

## Primary Appraisals Moderating Between Trauma Exposure and Mental Health Symptoms among Journalists

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### Abstract

**Background.** The current research investigated how primary appraisal may affect the relationship between trauma exposure experienced by journalists and their symptoms of mental illness. The cognitive appraisal includes how an individual interprets an adverse event that may partially account for psychopathology. Consistent exposure of journalists to stressful life events increases the likelihood of the occurrence of illness, depression, and other physical and psychological problems.

**Method.** Participants were requested to complete Journalist Traumatic Exposure Scale (JTES), Depression, Anxiety, Stress Scale (DASS-21), and Primary Appraisal/Secondary Appraisal Scale (PASA). Personal and professional information was collected using comprehensive demographic sheet.

**Results.** Results of moderation analysis suggested that the link between trauma exposure and symptoms of mental health was moderated by harm/loss, threat, and challenge appraisal ( $B$  interaction = .01,  $p < .01$  for stress, anxiety, & depression), ( $B$  interaction = .01, for stress .02,  $p < .01$  for anxiety & depression), ( $B$  interaction = -.01,  $p < .05$  for anxiety) respectively. However, the moderation of challenge appraisal for the association between trauma exposure, stress, and depression was non-significant.

**Conclusion.** Due to the nature of their job, journalists are constantly exposed to unpleasant incidents, and repeated exposure to such events may lead to underlying mental health issues. Therefore, it is recommended that training be provided to help journalists reframe stressful situations in a positive way, which could potentially lead to less severe mental health consequences.

**Keywords.** Primary appraisals, trauma exposure, mental health symptoms, journalists



## Introduction

Journalism in Pakistan has a long and complex history, shaped by political, social, and cultural factors. Pakistan is a diverse country with a vibrant broadcasting landscape, with both privately and state-owned media houses operating in the country. Despite the diversity of the media landscape, journalists in Pakistan face several challenges, including censorship, intimidation, and violence. Pakistan has been consistently ranked as one of the most hazardous countries in the world for journalism, with numerous incidents of violence and intimidation reported in recent years.

Journalism is, indeed, a highly stressful profession, particularly for those covering traumatic events. Journalists are often exposed to graphic and disturbing content, and they may face significant emotional and psychological challenges as a result. Studies have shown that this exposure may have a significant consequence on their mental health, preceding to symptoms of depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Gates & Gillespie, 2008; Cunningham, 2003). It is very important to note that issues related to mental health issues may be particularly pronounced for journalists who cover certain types of events including war, violent crimes, and natural disasters. The cumulative impact of exposure to multiple traumatic events can also increase the risk of mental health problems. Moreover, the chronic stress that journalists experience as a result of their work can further exacerbate these issues.

Cognitive Appraisal describe the process that accounts for the discrepancy between stressors and psychological resources resulting in psychological distress. A primary element of association between traumatic event and negative health symptoms is the cognitive appraisal of an event (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Cognitive appraisal includes both primary and secondary appraisals (Folkman & Lazarus,

1991). In present study, exploring the moderating role of primary appraisals in association between trauma exposure, depression, anxiety, and stress is the key interest. Primary appraisal accredits meaning to a specific transaction which determines the significance of the transaction to individuals' well-being. The transaction may be evaluated as positive (employing a positive effect on individuals' well-being), stressful (signify threat, harm/loss, or challenge), or irrelevant (no significance to individuals' well-being). The primary interest is stressful transactions as the other two transactions do not evoke the need for subsequent coping and negative emotions. A stressful transaction may further be appraised as producing substantial harm/loss, threat, or challenge (Oliver & Brough, 2002). Harm /loss entails loss, harm, or damage that has already been sustained that includes injury, loss of friendship, or loss of self-esteem. Threat appraisal includes anticipated loss, harm, or damage. Challenge appraisal is the judgment involving the assessment of whether a transaction holds the potential for mastery and the potential for harm. Thus, in challenge appraisal, the appraisal of a sense of control and stakes are fused. The stressful encounter is seen as challenging but not exceeding one's resources. Threat and harm appraisals provoke negative emotions as fear, anger, and resentment. On the contrary challenge appraisal, entails the potential for growth and rewards when adequate coping resources are available, and entails positive emotions (e.g., eagerness, enthusiasm) (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991). It is postulated that, where individuals perceive the stressful situation as challenging, will experience fewer negative outcomes relative to the individual who appraises the situation as threatening. Thus, the transaction between the stressful event and the appraisal of that event leads to negative/positive mental health consequences.

Professionals who work in fields such as emergency response, law enforcement, healthcare, and journalism are at increased risk for developing mental health symptoms due to their exposure to traumatic events and high levels of stress. These individuals are often referred to as "first responders" and can experience a range of mental health symptoms including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It is important for these professionals to have access to mental health support and resources to help prevent or manage these symptoms. Journalists have to cover traumatic events directly (in fields) and in newsrooms they may view some disturbing and traumatic content as a part of their job. Studies have consistently found mental health symptoms among professionals working in fields with regular exposure to traumatic events, including ambulance personnel (Jonsson, Segesten, & Mattsson, 2003), nursing (Gates & Gillespie, 2008), mental health (Cunningham, 2003), firefighters (Groot, Caturay, Khan, & Copes, 2019), and healthcare workers (Meadors, Lamson, Swanson, White, & Sira, 2010).

Frequently, journalists are being exposed to stressful events that involves psychological and physical harm (Seely, 2019). As similar to the first responders, journalists are also akin to respond to emergency situations including disaster, crime scene, destruction, and witnessing violence ( Massé, 2011; Himmelstein & Faithorn, 2002; Rentschler, 2009; Melki et al., 2013;). Journalists responds to traumatic events including fatal accidents, natural disasters, bomb blasts, street crimes, murders, and other potentially stressful/traumatic events. They may experience secondary traumatization during interviewing a victim or victims' family and through graphic scenes (McCann & Pearlman, 1990; Beam & Spratt, 2009; Rentschler, 2010). In addition, Simpson and Coté (2006) found that journalists working in newsrooms may be indirectly

exposed to repeated traumatizing content as they strive to fulfill the need for up-to-date news coverage. Thus, repeated encounters with situations that pose a threat to one's life are likely to have an adverse effect on both mental and physical health (Groot et al., 2019; Feinstein, Owen, & Blair, 2002; Dworznik, 2011; Newman, Simpson, & Handschuh, 2003; Morales, Pérez, & Martínez, 2014). It is possible for journalists to suffer from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and may need to undergo psychological or medical interventions (Browne, Evangeli, & Greenberg, 2012). Further, literature has suggested that journalist's nature of job, like soldiers, firefighters, and police officers, are high-risk population for mental health symptoms, emotional distress, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Browne et al., 2012; Dworznik, 2018; Monteiro, Marques Pinto, & Roberto, 2016; Feinstein, Pavisian, & Storm, 2018; Feinstein et al., 2002).

## **Method**

### **Participants and Procedures**

A total of 625 Pakistani journalists participated in the present study, comprising 440 males and 185 females from various press clubs and media houses in Lahore and the capital territory of Islamabad. The study involved participants, age ranged from 20 to 61 years, with an mean age of 34.21 (SD = 8.21). Individuals who had less than one year of job experience and those working as fashion journalists were not included in the study. The job experience of the participants varied from 1 to 43 years, with an average of 10.32 (SD = 7.29). Of the total sample, 51.6% were postgraduates, followed by 33.5% graduates and 14.9% undergraduates. Among the participants, 55.8% worked on a desk, 24.5% worked in the field, and 19.7% worked in both field and desk roles.

The participants were informed about the study and their right to withdraw from it, and written informed consent was obtained to ensure their awareness of the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights. The researchers also took measures to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants' information. Overall, it appears that the researchers adhered to ethical guidelines in conducting their study.

### **Assessment Measures**

***Journalist Traumatic Exposure Scale (JTES)*** (Pyevich et al., 2003). The Urdu Version of JTES (Malik, Malik, & Hanif, 2022) was used to evaluate the traumatic events encountered by journalists, with additional indicators added that are significant to the local context, such as blasphemy, stress crimes, mob activities, and cyber harassment. Participants were asked to report the extent to which they had been exposed to traumatic events during their job responsibilities. The 18-items of the scale assessed the frequency of exposure to various traumatic events, such as accidents, mass casualties, war zones, torture, murder, kidnapping, physical assault, natural disasters, blasphemy, and sexual assault. The response options in the original scale, which were open-ended, were replaced with a Likert-type scale for this study. The Likert-type scale ranged from 0, indicating "never," to 3, indicating "more than six times." The remaining nine items measured the occurrence of specific traumatic events at work, such as verbal threats, physical attacks, and injuries while covering various types of assignments. The instructions of the scale were modified, and journalists were guided to indicate how often they had been exposed to stressful events in the course of their job during the last three months. The composite score on the JTES was calculated by adding scores on the event occurrence scale and frequency scale. The original scale has demonstrated good internal consistency with a score of .83 (Drevo et al., 2013).

***Primary/Secondary Appraisal Scale (PASA)***. The self-assessment tool, known as the Primary/Secondary Appraisal Scale, consists of 24 items designed to evaluate primary and secondary appraisals before engaging in a cognitive task (Gaab, Rohleder, Nater, & Ehlert, 2005). Primary appraisal comprises three subscales: threat, harm/loss, and challenge appraisal. The harm/loss appraisal is composed of 8 items that assess any loss, harm, or damage that has already been sustained, such as loss of self-esteem, injury, or loss of friendship. The threat appraisal is composed of 4 items that assess the potential for anticipated loss, harm, or damage.

The challenge appraisal is composed of 4 items that evaluate the potential for mastery or gain and the potential for harm. The secondary appraisal consists of conviction of control, which comprises 4 items that assess a sense of control over the outcome of the encountered situation, and self-concept of one's own abilities, which comprises 4 items that assess an individual's judgment regarding a wide range of coping options. Participants were asked to indicate their thoughts about the upcoming task on a 6-point Likert scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree), with negatively formulated items including items 1, 6, 7, 9, 10, and 22. The overall homogeneity was considered good based on internal consistency, which is an indicator of reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha score for the primary scale ranging from 0.61 to 0.83 and for the secondary scale ranging from 0.74 to 0.80 (Gaab et al., 2005).

***Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS21)***. Depression, anxiety, and stress were assessed through DASS-21, a self-report instrument which measures negative emotional state (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). The 7 items of depression subscale measures hopelessness, self-deprecation, lack of interest, and anhedonia. The anxiety subscale consisted of 7 items that measures skeletal situational anxiety, muscle

effects, subjective experience, and autonomic arousal. Further, the stress subscale of 7-items assessed chronic arousal that measures difficulty relaxing, being easily upset, nervous arousal, irritable, and impatient. Participants responds on 4-point frequency /severity scale the extent at which they have experienced each state over the last week. Studies have shown good estimates of alpha reliability ranging from .82 to .97 (Henry & Crawford, 2005).

## Results

The study used Cronbach's alpha to assess the internal consistency of three scales: the Journalist Traumatic Exposure Scale (JTES), Primary/Secondary Appraisal Scale (PASA), and DASS-21. The results demonstrated the good reliability for all scales.

**Table 1**

*Cronbach' alpha and correlation among demographics and study variables (N=625)*

S.No.	Variables	<i>a</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	Age (in years)	-	-	-.37**	-.04	-.01	.01	.01	-.07	-.05	-.06
2	Gender	-	-	.08*	.04	.06	-.03	.06	.07	.11**	
3	Trauma Exposure	.94				.30**	.30**	-.33**	.41**	.41**	.40**
4	Harm/loss Appraisal	.94					.71**	-.72**	.68**	.66**	.65**
5	Threat Appraisal	.86						-.87**	.68**	.69**	.67**
6	Challenge Appraisal	.83							-.65**	-.69**	-.67**
7	Stress	.89								.84**	.85**
8	Anxiety	.90									.89**
9	Depression	.89									

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ .

There are significant positive relationships between trauma exposure, stress, anxiety, and depression. Harm/loss appraisal was positively associated with stress, anxiety, and depression, which suggests that perceiving an event as harmful or involving loss can increase these negative outcomes. Threat appraisal was also positively associated with stress, anxiety, and depression, which suggests that perceiving an event as threatening can increase these negative outcomes as well. On the other hand, challenge appraisal was negatively associated with stress, anxiety, and depression, which suggests that perceiving an event as a challenge can decrease these negative outcomes.

**Table 2**

*Mean Differences across study variables (N=625)*

Variable	Male ( <i>n</i> =440)		Female ( <i>n</i> =185)		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% CI		Cohen's <i>d</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>D</i>			<i>LL</i>	<i>UL</i>	
Trauma Exposure	41.02	15.71	43.48	43.48	-1.84	0.07	-5.08	0.17	-.09
Harm/loss Appraisal	24.74	9.99	25.69	25.69	-1.07	0.28	-2.69	0.79	-.06
Threat Appraisal	10.48	4.62	11.15	11.15	-1.52	0.13	-1.53	0.20	-.09
Challenge Appraisal	17.25	4.39	16.98	16.98	0.63	0.53	-0.58	1.12	-.03
Stress	13.44	9.87	14.75	14.75	-1.41	0.16	-3.13	0.52	-.11
Anxiety	11.30	10.31	12.94	12.94	-1.79	0.07	-3.44	0.16	-.15
Depression	11.12	9.91	13.47	13.47	-2.54	0.01	-4.18	-0.53	-.21

Gender was found to be positively associated with trauma exposure and depression, with females scoring higher than males on depression. T-tests revealed a significant difference between genders in terms of depression.

**Table 3**

*Moderating effect of Primary Appraisals for Exposure to Trauma in predicting Symptoms of Mental Health (N=625)*

Predictors	Moderator Level	Dependent		
		Stress	Anxiety	Depression
Trauma Exposure		.16**	.17**	.16**
Harm/Loss Appraisal		.57**	.55**	.53**
TE*HL		.01**	.01**	.01**
	Low	.09**	.07*	.05
	Medium	.16**	.17**	.16**
	High	.23**	.27**	.26**
$R^2$		.52	.51	.49
$F$		224.87**	216.42**	200.01**
$\Delta R^2$		.01	.02	.02
Trauma Exposure		.16**	.16**	.15**
Threat Appraisal		1.20**	1.23**	1.18**
TE*TA		.01**	.02**	.01**
	Low	.11**	.08**	.08**
	Medium	.16**	.16**	.15**
	High	.21**	.24**	.22**
$R^2$		.51	.54	.50
$F$		218.33**	240.02**	211.97**
$\Delta R^2$		.01	.01	.01
Trauma Exposure		.15**	.15**	.14**
Challenge Appraisal		-1.24**	-1.33**	-1.26**
TE*CA		-.01	-.01*	-.01
	Low		.20**	.17**
	Medium		.15**	.14**
	High		.10**	.10**
$R^2$		.47	.52	.48
$F$		186.95**	228.98**	197.28**
$\Delta R^2$		.01	.01	.01

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ . TE = Trauma Exposure, HL = Harm/loss Appraisal, TA = Threat Appraisal, CA = Challenge Appraisal

The moderation analysis revealed that harm/loss appraisal plays a significant moderating role in the relationship between traumatic exposure and symptoms of mental health. Specifically, the level of harm/loss appraisal was found to substantially impact the link between trauma exposure and stress, anxiety, and depression. As harm/loss appraisal increased from low to high levels, the

association between traumatic exposure and symptoms of mental health became stronger, with higher level of harm/loss appraisal resulting in the strongest relationship. This suggests that individuals who perceive a high degree of harm/loss because of traumatic events may be more susceptible to experiencing mental health symptoms.

The model of moderation explains a significant amount of variance in stress, anxiety, and depression, indicating that harm/loss appraisal is an important factor to consider when examining the association between trauma exposure and symptoms of mental health in journalists.

The results of moderation analyses conducted in the study. The results indicate that threat appraisal moderates the association between traumatic exposure and symptoms of mental health, including anxiety, stress, and depression. The moderation result explains a significant amount of variance for each of these mental health symptoms, with 51%, 54%, and 50% of the variance explained for stress, anxiety, and depression, respectively. The results also show that for low, medium, and high levels of threat appraisal, there are significant effects on mental health symptoms. In addition, challenge appraisal moderates the association between trauma exposure and anxiety, explaining 52% of the variance, but the moderation effect for stress and depression was non-significant.

## **Discussion**

Journalists often work in high-stress environments and are frequently exposed to traumatic events, which can lead to mental health symptoms such as stress, anxiety, and depression. It's important for journalists to take care of their mental health and seek support if needed (Yang, 2018). Frequently journalists are being exposed to traumatic events that have adversative physical and psychological effects. For instance, they cover a number of stressful events which involves the aftermath of natural disasters, killing, life-threatening illnesses, and war. Journalists interacts with individuals which are affected by disasters and tragedies. A study by Ananthan (2017) reported that 80-100% of journalists surveyed had experienced exposure to traumatic events. However, exposure to trauma does not essentially lead to mental health symptoms. In a study, Newman et al. (2003) postulated that 98% photojournalist had been exposed to stressful events, but only

6% of the journalists meet the criteria for post-traumatic stress symptoms. The differences in the prevalence rate of post-traumatic stress symptoms are most likely due to the different factors including the degree of the exposure to potential stressful events, intensity, and coverage (Hatanaka et al., 2010; Feinstein et al., 2014; Marais & Stuart, 2005; Lee, Ha, & Pae, 2018; Seely, 2019; Newman et al., 2003;), organizational stressors (Monteiro et al., 2016; Dworznik, 2020), and the way an individual appraises a particularly stressful event cognitive appraisal (Hatanaka et al., 2010).

The present study showed that journalists were recurrently exposed to events inducing trauma and often experience mental distress. Journalists were exposed to a potentially stressful event in the last three months. Several studies have been reported that the prevalence of post-traumatic symptoms was high among journalists (48.61%) among photojournalists (Shah et al., 2020) and (59%) covering war/drug cartels (Flores Morales, Reyes Pérez, & Reidl Martínez, 2012). The psychological distress may be explained by the ongoing intense risks and conflicts which Pakistani journalists are facing. Waisbord (2019) reported the increased financial burden and threats from non-state and state agencies make media professionals, including journalists, more vulnerable to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. This is especially true in countries like Pakistan where press freedom is not always upheld, and journalists are often targeted for their reporting. The high number of journalists killed in Pakistan since 2002 is a clear indication of the risks that journalists face in the country. Along with the risk of physical harm, the ongoing conflict and insecurity in the country can cause acute stress among journalists, which can lead to the development of mental health symptoms over time. Journalists in Pakistan face threats from non-state and state agencies while performing their job responsibilities (Mezzera & Sial, 2010). Press Foundation Pakistan has reported that since 2002, a total of 72 journalists have been killed. the risks to journalists in

Pakistan are significant. The high number of journalist fatalities in Pakistan is alarming and can lead to increased fear and stress among journalists who continue to work in this field. Along with direct threats to their safety, journalists in Pakistan also face legal and political pressures that can impact their mental health and well-being. The ongoing risks and conflicts faced by Pakistani journalists can lead to chronic stress, anxiety, and trauma. It is important to recognize and address these risks and provide support to journalists in order to promote their mental health and well-being (Osman, Dvorkin, Inbar, Page-Gould, & Feinstein, 2021).

More recent attention has been paid to how an individual stretch meaning in the aftermath of stressful events including earthquakes, sexual assault, life-threatening illness, combat, and how subjective interpretations of such traumatic event contributes to pathological responses, mental health illness, or positive adaptation (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). How an individual evaluates stressful events has implications for one's coping capacity, emotional response, and, consequently for negative or positive adaptation to adverse events. The present study investigated the moderating effect of primary appraisals for trauma exposure in predicting mental health symptoms. Results indicated that negative appraisals (harm/loss and threat appraisal) of stressful events tend to be associated with mental health symptoms (depression, anxiety, and stress), Prospective studies reported that catastrophic appraisals in the immediate aftermath of the traumatic event may be a strong predictor of later psychopathologies such as posttraumatic stress disorder and mental health symptoms (Bryant, 2003; McNally, 2003). Furthermore, Ehlers and Clark (2000) contended that mental health illness is developed and maintained by negative appraisals of the current, ongoing threats that may persist long after the exposure of traumatic events has occurred. In post-traumatic stress, negative appraisal becomes intrusive which leads to cognitive suppression or a vicious cycle

of conscious avoidance, and emotions that increase cognitive intrusion about the traumatic event thereby exacerbating emotional distress.

Moreover, results of the present study indicate that positive appraisal (challenge appraisal) tends to negatively predict mental health symptoms (anxiety) as an individual who may find positive meaning within the stressful situation is better able to justify hardships (Litz, King, King, Orsillo, & Friedman, 1997). Research also indicated that those who report positive meaning are less likely to develop post-trauma sequelae (Sutker, Davis, Uddo, & Ditta, 1995; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

It is critical for media organizations to provide support and resources to journalists to help them cope with trauma exposure and mitigate the negative impact on their mental health. This may include access to counseling and therapy services, as well as training on how to manage stress and trauma. Additionally, media organizations can promote a culture of self-care and encourage journalists to take breaks and prioritize their mental health.

### **Limitation**

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the present study. Convenience sampling may not be representative of the population, as it involves recruiting participants who are readily available and willing to participate, which can lead to sampling bias. Therefore, the findings of present study may not be generalized to other populations or areas with different socio-cultural contexts. Moreover, self-report measures have limitations as they rely on participants' subjective perceptions and may be subject to response biases such as social desirability bias or memory biases. Additionally, the study was conducted only in metropolitan areas of Pakistan, that limits the generalizability of the findings to other areas with different socio-economic or cultural backgrounds. Finally, relationships found in this study are correlational and further research is needed to establish causation. Future studies should address these limitations by using representative samples, multi-method



approaches, and longitudinal designs to better understand the complex relationships between journalists' exposure to potentially stressful events and their mental health outcomes.

### Recommendation

Future research may explore the effectiveness of interventions and strategies for promoting the journalist's mental health, such as counseling, peer support, and training on coping strategies. Longitudinal studies may also be useful in examining the long-term effects of traumatic exposure on the mental health of journalists. Overall, continued research in this area is crucial to better understand the mental health challenges faced by journalists and to develop effective interventions to support them.

### Declaration

**Conflicts of Interest.** The authors did not have any personal or financial interests that could potentially influence the outcome or interpretation of their study. This ensures the integrity and objectivity of their study.

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**Availability of data and materials.** The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding authors on reasonable request.

**Welfare of Animals.** Present research does not contain any study performed with animals.

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