Grieving the Loss of a Father to Death Row: Disenfranchised Grief and Nonfinite Loss Confronting the Children of Death Row Inmates

National Children of Incarcerated Parents Conference

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“The Forgotten Victims”

- In 2004, initiated research project with death row inmates and their families in Delaware
- My study examines the grieving process experienced by the families of death row inmates from the time of arrest to execution and beyond.
- Clinical interventions are offered for mental health professionals who provide services for this population at various stages of their grieving process.

Children of Death Row Inmates face increased risks, as compared to children of the incarcerated in general, as they have to contend with the following:

- 1) the probability that their parent will die an untimely death at the hands of the state
- 2) the fact that many in their community will support the death
- 3) intense media attention, particularly during times of increased pain and anxiety to include the announcement of an execution date
- 4) the often highly restrictive rules involving death row visitation
- 5) the anticipatory feeling of grief and anxiety associated with an impending death
Estimated Number of Children with Parents on Death Row

The first recorded, state-sanctioned execution in the American colonies occurred in 1608; since that time, at least 15,921 people in the United States have met the same fate.

As of July 1, 2017, there are 2,817 individuals serving death sentences across the nation. If each of these death row inmates has two children (a very conservative estimate), then 5,634 children are currently facing the impending execution of a parent, and their experience has been shared by nearly 32,000 children in the United States before them.

If my count includes the children of the 161 people who have been exonerated since 1973, approximately three hundred and twenty-two additional children have faced the fear of their parents’ execution.


This number of death row inmates and exonerees is reported by the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC), as of April 12, 2018.
Additional Children Affected

Any estimate of the total number of youth affected by an execution or by the death sentence of an inmate grows significantly when taking into consideration not only the children of these inmates, but also ......

- siblings
- nieces/ nephews
- cousins
- grandchildren
- children of the inmates’ close friends
- children of alleged victims
Factors Impacting the Relationship between Child and Father on Death Row

- Knowledge of who the child’s father is, as well as why he is incarcerated, and the sentence he has been given
- Age of child at the time parent is sent to death row
- The length of time the child was afforded to build a relationship with her father prior to his arrest for capital murder, as well as the quality of that time she shared with him
- Frequency of visits at the prison, phone calls, letters; emotional state of child following contact with parent
- Obstacles imposed by the prison (policies around visits and phone calls)
- Support system encouraging of the relationship between child and parent
- Quality of relationship between condemned parent and custodial parent/guardian
Valerie and Rodney: Stigma and Social Isolation

- The week after her father’s execution, Valerie returned to school and a girl in her class was making fun of her, along with many other students “behind my back.” Valerie said that when this girl approached her: “She’s like, I found out about your Dad and everything and like what did he do, and she wouldn’t leave me alone.”

- Several children I interviewed had negative confrontations with other children who were related to the victims of their fathers. These interactions further disenfranchised them from their grief. Rodney regrets confiding in a friend about his father being on death row after an incident occurred in which his friend told someone else “He had a necklace on with an ‘A’ that stood for Amber. I told my friend that my Dad killed her. So he kept staring at me and my friend went up to him and he told him and then we started to fight.” After this incident, Rodney’s position is “Now, I don’t tell no one.”
Kwame: Lack of privacy at visits

“The whole time we get to visit she talking. I’m backed up behind the thing because he couldn’t see me because all his attention on her. Every time I try to talk, she talk. I barely got to say anything. And then he is like, ‘Move up, move up, don’t sit back there.’ .... It don’t matter if you’re his mom. We’re his kids! When you’re older, you can go anytime. We can’t just walk in there and say let me see our Dad. That’s a rule that needs to be done where kids are able to go and have the mom wait in the waiting room, while you go and see your Dad.”
Quinton and Debbie: No contact visit behind glass

“The glass makes me angry too. It would be different without the glass. I could hug him, talk to him, and we could really talk” (son)

“I couldn’t even tell you the last time I got to touch him. He is always behind the glass, always behind the grit. I can barely hear. They don’t want us to come visit them. But my thing is, how would they feel if it was their kid, their brother, their sister?!” (sister)
Death Row Families/Children
Multifaceted Grieving Process

Death row families experience a unique grieving process:
- Anticipatory Grief
- Ambiguous Loss
- Traumatic Grief
- Loss of Assumptive World
- Disenfranchised grief
- Nonfinite loss
Anticipatory Grief

- Defined as responses to the expectation of death or loss; not simply grief that has begun in advance, rather it is different from post-mortem grief both in duration and form.

- While various social rituals exist to help bereaved people after a death, this kind of support is typically not available before a death.

- Forewarning is not a sufficient condition for realistic anticipation (those who are forewarned about the death of a loved one may not act on it)
Ambiguous Loss

- These griever suffering from one or both of the basic types of ambiguous loss, to one degree or another, at one time or another, perceiving their loved one as:
  - Physically absent but psychologically present
  - Physically present but psychologically absent
- Their loss has immobilized them due to their mixed emotions & uncertainty about outcome
- They find it difficult to problem-solve due to the uncertainty of eventual outcome; they long for certainty, whether news of their loved one’s condition brings good or bad news
Traumatic Grief

“The state of having suffered the loss of a loved one when grief and mourning over the death is empowered by the traumatic stress brought about by its circumstances” (Rando, 2012).

Rando has identified 12 high-risk elements for traumatic bereavement:

1) sudden death
2) Violence and its consequences
3) human-caused event
4) suffering (physical or emotional) of the loved one prior to the death
5) unnaturalness
6) preventability
7) intent of the responsible agent(s)
8) randomness
9) multiple deaths
10) one’s own personal encounter with death
11) untimeliness of the deceased’s youth
12) loss of one’s child

Loss of the Assumptive World

- Assumptive World: “the only world we know and it includes everything we know or think we know. It includes our interpretation of the past and our expectations of the future, our plans and our prejudices” (Parkes, 1971)

- With the loss of the assumptive world, the newly bereaved question their prior beliefs and/or taken for granted assumptions about the world and become disillusioned.

- Common sentiment expressed by the children toward the system:
  “Why do they call it a ‘correctional facility’ when they don’t correct anyone? It’s like if they do something wrong, they don’t get a second chance! It’s like we’re in prison too. I just have a lot of anger for the system.”

Disenfranchised Grief

Disenfranchised grievers are considered to be outside of the “grieving rules” of society; their loss cannot be socially sanctioned, openly acknowledged or publicly mourned.

- Grief can be disenfranchised in 3 primary ways:
  - The relationship is not recognized
  - The loss is not recognized
  - The griever is not recognized

Disenfranchised Grief of Death Row Families

- The relationships between family members and their loved ones on death row are rarely recognized. The offender is made to look like such a monster or villain that it is difficult to imagine the existence of loved ones.

- The loss of death row families is not recognized as a real “loss”; family members are considered “better off” without a heinous murderer in their family.

- If these family members are even recognized by others in the community at all, they are typically presumed to be highly dysfunctional, therefore, blamed for the murderous behavior of their loved one.
The criminal justice system and the media ignore the family’s grief

“We were not told he was arrested...I got a call from a friend who had seen the news that morning that said he had been arrested. I was in shock. The first thing I did...I had the number to the detective who had come to me for questioning earlier and he said yes, it was true. I just kept thinking, Oh my God, my kids don’t know this! I was like, I have to tell my kids, who were at school. Then I saw the number of my daughter’s school on my caller ID. I was like, Oh my God, she knows! I need to get to her, I need to get to her!” (mother)
Nonfinite Loss

Situations in which losses are slowly manifested over time, and often do not have an impending ending; the grieving person experiences chronic despair as he/she is lost between two worlds, one that is known and one that is dreaded.

Three conditions for nonfinite loss:
- Loss must be continuous; often follows a major event
- Developmental expectations cannot be met
- Loss of one’s hopes and ideals

“Nonfinite Loss” (Bruce & Shultz, 2001)
Nonfinite Loss of Death Row Families

- The pain starts after a specific event: the alleged crime and subsequent arrest of loved one.
- With each new phase of their loss (arrest, conviction, sentencing, death warrants, and numerous failed appeals, and eventual execution of loved one), the family members feel as though they are experiencing the loss for the first time.
- Inability to meet developmental expectations: unmet milestones are not only felt by the incarcerated, but by the family members too.
- Loss of hopes and ideals leads to disillusionment: family loses ideal of what their government means to them and the ideal of justice by the criminal justice system.
- Family members grieve changes within their own identity.
- The more challenging task before the families is reaching a level of acceptance that many of their hopes and dreams for their loved one’s life would most likely never be realized.
Nonfinite Loss Experienced by the Children of Death Row Inmates

- The continuous, anticipatory nature of a nonfinite loss is responsible for the sadness that arises among the children when social milestones go unmet for their father.

- When social milestones go unmet for the fathers on death row, the children often feel uncomfortable sharing their sadness from such unfulfilled expectations with their incarcerated father.

- This is particularly the case when momentary occasions of happiness present themselves within the family.
  - For example: Ashley’s reluctance to share her wedding pictures with her father due to her concern that he would be sad that he wasn’t able to be there with his daughter on her special day.
Ashley:
(nonfinite loss)

“I don’t want to sound like I’m missing things, like it is all about me, but I’m missing out on a lot with him, like when I bought my first car because I didn’t have him there for me to help me pick out what I wanted. He didn’t get to see me prom night and then there was graduation. Like I am planning to get married next year and he won’t be here to walk me down the aisle. It’s things like that I will miss.”


