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Religious Coping Mechanisms Among Death Row Inmates

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Abstract

During their stay on death row, inmates have an abundance of free time with which they need to fill. Many inmates will turn to religion in order to preoccupy themselves. This research project set out to analyze the nature of religious coping among death row inmates. I propose that an inmate who is actively involved with their religion while coping will be able to cope with the social setting of death row better than an inmate who is falling out with their religion. Following a content analysis of scholarly research from a variety of academic disciplines, this project found that the symptoms of “death row syndrome” are conducive to cause an inmate to cope with religion. Death row inmates will cope more successfully with positive religious coping rather than negative religious coping. This research project reaffirms the notion that optimism is crucial for stable mental health.

Introduction

The social setting of death row is notorious for its controversial and dehumanizing conditions. As the United States of America continues to uphold the constitutionality of the death penalty, more debates are held on the topic to discuss its legality in the future. For now, all relevant research that can contribute to this discussion, as well as academic discourse in general, is of the utmost importance.

The purpose of this research project is to provide an analysis of a common coping mechanism among death row inmates: religion. Using qualitative research methods and combining the disciplines of sociology, criminal justice, religious studies, and psychology, this thesis project attempts to contribute to the national and academic discourse by analyzing what factors are significant in an inmate turning to religion, how the religious coping process takes place on death row, and why inmates would cope with religion rather than an alternative coping mechanism. Following the analysis, this research paper will discuss the implications and need for further research in order to get a fully understand of the death row experience.

Methodology

This study will use a qualitative analysis of the literature in order to analyze what factors are significant in an inmate turning to religion, how the religious coping process takes place on death row, and why inmates would cope with religion rather than an alternative coping mechanism. The literature being analyzed are scholarly articles from multiple disciplines including sociology, criminal justice, religious studies, and psychology. Using research from multiple disciplines will allow this research project to form generalizations regarding how and why death row inmates use religion as a coping mechanism.

Specifically, this research project will focus on the death row population of the United States. Although this research project was not designed to focus on a particular religion, the majority of existing research pertains to Christianity. The dataset being analyzed is limited by resource availability. The research relevant to this project was conducted from the second half of the twentieth century through the beginning of the twenty-first century. This research project combines a strong combination of both the older, foundational research as well as the newer, more focused research. Overall, the dataset is strong because of the depth of literature from a combination of academic disciplines which allows for the intersectionality of multiple perspectives.

This research project relies heavily on secondary sources; however, some articles do directly cite primary sources. Due to limited resources such as time and money, it would not be feasible to collect original data because the death row population is a unique, special population that is isolated from the general public.

This research project also presents and analyzes two specific cases related to religious coping on death row. These cases, that of Karla Faye Tucker and Wanda Jean Allen (Cooley 2002), will be used to demonstrate a specific context of the analysis provided.

Literature Review

This research project combines many academic fields; therefore, multiple perspectives and theoretical perspectives will be incorporated in the analysis. Relevant literature in the discipline of criminal justice, sociology, and psychology focus on death row as a social setting and the effects death row has on inmates. Using these effects, researchers, especially in the field of criminal justice, have made arguments for or against the legalization of the death penalty. The consti-

tutionality of the capital punishment will not be a factor in this research project and this research project will not take a stance for or against capital punishment, nor was it designed to take a particular stance on capital punishment.

The effects have been well-documented and are consistent in most death row settings in the United States. Death row inmates often spend beyond a decade waiting for their execution (Peel 2013). Ultimately, this means that death row inmates have virtually unlimited free time with which they must occupy, all the while knowing their execution is being discussed and planned. Many inmates will subsequently go into a state of denial and become preoccupied with various activities, including their cases, certain hobbies, or religion (Blustone and McGahee 1963; Johnson 1989). These hobbies or obsessions fill time for inmates, which can alleviate some of the debilitating effects of death row. The deteriorating mental status that results from death row is known as death row syndrome or death row phenomenon (Grassian 1986; Haney 2003; Sadoff 2008; Smith 2008). Some consistently documented “symptoms” of death row syndrome are extreme anxiety, dissociation, and complete psychosis (Grassian 1986; Haney 2003). Johnson describes the death row setting as a place where “men are systematically denied their humanity” (1989:17). Although this research gives consistent, thorough insight into how the death row setting affects inmates, it does little to explain how inmates respond to the effects. Religion is specifically listed in the research as a time consuming agent, but it is not analyzed any further in the existing research. This research project will focus on this gap using perspectives on coping, specifically religious coping.

Starting with a general base, coping can be exercised in three ways: “eliminating/modifying conditions giving rise to problems, perceptually controlling the meaning of experience that

neutralizes its problematic character, and by keeping emotional consequences of problems within manageable bounds” (Pearlin and Schooler 1978:2). These characteristics of coping can be applied using religion as the coping mechanism. Religious coping often comes in the form of a religious experience, such as prayer or “a personal episode ascribed to direct contact with the supernatural” (Yamane and Polzer 1994:2). With so much free time, inmates could learn a variety of prayers and recite them throughout the day or within their prison’s religious community, ultimately leading to a coping effect. Religious experiences are often triggered during states of despair, depression, and death (Kwilecki 2004). Despair, depression, and death all have clear association with the death row setting.

More specifically, religious coping can be broken down into two main categories: positive religious coping and negative religious coping (Bjork and Thurman 2007). Positive religious coping involves expressing spirituality, having meaning in one’s life, and having a secure relationship with a supernatural being. Positive religious coping is generally optimistic, which would be beneficial to someone who is in an extreme setting, such as death row. Negative religious coping involves having a tenuous relationship with a supernatural being and having one’s view of the world being threatened. Negative religious coping is much more pessimistic and would be unlikely to help someone who is need of alleviation of pain. Bjork and Thurman’s study contained many interesting findings, including: more positive coping was used as response to general stress; positive religious coping was negatively related to depression and positively related to life satisfaction; and positive religious coping helps alleviate the impact of accumulating events on depression (2007). Positive religious coping has many benefits that could lead it to being a successful coping mechanism for death row inmates.

Furthermore, some research indicates that “faith” is the single most effective coping strategy when dealing with “loss events” (McCrae and Costa 1986). However, the influence is mostly confined to those coping with death or illness (Mattlin, Wethington, and Kessler 1990). Although the influence is limited, faith could be a very effective coping strategy because inmates are constantly dealing with the thought of their death.

Analysis

To analyze religious coping mechanisms used by death row inmates, one must first identify the characteristics of death row which would cause an inmate to cope using religion. As previously stated, religious coping comes in the form of a religious experience, which is often triggered by states of despair, depression, and death (Kwilecki 2004). Despair, depression, and death are common emotional characteristics of death row inmates and are common symptoms of “death row syndrome” (Grassian 1986; Haney 2003; Sadoff 2008; Smith 2008). These analogous emotional states make this specific population susceptible to religious experiences and subsequent or simultaneous religious coping. Another reason religious coping may be an effective coping mechanism for death row inmates is due to the fact that “faith” has been found to be a very effective coping mechanism when dealing with “loss events” (McCrae and Costa 1986; Mattlin, Wethington, and Kessler 1990). Death row inmates have to cope with a very personal and seemingly imminent loss event on a daily basis over the course of their stay. Furthermore, incarceration on death row “systemically denies” the humanity of inmates (Johnson 1989:17). Positive religious coping, which is characterized as giving an individual a sense of purpose, can counteract the systematic denial of humanity and help an inmate overcome the emotional consequences of death row incarceration.

In all of the incidences listed above, religion is being used to keep the emotional consequences of death row incarceration within manageable bounds, the third main way coping is exercised (Pearlin and Schooler 1978). Religious coping can effectively keep the emotional consequences of death row incarceration within manageable bounds because of the themes and narratives that occur within religious canon. Most religions offer a path toward life after death, which can help those who are facing their death cope with their situation. Redemption is a common theme in religious canon, which may lead an inmate to be at peace with dying if they feel as though they will be redeemed in their afterlife.

When analyzing the factors that would cause a death row inmate to cope with religion, it is clear that positive religious coping would be a far more effective coping mechanism. Firstly, positive religious coping involves the individual becoming actively engaged with the religion (Bjork and Thurman 2007). By becoming actively involved in religion, an inmate can fill their abundance of free time on death row. In contrast, negative religious coping is characterized by a tenuous relationship with religion (Bjork and Thurman 2007). A lack of involvement with religion would do nothing to occupy the free time an inmate has and, therefore, not alleviate any symptoms of “death row syndrome.”

Another reason that positive religious coping is superior to negative religious coping in this setting is the optimistic nature of positive religious coping. Research has found that optimism can alleviate negative symptoms on mental health, such as depression (Scheier and Carver 1985). Therefore, it is logical to conclude that positive religious coping can help an inmate cope with the death row setting and death row syndrome, which has deteriorating effects on mental health. In contrast, negative religious coping is associated with pessimism, which would not offer

the same benefits to mental health. In fact, pessimism may exacerbate the symptoms of death row syndrome. Pessimism has been found to be a predictor of depression (Taylor and Stanton 2007). A pessimistic outlook combined with a social setting which breeds depression would only serve to prolong or enhance the symptoms of death row syndrome. A pessimistic, negative approach to religious coping on death row would serve no useful purpose if the inmate was trying to improve their overall mental health by alleviating the symptoms of death row syndrome.

Exploring the Cases of Karla Faye Tucker and Wanda Jean Allen

To provide specific context to the research analysis, I will explore the case studies of Karla Faye Tucker and Wanda Jean Allen (Cooley 2002). Both women were tried, convicted, and eventually executed. During their appeals process and time on death row, they became actively engaged with religion, which served as a positive religious coping mechanism in each of their lives.

Karla Faye Tucker was tried and convicted of capital murder in 1984. Prior to her execution, Tucker underwent a well-documented religious conversion. Throughout her appeal process, which reached the Supreme Court, Tucker coped using positive religious coping mechanisms. Tucker clearly became more involved with religion throughout her time on death row. Three months after her incarceration, Tucker wrote, "...when a ministry came to the jail and I went to the services...the full and overwhelming weight and reality of what I had done hit me" (Cooley 2002:708). This revelation, which can be described as a "religious experience", led Tucker down the path of active religious involvement. Tucker developed a strong comprehension of Biblical scripture and went on to marry an assistant prison chaplain (Cooley 2002). By becoming actively involved with religion, she extended her social network, which serves to alleviate the isolation of

death row incarceration. Tucker went on to “share the joy of her regeneration and rehabilitation with other inmates” and expressed a desire to have her sentenced commuted in order to reach more people (Cooley 2002:708). Clearly, Tucker’s positive religious coping brought joy and meaning to her life, rather than despair and depression which are usually expressed by death row inmates.

Wanda Jean Allen had a similar experience to Karla Faye Tucker. Eighteen months prior to her execution, Allen converted to a Pentecostal form of Christianity (Meyers 2001). Among others, she received the support of Jesse Jackson and clergyman Robin Meyers, who described Allen as someone who had become “a deeply religious woman...a person who is demonstrably religious” (Meyers 2001:701). Meyers, who became Allen’s closest ally during her death row incarceration, stated that Allen would often initiate prayer sessions and write to him with constant references of Biblical scripture (Meyers 2001). Clearly, Allen had become actively involved with religion, using positive religious coping to alleviate negative circumstances of death row.

These cases highlight the strength of positive religious coping. Though they both were executed, they used religion while on death row to cope with the symptoms of death row syndrome. Both women became actively involved with religion, which consumed their abundance of free time and extended their social network during their tenures on death row.

Conclusion and Implications

This research paper has attempted to show what factors would cause an inmate to cope with religion and how that process would unfold. Based on the analysis of existing research, this paper argues that despair and depression are the key factors which can cause a religious experience and subsequent religious coping. Those factors are often attributed to “death row syn-

drome”, a phenomenon experienced by inmates during their tenure on death row. Positive religious coping is a more effective coping mechanism for inmates who wish to alleviate the symptoms of “death row syndrome” because of the engaged and optimistic nature of positive religious coping. The cases of Karla Faye Tucker and Wanda Jean Allen, two death row inmates who underwent religious conversion, demonstrate the effectiveness of positive religious coping.

More research needs to be done in order to fully understand how inmates coping with the social setting of death row. A more comprehensive research project should focus on talking to inmates directly for a more in-depth, qualitative analysis. Other variables to consider researching include resource availability in prisons and unique coping differences among different religions.

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