Psychosocial Sequelae of Homicide among Murder Victims’ Family Members: An Appraisal of Depression, Grief, and Posttraumatic Stress

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Abstract

The current investigation explored what is known regarding the psychological sequelae of the post-homicide experience for murder victims’ family members and friends (MVFM). Participants were also asked about whether they felt they had attained closure, a term which populates anecdotal and theoretical accounts of MVFM’s experience. Previous literature guided a theoretical definition of closure as a dimensional construct that represents adaptive functioning following a murder, and includes (1) absence of disabling symptomatology, (2) absence of ruminations about the event or murder victim, and (3) subjective return to baseline functioning. This quasi-experiment consisted of a between-subjects cross-sectional design. The dependent variable (DV) was the post-homicide psychological functioning of the participant, consisting of (1) depressive, posttraumatic stress, and complicated grief symptomatology as well as (2) self-reports of closure. The independent variable (IV) is the perpetrators’ case disposition. Participants (N = 92) were recruited via organizations that serve MVFM as well as a sample of MVFM selected from a random sample of death row inmates. All participants were administered a structured interview and standardized psychodiagnostic measures by telephone. Of the total sample, 33% of the participants’ offenders were sentenced to LWOP, 25% to death, 14.1% to a sentence less than LWOP, and 2.2% were found Not Guilty By Reason of Insanity. Twenty-three (25.0%) participants’ offenders did not qualify for a penal sentence, as the case was unsolved (n = 10), the trial or sentencing phase was in process (n = 7), or the offender took his or her own life during the course of the murder (n = 4). Participants were, on average, approximately 15 years post-homicide at the time of the interview. Participants were diverse with regard to age and geography, but were disproportionately female (83.7%) and Caucasian (81.5%). The results of the current study indicated that participants were highly symptomatic, with particularly high rates of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Complicated Grief. Few MVFM were amenable to endorsing closure regardless of penal sentence. Sentence of the offender was correlated with PTSD scores and was uncorrelated with scores of depression, complicated grief, and quality of life. The results of the current study suggest a conceptual distinction between these often conflated diagnoses for this population and impart empirical insight into the commonly-held yet largely untested assumption that the DP serves a restorative, if not psychologically rehabilitative, function for survivors.