The goal of this article is to provide practical advice and suggestions for researchers, particularly “embedded” researchers (part of the affected community), who find themselves considering conducting a quick response study following a mass trauma. The co-authors were both embedded at universities recently experiencing mass shootings. On April 16, 2007, a lone gunman at Virginia Tech (VT) killed 32 people (and himself) and wounded 25. Less than one year later on January 14, 2008, a lone gunman at Northern Illinois University (NIU), killed 5 (and himself) and wounded 18 individuals. At the time of the VT shooting, Heather Littleton, a VT graduate, was an assistant professor at Sam Houston State University, and at the time of the NIU shooting, Holly Orcutt was an associate professor at NIU. Coincidentally, we were both involved (separately) in longitudinal research on sexual victimization at these universities and thus had potentially relevant pre-shooting data. We hope that our experiences will serve as a useful guide for future researchers.

Initial steps and resources

If you are in a community affected by a disaster, you most likely will want to try to bring something positive and meaningful to the tragedy. You may feel strongly compelled to implement a quick response study as a way to respond. However, it is also important to consider a number of issues before moving forward. Some things to consider include: Do you have time to complete this project? Do you have sufficient research assistance or can you get a teaching release/release from clinical duties or other assistance from your department? What other projects might you have to sacrifice? Will this study fit with your program of research?

If you do decide to move forward, asking for assistance is a key first step in launching your study. For example, you may want to put out a call for assistance on professional listserves, such as Division 56 of the American Psychological Association. You also will likely want to utilize the resources of the Disaster Research Education and Mentoring Center (http://www.disasterresearch.org/). This Web site is a treasure trove of information and includes training modules, samples of successful grant proposals and instruments. Finally, you may want to contact researchers directly to ask for advice, reprints and measures, particularly as you may find yourself having to quickly familiarize yourself with a new research area.

To maximize your likelihood for success, you will want to quickly assemble a research team. It can be very helpful for your team to have some members outside of the affected community, because embedded team members are also dealing with the disaster. Within the affected community, evaluate the potential for collaboration with other researchers and assess whether you are duplicating efforts or competing for the same funds. It is also important to consider how to prevent participant fatigue from multiple studies.

You will also want to put together a preliminary budget as soon as possible – have a “lean” budget that focuses on participant recruitment and retention. Write a brief concept paper as well to share with potential funding sources. As you develop your concept paper, several pitfalls to avoid include: (1) because you have data from participants prior to the disaster, that it is automatically of value, (2) because you are focusing on a disaster, that other aspects of the study will not be looked at as critically (e.g., novelty, feasibility), and (3) participants will want to be involved in the study because it concerns the disaster.

In terms of funding options, keep in mind that your office of sponsored projects may not be experienced in obtaining emergency funding. In fact, most traditional funding sources are not rapid enough for a quick response study. One exception is the Grants for Rapid Response Research (RAPID) through the...
National Science Foundation. The Disaster Research Education Mentoring Web site includes examples of successful RAPID grants. The RAPID requires a very brief proposal. It is reviewed internally and funds are available quickly (within weeks). Heather’s quick response study was funded by the previous incarnation of RAPID (known as SGER). The National Institutes of Health (NIH) also has a RAPID mechanism. However, NIH requires a full proposal that is sent for external review, and thus obtaining funding will likely take several months. Thus, you may need to consider funding from non-traditional sources. For example, Holly obtained funding for an immediate post-shooting survey from a grant from a private foundation targeting gun control as well as from funds advanced by NIU. Later, Holly obtained additional funding from an NIH RAPID grant.

**IRB Issues**

You may face a number of IRB issues as well. For example, it is likely your IRB has received a number of applications involving collection of time-sensitive data. At the same time, the IRB’s functioning may be disrupted by the disaster. The IRB may also have to comply with guidelines imposed by outside groups. For example, a special panel had to approve all VT shooting-related research. Finally, if the trauma involves a crime, the IRB may have to comply with legal requirements, such as federal laws regarding evidence retention. Thus, it is imperative that you communicate frequently with the IRB and seek consultation with other researchers regarding how to handle potential IRB concerns.

**Project Process**

If you are able to successfully implement a quick response study, it is also imperative that you remain flexible and willing to make changes. You may want to consider collecting qualitative data to gain a more comprehensive perspective on participants’ experiences and to suggest possible directions for gathering additional quantitative data. It is also important to be prepared for unexpected problems and to not be too harsh with yourself for not anticipating these problems. After all, you put together a successfully funded project in a very short time frame while at the same time managing the effects the disaster had on you.

It is also important to be mindful of your own emotional well-being. It is likely that you will have mixed emotions if your project gets funded, as this opportunity came as a result of tragedy. It is also likely that working on the project will bring up your own thoughts and feelings about the disaster. Thus, it is imperative that you practice good self-care, including monitoring your own reactions, ensuring that you take time to process your own thoughts and emotions, and, if necessary, shifting responsibility for portions of the project to others.

To conclude, for both of us, implementing a quick response study in the wake of disaster has been both a highly challenging and rewarding endeavor. We hope that if you ever find yourself in the difficult position of conducting research following a disaster in your community that you find our advice to be helpful.

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