

THE TUSCALOOSA TORNADO AND COPING STRATEGIES AMONG LOCAL  
JOURNALISTS

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## ABSTRACT

The EF-4 tornado on April 27, 2011, that tore through Alabama marks the most violent natural disaster to visit Tuscaloosa. Fifty-two people in Tuscaloosa died as a result of the tornado, which destroyed about 12 percent of Tuscaloosa. Two local media organizations, *The Tuscaloosa News* and *WVUA-TV*, covered the tornado's aftermath and the recovery. The present research interviews five journalists, drawn from each local media organization, to investigate how they have coped with witnessing or suffering direct loss from the tornado. Three of the five journalists suffered direct loss from the tornado. The present research also incorporates social identity theory perspectives upon ingroup and outgroup formation to investigate whether journalists' coping strategies can be understood within a sociological context. Literature discussing sociology of newsrooms also contributes to the present research's investigation of journalists' coping strategies. The present research argues that social identity theory perspectives can help explain the coping strategies of journalists after a traumatic situation such as the tornado.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The EF-4 tornado on April 27, 2011, marks the most violent natural disaster to visit Tuscaloosa. Fifty-two people in Tuscaloosa lost their lives as a result of the tornado, which lasted in Tuscaloosa for about six minutes. When the tornado passed, a 5.9 mile path of destruction that bisected Tuscaloosa left more than 5,300 residential structures damaged, severely damaged, or destroyed (Cross, 2015; Pow, 2011). About 12 percent of Tuscaloosa was destroyed, according to figures provided by the City six months later (Pow, 2011). The tornado struck Tuscaloosa less than two weeks after an EF-3 tornado on April 15, 2011, that caused structural damage to homes and businesses in the area but no fatalities (National Weather Service Weather Forecast Office, 2011).

The Enhanced Fujita Scale rates the strength of tornadoes based upon the damage they can cause. An EF-4 tornado, for instance, has wind speeds from 166 to 200 mph and can cause extreme damage (National Weather Service Storm Prediction Center, 2006). Alabama had been hit by a tornado outbreak before the April 2011 storms. From April 3-4, 1974, 148 tornadoes touched down in 13 states and Ontario. Three EF-5 tornadoes touched down in Alabama, where 77 people died as a result. The tornado outbreak of April 3-4, 1974, was the largest U.S. tornado outbreak before the April 2011 storms surpassed it (Cross, 2015).

From April 25-28, 2011, 355 tornadoes swept the eastern portion of the country in an unprecedented tornado outbreak. On April 27, 2011, a supercell just above Meridian, Mississippi, produced a large wedge tornado in rural Greene County, Alabama. The tornado moved toward neighboring Tuscaloosa County and downed many trees. The tornado rapidly intensified in strength and moved toward the southern and eastern sections of Tuscaloosa at around 5:10 p.m. (National Weather Service Weather Forecast Office, 2014).

The tornado touched down on the southern portion of Tuscaloosa before it crossed 35th Street and downed many trees as it picked up strength. The Rosedale and Forest Lake communities were demolished after the tornado damaged the City's Emergency Operations Center. Entire apartment complexes in Rosedale and Forest Lake were destroyed, and many homes were swept clean off of their foundation. The tornado continued to 15th Street and McFarland Boulevard, where the most damage in Tuscaloosa was done. Numerous businesses in the area were demolished, with piles of debris, downed power lines, and tossed vehicles strewn across the area. Residential areas along 15th Street lay in similar devastation. The University Mall was damaged. A Tuscaloosa resident chased the tornado and filmed the tornado running into the mall, later posting a video on Youtube (*The Crimson White*, 2011). The tornado then continued to the eastern neighborhood of Alberta City and flattened apartment buildings and a shopping center along University Boulevard. The Chastain Manor apartments near Alberta City were destroyed. The tornado then moved to the eastern suburb of Holt, still at high-end EF-4 strength, and leveled or swept away multiple homes. Every tree in its direct path snapped in the area, including trees found in deep ravines. The tornado then moved to rural areas between Tuscaloosa and Birmingham before it expanded to a mile-and-a-half wide in Birmingham, with a maximum estimated wind speed of 190 mph. The tornado dissipated northeast of Birmingham

after an 80.7 mile path through Greene, Tuscaloosa, and Jefferson counties. Sixty-four people, including six students from the University of Alabama, died as a result of the tornado (National Weather Service Weather Forecast Office, 2014; Grayson, 2011; Taylor, 2011; *The Crimson White*, 2011).

President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama visited Tuscaloosa on April 29, 2011, to tour some of the devastation. President Obama said he had “never seen devastation like this” and confirmed he had declared a federal state of emergency for Alabama (Peralta, 2011).

The tornado lasted in Tuscaloosa for about six minutes, but its aftermath--and the long road ahead--began the moment people could see what devastation had occurred. Survivors emerged from hiding spots to see the ground around them layered with debris. Some walked out of hiding spots to find their house or apartment had been obliterated in seconds. Houses, apartment buildings, and businesses had been totaled and partially or completely swept away from their foundation. Some stood with half of their structure crumpled, broken, and twisted. Entire neighborhoods were dangerous to walk through, if at all navigable. In the tornado’s wake, community members searched for loved ones and combed through the rubble for other survivors, despite the devastation that made many of the affected areas difficult to penetrate. Search and rescue continued as the missing persons list fell and the fatalities list grew from around 40 to the 52 in Tuscaloosa eventually reported dead as a result of the tornado (Cross, 2015; Pow, 2011).

The Tuscaloosa Forward initiative became the focus of the City’s hope for rebuilding beyond the cleanup stage. The Tuscaloosa Forward initiative included plans for rezoning floodways to open land for private development, building village districts to combine business with residential planning, and designing a greenway to run throughout the areas the tornado

devastated. Residents and business owners attended four meetings held in different areas the tornado affected (Manning, 2011; Bryant, 2012).

The journalists requested to participate in the present research experienced the aftermath of a natural disaster that wrought an unprecedented level of damage in Tuscaloosa. News broadcasts on April 27, 2011, told of a tornado heading toward Tuscaloosa. The size of the tornado could be seen in segments on television broadcasts. No one knew how much damage would be done or where the tornado would strike. The tornado seemed to be heading toward the University of Alabama's campus, according to live news coverage of its path through Tuscaloosa. As the tornado tore through Tuscaloosa, the news staff of *The Tuscaloosa News* followed the judgment of Katherine Lee, then city editor, to head to the basement of the news building. They discussed what kind of coverage they would carry out upon leaving the basement. They knew some kind of coverage of the tornado would be their next step. When the tornado had passed, reporters headed to different locations to assess the damage and gather facts. For instance, Jamon Smith, then a *Tuscaloosa News* reporter, went to his apartment in Alberta City, in eastern Tuscaloosa (J. Smith, personal communication, April 16, 2015). He parked at a bridge on University Boulevard that led into Alberta City. The bridge was impassable. He had to be careful where he walked. He did not recognize the area. All of the landmarks seemed destroyed beyond recognition. He saw the initial stage of his community's search and rescue effort. Community members, firefighters, and police officers carried the wounded out of buildings and helped other survivors emerge from the rubble. Smith interviewed a man through a window who, trapped in a building, waited for his rescue. Eventually, night began to fall. The power outage across Tuscaloosa necessitated leaving the area. Smith's apartment had been destroyed.

Not far from Alberta City, Mark Cobb, *The Tuscaloosa News*' art and features writer, gathered information at Druid City Hospital (M. Cobb, personal communication, April 16, 2015). Hundreds had walked wounded or carrying the wounded into the hospital. The Hobby Lobby store across the street had been destroyed. Rubble and shattered glass from the debris lay scattered around the hospital. The reporters visited the affected sections of Tuscaloosa as time and circumstance would permit. Eventually, it was clear that major sections and neighborhoods of Tuscaloosa had been damaged or destroyed. A steady pace of news kept the reporters busy. They considered their responsibility to lie in getting news to the people. People needed information about missing persons, water, sanitation, gas leaks, the affected sections of Tuscaloosa, the dead, and the recovery. Media from outside of Tuscaloosa came to cover what was thought to be an EF-5 tornado's aftermath, including *The New York Times*, *BBC*, *The Poynter Institute*, and *Fox News*. The event was eclipsed in the national media spotlight when President Obama announced the assassination of Osama bin Laden. In addition, an EF-5 tornado on May 22, 2011, that killed 158 people in and around Joplin, Missouri, helped eclipse the event in the national media spotlight.

For its work during the first few days after the tornado, *The Tuscaloosa News* won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News, particularly for its social media coverage of the natural disaster as information filtered into the newsroom. The reporters and editors worked with generators in the news building to supply power for their newsroom computers, with which they provided quick updates via their Twitter and Facebook accounts.

The present research breaks new ground by including journalists who have been directly affected by a natural disaster. Most journalism and trauma research calls attention to trauma in journalism relative to *witnessing* victims' suffering. The present research includes journalists

whose material possessions were lost in the tornado. They reported upon human suffering as they adjusted to direct loss in their personal lives.

Particularly, the present research hears from journalists who witnessed the tornado and its aftermath, including three journalists who were directly affected by the tornado. What we lack is an understanding of their stories. Journalism research has begun to pay attention to journalists who encounter traumatic situations. The Tuscaloosa tornado constitutes a traumatic situation encountered by the journalists interviewed for the present research.

Journalism and trauma research is relatively new and varied. Journalism and trauma research focuses upon journalistic objectivity as a motivator of emotional suppression (for example, see Masse, 2009; Rees, 2007; Simpson & Boggs, 1999), trauma training courses (for example, see Dworznik & Grubb, 2007; Maxson, 2000), and the incidence of trauma stress in journalism populations (for example, see Beam & Spratt, 2009; Buchanan & Keats, 2011; Newman, Simpson, & Handschuh, 2003), to name some topics reviewed below.

Researchers suggest that the journalistic norm of objectivity may encourage emotional suppression as a coping mechanism for emotional distress (see Masse, 2009; Rees, 2007; Simpson & Boggs, 1999). Objectivity, in journalism, refers to the neutrality adopted by journalists in reporting the facts and details of a story. Objectivity proposes to restrict journalists to uncovering the truth of a story in an unbiased manner. Researchers note that journalists tend to perceive emotional suppression as an extension of the journalistic norm of objectivity (see Masse, 2009; Rees, 2007; Simpson & Boggs, 1999). Thus, objectivity may pose an occupational risk of harm to journalists who cover traumatic events (see Masse, 2009; Rees, 2007; Simpson & Boggs, 1999). Researchers write that journalists should feel less reluctant to seek professional attention for their trauma stress (see Masse, 2009; Rees, 2007; Simpson & Boggs, 1999).

Researchers also encourage college courses to expose journalism students to simulations of trauma in trauma training courses (Dworznic & Grubb, 2007; Maxson, 2000). Trauma training courses can help prepare journalism students for job-related exposure to trauma, which in turn can help limit or mitigate the impact of journalists' first job-related exposure to trauma (Duncan & Newton, 2010; Dworznic & Grubb, 2007). Although simulations of trauma have limitations, the participants of simulations of trauma report they had a positive learning experience (Dworznic & Grubb, 2007). Journalism students suggest having simulations of trauma as a part of their college coursework (Dworznic & Grubb, 2007).

Researchers also study the incidence of trauma stress in journalism populations. Journalists tend to have symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder when a number of variables are present (Beam & Spratt, 2009; Buchanan & Keats, 2011; Newman, Simpson, & Handschuh, 2003). Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, can be defined as “an anxiety problem that develops in some people after extremely traumatic events, such as combat, crime, an accident or natural disaster. People with PTSD may relive the event via intrusive memories, flashbacks and nightmares; avoid anything that reminds them of the trauma; and have anxious feelings they didn't have before that are so intense their lives are disrupted” (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Backholm and Bjorkqvist (2010) found that personal exposure to trauma, the intensity of exposure to trauma, and the nature of exposure to trauma are strong predictors of whether journalists will suffer from symptoms of PTSD. Also, exposure to trauma outside of the scope of journalistic work (i.e., as an ordinary citizen or witness) can be a strong predictor of whether journalists will suffer from symptoms of PTSD (Backholm & Bjorkqvist, 2010).

The present research investigates trauma in the context of journalism with a qualitative approach by interviewing three reporters who suffered loss from the tornado as well as two

supervisors. It uses social identity theory, which describes how people see themselves as members (or not members) of groups, as a way to help explain the coping mechanisms of journalists whom the tornado affected. It does this in the context of literature discussing sociology of newsrooms. Journalism research can benefit from a study that focuses upon journalists who have experience not only with a traumatic situation (e.g., the Tuscaloosa tornado) but also with personal loss. Three of the journalists interviewed for the present research lost either their home or some personal belongings while reporting upon the most violent natural disaster in Tuscaloosa's history. One journalist with *The Tuscaloosa News* witnessed corpses being pulled from the rubble in his community, where he found his apartment destroyed by the tornado. The Tuscaloosa tornado constitutes a traumatic situation faced by two local media organizations asked to participate in the present research, *The Tuscaloosa News* and *WVUA-TV*. Five journalists participated as respondents.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW, SYNTHESIS OF RESEARCH, AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

#### **Introduction**

Chapter 2 covers the literature relevant to the present research. The literature review begins with coping and trauma research, which shows that trauma stress symptoms can be transmitted in the workplace. The cumulative exposure to trauma journalists can face in their line of work renders them susceptible to trauma stress symptoms. Coping and trauma research in the journalism field suggests that many journalists turn to maladaptive coping strategies to cope with emotional distress. The literature review discusses what ramifications maladaptive coping strategies can have upon journalists' mental health.

The literature review then moves to social identity theory and a related theory, categorization theory. Social identity theory attempts to describe, explain, and predict intergroup behavior based upon perceived status differences among groups with which an individual identifies either as a member (ingroup) or non-member (outgroup) (see Hogg & Grieve, 1999; Hogg & Terry, 2001). Categorization theory attempts to account for the process behind group identification (see Hogg & Grieve, 1999; Hogg & Terry, 2001). Categorization theory looks into what leads an individual to perceive a group as such and what thinking of persons within an intergroup context may mean for an individual's social identity (see Hogg & Grieve, 1999; Hogg

& Terry, 2001). The literature review pays particular attention to the process behind group identification, foreshadowing the present research's aim to investigate whether ingroup and outgroup dynamics motivate avoidance of help-seeking.

The literature review then moves to a sociological analysis of the newsroom. Warren Breed's (1955) functional analysis of the newsroom provides a foundation for subsequent literature that reflects many changes to the newsroom since his seminal research, such as the digital age, a growing pessimism among journalists regarding their future, and staff cuts.

The literature review segues into a synthesis of the literature and the aim of the present research. The synthesis proposes to draw from social identity theory perspectives upon ingroup and outgroup formation to better understand avoidance of help-seeking. Particularly, the present research examines *whether* avoidance of help-seeking has a sociological context that underpins its appeal in journalistic culture. Avoidance of help-seeking may facilitate categorization *against* the outgroup. The present research also hears from journalists to piece together their remembrance of events during and after the EF-4 tornado on April 27, 2011. The present research thus adopts, in part, a narrative interest in its approach.

Chapter 2 concludes with three research questions, which are used in creating the interview protocol that is a part of the methodology described in Chapter 3.

## **Literature Review**

**Coping and Trauma Research.** Journalists' work can require contact with human suffering. Car accidents, natural disasters, murders, and fires, among others, fill many segments people see in the news. Traumatic events reported in the news can bring journalists into contact with pain, loss, abandonment, cruelty, and violence, which in turn can jeopardize journalists' mental health (Buchanan & Keats, 2011; Feinstein, 2004; Feinstein & Nicolson, 2005; Keats &

Buchanan, 2009; Ricchiardi & Gerzynski, 1999; Simpson & Boggs, 1999). Coping and trauma research shows that trauma stress symptoms can be transmitted in the workplace (Figley, 1995). Consequently, trauma stress symptoms can be transmitted in the newsroom, the workplace of many journalists (see Keats & Buchanan, 2009). The transmission of trauma stress symptoms in the newsroom can be ameliorated by organizational resources in the newsroom. Elana Newman, a researcher with the DART Center for Journalism and Trauma, notes that traumatic situations can have an emotional toll upon journalists (DART Center, 2009). Unfortunately, journalism research lacks an adequate understanding of how traumatic situations can impact journalists' psychological well-being (DART Center, 2009). Newman suggests that media organizations should provide trauma-related organizational resources in newsrooms to reduce the occupational risk of harm to journalists (DART Center, 2009).

Other research, however, suggests that journalists may not want to use those resources. Keats and Buchanan (2009) interviewed 31 Canadian journalists and photojournalists and found many participants who saw competition as a reason to avoid formal peer support groups (Keats & Buchanan, 2009). Some participants feared being perceived as weak and disliked the availability of their records to employers who could access information that pertained to their use of organizational resources (Keats & Buchanan, 2009). Keats and Buchanan (2009) note that the workplace, where a journalist has beliefs about emotional distress transmitted to him or her, can exacerbate trauma stress symptoms. Beliefs about emotional distress in the newsroom can create a culture that discourages help-seeking (see Keats & Buchanan, 2009).

Research suggests that many journalists turn to avoidance-based response strategies, such as black humor, substance abuse, emotional suppression, and disengagement (Buchanan & Keats, 2011). Response strategies can affect mental health. A response strategy can facilitate

coping with emotional distress or impair coping with emotional distress. Mal-adaptive coping action, which can impair coping with emotional distress, is linked with avoidance-based coping action (Buchanan & Keats, 2011). On the other hand, a response strategy that allows for a person to cope well with emotional distress is called an approach (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005; Buchanan & Keats, 2011). An approach is linked with adaptive coping action (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005; Buchanan & Keats, 2011). Particular traits are shown by a person when using an approach for a coping action (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005; Buchanan & Keats, 2011). A person has an internal locus of control, ego-resilience, and positive self-esteem (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005; Buchanan & Keats, 2011). A person is also able to behaviorally adjust to situational stress (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005; Buchanan & Keats, 2011).

In coping and trauma research, the workplace environment and the person are understood to be mutually interactive and inseparable within the context of a traumatic situation (Buchanan & Keats, 2011). Coping action is not universal (Buchanan & Keats, 2011). Circumstances play a crucial role in determining how a particular person will cope (Buchanan & Keats, 2011). A person will cope differently depending upon his or her personal history and the trauma environment in which he or she negotiates (Buchanan & Keats, 2011). Whether a journalist has worked for two years or 10 matters for a journalist's coping ability (see Buchanan & Keats, 2011). Where a journalist copes, in a community close to home or in a country thousands of miles from home, also matters for a journalist's coping ability (see Buchanan & Keats, 2011). Change rather than stability should be expected of a person relative to his or her coping action (Buchanan & Keats, 2011; Gottlieb & Coyne, 1996).

The present research investigates how journalists who have experience with a natural disaster have coped with a traumatic situation. Research suggests that journalists tend to cope by

using avoidance-based response strategies, which can predispose journalists to symptoms of post-traumatic stress or secondary traumatic stress (see Buchanan & Keats, 2011). The newsroom culture of journalists can exacerbate trauma stress symptoms (see Keats & Buchanan, 2009). Resilience to a traumatic situation can be lowered by mal-adaptive coping, whereas adaptive coping can enhance resilience to a traumatic situation (Buchanan & Keats, 2011). Trauma stress symptoms can accumulate. The cumulative effect of exposure to traumatic situations poses an occupational risk of harm to journalists (Keats & Buchanan, 2009).

Journalists with trauma stress symptoms stand at a disadvantage relative to other professions. First responders tend to have formal support networks in place for debriefing after a traumatic situation. Journalists tend to lack such formal support networks (Buchanan & Keats, 2011). In addition, many journalists express either cynicism or ambivalence toward formal support networks. Keats and Buchanan (2009) note that journalists fear losing out to other journalists when considering disclosing emotional distress to a colleague or superior. Greenberg et al. (2009) note that journalists express a relatively non-stigmatizing attitude toward help-seeking in the newsroom (via formal support networks) and yet prefer informal support networks when considering help-seeking. Journalism research thus needs a better comprehension of coping action vis-a-vis journalistic culture. Particularly, what do journalists think of formal support networks? Does competition deter journalists from using formal support networks? Does the newsroom encourage or discourage help-seeking? Does the newsroom encourage or discourage the disclosure of emotional distress to a colleague or superior? How do journalists cope with a traumatic situation? How does a newsroom respond to sending its reporters into a natural disaster scene? How has a newsroom changed as a result of such an experience--particularly, one that comes close to home?

**Social Identity Theory.** Henri Tajfel, in 1972, introduced the concept of social identity by defining it as “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (Hogg & Terry, 2001, p. 2, quoting Tajfel, 1972, p. 292). Tajfel had been conducting research upon intergroup perception, specifically, stereotyping and prejudice, and decided to extend his research into an examination of “how a system of social categorizations ‘creates and defines an individual’s *own* place in society” (Hogg & Terry, 2001, p. 2, quoting Tajfel, 1972, p. 293).

Social identity theory thinks of an individual as belonging to social categories that render meaning to an individual (Hogg & Terry, 2001). Social categories have defining characteristics with which an individual comes to identify (Hogg & Terry, 2001). An individual belongs to multiple social categories that can vary in importance to an individual based upon his or her concept of self and the social context that has become relevant to an individual (Hogg & Terry, 2001). Each membership becomes cognitively represented to an individual as a kind of orientation toward what cognitions, feelings, and behaviors to adopt in a particular social context (Hogg & Terry, 2001). Hogg and Terry (2001) write:

Thus, when a specific social identity becomes the salient basis for self-regulation in a particular context, self perception and conduct become ingroup stereotypical and normative, perceptions of relevant outgroup members become outgroup stereotypical, and intergroup behavior acquires, to varying degrees depending on the nature of relations between the groups, competitive and discriminatory properties. (p. 3)

Social identity theory and the development of European social psychology are seen as inextricable (Hogg & Grieve, 1999). Social identity theory signaled a focus, metatheoretically distinct from contemporary American social psychology, upon “the relationship between human

psychological functioning and the large-scale social processes and events which shape this functioning and are shaped by it” (Hogg & Grieve, 1999, p. 80, quoting Tajfel, Jaspars, & Fraser, 1984, p. 3). Social identity theory developed as a result of Tajfel’s “lifelong commitment to developing a social psychology of prejudice, discrimination and intergroup conflict” (Hogg & Grieve, 1999, p. 80). Social identity theory “specified how social categorization, social comparison, self-esteem, and subjective beliefs about the nature of intergroup relations interact, or articulate (Doise, 1986), to produce specific forms of group and intergroup behavior” (Hogg & Grieve, 1999, p. 80).

Self-categorization theory, a theory close but still distinct in some respects from social identity theory, soon followed upon Tajfel’s scholarship. John C. Turner and his colleagues developed self-categorization theory as a way to elaborate the process of identification that had been outlined in social identity theory (Hogg & Grieve, 1999). Self-categorization theory explains how a person becomes depersonalized in identifying an ingroup during an encounter with a social context or social situation (Hogg & Grieve, 1999). Depersonalization occurs according to an ingroup prototype that bestows to a person a set of cognitions, feelings, and behaviors that result in a person shedding unique characteristics for those of an ingroup prototype (Hogg & Grieve, 1999). Prototypes are salient insofar as they are contextually relevant to a person encountering a social context or social situation, and prototypes are “constructed within intergroup comparative contexts according to a principle of metacontrast” (Hogg & Grieve, 1999, p. 80). Hogg and Grieve (1999) offer the following definition of depersonalization:

Depersonalization refers to a process whereby individuality and concomitant unshared beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors are replaced by an ingroup prototype that prescribes shared beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. Depersonalization changes

people so that they appear to agree more strongly with one another. This can be a transitory effect which is tied to local situational factors, or a more enduring effect which is tied to wider social contextual factors. (p. 82)

Social identity theory has been applied to a broad range of academic concepts, including cohesion and solidarity, conformity, norms and group influence, stereotyping, prejudice, and delinquency and adolescent reputation (Hogg & Grieve, 1999). Social identity researchers have tended to focus upon stereotyping, categorization processes, motivational processes, social influence and norms, solidarity and cohesion, attitudes, behavior and norms, collective behavior, and intergroup relations (Hogg & Terry, 2001).

Two sociocognitive processes, categorization and self-enhancement, underlie social identity phenomena (Hogg & Terry, 2001). Categorization makes intergroup boundaries more distinctive and gives groups their stereotypical and normative qualities that draw people into assigning themselves and others into ingroups and outgroups (Hogg & Terry, 2001).

Categorization operates upon both social and nonsocial stimuli and brings closer into view the aspects of social life that are subjectively important for a person in a particular social context (Hogg & Terry, 2001). Categorization also reduces uncertainty (Hogg & Terry, 2001). Penelope Oakes, Alexander Haslam, and Katherine Reynolds (1999) crystallize categorization in the following way:

This is the essence of categorization: it is a cognitive grouping process that transforms differences into similarities, and vice versa. Are physicists and biologists similar or different? Arising from the comparisons specified in the meta-contrast principle, categorization subjectively defines currently relevant similarities and differences, and from perceived similarities and differences flow, amongst other things, perceptions of

attraction and dislike, agreement and disagreement, cooperation and conflict. In sum, categorization underlies and defines our social orientation towards others. Within the science faculty, physicists might reject and deride biologists, claiming they aren't "real scientists," but in comparison with social scientists the two groups may present as inseparable allies. (p. 60)

Following a traumatic situation, for instance, a journalist may perceive another journalist who speaks openly about emotional distress as less representative of the ingroup among journalists (i.e., detached, strong, resilient) than a journalist who says nothing about emotional distress (see Masse, 2009; Rees, 2007; Simpson & Boggs, 1999). In other words, how a journalist responds, emotionally, to a traumatic situation can distinguish a journalist as a member of the ingroup, which happens by way of categorization. Interestingly, within a newsroom, a journalist who speaks openly about emotional distress may lie closer to the ingroup *among journalists* than a blogger or citizen journalist who shows a quiet, stoic demeanor (see McEnnis, 2013).

Self-enhancement, the second sociocognitive process, "guides the social categorization process such that ingroup norms and stereotypes are largely ingroup-favoring" (Hogg & Terry, 2001, p. 4). A person can make intergroup comparisons that favor the ingroup (Hogg & Terry, 2001). A person has a fundamental need for a positive self-image, which makes self-enhancement a natural incentive for the social identification process (Hogg & Terry, 2001). Deborah Terry (2001) explains self-enhancement in the following way:

Self-enhancement reflects the fact that, because the self is defined in terms of the group membership, people are motivated to favor the ingroup over the outgroup. Thus, the motivation to achieve and maintain a positive sense of self, or self-esteem, means that

people tend to make intergroup comparisons that favor the ingroup, and they tend to perceive norms and stereotypes that achieve this same goal. (p. 231)

For instance, membership in high-status groups, such as prestigious organizations, motivates people to maintain their membership and identify strongly with their high-status groups, whereas membership in low-status groups “fails to provide members with a positive social identity” (Terry, 2001, p. 231). Members of low-status groups thus seek membership in high-status groups. Terry (2001) explains, “These behaviors are motivated by a desire to maintain and enhance the positive contribution that the identity makes to their self-concept” (p. 231).

In a similar vein, a journalist may perceive coping strategies in terms of group membership such that coping with a traumatic situation may fail to render a positive social identity to a journalist when particular coping strategies are used *as opposed to* other particular coping strategies. Research suggests that journalists work in a newsroom environment that promotes silence when suffering emotional distress, which may encourage journalists to perceive avoidance of help-seeking as ingroup stereotypical (see Buchanan & Keats, 2011; Keats & Buchanan, 2009). Thus, *not* seeking help, if ingroup stereotypical, may facilitate a journalist’s categorization *against* the outgroup (i.e., those who seek help).

Motivation for social identification and group behavior has been divided into two broad classes, that of “the motivation cognitively to simplify and structure experience, and the motivation to feel relatively positive about oneself” (Hogg & Grieve, 1999, p. 81). According to Hogg and Grieve (1999), “The latter has been the main focus of attention--probably because early researchers wanted to explain the interplay between social identification, forms of intergroup behavior, and pervasive status and prestige hierarchies among social categories” (p. 81).

Self-esteem, as a motivator of identification, belongs on the individual level (Hogg & Grieve, 1999). Reduced self-esteem should motivate group identification, and group identification should elevate self-esteem (Hogg & Grieve, 1999). However, this “self-esteem hypothesis” has led to inconsistent findings in social identity research (Hogg & Grieve, 1999, p. 81). These inconsistent findings suggest that identification may be driven by motivations other than self-esteem, although self-esteem would still play an underlying role (Hogg & Grieve, 1999). As Hogg and Grieve (1999) put it, “In other words, self-esteem may not be a necessary or sufficient motivation for, or consequence of, identification” (p. 81).

Hogg and Grieve (1999) observe that subjective uncertainty reduction may serve as a motivation for social identification because people have a fundamental need for feeling certain “about their world and their place within it--subjective certainty renders existence meaningful and thus gives one confidence about how to behave, and what to expect from the physical and social environment within which one finds oneself” (p. 81). People look for certainty not in all aspects of life but only in aspects that are subjectively important to them (Hogg & Grieve, 1999).

Hogg and Grieve (1999) observe that self-categorization and depersonalization are “well suited to uncertainty reduction” (p. 81). People change as a result of depersonalization such that “they appear to agree more strongly with one another” (Hogg & Grieve, 1999, p. 81). Hogg and Grieve (1999) seem to link this ingroup agreement consequence of depersonalization to the concept of subjective certainty. Because an ingroup agreement occurs, at least in appearance, as a result of depersonalization, a person who becomes a member of an ingroup acquires a greater or increased sense of subjective certainty by exchanging what is unshared about him or herself for what is shared by an ingroup. Whether this sharing of attributes and features is tantamount to subjective certainty is debatable, though, because (a) the appearance that is a component of this

sharing of attributes and features can pose a likelihood of being an appearance only and not a factual component of an ingroup's beliefs, and (b) agreement does not equate to certainty, for instance, when I agree about the meaning of a particular outgroup person's actions toward a person of my ingroup, I still can remain uncertain about details of a particular outgroup person's actions as they would relate to me or someone else, that is, pertaining to a detail that does not constitute an agreement between myself and a fellow ingroup member. Hogg and Grieve (1999) maintain, though, that "certainty about attitudes, feelings, and behaviors is actually certainty about who we are. If we did not know what to think, feel or do, then we really would not know who we are" (p. 81). Uncertainty reduction is thus linked to the self-concept and motivates social identification as "an individual motivation that articulates with wider social processes for its satisfaction" (Hogg & Grieve, 1999, p. 88).

Hogg, Terry, and White (1995) emphasize that categorization accentuates the perception of similarity among stimuli of the same category and the perception of differences among stimuli that belong to different categories. Stimuli can be physical objects, people, or the self (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). The categorizer, during categorization, accentuates similarities and differences, as such, according to the dimensions "that the categorizer believes are correlated with the categorization" (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995, p. 260). This result of accentuation during categorization "highlights intergroup discontinuities, ultimately renders experience of the world subjectively meaningful, and identifies those aspects which are relevant to action in a particular context" (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995, p. 261).

Self-categorization theory posits that people use what are called prototypes to cognitively represent social groups to themselves (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). A person constructs a prototype to be the subjective representation of the defining attributes and characteristics of a

particular social category (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). In constructing a prototype, a person evaluates “relevant social information in the immediate or more enduring interactive context” (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995, p. 261). People who belong to the same social group usually have closely related or similar prototypes because people of the same social group tend to be “exposed to similar information from the same perspective” and thus, as members of the same social group, are “placed relatively similarly in the same social field” (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995, p. 261). In short, a prototype governs what perceptions, feelings, and actions become depersonalized as a result of self-categorization (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995).

Moreland, Levine, and McMinn (2001) provide a succinct explanation of how categorization and prototypes interrelate when they write:

Categorization, which focuses attention on both the similarities within and the differences between groups, promotes the use of *prototypes* to characterize group members. A prototype (in this context) is a mental image of the type of person who best represents the group. Any characteristic (e.g., appearance, background, abilities, opinions, personality traits) that makes a significant contribution to the meta-contrast ratio on which a self-categorization is based will be incorporated into the group’s prototype. A prototypical member, whether real or imaginary, is thus someone who embodies whatever characteristics make the group distinctive. (p. 95-96)

To restate the means of social identity, a person encounters some kind of context-dependent set of circumstances in social life and finds some circumstances relevant in relation to his or her concept of self (Hogg & Terry, 2001). What guides social identification in this encounter is a prototype that is peculiar to each ingroup, which anchors, so to speak, the process of depersonalization (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). A person can derive a sense of self-esteem and

thereby self-enhancement, upon identifying an ingroup by making use of a prototype, as such, by invoking what are called intergroup comparisons (Hogg & Terry, 2001). These intergroup comparisons depend upon outgroups that are not a total, universal set of groups that surround an ingroup as though they are predetermined and objective, but, rather, are just as context-dependent as an ingroup that a person happens to identify along with potentially relevant outgroups (see Ellemers, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2001).

Following a traumatic situation, for instance, a journalist may cognitively represent help-seeking *among journalists* via a prototype that disfavors help-seeking as an assertion of journalistic detachment, toughness, or resilience to trauma (see Masse, 2009; Rees, 2007; Simpson & Boggs, 1999). The cognitive group processing *of* a prototype thus helps a journalist determine what attributes may confer to a journalist ingroup favorability, such as *not* seeking help when suffering emotional distress after a traumatic situation.

Moving on, social identities, in addition to being descriptive and prescriptive, furnish an evaluative component for a person that is widely shared and consensual due to the evaluative component of the particular social identity being shared by the other ingroup members. Group evaluation and self-evaluation go hand in hand in an intergroup context such that a person is motivated to invoke or maintain “ingroup-outgroup comparisons that favor the ingroup and thus of course the self” (Hogg & Terry, 2001, p. 4).

Social identity theory can be applied to the work setting by looking at an organization as a type of group structure. Organizations can be thought of as “internally structured groups, which are located in complex networks of intergroup relations that are characterized by power, status, and prestige differentials” (Hogg & Terry, 2001, p. 1). A person derives, to varying degrees, his or her “identity and sense of self” from the organization to which he or she belongs (Hogg &

Terry, 2001, p. 1). An organizational identity may supersede in importance to a person an ascribed identity based upon gender, age, race, and other demographic information (Hogg & Terry, 2001).

Gaertner et al. (2000) show an interest in understanding how motivation behind intergroup bias, such as self-enhancement, can lead to an identification with a “common superordinate group inclusive of former outgroup members” (p. 134). In turn, former outgroup members become closer to the self rather than distanced and rejected as outgroup members (Gaertner et al., 2000).

**Socialization in the Newsroom.** In addition to social identity theory, the present research benefits from Warren Breed’s (1955) seminal research upon socialization in the newsroom. Breed (1955) defines policy “as the more or less consistent orientation shown by a paper, not only in its editorial but in its news columns and headlines as well, concerning selected issues and events” (p. 327). Breed (1955) explains that policy is covert rather than explicit because policy makers are not willing to risk their reputation to “being accused of open commands to slant a news story” (p. 327).

A journalist may learn of policy by reading the newspaper for which he or she works, by noticing which story an editor wishes for a journalist to pursue and which story to drop, and by noticing the criticisms that come from an editor when policy has been slighted by a journalist’s coverage of a person or an event toward which the newspaper tends toward a slant in coverage (Breed, 1955). Reprimand in a newsroom tends to be “oblique, due to the covert nature of policy, but learning occurs nevertheless” (Breed, 1955, p. 328). The implication of not following policy is punishment (Breed, 1955). Journalists can take advantage of blind spots in the newsmaking process (Breed, 1955). Particularly, journalists can use their knowledge of story building to

subvert policy, although, generally, policy works to disempower journalists (Breed, 1955). Breed (1955) gives six reasons behind why a journalist avoids writing stories that contradict policy: institutional authority and sanctions, feelings of obligation and esteem for superiors, mobility aspirations, absence of conflicting group allegiance, the pleasant nature of working as a journalist, and the primacy of news as the ultimate value of a journalist's work. Of the six factors, the second of "feelings of obligation and esteem for superiors" had a prominent characteristic of varying among the participants of Breed's (1955) interviews, whereas the other five factors remained relatively constant (Breed, 1955, p. 330).

Research about socialization in the newsroom in the digital age suggests that journalists feel pessimistic about their future (see Schulte, 2014). Journalists don't get along like they used to, journalists feel their jobs are changing for the worse, journalists feel the news *business* model has failed them, and journalists are having to adapt to social media, digital, and satellite technology (Bivens, 2015; Farhi, 2008; Schulte, 2014). News workers slow to adapt to the digital age are laid off (Schulte, 2014). Technology and profit motive have driven newsrooms to cut staff (Schulte, 2014). The adaptation to technology entails certain spaces of autonomy for journalists who sometimes can use the technology in original ways (Bivens, 2015; Schulte, 2014). The decline of print journalism elicits finger-pointing from journalists who attribute the decline to *the business* of journalism, not the craft (Farhi, 2008). Business has failed to adapt to the digital revolution (Farhi, 2008). Quality reporting, writing, and photography are not to blame for the decline of the journalism industry (Farhi, 2008). Journalists fear technology may entail changes to their role as journalists (Wilson, 2008). Journalists express uncertainty and pessimism about the role of technology in journalism (Wilson, 2008). Nonetheless, many journalists acknowledge that technology permits them to make a better product (Wilson, 2008). Many

journalists say they need more training to adjust to the increasing demands expected of them (Wilson, 2008).

Novices become trained in the newsroom with varying levels of respect from superiors (Gravengaard & Rimestad, 2014; Schulte, 2014). Superiors initiate novices into *the routine* of journalism (Gravengaard & Rimestad, 2014; Schulte, 2014). Expertise becomes passed down to novices through training (Gravengaard & Rimestad, 2014). Novices are expected to learn from superiors and perform certain tasks to gain expertise (Gravengaard & Rimestad, 2014).

Gravengaard and Rimestad (2014) found that news editors adopt different levels of authority in communicating with their news reporters, particularly, when their news reporters are novices. Their research followed interns for one year and used conversation analysis to examine how journalists become socialized into the profession by superiors with expertise (Gravengaard & Rimestad, 2014). The researchers viewed language as essential to socialization. Linguistic anthropology, with its emphasis upon communicative practices as the building blocks for social meaning, guided their research (Gravengaard & Rimestad, 2014). Gravengaard and Rimestad (2014) found one news editor dominating the conversation with the novice news reporter, whose response to the direction of the news editor consisted almost entirely of recognition and compliance. Another news editor deliberated with the novice news reporter to develop the story idea (Gravengaard & Rimestad, 2014).

The literature related to the pressures and influences upon the American news worker suggests that journalists have little influence upon what goes into the media (see Schulte, 2014). Organizations determine content (Schulte, 2014). When journalists resist policy, such as focusing upon quality writing and photography rather than digital tasks, they tend to lose their jobs (see Schulte, 2014). Organizations want speed, hypertext, and multimedia, not traditional reporting

and photography (Schulte, 2014). Journalists feel disillusioned with the digital revolution's impact upon what autonomy they have to produce content for their organization (Schulte, 2014).

Although the present research includes both women and men as participants, it does not incorporate a particular emphasis upon gender differences in journalism. Research suggests that women and men “conceive the role of news and evaluate the ethics of controversial reporting methods in similar ways” (Steiner, 2012, p. 203). Particularly, for careers in journalism, gender differences may have less predictive power than individual differences (Steiner, 2012). Also, gender socialization research in journalism “indicates far more similarities between women and men than differences” (Steiner, 2012, p. 209).

Breed (1955) is an integral part of the present research but not its foundation. His functional approach to the newsroom collaborates with the social identity theory employed in the present research, the synthesis of which is explained below.

### **Synthesis of the research and research aim**

Coping and trauma research shows that trauma stress symptoms can be transmitted in the workplace (Figley, 1995). Also, the workplace environment is inseparable and mutually interactive with the person in the context of a traumatic situation (see Buchanan & Keats, 2011). In other words, the workplace environment must be understood as an element configuring a formative part of a particular person's coping history, in the context of a traumatic situation (see Buchanan & Keats, 2011).

Research suggests that journalists work in a newsroom environment that discourages help-seeking (see Buchanan & Keats, 2011; Keats & Buchanan, 2009). Avoiding help after a traumatic stressor can be a form of mal-adaptive coping action (see Buchanan & Keats, 2011). Mal-adaptive coping action can exacerbate trauma stress symptoms (see Buchanan & Keats,

2011). Consequently, the present research concentrates upon avoidance of help-seeking, particularly, whether it has an appeal in journalistic culture underpinned by ingroup and outgroup dynamics. Social identity theory allows the present research to investigate whether ingroup and outgroup dynamics motivate avoidance of help-seeking.

How a journalist perceives help-seeking (e.g., whether *other* journalists in need of help should be able to approach a colleague or superior) can encourage or discourage (i.e., influence) adaptive coping. Research suggests that journalists fear being perceived as weak vis-a-vis their use of formal support networks (see Keats & Buchanan, 2009). In addition, research suggests that journalists feel either cynicism or ambivalence toward formal support networks (see Greenberg et al., 2009; Keats & Buchanan, 2009).

The present research was designed to gather the details necessary for retelling the stories of three reporters directly affected by the tornado juxtaposed with the stories of two supervisors. Although the narratives were incomplete, given the time constraints and limited focus, the narratives were congruent with the second purpose of the present research. The present research was also designed to investigate *whether* adaptive coping is stymied in journalism because social identity processes encourage, or motivate, mal-adaptive coping action (avoidance) as a function of favoring the ingroup against the outgroup. Journalists learn how to interact as media professionals in a newsroom environment that has a history of promoting silence during emotional distress (see Buchanan & Keats, 2011). Journalists can have cumulative exposure to traumatic situations, and trauma stress symptoms can accumulate over time (see Keats & Buchanan, 2009). Therefore, *avoiding*, as a response strategy to a traumatic situation (such as the tornado), can mean psychological, physical, and emotional injury for journalists in particular because avoiding renders *to the journalist* ingroup favorability vis-a-vis the outgroup (i.e., those

who seek help). Journalists perhaps have motivation to adopt mal-adaptive coping action as a way to categorize against the outgroup.

Social identity theory can help investigate avoidance of help-seeking as a sociological phenomenon. In the newsroom, avoidance of help-seeking may have a prototypical status. According to social identity theory, people look for ways *that favor* the ingroup against the outgroup. Thus, a journalist, considering the journalistic culture that discourages help-seeking and the history of stigma in the media, may identify with *not* seeking help because ingroup favorability renders an avoidance of help-seeking attractive to a journalist's social identity. A straightforward model of ingroup and outgroup formation vis-a-vis avoidance of help-seeking could be shown as follows: Ingroup: Strong, resilient, tough. Outgroup: Weak, compromised, emotional. People tend to look for ways *that favor* the ingroup. (So, whether the particular newsroom is ultra competitive is not a precondition to this sociological dynamic because journalists will tend to identify in ways that favor the ingroup *against the outgroup*, i.e., those who seek help, independently of whether the particular newsroom is ultra competitive.)

Avoidance is a key issue because avoidance can constitute mal-adaptive coping action. The literature suggests journalists socialize in such a way that compels avoidance as a coping strategy. Thus, the literature needs information that speaks to whether avoidance is motivated as a sociological phenomenon.

Buchanan and Keats (2011) have made substantial progress in bridging avoidance research and journalism research. The present research intends to introduce an original emphasis upon categorization as the process motivating avoidance of help-seeking. It does not claim to find anything exhaustive about avoidance research vis-a-vis journalism research.

### **Research Questions**

A search of the literature shows no research that focuses upon the relation between social identity theory and coping action among journalists. The interconnection could lend journalism research valuable insight into whether a journalist's avoidance of help-seeking stems from socializing practices in the newsroom. Journalists learn how to behave from socializing practices in the newsroom that reward certain behaviors and penalize others. Social identity theory is relevant to this focus because of its assertion that ingroup and outgroup dynamics drive a person *to identify* with a prototype favorable to the ingroup *in contrast to the outgroup*. Social identity theory can therefore help explain whether journalists learn to identify themselves as persons who prefer *not to seek help*. Perhaps journalists are led to identify help-seekers as weak and therefore, in accordance with a prototype, apprehend other journalists identifying them as weak were they to seek help after a traumatic situation.

The literature leads to these three research questions:

*RQ1: What do journalists have to say about remembering the April 27, 2011, tornado and its aftermath, particularly for its affect upon them and the community? What stories do they have to tell in remembering what happened while they reported about the worst natural disaster to strike Tuscaloosa?*

This focus is essential to the present research. Particularly, the journalists who have experience with personal loss can contribute to journalism and trauma research by providing insight into their coping histories. Learning from them what they remember about the tornado and its aftermath can advance journalism and trauma research.

*RQ2: What coping strategies did journalists turn to in dealing with witnessing or suffering direct loss from the April 27, 2011, tornado? Is there a relation between the*

*prototypical journalist (the exemplary or ideal journalist) and coping strategies among journalists?*

The literature suggests that many journalists turn to avoidance-based response strategies. Keats and Buchanan (2009) write, “A fear of job loss, missed opportunities, and career hindrances maintains a machismo approach as described by many participants in this study and reflects what is at stake when addressing the stigma” toward help-seeking (p. 173). Perhaps the logic of newsroom competition compels a preference *not to seek help*, given the association of help-seeking with weakness as documented in the literature. If such a preference holds true, then perhaps the present research could help explain why journalists turn to avoidance-based response strategies in dealing with a traumatic situation that lies in their past. Adaptive coping via help-seeking would be frowned upon *as weak*, that is, as indicative of the outgroup, thus predisposing a journalist not to use help-seeking as a means to cope because help-seeking fails *to favor* the ingroup.

Categorization theory posits that people rely upon prototypes to “cognitively represent the defining and stereotypical attributes of groups” (Hogg & Terry, 2001, p. 5). Prototypes often appear to people in the form of exemplary members (actual members of the group) or ideal types (an abstraction of the group) (Hogg & Terry, 2001). Exemplary members best embody the group, whereas ideal types arise from group features as an abstraction *of the group* (Hogg & Terry, 2001). Perhaps prototypes in the newsroom influence how journalists cope with a traumatic situation.

*RQ3: Do journalists prefer informal support networks instead of formal support networks?*

Greenberg et al. (2009) found that the journalists surveyed preferred informal support networks when considering help-seeking, although the journalists surveyed held relatively non-stigmatizing attitudes toward help-seeking in the newsroom (via formal support networks). Investigating this issue--informal support networks vis-a-vis formal support networks--advances an understanding of how journalists perceive help-seeking. To refer to social identity theory, in the newsroom, perhaps the ingroup favors personal approaches to coping rather than formal support networks, thus explaining a preference toward informal support networks in journalism research. The literature suggests that the present research will find that journalists prefer informal support networks.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The present research sought to provide insight into its three research questions by conducting interviews with journalists to discover how they have coped with witnessing or suffering direct loss from the EF-4 tornado on April 27, 2011. The interviews allowed the present research to piece together the stories of the journalists by looking to their remembrance of the natural disaster and how it has affected them.

Interviewing, of course, is a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach can set the scene, so to speak, for in-depth explanations, follow-up questions, and clarifications that may fall beyond the scope of quantitative research. A qualitative approach can better examine the life world of a participant from the perspective of a participant and can establish a space in which dialogue about a participant can approach meaningful correspondence with theoretical research questions (see Hermanns, 2004). A qualitative approach can retain the theoretical interest of social science research while inviting a participant to respond in language that speaks from his or her perspective of topics that guide interviews (see Hermanns, 2004). A qualitative approach was fitting for the present research, given the small number of participants and the nature of the topics investigated. Particularly, the interviews provided a closer perspective upon the topics investigated than a survey questionnaire could have provided.

The interviews were both narrative and focused. The narrative approach allowed the journalists to tell their stories. The journalists had valuable stories to tell in relation to their experience of events during and after the EF-4 tornado on April 27, 2011. The narrative approach thus shed a valuable light upon their personal histories in relation to their experience of the natural disaster and the way in which coping with the natural disaster has affected them emotionally, professionally, and psychologically. The focused approach allowed the theoretical interest in social identity theory to examine whether journalists socialize *toward* an avoidance of help-seeking. The focused approach also allowed an examination of whether journalists prefer informal support networks instead of formal support networks.

The participants in the present research were drawn from two local media organizations that covered the EF-4 tornado on April 27, 2011. The participants spoke to their remembrance of the natural disaster, thus giving the present research relevant narratives. Particularly, the participants spoke to how they have coped with the natural disaster *as media professionals*. Three of the participants suffered direct loss from the natural disaster. Two of the participants worked as supervisors during the time of the natural disaster. Having them as participants gave an additional perspective upon a possible difference of opinion between reporters and supervisors.

Each participant's name and professional affiliation at the time of the tornado can be seen below. Also mentioned is the date of the interview with each participant.

- Jamon Smith. Reporter with *The Tuscaloosa News*. Personal communication, November 18, 2015.
- Lydia Avant. Reporter with *The Tuscaloosa News*. Personal communication, December 8, 2015.

- Richard Scott. Reporter with *WVUA-TV*. Personal communication, November 19, 2015.
- Michael James. Supervisor with *The Tuscaloosa News*. Personal communication, December 14, 2015.
- Lynn Brooks. Supervisor with *WVUA-TV*. Personal communication, November 24, 2015.

This study's three research questions were used as the topics that guided the interviews. First, what are the journalists' stories? This study heard from journalists and learned what they remember about their experience of events during and after the EF-4 tornado on April 27, 2011. This topic constituted the narrative approach of the interviews. Second, how have journalists coped with witnessing or suffering direct loss from the EF-4 tornado on April 27, 2011? The coping and trauma research covered in the literature review of this study informed a search for coping strategies among journalists. Third, do journalists prefer informal support networks instead of formal support networks? The interviews searched for information that pertained to which kind of support network journalists find more suitable to their needs.

The research methodology was approved by the University of Alabama's Institutional Review Board (approval number: 15-OR-347) on November 6, 2015 (see Appendix C).

### **Interview protocol**

The list of questions that comprised the interviews can be seen below, along with justification for those questions and how they sought to provide insight into specific research questions. Participants were asked these questions.

**1. What can you tell me about your experience of the April 27 tornado? Where were you? What did you do in your role as a journalist during the tornado? What did you see, hear, and feel? What details stand out to you, now? If you suffered personal loss, how did you**

**balance the role of journalist covering a disaster and someone who suffered personal loss from that disaster?**

This question related to the first research question by allowing the interviews to piece together the particular story of each journalist. The first research question sought to uncover the particular story of each journalist. The above question sought to gather information that spoke to each journalist's experience of events during and after the EF-4 tornado on April 27, 2011. The above question does not assume that the participants must have suffered personal loss for their stories to be relevant to the present research. Nonetheless, some of the participants suffered personal loss from the tornado, so the above question allowed them to speak to their experience of covering a natural disaster that directly affected them.

**2. Did you lose any property or personal belongings to the April 27 tornado? If so, what did you lose? How has that loss affected you, if at all? Do you have any other loss, perhaps emotional or abstract but not physical, related to the tornado that has affected you? Do you feel time has changed how you feel about your loss or how your loss affects you today?**

This question related to the second research question by allowing the interviews to investigate what loss the journalist has experienced, if any, in relation to his or her history with the tornado. How the journalist felt about witnessing or directly losing something from the tornado was important to understand in examining the journalist's coping history.

**3. How have you coped with the April 27 tornado? What, specifically, did you do? What did you not do? Do you feel your professional identity as a journalist has affected how you have coped with the April 27 tornado? In other words, if at all, how has being a journalist affected your experience of coping with the April 27 tornado?**

This question related to the second research question by allowing the interviews to investigate the coping strategies of each journalist. Coping strategies are important to understand in research dedicated to coping and trauma because coping strategies, if maladaptive, can exacerbate trauma stress symptoms. The above question sought to gather information from the participants that spoke to their coping strategies, whether adaptive or maladaptive, as a part of the present research's aim to investigate coping strategies among journalists after a traumatic situation.

**4. How did your colleagues deal with you after the tornado? Did you talk with them about what you had gone through and/or what you were going through? If so, describe what that was like. If not, why not?**

This question related to the second research question by allowing the interviews to investigate what kind of relations the journalist has had with his or her colleagues. How other journalists perceive help-seeking can affect a journalist's perception of help-seeking, as it relates to intergroup comparisons that favor the ingroup *against* the outgroup.

**5. What do you think of talking about emotional distress with a colleague? Do you think talking with a colleague would expose you to judgment from someone in the newsroom? Do you think *not* talking about emotional distress renders judgment from a colleague less likely? In other words, do you think a colleague is less likely to judge a fellow journalist who doesn't talk about his or her emotional distress? Why (or why not)?**

This question related to the second research question by allowing the interviews to investigate whether the journalist felt stigmatization toward help-seeking existed in the newsroom. This question also asked whether *not* talking about emotional distress, to the journalist's perception, rendered less likely a negative perception *of a journalist from other*

*journalists*, which was crucial to know in gathering information about cognitive group processing. Again, perhaps avoiding help-seeking categorizes against the outgroup among journalists, thus rendering ingroup favorability to a journalist whose motivation lies in achieving an intergroup comparison favorable to self-esteem.

**6. Do you think work-related emotional distress, such as difficulty handling everyday tasks in the newsroom, would isolate you from your colleagues, were you to show signs of work-related emotional distress? Why (or why not)?**

This question related to the second research question by allowing the interviews to investigate what the journalist thought about work-related emotional distress in particular, as it related to his or her rapport with colleagues in the newsroom. Many journalists in the digital age face an unrelenting news cycle, so work-related emotional distress may pose a significant occupational risk, as well as mental health risk, in the journalism industry.

**7. Do you believe journalists avoid talking about emotional distress with their colleagues? Do you perceive an occupational risk attached to speaking openly about emotional distress in the newsroom? Where do you think journalists learn their beliefs about emotional distress? What do you think informs journalists' beliefs about emotional distress?**

This question related to the second research question by allowing the interviews to identify the beliefs of the journalist vis-a-vis avoidance of help-seeking and any career liability attached to help-seeking. This question was important because it allowed the interviews to understand whether the journalist perceived avoidance of help-seeking as an occurrence descriptive of *other journalists'* behavior toward help-seeking. This question also brought into focus the issue of any occupational risk the journalist perceived of help-seeking.

**8. Do you think formal support networks, which are resources for psychological stress provided by your media organization, are needed? Do you think they are helpful? Would you use them? Have you used them?**

This question related to the third research question by allowing the interviews to better understand what the journalist thought about organizational resources. Research suggests that journalists prefer informal support networks instead of formal support networks when considering help-seeking (see Greenberg et al., 2009). The present research sought to gather information from journalists that suggested an agreement or disagreement with this trend in journalism research. This question also asked what the journalist thought about the organizational resources provided by his or her media organization as a part of a greater effort to understand help-seeking among journalists.

**9. Do you think your media organization should provide more resources for journalists who encounter traumatic situations? If so, what resources? Do you think different resources than those provided, currently, by your media organization are needed?**

This question related to the third research question by allowing the interviews to assess whether journalists felt satisfied with their media organization's formal support networks. The present research sought to understand whether formal support networks constituted a desirable option vis-a-vis informal support networks.

### **Data collection and analysis**

The participants were emailed an informed consent form, which informed them their responses would be audio recorded for use in the present research if they consented to participate. The participants were asked to consent to their participation in the present research when they were called via an iPhone. Consent was audio recorded before the interviews began.

Also, before the interviews began, participants were informed they could determine to what extent the information they provided during the interviews would identify them in the present research. Participants were told they could go off the record (nothing they said would be used for analysis) or on background (information they provided would not be attributed to them) and could take back their responses at any time. No participant requested non-disclosure of the information they provided during the interviews.

The participants were journalists with extensive experience in interviewing. They had familiarity with the give and take of interviews. Interviewing was a skill they had honed as professionals in the media industry. They had a firm foundation in interviewing as a data gathering tool, and they had a firm understanding of how to request particular information to be retracted, that is, even though the interviews had a data-gathering function that may have seen retracted material as relevant to topics underlying the interviews.

Three reporters and two supervisors present during the EF-4 tornado on April 27, 2011, participated as respondents in this study. To facilitate a search for discrepancies between the reporters and supervisors, as well as points of agreement, the same interview protocol was used for each group. The participants' responses were transcribed via word processing on a Macbook Pro. The participants were interviewed via an iPhone. A voice recorder was used to record the participants' responses. The participants were informed beforehand that audio recording technology would be used to record their responses. After the interviews were completed, the researcher looked for themes by analyzing the participants' responses. A journalism professor supervising the present research reviewed the researcher's analysis of the participants' responses.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

The results of this research are presented in two parts, in the order in which the interviews connected with particular research questions. The first section of results includes narrative material gleaned from the first part of the interviews, which focused upon participants' stories in relation to events during and after the EF-4 tornado on April 27, 2011. The first section of results answers RQ 1. The second section of results answers RQ 2 and RQ 3.

Narrative material provided meaningful qualitative findings that allowed the present research to engage with the remembrance of the participants in relation to their experience of events during and after the tornado. Narrative material gathered information from participants in connection with RQ 1, which guided the narrative aspect of the interviews, allowed the present research to delve further into the remainder of the research questions when the interviews transitioned to their focused aspect in connection with RQ 2 and RQ 3. The focused aspect of the interviews examined coping strategies among journalists and whether journalists prefer informal support networks instead of formal support networks.

#### **Narrative Interview Findings: RQ 1**

Five journalists participated as respondents. They were interviewed via an iPhone between November 18, 2015, and December 14, 2015. Two participants are women, and three

participants are men. However, the present research chose not to focus upon gender differences in journalism. The present research also chose not to focus upon participants' particular demographic characteristics.

The narrative interviews answered RQ 1, which asked, "What do journalists have to say about remembering the April 27, 2011, tornado and its aftermath, particularly for its affect upon them and the community? What stories do they have to tell in remembering what happened while they reported about the worst natural disaster to strike Tuscaloosa?" RQ 1 sought to gather narrative material from the participants because research about trauma in journalism needs more stories from and about journalists.

The narratives of the participants are organized by person.

**Jamon Smith, reporter, *The Tuscaloosa News*.** Smith lost his apartment to the tornado. Along with his apartment, the tornado took mementoes of his family, including pictures of his son and a dime his father gave to him in Germany. He said the only "items of sentimental value" were the mementoes he had of his family that the tornado took from him, toward which he expressed a sense of loss. He said other material possessions he lost to the tornado were "just stuff. I still don't think it matters. I don't want to lose it again, (...) but it doesn't matter, once you let it go."

He said he had heard news about tornadoes touching down around the Tuscaloosa area earlier in the day. That afternoon, he heard about a tornado coming toward the city, so, along with his colleagues, he headed to the basement of the news building. He wanted his wife (then his girlfriend) to come to the basement for her protection. Smith turned to Doug Ray, then executive editor, and asked whether she could join them in the basement. Ray said she could. Smith called his wife and told her the situation was very serious. This tornado alert was not just

another drill. “I told her to hurry up because we had just heard that it was headed down 15th Street. It was headed in that direction of Alberta (City), where I live,” Smith said. She left Alberta City about 10 to 15 minutes before the tornado “flattened” the community. “She got there (to the newsroom) after we had heard it was over,” Smith said.

The news staff had discussed what steps they would take to cover the event. He said no one knew where the tornado would track and what extent of damage would be done. He said the news building had lost power when he left with his wife for Alberta City, after the tornado passed. Other reporters headed to different areas to determine what had happened as a result of the tornado. Smith and his wife parked at a bridge on University Boulevard that led into Alberta City. The bridge was impassable. Roads into the community also were impassable, so they began to walk toward Smith’s apartment and saw people fleeing the area. Smith said:

As we were parking, people were walking away from Alberta, and they were devastated. They were dusty, and they were just bleeding. People were carrying people, injured people. It was like the walking dead. It was like the walking wounded--the terms referred to, I think, in the military.

He said he was taking video of what he saw as he walked into Alberta City. “So, I asked them, ‘What happened?’ (I heard), ‘Alberta’s gone. It’s gone.’ I had it on film. I was reporting. I was doing my job, and it was just really crazy to hear that.” He walked with his wife closer toward his apartment and saw “debris everywhere. There were downed power lines, people trapped in buildings.” He interviewed a man who, trapped in a building, waited for his rescue. Smith said:

He was just trying to get out, and firefighters were working hard to help people, and they didn’t have time to really get him out. He was safe. So, they (told him), “We have to handle people who are not safe right now or injured.”

He said the initial stage of search and rescue “seemed like almost a futile effort.” He continued, “You see one firefighter over there with an ax just popping away at something, and they were unburying rubble. They’re so spread out. It was such a huge undertaking and task. They were doing their very best.” He saw corpses that were covered with tarps near an ambulance. He also saw wounded people being pushed in grocery carts. He saw black and white community members helping each other. He said:

I remember this old white guy who was carrying out this little black girl who was completely covered in dust. He said he had dug her out, and I think her parents had died. And he was carrying her to the hospital. And that was a really touching scene. I saw another situation where it was a younger white guy helping out a probably young-to-middle-aged black guy. He was a big guy, too. And this other guy was kind of small. He was helping him down the street--a lot of stuff like that. That was touching.

Smith said he and his wife interviewed people as they walked closer toward 25th Avenue East, where he lived. “It was hard to recognize where we were at the time because all of the landmarks were gone. All of the street signs were gone,” he said. They reached the area where he lived and saw “a lot of people coming out of the area, carrying people.” He continued:

Four or five people were carrying a woman on a mattress and just kind of carrying her out of there. There was this one lady who was just wandering around. She was dusty. Her hair was like she had been electrocuted. It was just shocked up. And we asked (her) was she OK. And she looked at us and stared. (We asked her), ‘Are you OK?’ And she was just wandering around, looking at us and picking through the rubble like she couldn’t even hear us, kind of like she was shell-shocked.

He found where his apartment was destroyed. He said his apartment “was leveled completely, like a bomb had hit it.” He heard an injured University of Alabama student screaming that she could not feel her legs. Rescuers were attempting to cut through debris that trapped her. He said:

She was about six feet under, at least, and there were so many people trying to help her, just regular people that lived in the area, firefighters, policemen, all kinds of people just digging and digging, and people taking heavy equipment and trying to cut through rubble and beams, and they couldn’t reach her.

A power outage across Tuscaloosa made time even more precious during the initial search and rescue effort. Night began to fall. He said, “It was still dark, and the weather looked pretty bad, so we were like, ‘OK, it’s time to move, because how are we going to get back with no lights?’” He said he and his wife went back to the newsroom, where reporters used two computers powered by an emergency generator to write a composite story of the devastation they had seen. Smith contributed his coverage of Alberta City, which took the lead in the article.

**Lydia Avant, reporter, *The Tuscaloosa News*.** Avant’s house was damaged by the tornado. She reached her house after climbing over trees that covered the ground of her neighborhood. She found oak trees in her yard had fallen parallel to her house, unlike many other houses in her neighborhood that had been hit by fallen trees. She said, in relation to the tornado’s impact upon her house, “We had a couple of boarded-up windows and no power, and we couldn’t go back because of the gas leak, and we had a little bit of roof damage, but (...) it was cosmetic. It was the trees and the neighborhood around us.” She said the damage done to her house was “just minor compared to everybody else” in her neighborhood, which suffered a severe hit from the tornado that took down many of her neighborhood’s trees.

She said she knew the day before the tornado that a bad weather event was likely to affect Tuscaloosa. She said Katherine Lee, then city editor, told reporters to buy gas on April 26, 2011, because of the bad weather predicted for Tuscaloosa. Some tornadoes touched down in the morning of April 27, 2011, and, as usual, failed to track through the city of Tuscaloosa. Avant said she believed the rest of the day would follow a similar pattern. She said her colleagues began bringing loved ones and pets to the newsroom, as the weather predictions for Tuscaloosa grew worse. Her husband was staying at their home with their two-year-old daughter, who did not go to school that day because she was sick, when Avant called him. Her husband said they would “stick it out,” but Avant went home, packed a diaper bag, and persuaded her husband to take their daughter to his workplace on the University of Alabama’s campus, a basement in Bidgood hall. Avant returned to the newsroom and headed to the news building’s basement when Katherine Lee told everyone to go downstairs for their protection. Avant said, just before the power cut out, she heard meteorologist James Spann say on the television that the tornado was at the intersection of Interstate 359 and 15th Street, about a quarter mile from her house. “At that point, I knew that it was probably really close to my house,” she said. She continued, “That was the house that we bought when we first got married, and I’m very attached to our neighborhood and very attached to our house, and so it was just kind of like a panic attack at first, not knowing what was going on, if our house was still there.”

She said she had difficulty getting in touch with people when the tornado had passed. She tried to call her husband and her mom but could not get a connection with either person. She said, “I just remember being in the basement and not having a whole lot of contact with anybody.” She said, about 10 minutes after the tornado passed, she called a neighbor, who lived two doors down from her. Her neighbor answered and told Avant she was OK, when Avant

asked how she was doing. Avant's neighbor had been hiding under her stairs with her husband and her son. As she was on the phone with Avant, she said the tornado had taken down the neighborhood's trees, when she opened her front door and saw the condition of the neighborhood. The phone call then cut out. Avant left the newsroom to see whether the tornado had hit her house. She said she reached an intersection on Hargrove Road across from her neighborhood. She continued:

When I got up to the intersection, I could see the neighborhood. It was almost like the tornado had just like hit the edge--it just went directly through the neighborhood but didn't affect anything across the street. All I could see were just trees that were down on the ground. You couldn't see the houses because all of the trees were on top of them, and all you could see was sky. I remember that visual, just seeing all of the sky that you couldn't see before because of the trees.

The trees snapped by the tornado made the way into her neighborhood impassable, so she parked across the street. She climbed over trees snapped by the tornado to reach her house, which she said had minor damage compared to her neighbors' houses. She said:

We had three huge oak trees in the front yard and one in the back yard, and, amazingly, somehow, they all fell, but they fell parallel to the house. Nothing was on top of our house, which was amazing because I think there were only four houses in our neighborhood that didn't have a tree directly on the house. But we had huge gas leaks and some other damage.

She said the first person she saw after reaching her house was her neighbor, whom she had called earlier. They ran to each other and embraced. Avant ran into her husband and daughter soon afterward. She said she took "a few shots, specifically of the house across the street and one of

our house,” and posted them on Facebook. She returned to the newsroom with her husband and daughter. She said:

I was there trying to find out what I needed to do next. And it was clear that we couldn't go home because there was just a big gas leak and trees all around us and so, at that point, we decided we were going to try to get a hotel.

She said her father-in-law, in Georgia, heard about the tornado in Tuscaloosa and helped Avant find a hotel room for the night. Avant said, meanwhile, her editor-in-chief, Doug Ray, was telling her to “go somewhere safe for the night and then come back tomorrow.” So, she did no “immediate reporting that night, other than post a few things on social media.” The next day, she returned to her neighborhood. A friend looked after her daughter for the day, and Avant “started going around the neighborhood, talking to people about the experience, about what they were going to do.” Avant continued, “I think everybody was in a state of shock, at that point.” She said she returned to the newsroom to add her coverage to a composite story written by the reporters. She said the power was out, so she used a laptop to add her coverage. She said she saw aerial photographs of the tornado's aftermath that were taken by a *Tuscaloosa News* photographer. She said:

I remember (...) seeing her slideshow of photos that she (...) had taken and seeing Rosedale and then seeing apartment complexes that lived right behind our neighborhood, too, and it was completely flattened. In fact, a body was found in one of my neighbor's (yard)--down the street from me, in their backyard. And then seeing the neighborhood next to ours, which was even worse than ours, and just seeing buildings that you pass every single day, and, all of a sudden, everything looks completely different, and you have to figure out, ‘OK, where is this?’ I remember being really shocked that day, when I

was at work, because that was the first time that I really grasped how big the tornado was and how much damage there actually was.

She said she visited family outside of Tuscaloosa a couple of days after the tornado. She said daycare for her daughter was unavailable at the time, so she took her daughter to her mom's house in her hometown of Florence. When she returned to Tuscaloosa, she covered a church service held for Forest Lake Baptist Church, a congregation whose building the tornado had hit. Members of the congregation approached her in compassion when she cried during the church service. She said, after the church service, she covered "storm recovery and storm stories" for about three months until she took maternity leave for her newborn son.

**Richard Scott, meteorologist, WVUA-TV.** Scott lost his house to the tornado. He said speed tables were the only landmarks in his neighborhood he recognized, when he returned to see whether his house was hit. Scott said his roommate survived the tornado because he left the living room for the bathtub about 30 seconds before the tornado hit his house. Scott said he returned to the television station to continue his tornado-related coverage so that he could help inform the public.

He said his job "is to tell the viewers--people that are watching and listening--where the tornado is and what to do and any significant details I can provide." He said tornado-related activity was detected "very early in the morning" on April 27, 2011. He said tornadoes tracked across West Alabama around 3 to 5 that morning. He said one tornado came within about 10 miles of Tuscaloosa. "A lot of people forget about that one," he said. Bad weather was predicted for Tuscaloosa days in advance of April 27, 2011. Scott said, "We knew for days and days that this was going to be significant." The television station covered the storm "all the way from Mississippi into Alabama" and then saw the tornado, as it approached Tuscaloosa. "We're

located in Tuscaloosa, our TV station, and our camera is stationed on top of our building, so we could see the tornado coming our way,” he said.

The television station tracked the tornado on the ground. “As the tornado got close to Tuscaloosa, we could actually see it and see how large it was. At that point, I mean, my heart sunk because this tornado’s coming into a heavily populated city,” he said. He “had a huge fear of what was going to happen.”

It appeared, at first, that the tornado was headed for the University of Alabama’s campus, so Scott and his colleagues thought the television station inside Reese Phifer hall on campus could be hit, as they saw the tornado approaching. However, it missed the campus and “made a slight right turn. Tornadoes do that often--make slight turns. Honestly, I believe that saved the campus. Unfortunately, the other part of town wasn’t saved,” he said.

The station lost power, so he left to see whether the tornado had hit his house. He told his weekend weather colleague to stay at the station. If power returned, then someone would need to continue coverage, he said to his colleague. He drove down University Boulevard. He lived in a neighborhood on 13th Street East behind Big Lots and Hobby Lobby, businesses which the tornado destroyed. He parked on McFarland Boulevard, about three quarters-of-a-mile from his house, because the roads to his house were impassable. He said:

I had my suit on, my microphone on. Everything was still on me, and I was basically walking down the tornado’s path, down 13th Street East, and it was unbelievable. This was about 10 minutes after the tornado hit. People were just coming out of what was left of their house. This picture on the side of 13th Street East--I’m in the core of the tornado’s path, where winds were 190 miles per hour. People were just coming out of the rubble, and I remember people screaming and crying, people screaming for help.

He said he could smell pine scent, “the smell of basically trees that are ripped apart,” as well as natural gas. He continued, “You (also) could smell--it smelled like laundry detergent--some kind of strange odor. I guess that’s because it was near Big Lots and Hobby Lobby. Everything in there was destroyed.” He said he had difficulty identifying his house in the devastation. He described the moment he found his house:

The mud was picked up from the tornado and thrown against the houses so they were all brown. They all had this brown tint. The roofs were all gone, so I didn’t recognize the roofline. The only way I could recognize (which house was mine) was my mailbox somehow was still standing in my front yard, and I had a unique mailbox. I mean, it was a really weird feeling. (...) When I found it and realized that’s my house, it was like my heart dropped out of my chest. I worked so hard for it. It’s gone, now. I didn’t know where to go. I didn’t know what to do because I couldn’t stay in this house anymore. (...) It was a feeling that: where do I go now?

He said his roommate survived the tornado with minor injuries, which relieved Scott.

Many tornadoes hit Alabama that day, so Scott returned to the television station to continue his work. He said, “So, I had to just basically throw this to the side. I’ve just lost everything I’ve worked for. I’ve got to throw that to the side. I’ve got to get back to my broadcast side.” He said his colleagues had heard about his personal loss when he returned to the television station. He said they hugged and consoled him about his personal loss. He said the television station received a back-up generator about two hours after the power cut out, but the back-up generator failed because the load it had to carry was too much. *WVUA-TV* then sought the help of *Alabama Public Radio* to assist with its broadcasting. He said:

I was trying to give people as much information as I could through the radio, which is actually good because so many people didn't have power they probably wouldn't be able to see it on television, anyway. Understand, there were 62 tornadoes tracked across our state that day. Millions of people didn't have power. The only other source was radio, back-up radio. We always tell people during emergencies to have a radio, a battery backed-up radio, ready to go, just in case because you may not be able to get on your phone. You may not be able to get on your--watch your TV. The only other option is radio.

He said his family helped support him after the tornado, for which he feels blessed. He said he moved into his new house about four months after the tornado.

**Michael James, business editor, *The Tuscaloosa News*.** James was *The Tuscaloosa News*' business editor when the tornado struck Tuscaloosa. He drove to his house in Northport, just outside of Tuscaloosa, when his wife told him she was having difficulty getting their cats into their pet carriers. The tornado struck Tuscaloosa when he was at his house.

He said he returned to the newsroom when the tornado had passed. He said he had access to news about the tornado via radio and television before he returned to the newsroom; however, the extent of the tornado's violence was more apparent to him when he returned to the newsroom and heard from his colleagues about what had happened. He said he worked in the news building that day and the day afterward. He said, that Friday, he walked with Katherine Lee along 15th Street and saw the devastation "with my own eyes." He said, "Words can't really describe how bad something like that is."

**Lynn Brooks, news director, *WVUA-TV*.** Brooks saw the tornado before she took shelter in a stairwell of Reese Phifer hall. When the tornado had passed, she took a sports

photographer with her to document what had happened. She said they parked beside DCH Regional Medical Center and walked along McFarland Boulevard less than four minutes after the tornado passed. She said the area was “quiet” and “destroyed” when they arrived. She described the scene:

The smell of gasoline--it smelled like fresh-cut lumber. It smelled like electrical wires burning--all of that. And I looked across the parking lot of what was Full Moon Barbecue, Big Lots, and all of the way across, from left to right, all of the way over to Cedar Crest, and I can remember the vision of just flashing hazard lights on all of the cars and all of the car alarms going off. And I heard those alarms long before I heard ambulance sirens.

She said people began to emerge from the rubble in a “zombie-like state.” She said, “Everyone was just walking aimlessly to nowhere. People didn’t know where they were going. They didn’t know what they were doing. They (...) weren’t really speaking a lot. No one was really saying very much.” People began to roam into the streets in this condition after they “slowly but surely” emerged from the rubble. She said, “After that, it was a barrage of ambulance sirens, just screaming down McFarland Boulevard.”

### **Focused Interview Findings: RQ 2 and RQ 3**

Information gleaned from the present research’s focused interviews was analyzed to gain insight into the remainder of the research questions. The last two research questions focused upon coping strategies among journalists (RQ 2) and informal support networks vis-a-vis formal support networks (RQ 3). The focused interviews allowed for a connection with research that scrutinizes journalistic culture for its influence upon journalists’ perception toward help-seeking, trauma stress symptoms, and emotional distress.

Participants' responses indicated they had resilience to trauma. Participants' responses indicated journalists find their duties to inform the public and perform well under pressure, particularly during a crisis situation such as the tornado, supersedes their personal difficulties, *even when the subject matter of their reporting directly impacts them*. All participants emphasized a journalist's duty to put aside difficulties in their personal lives for the sake of good reporting. Also, all participants found informal support networks helpful, to an extent that placed formal support networks into a somewhat marginal status in relation to how the participants chose to respond to the tornado's impact upon them.

**RQ 2: Coping strategies.** RQ 2 asked, "What coping strategies did journalists turn to in dealing with witnessing or suffering direct loss from the April 27, 2011, tornado? Is there a relation between the prototypical journalist (the exemplary or ideal journalist) and coping strategies among journalists?" This question guided the transition of the interviews from their narrative aspect to their focused aspect, which consisted of questions that connected with RQ 2 and RQ 3. Participants spoke to their perception of help-seeking, such as disclosing emotional distress to a colleague or superior, as well as what particular coping strategies they adopted after the tornado. Two participants sought a counseling service for journalists who covered the tornado, which was provided by the DART Center. No participant sought a trauma-related resource provided by his or her media organization. Two participants received from their media organization financial assistance after the tornado, which they appreciated.

Strong themes emerged from the information gleaned in connection with RQ 2 and RQ 3. Participants' responses indicated a strong identification with resilience to trauma and with coping by focusing upon their work. Participants saw resilience to trauma as a characteristic descriptive of most journalists and as a source of support when difficulties in their personal lives need to be

compartmentalized for the sake of good reporting. Participants' responses indicated journalists who witness a traumatic situation do not favor the use of trauma-related organizational resources. The present research cautions against interpreting such a result as indicating maladaptive coping action because many approaches to coping with emotional distress can lie outside of the scope of organizational resources (i.e., help-seeking can have many forms). Participants' responses also indicated a strong identification with journalistic detachment during a crisis situation, even when a crisis situation directly impacts them.

Participants' responses are organized by person, as seen above with the narratives of the participants presented in connection with RQ 1.

**Jamon Smith.** Smith said he noticed he stopped spending money after the tornado. "I guess I didn't want to build things back up and then lose them all over again. And then I felt like, at the same time, I saw how unnecessary stuff is," he said. He also said his tornado-related coverage became his primary focus after he lost his apartment to the tornado. He said:

I wasn't worried. I wasn't upset. I just wanted to do my best to help people because (the) power was out all over. People could see Facebook and Twitter because of their cellphones, so we were just tweeting things as it happened. (...) People I usually use as sources, officials, etcetera, were responding, 'What's going on? What's going on?' And (they) were really dependent on us, *The Tuscaloosa News*, to tell them what's going on, and I felt like, at that point in time, that was our duty, you know? Any concern with personal loss: I did not feel it at all. It was just, mostly: let's do our job because everybody's dependent on us right now.

He said the nature of the event as a local disaster helped solidify the news staff in its effort to bring information to the public. He said the news staff felt "a strong sense" to help

people through its reporting. He said, “It was a horrible thing that happened, but it was also a blessing because it really showed us that we can put aside all of our differences and work together for the greater good.” He said his professional identity as a journalist influenced his response to the tornado. He said he stayed “on work mode” for a long time after the tornado. He said the tornado failed to affect him for a long time because of his determination to help people through his reporting. He said he felt no urge to engage himself in his response to the tornado “as a victim.” He continued, “I just wanted to capture it and report it and help people through that reporting. That was it.”

He said he attended a counseling service that the DART Center provided to journalists who covered the tornado. “They just wanted to give some love and a listening ear,” he said. He said he met other journalists at the counseling service whom the tornado traumatized. He said the affect the tornado had upon him “was not what people would probably expect. It was very subtle.” He said his bosses grew “concerned a little bit” when they saw he kept working after losing his apartment to the tornado. He said his colleagues admired his work ethic and persistence. He said his personal loss resulted from an event that also affected his colleagues, who “witnessed some horrible stuff or reported some horrible stuff.” So, he asked, “What’s my story compared to everybody else?” He said journalists “tell stories of what’s going on in the world,” which can include tragic or violent events. He said he had minimal dialogue with his colleagues about his personal loss because he “didn’t feel the need to have to talk about it.” He continued, “I only talk about it when people approach me about it, usually. And that’s about it.”

He said his colleagues would not isolate or reproach a journalist for openly disclosing emotional distress. He also said his colleagues were resilient to trauma. “We’re generally a little

tougher than average. We got to have thick skins,” he said. He said he had been a cops reporter for four years. He said journalists can see death and tragedy in their line of work.

*Lydia Avant.* Avant said her reporting had brought her exposure to natural disasters before the tornado. She said she covered Hurricane Katrina by focusing upon a family who lived in Tuscaloosa after they evacuated New Orleans. She said:

I’m used to covering disasters, to a certain extent, but when it’s your neighborhood or your neighbors or your town and your community that’s affected, it’s a completely different experience because, rather than being separated from the story and just reporting on what happened to other people, you’re having to live it and report it at the same time, and that’s what’s difficult.

She said she could relate to people who had lost their home “on a much different level” than she had in previous natural disasters because of the camaraderie she felt with her sources. She said, “Sometimes, I would tell them where I live and the fact that my house got hit, too.” She also said she felt camaraderie with her colleagues in their effort to bring information to the public. She said, in relation to the news staff’s work after the tornado, “Our first reaction was just to go out there and do our jobs and not necessarily think about what we were having to go through.”

Avant covered the tornado until she took maternity leave about three months later. She said maternity leave gave her time to step back from what had happened. She said if she had covered the tornado for six months without time to step back, then she would have had a rougher time, “mentally, just recovering from all of that.” She also said her personal loss could have been much worse. She said Jamon Smith’s response to his personal loss helped ground her in her experience. “He didn’t have anywhere else to go, and so he just worked, and he worked for days

after the tornado,” she said. She said she felt “extremely emotional” a couple of days after the tornado but, in relation to her reporting, felt “kind of numb to everything.”

She said she attended a counseling service that the DART Center provided to journalists who covered the tornado. She also said she took advantage of a free counseling service provided through a grant offered to people whom the tornado affected; she did not recall the name of the organization that provided the grant. She said her personal loss affects her when she talks to people who have lost their home because she can relate to them “a little bit more.” She said, “It helps me in telling other people’s stories when it comes to loss.” She said she felt an “ultimate grief” about whether her neighborhood “was ever going to be the same again.” She said her main concern beyond that grief was her responsibility as a journalist. She said, “I loved my job. I enjoyed it, and I felt like there was just this huge importance to tell the story beyond just how I was feeling.” She said her journalistic responsibility to bring information to the public was her main focus, in her reporting. She explained how her job affected her response to the tornado:

It didn’t hit me until later that I was being emotionally impacted by my job, not just what I had gone through as far as the neighborhood was concerned. It was kind of a combination of both. And so it was much later that I started speaking about it and talking about it. At work, it was just kind of a camaraderie of: let’s do our job, and let’s do it well. And, again, we tried to support each other in ways that we could.

She said other newspapers sent care packages to *The Tuscaloosa News* after the tornado. For instance, a newspaper in Roanoke, Virginia, sent “a care package of snacks and things like that because when the Virginia Tech shootings happened, another newspaper sent them a care package of similar things.” She said leadership in the newsroom would have taken steps to help a journalist who openly disclosed emotional distress.

**Richard Scott.** Scott said he focused upon his journalistic responsibility to bring information to the public, after he saw what the tornado had done to his house. Images he saw in videos that depicted what other people were experiencing because of the tornado gave him a sense of purpose after he saw his personal loss. He said, “I was trying to get over the fact that, you know, how I’m going to cope with this. How am I going to--where am I going to stay? What am I going to do?” He said the tornado affected him to an extent that drained him of his usual energy. He said, “I just wasn’t myself. It took a little while to kind of get the energy back, to get the steam back, and how to balance work and dealing with this.”

He said some of his colleagues also lost their house. He said the tornado brought his colleagues closer together. He said the news staff felt motivated to set aside their personal issues to “tell the story of what has happened.” He said, after the tornado, there were windows of time (e.g., commercial breaks) when the news staff could share personal stories about what they were experiencing. He said:

It was really hard to talk about, at first. I’ll be honest. It brought so much pain back. I’m not talking about personal (loss). The fact that I lost my house--I can replace that. It was hard, but I can replace that. What hurt me more than anything is the fact that so many people died that day.

He said he feels conflicted about his role in warning people whom the tornado affected. “Could I have done anything different? I don’t know. I really don’t know. (...) When your entire structure is taken by the tornado, there’s nothing you can do,” he said. He said some of his colleagues thanked him for his suggestion that they stay at the television station when they were thinking of going home just before the tornado struck where they lived. “That helped me a little bit because all of those people that died that day, I helped at least one person make the decision

not to go back to their apartment to that third floor that no longer existed,” he said. He continued, “That’s what I want to do is help people.”

He said, after the tornado, he drove by the land where his house was located every day for about three months. He said:

Even after they bulldozed everything to the road, (when) they cleaned it up, (and) there was nothing but dirt, I went by there every day. I have no idea why. I can’t explain that. I went down there. I walked around, got in my truck, and left. Don’t know why I did it. But for that entire summer, I did that.

He said he likes to see new growth and wants to meet the people who occupy the house being built where his house was located before he lost it to the tornado.

He said he did not take advantage of formal support networks provided to the news staff because he had family. “Family is so strong and so important in my life. That really helped me,” he said. He also said his colleagues would not isolate or reproach a journalist for openly disclosing emotional distress. He said the news staff is a “very close group” and knows “to basically go to this person (and) do what we can to help.”

**Michael James.** James was *The Tuscaloosa News*’ business editor when the tornado struck Tuscaloosa. He said he was not directly affected by the tornado but felt that “we were all hit in some way.” He said the news staff’s tornado-related coverage required journalistic detachment to be done well. Only several days later did it “start sinking in” that “there was some emotional reaction more so then than there might have been immediately,” he said. He said journalists may have a delayed reaction to their event-related experience of trauma. “In this profession, you have to have a certain detachment in order to do your job the right way, and so I guess it takes some sort of mental exercise to get to that point. And, like I said, I think it takes a

few days when you finally feel like, ‘OK, you’ve done that part of your job that you really start feeling a more personal sense of loss,’” he said.

He said the news staff was focused upon doing its job to bring information to the public. The news staff collaborated to write a composite story that covered several areas the tornado affected, which required several reporters to pull together the details. “I don’t really remember until we had finally gotten to the point where we were putting the paper to bed that there was a lot of conversation about what had happened--any kind of speculation or any kind of just give and take. I don’t remember a lot of that,” he said. He said journalists resist putting an event that they cover into a personal context. “You’re just trying to get your job done, and I think everybody was doing that. I don’t say it was done in this sort of cold and aloof way. It was just, ‘Hey, we got to get a paper out. We got to report what’s happened, and this is how you do it,’” he said. He said people who become journalists most likely have a thick-skinned sensibility. He said:

I think there are things you might learn (on the job) about how you’re supposed to deal with things, but I think people gravitate to this profession because they have the capacity to be able to handle things like that. Of course, if they don’t, you probably find that out pretty quickly, but I was really impressed with the people I worked with and how they responded to it because they were very professional about it. They didn’t let it, this personal, you know, incident, in many ways, personal tragedy, prevent them from doing their jobs. They did very well.

He said no one among the news staff expressed any outward sign of emotional distress after the tornado. “I think most people, if not all, continued to do their jobs and didn’t really have any kind of reaction that was apparent to me, anyway. I don’t think anybody said, ‘Hey, I need a

day,' or even something as simple as that," he said. He said he may have dealt with the tornado differently had he suffered personal loss as a result of the tornado. He said:

You almost have to force yourself to put aside anything other than just doing your job. I guess maybe if I had actually lost my home or had been more directly impacted that way, it possibly could have been different. And then I ask myself, 'OK, how would you push through and do your job, knowing that had happened to you, sort of like Jamon did?' You just have to push those thoughts out.

He likened it to when he saw his first dead body, as a journalist reporting a story, when he went to a scene of a wreck many years ago. He said, in relation to seeing a dead body, "I would imagine that some people would be in that situation and then would be, 'OK, I'm not doing this anymore.' Yeah, it's bothersome. I think it would have been a lot worse had it been somebody I knew." He said reporting a house fire also can be a difficult moment for a journalist. He continued, "I guess maybe you have to have a certain sort of psychological makeup to do what we do, maybe not. Maybe everybody has it. Maybe it's just the rare exception that doesn't." He said supervisors may need to have greater awareness of reporters' psychological well-being after a traumatic situation. He said his colleagues would not isolate or reproach a journalist for openly disclosing emotional distress after a traumatic situation.

**Lynn Brooks.** Brooks said she has less fear of severe weather events as a result of her coverage of them. She said, "I respect a severe weather event, having seen firsthand what it can do but also having seen that I can survive it." She said she covered a tornado that struck Tuscaloosa on December 16, 2000, which gave her a lasting impression of the violence a tornado can inflict. She continued, "I've learned a lot about how to track storms--where I can be to be

safe from a storm--so I feel like, even though it's been really scary, it's also equipped me (to be safe).”

She said covering the EF-4 tornado on April 27, 2011, jaded her to an extent about the goodwill of community members, some of whom she thought participated in relief efforts just for the publicity. For instance, parents called *WVUA-TV* and criticized the news staff for not covering children who had collected change to donate to relief efforts, she said. “I saw the very, very best in people, and I saw the very, very worst in people,” she said.

She said the news staff had minimal dialogue about their personal tornado-related experience because the tornado “was the biggest story of our time. To that point, we had never covered a bigger story, and we haven't covered a story as big since.” She said the news staff was “in non-stop coverage, so we were in non-stop need of new video, new interviews.” Also, because the television station had suffered a power outage, which lasted for about 40 hours, the news staff worked with its CNN partners to obtain live-shots. She continued, “So, we were trying to get those things resolved, and, really, our own personal experience with it was way far in the distance.”

She said dialogue about a journalist's personal event-related experience of trauma is appropriate. However, “it just doesn't happen very much because I think there's so much focus on what we have to do,” she said. She said she spoke with her husband about the fact that she saw dead people after the tornado. She said, in relation to dialogue with colleagues about trauma, she may speak with someone whom she feels has similar trauma-related experience. “For me, it's really hard to talk about it with somebody who wasn't in it. You hear people in the military say that all of the time. I completely relate to that,” she said. She continued, “It's hard for me to feel like someone is really qualified to help me if they don't know what that's like. Somebody who

hasn't been there when a dead child is pulled out of a housing project that was holding onto the sink with grandma. Those things are traumatic.”

She said detached observation of an event helps her fulfill her responsibility as a journalist:

While I'm in that reporting mode, I feel such a responsibility that I need to be taking in what I'm seeing. I need to be taking in what people are doing. What am I seeing? What am I hearing? What am I smelling? What exactly--I'm so trying to be a sponge of what's going on.

She said her colleagues would not isolate or reproach a journalist for openly disclosing emotional distress. She said media organizations can do better to include resources for journalists who may experience emotional distress after a traumatic situation.

**RQ 3: Support networks.** RQ 3 asked, “Do journalists prefer informal support networks instead of formal support networks?” RQ 3 allowed the present research to investigate which kind of support network journalists find more suitable to their needs. Participants spoke to their perception of informal support networks vis-a-vis formal support networks.

Participants' responses indicated formal support networks may have a weak appeal in journalism. Participants said they knew about the availability of formal support networks and found their use acceptable. However, no participant sought a trauma-related resource provided by his or her media organization. Two participants sought a counseling service for journalists who covered the tornado, which was provided by the DART Center.

Strong themes emerged from the information gleaned in connection with RQ 3. Participants' responses indicated a strong preference for informal support networks. Two participants found counseling services personally helpful, so this study does not reinforce

research suggesting that a stigma toward help-seeking discourages journalists from seeking trauma-related resources (see Keats & Buchanan, 2009). Also, no participant found the use of formal support networks inappropriate for a journalist. Supervisors' responses indicated a need to have better formal support networks available for journalists who may experience emotional distress after a traumatic situation. Nonetheless, supervisors did not have a definite idea or objective for how to meet such a need.

Participants' responses are organized by person, as seen above with the first and second research questions.

**Jamon Smith.** Smith said "a massive outpouring of aid" met him from various sources, including his church, colleagues, family, and friends. He said, "The help was definitely, extremely appreciated." He said he turned down a lot of help offered to him because he "didn't want to be a charity case." He continued, "I'm used to helping people, myself. I was still getting a paycheck, so I figured, 'Oh, well. I can use that to do what I need to do.'" He said he received donations of clothes, food, and money. He said an out-of-state group drove to Tuscaloosa with a tractor-trailer full of "a bed and furniture and all kinds of stuff." He said, "They spent the whole weekend with me and my family just giving us stuff, setting us up," with which he "was extremely touched." He said *The New York Times* (then owner of *The Tuscaloosa News*) sent him financial assistance, which helped pay for housing and other expenses. He said, "The company, the newsroom, paid for hotels for me to stay in for a couple of days, and then they gave me a fully furnished apartment for a month." He said nothing was missing from the support he received after the tornado. "It was a total package," he said. He said he attended a counseling service for journalists who covered the tornado, which was provided by the DART Center.

**Lydia Avant.** Avant said she received financial assistance from *The New York Times*, which reached out to *Tuscaloosa News*' journalists whom the tornado affected. She said, "I think it was a few hundred dollars. They cut us a check, basically, to help us out, as far as living in a hotel and that sort of thing." She said she felt the counseling services made available through an employee assistance program (provided by *The New York Times*) were sufficient. She said, "I never felt like they needed to be doing more for us or anything like that because I felt like they were already doing quite a lot." She said her coverage of tornado relief efforts informed her of many sources of help that she could have used. She said she also attended the counseling service for journalists provided by the DART Center:

(W)e all just kind of talked about our experience of where we were when the tornado hit and how it was, covering it, for the days and weeks and months afterward and how it affected us or didn't affect us and kind of our viewpoint moving forward as journalists. And so it was interesting, because that was really the first time I think that I sat down with some of my co-workers and kind of relived it and talked about it and realized that it did impact us professionally.

She also said she took advantage of a free counseling service provided through a grant offered to people whom the tornado affected; she did not recall the name of the organization that provided the grant.

**Richard Scott.** Scott said he did not seek a formal support network after the tornado because he had family who helped support him. He said his family plays a significant role in his life. He said "talking it out" with his family helped him "move on, physically and mentally." He said formal support networks would help a journalist whose family lives far away.

**Michael James.** James said media organizations should provide trauma-related resources in newsrooms to care for their employees. He said an option for ad hoc counseling services may be helpful. He questioned whether such an option would be necessary if it duplicated counseling services already available through benefits. He said media organizations may have to evaluate a journalist's need for trauma-related resources on a case-by-case basis.

**Lynn Brooks.** Brooks said media organizations should provide trauma-related resources in newsrooms to care for their employees. She said counseling services need to come to the journalist to be effective in a deadline-driven industry. She said media organizations can do better to include trauma-related resources in newsrooms. She said, "Any improvement would be a good improvement because most media organizations are doing very little, if anything."

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

The goals of the present research were pursued with narrative and focused interviews, which asked journalists who witnessed a traumatic situation to answer questions pertinent to research about trauma in journalism. The narrative aspect of the interviews preceded the focused aspect of the interviews, as shown in the interview protocol and reflected by the results shown in Chapter 4. The first goal of the present research concerned stories from and about journalists in relation to their experience of events during and after the EF-4 tornado on April 27, 2011. The second goal concerned an examination of whether social identity theory perspectives can help explain journalists' coping strategies after a traumatic situation; particularly, whether avoidance of help-seeking has an appeal in journalistic culture underpinned by ingroup and outgroup dynamics. Participants' responses indicated a strong identification with a responsibility to inform the public when a violent or tragic event results in a vital need for detached coverage. The third goal concerned whether journalists prefer informal support networks instead of formal support networks. Participants' responses indicated a strong preference for informal support networks. Participants found informal support networks met their needs.

The three goals of the present research were formed by the three research questions. Five journalists who participated in the present research answered questions that connected with the three research questions, which investigated:

- (RQ 1) What did journalists experience in witnessing the aftermath of the EF-4 tornado on April 27, 2011? What are their stories?
- (RQ 2) Do journalists see a relation between their professional identity and coping with a natural disaster in a particular way?
- (RQ 3) Do journalists prefer to use informal support networks instead of formal support networks? Do journalists see formal support networks as a desirable resource?

The present research is unique because it interviewed journalists who suffered loss from a traumatic situation that they covered. Most journalism and trauma research calls attention to trauma in journalism relative to *witnessing* victims' suffering. The present research includes journalists who reported about a natural disaster as they adjusted to direct loss in their personal lives. It also explored whether journalists see a relation between their professional identity and coping strategies. Thus, the present research furthered an intersection between journalism research and coping and trauma research. Findings from the present research revealed:

1. Journalists identify with members of their profession and their community when they perceive the public needs information about a local disaster.

2. Journalists reporting in a public service role are motivated to self-identify as detached observers of an event.

3. Journalists adapt technology to their coverage of a traumatic situation.

4. Journalists believe an exposure to trauma can be common in journalism.

5. Journalists believe their colleagues would not isolate or reproach a journalist for openly disclosing emotional distress.

6. Journalists prefer informal support networks.

These findings and related recommendations to researchers are discussed. Afterward, the present research discusses its limitations and justifications.

### **Research findings and related recommendations**

The present research gathered information pertinent to critical issues in journalism, such as how journalists cope with a traumatic situation, whether journalists perceive coping strategies in relation to their professional identity, and whether journalists prefer informal support networks instead of formal support networks. Research about trauma in journalism has more work to do in gathering responses that can allow for clear-cut explanations for why journalists approach trauma in a particular way *as journalists*. This study offers meaningful results for research that focuses upon journalists who witness traumatic situations.

**Journalists identify with members of their profession and their community when they perceive the public needs information about a local disaster.** A distinction of the present research is its inclusion of journalists who covered local news before they covered a local disaster. Participants' memberships in their profession and their community constitute social categories relevant to how they responded to the tornado. An individual belongs to multiple social categories, which can vary in importance to an individual based upon his or her concept of self and the social context that has become relevant to an individual (Hogg & Terry, 2001). Participants were motivated to perceive their tornado-related experience in the context of detached observers (reporting in a public service role) and local community members (helping those affected by the tornado).

Journalists with strong ties to the communities affected by a traumatic situation may identify with a public service role in the wake of any trauma to which they are exposed as a result of their coverage. Particularly, journalists in such a context may *continue* their coverage as they identify with a public service role. Participants in this study adopted positive coping strategies and coped adaptively with their exposure to trauma as they reported in the context of a public service role. So, this dynamic did not impair their ability to cope with a traumatic situation. Nonetheless, this dynamic may pose an occupational risk of harm to journalists because it may motivate them to construe their coverage as obligatory even when trauma stress symptoms develop as a result of their exposure to trauma. This dynamic also may motivate overworking as a means to cope with a traumatic situation. Researchers should examine whether an identification with a public service role impacts journalists' coping strategies after a traumatic situation.

Depersonalization can be “tied to local situational factors” or “wider social contextual factors” (Hogg & Grieve, 1999, p. 82). It is unclear which kind of factor predominated in participants' depersonalization. Obviously, a local disaster occurred, so local situational factors were relevant to depersonalization. At the same time, participants demonstrated prototypical attributes of journalistic culture (i.e., detachment, toughness, resilience), which helped them develop a shared response to a local disaster. So, “wider social contextual factors” associated with journalistic culture were relevant to depersonalization (Hogg & Grieve, 1999, p. 82). It appears, then, that each kind of factor was relevant to participants' depersonalization as *local journalists*. Researchers should investigate which kind of factor predominates in journalists' depersonalization after a traumatic situation, particularly when a traumatic situation occurs in communities with which journalists have strong ties.

Self-esteem, as a motivator of identification, belongs on the individual level (Hogg & Grieve, 1999). Reduced self-esteem should motivate group identification, which in turn should elevate self-esteem (Hogg & Grieve, 1999). It is unclear whether self-esteem played a significant role in participants' identification with prototypical attributes of journalistic culture. Participants' depersonalization was focused through a public service role they perceived of their coverage in relation to their professional identity as journalists, which emphasized a desire to help others. Self-esteem may have been relatively insignificant in participants' motivation to identify with prototypical attributes of journalistic culture because a public service role can focus attention away from the self. Motivations for identification in the context of a public service role can lie beyond self-esteem precisely because the best contributions to a person's social identity can consist of selfless acts and decisions. In other words, a person who identifies with a public service role (as a shared social category) may continue to identify with such a role even when it fails to elevate self-esteem. This characteristic seems to reinforce research that reveals inconsistencies behind the "self-esteem hypothesis" (Hogg & Grieve, 1999, p. 81).

**Journalists reporting in a public service role are motivated to self-identify as detached observers of an event.** Journalistic detachment facilitated participants' identification with a responsibility to inform the public, in the context of a public service role. Journalistic detachment also influenced participants' experience of an event. Participants filtered their experience of the tornado into professional and personal contexts in accordance with a motivation to cover the tornado in a detached mode. However, it is unclear whether journalistic detachment plays a role in facilitating or impairing journalists' coping ability after a traumatic situation. No participant attested to suffering from trauma stress symptoms. No participant said journalistic detachment inhibited an ability to deal with the stress of their work after the tornado.

Indeed, two participants sought a counseling service provided by the DART Center, an instance of adaptive coping, and relied upon journalistic detachment to form their tornado-related coverage. So, researchers should examine whether journalistic detachment plays a role in journalists' coping strategies after a traumatic situation. This research suggests that journalistic detachment may motivate journalists to postpone help-seeking when they are gathering information about an event that demands immediate coverage for the sake of informing the public.

It is unclear, however, whether journalistic culture *values* detached coverage of an event per se. Journalism research suggests that detached coverage of an event is distinctive in group terms (see Cunningham, 2003). So, when journalists respond to an event with detached coverage, they may perceive their *response* as favorable to their social identity as journalists because it may be congruent with a mode of reporting per se *valuable* in journalistic culture--as a response to an event. Researchers should examine this dynamic because it may reflect how journalists are motivated to respond to an event even when they develop trauma stress symptoms as a result of their event-related coverage.

The present research found that journalistic detachment plays a major role in how journalists respond to an event. The present research also suggests that journalists who suffer personal loss from a traumatic situation prefer to have minimal dialogue with colleagues about their personal loss. However, these results do not show that journalistic detachment and minimal dialogue with colleagues about personal loss are related. Participants' responses indicated there may be a relation between these results, so future research should examine any such relation as a particular research question.

Having said that, some of the participants in this research did not stick strictly to detachment in their reporting. Jamon Smith and Lydia Avant wrote articles in first-person that reflected upon their personal loss (see Avant, 2011; Smith, 2011). Writing about trauma can allow for self-reflection and adaptive coping (Gibbons et al., 2014).

**Journalists adapt technology to their coverage of a traumatic situation.** Research about socialization in the newsroom suggests that journalists have little influence upon what goes into the media (see Schulte, 2014). Research also suggests that journalists feel uncertain and pessimistic about the role of technology in journalism (see Wilson, 2008). No participant, in contrast, said technology stood in the way of producing original content. No participant felt uncertain or pessimistic about the role of technology in journalism. Jamon Smith, for instance, said he took video footage of Alberta City when he walked into his community just after the tornado had struck it. He said his executive editor at the time, Doug Ray, praised his work for the video footage he had taken. Lydia Avant said she made a few social media posts about the tornado in the hours after she learned her house had been damaged. She did not say social media impeded her particular coverage of the tornado, in other words. Indeed, *The Tuscaloosa News* continued to produce content via its social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter as a means to communicate with people who needed information about the tornado. As mentioned previously, the Pulitzer committee's citation specifically highlighted the newspaper's social media work. Also, participants mentioned no significant conflict or tension between reporters and supervisors in relation to how the tornado was covered. Researchers should examine whether journalists who witness traumatic situations find technology beneficial or deleterious to their coverage.

**Journalists believe an exposure to trauma can be common in journalism.** The participants attested to a likelihood of seeing trauma as journalists because stories reported in the news can involve potentially traumatizing events. Jamon Smith, for instance, said journalists can see death and tragedy in their line of work. Michael James said he remembered when he saw his “first real dead body” many years ago, an experience which he said was difficult to describe. He also said people may gravitate to the journalism industry because they can manage the stress that can result from journalists’ exposure to trauma. Lynn Brooks said she saw the victims of a tornado that struck Tuscaloosa on December 16, 2000, which gave her a lasting impression of what a tornado can do to a community.

This research suggests that journalists who suffer personal loss from an event that they cover may perceive their previous trauma-related coverage as a source of support. This research also suggests that there may be an actual tendency of resilience to trauma among journalists. No participant reported being traumatized as a result of their tornado-related coverage, including those who suffered personal loss.

**Journalists believe their colleagues would not isolate or reproach a journalist for openly disclosing emotional distress.** Participants saw their colleagues as receptive to an open disclosure of emotional distress. Participants felt their colleagues would look for constructive and specific means to help a journalist who openly disclosed emotional distress. Supervisors felt an open disclosure of emotional distress was appropriate for a journalist. However, supervisors did not have a definite idea or objective for how to include resources in the newsroom that can help a journalist who openly discloses emotional distress.

**Journalists prefer informal support networks.** Participants’ responses indicated journalists prefer informal support networks instead of formal support networks. This finding has

a variety of reasons that underlie it. The abundance of support that met participants from various sources outside of their media organization seems to have rendered formal support networks less distinctive (as an option for a journalist in need of support) after the tornado. A traumatic situation that resulted in less community support of its journalists may have produced a different set of responses from participants, who emphasized the role of their community as a support network.

Participants also had strong family support after the tornado, so formal support networks may be relatively unappealing to journalists who have direct, proximate support networks outside of their media organization. For instance, Richard Scott said formal support networks would help a journalist whose family lives far away.

Participants also felt the support they had from their colleagues was sufficient; in other words, participants said they felt no need to ask for further support from their colleagues. Jamon Smith's colleagues bought him items to go toward his new apartment and spoke well of his resilience to his personal loss. He said he did not need to have a conversation more than once with his colleagues about his personal loss. Lydia Avant said she felt her media organization did more than enough to help her after the tornado. Avant said the main focus of the news staff was to get information to the public. She said the news staff was aware that resources for psychological stress were available. Minimal dialogue surrounded their availability or use, she said. This finding suggests that the nature of the event as a local disaster coupled with the availability of informal support networks may have lessened the appeal of formal support networks to the participants, particularly during a time that called upon them to pull together for the sake of informing their community. In other words, the appeal of formal support networks, to a journalist faced with a traumatic situation, may be determined by the nature of the traumatic

situation and the availability of informal support networks. This finding suggests that journalists find formal support networks relatively unappealing because informal support networks meet their needs after a traumatic situation.

Beliefs about emotional distress in the newsroom can create a culture that discourages help-seeking (see Keats & Buchanan, 2009). Participants in this study did not show a strong identification with the use of formal support networks. However, participants said they would welcome a journalist to use a formal support network and felt their colleagues would not isolate or reproach a journalist for accessing a formal support network. That is, no participant showed a negative attitude toward formal support networks. This result seems to reinforce the research by Greenberg et al. (2009), which found that journalists who express a relatively non-stigmatizing attitude toward formal support networks nonetheless prefer informal support networks.

No participant sought a trauma-related resource provided by his or her media organization. However, participants found many other sources of support after the tornado, as shown by the results provided in connection with RQ 3. Journalists may prefer not to use trauma-related resources via formal support networks when those resources are overshadowed by other sources of support. Indeed, this characteristic may help reveal why journalists prefer informal support networks--perhaps formal support networks are easily overshadowed. This characteristic also may reflect the relatively weak appeal of formal support networks vis-a-vis informal support networks. Researchers should examine whether journalists find formal support networks appealing in relation to other sources of support after a traumatic situation.

Supervisors did not have a broader awareness of help-seeking after a traumatic situation than reporters. However, supervisors emphasized a need for cost-effective formal support networks and a need among supervisors to be cognizant of reporters' psychological well-being

after a traumatic situation. Reporters and supervisors in this study agreed that media organizations should provide trauma-related resources in newsrooms. Researchers should examine whether journalists' position in a media organization influences their perspective of formal support networks.

### **Limitations and justifications**

One limitation of the present research is its exploratory nature. A search of the literature shows no research that examines whether ingroup and outgroup identification motivates avoidance of help-seeking among journalists. However, such an absence in the literature should only compel this particular research. The literature needs a socialization aspect to its understanding of coping and trauma in journalism. The newsroom is a social environment. Also, avoidance is not without context. If avoidance can constitute mal-adaptive coping action *when an approach could be used instead*, then understanding the context that underlies avoidance is crucial. A search of the literature shows no research that uses a particular socialization theory to explain how a journalist identifies with *not* seeking help, that is, how avoidance becomes constituted into the social identity of a journalist when considering help-seeking. Journalism research thus needs to gather information from journalists that speaks to their opinion of avoidance, help-seeking, and organizational resources.

Another limitation to the present research is its restricted exploration of the construct of avoidance. Avoidance is a multi-faceted construct that can be explored in more than one way. To name some examples, avoidance research could look into behavioral avoidance, cognitive avoidance, passive avoidance, and avoidance as a predictor of anxiety and depression.

Traumatic events can confront people who encounter them with perceptual stimuli that can lead to trauma stress symptoms, such as re-experiencing “the highly-distressing and

emotional fragments of trauma repetitively and involuntarily” (Lin et al., 2015, p. 202).

Buchanan and Keats (2011) note that journalists can face an increased risk of developing trauma stress symptoms as a result of their exposure to trauma. In turn, mal-adaptive coping action can exacerbate trauma stress symptoms (Buchanan & Keats, 2011). Avoiding help after a traumatic stressor can be a form of mal-adaptive coping action (see Buchanan & Keats, 2011). Research suggests that journalists categorize toward an avoidance of help-seeking after a traumatic situation (see Buchanan & Keats, 2011; Keats & Buchanan, 2009). Categorization helps people make sense of the world around them by allowing them to process in group terms social as well as nonsocial stimuli (see Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Moreland, Levine, & McMinn, 2001). Categorization “allows people to respond rapidly to stimuli, without evaluating them exhaustively” (Moreland, Levine, & McMinn, 2001, p. 95). Trauma in journalism therefore confronts researchers with a paradox. Categorization, a sociological phenomenon by which people cope effectively with social and nonsocial stimuli, may instead lead journalists closer to harm because an avoidance of help-seeking is prototypical in journalistic culture. Categorization therefore may impair journalists’ ability to cope with stimuli associated with their exposure to trauma.

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## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. What can you tell me about your experience of the April 27 tornado? Where were you? What did you do in your role as a journalist during the tornado? What did you see, hear, and feel? What details stand out to you, now? If you suffered personal loss, how did you balance the role of journalist covering a disaster and someone who suffered personal loss from that disaster?
2. Did you lose any property or personal belongings to the April 27 tornado? If so, what did you lose? How has that loss affected you, if at all? Do you have any other loss, perhaps emotional or abstract but not physical, related to the tornado that has affected you? Do you feel time has changed how you feel about your loss or how your loss affects you today?
3. How have you coped with the April 27 tornado? What, specifically, did you do? What did you not do? Do you feel your professional identity as a journalist has affected how you have coped with the April 27 tornado? In other words, if at all, how has being a journalist affected your experience of coping with the April 27 tornado?
4. How did your colleagues deal with you after the tornado? Did you talk with them about what you had gone through and/or what you were going through? If so, describe what that was like. If not, why not?

5. What do you think of talking about emotional distress with a colleague? Do you think talking with a colleague would expose you to judgment from someone in the newsroom? Do you think *not* talking about emotional distress renders judgment from a colleague less likely? In other words, do you think a colleague is less likely to judge a fellow journalist who doesn't talk about his or her emotional distress? Why (or why not)?

6. Do you think work-related emotional distress, such as difficulty handling everyday tasks in the newsroom, would isolate you from your colleagues, were you to show signs of work-related emotional distress? Why (or why not)?

7. Do you believe journalists avoid talking about emotional distress with their colleagues? Do you perceive an occupational risk attached to speaking openly about emotional distress in the newsroom? Where do you think journalists learn their beliefs about emotional distress? What do you think informs journalists' beliefs about emotional distress?

8. Do you think formal support networks, which are resources for psychological stress provided by your media organization, are needed? Do you think they are helpful? Would you use them? Have you used them?

9. Do you think your media organization should provide more resources for journalists who encounter traumatic situations? If so, what resources? Do you think different resources than those provided, currently, by your media organization are needed?

## APPENDIX B

### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD CONSENT AND RECRUITMENT MATERIALS



November 6, 2015

William Evans  
Department of Journalism  
College of Communication & Information Sciences  
Box 870172

Re: IRB # 15-OR-347, "The Tuscaloosa Tornado and Coping Strategies  
Among Local Journalists"

Dear Mr. Evans:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval  
for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part  
46. You have also been granted the requested waiver of written  
documentation of informed consent. Approval has been given under  
expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

*(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including,  
but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity,  
language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior)  
or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program  
evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.*

Your application will expire on November 5, 2016. If your research will  
continue beyond this date, please complete the relevant portions of the IRB  
Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, please complete  
the Modification of an Approved Protocol form. Changes in this study cannot  
be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate  
apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please  
complete the Request for Study Closure form.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this  
proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



Carpaigato T. Myles, MSM, CIM, CIP  
Director & Research Compliance Officer  
Office for Research Compliance  
The University of Alabama



358 Rose Administration Building  
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**Research Study:** The Tuscaloosa Tornado and Coping Strategies Among Local Journalists  
**Investigator:** William Evans, MA Student in Journalism  
**Institution:** University of Alabama

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The research study is called “The Tuscaloosa Tornado and Coping Strategies Among Local Journalists.” The research study is being done by William Evans, who is a graduate student at the University of Alabama. Mr. Evans is being supervised by Dr. Chris Roberts, who is a professor of journalism at the University of Alabama.

**What is the research study about? What is the investigator trying to learn?**

The research study is being done to find out how local journalists have coped with a local disaster. The research study does not assume its participants have been traumatized by the Tuscaloosa tornado or its aftermath.

The questions will look into topics such as:

- What did local journalists experience in witnessing the aftermath of the Tuscaloosa tornado? What are their stories?
- Do local journalists see a relation between their professional identity and coping with a local disaster in a particular way?
- Do local journalists prefer to use informal support networks instead of formal support networks? Do local journalists see formal support networks as a desirable resource?

**Why is the research study important or useful?**

With in-depth interviews, the investigator hopes to learn how local journalists have coped with a local disaster, how local journalists perceive their coping history in relation to their professional identity, and how local journalists perceive informal support networks in relation to formal support networks. Each participant witnessed the aftermath of the Tuscaloosa tornado. Some of the participants suffered direct loss from the Tuscaloosa tornado. The participants' responses to the research study's questions will advance research in the field of journalism.

**Why have I been asked to be in the research study?**

You have been asked to be in the research study because of your work experience and history relative to a local disaster. As a local journalist, you worked to bring information to the public and community members affected by the Tuscaloosa tornado when the local disaster struck on April 27, 2011. You worked for a local news organization during the event. Your work experience and history relative to the Tuscaloosa tornado are critical to the research study.

**How many people will be in the research study?**

The investigator hopes to interview six participants drawn from two local media organizations, *The Tuscaloosa News* and *WVUA-TV*.

**What will I be asked to do in the research study?**

If you agree to be interviewed, then you will be asked to do these things:

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 Approval date: 11-6-15  
 Expiration date: 11-5-16

The investigator will call you via an iPhone. You will respond to questions at a location you find appropriate for an in-depth interview. The investigator will audio record the interview in its entirety. Consequently, consenting/assenting to being audio recorded is a requirement of participating in the research study. If you choose not to be audio recorded, then you cannot participate in the research study.

**How much time will I spend being in the research study?**

Each interview will last about one hour, depending upon how much information each participant chooses to share.

**Will being in the research study cost me anything?**

The only costs to you from the research study are your time and any fees your service provider may charge for accepting a call.

**Will I be compensated for being in the research study?**

No. The research study has no monetary compensation for its participants.

**Can the investigator take me out of the research study?**

The investigator may take you out of the research study if something happens that means you no longer meet the research study requirements.

**What are the risks (dangers or harms) to me if I am in the research study?**

Participation in the research study presents no foreseen risk to participants. You have the choice not to participate in the research study. If you agree to participate, then you can determine what information to share with the investigator. Also, you can take back any response if particularly requested.

The investigator will work to ensure each participant feels comfortable responding to the questions developed for the research study.

**What are the benefits (good things) that may happen if I am in the research study? What are the benefits to science or society?**

Other journalists who have experience with a local disaster may identify with your story and your responses. Your participation will advance research focused upon journalists who witness traumatic situations.

**How will my privacy be protected?**

Your responses will be kept on a laptop available only to the investigator. The audio recordings for the interviews will be kept with the investigator on the device used to record the interviews and will not be distributed or given to anyone beyond the journalism professor supervising the research study (Dr. Roberts).

**How will my confidentiality be protected?**

If you agree to participate, then your name will appear in connection with the research study. For instance, your name will appear in published reports of the research study. The first part of the research study will have you tell your story of the Tuscaloosa tornado and its aftermath. As such, the research study cannot promise you anonymity.

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Think of the interview as a journalistic interview. You can determine to what extent the information you provide will identify you in the research study. You can go off the record, in which no information you provide will be used in the research study. You can go on background, in which information you provide will not identify you in the research study. Otherwise, we will consider the interview on the record, which means information you provide will include your identity in the research study. You can take back your responses at any time.

Your participation is voluntary. That means you may refuse to take part in the research study or, if you decide to participate in the research study, you may decide not to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable or to stop the interview at any time.

**What are the alternatives to being in the research study? Do I have other choices?**

The alternative to being in the research study is not to participate.

**What are my rights as a participant in the research study?**

Taking part in the research study is voluntary. It is your free choice. You can refuse to be in it. If you start the research study, then you can stop at any time.

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board (“the IRB”) is the committee that protects the rights of people in research studies. The IRB may review research study records from time to time to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the research study is being carried out as planned.

**Whom do I call if I have questions or problems?**

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research study right now, then please ask them. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research study later on, then please call the investigator William Evans at 334-318-2580. If you have questions about your rights as a person in a research study, then call Ms. Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer of the University, at 205-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066.

You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at [http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO\\_Welcome.html](http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html) or email the Research Compliance office at [participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu](mailto:participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu).

After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants that is online at the outreach website or you may ask the investigator for a copy of it and mail it to the University Office for Research Compliance, Box 870127, 358 Rose Administration Building, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127.

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### TELEPHONE CONSENT

*I am calling in regard to a research study being conducted at the University of Alabama. Your telephone number was selected because of your significance to the research study, based upon your work experience and history relative to a local disaster. The research study examines coping mechanisms among local journalists following a local disaster. I would like to ask you some questions in an interview for the research study, which will take about one hour of your time. Your participation will help provide information pertinent to a critical issue in journalism with the only risk being that some of the questions may make you feel uncomfortable.*

*Think of the interview as a journalistic interview. You can determine to what extent the information you provide will identify you in the research study. You can go off the record, in which no information you provide will be used in the research study. You can go on background, in which information you provide will not identify you in the research study. Otherwise, we will consider the interview on the record, which means information you provide will include your identity in the research study. You can take back your responses at any time.*

*Your participation is voluntary. That means you may refuse to take part in the research study or, if you decide to participate in the research study, you may decide not to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable or to stop the interview at any time.*

*Do you understand your rights?*

*Do you consent to being interviewed for the research study?*

*Do you consent to being audio recorded for the research study?*

*May I ask the first question?*

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**Approval date: 11-6-15**

**Expiration date: 11-5-16**