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# "I Know What You Are Going Through": The Impact of Negotiating the Criminal Justice System on the Well Being of Family Members of Homicide Victims and Criminal Offenders.

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“I KNOW WHAT YOU ARE GOING THROUGH”: THE IMPACT OF  
NEGOTIATING THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM ON THE WELL BEING OF  
FAMILY MEMBERS OF HOMICIDE VICTIMS AND CRIMINAL OFFENDERS.

by

VANESSA H. BERTOLLINI

Under the direction of Denise Donnelly

ABSTRACT

Increasingly individuals are coming into contact with the criminal justice system. For millions of Americans this contact is mediated by the victimization or offense of a loved one. This study focused on exploring what the family members of victims and offenders identify as their needs and concerns in relation to the criminal justice system, assessing if the system is effective in addressing these needs and concerns, and understanding how these families' lives are shaped by interaction with the system. Grounded theory method was used to analyze the narratives posted on two on-line message boards, one for victims' families and one for offenders' families. The results from this study suggest that both groups express the same frustrations and concerns about the criminal justice system, and that both groups develop similar coping strategies to assist them in negotiating the system after initial incarceration or victimization.

INDEX WORDS: Criminal justice system, homicide survivors, family members of victims and criminal offenders, perceptions, help-seeking, coping strategies

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VANESSA H. BERTOLLINI

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2005

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Cara-Vanessa Hadassah Bertollini  
2005

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER		
1	INTRODUCTION	1
	Statement of Problem	1
2	REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	4
	Offenders' Families	4
	Victims' Families	10
	Problems with Comparing Victims' and Offenders' Families	15
3	THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: A SYNTHESIS OF THREE	18
	Cognitive Sociology	18
	Symbolic Interactionism	21
	Family Stress Theory	24
	Research Foci	26
	Themes	27
4	METHODOLOGY	30
	Sample Characteristics	31
	Data Management	35
	Data Analysis: Grounded Theory Method	36
5	ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVES: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	45
	Impetuses and Strength of Relationship with Victim or Offender	45
	Number of Perceived Obstacles	48
	Degree of Anomie	56
	Perceived Level of Stigmatized Identity	59
	Level of Support Seeking	61
	Number of Coping Strategies Developed	65
	Frequency of Support Giving	68
	Level of Satisfaction with the Offender's Accountability	73
	The Model as an Ideal Type	76
6	UNDERSTANDING THE NARRATIVES	78
	Homicide Survivors	78
	Offenders' Family Members	81
	Similarity in the Populations' Perceptions	82
	Reification and Imperceptions	84
7	CONCLUSION	87
	Suggestions for Practice and Policy	89

Limitations of Research	91
Contributions of Research	93
Suggestions on Future Research	93
REFERENCES	95
APPENDICES	
A. Model I	102
B. Model II	103



## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

In 2003, over two million individuals were held in Federal or State prisons or in local jails, and 5.4 million people were victims of violent crime (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2004). While these numbers seem staggering, they are even more so when we broaden our definition of the impact of crime and victimization to include the family members of offenders and victims. For instance, it is estimated that some 1.5 million children under the age of 18 have a parent currently imprisoned (Eddy and Reid 2003) and that around 5 million adults have lost a family member to criminal or vehicular homicide (Thompson and Vardaman 1996:44). These statistics are only the beginning. They do not tell the story of adults who have a loved one imprisoned, of the adults and children who have had a loved one victimized by violent crime, nor of the lifelong implications associated with a loved one's victimization or offense. The purpose of this study is not to address all the issues facing these families, but to explore one story that both victims' and offenders' family members have in common -- interacting with the criminal justice system and its policies and procedures.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Unfortunately, American sociologists have yet to intimately examine the increasingly wide-ranging impact of the criminal justice system and its policies on the family members of victims and offenders, or how members of these families perceive the impact of their interactions with the system on the well-being of both themselves and

their loved ones. A need to do so is evident, as researchers have recently become concerned that victimization may occur simply by virtue of coming into contact with the criminal justice system (Spungen 1998; Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2003; Travis and Waul 2003a), an outcome labeled “secondary victimization” (Spungen 1998; Rock 1998). The concept of secondary victimization evolved as a response to the alarming awareness that involvement with the criminal justice system oftentimes enhances a victim’s feelings of guilt and ill treatment after primary victimization (Spungen 1998). For instance, during a trial a victim’s actions are frequently brought under scrutiny and a victim may be made to feel as if he or she was directly responsible for the violence inflicted upon him or her (Spungen 1998). While secondary victimization is normally applied to the experience of victims of crime, it is increasingly being used to describe the experience of victims’ and offenders’ family members in the aftermath of negotiating criminal justice proceedings (Spungen 1998; Eschholtz 2003).

Criminal justice policies have a wide ranging effect on victims, offenders *and* their loved ones. Failure to explore the impact of policy on the family members of offenders and victims, or consider the effects of negotiating the justice system on these families, neglects a large portion of the population whose lives are intimately shaped by interaction with this social institution. This study attempts to fill the gap in current research on the impact of criminal justice policy and procedure by exploring and analyzing victims’ and offenders’ family members’ perceptions of how they are affected by interaction with the criminal justice system. Understanding the differences and similarities involved in how these individuals perceive the criminal justice system itself may provide insight regarding the following:

- (1) Exploring what the family members of victims and offenders identify as their needs and concerns in relation to the criminal justice system
- (2) Assessing if the system is effective in addressing these needs and concerns
- (3) Understanding how these families' lives are shaped by interaction with the system

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

With the exception of families' perceptions of stigma (Hatton 2003; Spungen 1996), and research concerning the impact of capital offenses where both the victim and offender's family lose a loved one in death (King 2004; Eschholtz et al. 2003; Beck et al. 2003), there is very little comparable research concerning the family members of offenders and victims. Research concerning offenders' families often focuses on the impact of incarceration on family structure and family functioning, whereas the current research on victims' families focuses on grief, coping strategies, the negotiation of the criminal justice system, and the effectiveness of state-sponsored support programs. As the examples show, research on offenders' families tends to focus on the socio-demographic make up of the families, while the existing research on victims' families highlights the psychological well-being of victims' families, and ignores their socio-demographic make up. The following literature review will address the current research concerning offenders' and victims' families, along with a brief discussion of the problems associated with comparing the two groups, and the lack of crossover literature concerning each.

### **Offenders' Families**

Early studies of offenders' families focused on the weakening of familial and social ties associated with incarceration and how this affected the *inmate's* functioning (Brodsky 1975). Direct attention to the experience of offenders' families is associated with the dramatic increase of women imprisoned in the United States, inasmuch as their

numbers have “increased at nearly double the rate for men” since 1980 (Covington 2003: 68). It was not until researchers began to notice the number of children displaced as a result of their mother’s imprisonment that they started to tackle the impact of incarceration on families directly (see Stanton 1980; Baunach 1985; Gabel and Johnston 1995; Enos 2001; Seymour and Hairston 2001; Covington 2003). Most studies of offenders' families have focused on the impact of incarceration on children, how gender varies a family member's response to incarceration, and the financial and emotional hardships faced by an inmate's family.

### *Children of Offenders*

There is growing evidence that experience with the criminal justice system is multi-generational (Gabel and Johnston 1995: 28), with children of incarcerated parents considerably more likely to experience incarceration themselves (Boswell and Wedge 2002). In addition, research thus far has concluded that a child’s experience after the incarceration of a parent differs considerably depending on which parent is imprisoned, age at separation, length of separation, health of family, disruptiveness of incarceration, familiarity with new caregiver, strength of parent-child relationship, previous separation, nature of parent’s crime, family and community support, and degree of stigma associated with incarceration within the residing community (Seymour and Hairston 2001; see also Gabel and Johnston 1995).

Johnston (1995) describes the differences experienced by offenders’ children, breaking these down by age. Through a review of the literature she identifies three factors that are persistent in studies of these children across age groups: parent-child separation, enduring traumatic stress, and inadequate quality of care (p. 65-67).

Specifically, however, these factors can be less or more extreme depending on whether a child is in infancy, early or middle childhood, or early or late adolescence at the time of incarceration, with older children having more negative outcomes after a parent's incarceration.

Other research supports Johnston's work (Carlson and Cervera 1992) and indicates that the effects of incarceration on children include disruptions in psychological and social development such as "fear, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, guilt, low self-esteem, depression, emotional withdrawal, acting out or other anti-social behaviors, and poor academic performance" (Seymour and Hairston 2001: 4-5). The generalizability of current research on offenders' children is suspect, however, inasmuch as most research to date has not been conducted through direct contact with the children: instead our knowledge is based on what has been reported by parents or other caretakers (Carlson and Cervera 1992; Gabel and Johnston 1995; Seymour and Hairston 2001).

It is important to emphasize that many of the problems experienced by the children of offenders are not caused by incarceration, but by poverty. The majority of those in prison share the following characteristics: low-income, limited education and job skills, separation from own parents during childhood, substance abuse, exposure to traumatic experiences such as battering, molestation, alcoholism and addiction (see Gabel and Johnston 1995; Bilchik et al. 2001; Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2002; Rubinstein and Mukamal 2002; and Davis 2002). This makes the study of the effects of incarceration problematic as evidence suggests that the children of offenders are already at high risk for future delinquency and/or criminal outcomes. This may be due to any number of reasons

such as “parent-child separation, the crime and arrest that preceded incarceration, or general instability, poverty and inadequate care at home” (Travis and Waul 2003b).

### *Gender*

There is considerable evidence that incarceration impacts the women of an inmate’s family more severely than the men. For instance, Braman and Wood (2003) found that “nearly without exception, the wives, girlfriends, mothers, and sisters closest to the prisoners ... experienced depression and blamed their depression, at least in part on their loved ones’ incarceration” (p. 168). In addition, in many cases it is the wives, mothers, and grandmothers who take on the responsibility of maintaining kin ties with the incarcerated family member (Brodskey 1975; Ruiz 2002; Travis and Waul 2003b; Braman and Wood 2003). The kin maintenance performed by the women in an inmate's family includes organizing visitations, caring for an inmate's children, keeping the inmate abreast of familial issues, and the bulk of the emotional work connected to the incarceration. However, studies of the differences between male and female family members tend to focus on the female adults in an inmate’s family specifically because of their high level of involvement in the inmates’ life. Whether or not adult male family members experience high levels of depression or other psychological problems is largely unexplored, even if it is a female member of the family incarcerated.

### *Financial and emotional hardships*

Financially, incarceration impacts offenders’ families in very direct ways. Some, but not all, of the monetary expenses associated with having a loved one imprisoned are related to legal fees and the cost of keeping in contact with the prisoner (i.e. collect calls and other expenditures such as bus fair and/or gas to the penitentiary, and overnight hotel

stays to rural prisons). Other costs, however, directly impact the functioning of an inmate's family's household. These costs are the loss of childcare, and the loss of income the incarcerated family member provides to the home. (Braman 2002; Brauman and Wood 2003; Richie 2002; Travis and Waul 2003b)

In addition to the financial burden associated with having a loved one incarcerated, the emotional burden is immense. What little we know about adult family members of offenders suggests that stress and stigma associated with incarceration are also considerable. Families of offenders who commit capital offenses have reported experiencing symptoms of stress and trauma consistent with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Eschholtz et al. 2003; Beck et al. 2003). The following additional characteristics are also attributed to issues of stigma: causing families to lose contact (Brodsky 1975; Carlson and Cervera 1992); forced silence – meaning that some family members are not told about the incarceration (oftentimes children), and/or all members of the family hide the incarceration as a secret from the residing community (Carlson and Cervera 1992; Braman 2002; Braman and Wood 2003; King and Norgard 2003); moving away in order to escape stigma from a community (Brodsky 1975; Eschholz et al. 2003); failing to tap into family and community resources for fear of being stigmatized (Braman 2002; Braman and Wood 2003). These feelings are enhanced by a sense of blame and being directly responsible for the crimes of their loved one, leading to a perception that failure to assist a loved one before the act of criminality somehow contributed to the offense and subsequent incarceration.

It has been suggested that caregivers, not the children of offenders, are sensitive of social stigma and/or shame (Johnston 1995). Increasingly, offenders come from



communities with high incarceration rates or from families where other members have been or are incarcerated as well (Johnston 1995; see also Seymour and Hairston 2001). It may be that the observance of low levels of stigma awareness among children is because they are likely to know someone else who has an incarcerated loved one and/or be familiar with the situation previously through other family members. Stigma may be more likely to be felt by families and children of first time offenders, perpetrators of sex crimes, and those convicted of white-collar crimes such as embezzlement and tax fraud (Johnston 2005).

It is important to take race and socioeconomic status into account when examining stigma. White-collar crime is more likely to be committed by whites that are middle and upper class. In these communities incarceration is not a visible part of community life. Conversely, “in some minority communities as many as twenty-five percent of male young adults are incarcerated at any given time ... [and] the lifetime probability of incarceration for African Americans is higher than one in four” (Clear and Rose 2000). What this means is that issues of stigma and/or shame associated with incarceration need to be studied in the context of race and socioeconomic status in order to see how these variables may aggravate or perhaps safeguard an offenders’ family from possible stigmatization associated with incarceration. Additionally, it is currently unclear as to whether the degree of stigma is associated with personal blame, perceptions derived from interactions with the residing community, the criminal justice system or other institution(s), or a combination of factors.

## **Victims' Families**

The 1970's saw the beginning of victims' rights movements designed to assist individuals in dealing with the emotional implications of criminal victimization (Spungen 1998; Sullivan and Tift 2001; Umbriet 2001; Eschholtz et al. 2003). These movements drew special attention to the traumatic experiences of victims of crime, highlighting the ways in which the criminal justice system fosters secondary victimization (Spungen 1998). Victims' rights movements have redefined the meaning of the word victim to include not only those who are directly victimized, but also the victim's family and friends (co-victims) who are indirectly victimized by the harm inflicted upon their loved one (Rock 1998). The victims' rights movement pushes for awareness of secondary victimization – in all its forms – within the criminal justice system, in an attempt to shape public policy and assist victims and their families in recovery after initial victimization.

Research on victims' families, while drawn from victims' rights movements, has focused mainly on the families of homicide victims, with some attention being paid to families of sexual assault survivors. This study focuses on the responses of family members of homicide victims to a loved one's victimization. This focus is due to the overwhelming literature on the family members of homicide victims and the dearth of literature concerning the secondary impact of other crimes. What follows is a discussion of the characteristics of homicide victims' families, the literature on the emotional impact of secondary victimization on a victims' family, the emotional responses of families of homicide victims, and the current programs that are designed to assist victims' families after victimization.

### *Characteristics*

Hard statistics are not available on the social characteristics of the families of homicide victims; however, these characteristics can be inferred from the statistics on victims. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, the population of those who experience victimization looks very similar to the population of those who are incarcerated for criminal offenses (2004). In relation to the U.S. population, blacks are disproportionately represented as homicide victims, and are six times more likely to be murdered than whites. Males represent nearly three quarters of homicide victims, and are three times more likely to be murdered than females. Additionally, one third of homicide victims are under the age of 25. Persons in households with an annual income of less than \$7,500 experience violent crime at a significantly higher rate than persons in households earning more and never married persons are victimized at higher rates than those individuals who are married, widowed, and divorced/separated.

Generalizing the aforementioned statistics to the population of victims' families implies that victims' families are more likely to be low-income and belonging to a minority population. Further, because such a large number of homicide victims are under the age of 25 and male, homicide survivors may be more likely to be parents, and female partners. The need for more research concerning the social location and economic status of homicide victims' families is necessary before any definitive statements may be made regarding the demographics of the population.

### *Emotional impact of secondary victimization*

Most policy research on the secondary victimization experiences of a victim's family concerns the emotional experience of co-victims immediately after the occurrence

of a crime (Horne 2003). The life-long process of surviving indirect victimization, however, has not gone unnoticed (Rock 1998; Spungen 1998). Anger, anxiety, depression, and guilt may become persistent for certain members of a victim's family (Hatton 2003; Horne 2003; Spungen 1998), leading to a recurring need to seek support and assistance in dealing with the original trauma. While these feelings tend to be common to all crime victims and co-victims (Spungen 1998), certain emotional consequences of secondary victimization differ between co-victims according to the violent nature of the crime (Horne 2003), or whether the victim's own emotional and physical recovery seems to be improving, as in the case of sexual assault (Remer and Ferguson 1995).

Spungen (1998) argues that secondary victimization is not adequate to describe the entirety of a victim's experience, due to the fact that the crime itself is often not the most difficult phase of a victim's experience. Instead, she asserts that victims often suffer from a "second wound" which is inflicted when family, friends and social services, "from whom the co-victims [or victims] had expected help in dealing with the loss and in remedying the injustices caused" fail to provide adequate support, contributing to an increased feeling of helplessness (p. 10). If victims (or their family) continually feel as they are being inflicted a second injury, this perception may impact their ultimate experience and identity formation in the continuing aftermath of the initial victimization.

#### *Emotional response of survivors of homicide*

Co-victims of homicide, or homicide survivors, are by far the most researched group concerning secondary victimization. Homicide survivors face an array of obstacles including stigma, possible distortions of their loved one's character in the media, duties

required by medical examiners, negotiation of the criminal justice system, and the incarceration and [possible] release of a loved one's murderer (Spungen 1998). In the instance of homicide, researchers suggest that an individual's well-being after a loved one's victimization depends upon a milieu of factors, most notably "preoccupation with the violent nature of death, fears about personal security, and feelings of confusion and anger evoked by the criminal justice system" (Horne 2003). There is evidence to suggest that the trauma that occurs upon learning of homicide may permanently alter an individual's nervous system (Spungen 1998); that around 24% of homicide survivors develop post traumatic stress disorder at some stage (*PTSD*) (Thompson et al. 1998); and that some survivors report having reoccurring hallucinations of their deceased loved one (Spungen 1998).

Spungen (1998) and Rock (1998) both address the palpable nature of the homicide survivor's anger, which is reported almost universally among co-victims. Survivors often report outbursts, misplaced anger at surviving friends and family, and feelings of wanting to seek revenge. Rock suggests that levels of anger may be transformed into feelings of a co-victim's "moral authority" which may be asserted by the survivor's knowledge that they have "been set apart by extraordinary grief," and is, at times, transformed into a "mission to act" (p. 128). The formation of advocacy organizations, in-person or online support groups, etc. has become a characteristic of homicide survivors' response to their tragedy, and a result of feelings of disenchantment with the criminal justice system's "offender-centered" approach to justice (Spungen 1998).

*Assisting indirect victims*

What seems to be consistent among co-victims of crime, are feelings of anger, frustration, and helplessness when dealing with the criminal justice system, however, addressing the needs of secondary victims is difficult considering the fact that victims' needs have only been addressed in the last thirty-five years and have focused primarily on grief counseling. Strides have been made for victims' rights and the movements have succeeded in opening the debate over victim compensation (Meiners 1978), the establishment of victim impact statements during offender sentencing (Sullivan and Tift 2001; Spungen 1998), the organization of federal and state victim/witness assistance programs, and Victims' Bill of Rights legislation across the country (Maryland Crime Victims' Resource Center 2004-2005), all as attempts to further victim(s) participation in the justice process.

In addition, advocacy for restorative justice models of the criminal justice system has highlighted awareness of the needs of not only victims, but their families and communities as well (Sullivan and Tift 2001; Umbriet 2001; Strang and Braithwaite 2000). Restorative justice is centered around "the premise that violent acts, whether defined by the state as crimes or not, must be viewed first and foremost in personal terms: that is, in terms of the suffering and misery they create for those affected by the violence" (Sullivan and Tift 2001: 35). In particular, this justice model is theorized as an alternative to the current model of criminal justice in the United States, placing the emphasis on victims and their needs (Sullivan and Tift 2001; Zehr 1997), along with making offenders accountable for their actions (Zehr 1997). Restorative justice, therefore, sees crime as something that happens against individuals and their

communities, rather than against the state (Umbriet and Zehr 1996), and attempts to pull all these parties into dialogue with the offender in order to facilitate healing after a crime. While the movement for restorative justice is strong, retributive models of justice that identify the state as the crime victim and focus primarily on the offender's punishment, still dominate the American criminal justice system.

Policy reforms and restorative justice advocacy has served to establish organizations specific to the needs of victims and to highlight their role in current criminal justice procedures, however, research still indicates that victims' families are dissatisfied with their experiences in the criminal justice system (King 2004; Thompson et al. 1996), and their experiences in certain supportive institutions such as religious organizations (Thompson and Vardaman 1997). This suggests that there is still a long way to go in identifying and meeting the needs of indirect victims of crime.

### **Problems with comparing victims' and offenders' families**

Comparison between victims' and offenders' families is problematic due to the different nature of the experiences of victims' and offenders' family members. For instance, the fragmentation of the family inherent in incarceration manifests itself differently in offenders' families than it does in a family facing separation due to victimization such as homicide. Whereas offenders' families often experience a period of separation for any number of criminal offenses and this separation is enforced by the state, victims' families are typically separated only in the event of death, debilitating handicap, or the inability to adjust to the personal and familial dynamic that has been facilitated by victimization, as in the case of rape (Connop and Petrak 2004). Whether a victim's family is impacted by the victimization of a loved one is likely to be dependent

on the seriousness of the victimization. A family member having a car stolen is probably not going to be the catalyst that leads an individual to seek support or counseling; however, if the car thief is arrested and incarcerated, his or her family may be in need of either emotional or financial aid to assist them throughout the offender's incarceration and reentry. Conversely, as researchers have noted, murder victim survivors often suffer from immense physical and emotional difficulties as a result of victimization, and these difficulties are often exasperated by poor support systems in the aftermath of victimization. For an offender's family, there is typically the possibility of eventual release from incarceration, but for a murder victim survivor a loved one will never come home.

Comparison between the situations of these two groups of families is further complicated by the fact that researchers thus far have focused on wildly different aspects of each population's experience. As previously mentioned, offenders' families are often scrutinized in terms of their social location and family functioning, whereas researchers are more likely to approach victims' families from counseling and social work literatures, paying special attention to the population's social service needs in the aftermath of victimization. The differences in the current literature make it difficult to determine what similarities the populations are likely to have.

Despite the problems with current research and comparisons of the two, because both populations find themselves dealing with the criminal justice system and its policies, we can focus on how they perceive their interaction with the system. While researchers have focused on how victims' and offenders' perceive the impact of the criminal justice system on themselves and their families (Sharp et al. 1997; Herman 2003) and how the



general public perceives the impact of the system on the alleviation of crime (Lochner 2003; Sherman 2001; McNeely 1995), perceptions of the justice system by the individuals who come into contact with it due to a loved one's victimization or offense is less understood.

### **CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE A Synthesis of Three**

This research was informed by a synthesis of the following theoretical perspectives: cognitive sociology, symbolic interactionism, and family stress theory. These perspectives, while treated as separate theories for the purpose of their presentation, come from the same school of thought in sociology and focus on how individuals in institutions interact with each other, and create and define meaning from those interactions. Utilization of these perspectives allowed for a method to understand not only how family members of victims and offenders interpret and perceive their situations, but how their identity changes after initial victimization or offense. Understanding changes in identity perception is important, because this understanding also allows us to determine how this change impacts a member's ability to deal with stress, as well as encounters with individuals not impacted by the trauma. Below I discuss each theoretical perspective separately, the perspectives' importance in the context of this study, and the foci of this research.

#### **Cognitive Sociology**

Zerubavel (1997) defines cognitive sociology as a method of explanation that attempts to determine "why our thinking is *similar are well as different from* the way other people think" (p. 5). One way to determine these similarities and differences is by identifying the separate thought communities that we all belong to. Zerubavel defines thought communities as the product of "common social experiences" (p. 9) that either

shape or differentiate an individual's understanding of their own social experience in relation to others. While we all belong to several different thought communities, such as the thought community of present day human beings, the thought community of academics, or the thought community of homicide survivors or offenders' loved ones, certain thought communities that we belong to can more strongly dictate how our perceptions differ from others' perceptions. For example, thought communities that we do not join willingly may impact our view of how much control we have over decisions made in our own lives.

Thought communities are not always permanent; rather, many times they are something that we join or become part of, and may even cease to be members of. For example, upon graduation from a university an individual may leave the thought community of students and enter the thought community of workers. A sudden, atypical experience may force an individual to enter a thought community that they he or she never anticipated being in. This exposure to a new "social world" previously "different from the one [he or she has] come to regard as given" (p. 10) may have various consequences. Because entrance to these thought communities is not voluntary, previous perceptions formed from thought communities in which one already is a member may have serious implications for how a loved one of a victim or offender interprets his or her situation. Inasmuch as society has a "considerable amount of control over what we attend to, how we reason, how we remember, and how we interpret our own experience" (p. 17), the forced joining of a new thought community may or may not contribute to feelings of isolation if the new community is perceived as deviant or atypical.

One possible way to determine the impact of the forced joining of a particular thought community is through the analysis of the narratives of its members. Understanding how the family members of victims and offenders interpret their situations and experiences is dependent upon what Zerubavel identifies as six cognitive acts. These acts are perception, attention, classification, semiotic association, memory, and time reckoning. These acts, as Zerubavel argues, are informed by an individual's social location. What factors relate to the ways in which the loved ones of victims and offenders perform these six acts may shed light on their particular situations and identify what they feel are the major obstacles they face.

It is important to note that the identification of obstacles is not only dependent upon the aforementioned six cognitive acts, but, as Berger and Luckmann (1966) point out, "our common participation in the available social stock of knowledge" (p. 41). Meaning is in essence created by the interplay between micro and macro social forces that impact individual lives on a daily basis. Note that Berger and Luckmann use the word "participation." They imply there is a negotiation that happens when we construct meaning. This negotiation allows for ideas to be accepted, reformed and perhaps even rejected throughout the process of meaning construction. Acceptance, reformation, or rejection is based on social location and the typification (what is or is not considered a typical trajectory) of personal experience (Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

Exploration of narratives allows for the opportunity to examine a particular thought community's perception of its situation or of an institution that shapes the lives of the community's members. This is essential to understanding how the members interact with the institution, especially if the event or life trajectory being described in the narratives is

considered atypical, making the script for interaction unclear. In addition, perception also indicates a degree of *imperceptions* (Zerubavel 1997), meaning that clear understanding regarding members' interpretations of a certain happening can only be explored through analysis of what the members' perceive, what they do not perceive, what they reify – abstract concepts that are made material (Berger and Luckmann 1966), or disregard as irrelevant (Zerubavel 1997). This approach to understanding the construction of meaning is important when examining stigmatized communities (or communities that perceive themselves to be stigmatized).

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism attempts to understand how individuals negotiate and create meaning through the process of interaction, and relies on the following three premises for analysis of the behavior of interaction: (1) human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings which these things have for them; (2) the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows; (3) meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he or she encounters (Blumer 1969: p. 2). These premises remind us that the interpretation and perception of meaning is by no means inevitable; rather, it is filtered through a socio-mental lens that is constructed from our particular social experiences, social location, and institutions such as media, academia, and the government. These institutions control the creation and negotiation of meaning by assigning importance to certain topics, events, etc. (Zerubavel 1997), and by presenting us with images and meanings that become part of the library of pre-existing

representations that shape understanding of new knowledge as it is experienced (Morgan and Schwalbe 1990).

The premises of symbolic interactionism remind us that how people perceive events, culture, identities, etc. is derived from *what people* do (p. 8). For example, if an individual expects to be treated a certain way after a loved one's victimization or offense, that expectation may shape their actual experience. For policy makers and administrators, understanding the socio-mental lens of victims' families and offenders' families is essential to determining what types of assistance these populations may or may not need in relation to secondary victimization and/or the stress associated with incarceration.

An interactionist perspective also leads to further questions concerning the negotiation of identity (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). In the case of families of victims and offenders, like families in the aftermath of childbirth, divorce, or death, some measure of redefinition of members' identities must occur as the family reorganizes itself. How well members adapt to their new circumstances and understanding of both their situations and themselves may dictate family functioning after victimization or incarceration. How members perceive the ease or difficulty associated with adapting to their new situations could provide insight concerning how the family members as a unit or as a population of individuals who deal with the criminal justice system "arrive at a more or less shared sense of the world" (LaRossa and Reitzes 1993). It is the shared understanding of the criminal justice system among families of victims and offenders that I explore in this thesis.

Interaction with others, perceptions of self, and the interpretation of meaning can be further convoluted if an individual understands him or her self to be part of a deviant or stigmatized group. Goffman (1963) defines stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (p. 3). The discrediting nature of stigma means that the possession of one can impact how an individual interacts with others, and how others interact with that individual. In the case of victims and offenders family members, their stigma is not immediately perceivable to individuals outside of the criminal justice setting. Stigma negotiation for them, therefore, may be different depending on their social situation, and especially frustrating and difficult when they are dealing with criminal justice officials.

Outside of criminal justice settings stigma negotiation may be more stressful for victims and offenders due to stress involved with negotiating the disclosure of a murder or offense. As Goffman suggests, the management of information regarding a stigma involves confusion when an individual is confronted with questions of who to disclose information to, and whether or not they even should disclose the information in the first place. A stigmatized individual’s personal and social identities can be severely impacted by the disclosure of information, dividing his or her social relations between the “knowing and unknowing” (p. 66), and creating stressful tension when these relations interact together. The stress involved in negotiating the stigma of having had a loved one murdered, or of having a loved one incarcerated, may lead to serious consequences for a victim or offender’s family.

Finally, Goffman suggests that certain individuals possess “courtesy stigmas,” which he defines as stigmas that are “spread from the stigmatized individual to his close connections” (p. 30). This is interesting in terms of victims’ and offenders’ family

members because whether or not they see themselves as in possession of the stigma, or their loved one as the primary stigma holder, may determine how they interpret and negotiate social situations. An individual who feels as if he or she is a primary stigma holder may internalize stress more readily than someone who associates the stigma with the murdered or incarcerated loved one.

### **Family Stress Theory**

Boss (2002) defines family stress as “pressure or tension in the family system – a disturbance in the steady state of the family” (p. 16). Family stress theory examines the ways in which a family manages and negotiates stressful situations. The theory has long been applied to situations where a member of the family is absent due to separations such as death, deployment to a war zone, and even divorce. Because families are made up of individuals, the ability for a family, as a social unit, to cope with stress and stressful situations, is highly dependent upon the ability of members to develop a collective “family meaning” of a stressful event (p. 23), and for the individual members of the family to develop effective coping strategies that allow both the individual and the family as a unit to cope with the stressful situation.

Burr (1970) suggests that patterns of family stress and coping begin with a catalyst or “stressor event,” which leads to “related family hardships,” and the family’s subsequent “vulnerability.” (McCubbin et al. 1980: p. 856). The concept of regenerative power “explains the variation in the family’s ability to recover from the disruptiveness that results from a stressor event” (p. 856). In terms of victims’ and offenders’ family members, understanding how individual members deal with the stress of negotiating the criminal justice system may assist in understanding how the system is dealt with and



perceived by the larger family unit. Individual responses to stress, however, are highly dependent upon social factors such as gender, race, education, and social class. For example, researchers have historically found that female members of families are more likely to reach out for help during stressful situations, whereas males are more likely to ignore and flee from stress (Boss 2002: p. 26). The differences among individual responses can present a problem when attempting to study stigmatized groups, biasing findings and making generalized statements problematic.

Boss (2002) outlines several premises for family stress theory that are applicable to this research. First, if one member of a family is in trouble that member acts as a scapegoat – one member of the family that other family members will define as the source of the stress. Family scapegoats can assist a family in maintaining its equilibrium during stressful periods. Second, whether or not stress is treated as negative depends on the perception of the stressor event(s), and the ability of the family as a unit to develop a common definition concerning the meaning of the stress. Finally, stress cannot be studied outside of the social context in which the family is living. These premises are important to this study because they not only reinforce the importance of perception when interpreting responses to any given situation, but they also provide a contextual framework for understanding *how* family members deal with stress imposed by social institutions, criminality, or stigma. While being the family member of a homicide victim or criminal offender is stressful, how family members recover after the initial incarceration or victimization is dependent on outside factors.

It is important to recognize that while family stress is inevitable, family crisis is not (Boss 2002; McCubbin 1979). Because homicide and incarceration may not be typical

situations that individuals and families expect to experience, this may complicate coping strategies that family members seek to assist in alleviating stress. Therapy and traditional social networks may be seen not as potential coping strategies, but as sources that victims' and offenders' loved ones actively avoid. The threat of stigma regarding atypical situations may aggravate the stress associated with having a loved one murdered or incarcerated, and complicate family stress management.

### **Research Foci**

This research focuses on how the family members of victims and offenders *perceive* their situations and interactions with the criminal justice system and its policies and procedures. In order to understand a community or population's perceptions, it is important to identify the following: how members join a particular thought community, the common themes reoccurring in the personal narratives of said community, and how these themes determine a member's perception of their place within society. Based upon theoretical assumptions derived from cognitive, interactionist, and family stress theories, this research operated under the assumption that how a member sees his or her situation in relation to society will dictate how he or she interprets his or her situation, and the situation of others like or unlike his or her self. For example, if a member's situation is particularly stressful then a member may perceive that situation as more difficult than the situations of others he or she knows that are not experiencing the same situation. It may, therefore, become necessary to develop strategies for managing stress and negotiating encounters with individuals who are not experiencing the situation in question. Interpretation of one's situation dictates how a member negotiates his or her identity within a given situation. If a member's situation is stigmatized in some way, identity

negotiation will take this stigma into account when developing coping strategies for stress management.

Basis for the above assumptions and theoretical foundations also originated from a pilot study that I conducted in the fall of 2004. This study analyzed the narratives of offenders' family members. These narratives were discovered on an online message board specifically designed to offer a place for offenders' loved ones to share their experiences.

The preliminary study suggested that by virtue of having a loved one incarcerated the individuals who connected with others in the same predicament felt a shared sense of community. This sense of community resulted in the solicitation and exchange of support, as well as the formation of a group identity. The group as a whole saw itself as being victimized by the criminal justice system, and felt that the system punished them for the crime of their loved one. This sense of stigma contributed to the members of the message board feeling that traditional sources of assistance (therapy, accessing kin networks, and state-sponsored agencies) were unavailable to them. The members' perceptions of their stigmatized situations dictated their understanding of relationships with individuals outside of their particular thought community, and forced them to find alternative means for coping with the stress that arose from their situations (such as joining an on-line message board community).

### **Themes**

During the analysis process of this project, I searched for emergent themes and concepts within the data, as suggested by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), as opposed to beginning analysis with a set of research questions. The themes I searched for were

informed by previous literature on victims' and offenders' families, and by the theoretical foundation for this research. Building on the findings from the pilot study that I conducted, this thesis further explored the group identity of family members of offenders and their relationship with the criminal justice system. By the same token, it also examined the narratives of family members of homicide victims in an effort to determine how they perceive the criminal justice system and if they form a group identity along the same lines as offenders' families, comparing and contrasting the two groups. In all, based upon the literature review conducted, I expected to find more similarities in the narratives of offenders' and victims' families than differences.

Additionally, I expected that both groups would express general dissatisfaction with how the system addresses their needs, and anticipated finding that family members from both groups feel victimized by the criminal justice system, supporting the literature on secondary victimization. I also wanted to determine what variables associated with the system either increased or decreased the stress involved with either having a loved one incarcerated or with feeling that punishment for an offender did not/does not reconcile the sense of loss or pain felt by a victim's family.

Based upon the fact that there is more institutional support for families of victims and that there is a current attempt to address their needs, I began analysis expecting that offenders' family members would indicate that their dealings with the system make them feel more isolated and stigmatized than victims' families. On the other hand, I expected that victims' families would express more of an overall general dissatisfaction. Finally, I paid special attention to what aspects of members' situations were reified, what features

associated with incarceration/victimization were treated with little importance or perceived as inconsequential, and how members employed each other for support.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY**

The data obtained for this analysis were gathered from two on-line forums. One site was designed as a support resource for family members and friends dealing with a loved one's incarceration, and the other was a support forum for family and friends in the aftermath of homicide. The sites were comparable in nature, both in size and content. Both forums provide an opportunity for the families and friends of offenders and murder victims to connect with others experiencing similar circumstances. Each forum requires individuals to join as "members" in order to post messages and each contains information regarding a range of issues applicable to the situation in question (i.e., on accessing local support groups or legal help). In addition, the forums host a message board that members may post questions and responses to. Member postings on both message boards range from the solicitation of advice, offerings of support, and information regarding activist agendas. In both cases there are very active and less active members who post on the boards. The forums' message boards are where data for this analysis were obtained.

These forums, along with their message boards, were discovered through a popular on-line search engine, and are available for the perusal of anyone with access to the Internet, making them public in nature. The public nature of the data meets the ethical requirements set forth in Robinson (2001)'s article concerning the use of the Internet for gathering data: i.e., it was found on a "freely accessible asynchronous forum" on which individuals posting messages "expect that persons unknown to them may read, share, and comment on their postings" (p. 711). In addition to the public nature of the

data provided on the message boards, I have contacted and received permission from the site moderators to freely view and analyze the messages posted. Seeking permission from the message boards was a stipulation of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), from which approval for this research was granted on April 20, 2005.

It is acknowledged that permission to analyze the messages posted on the boards was not obtained from each member of the board who utilizes it for support; however, as the moderator of the message board for victims' loved ones stated, "many people [on the board] come and go and it can be difficult to get a hold of someone who posted in the past." With this in mind, I believe that making my intentions to view and utilize the data on the message boards known to the site moderators satisfies as many ethical boundaries as research using Internet data can.

### **Sample Characteristics**

#### *Size*

The sample consisted of 727 pages of text collected from the two message boards (302 pages of postings from murder victim survivors and 425 pages of postings from offenders' loved ones). The text was single spaced and composed of 12 point, Times New Roman font. The postings gathered from the site for victims' families were posted in the years 2003-2004, and the postings gathered from the site for offenders' families were posted in the years 2001-2004. The discrepancy in years is due to an attempt to gather a roughly equal number of messages from each message board. In all, the board for murder victim survivors was more active, with a greater quantity of postings, more members (reported at 775 on the forum), and a more diverse membership consisting of both genders and the full range of possible family members (aunts, cousins, fathers,

mothers, daughters, sisters, brothers, etc.). On the other hand, the site for offenders' loved ones was utilized almost exclusively by the women in an offender's family (typically mothers, wives, and girlfriends), and has a smaller membership (estimated at about 400).

Each message board was composed of different topic "threads." In Internet-speak a thread is a "list of messages loosely relating to one another" (Internet Jargon Buster 2005). These threads could be about any topic. Most topics were related to being the loved one of an offender or murder victim, but some were designed for members of the message boards to "chit chat" about whatever they wanted. Some threads were actively used (meaning there were many postings on them), and others were not. In order to select threads for my sample I chose those threads with the most relevance to this study, that were the most active, and that conveyed diversity in their topics. The threads chosen for murder victims survivors were the following: general conversation about being a murder victim survivor, unsolved murders, "sadiansaries" (a death date remembrance thread), member profiles (for members to introduce themselves to the on-line community), and a thread for "anything under the sun." For offenders' loved ones I chose the following threads: a discussion group for mothers of the incarcerated, for wives of the incarcerated, for families of the incarcerated, and one concerning family and conjugal visitation.

While I read all of the messages posted on the threads during the years specified, coding was only done on the first 100 messages for each board. In understanding the sample size it is important to note that there was no standard length for the size of a message posted on either board. Length of a message ranged from a single word or



sentence to several paragraphs, with the majority of posts being several sentences long. Each post was considered a complete post, regardless of the size. Justification for this is presented in the section of this proposal entitled “data analysis.”

### *Demographic characteristics*

The Internet offers an invaluable opportunity for researchers to access stigmatized groups (Burgess, Donnelly, Dillard and Davis 2001), however, using the Internet for acquiring data means that individuals struggling with the studied phenomena, who are not in possession of a computer with Internet access, are excluded from the analysis. Oftentimes this means individuals who are older, less educated, and of low socioeconomic status (Burgess et al. 2001; Robinson 2001). This exclusion is especially important in light of the present study because offenders, victims, and their families are most likely to come from low-income and working class families (see Bureau of Justice Statistics 2004; Davis 2002; Mauer and Chesney-Lind 2002; Rubinstein and Mukamal 2002; Bilchik et al. 2001 and Gabel and Johnston 1995). It is important to keep in mind that both samples used in this study run a risk of being biased toward those with more education and means. However, without attempting to contact the message board posters themselves, race, social status, education, and other socio demographic characteristics for the individuals within this sample were impossible to pinpoint unless the member of the board self identified them for me (see the section on limitations), which very few did. These variables are not controlled for in this study.

This study does control for gender. Not only did the message board posters identify gender through the use of pronouns and context, but the forum for victims' families specifies the gender of posters before their messages (unless the posting is

anonymous). This control is appropriate based on the fact that men are more likely to be incarcerated and victimized (with the exception of sex crimes) than women (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2004; Spungen 1998; Madriz 1997), leading women to be the predominate population seeking support on both message boards. For the purpose of this study gender was reduced to two categories: men and women. The sample for offenders' loved ones is composed entirely of women, and the sample for victims' loved ones was 75% female (59) and 25% male (20).

Additionally, this study focused on the criminal justice system in the United States. The forums chosen cater mostly to U.S. residents, but occasionally posters indicated that they were from other English-speaking areas of the world (mostly England and Australia). Anyone who indicated that he or she was from a country other than the United States was removed from the sample.

Concerning an individual's relationship to the criminal justice system, I only examined postings of individuals who were either family members of a victim(s) or offender(s). Any poster who indicated that he or she was related to both a victim and his/her assailant, or who indicated that they had a loved one incarcerated, but also experienced a homicide, was omitted from this analysis. Families that are traumatized by both a victimization and offense deal with a matrix of compounded problems and should be dealt with separately.

Finally, while the message board for offenders' families deals with families who have a loved one incarcerated for numerous reasons, the message board for victims' families deals with homicide victims exclusively. Therefore, this research will be applicable to homicide victims' only. Since most research on secondary victimization

concerns homicide victims, this study will be able to add to the existing literature on these families.

### **Data Management**

Data on the message boards contained personal, identifying information about the message board posters, despite the anonymity that the message boards offered. Even though any person(s) with access to the Internet can find this information, I took great pains to eliminate this information from my analysis. Names, states, prisons, specific details of deaths, etc. were omitted, as well as the specific URL's from where the data were obtained. Any postings from individuals whom I suspected to be below age 18 -- the legal age of adulthood -- or who are currently incarcerated or institutionalized were removed from the data.

Electronic data for this research were stored on a password-protected computer, and any hard copies of data were placed in a lock box, to which only I am in possession of the key. Postings from message boards were placed into Open Office documents (a free, open source version of Microsoft Office). Postings were categorized in a number of different ways and individual Open Office files were created for each category. First, postings by victims' and offenders' families were kept in separate file documents. Within these two groups there were three further files -- a file with postings that were ordered chronologically, a file with postings that were grouped together by "poster," in order to separate and identify multiple posters, and a file that separated postings by topic and theme.

Analysis of data also occurred electronically. While analyzing the postings, I inserted any code notes or thoughts in bold brackets after text. Analysis that did not

occur electronically was conducted by creating documents that had wide, three-inch margins on all sides. Coding took place within the margins and was then transcribed to electronic form in the corresponding file stored in my computer.

This research included three phases of coding for each message board. Initial coding of data for both sites occurred consecutively. I began the analysis by performing the initial phase of coding on the message board concerning victims' families, and then on the board for offenders' families. The last two phases of coding occurred simultaneously. The reasoning behind this coding strategy was to ensure that the coding of one sample did not bias the coding of the other, with the assumption that bias was most likely to appear during the final two stages of ground theory analysis, which are when theory formation occurs. Because of the tedious and time consuming nature of the initial coding phase, conducting the process consecutively on the boards was the most manageable way to initially analyze the data.

Finally, throughout the analysis process (and this thesis), I referred to members of the message boards as “posters.” This term is derived from the actual action that members of the boards are performing, which is called “posting.” The term posting is defined as the action that occurs when there is a “single message entered into a network communications system, i.e. posted to a newsgroup or message board” (Nottingham.biz/jargon 2005).

### **Data Analysis: Grounded Theory Method**

Strauss and Corbin (1998) define grounded theory method as the systematic gathering and analysis of data to allow for the emergence of theory. The presumption of the method is that “theory derived from the data is more likely to resemble ‘reality’ than

is theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based on experience solely through speculation” (p. 12). Grounded theory method advocates and encourages the analysis of data to be “interplay between researchers and data,” utilizing both science and creativity (p. 13) in a way that produces testable theory in both its application and development.

Data analysis for this study was performed using grounded theory method, as outlined by Strauss and Corbin in their 1998 text *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Strauss and Corbin's model of grounded theory was chosen because of the flexibility it offers, allowing for the incorporation of outside theories and concepts in final theoretical models produced during analysis. In general, the method of analysis was ultimately chosen because of its attention to detail, sensitivity to meanings within data, and theory development.

#### *Open, Axial and Selective Coding*

According to Strauss and Corbin, grounded theory method is delineated by three stages of analysis: open, axial, and selective coding. Open coding is the “analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data” (p. 101); axial coding is “the process of relating categories to their subcategories” (p. 123); and selective coding is “the process of integrating and refining theory” (p. 143). All three phases of coding were utilized during this analysis, but were not mutually exclusive. While open coding was conducted initially, I continued to perform open coding throughout the analysis process as I formed new ideas related to my theoretical model. Additionally, axial coding and selective coding were conducted almost simultaneously, and aspects of grounded theory method normally associated with

axial and selective coding occurred during the open coding process as well. I found that conducting the three phases of coding as continuous and overlapping phases of analysis – rather than mutually exclusive, allowed me to constantly monitor my thought process, and better manage the data analysis process in general.

### *Variables*

One variation from Strauss and Corbin’s theoretical model is the recommendation by LaRossa (2005) to use the term “variable” instead of “category” to denote the relationships between phenomena derived from the analysis process. As LaRossa points out, the term category is used to connote two different ideas in grounded theory analysis – those of categorization (grouping like things into a category of like things), and discovering dimensionality among like concepts (p. 842-843). The dimensionalization of like concepts occurs when variation is discovered across concepts. Variation includes understanding the properties and characteristics of any given conceptual idea. LaRossa suggests, and I agree, that by substituting the term *variable* for *category*, it becomes clear that “a category is essentially intended to capture not only similitude but also dimensionality among a set of concepts” (p. 843). Additionally, the term *variable* better conveys the relationship between phenomena than does the term *category*, because it better describes the positive or negative impact of one phenomenon on another. Therefore, the term *variable* will be used to denote categories that were formed during the analysis from this point forward.

### *Memos and Diagramming*

Essential to the grounded theory method are the processes of memo writing and diagramming relationships (p. 218-219). I employed both memo writing and the

diagramming of relationships throughout the analysis process. Memos were written to examine reoccurring words and ideas within the data, to discover dimensions within concepts, to relate variables, and, at times, to clear and organize my thoughts during the analysis process. Memo writing and diagramming were used as a means by which I could step away from the data, keep my biases toward the data in check, think abstractly about the data, criticize my analysis of the data and change previous conceptualizations of data (if necessary), to remain respectful and sensitive of the data and, finally, to develop a sense of absorption within the analytical process (Strauss and Corbin 1998: 7).

#### *Theoretical sampling and saturation*

It is important to note that grounded theory method calls for theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling is a process where a sample is not “predetermined before beginning research,” but rather “evolves during the process” (p. 202). This form of sampling allows a researcher to select data that are based on the emerging concepts that form during their analysis. I only used partial theoretical sampling during the research process, keeping the sampling process confined to the message boards I was given permission to collect data from. Theoretical saturation is the process by which a researcher may cease sampling, because “no new or significant data emerge” and variables composing the theory are “well developed in terms of properties and dimensions” (p. 215). Initially I chose not to utilize full theoretical sampling for the purpose of keeping the size of this project manageable, and planned to continue to analyze and collect narratives from the message boards until reaching theoretical saturation. This point happened sooner than expected, keeping the sample relatively small, at 100 messages for each population.

### *Open Coding*

During the open coding phase of data analysis I carefully fractured the data in order to discover its more abstract meaning. I began this process by closely reading over the data that I had gathered from the message boards. During the initial read-through of the data I marked areas of narrative that related to my research questions, moments where I identified important or interesting themes, and reoccurring words, phrases, concepts and images. My initial impression of the data was of their sense of informality and intimacy. There were misspelled words, grammatical typos, multiple uses of question and punctuation marks, very personal requests for help or advice, moments of introduction, consoling, and disclosure. This impression paralleled Robinson (2001)'s feeling for her own data, that "the relative (although not absolute) anonymity of the Internet provided for a safe environment in which individuals expressed their feelings and frustrations" (p. 709).

It was with this general feeling for the data that I began coding. During the coding of this data I revisited the notes that I made during my initial read through. The notes regarding the reoccurring words, phrases, and themes were actually a very good initial list of indicators. I began the process of naming and conceptualizing these initial indicators, and applying to them a level of abstraction in order to form concepts. At this time I wrote many memos to myself, in which I discovered the properties (characteristics) of the concepts, as well as the concepts' dimensions (the range or variation within a concept). Eventually variables began to form from the concepts being uncovered.

Keeping in mind that a variable should "stand for phenomena" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 101), I began to wonder about the causes and consequences of the



phenomena being exposed in the data. I wrote preliminary memos attempting to sketch out when, where, why, and how the phenomena were likely to occur, further explaining the variables that were already forming. Eventually, the following variables emerged from my analysis: *degree of anomie*, *number of perceived obstacles*, *level of satisfaction with the offender's accountability* [applicable to victims' families only], *length of offender's sentence* [applicable to offenders' families only], *strength of relationship with victim or offender*, *level of support seeking*, *frequency of support giving*, *perceived level of stigmatized identity*, and *number of coping strategies developed* (each is discussed in detail in Chapter Five of this thesis).

#### *Axial Coding*

It was during this phase of analysis that I began to determine how the variables that were formed related to each other, and the process(es) through which the phenomena in question evolved over time. My goal at this point was to come up with a sequence of events in order to determine what was happening, when it was happening, and which variables determined the outcome of others. I revisited the preliminary memos that I began during the open coding phase of analysis regarding when, where, why and how the identified phenomena were likely to occur. As Strauss and Corbin describe axial coding, I attempted to reassemble “data that were fractured during open coding” (p. 124). Additionally, I paid special attention to the clues offered by the data, but considered the relationships among the variables at a conceptual, rather than a descriptive level. Both memos and diagramming were helpful during this period.

Eventually, I came to realize that the variable *number of perceived obstacles* was an influencing variable that had a causal relationship with the other variables formed.

The variables *degree of anomie*, *number of coping strategies developed*, *level of support seeking*, *frequency of support giving*, and *perceived level of stigmatized identity* were all consequences of the obstacles that the posters faced. In addition, the variables *strength of relationship with victim or offender*, *length of an offender's sentence*, and *level of satisfaction with offender's accountability* were influencing variables as well. Depending on the population, each could directly impact the severity of the consequential variables.

### *Selective Coding*

Diagramming became essential to working out how the variables related to each other, and eventually led to complete absorption within the data. I would work out the relationships while in the shower, driving in my car, and lifting weights at the gym. I became convinced that I had developed two models, one for each population, but both determined by the core variable for each group and an antecedent. The model for victims' families was as follows:

Strength of Relationship with Victim > Murder (Antecedent) > Number of Perceived Obstacles > Degree of Anomie > Perceived Level of Stigmatized Identity > Level of Support Seeking > Number of Coping Strategies Developed > Frequency of Support Giving

Each variable, with the exception of the antecedent and the variables, *strength of relationship with victim*, *perceived level of stigmatized identity* and *frequency of support giving*, was determined to be related to a murder victim survivor's *level of satisfaction with the offender's accountability*, the core variable to this model. The model for offenders' loved ones was virtually the same except with the following notable differences: the antecedent was the seen as being the offense and the core variable was the *length of the offender's sentence*. It was not until meeting with an adviser, speaking with her about my models, and hearing her say “your core variables sound like the same

thing,” that I realized that I was dealing with one model that describes support seeking under the core variable *level of satisfaction with the offender’s accountability*.

The importance of a poster’s level of satisfaction with the offender’s accountability is related to whether or not a poster is ultimately happy with the outcome of criminal justice proceedings and the punishment that is mediated to the offender. This variable has a direct impact on the number of perceived obstacles that a poster identifies, the degree of anomie that a poster feels, the level of support seeking that is necessary for a poster, and the number of coping strategies that a poster develops. This core variable also indirectly impacts a poster’s perceived level of stigmatized identity, along with the frequency with which he or she gives support, by increasing his or her degree of anomie and the number of coping strategies that he or she is forced to develop.

Thus, I selected *level of satisfaction with the offender’s accountability* to be the core variable for the model generated from this analysis (please refer to *Model I* in the Appendix). Not only does the variable possess the most “analytic power” to describe what is happening in these data (p. 146), it also meets the requirements outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) -- most variables can be related to it, it appears frequently in the data, the data are easily related to it and not forced, it is abstract and may be used to develop a more general theory, it has explanatory power, and explains variation as well as the main story that is occurring within the data (p. 147).

*Model II* in the Appendix describes the explanatory power of the core variable. At a more abstract level the phenomena described are concerned with separation. A renaming of the core variable to *level of satisfaction with length of separation* may make the model more applicable to a variety of phenomena related to institutionalization such

as foster care, psychiatric hospitals, and perhaps even missing person situations.

Additionally, the model may also be applicable to an individual who has a close loved one who is missing, on active duty in the military and stationed elsewhere, or who is enduring the unexpected loss of a loved one to a situation other than homicide (HIV/AIDS, cancer, etc.).

A detailed discussion of the core variable for *Model I*, along with the other variables, and the explanatory power of *Model I* in relation to this research is presented in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: ANALYSIS OF THE NARRATIVES Findings and Discussion**

The data gathered for this analysis indicate that both the loved ones of victims' and offenders' experience the same basic support seeking stages in the aftermath of victimization or incarceration. These stages, while being preceded by different antecedents for both groups, are as follows: *number of perceived obstacles, degree of anomie, perceived level of stigmatized identity, level of support seeking, number of coping strategies developed, and frequency of support giving*. While the stages progress in the order listed, each stage is dependent upon the strength of the individual's relationship with the victim or offender, and the satisfaction level regarding the offender's accountability for his or her crime. *Model I* in the Appendix diagrams this relationship.

The findings from this analysis are discussed below, and are broken up according to the variables included in the model that was developed during the analysis process. Within each section I will also discuss the specific indicators and concepts that were explored for the populations studied (victims' and offenders' loved ones), along with the theoretical implication of these findings. After the description of the model, I will discuss the findings related to the specific research questions detailed previously.

### **Impetuses and Strength of Relationship with Victim or Offender**

Whether or not an offender's loved ones are going to be deeply affected by their incarceration is highly dependent on the strength of the relationship that the offender and the loved one had. Nearly all the posters on the message board for offenders' families are

dealing with the incarceration of a son, betrothed, or husband – no posters join the board and become members of the board's community because of a distant or estranged relative or friend's incarceration. How strong the relationship between the offender and poster is influences how difficult the separation from the offender is for the poster and, thus, whether they move through the following phases described in the next section. While a loved one's offense is the antecedent for a family member to seek support, the strength of that individual's relationship with the offender will determine whether they need to seek support in the first place.

There would be no message board for victims' loved ones without one key event – the murder of a loved one. This is the moment of grief that unites the members of the message board community, and is the antecedent that also forces the members to search for support in the first place. Within the data, how close a victim was to the message board poster directly influenced the number of obstacles that a poster reported having to face; however, the trauma associated with the homicide was often enough to ensure that a relative would need to seek some sort of help in the aftermath of the murder, regardless of how close he or she was with the victim before the murder. Stories of the murder of nephews, cousins, aunt, or uncle that a poster knew very little were very common.

#### *Symbolic vs. Literal Losses*

For both victims' and offenders' family members the impact of homicide or incarceration was related to how integral the victim and offender was in the lives of those they left behind. For the posters on either message board who had a loved one murdered or incarcerated before they had a chance to know them, the key factor concerning how they reported dealing with the trauma seemed to be more related to the significance that

society placed on the role that the victim or offender represented, rather than how strong their relationship was with that family member.

I as a child believed my father didn't care about me, but I didn't even know him.

-- Daughter of an Offender

I have gone through waves of acceptance and then overwhelming grief throughout my life. The hardest times are the memories I was robbed of. Daddy/daughter dances, bullying my first date, 16th birthday, graduation, being Daddy's little girl, walking me down the aisle, introducing him to his granddaughter, bedtime stories, and memories I didn't even know I could have.

-- Daughter of a Homicide Victim

As the above passages indicate, for certain relationships that are given a high level of societal importance, the strength of the victim or offender's relationship in the message board poster's life may be more symbolic than literal. In these cases, the symbolic loss of a family member was as important for these posters as the literal loss of those who experience homicide or incarceration at a point where their relationships were pre-established with their loved one before a murder or offense:

My brother has just been incarcerated, at age 50, for what may be ten years ... My heart is breaking, and I can't understand this system. I still feel that no matter what, I will always be there for my brother.

-- Sister of an Offender

My sister was murdered aged 30, by 2 men. I felt numb and like I was in a bubble for about 6 months after my sisters murder. I thought about it constantly. I also felt like I was going nuts.

-- Sister of a Homicide Victim

These posters have long histories with the loved one they are now separated from, and those histories exasperate the separation that the posters now face.

Some key differences in the importance with which posters assigned their relationships are important to note. First, posters on the board for victims' loved ones were much more likely to discuss a symbolic loss. Additionally, for victims' family

members the “symbolic” relationships that they described having difficulties dealing with were always relationships related to a nuclear familial structure (i.e. mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers). Conversely, offenders’ family members who discussed “symbolic” losses due to incarceration were most likely to be discussing parents who were incarcerated. These individuals were likely to have never known their father or mother because of decisions made by a caretaker to sever the child’s relationship with the offender. Those who experienced this kind of separation almost always included pleas to others on the message board such as this one, posted by a daughter who was not allowed to see her father: “PLEASE let your kids see their fathers!”

The strength of a poster’s relationship with a victim or offender who represents a symbolic loss is shaped not by the poster’s personal experience, but by what the poster understands society to deem important. Society assigns meaning to the nuclear family and its importance in everyday life. Mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers, are symbols that society associates with certain qualities such as a happy home and childhood, a normal upbringing. As Zerubavel (1997) suggests, assigning these titles to an individual also assigns a social meaning with certain connotations. These connotations become salient and therefore impact how an individual perceives the loss of someone who has come to symbolize the meaning associated with the title, even if the person’s actual *physical* role is “completely disassociated” from the symbolic meaning assigned to them (p. 71).

### **Number of Perceived Obstacles**

In this analysis the term obstacles is used to describe both emotional and tangible experiences that authors of the narratives used to portray the difficulty of their situation in the aftermath of murder or incarceration. The obstacles that contributed to a poster's



perceived level of difficulty also intensified their levels of stress and frustration, and prevented them from being able to cope after the initial shock of their situation. The below chart details some of the indicators used to represent “obstacles” as a concept:

Obstacles perceived by Victims' Loved Ones	Obstacles perceived by Offenders' Loved Ones
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·Unsolved crimes</li> <li>·Feeling as if law enforcement did not care about their case</li> <li>·The length of time it took for an offender to go to trial</li> <li>·Plea bargains that are perceived as too lenient</li> <li>·Lack of support from family, friends, and the community as a whole</li> <li>·Fixation on the murder, and worries about one's own safety</li> <li>·Health issues that they related to the murder</li> <li>·Guilt for not being able to protect their loved one(s) from the offender(s)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·The perception that they are being punished by the criminal justice system, along with the offender</li> <li>·Difficulty negotiating the criminal justice system</li> <li>·Length of time between arrest/trial/sentencing</li> <li>·No concrete release date</li> <li>·Guilt about not being able to help the offender after or before incarceration</li> <li>·Feeling stigmatized by the community</li> <li>·Personal difficulties such as finances</li> <li>·Loss of support from family and friends</li> </ul>

After conceptualizing the above indicators to mean “obstacle,” I began to look for the properties associated with said obstacles. The intensity, frequency, and duration with which a poster perceived obstacles that they identified directly impacted their ability to cope after the initial shock of victimization or incarceration. For instance, posters perceived the level of obstacles faced as small or large in quantity, and difficult or manageable in quality. The frequency with which obstacles must be dealt with, and whether or not perceived obstacles continued to occur or seemed to abate over time contributed heavily to the amount of stress associated with the obstacles.

It is important to note that while some obstacles were different for both populations, both victims' and offenders' loved ones identified the criminal justice system and lack of support from their friends and communities as the primary obstacles and stressors. While each group made similar statements about their family, friends, and communities, perceptions of the obstacles caused by the criminal justice system

possessed more variation between groups. Both obstacles are discussed separately below.

### *The Criminal Justice System*

In the case of the criminal justice system, members of each group were likely to express dissatisfaction about how the system treated the offender, but in very different contexts. Victims' family members were most likely to refer to the system as an obstacle if they felt that it was taking too long to mediate punishment to the offender, or if a criminal justice worker made pejorative comments about the victim. Offenders' families also viewed how the system treated their loved ones as an obstacle, along with how the system treated them, personally. Examples for both groups follow.

#### Victims' Families.

After a homicide a victim's family members are dependent upon the criminal justice system to mediate justice in the name of their murdered loved one. The speed with which this happens can be a source of great stress for many of them:

The killer has never been arrested. Even though we have a very good idea who killed her, I know the police could have done more to solve this case. I feel like I have failed her, because her killer is still walking free.  
-- Daughter of a Homicide Victim

After almost 3 years we finally have seen justice served! The man who murdered my dear sweet sister in law [name] has finally been convicted and sentenced. It has been a very long and painful process but it feels great knowing that this man will never have the chance to hurt anyone ever again!!  
-- Sister in law of Homicide Victim

It is not only how quickly the system mediates justice, but also whether or not a poster feels that anyone who belongs to the system is trying to assist them:

My last contact with police was simply that it is time to prepare for the fact this crime may never be solved. I am having trouble just accepting the loss and the circumstances still seem unreal. Do the police and city officials actually care?

-- Son of a Homicide Victim

As the above post indicates, believing that more could have been done was often synonymous with feeling that the criminal justice system did not care whether the crime was solved in the first place.

In addition to whether or not representatives of the criminal justice system were working to solve the crime, victims' family members often shared experiences where a representative criticized or made pejorative statements about the homicide victim:

The justice system is awful ... one lawyer mentioned because my father was a big man and ate at fast food restaurants he was going to probably have a heart attack anyway. I could not believe it!

-- Daughter of a Homicide Victim

Statements such as this one often caused undo pain for the posters, and contributed to the perception that the criminal justice system was not a source of comfort or support in the aftermath of victimization. In fact, these instances further solicited feelings of anger and frustration from victims' loved ones.

#### Offenders' Families.

For offenders' families, treatment of the offender, while a primary concern, was directly related to how they viewed their own treatment by the system. For instance, if it was difficult for a poster to communicate to his or her loved one a poster might criticize the system by saying that it was exploiting the offender's family:

What can be done? I wanted to advocate against the seemingly corrupt agreement between the prison system and the phone carrier provider. Please... do they think that a family that's already minus a major income, [can] afford the 1.50/min collect phone calls? I don't know what to do.

-- Sister of an Offender

Additionally, posters on the site for offenders' loved ones felt that the system tried to prevent them from providing their loved ones with the support that they needed, often drawing attention to the system preventing contact from close intimates:

My best friend just got sent to prison, and they are saying his pregnant fiancé is NOT aloud to visit!!!! Why is this?????

-- Friend of an Offender

The relationship between how the poster was treated and how the offender was treated was highly correlated in every instance that the system was brought up in one of the poster's narratives; however, at times the poster's main concerns were related to an official's treatment of him or her as if he or she were less than human, and deserving of little respect:

Those of you who have conjugal visits don't know how lucky you are. Where my boyfriend is, they don't have them. The closest we have gotten was a big fat ugly guard telling him "I'll let you take her in the bathroom if I can have a turn with her when you are done."

-- Girlfriend of an Offender

Instances such as the one above contributed to a general feeling of unease concerning the system itself, and its representatives – making it very difficult for offenders' loved ones to view the system as anything other than dissatisfactory.

### *Dealing with Dissatisfaction*

Being dissatisfied with the criminal justice system was treated as an obstacle in different ways by both groups. Victims' families often indicated that they realized that without the system justice, in any form, could not be served. While this realization was mentioned often, it was also readily perceived that in order to overcome the obstacle they must “work with the system” in order to ensure that the offender was held accountable for the crime against their loved one. In addition, many of the posters discussed

becoming involved with the system as a means of helping them alleviate their own pain, and help others in the same situation with the grieving process. The most frequently mentioned form of involvement was participating in victim-witness assistance programs and/or other local and state support groups for murder victim survivors.

Offenders' loved ones frequently mentioned how they should try to work together, amongst themselves, to mobilize against the system in an attempt to try to change how the system treated offenders' and their loved ones. Working together was seen as the only way to get the system to cease its harsh treatment of offenders and their families by bringing the situation out into the open, holding law enforcement and prison officials accountable for their treatment of prisoners and their families, and advocating for punishments and/or sentencing that matched the offenders' crime. However, there was no sense that their efforts could really bring about change; rather, posters seemed to believe that challenging the system would bring repercussions for themselves or their loved ones. The comment below sums up the general feeling that existed among offenders' loved ones concerning this topic:

I've learned that the officials aren't interested in our problems or our loved one's. They want things to run smoothly. Complaints rock the boat and give them extra work. They find ways to make sure you don't complain again.

Sadly, while murder victim survivors seemed to acknowledge that they could affect change within the system; offenders' loved ones often saw any potential efforts to change their situation(s) as futile.

*Family, Friends, and the Community*

The second major obstacle mentioned by both groups was lack of support from families, friends, and communities. Most often this lack of support was seen as the failure of others around them to understand or identify with their situations:

None of my friends understand what I'm going through. They mean well, but hearing that this situation is not in my control, or that his decisions are the cause of this, doesn't help me. It only makes me feel more helpless, and angry at the system.

--Sister of an Offender

I lost most my friends after my sister's murder as they could not deal with me being in so much pain, and felt I should get on with my life.

--Sister of a Homicide Victim

Loss of support caused posters on both boards to feel alone, depressed, and stigmatized. Victims families indicated that they felt that friends who did not know the victim often offered them "judgments and platitudes," and that they did not understand why they could not "move on with their lives." Offenders' loved ones often spoke about family or friends abandoning them because they did not agree with the poster's decision to support the offender. For offenders' loved ones, stories of abandonment were most likely to occur if they attempted to carry out a romantic relationship with the offender, did not dissolve a marriage that existed before the offense, or allowed children to visit the offender during incarceration.

*Implications of lack of institutional and social support*

The perception of lack of support from the criminal justice system, as well as from family and friends is problematic. Family research has long acknowledged the importance of social networks and the "potential support [they] offer to alleviate or mediate the effects of stress" (McCubbin et al. 1980: p. 855; Cobb 1976; Granovetter

1973). The stressors associated with the criminal justice system combined with poor social support can assist in further aggravating the aftermath of incarceration and offense, and amplifying or creating additional obstacles for family members of these populations.

As Boss (2002) points out, “cultural context” plays “a major part” in how families and individuals react to and “define events of stress” (p. 152). Inasmuch as incarceration and victimization are seen as culturally stigmatizing events, even the ability of social networks and institutions specifically designed to assist individuals with these issues are undermined because those within these institutions also possess current cultural values. The family members of victims and offenders must deal with societal definitions that pigeonhole them into characterizations, provided by the broader culture, which they and others must then negotiate in the context of social situations.

Additionally, the groups’ understandings of what it is like to deal with a stigmatizing event become similar after intimately dealing with the criminal justice system. The obstacles that are imposed by dealing with the system “teach” the family members that they are a stigmatized group, and in some cases are not deserving of information or respect – attributes that they have come to expect from their social institutions:

I was and still am, playing by the system rules, and what they have done to my family and I is almost unforgiving ... these people could care less how we were feeling.

-- Homicide Survivor

I don't know a thing about the whole process. Every time I ask someone for help or information I get very little.

-- Girlfriend of an Offender

The similarities between the ways in which victims’ and offenders’ loved ones describe their interactions with the criminal justice system and communities imply that at some

point after initial victimization or offense, both groups become members of the same thought community in reference to seeking support from the criminal justice system. These thought communities begin to expect that the system is not going to meet their needs, spurning the family members of victims' and offenders' to form groups (or discuss group formation) to assist them in having their needs met, and overcoming the obstacles imposed by the system..

### **Degree of Anomie**

The working definition of anomie used to apply to this research was proposed by Ritzer (2002). He defines anomie "as a sense ... of not knowing what one is expected to do; of being adrift in society without any clear and secure moorings" (p. 20). The variable "degree of anomie" is applied to a phenomenon that occurred on both message boards. In the face of perceived obstacles, members of both message boards described the impact of dealing with the obstacles as "confusing" and "frustrating." The net result of having no or little support to turn to, and being unable to easily negotiate the criminal justice system, was a general sense of isolation and powerlessness, as well as disconnect from social support networks and social service institutions. This resulted in a feeling of estrangement that served to accentuate a sense of impotency regarding the processes of navigating the new social situations the posters experienced after incarceration and victimization.

The vulnerability of these families is inherently related to their relationships with the social institutions with which they interact. Family members of victims and offenders described feeling "powerless" and "confused" when dealing with the criminal justice system. Examples of this are as follows:



I frequently feel pushed too far by the system but I try to keep cool and not complain even when I know my complaint is legitimate. I know they'll take it out on him if I do.

-- Wife of an Offender

We are just starting the court phase and I am so scared ... I am lost and confused and feel really left out of the whole process.

-- Sister of a Homicide Victim

These individuals are not only deeply influenced by how they are treated by the criminal justice system, but also by how they are treated by their communities:

I've been disappointed too many times in the past when I've needed support. To me, that means it's time to move on.

-- Homicide Survivor

This whole thing is compounded by the lack of support ...

-- Friend of a Homicide Victim

A lot of our friends and my friends have stopped talking to me.

-- Wife of an Offender

As family members of victims and offenders are denied help from the social institutions that they thought were in place to assist them, they become more and more disconnected from these institutions. These “large-scale structures of society” impact the “thoughts and actions of individuals” that must come into contact with them (Ritzer 2000: p. 181), and the groups begin to perceive their new identity as atypical because they are no longer able to find support and assistance from institutions that they once turned to for help. This results in isolation from others, from the society at large, and the perception that they are somehow damaged or abnormal persons. These findings support Spungen (1998)’s findings on secondary victimization, and suggest that both family members of victims and offenders experience anomic states of being directly as a result of interactions with these institutions.

The feeling of isolation that the family members of victims and offenders describe results in the perception that they lack “a common bond with those that work and live around them” (Ritzer 2000: p. 190). This lack of connection also leads to a lack of rules for the family members to follow, resulting in confusion about how to behave. As Calhoun (2002) suggests, anomie results from the “disconnection of people from social bonds – resulting either from isolation or disorienting changes in society at large” (Calhoun, et al. 2002: p. 106). For the message board posters society in and of itself does not change; rather, it is their *perception* of society, its institutions, and their place within them that changes. The posters on both boards often talk about how they used to think of the criminal justice system or feel connected to their communities, and how currently their understandings of both have changed: the system is no longer seen as an institution that helps, and they no longer feel like integrated members of their communities.

Anomie, as a variable, is measured in degrees. A poster’s degree of anomie occurs on a continuum. Because anomie encompasses the estrangement of an individual from institutions, the concept of confusion fits nicely into this variable, as well as that of powerlessness. A person whose is immersed in an anomic state is both confused and powerless due to the powers opposing her or him. Someone who is not experiencing a state of anomie is an integrated part of the community, understands that community, and has a degree of control over events and happenings within it. Comments within the narratives such as “I feel so alone,” and “it's out of our hands,” suggest that the message board posters experience the opposite of this very often.

### **Perceived Level of Stigmatized Identity**

As a poster's degree of anomic being increases, so does the poster's perception that he or she is in possession of a stigmatized identity. This variable is a direct consequence of a poster's anomic state of being, and can influence the level of support that a poster seeks. A poster does not have to feel stigmatized to seek support, but stigma will increase support seeking if a poster sees him or her self as having to manage stigma often.

Indicators that were used to develop this variable included phrases such as "I feel like there is something wrong with me," and "people treat you different now." Both victims' and offenders' families report perceptions of stigma at the same rate, and typically used the same kind of language to describe their perceptions:

I have learned to be content with and without, but these walls are getting thicker and thicker, I have done nothing wrong, yet I feel like I'm being treated like I was the perpetrator. Yes I'm losing at a fast rate.  
--Homicide Survivor

I wish the idiot system would realize, and the people would realize, that they are not just punishing the inmates...the families did nothing wrong.

-- Wife of an Offender

As the above passages illustrate, both groups felt that they were being treated as if they did something wrong. Especially interesting is the use of language by members of both groups where posters describe feeling as if their actions are somehow criminal (i.e. like a "perpetrator" or as if they are being punished). These narratives indicate that the stigma of criminality is not just spread from the perpetrator of the crime or to his or her family members, but to the victim and the victim's family members as well.

For some of the posters, perceptions of stigma were validated by threatening actions from their communities:

Since that horrible night, we have been "ditched" by so-called family and friends, subjected to ignorant and insensitive comments and remarks by perfect strangers, been deliberately left out "of the loop" by our DA's office, and threatened by friends and family of those who murdered my parents.  
-- Daughter of a Homicide Victim

Our family was harassed and threatened.  
-- Wife of an Offender

In instances where posters discussed the negative receptions received by their communities, they almost always followed up these statements with comments such as the following statement made by a homicide survivor:

I know that most people here would understand.

In addition to the perception that other posters on the message board understood what a single poster was going through, there was also a general sense of community on the boards. Posters from both groups referred to each other as "we," "us," or the message board as "our community." The tendency of the message board posters in both on-line communities to feel connected to each other supports Goffman (1963)'s assertion that "those who fall within a given stigma category may well refer to the total membership by the term "group" or an equivalent such as "we," or "our people" (p. 23). Members of both message boards not only see themselves as a stigmatized social group, but assume that other members of the boards are experiencing the same social situations that they experience based on this group membership.

The findings here did not support the idea that family members of victims and offenders experience "courtesy" stigmas; rather, that they perceive themselves to be primary stigma holders. Whether or not members of these groups are stigmatized based upon their own actions is irrelevant. Their perception of their own status as primary

stigma holders dictates their relationship with others that they come into contact with. As the previous examples indicated, members of these groups find themselves interacting with others *as if* they committed the socially unaccepted and stigmatized actions. These encounters reinforce the “other” status of victims’ and offenders’ family members, and force them to manage information about their situations due to fear of how individuals from outside their group membership will treat them (Goffman 1963), as the below examples illustrate:

I hate everything about our life. A lot of our friends and my friends have stopped talking to me. My family has been generally supportive. I don’t know what to tell anyone I meet when they ask what my husband does or if we’d like to get together. That never gets easier.

-- Wife of an Offender

Others can be sympathetic but cannot understand what you are going through or how you want to handle it.

-- Homicide Survivor

While the first quote describes managing unknown stigmatizing information, the second quote describes managing information that is known. In either situation the fear of dealing with someone outside the individual’s group membership stymies the individual’s interactions with members outside the group, and fosters the necessity for the individual to turn to members of his or her own group for support.

### **Level of Support Seeking**

As family members of victims and offenders find themselves in increasingly stressful situations support seeking of some kind becomes highly likely. It is generally acknowledged that before support seeking occurs two prerequisites are necessary: “recognizing a problem that defines a need for help” and “making a decision to seek help for the problem” (Bringle and Byers 1997: p. 299). Posters on both message boards meet these prerequisites, as the following examples of narrative suggest:

I don't know what I would have done if I'd not found this board.  
-Murder Victim Survivor

I have come to this site looking for a way out of the fog I feel I  
am in.  
-Murder Victim Survivor

Hi everybody I was web surfing today and the lord led me to this  
website.  
-Offender's loved one

It is the collective challenge of dealing with the obstacles related to incarceration and victimization, an increasingly anomic state and, in many cases, the perception that one possesses a stigmatized identity that leads a poster to recognize that support is necessary, and subsequently seek that support.

Joining a message board is just one of the strategies for finding support mentioned by the posters on both boards, but it is notable that posters often indicated that the message board itself was a great source of comfort and support. The boards provided the posters with a forum to express their situations to others who were experiencing similar circumstances. Additionally, because the forums have a broad reach (all across the country), posters were more likely to identify with another member of the board than a person they met locally who was also dealing with incarceration or victimization. Other forms of support that posters mentioned seeking include counseling from licensed therapists or through a church, a close friend or family member, non-profit organizations, or state-sponsored programs (victims' families only).

This variable, level of support seeking, developed from several different concepts and processes: introduction, establishing a connection, and advice/support. First, new members of the boards often join a board by first introducing themselves and their situation. This introduction period has two different functions. A poster will introduce him or her self, their situation, and the situation of their loved one. A victim's family

member will describe their loved one's murder (often in graphic detail) along with the trouble they are having coping with the death, while an offender's loved one will most often relate how long the offender will be incarcerated and the difficulty they are having keeping in touch with them. The next function of the introduction is to establish a connection with the other members of the board. This is most often begun with statements such as "I'm so glad I've found others in this same situation," or "I can't believe I'm not alone." The posters will then begin soliciting advice.

Advice that was solicited had many different properties and indicators. A poster could ask advice concerning something logistical (like how to visit their loved one or how to lobby their government for better victim rights), or the advice could concern how to cope in the aftermath of incarceration or victimization. The type of advice that was solicited often determined the intensity of the advice. For instance, a logistical question typically was not introduced or followed by an emotional plea. A message concerning how to cope, however, was often book ended by descriptions of the murder or difficulties relating to the incarceration. Take the following messages from the site for offenders' loved ones, for instance:

Need some help here. Boyfriend of 4 yrs going to prison. I don't know a thing about the whole process. Every time I ask someone for help or information I get very little. He says I may not be able to visit until he is out of reception. Unless of course we get married. Is this true? Can anybody give some information about visits?

-Offender's loved one

My son has been in detention center for two months after being arrested for serious drug charges. He is 35 and an ADD personality and it is driving him crazy not to be able to do things to keep busy. It is hard for him to read books. I fear what he will do or say in desperation to get out or relocated to a less hostile environment. Is there anything available about the psychology of the inmates newly incarcerated. He has never had to serve time before and leaves two small children at home. Does the sick feeling in my stomach ever go away and do you ever begin to

enjoy things again. [sic] Is there any one in [State]? A support group or anything?

-Offender's loved one

As the above messages indicate, the solicitation of advice often went hand in hand with requests for support. Posters would ask questions regarding their loved one's situation, while at the same time acknowledging that they have no one to turn to for help. Many times the solicitation of advice was just the asking of questions to alleviate the sense that they were alone or that their situation was abnormal. The "solicitation of advice," therefore, is an indicator for the variable level of support seeking.

Tactics used by posters to have other message board members respond to their postings were varied, but consistent on both boards. Posters would often first try to identify with a previous poster's message. This attempt to identify sometimes included personal demographics such as "I'm a college student too," or "I also lost my family five years ago." Sometimes, as in the previous examples, posters would simply begin by asking their questions or telling their stories. In many instances posters seeking support would detail as much painful information about their situation as possible in an attempt to get others on the message boards to respond to them. Many posters would detail personal problems such as being suicidal or suffering from depression.

The dimensions related to the process of seeking support relate to the number of perceived obstacles, the degree of anomie that a poster is experiencing, as well as to the poster's perception of possessing a stigmatized identity. A poster facing many obstacles might solicit support frequently and over a long period of time. On the other hand, a poster whose perception of his or her obstacles as relatively limited may only seek support infrequently, and for a shorter period of time. A poster who had previously



developed networks of support or coping strategies before victimization or incarceration may not need to seek support on a regular basis if these networks and strategies remain intact and applicable after the homicide or offense. And finally, a poster who feels that he or she is consistently managing a stigmatized identity may seek a greater level of support. This phase of the model is highly dependent upon the preceding categories before it, and pre-existing coping strategies that the posters may have developed for other situations.

### **Number of Coping Strategies Developed**

This variable intersects two stages in the model, level of support seeking and frequency of support giving. Basic properties for this variable include types of coping strategies, the duration the strategy must last, how often the strategy is necessary, and the quantity of strategies. Adding dimensionality to these properties shows us that someone who is in need of coping strategies most likely began either without needing them or with pre-existing strategies for other phenomena, and that some catalyst makes the strategies necessary to be developed or utilized. The duration for utilization of the strategy may be short or long, fragmented or consistent; the need for them may be often or seldom; a person may need many strategies or simply a few; a lot of one strategy (counseling, joining a message board, etc.). Types of coping strategies identified on the message boards included time, faith, being active within the message board community, counseling and activism.

Posters who utilized “time” as a coping strategy were essentially “waiting out” their situations. For offenders' loved ones this often meant waiting until the offender was released:

I try to take this one day at a time ... some days are good others are not!

-- Wife on an Offender

For victims' families, however, time was seen as a concept that, as it progressed forward, would eventually numb the pain of their situation, as in the following example:

I finally found some relief in time...it's been 5 years...and I am finally getting my energy back.

-- Father of Homicide Victim

“Giving things time” was also a common phrase used to convey this idea. As time progressed an offender would come home, or a murder victim survivor would grow more used to his or her situation and the pain would abate.

A second coping mechanism, faith, was used as a way to gain control over the posters' situations – situations that the posters otherwise felt powerless over. Posters would use their faith in a higher power as a way to support their wants and desires. As one poster wrote:

I am so glad that I at least believe in divine justice and if they don't pay for it now they will later.

--Murder Victim Survivor

Whereas murder victim survivors often felt that they were incapable of avenging the death of their loved ones in life, they used faith as means to vindicate themselves and their sense that justice will be served some day. This allowed the posters to gain control over their situation by believing that an afterlife could accomplish the justice they could not in their lifetimes. Offenders' loved ones use faith much the same way, except that for them faith is a source of strength to help them wait out the time until the offender's release, and a way for them to alleviate fears about the safety of the offender or the situation they will be facing upon the offender's release:

I know that God will prevail and send my husband home.

-- Wife of an Offender

I have worries of what my husband will do when released and so on...  
then I think it is in god's hands!

-- Wife of an Offender

Additionally, offenders' loved ones use faith as a means to battle anomie. Statements such as "god knows what I'm going through" or "if it wasn't for my faith" are common ways that posters cope with the state of isolation. A connection with the divine allows them to feel as if they are an integrated part of a more complex universe.

Essential to being able to cope was joining a community where people were enduring the same situation and could relate to the poster's experience.

I have just come upon this site after many months of searching for some type of support system... I hope that talking with each of you who are going through the same thing will help me.

--Mother of an Offender

Additionally, the posters who had been on the board for any length of time often posted accounts of how the community of the board helped them through difficult periods:

I don't know what I would have done had I not found this board.  
I felt very alone and confused, but all of you have made me realize I AM NOT ALONE. Thank you all!!

--Murder Victim Survivor

Beyond giving the posters a place to ask questions and receive support, the on-line community allowed the poster from both boards a place where they do not feel as if they needed to censor their statements about their situations, the seriousness of the circumstances that they were enduring, or their anger at certain institutions or people. The communities on the boards were so active that posters often discussed issues completely unrelated to the situations that brought them to the boards. Sometimes they discussed fall colors or their moving plans. Each of these personal conversations served to enhance and strengthen the support community that the posters had formed.

Finally, many posters indicated that they were seeing one or multiple counselors as a result of their circumstances, that they *had* seen a counselor at some point, that they saw a counselor off and on, or that they wanted to see a counselor but were afraid to. Besides counselors, some of the members of the board reported becoming activists for their populations. On both boards there were several public speakers and authors. The general feeling was that if they, as a murder victim survivor or the loved one of an offender, could be active and spread the word about their situation, then they were not only helping themselves cope with their situation, but potentially helping someone else.

### **Frequency of Support Giving**

As posters moved through the above stages and learned to cope with their situations they often moved into the role of “helper.” After some time learning to deal with the obstacles associated with victimization or incarceration, discovering support groups, and learning to cope with loss, posters on both boards became experts in living as a murder victim survivor or having a loved one incarcerated. These individuals could give support, and often did, without having experienced each stage in the model to an extreme level, but it was typically those posters who readily identified with another poster's story and had survived the same situation that would respond to a posting. Not all forms of support were the same. Sometimes the support was tangible, but often it was not. Some forms of support on the boards included providing information, giving advice, or offering emotional support.

Information that was provided on the board ran the gamut of topics. Often it was associated with the incarceration or victimization that brought a poster to the board, but sometimes it concerned such mundane things as how to find a proper mechanic. In each

situation, the posters who responded to such postings were frequent users of the on-line community. These frequent (and in many cases, long-time) members of the community were the most likely to respond to new members or members who appeared to be in need – no matter what the topic was.

The most typical kind of advice offered by posters on the boards was about how to deal with the criminal justice system. Both sets of loved ones often asked questions concerning how to move the trial process along, and members giving support would respond with what they went through, how they dealt with the problem, and steps that they took to try and have their voices heard that worked or not. Advice was given about the kind of support groups to access and the kind of behaviors that achieved results. Members on the site for victims were more likely to be able to offer tangible advice to other members because they could identify a greater number of support groups, most typically funded by the state or local governments. Offenders' loved ones were more likely to give another poster advice on how she could deal with her situation through the message board community, by accessing private organizations (such as Stop Prison Rape), or actions that the poster could take in her every day life (like going to see a counselor or how to take out a loan to assist the offender).

Members offered support in a variety of ways but most often by letting a poster in need know that they understood their situation and were there for them if they wanted to talk about it.

I will keep posting here for quite some time yet. If I can't help others going through the same nightmare I did then it would all be in vain.  
-- Wife of an Offender

So very sorry about your sister. My father was murdered in a home invasion three years ago so understand your pain.

-- Daughter of Homicide Victim

Additionally, members of both boards used prayer as a means of support. Comments such as “you are in my prayers” and “god bless” were ways in which posters let someone in need of support know that they were being thought of.

Additionally, support was given to members of both groups by justifying a poster's angry outburst by telling them that they had “a right to feel” the way they did. For victims' families this anger was most often projected at the offender or the criminal justice system while offenders' loved ones projected such anger at the criminal justice system and the individuals who were employed in various aspects of the system.

Outbursts of anger tended to include the dehumanization of the individuals the poster was angry at. The following passages provide an example of this:

My brother was murdered. As it seems.... Time does not heal all wounds. Below is a page I created about [name of brother].  
And the piece of garbage who killed him.  
Kill and be killed!

--Murder Victim Survivor

They don't care about us, our problems or our guys. Let's face it. They're the dregs! What can we expect from minimum wage, uneducated people who choose dead end jobs in such a negative environment?

--Offender's Loved One

Time and again the posters on the message boards would use language to dehumanize the individuals whom they perceived either as instigating or aggravating their situations.

Even more interestingly, this dehumanization of a perpetrator was almost always followed by phrases such as "our dear loved ones," "my angel," "my wonderful sister," or “the love of my life.”

The juxtaposition of phrases that dehumanized either an offender or a justice system worker with those that humanized the victim or offender became of special interest to me. After exploring all the moments in the texts where this juxtaposition occurred I wrote the following memo:

By dehumanizing the offender or a justice system worker and humanizing or idolizing the victim or offender, a poster can justify his or her own feelings of anger, hate, and helplessness. Their feelings are translated into a very human response against what they see as nonhuman or incomprehensible actions. They feel that they are enduring circumstances that are equivalent to a battle against good and evil, and as they make their situation more and more personal, the offender or individual that is aggravating their situation becomes less real, less human, and impossible to identify with.

By dichotomizing their situations in this way, and labeling themselves and others in such terms, both populations are able to regain control over their experiences. As Richard Harvey Brown (1993) suggests, classifications such as “true or false, good or bad, legal or criminal, sane or mad also are definitions of personhood, hierarchies of value, and forms for power” that act as “methods for organizing perceptions, knowledge, and moral relationships” (p. 659). Thus, families of victims and offenders were able to cope with their situations by justifying their positions and redefining their status in the context of their situations.

By classifying the offender or the justice system worker in roles that were socially or morally beneath their own, both groups were able to more effectively manage their situations and their perceptions of their own stigmatized social rankings. These classifications were essential tools that members of the message boards used in order to make mental distinctions concerning who did and who did not belong to their communities. In this way the perception of who was a “victim” and who was an

“offender” became an opportunity for members of the message boards to classify who was “human” and who was “nonhuman;” thereby reifying those aspects of the offender or justice system worker that they felt most negatively impacted their own lives, and effectively ignoring any similarities that existed between themselves and the individual classified as morally beneath them.

As I mentioned before, support givers played a vital role in allowing posters to feel justified in their anger, and in reinforcing the dehumanizing of offenders and justice system workers. At times support givers would pick up the anger of the poster they were responding to and berate the offender with them (calling him or her a “monster” or a “scumbag”), by sharing their own story of how they too dealt with the “lowlifes” at a prison, or by simply acknowledging the normalcy in the poster's anger. In this way and the others indicated, support giving is essential to the process through which a member of the message boards progresses. By participating in the forum and responding to someone's most mundane questions and the most pure anger, the posters who give support on the message boards help others through the process of learning how to cope with their new situation.

A poster may or may not, however, make the transition to giving support to others. This stage is highly dependent upon the poster's ability to develop adequate coping mechanisms that alleviate his or her degree of stress, and/or if the poster's pre-existing coping mechanisms were sufficient to assist them in dealing with their new situations. If such mechanisms never develop to a point where the poster can cope with their situation, they may never take on the role of support giver.



### **Level of Satisfaction with the Offender's Accountability**

Level of Satisfaction with the Offender's Accountability is the core variable for *Model I*. This variable relates to and influences every other aspect of the model that was developed. For instance, the less satisfied a poster is with the offender's accountability, the more difficult it is for them to move on after the initial victimization or offense. Whether or not the offender is held accountable at all and whether or not a punishment for the offender is seen as satisfactory, can have serious repercussions concerning a victim or offender's loved one's perception of obstacles in the aftermath of the murder or offense, the degree to which they experience an anomic state, the level of support they seek, or the number of coping strategies they develop.

Satisfaction is of course different for each group. As one murder victim survivor stated:

This creature has a 40 year prison sentence with no possibility of parole. We are left with a life sentence.

While a satisfactory sentence for an offender does not take away the pain, anger, and loss felt by a victim's loved one, it does allow their loved ones a perception of justice and a degree of closure. Those posters who were unhappy with the sentences or plea bargains offered to offenders, or who dealt with an unsolved crime, had a more difficult time coping with their situation. An example of this is as follows:

My sister was also murdered. She disappeared [date]. The police have always known that her husband murdered her and hid her body. My family has been working towards getting her killer convicted but so far have met with disappointment. The local prosecutor is now considering trying the case without a body but is unsure of being able to win a conviction. My family is waiting on pins and needles to find if he will try my sister's killer or not. This all has not been easy to handle, no funeral to say goodbye. No justice. Good memories of my sister have been

overshadowed by the memories of her disappearance and of someone getting away with murder.

-- Sister of a Homicide Victim

For over twenty years this poster has been dealing with a lack of closure and a prolonged relationship dealing with the authorities, waiting for someone to be held accountable for the murder. The arrest and trial/plea bargaining process were consistently identified as main stressors for victims' loved ones, with the end result being some form of closure. This poster, however, has not had an opportunity to reach that point – a variable that has exasperated the obstacles that that the poster has had to endure. As we have seen, the more difficult the obstacles a poster faces, the more likely he or she will experience a degree of anomie, and the greater his or her perception of that he or she possesses a stigmatized identity. These variables make it necessary for the poster to seek methods of support.

Offenders' loved ones are inextricably bound to the offender's accountability.

Like many of you I never dreamed that I would be married to someone serving a 7 year sentence! I thought that are biggest problem would be about money! Nobody can understand what we who visit this sight in hopes to find support go threw!

-- Wife of an Offender

Against my wishes [my son] signed a plea deal which gave him a 15 year prison sentence. This was a first time offense for him and he did not even commit the crime himself ....This is not justice, it's revenge pure and simple! I feel as if my whole world is crashing down around me.

-- Mother of an Offender

Offenders' loved ones burdened by physical factors related to the length of an offender's sentence. For example, the longer an offender is incarcerated the more money it will cost the poster (to remain in contact, deal with legal fees, assist the offender while in prison), and the more frequently he or she will have to negotiate the criminal justice system (usually during the parole process or visitation). In addition, the length of an

offender's sentence imposes emotional barriers for his or her family members as well.

The length of time the offender is incarcerated will determine the poster's separation from the offender. This will foster the poster's anomie and management of stigma, eventually leading them to seek support and develop mechanisms for coping.

It may seem that posters on the boards are concerned with whether or not the offender's sentence is "just" versus whether or not they are satisfied with that sentence; however, justice is not necessarily the prime concern of victim's or offender's family members. While they want justice to be served, it is *their* definition of justice that they are concerned with:

He killed the other person, and thank god they reduced the charges from 1st degree murder to 1st degree manslaughter. He was sentenced to 7 years. In [State] you have to serve 85% of your sentence with a violent crime. I know that I should be thankful ... that they reduced the charges, and that he didn't get life. But I am still alone, Lonely, and in my own hell.  
-- Wife of an Offender

I am grateful that there was an arrest made ... at least we positively knew who did it and a lot of questions were able to be answered that others must desperately want to know. The real heart wrenching thing for me right now is the sentencing that they received. One is charged with 2nd degree murder the other manslaughter. The first gets life with parole set at 12.5 years. The other got sentenced 8 years but the police said he will probably be out in 4 years. I am thinking how lucky my dad would have been if he only had to lie in his premature grave for 4, or 6 or 10years!!!  
-- Daughter of a Homicide Victim

I thought that if he was given the death penalty things would be easier, but I'm just as confused now.  
-- Daughter of a Homicide Victim

A poster's level of satisfaction, on either board, is not always related to the justness of the offender's sentence but, as the above passages suggest, seems to be dependent upon the poster's perception of how the sentencing directly affects him or her. For the family members of homicide victims and offenders, how satisfied they are with the offender's sentence is directly related to the hardships they face (either physical or emotional) in the

aftermath of victimization or offense, and whether or not the offender's accountability alleviates or aggravates those hardships.

Thus, this category fits the requirements for a core category as outlined by Strauss (1987) – it is *central* and relates to as many other categories as possible, it appears frequently within the data, it *relates easily* to other categories, and it provides maximum variation within the model (p. 36). The other two requirements, moving theory forward, and having clear implications for more general theory are discussed in the conclusion.

### **The Model as an Ideal Type**

The intensity, frequency, or duration of any of the given phases within this model impact the progression of a victim or offender's loved one movement through the stages to eventual develop effective coping strategies; however, it is important to recognize that this model is an ideal type. Posters may join the message board only to meet others like them selves – they may not be moving through the process that I have detailed above.

In the data used for this analysis, however, the process described by the model was a vital path toward being able to establish stability. As one poster put it:

I am getting through this by taking one day at a time right now  
and you will make it through, too  
-- Offender's Mother

Getting to the point of this poster, however, was a process. The process included facing obstacles previously unanticipated and unscripted, and feeling alone and confused to the point that seeking support was necessary for the poster's well-being.

The moments of the most intense frustration and disconnect from a posters' social life eventually lead the posters to search for help, and eventually to find others like themselves on the message boards. Once the posters find each other they are able to reconnect to social networks, and once again become part of a community. It is during the process of seeking support that posters use the on-line community as one of their

strategies for coping with the difficulty associated with the aftermath of homicide and incarceration:

You have ALOT of baggage. You only have two hands. I too have two hands. Others have two hands. All of us together can help you with your load

--Murder Victim Survivor

Thus begins the process of giving support to one another.

## **CHAPTER SIX: UNDERSTANDING THE NARRATIVES**

I proposed that this research would provide insight regarding the following:

- (1) Identifying the needs and concerns of these families in relation to the justice system
- (2) Assessing if the system is effective in addressing their needs and concerns
- (3) Understanding how these families are shaped by interaction with the system

While the model generated from this research generally discusses the importance of the criminal justice system and the relationship its employees have with individuals in these particular circumstances, a detailed explanation of the views of each group in relation to the first two research questions is needed (the last question is discussed separately), along with the implications for the model's broader applicability, as illustrated in *Model II*. Additionally, limitations of the research and suggestions for policy and practice are also mentioned.

### **Homicide Survivors**

On the whole, victims' families are not happy with the criminal justice system. The factors detailed in the below chart contribute to the level of satisfaction for a victim's family members:

**Factors Associated with Homicide Survivors' Perceptions of the Criminal Justice System and their Level of Satisfaction with the System's Policies and Procedures**

1. If they feel that law enforcement is working to solve their case
2. If the D.A. / Prosecutor keeps them involved in court proceedings, plea offers, and the status of their case
3. If there are support services offered by the state and local governments
4. If the case is solved and the offender brought to trial with what they perceive as a satisfactory sentence
5. If the offender is going to be released, do they feel that the offender is being/has been rehabilitated
6. If they feel that it was inadequate law enforcement that led to the murder in the first place (i.e. was there an arrest warrant out for the offender, was there a restraining order, did the victim call 911 and the police not come or leave early, etc.)
7. Whether or not they perceive the court system as being "offender focused" and not focusing on their rights and the rights of the victim
8. If the judge / jury / and attorneys respect their position as grieving family members during a trial
9. If the character of the victim is allowed to be attacked during the trial
10. The length of time it took for the resolution of the trial/plea bargain (if there was a resolution)

These variables, while many, are the most commonly identified stressors for murder victim survivors in relation to the criminal justice system. Additionally, these variables are often identified as obstacles that the posters must overcome, and serve to increase the degree of anomie that a poster purports.

The loved ones who are more satisfied with the court system / law enforcement tend to feel that they were respected, the system worked hard to find and prosecute the offender (or at least attempted to find them), that the punishment fit the crime committed, and that they were kept involved in the process. While some posters viewed the system in a less negative light, the majority of the posters felt that the system failed them in some way or were simply ambivalent about their dealings with the system. It was common for the posters to say, "I used to think that the system was there to help," and for them to express that they felt personally "victimized" by the system. The posters who expressed

ambivalence were typically dissatisfied in some way, but often acknowledged that there were people involved in the system that did care about their situation and tried to help them (they did not always feel this way about friends/family/or their community).

For posters who did not join the board due to dissatisfaction with the criminal justice system, stigma from their community or a general sense of depression and loneliness that related to missing their loved one was the impetus for joining. It is important to note that many of the posters indicated that they experienced all of the aforementioned obstacles; however, some posters did experience one or the other.

*Victims' loved ones: controlling for gender*

The data for victims' loved ones, while skewed toward women, does imply that there is some difference in how female and male murder victim survivors cope in the aftermath of victimization. The accounts of the men in the sample were angrier than those of the women, and were more likely to include expletives directed to the offender at the end of their messages. One example of this is a poster whose on-line signature begged the offender to "Die [Name] die!" These findings do coincide with other research that suggests that men express more anger in the aftermath of homicide than women (Spungen 1998). Both men and women were equally likely to use the message board to discuss the details of their loved ones' murders; however, women were more likely to discuss the emotional harm that the murder caused them. In addition, women were more likely to utilize the board in general, making up most of the on-line population and posting more frequently than the male members of the board.



## **Offenders' Family Members**

After analyzing the messages posted by these individuals it is very clear that they do not feel as if the system assists them in dealing with their situations. In fact, they feel as if the system stigmatizes them, punishes them for the offender's crime, and does not care whether or not they remain in contact with the offender. Concerning the last, offenders' families regularly lament that the system does everything it can to prevent them from maintaining kin ties (by shipping prisoners to prisons far away, making the visitation experience embarrassing and unpleasant, charging high rates for telephone calls, vending machine food, etc.). A source of extreme stress and concern for these individuals is trying to sustain their relationship with the offender. Many posters were not able to see their loved ones as much as they wish they could because they could not afford to maintain contact with the offenders due to the system's policies and procedures. Posters felt that they are being unfairly burdened by the system's regulations, and that the regulations conflicted with society's expectation they are expected to maintain contact and be with their loved ones in order to help with rehabilitation. As one poster lamented, they are "told that maintaining contact is good to prevent recidivism, but the system makes it difficult to do so."

Unlike victims' families, offenders' family members did not mention state-sponsored or local government-sponsored support groups in their postings on the message board. All local support groups, if there was one, were private, nonprofit groups or informal groups started by family members who lived near each other and had loved ones in the same prison. On-line support groups were mentioned often in the postings, and the posters often tried to connect with anyone in their area via the message board.

Family members of offenders describe themselves as feeling "alone," as if they are "serving a sentence" too, confused and frustrated, powerless. Their powerlessness was attributed to not being able to keep in contact with their loved ones, not being able to protect their loved one from isolation or the dangers of prison (either other inmates or the prison officials themselves), and being confused about the criminal justice system. They are often not kept in the loop by attorneys and courts, and they are not considered during the trial and sentencing phases – except in the case of capital punishment. The members of this board feel and describe themselves as being unseen by the criminal justice system, and requested the same kinds of social services that victims' families lobby for (i.e. sympathetic judges and attorneys; humane treatment by law enforcement, the media, and their communities; support groups composed of others experiencing their same circumstances).

### **Similarities in the populations' perceptions**

The degree of similarity with which offenders' and victims' loved ones view the criminal justice system and their on-line communities was surprising. Finding support groups and recognizing that there are others out there who not only understand, but know exactly what the individuals posting on the boards were going through seems to be essential to either getting on with one's life after a murder, or dealing with the waiting period that exists until an offender is released (if they are released). Members describe the on-line communities as valuable assets that assist them with feeling as if their plights are less alienating:

I found this site this week and I hope it will help me get through the many months ahead. Just reading some of these stories makes me feel that I am not alone, that this can happen to anyone, anytime

--Mother of an Offender

I really needed to vent, sorry for going on, but I feel better somehow, we are all in the same boat, I guess that saying \*misery loves company\* would apply

--Murder Victim Survivor

As the above passages indicate, the realization that a poster was part of a “thought community” was vitally important. The degree of anomie that is felt by a murder victim survivor or offender's family member is often lessened by the discovery that he or she is not alone and what they are feeling is “normal” for their particular situation.

The individuals who have discovered their respective message boards have made the first step to joining a community where they may or may not be able to find the support required, but where they do find others familiar with their situation. There were no data on the message boards to directly suggest what happens to someone who does not find a support group and develop coping strategies that work for them. If we can infer from the messages posted by the posters, describing their loved ones, it seems that severe depression, disassociation from family, friends (when relevant – the offender), and even suicide can result from not learning to adjust to the situation at hand. The following quotes are examples of the kind of situations described by members of the boards:

My real father then [after the homicide] commented suicide three months later ..... and frankly I am suicidal myself

-- Murder Victim Survivor

My mother doesn't deal with crises very well; usually displacing her anger elsewhere, I'm very sad for her, as this is the time she needs family the most, but only pushes everyone away with bitterness and hate

-- Offender's Loved One

As the above quotes suggest, the consequences of not finding help in the aftermath of victimization or offense can cause further stress and devastation to a family's well-being.

### **Reification and Imperceptions**

While the members of each group used similar language to discuss their situations, and moved through the same stages in the aftermath of victimization and incarceration, differences in what each group reified or failed to perceive about their situations are important to note (Zerubavel 1997). For murder victim survivors the anniversary of their loved one's death is a date that is constantly remembered and reified. Survivors on the message board called the date a "sadiversary," and the board itself had an entire thread devoted only to this topic. Posters reported feeling depressed and lonely on this date, as well as experiencing a need to acknowledge their lost loved one in some way. By the same token, the moment a poster was informed about the murder is referred to as a "turning point" in many of their lives, after which their views of security, society and its institutions, and humanity change. For many, learning of the method of death becomes a fixation that continues to add corrosive implications to their psychological states in the aftermath of murder.

Murder victim survivors are also highly focused on the offender and his or her punishment. Offenders are stripped of their humanity, and while speculation and frustration regarding the offender's punishment was often mentioned, the posters on the message boards did not tend to focus on the offender as a person. As previously mentioned, offenders were viewed by many on the boards as "inhuman," "scum," and "monsters," while victims were often viewed in a positive, almost angelic light. As thus, thoughts were not given to offenders' situations or their families.

On the other hand, offenders' loved ones do not reify the reason for an offender's incarceration. In fact, the reason for incarceration was often glaringly absent from most of the postings. Instead, for offenders' families, the offender's release date, the relationship between the poster and the offender, and the difficulties associated with the incarceration are reified as the foremost aspects of their situations. Each poster knew the exact time frame of her loved one's release – in some instances the *exact amount of time* until their release. As one poster wrote: “four months, six days, and twelve hours!!!!” The date of release was often a source of stress and excitement. Many posters identified it as a turning point that would mark the end of their current crisis.

By ignoring the reason for the offender's incarceration and focusing instead on the offender's release date, family members of offenders give precedent to their relationship with the offender *over* the actions of the offender. It is arguable that this may be one reason why family members of offenders have such high levels of perceived stigma. For these individuals the stress associated with the situation is more readily dealt with if it is defined in terms of *separation*. If the separation of the offender and his or her loved one is reified, then a poster is more readily able to manage the situation. If, however, the poster were to focus on the moral, ethical, and altogether more difficult issues related to the offender's crime then the offender's incarceration might be more difficult to deal with. While an offender's family members might ignore these issues, however, they recognize that others who are not associated with the offender will not ignore them. Thus, the perception of stigma is high.

### *The Social Construction of Time*

For both victims' and offenders' family members, time, as a concept, is socially constructed as a salient, tangible *thing* that marks some stage in their lives. By reifying either the death date of the victim or the release date of the offender family members of victims and offenders reference time as an obstacle that impacts their well being in some way. How the family members "reckon time" is not only intensely personal, but a social characteristic related to their particular thought communities, and social definitions of time as well (Zerubavel 1997). Death date remembrances and release date markers are temporal frameworks by which the posters map their existences. In the aftermath of victimization and incarceration the past and the future become very important for the family members of victims and offenders, so much so that the reality of the past and the future *define* their present.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

While the model developed from this analysis was derived from on-line data, its applicability is broader, and adds to the literature on family stress and coping. This model parallels Burr's (1970) research on family vulnerability and regenerative power. The model from this analysis explains an individual family member's response to a stressor event and not the entirety of the family. For the individual, what can be conceptualized as "related family hardships," is translated to "perceived difficulty of obstacles." Further, Burr's "family vulnerability" is the result of the degree of the anomic state of being of individual family members. While families as a social unit may possess "regenerative power," the ability of families to regenerate in the aftermath of a stressful event depends on the ability of each member to develop effective coping strategies. Additionally, the inclusion of perception and identity in both models supports Boss (2002)'s assertion that individual perceptions are essential to understanding how people react after stressful events, and how interactions between individuals are shaped by these perceptions. As the findings from this study suggest, the regenerative power of individuals after an event such as incarceration or victimization is highly dependent upon the individual's *understanding* of that event.

Burr's model may explain some of the variation in family functioning in the aftermath of stressor events, but the model itself treats the family as a unit and negates the individual lives that construct that unit. The regenerative power of families as a whole is questionable. As this research suggests, individual members of a family may

not recover after the victimization or incarceration of a loved one. The impact of the failure of a member to develop coping strategies can further add further stress to the other members of that unit; however, that does not mean that members cannot recover from stressful happenings, only that every member may not recover. I suggest that using the family as a unit of analysis may give a too general, and oftentimes incomplete, understanding of the recovery after a stressor event. I suggest, as Boss (2002) does, that examining families in terms of the individual members who compose them first, and then as a unit second, may provide greater insight into how families manage traumatic events such as incarceration or victimization. Inasmuch as individuals often project stress and can be instrumental in either creating or alleviating stress for social groups, the individual is a more appropriate unit of analysis.

The support seeking/support giving aspect of this model nicely integrates into the existing literature on support seeking. For instance, recognition that one needs to seek support is not automatic. As Bringle and Myers suggest (1997), before one seeks help one has to recognize a problem that defines a need for help, and make the decision to seek help for the problem. Several factors may precede an individual's decision to seek help. For instance, one may procrastinate, resign oneself to the problem, and/or discuss the problem with family and friends (p. 299). For members of the message boards, the desire to seek help is palpable, and simply coming to the message boards is indicative of making the decision. Additionally, members discuss seeking a range of other methods of support. While the message board itself is only one method for seeking help, the on-line community offers individuals something that traditional institutional or professional help-



seeking services do not: 24-hour community-oriented advice and support, and a chance to confer with multiple “experts” on a topic.

The existence of similar research on coping with stress and help seeking indicates that *Model I* is applicable beyond the on-line communities of these groups, and can at the very least be applied when individuals are dealing with a stressor related to institutions that dictate rules of social interaction, as *Model II* (see Appendix) suggests. For instance, for some social phenomena the rules of behavior may not be as clearly delineated as others. The victimization or incarceration of a loved one serve as two examples of these type of phenomena. The lack of a set social script, and the perception that victimization or incarceration are stigmatizing events by those affected by them, pose certain questions concerning how individuals faced with particular social circumstances negotiate an environment and situation they did not expect. I suggest that this model begins to explain the negotiation of these types of situations, and that further research may show that variations of this model are generally applicable to situations where a member of a family or member of a close social network is unexpectedly institutionalized (See *Model II*).

### **Suggestions for Practice and Policy**

From the complaints of murder victim survivors we may infer several things. First, contact with professionals in the criminal justice system can directly shape their emotional experiences in the aftermath of a homicide. Many of their concerns are related to feeling as if the system is uninterested in their needs. Inasmuch as the system itself is personified through its professionals, contact with professionals who are caring or professionals who are disinterested in their situations not only shapes their impressions of the system, but can serve to either aggravate or alleviate the pain caused in the aftermath

of homicide. Additionally, the dissemination of information regarding the system's workings was critical. A murder victim survivor who received information from law enforcement officials felt as if he or she was part of the process of ensuring that their loved one's murderer received justice; whereas those who did not receive information or were barred from information called the system "offender centered." These findings indicate that a vast majority of murder victim survivors perceive the system as unresponsive to their needs, and failing to address their primary concerns.

While the aforementioned is true of victims' family members, it is even truer for offenders' family members. I suggest that policy should be implemented to include an offender's family in the court process. Providing information to offenders' families is vital to the well-being of the individuals to whom society looks for the prevention of recidivism. Without their inclusion we are only assisting one of the populations whose participation in the criminal justice process is vital for in the mediation of justice.

This study supported findings from previous research regarding the similarities in the responses of offenders' and victims' families in the aftermath of criminal proceedings (King and Norgard 2003). I reiterate the suggestions offered by Beck et al. (2003) and Eschholz et al. (2003) that offenders' family members should be integrated into the same social services that are currently available for victims' families. As mentioned, while victims' families often describe being unhappy with their treatment by the criminal justice system, they did acknowledge structural support from the system – in terms of victims' rights, restorative justice programs, and victim-witness assistance programs. Offenders' families are often not included in these support groups (although the movement to

include them is alive in the restorative justice literature), but could be easily assimilated into the already existing programs offered by state and local communities.

Additionally, as King and Norgard (2003) suggest, the education of law enforcement officials and other employees of the criminal justice system cannot be advocated enough. The inability of the system to properly address the needs of these individuals is detrimental to individual lives, and a critical aggravate of the situation that these families and individuals find themselves in. While supportive infrastructure may not be a solution that is immediately accessible to these populations, caring officials should be a mandatory requirement. Inasmuch as the criminal justice system as an institution is delineated through interactions with the individuals who make up its various parts, the system itself cannot be viewed as having a positive role in determining and enforcing justice until its standards on interacting with the public are addressed.

### **Limitations of the Research**

There are several important limitations to this research. First, there is no way to know if the findings from the research will be applicable to a larger population of U.S. offenders' and victims' friends and families. The lack of a consistent method for building the sample in this analysis is a serious limitation; however, this study is largely exploratory. Research on how offenders' and victims' families perceive their negotiation of the criminal justice system is relatively new, and an exploratory study that attempts to determine how these families socially construct their particular situations is both timely and appropriate for these social phenomena (Babbie 2002; Neuman 2003).

While there was some opportunity to compare and contrast the difference between murder victim survivors based on gender, the all female sample for offenders' loved ones

is problematic. Like previous researchers before me, this study largely focuses on the feminine response to incarceration. Only comparisons between male and female family members will confirm whether or not the findings from this study are applicable to men as well as women. Unfortunately, for this research, permission was only granted to gather data from one message board for this population, and the message board ended up being frequented by women only.

Lack of control for socioeconomic status is problematic when determining the broader applicability of the findings from this research. As mentioned, victims' and offenders' families typically come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and are disproportionately minority. While Internet users are becoming more diverse, the majority are white and middle class (Burgess et al. 2001). While socioeconomic status could not be determined from this sample, the probability of the sample being skewed toward those with better means is high. Additionally, another important possible limitation in this study is that the findings may only be applicable to the on-line communities of victims' and offenders' loved ones. Though I suggest that the findings may pertain to a wider scope of situations, without further research this suggestion is not supported.

Finally, one last note about gender and offenders' loved ones. It is interesting that the board I used to gather data from this population had a forum set aside specifically for men with incarcerated loved ones. Only three postings have been placed on this forum from 2001 to the present. One of these postings was a reporter seeking respondents for a news article.

### **Contributions of the Research**

This study highlighted the similarity of the experiences of homicide victims' and offenders' families in the aftermath of victimization or incarceration – further supporting previous literature doing the same (King and Norgard 2003), and illustrated that offenders' families often request the same kind of social services that victims' families lobby for in victims' rights movements. Further, this study found that both groups experience the same stages while attempting to seek support and assistance in the aftermath of victimization or incarceration, highlighting that support is necessary and pertinent to the well-being of these populations.

The major contribution of this research, however, are the findings that both victims' and offenders' loved ones perceive the criminal justice system as ineffective, uncommunicative, and difficult to negotiate. This suggests that the system itself is in need of a drastic overhaul concerning how it mediates justice and interacts with the individuals that must come into contact with it.

### **Suggestions on future research**

To really understand the applicability of this research it is vital to explore the differences between how men and women in these populations respond to the stress imposed by their circumstances. The tendency for the women to more actively utilize these on-line support groups may not be an isolated event. The findings for offenders' loved ones are consistent with prior research indicating that the psychological impact of incarceration is more salient for women. These findings, however, could be indicative of a more complex gendered social world where women feel more comfortable sharing emotional responses to trauma than men. Further research on the differences and

similarities in responses is necessary for the purpose of establishing community-run and government supported programs to assist these individuals. Thus far research has focused mainly on comparisons between offenders and victims in relation to capital crimes. Further attention should be made to victims' and offenders' families *in general*, not simply those enduring the trauma of dealing of with death penalty proceedings.

Without negating the situations of either population, comparisons between victims' and offenders' families should be more developed in the literature. Implications that both groups would benefit from many of the same social service programs should be further explored. Doing so may also help strengthen restorative justice movements, and facilitate greater openness in the criminal justice system. Additionally, further research on the policies and procedures of the criminal justice system itself is highly recommended. The apparent ineffectiveness of current practices in relation to victims' and offenders' families may not be the only issue facing the system.

Finally, the literature on victims' families, their grieving process, and their social service needs is developed; however, studies of the social demographics of these families are also necessary. The social biographies of these individuals may help with our understanding of how they grieve, cope in the aftermath of the homicide, and further our understanding of their similarities and differences in relation to offenders' families.

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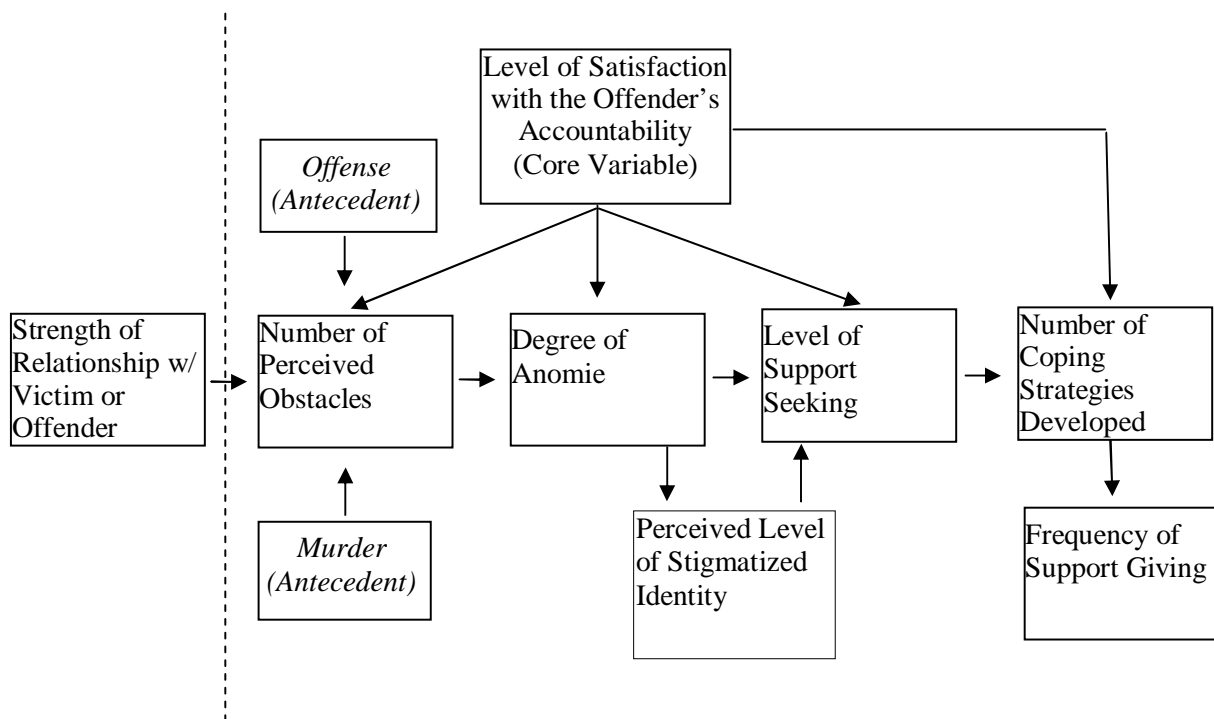
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## APPENDIX A

### Model I: Support seeking model for victims' and offenders' families



\*Strength of Relationship w/ victim or offender is an influencing, independent variable. This variable will directly affect the number of perceived obstacles that a family member faces.

## APPENDIX B

### Model II:

Theoretically this conceptual model could be applicable, but not limited, to individuals who have a loved one hospitalized for psychiatric or physical problems, in foster care, a loved one in a nursing home or assisted living program, or a loved one who is missing for some reason.

