Journey of Family Members of Homicide Victims: A Qualitative Study of Their Posthomicide Experience

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Family members of homicide victims are a neglected population whose posthomicide experience is shaped by the social milieu and primacy of the state's agenda for justice. Themes derived from interviews with 14 families about their lived experience are analyzed and explored through the lens of social constructionist theory, and implications for clinical practice and policy are presented.

Nearly 425,000 Americans have been murdered during the past 2 decades (U.S. Department of Justice, 2001). While this figure is sizable, the number of family members affected by a homicide is substantially larger. Indeed, a national prevalence survey found that 9.3% of the adults sampled had close friends or relatives who had been murdered (Amick-McMullan, Kilpatrick, & Resnick, 1991). Attention to the needs of this group, however, is limited. I found only a handful of empirically based studies with an exclusive emphasis on the posthomicide experience of family members (e.g., Amick-McMullan et al., 1991; Amick-McMullan, Kilpatrick, Veronen, & Smith, 1989; Freeman, Shaffer, & Smith, 1996; Rinear, 1988; Rynearson & McCreery, 1993; Sprang, McNeil, & Wright, 1993; M. P. Thompson & Vardaman, 1997). The purpose of this research is to expand understanding of the needs of this vulnerable yet invisible population by illuminating the subjective experience of family members who have lost a loved one to death by murder. Explicating the essence of that experience can inform policy, professional practice, and theory relevant to traumatized populations.

Homicide is defined as the willful killing of one human being by another (Morales, 1995). The rate of homicide per 100,000 people in the United States is 7.4 (Maguire & Pastore, 1998), one of the highest in the industrialized world (Morales, 1995). Prevalence rates for African American males, ages 18–24, jump to 102.8 homicides per 100,000 people (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999). In spite of the national rate and vast literature on the subject of homicide, family members of homicide victims tend to be neglected and not recognized as victims of a criminal act. When their experience is acknowledged, it is addressed from the perspective of their commonality with survivors of other kinds of traumatic death (e.g., suicide, accidental death, vehicular homicide, death of a child). In fact, death by homicide is different for a variety of reasons. First, family members are left to struggle with the fact that the death of their loved one was caused by the willful, unanticipated, and violent act of another person. Second, since murder is a public event, family members are stripped of their rights to privacy and how they are publicly portrayed. Third, since murder is a crime against the state, family members become bystanders whose needs are secondary to those of the state. Bereavement, therefore, does not proceed as a private and personal matter since it is heavily controlled by the state and social milieu. Moreover, bereavement is a process marked by ongoing traumatizing events. It does not appear to lessen with time (Rando, 1996; Redmond, 1996; Spungen, 1998).

Posthomicide Studies

Literature has documented some of the posthomicide experience. Burgess (1975); Getzel and Masters (1984); Masters, Friedman, and Getzel (1988); Bard, Arnone, and Nemiroff (1986); Rinear, (1988); and Freeman, Shaffer, and Smith (1996) described how psychosocial stressors from formal systems and informal social networks influenced the posttraumatic stress adaptation of survivors. Amick-McMullan et al. (1989) substantiated this claim by finding a negative correlation between satisfaction with the criminal justice system and the development of posttraumatic stress disorder ($r = -.84$). Doka (1988, 1996), Spungen (1998), and Redmond (1996) noted how the stigma attached to murder resulted in blame from others.
for the way the victim died, or even for the way the victim lived, as well as self-castigation for not having prevented the victim's death. Amick-McMullan et al. (1991), Parkes (1993), Rando (1993, 1996), Rynearson (1984, 1988), Rynearson and McCreery (1993), and Spungen (1998) observed how the psychosocially dissonant and abhorrent act of murder could create severe and possibly long-term trauma reactions, shatter meaning systems, and prolong grieving.

While the literature identifies that social institutions and other external forces negatively impact the posthomicide experience, its primary focus has been limited to the trauma reactions of family members. This focus has located the experience in a model of pathology, which excludes a holistic examination of the family's posthomicide journey. It misses the dynamic interplay between family members and the larger community that makes death by murder different. It also ignores the family's efforts to manage unspeakable horror and construct a new sense of "normal." This study, therefore, placed social context at the center of the inquiry and privileged the voices of family members in order to find the core constituents of their journey. Social constructionist theory provided the conceptual framework for this investigation since it posits that the meaning given to experience is coconstructed through human relationships and communicative interactions (Gergen, 1994). This approach differs from intrapsychic and cognitive models of meaning construction that emphasize making attributions about why an event occurred (Park & Folkman, 1997) or finding redeeming or transcendent features in the tragedy (Frankl, 1969).

This study also sought to examine the posthomicide experience from the vantage point of the family. Homicide violates the integrity of the family unit by stripping it of one of its members. Family members share the loss of their loved one, bear the stigma associated with murder, endure the revictimization from outside institutions, and serve as points of reference to each other even though they may have differing reactions to the murder and its subsequent events. Accordingly, this study sought to capture the family's experience through family interviews that focused on the content and formation of the family's narrative.

Method

A hermeneutic phenomenological paradigm guided the research approach. Hermeneutic phenomenology attempts to find, describe, and understand the individual's subjective experience by systematically determining the invariant components of a particular phenomenon (e.g., being a family member of a homicide victim; Giorgi, 1985, 1997; VanManen, 1990). Although phenomenological research seeks the essence of the experience, there is the realization that the interpretation of that experience is socially constructed by the participants themselves and coconstructed with the researcher. Truth, therefore, is inherently tentative and relative to the context.

Fourteen families who had experienced the homicide of a family member were recruited from three sites. The total number of participants was 38, the majority of whom were Anglo-White. Mean length of time since the homicide was 7.5 years (range = 18 months–23 years, SD = 5.59). Consent to participate in family interviews was obtained from each participating family member.

Data were collected through open-ended family interviews that were audiotaped. Interviews lasted from 2 to 4 hr. The opening question for the interview was "Tell me about your journey and how you got to the present from the time of the homicide." Questions were kept to a minimum to allow each family to construct its own narrative. Observations were corroborated by newspaper accounts, victim impact statements, and miscellaneous materials (e.g., letter of complaint to the editor of a local newspaper, videotape of a family's story made for training police chaplains, and an article in a national magazine based on interviews with some of the participants).

Themes were assigned and clustered based on a line-by-line and holistic reading of interview transcripts and accompanying materials as well as cross-case comparisons. Essential themes were determined using the process of imaginative variation. A qualitative computer research program (Atlas.ti, Version 4.16) was used to recode the transcripts according to the essential themes and retrieve the quotes to substantiate and describe the findings. The findings were validated by repeatedly reading and testing texts against (a) proposed interpretations, (b) accounts from family members of homicide victims who were not research participants, (c) facilitators for homicide support groups who wrote anonymous responses after reading the findings, and (d) research participants who anonymously rated the applicability of each essential theme to their experience.

Since qualitative research uses the researcher as the instrument of data collection and the center of the analytic process (Patton, 1990), it is necessary to establish mechanisms that hold the researcher accountable for the disciplined use of his or her subjectivity. One method is for the researcher to be internally reflexive and forthcoming about his or her process (Gilgun, 1999). My perspective is shaped by the fact that I am an Anglo-White family therapist and have personally experienced the violent death of more than one family member. My own lived experience has taught me not to fear intense emotions and has given me the confidence and skill to approach volatile subjects from the perspective of the family.

In addition to keeping an audit trail of raw data as well as a log of experiences, emotions, insights, and questions, I used two consultants to monitor the influence of my subjectivity on the data. The first consultant shadowed and challenged the research process by independently listening to the audiotaped
interviews, writing reflections on the interviews, substantiating the determination of the essential themes, and reviewing the findings against the associated quotes from the transcripts. The second consultant was a specialist in hermeneutic phenomenology. She reviewed methodological procedures, the essential themes, and descriptions of the themes.

Results

Six themes composed the core constructs of the participants’ experience. Their seemingly linear sequence is misleading because there is no order to their emergence. Rather, any one theme may be present at any point in the experience of a family member of a homicide victim. Moreover, the themes interacted with each other so that the presence of one theme could stimulate the occurrence of another.

Theme 1: This Is a Nightmare You Don’t Wake Up From

Learning a loved one had been murdered was a defining moment that plunged family members into a netherworld from which there was no escape. The news left an indelible imprint. A mother vividly recalled her response after being awakened by the police at 3:30 in the morning and told of her son’s murder. “I walked around the house and around the house, screaming and screaming until daylight. You know, until people came.” The news reduced family members to a primal state. They recognized that their screaming, howling, banging, and mindless pacing were behaviors normally reserved for lower forms of life. A family member described her alien impulse to throw a cup of coffee. “Just out of nowhere, I am... sitting there... and all of a sudden, I will feel like I want to pick it up [a cup of coffee] and just throw it against the wall.”

The news of the murder was only one in a succession of onslaughts that appeared without warning, thwarted the ability of family members to regain a firm footing, and left them feeling defeated. A father described his fall after he later learned that his 14-year-old daughter had also been raped. “Now the only good thing of her dying a virgin is gone. Now I’m mad. I mean I’ve sunk another level lower. You’re just, you’re falling and... you can’t catch yourself. I’m just—God, I’m drowning.” A mother talked about going Christmas shopping and encountering the murderer, who remained at large.

Mother: I am seeing all those things that I would have loved to have gotten [my deceased daughter]... and I turn the corner and here is... that piece of garbage, “Michael.”

Interviewer: What do you do when you see him?

Mother: Shake, smile, and keep going on. And pray. Believe me I pray a lot.

Family members could not fathom why someone would take the life of their loved one. One mother sought out the bar owner where her son had been shot. “I’m goin’ to him. An I wanna know what happen’d.” A sister went to the courthouse: “I read all the documents. I... read every page because I had to. I had to see everything that was said and piece it all together. I was looking for more people to blame [laughing] and hold responsible.” The “why” question provoked guilt and left family members adrift in an ocean of infinite possibilities. The constancy of the “why” question became a poignant statement about having no control, resolution, or relief.

Family members waited for the pain to pass, but it never did. A father could not speak his son’s name for 18 years. A mother felt robbed of her son’s future. “I’ll never get over the hopes that we had, that he never got to come home.” A wife said to her husband, “I don’t know if it is ever going to go away or if it is something that I am going to have to live with the rest of my life.” Her husband answered, “I don’t think that it is going to go away.” A mother described her realization that her daughter’s murder would be a permanent nightmare. “[E]very parent has a nightmare where your child dies but you wake up. This was something you cannot wake up from. This was permanent. This is real.”

Theme 2: I Feel Betrayed by Those I Thought Cared

Family members felt continually betrayed by people who did not live up to their expectations. They also felt hurt and disenfranchised by the actions of others who mistreated them. The Oxford English Dictionary (Simpson & Weiner, 1989) defines betrayal as “a violation of trust or confidence, an abandonment of something committed to one’s charge” (p. 150). It defines betray as “to be or prove false to; to be disloyal to; to disappoint the hopes or expectations of” (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, p. 150).

The feeling of betrayal was exemplified by the sense of abandonment from friends and/or members of extended families. A mother who felt deserted by her family said, “No one has ever said anything. None of them have ever even asked me, ‘How are you making it through?’ I know they always said... ‘You’re the strong one.’... I think they just view me as... ‘S[he’s] strong an’ she’ll pull through.’ Because for five years, they have never ever called an’ asked me
how I was doin’.” Being ostracized estranged family members from their social groups. They no longer fit. They no longer felt secure. A wife said, “I went [to my old church] last night for the first time in a long time. It felt cold like I don’t belong here anymore. It’s not my home [voice quivering and crying].” Family members rationalized the disappearance of their families and friends. “They all disappeared because they couldn’t handle it.” “They may be afraid to bring up his name because of the tears.” While these explanations made sense of the abandonment, they also reminded family members that they were alone and should not look to family and friends for what they needed.

The sense of betrayal was exemplified by the deceptive practices of others. A niece whose uncle murdered her sister exclaimed, “This murder has . . . kind of broken my faith in people. I thought there would be enough . . . goodness left in him, some decency, humanness that even [my uncle], who I knew was mentally ill, would never go so far as to do something so heinous.” A mother described how the murderer twisted the truth to portray her daughter’s murder as a mercy killing.

He tried to say, when he confessed to the police, that [my daughter] asked him to render her unconscious because she was so upset about the rape and didn’t want her parents to find out. That’s how sick he is! He’s trying to justify what he did. It was like . . . “she gave me the okay to do it.”

The disregard for the truth also came from people who were supposed to act with integrity. A father described the rebuff he got from the police when he called to report that his daughter was missing. “[T]he police said, ‘Sorry, we do not have time to go looking for every kid that skips school . . . Go check the mall . . . She’s probably there with her girlfriends.’”

The sense of betrayal was exemplified by the insensitive responses from others. Instead of receiving care and consideration, they were given perfunctory and cursory treatment. A chaplain lectured one family on the subject of forgiveness.

Wife: He delivered the notice [of the death] and just told us briefly, very briefly what had happened. Then he said, “I need to tell you now that as you go through this whole process that you’ve got to think about forgiveness. Forgiveness is very important. You don’t want to be angry.”

Daughter: “And maybe not right now but somewhere down the line, ya gotta think about forgiveness.” We all wanted to plaster the man.

Family members were also annoyed by inappropriate and thoughtless condolences. “Anyone who says, ‘God never gives us anything that we can’t handle’ hasn’t been through shit. That’s all I can tell them. ‘You haven’t been through it cause you would never say that.’” Family members felt betrayed because their trust in the benevolence of others was broken. Family and friends drifted away. People were no longer trustworthy. Those who were supposed to care made only minimal efforts to connect. These experiences taught family members that the world they had known was no longer there for them. A family member echoed the sentiments of many other participants when she said, “And doesn’t the world know? Doesn’t the world care?”

Theme 3: What Rights Don’t I Have Anymore

Family members quickly discovered that their individual rights were subsumed by the public agenda. They felt invisible in the criminal justice system because murder is a crime against the state rather than a crime against them. Yet, they were thrust into the limelight by the media who claimed that the public had a right to information. They also felt marked as an object lesson in the community about what can go wrong in someone’s life. Changes in their status happened overnight. Indeed, the rights they had assumed as private citizens became rights they no longer had.

Family members, for example, craved information about the suspect, the progress of the police investigation, or the autopsy. Instead of getting what they needed, they felt barred, patronized, or discriminated against. A mother declared, “I’m really tired of being placated and patronized: ‘Oh well, . . . We aren’t at liberty to talk about that.’ ‘Well, when will you be?’ It’s been 4 years and I have seen absolutely nothing.” A daughter hounded the coroner for information about her father.

There was nobody to even know to go after. I didn’t know to be pissed off at the coroner’s office and that they should have told me what the hell happened and told me where to get a report. They just didn’t want to tell me and they didn’t want to deal with it. And they admitted that afterwards when I called them and confronted [them] . . . “Lady, it is not our job to tell you. We don’t have to. We don’t want to.”

Her sister added, “The information about my dad [who] was killed with 75 wounds and . . . butchered would probably have been a good thing to tell us at some point. Rather than finding out at the trial 3 months later.”
Besides having no right to know, family members also learned they had no right to have justice done. The state’s procedures, protocol, and agenda took priority, and family members felt like bit players who could only endure lengthy court delays, courtroom shenanigans, and unjust verdicts. A mother explained,

All that delay stuff is very intentional yet [defense attorneys] call all the shots. [Since murderers] have a right to a speedy trial, they use that and manipulate that to get things done. Then, when they don’t want it they can waive [it] ... yet we don’t have any of those rights.

While family members were unsure of what was allowed them, representatives of the media had no trouble asserting their rights, on behalf of the public, to gather, print, and broadcast all information and speculation about the murder. A mother described how the cameras from every news channel faced her as she walked down the church steps after her daughter’s funeral. “[T]he next thing you know, we were in the funeral procession and the media’s trying to cut in there to get to the cemetery before us.” Another mother felt the injustice of the media’s efforts to expose her son’s past. “They went and got his records and wrote up everything that was in them.” Families felt violated and exposed. How loved ones were portrayed distorted who they had been. Accordingly, families felt they lost control of their truth about the victim.

Family members also lost their right to control their standing in the community. They felt marked. “I felt I had a big M on my forehead for Murder.” They also felt tyed as bad luck families. A daughter explained, “There has to be a reason why somebody gets murdered. Either they are in a bad neighborhood, they are involved in a drug deal, they are a different color than me, or they are poor and lazy. There has to be a reason why it can’t ... happen to ... me.” Whether they were subtly dismissed or blatantly disgraced, family members felt the erosion of who they had been. They also felt impotent to stop the judgments that distanced them from their communities.

**Theme 4: Belonging Relieves My Alienation and Loneliness**

Homicide rips families away from their loved ones and the community that does not share their grief. In some select situations, however, they experience a belonging that affirms their common humanity with others. The sense of belonging can derive from various sources—the family, those who have been or are going through pain, loving companions, or the memory of a loved one.

Family members, who otherwise belong to each other, felt more intensely joined by what had happened to them. A family banded together after a funeral director treated them insensitively.

**Daughter:** Not only are we doers ... we are bargain hunters [laughs]. If you can’t use a coupon or ... get it on sale, you just don’t do it.

**Mother:** [The funeral director] was bugging me. ... He had this long list and he said [rotely], “This [item] will cost this much. This [item] will cost this much.” And he kept his head down. He never looked at us. I finally said, “Do you take coupons?” [family laughs]. It just came out.

**Daughter:** All of us are laughing. I mean we just busted a gut because this is the mode of our family.

Family members also felt a sense of belonging when others understood their suffering or they became involved with the suffering of others. A mother felt a bond with the judge after the trial. “The judge, this touched me so much, she came over to me. She had tears streaming down her cheeks.” In addition to individual responses, family members felt received in support groups where they didn’t have to meet anyone else’s agenda but their own. A mother remarked, “You don’t even need to talk to these people [support group members]. You know they know.” Indeed, the “right” questions helped to open up the suffering that festered inside.

**Sister 1:** They [the group leaders] said, “Talk about the violence and trauma to your loved one’s body. They didn’t say, “I don’t want to hear it. I’m not ready for it. Oh, that’s horrible.” [They said] “Tell me about the nightmares? Tell me what you’d like to do to this guy? And do you have revenge fantasies?”

**Sister 2:** Yeah, they weren’t shocked by “I want to chop his head off.”

While family members treasured the opportunities to be heard, their suffering opened them to the suffering of others. A father who helped another father said, “People just need somebody there. Most of the time you’re better off saying nothing. Just be there.”

Family members felt a sense of belonging from unexpected companions that shared their burden and tended them with loving guidance. A son recalled how “Margaret,” the director of a program for homicide
survivors had tried to spare his family from pain by anticipating their future. “The book of Margaret. She told us about a number of things. It sounds like a cliché but [she said] we would be rewriting our address book.” A mother used the words of an old childhood friend to guide her through her sorrow. “He said, ‘They were given to us on loan. They don’t belong to us. And when that man says, “I want my kids back,” he calls them [back].’”

The pain of remembering also tied family members to their loved one. A father described his visits to his daughter’s grave.

You go to the graveside and... go. “That’s my 13-year-old daughter. She’ll never get any older.” You know she’s safe. You know she’s good. You know she’s in heaven. You don’t spend a lot of time because it hurts. But you come away smiling.

The pain of remembering also reminded family members that they belonged to something larger than their pain. A mother described the transcendent feeling she had after talking to troubled teens about her son. “I just get warm affirmation and always say to myself, ‘Have you ever had such a good feeling? Genuine feeling?’ And I say that every time after a [group]. I’m high on life driving home through the ghetto.” When family members belonged, they felt seen. Feeling attached affirmed their common humanity with others. Being cared for affirmed their worth.

Theme 5: I’ve Stopped Waiting for Things to Go Back

The murder of a loved one psychologically stretched family members. Instead of landing at a final destination, they found themselves in a state of continuous change and emergence. They also discovered aspects of themselves they had not known before. Specifically, they became keenly aware of their environments. They felt strong and overwhelming emotions. They saw through to the core of things. They focused intently on what really mattered and they responded with immediacy to the problems at hand. A brother, who used to be impervious to shooting scenes in movies, said, “I am completely aware of it now and... I will avoid a movie if I think it will be violent.” A mother talked about her ability to see things from a different perspective. “Most people I know are looking here [pointing downwards]. I’m here [pointing upwards]. I can’t go back down there... Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t.”

While some of the changes were viewed positively, some were disabling. A son described the permanence of his mother’s depression. “I think the day my Mom heals is probably going to be the day she dies.” A sister recalled that her father began drinking heavily, landed in a nursing home, and eventually died, “He couldn’t get up... but there was no physical reason... he couldn’t walk.”

Family members were cognizant that they had choices about how to respond to the homicide, but their decisions did not feel voluntary. Rather, they felt compelled to go in particular directions. A daughter said, “I know the two ways we could have gone but I don’t understand why I went one way. I can’t say that it’s because I am stronger than somebody else that went another way.” Family members were also cognizant that their changes separated them from persons who had not experienced homicide. A daughter declared, “I feel like we know something other people definitely do not know... and if I had to go through something like that ever again, I can fight my way out of it, I guess.”

In addition to realizing that they were different from whom they had been as well as different from others, family members were forced to recognize that their prior assumptions and beliefs about order in the world and control over events were archaic. They accordingly developed, through their living, a different set of assumptions that gave them more control over the definition of what was real. While these new beliefs stripped away old illusions, they also provided family members with more reliable truths on which to base their living. These new beliefs resulted in a “new normal.”

The new normal consisted of the following beliefs.

1. “It could happen again.” Family members agreed they never could have predicted the murder of their loved one. Since it had happened once, it was not improbable it could happen again. A mother said, “I really hope I never have to see someone go through that pain. But I know it’s probably going to happen.”

2. “I don’t control anything anymore.” Family members learned that being in control of events and conditions was a fantasy. They could not stop the suffering they saw around them. They recognized the limits of their power to make anything happen.

3. “They’re [homicide victims] not coming back.” Family members acknowledged their reluctance to fully accept the reality of the murder and the finality of their loved one’s death. A mother
explained that holding on was natural because there was no goodbye. “[T]hat’s what bothers a lot of people. ‘I never got to tell him goodbye.’”

4. “There’s no closure.” Family members recognized they would never feel a sense of completion or resolution. Rather, the real challenge lay in working with the consequences over time. “It’s never going to go away. It’s just another pot you have to attend to.”

5. “Suffering is natural.” Family members learned that having intense feelings did not demolish them. They learned to respect their pain and to view suffering as normal, rough, and necessary for their health. “Out of no trauma comes lack-adaisical living.”

6. “I draw my own conclusions.” Family members determined for themselves what they believed. They stated their beliefs as proclamations of truth. A daughter proclaimed, “That phrase ‘time heals all wounds’ is a bunch of shit. It doesn’t heal anything. It just makes it more in the past.”

7. “I don’t believe past tomorrow.” Family members placed their faith in what they had today. They used their belief to motivate themselves to take action. A mother said, “We’re not promised tomorrow. But you never think about it . . . until you’ve lost somebody.”

8. “Everyone does it differently.” Family members were resolute in their conviction that each person needed room to grieve in his or her own way. A brother said, “You’ve got to respect [people] for what they are doing. Let them heal the way they are going to heal and don’t try to force your opinion upon [them].”

These new beliefs encompassed the randomness of events and allowed for individual differences. They also normalized suffering and provided for a more accurate interpretation of time. A daughter evaluated her life for now by saying, “things have returned to their new normal. I don’t know that [life] is any better or worse. I feel I know a whole lot more and [am better] prepared for the rest of my life.”

**Theme 6: The Intense Pursuit of What Matters Is the Meaning in My Life**

The homicide threw families into an abyss of chaos and desolation. While family members believed that the act of murder was needless and senseless, they also found that they had intense feelings about what mattered to them. By following the dictates of these intense feelings, they created meaning in their lives. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (Simpson & Weiner, 1989) defines *matter* (in the sense of what matters) as “to be of importance, to signify.” It defines *meaning* as “intention” or “purpose.” Hence, the pursuit by family members of what they deemed significant gave some purpose to their otherwise shattered lives.

The process of reacting intentionally occurred throughout the posthomicide experience, and family members used a myriad of ways to express what mattered to them. For example, family members made pronouncements about the hypocrisy they saw around them. These pronouncements declared what was true and mattered as they saw it while exposing the pretense of others. The pronouncements also appeared to be guided by an internal sense of integrity, which gave strength, direction, and coherence to their journey. A father laid out the evidence that made the government responsible for his daughter’s murder.

[The murderer] never went to the halfway house and the police never looked for him. So he . . . broke his parole . . . They didn’t even post that he was missing. Because the government screwed up, I lost my daughter. That will never settle with me.

A mother exposed the dishonest motives of the press. “Whenever there’s media around . . . I have told them . . . absolutely never, no way would you hear a word from me because you’re not doing it for my good. You’re doing it to sell papers.”

Family members pursued what mattered to them by fighting for what they deemed was right. Sometimes they demanded what was due them. Sometimes they admonished others for their poor performance. Sometimes they sought to enlighten people who were ignorant. A mother decided to sing at her son’s funeral as a way to reach young people and address the violence in their community.

I let them know that there was nuthin’ that I could do for my child. But I could let them know that they’ve got a chance and they need to stop all the killing. The song that I sung was “Stop Going Through the Motions.”

A mother castigated a reporter for the erroneous information that degraded her son.

I just said, “You don’t even know me . . . You don’t even know my son! The only reason you can do this is because he’s dead. He can’t even defend himself . . . What you’ve done is absolutely wrong . . . I hope you never lose anyone.”
Family members often felt strengthened by the sense of moral purpose that accompanied these efforts. A father, who challenged a member of the prison staff for her leniency toward hard-core criminals said, "That helped me to let out that this hurts. This is not over." Another father used the court setting to express his sentiment that justice had been done. He explained, "[At the end of the trial] I started clapping and then everybody broke loose and [the murderer] turned around and whipped me the bird. And I thought, 'I did it. I finally got to this guy.'"

Family members felt strongly that their loved one's death not be in vain. They carried their loved one forward in the decisions they made about their own lives. They used their experiences to educate others. They also used their loved one's death as a base of direction for their own lives. A couple who lost their daughter decided to devote time to Parents of Murdered Children. "'Gail' will not be forgotten. She won't be a statistic. We've always said, 'Number one, this is for Gail and number two is for other survivors of homicide.'" A mother decided to attend every hearing for the eight boys who kidnapped, raped, and killed her son.

I have always wanted to be there for my kids and this was my last time for 'Claude'. He would expect it. . . . The attorneys do a lot of things. . . . if they don't have to look family in the eyes. [I believed] that if they had to look at me and explain to me what they were going to do, we probably would get the best outcome we could get.

The intense pursuit of what mattered was expressed through declaring a truth, fighting for what was right, and living in ways that recognized the significance of the family's loved one. The pursuit had important implications for family members. It allowed them to be self-determining when they felt little control. It forced them to take risks in unknown situations. It created the meaning from which life could go on. A daughter spoke about the need to pursue what matters fully.

If you don't get out of this [experience] that life is worth living—you have got to live in each moment, you have got to enjoy it, you have got to laugh and you have got to cry, and you have got to do what you have got to do—then, you haven't learned a dang thing.

Validation of the Findings

Participants were asked to read the description for each theme and anonymously rate its applicability to his or her experience. Table 1 shows the ratings for each theme. There was a 61% return rate (N = 23). A 5-point rating system was used. Within interpretive phenomenology, the findings can be considered valid if each theme reflects, to some degree, the experience of the participants. The results indicate that Theme 2 does not adequately represent the experience of some of the participants and needs to be investigated further. The descriptor of betrayal may be too strong. There may also be a mismatch between how officials from social institutions respond and the idea of personal betrayal. Some participants may not have experienced the conditions described in the theme.

Discussion

The most important outcome of this study is the recognition that the state and social milieu play an important role in shaping the posthomicide experience. The social context that attends death by murder is different because the institutions and needs of society take precedence over the personal needs of the family. For this reason, many of the participants felt neglected, marginalized, or invisible. This study showed that the press, the criminal justice system, social networks, and the community—as well as social attitudes and the overall climate of investigation, manipulation,

<table>
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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>Barely</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Substantially</th>
<th>Completely</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>7</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17.0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9.0</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6*</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*One participant did not rate this theme.
speculation, rumor, and delay—gave family members less power to direct their fate.

On occasion, family members had different experiences with these systems that were personally satisfying or alleviated some of their alienation and loneliness. The tears of a judge helped one mother to feel understood and less alone. A father expressed his satisfaction with the life sentence given the murderer by publicly clapping in the courtroom. A mother’s decision to attend every hearing for the eight youth accused of murdering her son gave her a sense of purpose because she felt she could monitor the court’s actions. These experiences were therapeutic in that they helped alleviate feelings of powerlessness. These experiences were idiosyncratic, however, to particular family members and did not change the primacy of the state’s agenda and its overriding impact.

The results further indicate that family members of homicide victims do not find or expect to experience closure. Sometimes the length of the murder investigation and trial, the lack of evidence to apprehend the murderer, a short sentence or the possibility of parole, and retrospective stories by the media made it difficult for family members to find closure. Some participants expressed concern that finding closure might either indicate their acceptance of an abhorrent act or be disloyal to the memory of their loved one. Still other participants explained that the murder had changed them irrevocably and continued to change them from within. Hence, there was no closure.

The lack of closure, however, did not preclude achieving a sense of partial justice or semiresolution. For example, some participants rested easier because the murderer got a life sentence or their efforts to stop paroles were successful. Other participants were buoyed by their ability to educate and reach delinquent youth about the potential dangers of their actions or create programs that honored their loved ones. Situations like these provided relief and an impetus to move forward. They did not, however, close the wound.

This study also shows that the personal impact from homicidal death for these participants was broader than posttraumatic stress reactions and inclusive of significant personality change. Participants reported that they were fundamentally altered by the homicide and posthomicide experience. They noted a heightened reactivity to events, high tolerance for pain and suffering in others, extreme clarity in perception, and an intensity to their living. Their belief in a new normal also meant that their assumptive base had changed and was different from those around them. Participants indicated that these qualities, in concert with having experienced a homicide, made them unlike other people.

The results suggest that when support came, it was unexpected. This finding indicates that extended family and friends could not relate to the posthomicide experience, and participants adjusted their expectations accordingly. Participants, therefore, were surprised when would-be strangers understood their suffering or helped guide their journey. Moreover, participants found that the homicide created a new role for the immediate family. Instead of being solely a source of comfort and support, family members were pushed to function as a team in order to address the outside forces that periodically revictimized them. Consequently, participants discovered that the family could be a refuge and bastion for belonging when other support systems had fallen away.

Literature suggests that trauma compels individuals to readjust or reestablish their systems of appraisal in order to integrate and absorb the traumatic event (Park & Folkman, 1997; Patterson & Garwick, 1994; Taylor, 1983; S. Thompson & Jangian, 1988). Readjusting or reestablishing new systems of appraisal is also necessary for reinstating continuity and a sense of coherence. The literature posits that this is achieved by making sense out of what has occurred. Some studies have shown, however, that making sense is not possible for victims of sexual abuse (Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983) or family members of victims of automobile fatalities (Wortman, Silver, & Kessler, 1993). In this study, participants moved forward by intensely pursuing what mattered to them. Taking control allowed participants to write their own scripts. Delineating what mattered gave purpose and direction to their living. Homicide survivors may be like other traumatized populations, therefore, who are not able to use cognitive systems of appraisal to restore order and meaning. Rather, their proactive living may give them back some of the power they lose to be in charge of their fate.

This study suggests that the bereavement of family members of homicide victims may be uniquely structured by the meaning given to the murder by the family and the meaning of murder in the larger society. It controls their status and the priority given to their needs, the care and compassion from others, the advent of personal changes and beliefs, and the measures available to reestablish order and meaning.

Implications

Family members of homicide victims are an invisible and neglected population whose needs have been limitedly addressed under the lens of posttraumatic stress. This study calls for a shift in perspective and emphasis so that social context and the interplay between families and social institutions can emerge more fully.
An ecological model of research and intervention would help direct attention to the social determinants of psychological damage and build policy accordingly. This study further indicates that family members must be recognized as legitimate crime victims and accorded a higher status by the institutions that influence their lives. For example, they need to be counted in national justice statistics as a viable population of victims of violence. Additionally, more attention needs to be given to the development of restorative justice initiatives. Restorative justice is a victim-centered response that provides opportunities for those most directly affected by crime to meet in a face-to-face process for the purpose of responding to the harm caused by the criminal act and for the purpose of bringing resolution (Umbreit, 1994). Community circles and forums could offer family members and representatives of social institutions such as the media, funeral industry, schools, and the criminal justice system the chance for a public conversation and the development of policies to ease some of the family’s unnecessary suffering due to institutional responses. Victim-offender mediation and dialogue is an emerging initiative that provides for a mediated dialogue with the murderer (Bradshaw, Umbreit, Coates, & Peterson, 2002; Umbreit, Bradshaw, & Coates, 1999; Umbreit & Vos, 2000). It accords homicide survivors the recognition they were previously denied by the state’s need to bring the murderer to justice and affirms their experience by letting homicide survivors tell the offender how the crime affected them and ask questions about the details of the murder. This program could be greatly expanded.

The findings give information about how practitioners can increase the effectiveness and range of their treatment interventions. First, the study shows that the intense pursuit of what matters is a generative process that gives control back to family members. Practitioners, therefore, need to ferret out the arenas for proactive behavior and cultivate the drive for actualization of what is important at the time. Second, the study shows that even with individual differences, the family serves as a potential resource for managing the ongoing pain and intrusions. Interventions that promote the solidarity of the family help individual members to feel less alone. Building solidarity also minimizes the chances for personal disintegration since family members can use each other as reference points to normalize their reactions. Furthering the family-team concept helps members prepare for future crises and, thus, aid the family. Third, the study indicates that education and information are needed to help guide family members through the maze of unanticipated events.

Limitations

This study was limited by the fact that the qualitative findings cannot be generalized beyond the families who participated in this research or the sociohistoric time when they were interviewed. Moreover, the sample was composed primarily of Anglo-White participants. The sample, therefore, was neither ethnically diverse nor representative of the populations most heavily impacted by homicide. Finally, the population used for this study was restricted to those who were users of services for homicide survivors.

References


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