MEANING MAKING IN THE AFTERMATH OF HOMICIDE

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Although sense making or finding benefit are well documented examples of meaning making processes, meaning making grounded in action has received less attention. This article adds a specific demonstration of the relevance of performed meanings to homicide survivors and other traumatized populations through a qualitative study of 38 members of 14 families. The central finding of the study points to “the intense pursuit of what matters” as a major avenue for meaning making in the aftermath of homicide, one which is expressed in action. Implications of this mode of meaning reconstruction are discussed relative to the re-establishment of a sense of coherence and self-continuity.

Few events are more seismically traumatizing than the loss of a loved one to murder. Besides the horror that someone willfully and violently took life away from another, homicide survivors quickly learn that the dominant social narrative makes the state the surrogate victim and harm done by offenders to victims is handled as if it is harm done by offenders to the state. Homicide survivors become invisible as the agenda of the criminal justice system, the media’s interpretation of the facts, and the community’s response construct the public meaning given to the tragedy. Too often, they are cruelly left alone to face the abject grief, rage, and sense of violation that accompanies the abhorrent act of murder. As their meaning systems implode, they enter a netherworld where they fight to find footing in a world that no longer fits.

Neimeyer (2001) contended that meaning reconstruction in response to loss is the central feature of grieving. Studies of traumatically bereaved...
mourners suggest, however, that meaning making based on traditional definitions of the process may not occur because violent death is irrational and meaningless (Davis, Wortman, Lehman, & Silver, 2000; Rynearson, 2001). Specifically, meaning making has been narrowly construed as “making sense” based on a cognitive system of appraisal about the nature of the event or as an existential search for meaning and purpose in life. Populations who are blocked from finding meaning in these ways may use other methods both to counter the incoherence inherent in violent acts and re-build meaning where little seems to exist.

The article draws upon the results of a previously published qualitative study of 14 families of homicide victims (Armour, 2002) to elaborate on the concept of meaning making grounded in action as reflected in the accounts of these family members. Discussions of the “meaning of meaning” have drawn attention to the performative dimension of meaning making beyond the predominant cognitive conceptualization that dominates most research (Neimeyer, 2000). This article adds a specific demonstration of the relevance of performed meanings in the case of a distinctive population of the bereaved. Moreover, because the deeds that mark the journey for homicide survivors are often done in reaction to being in the public eye, meaning making is both an intrapersonal and interpersonal endeavor.

**Literature Review**

The search for meaning after stressful events is a common and essential task (Park & Folkman, 1997). Successful adaptation, however, depends upon achieving congruence between the appraised meaning of a current situation and long-standing global beliefs about order and purpose including estimates of benevolence, a sense of fairness and predictable order, and evaluations of one’s self as worthy. Severe stressors such as unexpected, unnatural, and violent death can challenge the global meaning system at its most fundamental level because beliefs about how and why things happen no longer seem tenable (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Park & Folkman, 1997). Theorists generally agree that people make efforts to bridge the gap by finding reasons for what happened or discovering benefit and purpose in the occurrence (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998; Murphy, Johnson, & Lohan, in press; Park & Folkman, 1997). Making attributions about causality falls within the
framework of meaning-as-comprehensibility and refers to “sense-making.” Deriving perceived benefit falls within the framework of meaning-as-significance and refers to a new appreciation for life.

Neimeyer and Anderson (2002) contend that people who have experienced traumatic loss use these two dimensions, among others, to assimilate the loss by constructing a coherent self-narrative that preserves a sense of continuity about who they have been and are now. The ability to find meaning has far-reaching consequences. Realizing benefit in the loss influences adjustment and adaptation (Murphy et al., in press). Without resolution, for example, traumatic grief, anxiety, and depression predict negative health outcomes including cancer, heart trouble, high blood pressure, and negative eating habits (Prigerson et al., 1997).

Indeed, studies show that many persons have difficulty making sense of violent death or other traumatic events or pulling back far enough to find a silver lining in catastrophic acts. According to Lehman, Wortman, and Williams (1987), 64% of parents who lost a child in a motor vehicle accident were not able to make sense of the loss 4 to 7 years after it occurred. In a Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) study described by Davis, Wortman, Lehman, and Silver (2000), 66% of parents who had lost a child to SIDS were unable to find meaning at 18 months post-loss. Murphy et al. (in press) determined that 43% of parents whose child suffered a violent death from accident, suicide, or homicide were not able to find meaning after 5 years. The largest percentages of parents unable to find meaning were parents of children dying from suicide (61%) or homicide (66%). Moreover, parents of homicide victims showed the greatest distress.

Although speculative, the difficulty in finding meaning may be attributed to problems with reflection, incoherent realities, and the lack of a supportive and accepting audience for meaning reconstruction. Rynecki (2001) theorized that the “disintegrative effects of traumatic imagery and avoidance impair the more reflective demands of acknowledging and adjusting to the loss” (p. 260). Consequently, methods of meaning making that require reflection may not be accessible to mourners who have extensive trauma distress. Neimeyer, Prigerson, and Davies (2002) suggested that the ability to reconstruct a personal world of meaning rests on fitting traumatic loss into an underlying assumptive base on which the self-narrative depends. The extinguishing of that base leaves mourners void of a meaning base from which to create a coherent
story. Moreover, Ryncarson (2001) contended that achieving coherence is blocked by the paradox of trying to integrate a story about living from a violent dying that continues to pulse. Therefore, meaning making by assimilating the loss into an existing self-narrative may not be possible. Neimeyer et al. (2002) asserted that meaning making is not a private affair but is pursued at the juncture of self and society. The significance of the loss can be affirmed or contested, congruent or discrepant, upheld or disconfirmed through interactions with other reference groups. The ability to make meaning by constructing a coherent account of bereavement may, therefore, be dependent on a supportive and validating social milieu. People suffering from disenfranchised losses such as homicide receive little or no ritual support from the community (Doka, 2002; Neimeyer & Jordan, 2002). Consequently, the ability to make meaning can be thwarted by their stigmatized social status and the meaning given to the death by others.

Persons who cannot find meaning are more likely to suffer from complicated bereavement. Murphy (1999) found that 30% of parents of children who died violent deaths have no trauma diminishment. They suffer persistent thoughts of reenactment, remorse, retaliation, and over-protection of other family members. Moreover, those parents who could not find meaning were less well off relative to mental distress, marital satisfaction, and physical health status than those who found something positive in the experience. Neimeyer et al. (2002) claimed that complicated bereavement can be viewed as “the inability to reconstruct a meaningful personal reality” (p. 235) Symptoms in fact are viewed in terms of a struggle to integrate the meaning of the loss. They are not effectively reduced by interpersonal psychotherapy and/or tricyclic antidepressants. Additionally, the study of bereaved parents of a child’s violent death found that personal and family prayer and church attendance did not improve outcomes over time (Murphy, Johnson, Lohan, & Tapper, 2002). Although participation in a support group seemed to make some difference, mutual support did not aid in the reduction of mental distress and PTSD.

The examination of meaning making may need to include other dimensions that have been eclipsed by the focus on cognitive appraisals or existential quests for significance in the loss. Neimeyer and Anderson (2002) suggested exploring the ways people make meaning in the stories they construct for themselves and others. Pennebaker (1997; Pennebaker, Zech, & Rime, 2001) has shown that narrative journaling about
traumatic experiences seems to improve mood and reduce health complaints. Ryneearson (2001) has developed a model for retelling violent death that helps the mourner to disengage from the futile search for coherence in the imaginary story of violent dying and build resilience by reconnecting with living memories and experience beyond the event of the dying.

Neimeyer and Anderson (2002) have also added identity reconstruction as a dimension of meaning making that occurs as a consequence of the transition between the past and the present. Identity reconstruction may have more application to traumatized populations that deal with violent death because meaning making is associated with fundamental change that requires “relearning the self” and “relearning the world” (Attig, 1996, 2001). Indeed, meaning making grounded in action may be an important mechanism for promoting positive reconstruction of the self. As this article describes, it is used by some families of homicide victims to confront post-homicide challenges while discovering and testing out latent resources in a changed world.

Meaning reconstruction is a form of adaptive coping. It has traditionally been equated with cognitions and intrapsychic processes (Neimeyer, 2000). Moreover, it is considered a result of shifts in perception. Studies have shown that finding meaning occurs less often for persons dealing with violent death (Davis et al., 2000; Murphy et al., in press). Consequently, it is important to examine other dimensions of meaning making that may be less direct but still central to the construction of coherent accounts. This article describes how families of homicide victims made meaning through behaviors that had symbolic significance. Instead of finding meaning, the meaning of the behaviors was inferred.

**Background**

The finding of the performative dimension of meaning making comes from an earlier family-focused study of the post-homicide experience (Armour, 2002). Fourteen families who had experienced the homicide of a family member were recruited from three sites. The total number of participants was 38, of whom 92% were Caucasian, 5% were African American, and 3% were Korean American. Mean length of time since the homicide was 7.5 years (range = 18 months–23 years, SD = 5.59). Data were collected through one 2–4-hour, open-ended interview with each family. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis.
A qualitative approach is appropriate for research that seeks to systematically examine unexplored areas such as the lived experience of homicide survivors. The study used a hermeneutic phenomenological paradigm to guide the research approach. This specific qualitative method was selected because it had the ability to expand what was known about the subjective experience of homicide survivors beyond the traditional focus on homicide trauma, identify patterns and core meanings that survivors attach to their loss, illuminate the interactional processes by which meaning was made, and attend, as described by Neimeyer (2000), to the tacit and preverbal as well as explicit and articulate meanings hinted at by vocal tones, gestures, and emphases.

In the data analysis, 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. Out of the clustered themes, essential themes were determined using the process of imaginative variation (Giorgi, 1985, 1997). Imaginative variation is a process whereby the researcher takes a concrete example of a thing, and imaginatively subtracts one feature, then another, discovering in the process which features are essential and which are not. Essential themes were determined by both the researcher and one of two consultants to the study after they collaboratively reviewed each cluster of themes to first find the essence of the phenomenon and then evaluate whether or not the essence was core to the lived experience of the participants. 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 the researcher who repeatedly read and tested the initial descriptions of the essential themes against (a) alternative 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 using a 5-point rating system. In this study, meaning making was depicted by the following essential theme: "the intense pursuit of what matters is the meaning in my life." There were 48% of the participants who indicated that this theme completely represented their experience and 35% felt it substantially represented their experience (Armour, 2002).
Two consultants monitored the entire research process. The first consultant was a psychologist who reviewed the audiotapes for subjective bias in the researcher’s questions and responses, substantiated the determination of essential themes, and reviewed the findings against the associated quotes from the transcripts. The second consultant was a specialist in hermeneutic phenomenology and reviewed methodological procedures, essential themes, and descriptions of the themes.

**Characteristics of Meaning Making Grounded in Action**

“The intense pursuit of what matters” is a form of coping composed of intentional acts that have symbolic meaning. Its implied purpose is to restore or find meaning in a changed life through problem solving or striving to attain visionary goals. Although acts are geared toward desirable results, meaningfulness related to the post-homicide experience rests primarily on the process of the pursuit rather than the specific outcome. Over time, engagement in numerous meaning making ventures reconstructs a self-identity as homicide survivors both “relearn the self” and “relearn the world” (Attig, 1996). Narratives about their actions in response to the post-homicide experience facilitate this re-authoring of the self.

For homicide survivors, meaning making grounded in action has attributes that are shaped by the trauma: (a) The meta meaning of behavior is to re-establish a moral order by deliberately reacting to what matters as a consequence of the murder. (b) The meaning making initiative is generated by intrusive stimuli such as insensitive responses from friends or violations of privacy by the media, which compel reactions that are either self-protective or encompassing of a survivor mission. (c) Meaning making is composed of many small acts that can occur within hours of the death notification and continue throughout the post-homicide experience. (d) The attainment of meaning is a byproduct of a focused striving to attend to that which is deemed significant. These characteristics suggest that the performative dimension of meaning making is a form of coping in response to the appraised meaning of post-homicide events. As such, the meaning making endeavor is both interpersonally and intrapersonally interactional.
Methods of Meaning Making Grounded in Action

This article is an explication of one essential theme from the previously published study that serves as an example of meaning making grounded in action. It is labeled by the phrase "the intense pursuit of what matters is the meaning in my life." Manifestations of the theme include (a) declarations of truth, (b) fighting for what's right, and (c) living in ways that give purpose to the loved one's death. Each of these manifestations is conveyed in two ways: First, declarations of truth are conveyed by (a) declarations that expose hypocrisy and (b) declarations of self-determination. Second, fighting for what's right is conveyed by (a) fighting for what's mine and (b) fighting to correct what's wrong. Third, living in ways that give purpose to the loved one's death is conveyed by (a) using experience to benefit others and (b) living life deliberately in an effort to give positive value to the homicide. These categories are not discrete. For example, a particular act might include both declarations that expose hypocrisy and a fight to correct what was wrong. Moreover, individual homicide survivors might use some methods more often than others.

Declarations of Truth

Homicide survivors construct narratives that are punctuated with commentary, opinions, and beliefs about the real truth of what happened in post-homicide events. The certitude with which they express their convictions is guided by an internal sense of integrity that gives strength and direction to their journey. In their pronouncements, they symbolically claim their right to see things as they are, reveal hidden motives behind other people's behavior and decide things for themselves separate and apart from the opinions of others.

Declarations That Expose Hypocrisy

Homicide survivors make statements that show the incompetence, ignorance, and hypocrisy of others. Their incisive comments penetrate pretense and assert truth as they see it. Declarations are based on seeing life through a moral lens that separates what is genuine from what is false. The pronouncements scrutinize the motives of others so that homicide survivors can be protected from further harm. Their recounting of
personal injustices dealt them or others justifies their anger and lets them claim their worth as undeserving victims of crime.

In the following example, family members expound on the incompetence of the police chaplain who advised them to forgive the murderer. They claim their own authority by mocking his patronizing and controlling behavior, exposing his incompetence, and disqualifying his legitimacy as a valid cleric in their lives. Their anger implicitly establishes their worth as vulnerable survivors who deserved better treatment.

Family Member 1: Well this chaplain was a jerk. It’s like he’s got his little personal mission or something. He volunteers. He is not paid. He spoke very quietly. He delivered the news and just told us briefly, very briefly what had happened. And then he said (voice measured and soft, imitating the chaplain), “You know I need to tell you now that as you go through this whole process that you got to think about forgiveness. Maybe not right now but somewhere down the line ya gotta think about forgiveness.”

Family Member 2: We all wanted to (yelling) plaster the man. Nobody is ready to hear that once they had just heard the news. It just seemed arrogant. We are Catholic. We have our faith. We didn’t need anyone (sounding insulted) preaching to us. It was presumptuous, like he knew more than we did and he was (slapping hand with fist) going to get it to us right now. I’ve got my one chance to hook into this family and I’m going to do.

Family Member 3: Well and anybody who has dealt with homicide for any period of time knows that forgiveness (sing song voice) doesn’t come for a while. The thought doesn’t even hit your head until you are ready for it.

Family Member 1: When?

Family Member 3: If you’re ready for it. At that point I don’t think any of us were...

Family Member 4: No one who hasn’t been through this has the right to say that to anyone. Even someone who has been through it would know they don’t have the right to say that to someone. You don’t tell someone else, “You have to forgive.” You just, you don’t do that.

A father, whose 13-year-old daughter was killed by a serial rapist, exposed the government’s negligence in releasing a dangerous criminal from prison and not monitoring his whereabouts. As he shows that the government was culpable in his daughter’s death, he implicitly claims that her death was preventable and the government is inept in its ability to protect its citizens. Moreover, the unrelenting quality of his anger is justified because there is no way to undo his loss.

The long and the short is after he was caught, a while after, we find out that he had been in Hollingswood State Prison for two and a half years and had been let
out nine months earlier on good behavior. He had been there for the rape of three other young girls. We find out that when he was released he was supposed to go to a halfway house. He never went to that house and the police never looked for him. So he broke his parole and was a felon but they didn't look for him. They didn't even post that he was missing. That really irritated us and still does today. Because the government screwed up I lost my daughter. And that will never settle with me.

**Declarations of Self-Determination**

Homicide survivors take positions that are grounded in moral precepts and the meanings they assign to particular situations. The beliefs that undergird their declarations provide a source of energy and motivation. A sense of having reduced choices drives them to act on their own behalf. They find that who they are and what they believe does not fit cultural prescriptions or the expectations of others. They realize that their destiny is to stand alone and apart from the crowd. The commitment to following their own path creates a sense of wholeness.

In the following example, a sister draws her own conclusions about why she cannot continue to hate the boy who senselessly murdered her brother. In her decision to hate or not hate, she realizes that the true victims in her revenge fantasy would be the many innocent people, like her, whose lives she would hurt if she hurt the murderer. She speaks from this moral imperative in ordering others to move in a different direction.

When Bobby (a pseudonym) died the person that killed him should have hated him. There should have been more of a reason. There wasn't which made it all the more pathetic. There was (said emphatically) no... reason. Bobby is gone now. This person is happy because the person they didn't like is gone. But who did you actually hurt? Bobby? No. You hurt all of the people that are left. All of us, that's who you hurt. So by my hurting Cal—because that's what I wanted to do so bad, to kill him—I'm not hurting Cal. I'm hurting all of his. I started realizing I can't (loud voice) hate this person anymore, I can't (loud voice) want to kill this person anymore because what am I going to get from it? (loud voice)

Nothing. No satisfaction. I'm still going to get: Bobby back. And look how many people's lives I'm going to (loud voice) hurt if I hurt him. That's what I say to people now. "You can't do that." The old saying 'two wrongs don't make a right' is so true. You're not going to get anything back.

An African American mother controlled what she learned from the media and who and what she would believe about her son's murder by steadfastly electing to blank out her television screen. Instead of succumbing to pressure, she chose her own path by going to reliable sources for information about her son's death.
I never seen, I never seen it on TV. I never saw any of the news reports. And all they were sayin' was there was a body left at Seton Hospital. I guess I never seen, I never seen, I didn't see any of it on TV. Someone would call me and say, "Latoya, look right now. It's comin' on channel such and such and I'd sit there and it would not come on my TV. It never came on my TV. I never saw it at all. Yah know, they would call and say, "Well did yah know he was shot multiple times?" And I said, "No." So I hung up and I called my sister [for the information].

Verbal assertions reshape the narrative and the meaning given to the death by others. Declarations show the dissonance between what is and what's professed. They also illuminate the necessity for autonomy in decision making due to the solitary and uncommon circumstances that comprise each person's experience.

**Fighting for What's Right**

Homicide survivors feel ill-treated by the actions of others. In response, they forcefully assert themselves by holding others accountable and claiming what is rightfully theirs. Their interventions become symbolic statements about the importance of their experience and their right to be seen. Their actions help re-establish a moral and principled world.

**Fighting for What's Mine**

Homicide survivors are forced into interactions with the public that rob them of important rights and deprive them of their justifiable privilege to define and control their realities. What they fight for underscores what matters to them. The convictions they act on are fueled by moral indignation and passion for what is theirs to hold onto, correct, or take back. Fighting is a form of self-preservation to minimize more losses. Asserting their needs makes who they are visible to others.

In the following example, a father breaks through the dispassionate courtroom climate to claim and celebrate his victory over the murderer. His applause redefines the occasion as joyous rather than somber, re-establishes that he, rather than the state, is the aggrieved party, and congratulates the judge, jury, and prosecution on a job well done. His applause also provokes a reaction from the murderer that validates the father's gain and presence as a force with which to be reckoned.

So now the whole courtroom is still absolutely quiet. Nobody has even moved. And I want to jump and scream so bad, I'm ready to wet my pants. And nothing
is happening. Now the judges are not leaving, but kind of packing up to leave. The jury is taken out. The defense attorney is starting to pack his belongings. The guards are coming in to take Brandel and cuff him back up and finally I started clapping. Then everybody broke loose and Frank Brandel turned around and whipped me the bird. And I thought, "I did it. I finally got to the guy. I finally got to the asshole (laughs). I finally got to this guy." They hauled him off and then we just exploded.

Two sisters formed a pact not to let any psychotherapist take away or alter their reality with drugs. They fought for the right to have intense reactions by insisting that the therapist not pathologize their inappropriate responses to their father’s murder. As they reassured the therapist that they would monitor their suicidal proclivities, they took back the power to determine their dangerousness.

Sister 1: They all tried to put me on drugs.
Sister 2: This lady mentioned it and encouraged it. But when I refused she said that was okay. Cause I kept telling her that there is nothing wrong with me. I am supposed to be fucked up. "My dad, you know, was butchered. I am supposed to be messed up. When I am going to kill myself I’ll let you know," I promised her that.
Sister 1: That’s one thing we all agreed on. We did not want to do that. We didn’t want to be on Prozac.
Sister 2: “No, you can’t take that away from me.”

Fighting to Correct What’s Wrong

Homicide survivors respond viscerally to situations they recognize as wrong and work to wake others up to the realities they see clearly. In their dedication to stop or prevent more harm, they demand what is due them, admonish others for their poor performance, and enlighten people who are ignorant. Their ability to recognize wider issues prompts them to hold others accountable for the part they play in creating pain. By teaching lessons or monitoring behavior, they seek to control what happens to them and re-establish order. Righting the wrong makes them feel strong and worthwhile.

In the following example, a family took offense at the funeral director’s insensitivity to their loss. They chose to correct his behavior with a question that simultaneously registered their insult, mocked his priorities and served as commentary on the absurdity of the situation. Moreover, their question held him accountable for making cost more important than human life, human feelings, and human interaction.
Family Member 1: He was the epitome of an asshole. He was a jerk from the get go, we walked in the place and he was a jerk (hitting hand with fist) right now.

Family Member 2: He never even said, “I am sorry for your loss.” Typical words given to anybody who has lost [a loved one]. No, didn’t even recognize [our loss] and he knew the situation. Never ever recognized anything, just said (horridly) “Well, come on.”

Family Member 3: We’re going through book after book and form after form and of course they are trying to sell you the world here at the funeral home. We are bargain hunters (laughs). And of course if you can’t use a coupon or if you can’t get it on clearance or on sale, you just don’t do it right.

Family Member 2: He was bugging me. The guy was bugging me. He had this long list and he said, “This will cost this much” (angry/led up voice). And he kept his head down. He (said loudly) never looked at us. This will cost this much. This will cost this much… He never looked at us. And finally I said, (serious question) “Do you take coupons?” (laughter) It just came out.

A mother implored attendees at her son’s funeral to stop killing each other by lecturing and singing a solo about their halfhearted efforts to end violence. She used herself to poignantly remind them that she could no longer help her son but they still had a chance. She implicitly directed the attendees to use her son as an object lesson and to lessen the needless loss of his life by turning things around.

I just wanted to be able to say something to the young people. An I saw that as an opportunity of being able to do that. Cause I begin to talk and I let them know that there was nuthin’ that I could do for my child. Nothing more I could do for them. But I could let them know that they’ve got a chance and that they need to stop all the killing and just come together and love one another. I begin to sing a song called ‘Stop Going Through the Motions’. I don’t even know if it meant anything to these young people because they are all young and doin’ their own thing. I just knew that I had to sing it. I don’t know if the words mean anything to the young people. But the older people that was there. I’m sure that they understood. I, I hope it said somethin’ to the younger people.

Fighting for what’s right consists of actions that take personal ownership or attempt to manage outcomes. Most often, they occur in response to feeling powerless or a lack of control.

Living in Ways that Give Purpose to the Loved One’s Death

Homicide survivors feel a fierce commitment to their loved one. Besides being incensed by the needless loss of life, they value what his or her life now stands for. Their pain and outrage propel them in directions that
provide purpose and create meaning out of a senseless act. Choices about how to live become testimonies to the fact that their loved one's life mattered as do the lives of others, including themselves.

**Others Can Benefit from My Experience**

Homicide survivors grow wise quickly and feel called to give because they know the territory others must cross. Their generative acts, though life giving, validate their loss and what they have been through. By converting the bad that happened to them to good in contributing to the world, they transcend their own trauma. Helping others provides a way to meaningfully fit in the world and makes them feel worthwhile.

In the following example, a mother shared all she has left of her son with young delinquents in an effort to shock them into valuing their own lives. She carefully read the labels the police put on the envelopes that contain her son's personal effects and shows the condition of the clothing he was wearing when he was shot. The bonding that happened between her and these adolescents validated the significance of her son's death, affirmed her and her mission, and produced transcendent feelings of happiness.

This is all I had left of my son. A pair of tennis shoes and a pair of underwear that had no blood on them. He loved this little chain he had on. And you see how it's broken up, with a shot? Here's his earring. It was found on the ground. It was all I had. Look at this—"Homicide"—you know, ugh, ugly. "Personal Belongings—you number" "Days on Doccased" "$13.37". That money's still in here. I won't be touching it. This sock still has the dirt where he fell. See, I use these in my little talks to the kids. That's my shock bag. These groups of young kids are sitting there like this (gestures), you know, thugs. And I just love every one of them. I hug them. And I tell them exactly about my son. I said, "My son went the same path as you. I'd like to see you [back] here in a year." They hugged me. I'm totally, totally committed to them. Driving home tonight from that group, I just get warm, like affirmation, and I always say to myself, "Have you ever had such a good feeling? Genuine feeling?" And I say that every time after [the group]. I'm just, I'm high on life driving home through the ghetto.

A mother attended a homicide support group to buttress survivors with the truths that had helped her maneuver her son's death. Recognizing their vulnerability to their own self-condemnation and the judgments of others, she uses her own experience to draw a map that anticipates the challenges and furnishes a set of guiding principles that frees them
to value their own process. She underscores what matters by being repetitious.

I went to Parents of Murdered Children for a period of time and I basically went to help others. That was my basic rule for going. I was there to help some of the people through it and to let them realize that you always try to blame yourself—what if, what if I, what if I—and just to let them realize that they couldn’t have helped it. They couldn’t have helped it. Number one is they are going to have problems on the first year of the holidays and number two is don’t let anybody tell you how long you can grieve. People will say, “Well, you ought to be over it by now.” I told that to a friend of mine. I said, “Don’t let anybody tell you how long you should grieve. That’s an individual thing. It’s your thing. So when they come up to you and say, “Well aren’t you over it,” just look at them and laugh. Also, I said, “You are going to be driving down the street and thinking of something and you are going to start crying while you are driving and I said, “Don’t worry about it. Don’t worry about it. That’s what’s going to happen. Just, just do it.”

**Living Life Deliberately Gives Me a Sense of Purpose**

Homicide survivors intentionally make life-altering decisions out of a resolve to live differently. Convictions about what matters now move them into virgin territory where they determine to be proactive or make something important happen. Following through requires a deep commitment to themselves and what they believe. The actions taken give survivors a sense of personal completion that helps generate wholeness and satisfaction.

In the following example, a mother decided to mother her dead son by attending and becoming a visible presence at every hearing held for the eight boys who killed him. She watched over her son and his welfare by sitting in for the victim and making the court system, as well as the boys, accountable to her. This deliberate act of dedication helped complete her as a mother and publicly established her loss and deep love for her son.

Mother: I don’t know how many hours I spent in the courtroom but it was a ton because I went to every hearing they had for anything. I felt it was important that Nate was represented there. If they had to look at me and explain to me what they were going to do then probably we would get the best outcome we could get. I think maybe it helped them work a little harder. The judge looked at me everyday and he knew who I was and he would check through the attorneys whether or not I was aware and OK with certain things. It did matter and my thought was that I always have wanted to be there for my kids and so this was my last time for Nate. He would expect it and it’s something that I would do. I was still an important part in Nate’s death. I was in his life and then in his death just
to hold the system accountable. Make sure that he wasn't just a number or an empty face, that he had impacted our lives and that he was important and that the best thing should come from the system.

A father pushed through a barrier by challenging himself to find the courage to make his loss and the murder of thousands of others visible. Although "coming out" was difficult, he realized that he had to answer to himself and accept unabashedly what had happened to him and who he was now. His decision to no longer hide helped resolve his shame and cemented his decision not to be controlled by people's discomfort.

I remembered coming back on the plane from [the national meeting of Parents of Murdered Children] and I was really enthused about doing things. And then the next year I went to Chicago to the second one and I was coming back the same way on the plane. I had bought this big red bumper sticker to put on my car the first year and as I was coming back from Chicago I said, "Well, you haven't done anything in a year." Anyway the next morning after I finished [breakfast]. I put that on the car and it's been on every car I've ever had ever since. It was a hard thing to do at first but it's like so many things. [People] come up a lot when I park and somebody will look at it and... say, "That's a strange..." They don't know what to do. It just says Parents of Murdered Children. And it's bright red. You can't miss it. And I just decided, it's sort of like with the gay issue when I didn't tell that we had a gay son. So I just thought, "That's going to be your problem, not mine." Like I say, that's who we are now.

Living in ways that give purpose of the loved one's death consists of acts that aim to transcend the negativity or senselessness of the loved one's violent death. These undertakings either benefit others or give significance to the survivor's life.

**Discussion**

The essential theme labeled as "the intense pursuit of what matters" has three manifestations that use different behaviors to cope with the negative conditions created by homicide. Declarations of truth consist of pronouncements that define territories of insincerity and personal autonomy. Fighting for what's right is composed of acts that respond to specific injustices. Living in ways that give purpose to the loved one's death encompasses acts that transcend the murder in a life-affirming way. These behaviors occur in response to negatively appraised meanings. Although studies of traumatic death suggest that certain negative conditions such as death imagery or shattered worldviews may impede
finding meaning as sense making or benefit finding (Davis et al., 2000; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Rynearson, 2001; Rynearson & McGreery, 1993), the negative meanings given to events by the homicide survivors in this previously published study helped elicit meaning making behaviors connected to naming truth, problem solving, and the revamping of life goals. It is possible that these behaviors establish or reinforce a sense of mastery and control in the midst of conditions that may not be within a person's control. A sense of accomplishment may generate positive affect to help bolster homicide survivors through the otherwise arduous journey. Moreover, the accumulation of actions over time may give family members the base off of which to construct coherent narratives in which their experience in central.

Meaning making associated with the “the intense pursuit of what matters” occurred on both an intrapersonal and interpersonal level. The intrapersonal level consisted of the individual's appraisal of self and other including the significance to the homicide survivor of his or her behavior. The interpersonal level consisted of actions done in response to external events and meaning made in interaction with others including family, friends, representatives of social institutions, and others in the community. These two levels show that the performative dimension of meaning making may use both personal construct theory (Kelly, 1955) at the intrapersonal level and the theory of social constructionism (Gergen, 1998; McNamee & Gergen, 1999; Shotter, 1996) at the interpersonal level to explain how meaning making occurs. Personal construct theory is built on the premise that the individual seeks to understand his or her environment by attributing unique meanings to the data of his or her experience (Neimeyer, Epting, & Kreiger, 1984). Social constructionism maintains that psychological reality is socially constructed and that meanings are realized through 'joint action' or the continuously unfolding relations occurring between ourselves and others (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Shotter, 1996).

**Psychological Implications of Meaning Making
Grounded in Action**

Meaning making serves to re-establish the coherence and continuity of the self by reducing the dissonance created by the conflict between pre- and post-realities. Rynearson (2001) contended that looking for life
generating meaning in the violent death itself cannot reduce the dissonance. Data from the study of homicide survivors suggest that they decreased the dissonance by intensely pursuing what matters now in relationship to the homicide. Specifically, their ability to act in accordance with their beliefs creates an internal resonance that is self-affirming. Consequently, when homicide survivors confront someone who has made an insensitive comment, they act in ways that are congruent with their upset and the meaning assigned to that person’s behavior. The sense of agency required by such a pursuit and the feeling of completion that comes from addressing what matters produces a sense of coherence that gives order, meaningfulness, and comprehensibility to the interaction. The internal experience of the individual is that “I make sense.” This unity may counter the dissonance that can otherwise fragment the self.

The intense pursuit of what matters also creates a sense of continuity because the accumulation of individual acts about what matters provides an ongoing history from the time of the trauma to the present. Moreover, the formation of causal linkages between meaningful acts generates movement and directionality from event to event. Frequently, the response to each event grows out of the response to the event that preceded it. The internal experience of the individual is that “I go on.” Continuity of self marked by significant acts affirms the existence of a person in historic time. Consequently, when a homicide survivor repeatedly visits the victim’s grave, he or she establishes a pattern of remembrance that validates his or her ongoing love and commitment never to forget. Because the persistence required by this ritual is marked by time, the homicide survivor may experience a sense of personal endurance that is self-stabilizing and counters the despair associated with emptiness.

The pursuit of what matters contributes to the coherence and continuity of self. The intensity that fuels that pursuit is powerful because it provides an experience of self as enlarged because of the presence of strong emotions, clarity of purpose, and strength of commitment.

Additionally, pursuits related to what matters help establish a social identity because many of them involve interactions with others who also have a stake in the murder and how it is portrayed. Sometimes these pursuits are expressed through internalized conversations with key players or constructive activities that can benefit other people. More often these pursuits occur in reaction to unexpected events that compel homicide survivors to take action to minimize harm or prevent additional losses to themselves or others. Encounters, for example, with representatives
of social institutions, the community, family or friends, can be, in effect, meaning making arguments or conversations over who has the power to decide outcomes or define and determine how the murder, the homicide victim, and the family will be perceived. A daughter's struggle, for example, with the coroner for information about the extent of her father's wounds is thus a fight for the power to control access to information that rightfully belongs to her. These struggles for personal justice can be ironically empowering in that they force homicide survivors to think and act in ways that are determinative of their new social identity. By intensely pursuing what matters, homicide survivors, therefore, lay the foundation for another kind of membership in the community.

The intense pursuit of what matters attempts to make order and establish control through acts of inferred meaning. Besides creating a sense of personal coherence and continuity, these acts, in concert with other people, further the development of a social identity and construct new ways to belong. Therefore, identity reconstruction as formulated by Neimeyer and Anderson (2002) is inherent to this process as homicide survivors are compelled to live differently in a changed world.

Conclusion

The performative dimension of meaning making may be a particularly relevant arena to explore in dealing with traumatized populations who otherwise struggle to cognitively reconcile images of violent dying with memories of tenderness or acts of destruction with global beliefs about a benevolent world. Family members of persons who have died from suicide, been killed in motor vehicle crashes, or been the casualties of medical negligence may pursue what matters by using some of the meaning making processes noted in this article. Victims traumatized by physical, sexual, and emotional abuse may also use mechanisms such as declarations of truth or fighting for what's right to redress the violation and reconstruct their lives. Furthermore, people whose world views are threatened by the meaninglessness of a particular event may exercise some of the behaviors that comprise "the intense pursuit of what matters" as a response to those situations that have no redemptive value. Individuals, however, may not recognize that meaning making is occurring because meaning itself may be a byproduct of and imbedded in numerous or small actions.
Meaning making grounded in action has been portrayed as activism in relation to behaviors performed by persons who have been traumatized (Office of Victims of Crime Bulletin, 1998). Although this categorization recognizes the significance of empowering behavior, it assigns a function to behavior that may not adequately represent the meaning that the behavior signifies. For example, the concept of activism may exclude behavior that is not aimed at changing social conditions. Moreover, because activism assumes some level of premeditated planning, it may not reflect impulsive behavior generated by unexpected and volatile situations or behavior generated by an impromptu rather than integrated self (Langer, 1991). Finally, the concept of activism embodies the formation of noble goals and may not be inclusive enough of practices that create provisional meaning in small ways (Debats, 1998).

Future research is needed to examine how populations who deal with different kinds of trauma use or add to the processes described in this article. Additional studies on homicide survivors are needed both to replicate findings and examine the performative dimension of meaning making by culturally diverse groups. An important area for clinical practice is whether the processes that comprise "the intense pursuit of what matters" build resilience in response to trauma. Literature on post-traumatic stress indicates that people can thrive as a result of coping with stress (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001; Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). Disruptions in world views force fundamental changes in belief systems and the reordering of priorities. Coping effectively with traumatic events may result in closer relationships, new coping skills, and enhanced personal resources. Finally, research on trauma and meaning making grounded in action should examine the relationship between meaning making, social context, and the nature of the trauma. Many of the processes used in the intense pursuit of what matters reflect the public nature of dying by homicide. Other traumatized populations may also face distinctive challenges and create unique meaning making responses grounded in action.

References

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