of .33. The significance of the increment showed that guilt cognitions had a statistically significant unique contribution to PTSD symptoms. The standardized partial coefficient, was .36, \( t(47) = 2.75, p = .008 \). Work exposure was not independently associated with PTSD symptoms once guilt cognitions were in the model. Therefore, the impact of work exposure on PTSD symptoms was lessened after controlling for guilt cognitions, indicating partial mediation.

To test the indirect effect of work exposure on PTSD symptoms via guilt cognitions, a bootstrapping method with 1,000 bootstrap resamples was used (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). The true indirect effect for guilt cognitions was estimated to lie between .0002 and .0038. As zero was not in the 95% confidence interval, it was concluded that the indirect effect was statistically significantly different from zero at \( p < .05 \); therefore, guilt partially mediated the relationship between work exposure and PTSD symptoms. However, these findings should be interpreted cautiously given the marginal significance of the indirect effect.

Discussion

This study explored the relationship of PTSD symptoms with exposure to work-related traumatic events and trauma-related guilt cognitions among journalists. Higher levels of exposure were significantly associated with higher levels of PTSD symptoms and guilt cognitions, and journalists reporting greater guilt cognitions also reported higher levels of PTSD symptoms. The findings showed that guilt cognitions partially mediated the relationship between exposure and PTSD symptoms.

The findings are consistent with previous research examining the association of exposure with PTSD among journalists (e.g., Pyevich et al., 2003) and with guilt among other trauma
populations (Kubany et al., 1996). In contrast with previous studies of journalists (Pyevich et al., 2003) and the general trauma literature, in the current study prior traumatic exposure was not related to PTSD symptoms. This disparity might be explained by sample characteristics, i.e., mostly middle-aged, well-educated, employed men who may have been at lower risk of developing PTSD.

The association between guilt cognitions and PTSD symptoms indicated that trauma-specific cognitions might be significant in understanding the impact of work-related trauma on the mental health of journalists. Furthermore, because guilt cognitions partially mediated the relationship between exposure and PTSD symptoms, our findings provide tentative support for PTSD models that focus on posttrauma appraisals, in addition to the impact of peritraumatic fear on memory. There may have also been other variables that mediated this relationship, aside from a direct relationship, such as depressive symptoms, other negative appraisals, or environmental factors (e.g., social support).

Several limitations of the study should be noted. There may have been a nonresponse bias or other extraneous factors (e.g., training, peer support) that accounted for the findings. Lack of psychometric data, other than internal consistencies, available for the adapted version of the Journalist Trauma Exposure Scale made it difficult to determine the measure’s quality. The cross-sectional design prevented causality being determined; longitudinal data is necessary in helping ascertain the direction and causation of the relationships reported. Furthermore, the use of convenience sampling and the low response rate meant the sample may not have been representative of the general population of journalists, therefore decreasing the study’s generalizability.

The study provides preliminary evidence of a relationship between guilt cognitions and PTSD symptoms among journalists exposed to work-related trauma. It was the first of which we are aware to examine trauma-specific cognitions among journalists and adds to the growing literature regarding this high-risk population. It also enhances the literature on trauma-related guilt and implies there may be specific factors that increase vulnerability to guilt among certain occupational groups. Several areas would benefit from further study, including the exploration of noncognitive aspects of guilt, and contextual factors that may contribute to the occurrence and magnitude of guilt among journalists.

References


