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Compassionate Horror or Compassion Fatigue? Responses to Human-Cost-of-War Photographs

JENNIFER MIDBERRY
Lehigh University, USA

Despite the insistence of photojournalists that war images have the potential for stirring concern, little academic research has looked specifically at the relationship between conflict photos and empathy, compassion, and engagement. This study used focus group interviews to investigate what type of visual frames in war photos might evoke empathy and compassion while encouraging engagement. More specifically, this study examined whether participants made meaning differently out of photos with three types of human-cost-of-war visual frames and a militarism frame in terms of empathic and compassionate responses and their intentions of future engagement with war coverage.

Keywords: photojournalism, compassion fatigue, empathy, war photography, visual communication, visual framing

Photojournalists have long argued that war photographs depicting human suffering have the capacity to evoke empathy and compassion in audiences, which then leads to antiwar attitudes and action (Kennedy, 2008). W. Eugene Smith captured this sentiment when he described the value of his images from World War II, saying, "If my photographs could cause compassionate horror within the viewer, they might also prod the conscience of that viewer into taking action" (Edelson, 1972, para. 3). Accordingly, the photojournalism community venerates pictures that focus on the ravages of conflict, which dominate contests and become visual icons (Ritchin, 2013).

Although images of the human cost of war are revered, publishing them in U.S. media outlets can be challenging. Editors are fearful of traumatizing audiences and alienating advertisers with disturbing images (McKinley & Fahmy, 2011). A graphic photograph must demonstrate particularly high news value or be visually astonishing to be worth risking such backlash (Emmett, 2010). At the same time, scholars and journalists have diagnosed U.S. news audiences with compassion fatigue, where people no longer respond emotionally to bad news (Tester, 2001). These two factors motivate photojournalists to produce imagery that is increasingly more shocking to grab the attention of those with dulled senses and to get past the news value threshold (Moeller, 1999).

Newsroom debates about war photography are imbued with several assumptions about the images' effects. First, photojournalists take it for granted that pictures of the human cost of war have the unique

Jennifer Midberry: midberry@lehigh.edu
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ability to arouse empathy and compassion that leads audiences to action. Another related assumption is that photographs depicting the extremes of conflict, such as graphic violence and death, are the most effective at stirring emotions and behavior. These notions have been given credence anecdotally, but lack empirical support (Kennedy, 2008). Third, it is presumed that compassion fatigue is what makes many news consumers nonresponsive to the emotional pull of pictures of wartime suffering. Although scholars have theorized about desensitization to conflict photos, a dearth of audience reception studies have explored this issue (Campbell, 2014).

Testing those assumptions, this study used focus group discussions to investigate what type of visual frames in war photos are most likely to evoke empathy, compassion, and engagement. More specifically, this study examined whether participants made meaning differently out of photographs (from conflicts in Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of Congo) with various human-cost-of-war visual frames and a militarism visual frame in terms of empathic and compassionate responses and intentions of engagement with war coverage. The findings expand our understanding about the way audiences react affectively to conflict photos and have implications for how photo editors might present images of war to engage audiences.

Literature Review

Theorizing Compassion Fatigue and Other Responses to War Photos

Media consumers bring their own life experiences to the process of interpreting a photograph. Also, although there may be a dominant message in a picture, "words and images carry connotations over which no one has complete control" (Hall, 1973, p. 270), and people do not uncritically accept embedded ideologies. Individuals can see different types of meaning in photographs (Barthes, 1972), including images of war. For example, people involved in conflict may not respond compassionately to pictures of their enemies' suffering (Sontag, 2003).

Individuals may have a wide range of responses to war photos. Some might react with what Rentschler (2004) identified as witnessing, or an active affective engagement with another's mediated pain. This emotional investment is theorized to "lead to the development of empathy, and that might open the door to more radical democratic engagements and movements in the future" (Landsberg, 2009, p. 228). For some, witnessing is even an imperative, where everyone is bound by a civil contract to react on behalf of those whose pain has been photographed (Azoulay, 2008) and where photos of war "call us to an ethical response to human suffering" (Green, Mann, & Story, 2006, p. 178). Mortensen and Trenz (2016) identified three specific modes of responding to imagery of suffering, or moral spectatorship: as an emotional observer, a critical observer, and a meta-observer.

Conversely, people may experience compassion fatigue, ceasing to respond to coverage of conflict because they become numb to the continual flow of bad news (Boltanski, 1999; Moeller, 1999; Tester, 2001). The predominant theorization of compassion fatigue argues that news media's incessant pace of extremely negative stories prompts audience aversion (Moeller, 2008). Key to this conceptualization is the notion that people no longer experience feelings of compassion when viewing the mediated suffering of

others (Tester, 2001). Another theory of compassion fatigue asserts that media consumers are engaged emotionally but withdraw because they are powerless to effect change (Berger, 1980; Moeller, 2008; Sontag, 2003). This state has been described as empty empathy, where audience members feel concern, but their perceived lack of efficacy leaves them hopeless and disengaged (Kaplan, 2008).

Visual Framing of War Photos

Photographs are laden with socially constructed meaning (Hall, 1973). One way that meaning is created in photographs is through visual framing. For media texts in general, Entman (1993) argued that "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text" (p. 52). Visual framing in images refers to the photographer's content choices and to the effects the resulting image has on viewers (Fahmy & Alkazemi, 2017). The messages embedded in a photograph are subtler than in written frames, which makes it challenging for viewers to perceive visual frames without making a concerted effort to decode them (Messaris & Abraham, 2001). People often assume pictures are a straightforward depiction of an event (Barthes, 1972); yet, how photos of war are framed embeds dominant ideological messages that can influence how viewers interpret conflict (Hall, 1973). Therefore, how audiences make meaning out of visual frames of war photos remains a vital area of investigation.

The most pervasive visual frame of war in U.S. news has been the militarism frame, which emphasizes U.S. military might. Communication research has shown that U.S. coverage of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan contains significantly more photos of U.S. soldiers and military machinery than of destruction, casualties, and civilians (Griffin, 2004; Griffin & Lee, 1995; Kennedy, 2008; King & Lester, 2005). These scholars have argued that such sanitized and incomplete visuals reinforce the U.S. government's agenda in public discourse. Vincent Laforet's reflection on his Iraq and Afghanistan war coverage indicates that photojournalists share this unease: "My main concern was that I was producing images that were glorifying the war too much" (Kennedy, 2008, p. 284).

Because militarism has been the dominant visual frame in U.S. media and the human-cost-of-war frame is the most revered in photojournalism, this study focused on these two frames. The human-cost-of-war visual frame was operationalized as images that emphasized the negative effects of conflict on people. These types of photos "make loss more personal, emotional, and salient" (Gartner, 2011, p. 547). Within this category, three subcategories of visual frames were identified in the present study: reaction-to-loss (people responding to destroyed homes and the loss of immediate family; Figure 1), civilian casualty (dead or injured noncombatants; Figure 2), and military casualty (dead soldiers or militants; Figure 3). The militarism frame included images emphasizing weapons and artillery and showed soldiers in battle (Figure 4). This type of visual frame has been found to "exalt the warrior and war machine" and "paint a picture of military force as triumphant, powerful, cool, and cheap" (Gartner, 2011, p. 547).

Behavioral and Attitudinal Effects of War Photos

Over the last two decades, scholars have begun empirically examining emotional and attitudinal responses to images of conflict, with some experiments finding support for war photos' influence over text. Among U.S. participants, photographs of Iraq war casualties elicited higher levels of opposition to the

conflict, puzzlement, anger, and sadness than articles alone or articles with photos (Pfau et al., 2006). Another study discovered that among British participants, a story about a victim kidnapped by terrorists evoked more fear and support for negotiations when accompanied by photos of the victim as opposed to text alone (Iyer & Oldmeadow, 2006).

Focusing on the isolated versus multimodal effects of war photos, one study revealed that U.S. participants who saw only photos of conflict in the Central African Republic experienced more sympathy and fear and expressed greater support for antiwar policy and intentions to engage in antiwar efforts than participants who only read an article (Powell, Boomgaarden, De Swert, & de Vreese, 2015). However, the results of the text and image combination condition were more nuanced, indicating that the textual frame drove participants' opinions on policy support, while the visual frame worked on participants' emotions of fear and anger, which then influenced behavioral intentions (Powell et al., 2015).

Although Powell and colleagues (2015) compared obligation (victims of war) and risk (militants) visual frames, these were similar in content to human-cost-of-war and militarism frames. When participants saw images alone, the obligation frame yielded higher levels of sympathy, support for intervention, and behavioral intentions, while the risk frame led to an increase in fear. However, when participants were exposed to text and images together, the obligation frame in the article elicited greater support for intervention than the story with a risk frame, while the obligation frame in the photos evoked more anger and intentions to donate to intervention efforts than the risk frame.

Additional work has explored the effects of a human-cost-of-war visual frame versus a militarism frame. One experiment found that U.S. participants who viewed casualty photos of U.S. soldiers felt more angry, disgusted, upset, and distressed than participants who viewed photos of soldiers in action (Aday, 2010). Another experiment determined that, among U.S. participants, conventionalized casualty photos from wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and a fictional country yielded higher levels of opposition to conflict than images of soldiers (Gartner, 2011). Political ideology interacted with the visual frame in both studies, indicating the complexity of the influence of images.

For human-cost-of-war visual frames, the level of graphicness has influenced editors' deliberations over publishing (Emmett, 2010). Contrary to what has been assumed in newsrooms, research has demonstrated that graphic pictures may not be as traumatizing as feared. For example, when U.S. participants viewed photos of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the level of graphicness did not influence policy attitudes (McKinley & Fahmy, 2011). Similarly, another study demonstrated that there were no differences in reported concern or policy support in participants who saw high versus low graphic images of destruction from U.S. drone strikes (Scharrer & Blackburn, 2015).

Reactions to pictures of wartime suffering is largely dependent on a person's interpretation. Yet, polysemy is not without its limits: Condit (1989) cautioned against an overemphasis on the flexibility of messages. So, while viewers can interpret images according to their worldviews, there are certain meanings embedded in those pictures because of photographers' and editors' choices. As Kaplan (2008) noted, "citizens' emotions regarding catastrophes will partly depend on the form of images they are given" (p. 4).

Therefore, one way to parse the influence of war photos is to examine the way that media consumers respond to different types of visual frames common in conflict photography.

Empathy, Compassion, and Engagement with War Photos

A small group of studies have examined the relationship between images of war and empathy and compassion. Brantner, Lobinger, and Wetzsein (2011) discovered that participants who viewed stories about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with photos with a human interest frame felt more disturbed than participants who viewed photos with a political frame. Participants reported greater levels of empathy in response to the human interest frame, but the difference merely approached significance. While visual framing in war photos may influence empathy, further investigation is required. Höijer (2004) found that interviewees experienced varying types of compassionate responses to images of the conflict in Kosovo. Although some people felt only compassion for the victims of war, many people experienced more ambiguous types of compassion mixed with feelings of shame, guilt, or powerlessness. Höijer (2004) concluded, "the compassion that the audience expresses is often directly related to the documentary pictures they have seen" (p. 520). This work demonstrates the ambivalent nature of affective responses to war visuals, suggesting that examinations must account for mixed emotions.

Some of the studies above examined the related concepts of sympathy, compassion, and empathy. It is necessary here to differentiate between conceptualizations of these terms. Agreement over the definition of empathy has been elusive because it has been tied variously to compassion, sympathy, and pity (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010). Although empathy is typically linked with compassion, it is possible for one person to empathize with another's happiness, hope, or other positive emotion (Decety & Jackson, 2006; Hein & Singer, 2008). Therefore, this study conceptualizes empathy as "the capacity to understand and respond to the unique affective experiences of another person" (Decety & Jackson, 2006, p. 54). Empathic processing involves both an affective component, whereby one person automatically taps into the emotional state of another, and a cognitive component, as one person consciously considers the perspective of another (Hein & Singer, 2008). Where empathy is a process that can lead one to take on various emotional states in response to another's circumstances, compassion is a discrete emotion (Hein & Singer, 2008). Compassion is "the feeling that arises in witnessing another's suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help" (Goetz et al., 2010, p. 351).

When empathy arouses compassion in people, they are likely to want to assist those in need (Batson, 2011). Yet, seeing the pain of others can also provoke so much distress that people become motivated to disengage from the situation (Batson, 2011). These findings, when applied to mediated representations of suffering, support theories of compassion fatigue that argue when people feel overwhelmed by imagery, they are likely to turn away from such media to reduce their discomfort (Moeller, 1999; Sontag, 2003). Alternatively, when a viewer sees a picture with a human-cost-of-war frame that evokes empathy, compassion, and a longing to help or engage with the issue, that process aligns with the concept of witnessing (Landsberg, 2009; Rentschler, 2004).

Anecdotes have long suggested that war photographs have the power to generate antiwar attitudes and action (Kennedy, 2008). It follows that many of the studies above have focused on how visual frames

influence political opinions. However, some photojournalists have cautioned against expecting immediate changes. James Nachtwey explained that such transformations take time, and as a first step he suggests, "if people are confronted in the press with injustices and crimes against humanity, they should engage themselves with the issues. They should keep it alive inside themselves and not turn away from it" (Caponigro, 2000, para. 12). For people's attitudes about a complex issue—like war—to develop, they need to first remain interested in the topic. Following the logic that attitude change is a downstream effect of engagement, this study looked at whether empathy and compassion generated from viewing photos of war facilitates the desire to engage with similar coverage in the future.

Media scholars have also theorized that people feel more compassion in response to photographs of devastation when the subjects are from their own country (Boltanski, 1999; Moeller, 1999). This notion is supported by psychology research that shows identification influences levels of empathy, whereby people tend to display more empathy for a member of the same ingroup, as opposed to an outgroup. This has been found to apply to racial groups (Chiao & Mathur, 2010), social groups (Cheon et al., 2011), and hypothetical groups (Ruckman et al., 2015). Therefore, this study examined whether identification with an ingroup, in terms of nationality, influenced empathy, compassion, and intentions of engagement.

Based on the literature above, this study explored these research questions:

RQ1: Do human-cost-of-war visual frames evoke empathy and compassion differently than militarism visual frames?

RQ2: Are there specific types of human-cost-of-war visual frames that evoke empathy and compassion more than others?

RQ3: What factors, including empathy and compassion, influence intentions of engagement?

RQ4: Does identification with a conflict affect responses to images of war in terms of empathy, compassion, and intentions of engagement?

Method

Most research on this topic has been experimental, which does not allow for nuanced responses from media consumers. Previous qualitative research demonstrated that audiences feel ambivalent about images of wartime suffering (Höijer, 2004). Therefore, focus group interviews were used because they allow for the expression of overlapping and contradictory emotional reactions (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). This method also enables participants to negotiate meaning by reacting to others' comments and clarifying their own stances (McCollough, Crowell, & Napoli, 2017). Nevertheless, the research questions aimed to uncover potential variations in the way people construct photographic meaning from different visual frames and across separate political conflicts. Therefore, this study used a hybrid technique that randomly assigned participants to groups with different messages, as in an experiment, but used focus groups to "better understand meaning construction and gain a more holistic reading of response differences between groupings of mediated content" (Robinson & Mendelson, 2012, p. 332).

Participants

Participants were 87 undergraduates (26 males, 61 females) from Temple University on the East Coast of the United States. With IRB approval, participants were recruited from classes and received extra credit. Participants ranged in age from 18 years to 49 years (M = 21.23, Mdn = 20). The majority (95.4%) were American. Participants identified as 60.9% White, 19.5% Black, 9.2% Asian, 7% mixed, and 3.4% Hispanic. Participants were slightly more conservative (7 = *very conservative*) than liberal (1 = *very liberal*) in terms of political ideology (M = 4.87, SD = 1.292).

Thirty-two participants had a family member, significant other, or friend currently or previously in the U.S. military, and one was a veteran. There was at least one participant in each session with a military connection. On average, participants reported engaging with some type of news almost five times a week (M = 3.60, SD = 1.632, where 1 = *not at all*, 7 = *many times every day*). Participants most commonly cited social media, online news, CNN and local network news, movies, family discussions, and military connections as their sources for information about war.

Undergraduates were appropriate participants because the United States has been at war for most of their lives. Many participants explained that their views about conflict were influenced by two protracted wars. "I just know that there's not a time I can remember when we were not in war. Growing up, one of my earliest memories is 9/11, and past that, we've always been in a war of some type," remarked Elizabeth. When asked about their general thoughts on war media, some participants described the numbing effect that ubiquitous coverage over a lifetime can have. Rob observed, "People are becoming desensitized from it. Like they see it all the time so it's like, 'Oh this is happening again' . . . People seem to, not care less, but not pay attention as much as time goes on."

Procedure

Sixteen focus group sessions were conducted, with half of the sessions focused on the U.S. war in Afghanistan and half on the civil conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The number of participants in each session ranged from three to seven, and there were 44 participants in the Afghanistan sessions and 43 in the DRC sessions. Each session was 75 minutes long. Participants filled out a demographic survey and selected pseudonyms. Participants were first asked about how they respond in general to media about war. Midway through, they read a printed article about conflict in either Afghanistan or the DRC. Next, they viewed 12 photos of the conflict (a mix of six human-cost-of-war and six militarism photos) presented in randomized order, on a large television screen. The remaining discussion focused on participants' responses to these materials.

A semistructured interview guide with open-ended questions was used. This approach allowed for consistency across the sessions while leaving room to follow directions introduced by participants. The first half of the questions examined how participants emotionally process media about war. The second half of the questions explored how participants made meaning out of the study materials, particularly the photographs. Questions specifically about the images were held until participants mentioned them independently.

Materials

News Articles. The articles were composites of stories from *The New York Times, Stars and Stripes,* Associated Press, and Reuters. Both stories were presented as coming from *The New York Times*. The text in the articles was the same, except that the names of people, places, and groups were specific to the conflicts. The stories followed an inverted pyramid style and were approximately 300 words long. It was possible to present the same text for both conflicts because the political situation was similar: both countries' wars had been officially declared over, yet militants were still attacking government/allied forces.

News Photos. Ecological validity was a primary concern; therefore, authentic photos of the conflicts from Associated Press were used. For each war, thirteen photos were initially picked for the human-cost-of-war frame and ten for the militarism frame. Captions were edited to include only the location, the roles of subjects (without names), and a description of the activity. The images were pilot-tested with 32 undergraduate participants. They viewed 46 photographs (23 per conflict) in an online survey and rated each photo for arousal and valence using Bradley and Lang's (1994) Self-Assessment Manikin, a picture-oriented measurement tool like the Semantic Differential Scale. Mean arousal and valence scores were calculated, and pictures with scores that differed significantly from others were discarded. From the remaining images, six human-cost-of-war and six militarism photos were chosen for each conflict.

It was important to keep the images in one set parallel to the other to facilitate the comparison of responses to each conflict. Corresponding pictures from each war were as similar as possible in terms of type of action, level of graphicness, emotional expression, subject distance, and camera angles. To reduce the number of potential confounds, only males were depicted and adults were shown in all but one image pair (for which authentic, parallel pictures of men could not be found). Prioritizing ecological validity, best fit for the visual frames, and parallel content meant that other factors of potential influence were manifest. For example, there were ethnic, racial, and religious differences visible between the image sets, which could trigger varying participant responses.

The human-cost-of-war reaction-to-loss visual frame in each set consisted of a picture of a man crying over a dead relative (Figure 1) and one of a boy (approximately 10-years-old) standing near his destroyed home. The human-cost-of-war civilian casualty visual frame included a photograph of a man being treated for a serious injury in a hospital (Figure 2) and another of men holding a dead civilian. The human-cost-of-war military casualty visual frame consisted of one image of a dead government soldier(s) (Figure 3) and one of a dead militant. Lastly, the militarism visual frame included three images of government soldiers (Figure 4) and three of militants in battle or preparing for battle. In line with the militarism visual frame identified by scholars above, their weaponry and military might were emphasized over their personal attributes.

Figure 1. Human-cost-of-war: Reaction-to-loss. An Afghan man cries over the loss of his brother, who was accidentally killed in crossfire in Kabul, Afghanistan. (AP)

Figure 2. Human-cost-of-war: Civilian casualty. An Afghan man, who was wounded in a suicide attack, is treated in a hospital in Talaqan, Afghanistan. (AP)

Figure 3. Human-cost-of-war: Military casualty. U.S. soldiers ride in a helicopter with the bodies of soldiers who were killed by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan. (AP)

Figure 4. Militarism. U.S. soldiers run for cover during a firefight with Taliban fighters in Badula Qulp, Afghanistan. (AP)

Analysis

A qualitative analysis was performed on the data in an iterative and overlapping process with two coding phases (McCollough et al., 2017). The focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were first read to look for themes that emerged directly from the data. Second, the transcripts were coded with the research questions in mind to identify related themes. The coding results were then synthesized. While the analysis made note of the differences and the similarities between sessions from the two conflicts, it also examined responses across all the sessions to understand how participants generally make meaning out of war coverage and of viewing images of conflict. Therefore, the analysis looked across the two groups for patterns in the way participants explained their emotional reactions to images of war and how such coverage influences their intentions to seek more information about conflict. Responses from participants with military connections were assessed for differences; however, their comments fell into the same themes as those from the other participants.

Findings

Visual Frames Influence Empathy and Compassion

Overwhelmingly, participants attributed their emotional reactions to the photographs, as opposed to the text. The overall trend was for participants to cite the articles when making analytical statements about politics, but to reference the pictures when speaking about emotional responses. Some participants explicitly spoke about the influence of images compared with text. For example, Justin stated, "You could turn away from looking at a paper and forget about it, but you see the images and have sympathy for the families and civilians." Similarly, Victoria explained, "Articles give you the facts and the pictures give you the emotions." It was also evident that their empathic and compassionate responses were tied to the visual framing in images. These reactions informed RQ1 and RQ2.

In most sessions, participants spontaneously identified which images moved them most, which were predominantly those with a human-cost-of-war frame. Without being prompted, many participants spoke of pictures that specifically evoked compassion and empathy. After these voluntary comments, each participant was asked to specify which photograph they would select if they were an editor. In all 16 sessions, participants referred to pictures with a human-cost-of-war frame conspicuously more often than ones with a militarism frame. The most prevalent justification that participants offered was that those images would best tap into audiences' emotions. Only eight participants (in five sessions) chose images with a militarism frame, with four explaining they were touched by the photos and the other four reasoning that they aligned with the text best.

In terms of the specific types of human-cost-of-war pictures that resonated, some participants talked about the impact of images with civilian casualty and military casualty visual frames. For example, Jordan experienced empathy when looking at the photo of an injured Afghan man. "That was just so sad cause that could have been any—any of us if we lived there so, I don't know. It's just sad." However, participants overwhelmingly spoke about feeling empathy and compassion specifically in response to the photographs in each conflict of a boy outside his destroyed home and a man crying over the loss of his

relative, which comprised the reaction-to-loss visual frame. Therefore, the type of human-cost-of-war visual frame that evoked empathy and compassion most consistently was the reaction-to-loss frame, as opposed to the civilian casualty or military casualty frames.

Participants pointed chiefly to reaction-to-loss images when talking about their contrasting affective reactions to the human-cost-of-war and militarism frames. Comparing a photo of an Afghan man mourning to a photo of U.S. soldiers in a battle, Gail said, "When you see the man crying, you're like, 'Wow.' That hits you more than just seeing people running." Mary A. responded to Gail's comment about the man crying, "That was the one that struck me the most cause you actually see how it affects people, whereas [in the] others you are always seeing soldiers, soldiers, and soldiers, so you don't feel connected to that at all."

When participants described engaging in empathic processing toward the people involved in the conflict, they predominantly illustrated their points using pictures with the reaction-to-loss type of human-cost-of-war visual frame. Natalie commented on the picture of a Congolese boy outside his destroyed home: "He barely had anything, and now he really doesn't have anything because it was blown up or something. And he was alone in the picture so I just can't imagine what that is like." The same picture prompted Ryan to think empathically, remarking, "I could never imagine that happening to me as a child or even now, just losing my house because of war and terrorism." Referring to the photo of the crying man from the Afghanistan set, Michael revealed:

> The picture that resonated most with me was the one of the man that had his brother killed in the cross-fire, and just to see that, I felt it was like, 'Wow, what if one of my—what if I were in Afghanistan—that was my family member?' It just, I thought of—it was a very humanizing thing.

Responding similarly to the reaction-to-loss photos from Afghanistan, Tom said he felt "sad in seeing the little boy and the guy who was crying at his brother's funeral because those are—it's so unfortunate that there are people in those countries who have to live like that every day."

Participants' comments suggested that photographs with a reaction-to-loss type of human-cost-of-war frame evoked empathy and compassion because they focused on innocent victims, and they were novel. Many participants said they were particularly touched by innocent victims. Molly described why she was moved more by the DRC reaction-to-loss images compared with the militarism photos: "Cause you're soldiers and you're actually committing the violence right now. So, what's more heart-wrenching for me to see is people who aren't engaged in conflict but are affected by it. Like the child, like the dad." Dee explained that those same photos "put into perspective what's happening with citizens. They're not the people that are fighting. They are just people caught in the crossfires, you know?" In response to the Afghanistan reaction-to-loss photos, Antonio said, "that made me feel empathically, because they had to be a victim for something that they had no role or impact into." Many participants articulated that these pictures brought the reality of war to life for them. Referring to the photos of the mourning Congolese father and the Congolese boy, Katie A. said they brought "some form of relatability" to the people, and she argued that realization makes people likelier to gain a deeper understanding of the story and to want to learn more.

Difference in participants' emotional responses can also be ascribed to the novelty of the human-cost-of-war images compared with the militarism photos. Many participants said they regularly see pictures of military action, but not images of war's destruction. Piper said pictures of U.S. soldiers or Taliban fighters are the type she has seen most in U.S. media, and they do not affect her. She continued, "But if you see a kid standing there in rubble or somebody hugging [another person] with—you see the emotion in his face—you want to know the pain behind his eyes." Steve A. also asserted that U.S. media primarily illustrate war with soldiers, and he wished there were more human-cost-of-war photos. He said, "They never show the other side of the story, and I think that if you started showing those type of pictures, I think you'll get more of an emotional reaction out of people." Jack pointed to a lack of visual war coverage in U.S. media about civilian loss in Afghanistan. For him, the most poignant pictures were the crying brother and the injured civilian. He explained, "Because then you're seeing how much of an impact it has on the people over there. You don't really get to see that. You only get the American perspective."

Mixed Intentions for Future Engagement

For RQ3, participants' predictions about future engagement with media about the conflicts was varied. A minority of participants echoed newsroom anecdotes about the power of war photos of suffering to inspire action. These participants spoke about conflict pictures in general and the study photos specifically as being calls for people to become more informed and involved. Again, participants differentiated between the effect of photos and text. The article did not resonate with Mary B., but she said, "you see pictures next to it, you're like, 'Oh my gosh what's going on?' because you're captivated by the images, and that might get you to read the article and educate yourself more about it."

Similarly, Steve A. asserted, "We're a society [that] likes to look at pictures, and you know, when we look at those pictures, it'll conjure up [a] bunch of emotions." He felt the photos generated compassion and action, predicting the images would cause people to "look at the situation more and maybe—then maybe—they might have an idea of the situation and might say something or might advocate on doing something about it." Elizabeth also spoke about the power of war photos, remarking, "When we see the picture . . . you have to acknowledge that this is happening. You can't just push this aside and be ignorant of it." Grace put it more passionately, arguing that images can inspire action. She said that photojournalists who cover war aim to "shake up how easy everything is and to look at what's really going on all around the world and to make it a call to action and make you want to get involved and do your part to help." These responses could be categorized as the type of participatory viewing conceptualized as witnessing when confronted with photographs of wartime suffering (Landsberg, 2009; Rentschler, 2004).

Many participants also described a sense of responsibility to stay informed about the serious topic of conflict. For example, Katie A. argued, "It's your job to know these things so that even if there's not anything you can do about it, at least you know what's happening." Steve A. shared, "As much as I don't want to see it, you know, you kind of have to. You know, it's kind of, it is a very sobering reality." Yet, it was far more common for participants to predict that they would not seek out coverage of these conflicts, despite their affective reactions and evaluations of issue importance.

In terms of why people turn away from media about war, some participants spoke about the effects of a media environment with seemingly infinite choices. Sullivan explained, "news gets refreshed by the second now with everything. And you want to read so much, but when it just keeps updating and updating and updating you have to really be selective of what you want to read." As a result, many participants said they opt for media that is more entertaining than conflict coverage. Ned explained, "War is a heavy topic. There's a lot of different aspects: politics, people tie in religion, morals, stuff like that. We can watch the Kardashians. It's mindless." Similarly, Sarah A. spoke about her tendency to seek out other types of media, "When I read war stories, they're all sad, and, I mean, I don't know. I know I should be informed, but it kind of puts a damper on my time."

However, the most common reason participants gave to explain their aversion for war coverage was that it evokes sadness and leaves them feeling powerless to effect meaningful change. Many participants spoke at length about feeling frustrated because they care about victims of conflict but have no recourse. Talking about war coverage, John B. said, "It makes you feel a little bit helpless cause all these things are happening and there really isn't much you can do." Ashley spoke of feeling saddened by the image of the Congolese boy who lost his home, and she displayed empathic processing. Yet, she was exasperated over what to do with those emotions: "I'm here and that's—it's over there so I don't really know what I can do. Like how I can make a difference?" Katie B. described feeling deflated because of the seeming impossibility of responding to images of war. She lamented, "If you're being a realist, I'm not going to have a meeting with Obama. He's not gonna listen to me. I can't get a group and be like, oh these pictures are terrible; a call to action."

As a result, participants said they avoid media about conflict. "If I feel like there's nothing I can do about it, I'll just not watch it at all," Riley stated. Similarly, Paige explained she does not seek out conflict coverage "because it's so sad and depressing sometimes. It's like, why would I want to know all these horrible things if I can't do anything about it?" Michelle B. projected these feelings onto the wider population, saying, "I think that people kind of get this sense that, 'Oh my god, this problem is so much bigger than we can even imagine. What could I possibly do? What's the point of even knowing about it?'" Rick felt conflicted about keeping up with war news, commenting, "I don't want to be ignorant of people suffering. I don't just want to ignore what's going on but, at the same time, I don't know what I can do to help it."

Participants who vocalized frustration over the inability to make an impact also spoke of a desire for media that provides information about potential solutions or modes of intervention. Speaking about movies focused on veterans, Antonio said the films make him feel that "I can, should think about the soldiers that come back from war, I should help them wherever I can." He continued, "That's a good message and all, but it doesn't explain how I should do it." Angela avoids media about war because she does not think she can make a tangible impact, but she said, "If I could help and knew that it would go to really help that little boy and his village and rebuild for his education or something, yeah it would be different for me." Carrie expressed a desire for media to focus more on potential solutions to conflict, saying, "There's multiple solutions that I'm sure would be much better than war, but I guess I would be more interested in finding those solutions than actually researching and, you know, kind of reporting on war itself."

Influence of Identification

Half of the study's participants were given materials related to the U.S. war in Afghanistan, while the other half were presented with materials from conflict in the DRC. This enabled a comparison to see if identification, in terms of nationality, had any effect on participants' empathic and compassionate responses and intentions for engagement. The findings indicated that nearly all the participants held an ethnocentric view of conflict. When asked broadly about their thoughts on war, most of the participants spoke exclusively about conflicts involving the United States. Jake articulated this trend, saying, "we immediately think we're talking about the U.S. and then something else, and that's what we all focused on. And then you also—and then I remember that, you know, war happens all over the world all the time."

This ethnocentricity did not appear to factor into participants' empathic and compassionate responses, but it did affect their intentions of future engagement. Participants in the Afghanistan and the DRC groups engaged equally in empathic processing of the photographs. Participants in both groups overwhelmingly expressed these affective responses. Therefore, ingroup identification along nationality did not seem to dampen empathy and compassion for participants when looking at photos from a conflict the United States was not involved in. Rather, the tendency of participants to think about the people involved in conflict and to want to help those people appeared to be influenced primarily by the visual frame.

However, the country depicted did affect participants' stated intentions to pursue additional information about the conflicts in the future. Many participants admitted that although they were concerned for the people in the DRC photos, those feelings were unlikely to motivate their future engagement with the topic. "I felt empathy towards people caught up in that conflict," said Jim, yet he explained, "I don't want to say it's meaningless to me, cause it's not, and I understand that there's this going on, but it's like—I don't know—it's just very removed from me." Similarly, Kim said, "Seeing the images, it did make me feel sad, but it's—so far from, removed from my little world." In terms of future engagement, she explained, "It sounds terrible, but after I leave here, I probably won't reflect on it or think about it so . . . I don't know how much of an impact it'd really have." Some participants specifically explained that they would opt for news stories that deal with conflicts related directly to the United States. Carrie said, "Unless it's relevant to something that concerns the U.S., I'm not sure that I would feel so inclined to read." Capturing the sentiment expressed by many other participants, Aubrey said that when it comes to what type of information people seek out in terms of war, "it's what affects you. You're more likely to pay attention to things that affect you or maybe your family than things that don't."

Discussion

The findings add to our understanding of the complex, ambivalent way media consumers make meaning out of war photojournalism. First, this study bolsters long-held newsroom anecdotes about the power of pictures of wartime suffering to evoke empathy and compassion, and it aligns with research that has identified effects of human-cost-of-war visual frames in comparison to militarism frames (Aday, 2010; Gartner, 2011). Many of the participants experienced the process of empathy and felt the emotion of compassion specifically in response to seeing the human-cost-of-war images compared with the militarism

photographs. This finding is significant because there is little empirical support for the assertion that human-cost-of-war pictures effectively stir concern (Kennedy, 2019).

This study also demonstrated that not all human-cost-of-war photographs equally generate empathy and compassion. Contrary to the assumption that images of shocking wartime violence are the best at evoking concern (Emmett, 2010), the reaction-to-loss pictures aroused more compassion and empathy among participants than images of death and injury. This finding has implications for newsroom practice. Reaction-to-loss images tend to be less graphic (in terms of gruesome violence) than those of death and injury, but, in most cases, are more engaging than those of military action. Therefore, war images with a reaction-to-loss visual frame have the potential to be a middle ground in debates over publishing conflict photos if they evoke empathy and compassion without traumatizing audiences.

In terms of engagement, this study found that a mix of empathy, compassion, and helplessness left many participants discouraged from seeking further information. The data did not support the conceptualization of compassion fatigue in which people fail to be concerned because they are desensitized (Moeller, 1999). Most participants grew up seeing war footage from Afghanistan and Iraq, yet they still reacted with empathy and compassion to the human-cost-of-war photographs. Rather, it was the ambivalent emotions they felt that led to predictions of avoidance of such media in the future. Thus, the findings give credence to the interpretation of compassion fatigue that asserts people disengage from war visuals because they experience compassion but are overcome by helplessness (Moeller, 2008). In other words, Kennedy's (2019) assertion that compassion works by engaging people "via affective responses to agony,yet disengages them by eliding the geopolitical realities of power and violence that underlie the horrors" (p. 142) is supported. As there has been little empirical research about theories of compassion fatigue and war photographs (Campbell, 2014), this study makes a valuable contribution to understanding how some people experience compassion fatigue.

This study also adds to our knowledge of how identification with a conflict can bear on intentions to engage with news about a war. Powell and associates (2015) demonstrated that when people consume text and images of conflict together, the writing drives attitudes and the photographs prompt behavior. However, participants' reactions in this study complicate the idea that behavioral intentions are guided primarily by the influence of war images (Powell et al., 2015). Although participants in the Afghanistan and DRC groups had comparable empathic and compassionate responses to the images, participants in the Afghanistan sessions reported being likelier than those in the DRC sessions to seek out related media in the future. This indicates that identification may interact with the influence of photographic frames on people's intentions to engage with war coverage.

The focus group interviews yielded rich data that were effective in capturing ambivalent responses to war photos. As with all research utilizing this method, caution must be exercised in generalizing the responses of these participants to a wider population. Demographic data was used to contextualize the findings. To limit the study's scope, no analyses were conducted to identify differences in responses along lines of gender, race, ethnicity, religious background, and other factors, which were likely to have influenced participants. Care was taken in the selection process to find images that were authentic, represented the visual frames, and were parallel in content. Yet, it was not possible to avoid all potential confounds, which is another limitation of the study.

One suggestion for future research is to experimentally test whether reaction-to-loss visual frames evoke greater levels of empathy and compassion than those of death or military action. Participants' intentions varied, despite similar amounts of empathy and compassion, based on the conflict. This illustrates that war pictures will resonate differently based on how participants identify with the subjects and on how relevant the conflict is to them, necessitating future studies examining additional wars. Many participants expressed feelings of helplessness and a desire for media to cover efforts at resolution. Therefore, another fruitful area of exploration is to gauge whether intentions of engagement increase if the textual and visual frames took a peace journalism approach that emphasizes reconciliation (Fahmy & Alkazemi, 2017).

In sum, the findings demonstrate empirically that images of the human-cost-of-war do, in fact, have the potential to evoke the type of compassionate horror that W. Eugene Smith described. More specifically, this study suggests that reaction-to-loss is a particularly useful type of human-cost-of-war visual frame because it taps into media consumers' emotions without causing as much distress as graphic violence. Another implication is that feelings of helplessness appear to mitigate people's desire to engage with imagery of war. Therefore, this study advances theory about the effects of war photos on empathy and compassion and provides empirical data that informs ideas about compassion fatigue. This work also provides practical information for visual journalists making difficult decisions about the presentation of war photos. If conflict is comprehended for most people primarily through news images (Sontag, 2003), a deeper knowledge of how people respond emotionally and behaviorally to such pictures is crucial to reporting conflict responsibly.

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