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Meaning Making after
Homicide: An Exploratory
Study of Experiences of
People of Color

ABSTRACT

This study examined the ways survivors of homicide victims make meaning in the aftermath of homicide as a part of the post loss coping process. The particular focus of the study were survivors of Color because communities of Color experience higher numbers of homicides than Whites. Meaning making was conceptualized through the theory of assumptive structure and the conceptualization of meaning proposed by Janoff-Bulman and Frantz (1997) by distinguishing between meaning as significance and meaning as comprehensibility.

Twelve survivors of homicide victims from Massachusetts, ten of them people of Color, were recruited through the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute, Dorchester, MA. The participants were interviewed about the meaning, if any, that they attributed to their loss as such, as well as about how they find meaning in their life after the loss.

The findings of the study showed that meaning making seems to be an important part of survivors' experience after the loss of a family member to homicide. The prevalent ways of meaning making were: adjustment of the assumptive structure, benefiting from the experience (meaning as significance) and finding meaning through action. Religious beliefs appeared to assist survivors in finding meaning.

MEANING MAKING AFTER HOMICIDE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF
EXPERIENCES OF PEOPLE OF COLOR

A project based upon an investigation at the Louis D.
Brown Peace Institute, Dorchester, Massachusetts,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2007

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
III. METHODOLOGY	23
IV. FINDINGS	30
V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS.....	50
REFERENCES.....	62
APPENDIXES	
Appendix A: Informed Consent Form.....	65
Appendix B: Approval Letter from the Human Subjects Review Committee	67
Appendix C: Demographic Questionnaire.....	68
Appendix D: Interview Guide.....	69
Appendix E: Script for Initial Phone Contact with Possible Participants	70

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Homicides in the U.S. take a high toll on people's lives. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, in 2004 homicide was one of the 15 leading causes of death in the U.S. In that year, 17,357 Americans were the victims of homicide. In 2002 homicide was the leading cause of death for African Americans aged 15 to 34 years, the second leading cause of death for Hispanics aged 15 to 34 years and for Asian Pacific Islanders aged 15 to 24 years, and the third leading cause of death for American Indians and Alaskan Natives of all age groups (U.S. Department of Health and Youth Services). Those affected by homicide multiply if we think of the communities of survivors left to grieve. Homicide involves two categories of victims; besides the murdered person itself, there are also surviving family, friends, and loved ones. Although the term *survivor of homicide victim* can be applied to a broader community such as school, neighborhood, congregation etc., most researchers (Amick-McMullan, Kilpatrick, & Resnik, 1991; Armour, 2002; Hertz, Prothrow-Stith & Chery, 2005) as well as the present thesis use the term *survivor of homicide victim* as pertaining only to the family members or significant others of a person who died by homicide. Nevertheless, this definition of victims significantly extends the discussion about the effects of homicide to a broader population.

A telephone study of 12,500 nationally representative adult individuals showed that about 9 % of the subjects had lost a family member or a friend to homicide (Amick-McMullan et al., 1991). Similarly, Resnick, Kilpatrick, Dansky, Saunders, & Best (1993) reported a rate of homicide of a family member of 13% in a study of 4,000 women. Those numbers draw our attention to the devastating consequences of this crime for survivors and make investigation of their adjustment an important area of social work research.

Homicide represents an extreme form of traumatic loss for survivors. Survivors of homicide victims are described as dealing with issues of grief as well as traumatic stress reactions (Armour, 2002; Amick-McMillan et al, 1989; Rynearson,1993), which significantly complicates the coping process. The literature maintains that search for meaning is an apparent need that many bereaved have: “meaning making plays a central role in the process of adjusting to loss and trauma because it serves to maintain two aspects of our sense of self that often are most threatened by loss and trauma: our sense of self-worth and our most fundamental beliefs or assumptions about how the world works (assumptive worlds or worldviews)” (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001, p. 727).

Furthermore, for survivors of homicide victims the search for meaning might be complicated by additional factors, such as the unexpectedness of the death, the cruelty of the means of death, as well as the high publicity that usually accompanies homicide cases.

The purpose of this study is to explore if and how survivors of homicide victims make meaning of the homicide of a family member. The particular focus of this study is the survivors of homicide victims from communities of Color. While those communities are affected by high numbers of homicide, there is no literature on how survivors of

Color make meaning in the aftermath of homicide. This exploratory study consists of semi-structured interviews with 12 participants.

Although there are several theoretical perspectives on what is involved in meaning making, this phenomenon lacks rigorous theoretical conceptualization due to its abstract nature. This study uses the theoretical concept of meaning making as adjustment of assumptive structure that a person had before the event (2000 Braun & Berg, 1994; Davis et al. 2000; Janoff-Bulmann, 1992; Wheeler), as well as the theory developed by Janoff-Bulman & Frantz (1997). Janoff-Bulman and Frantz distinguish between *meaning as significance* defined as the process of finding value or worth in the experience as well as possibly benefiting from it; and *meaning as comprehensibility* defined as making meaning by “questioning whether something ‘makes sense’ and whether it fits with a system of accepted rules or theories” (p. 91)

This study will contribute to the field of social work by expanding the knowledge about the potentially traumatized population of survivors of homicide victims. The specific focus on recruiting people of Color is essential since according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, U.S. Department of Justice, in 2004 homicide victimization rates for African- Americans, for instance, were 6 times higher and offending rates were 7 times higher than the rates for whites.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Several strands of literature are of interest for this investigation. The first section introduces the literature on the phenomena of traumatic loss. The second section focuses more specifically on homicide as a form of traumatic loss. The third section investigates meaning making in coping with traumatic loss in general. The last section will deal more specifically with meaning making in the aftermath of homicide.

Traumatic Loss

Not surprisingly, bereavement, whether through homicide or other causes, represents a major life stressor, which is known to be associated with adverse effects on physical and mental health of an individual (Shear & Smith-Caroff, 2002). Generally, the literature provides strong evidence that all types of violent death are associated with negative mental health outcomes for survivors (Murphy, Johnson, Wu, Fan & Lohan, 2003). However, those who develop traumatic stress reactions as response to traumatic loss are even more at risk for mental and physical complications. In a study involving 150 bereaved spouses, subjects with high levels of traumatic grief were significantly more likely to develop health problems such as cancer, heart problems, unhealthy eating

habits as well as have higher risk for suicidal ideation as those bereaved who did not develop traumatic stress reactions in response to the loss (Prigerson, Bierhals, Kasl, Reynolds, Shear, Day, Beery, Newsom, & Jacobs, 1997).

For decades, research of bereavement after traumatic loss has focused on what factors influence adjustment outcomes and whether one mode of death has more detrimental affects on the bereaved than the other. As Shear et al. (2002) noted, “manifestations of grief vary in intensity and duration, depending upon the relationship with the deceased, the mode and timing of the death, characteristics of the bereaved, and other factors”(p. 1). Certain factors are generally associated with more prolonged or complicated bereavement (Green, Krupnick, Stockton, Goodman, & Petty, 2001; Redmond, 1996; Hertz et al., 2005). Those factors include: 1) death perpetrated by another human, 2) death that is unexpected, untimely or sudden, 3) death that is horrific, grotesque or painful, 4) death that is violent or stigmatized in some way, 5) death that involves multiple losses, 6) death of a child. The mentioned factors can be divided into two groups: mode of death (1,3,4,5) and timing of death (2,6). Davis, Wortman, Lehman, & Silver (2000) have identified, additional factors that might complicate the process of grieving. These include cases in which the death occurred of someone’s negligence, or if the survivor struggles with such issues as whether the loved one experienced suffering before death, or whether the loved one knew that he or she was going to die (Davis et al., 2000, p. 517). Also, as noted by Davis et al. (2000), “the literature provides clear evidence that mothers suffer more following the death of a child than do fathers, perhaps because of their greater investment in caring for the child. Those who lose an only child typically show greater distress than those who have surviving children” (p.521). There is

no clear consensus, however, on which of these factors have more adverse effect on adjustment. The mode of death and timing of death received major attention in the literature, whose findings will be briefly summarized below. I will also report research on two aspects of particular relevance for the present thesis, gender and race.

Mode of Death

Green, Krupnick, Stockton, Goodman, Corcoran, & Petty (2001) and Kaltman & Bonnano (2003) present evidence that the mode of death is the major factor associated with both PTSD symptoms and prolonged traumatic grief and depression. Green et al. (2001) compared the levels of PTSD, social adjustment and general psychiatric symptoms in three groups of undergraduate females: those with (1) no reported history of trauma, (2) a single physical assault as the only trauma, or (3) a single violent loss as the only trauma. The findings of the study indicated that symptoms of PTSD were higher in the violent loss group, whereas the physical assault group showed the highest distress level in general.¹

Timing of Death

By contrast, Kitson (2000) presents evidence that the mode of death does not influence the adjustment process, but the timing does. He examined the role of mode of death, unexpectedness of death, age, race, and marital status on psychological symptoms

¹ Another interesting finding was that while the death of a parent or sibling was associated with general distress and grief, in the traumatic loss group stress disorders (PTSD) were associated with the death of a friend rather than a family. Green et al. (2001) speculated that the traumatic death of a peer “strongly triggers the existential confrontation with one’s own mortality” (p. 832) and leads to more intrusive reexperiencing of the peer’s death.

for Black and White widows approximately 6 month after their husband's death. There was no significant correlation between the mode of death and the distress level when violent death widows were compared to the spouses of natural death victims. However, an unexpected finding of the study was that widows of husbands who died as a result of prolonged illness were more distressed than widows of men who died from a sudden violent or natural death. Kitson (2000) finds that the youngest widows (ages 18-34) and middle age widows (35-50) have similar scores in loss adjustment, with older widows (51-74) being least distressed and the youngest widows being most distressed. Kitson (2000) maintains that the off-timeness of a death and "the time in the survivor's life that the death occurred" (p. S349) may play a decisive role in the adjustment process, with more distress when a survivor is younger. This finding corresponds with previous and subsequent research (see the overview in Lopata, 1996; Parkes, 2001).

Race

Another important aspect that might account for bereavement differences after traumatic loss and that did not receive a lot of scientific attention is race. Several studies have suggested that Black widowed persons experience less distress than White widowed persons (Gove & Shin, 1989; Wortman et al., 1993, quoted in Kitson, 2000, p.342) due to more "familiarity" with life hardships and generally higher rates of homicide in African-American communities, which makes death a less unusual event and the support system more extensive. Kitson (2000) had hypothesized that Blacks have stronger religious ties that help them in coping, but found, ultimately, that in his sample, Black widows did not cope more easily with death and, in fact, had higher scores on several psychological

symptoms scales. This result cautions against simple predictions based on general living conditions rather than on closer examination of the complex interaction of various factors. Kitson (2000) himself explains the unexpected result with possible mistaken assumption due to the “little previous research on psychological adjustment by race and still less on bereavement differences” (p.350).

Gender

Yet another factor that is thought to influence bereavement process after traumatic loss is gender. In regards to bereavement in general, research shows that women more frequently use emotion-focused coping than men (Parkes, 2001; Van Heck & De Ridder, 2001), and are more likely than men to report psychiatric symptoms and seek psychiatric help during the first year of bereavement (Parkes, 2001). At the same time, there are many more men than women who die of a cardiac problems during the first year after the death of their wives (Parkes, 2001). Stroebe & Stroebe (1993) conclude that men have greater difficulties adjusting to the death of a spouse, with younger men having most difficulties after the unanticipated death of the wife (p. 195). One possible explanation is that men are less accustomed to taking care of themselves and to maintaining and developing social relationships (Berardo, 1970, quoted in Lopata, 1996). Another explanation might be that unlike widows, widowers more often have strained relationships with their children, and that makes it more difficult for widowers to find support (Wortman, Silver, & Kessler, 1993, p. 359)

Summary

In summary, while there have been promising first steps towards understanding the process of coping with traumatic loss and the factors contributing to it, much remains to be studied. Of particular interest for the present study is the unresolved role of race in the coping process. While Kitson (2000) provides some evidence that Blacks face more difficulties adjusting, he himself called for more studies of this issue.

Homicide as Traumatic Loss

Bereavement by homicide is an especially adverse form of traumatic loss and is associated with prolonged and complicated grief as well as high level of stress reactions (Green, Krupnick, Stockton, Goodman & Petty, 2001; Murphy, Chung & Johnson, 2002; Redmond, 1996; Rynearson, McCreery, 1993). Survivors of homicide victims more frequently report traumatic distress than victims of non crime trauma (Resnick et al., 1993). Complicating factors of homicide are that the bereavement process can be significantly challenged by anger and preoccupation with revenge, fear of further assault, possible withdrawal of support in case the perpetrator is a friend or a family member, media intrusion, and the need to negotiate with the justice system in times of high emotional stress (Hertz et al., 2005).

The earliest research on bereavement after homicide was anchored in the framework of grief, with the major idea of adjustment to the loss by moving through grief stages, such as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (Bowlby, 1963; Burgess, 1975). Subsequent research, although it did not deny the grief paradigm,

also focused on assessment of PTSD symptoms in survivors of homicide victims. The PTSD reactions to traumatic loss are usually described as re-experiencing, flashbacks, and dreams of reenactment (Rynearson et al., 1993). In their telephone study, Amick-McMullan et al. (1991) found that 23.3% of survivors of criminal homicide or traffic accidents victims developed PTSD at some point in their lifetime post loss, and 4.8% met full diagnostic criteria for PTSD during the subsequent 6 months post loss, while Resnick et al. (1993) report a lifetime rate of PTSD of about 22% in homicide survivors. In a longitudinal study, Murphy et al. (2003) observed 173 parents 4, 12, 24, and 60 month after the death of their children in a accident, suicide, or homicide and examined the influence of these three types of death on mental distress, PTSD symptoms, acceptance of the child's death, and marital satisfaction. Parents bereaved by homicide showed significantly higher PTSD symptoms than parents in the other two groups (they also showed the highest scores on mental distress and the lowest score on acceptance of death and marital satisfaction, although those differences were not statistically different).

Meaning-Making in Coping with Traumatic Loss

Meaning making as part of the adjustment process to traumatic loss has drawn significant attention by researchers. The following will introduce the literature on (1) theoretical concepts of what is involved in meaning making, and (2) factors influencing the search for meaning.

Theoretical Concepts Describing Meaning Making

Searching for meaning after a traumatic life event has been explained as an integral part of an adjustment process (Armour, 2003; Janoff-Bulman & McPerson, 1997; Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Neimeyer, 2000). According to Neimeyer (1998) the attempt to reconstruct meaning is the “central process in the experience of grieving” (p. 83). Davis, Wortman, Lehman & Silver (2000) explained that the perception of the importance of meaning for the bereavement process might be so prevalent because “the search for meaning is so commonly observed among people coping with loss, and because those facing a tragedy often seem so compelled to make some sense of it” (p. 498). However, meaning making as a complex phenomenon has not yet found a unified theoretical explanation. The main theoretical perspectives will be described below followed by a working definition of meaning making used in this study.

Generally, one can divide the theoretical perspectives on meaning making into two groups: those that provide broad conceptual understanding and those that describe the mechanisms of meaning making.

In the cognitive framework, adjustment to a traumatic event is conceptualized through the idea of cognitive mastery: explaining, understanding and “making sense” of the event. The cognitive mastery occurs with help of such cognitive mechanisms as counterfactual thinking, information seeking, intellectualizing, comparing and identifying positive benefits of the event.

The existential framework emphasizes the importance of purpose, goals and values in one’s life. According to Wheeler (2001) the existential framework explains the search for meaning in one’s life as “a search for a reinvestment in life when previous goals and purpose have been challenged by a traumatic life event” (p.52), in other words search for a renewed purpose. The emotional framework, as proposed by Greenberg & Pascual-Leone (1997), postulates that “the creation of personal meaning involves an ongoing dialectic between two streams of consciousness: consciously mediated conceptualization on the one hand, and automatic, immediate emotional experiences on the other – a dialectic between reason and emotion, explanation and direct experience” (p. 157). In this framework emotion is perceived as the primary meaning system that “informs people of the significance of events to their well-being” (Greenberg et al., 1997, p. 158).

Skaggs and Barron (2006) describe the mechanism of meaning making. Skaggs et al. (2006) distinguish between global meaning defined as “significant perceptions of one’s life or place in the world” (p. 560) (i.e., general goals, values, and beliefs in and about life) and situational meaning defined as “significant perceptions that are ascribed to a situation” (i.e., the interpretation of a particular event). The process of searching for meaning, triggered by an out-of-ordinary event, is described as happening in two possible

ways, which, if meaning is to be found, must ultimately lead to a congruence of global and situational meaning: (1) changing the meaning of the event by frequent comparisons or congruence checks between situational meaning and global meaning; or (2) changing global meaning if attempts to change the meaning of the event are unsuccessful.

Another theory of meaning making refers to the concept of “assumptive structure”. Research maintains that a traumatic loss represents a major challenge to the way a person made sense of the world before the event, or to an “assumptive structure” (Wheeler, 2000). The assumptive structure is thought to include assumptions about the world, the self and purpose in life (Braun & Berg, 1994; Davis et al. 2000; Janoff-Bulmann, 1992).

One of the theories that utilizes the concept of assumptive structure is the widely used one proposed by Janoff-Bulman and Frantz (1997). Here, meaning is conceptualized as twofold: meaning-as-comprehensibility and meaning-as-significance. The meaning-as-comprehensibility “involves questions regarding whether something ‘makes sense’ and whether it fits with a system of accepted rules or theories” (Janoff-Bulman et al., 1997, p. 91) and refers to cognitive mastery of an event. The meaning-as-significance “involves questions regarding whether something is of value or worth” and refers to benefiting from the event or experience (Janoff-Bulman et al., 1997, p. 91). Based on research with survivors Janoff-Bulman et al. (1997) identify different phases of dealing with the traumatic loss as they relate to meaning making. First, before the traumatic event (homicide) the world is considered to have meaning. According to Janoff-Bulman et al. (1997), in Western culture the central assumption that explains the world is the one of comprehensible relationship between a person and an outcome:

people get what they deserve and deserve what they get (justice), and people can control the outcome by actions and behaviors (control). Traumatic events such as homicide of a family member shatter the assumption of a meaningful world and bring a person in a state of disequilibrium. After the initial “horror of a meaningless universe and shattered assumptions” (Janoff-Bulman et al., 1997, p. 95), the survivor tries to create a new system of meaning by re-examining the meaning and value system and/or creating new explanations in order to “minimize the perceived randomness of the world” (Janoff-Bulman et al., 1997, p. 95). A common first stage after loss is self-blame and guilt (Janoff-Bulman, et al., 1997; Murphy et al., 2000). With time passing survivors are more prone to reevaluate their own life by turning from the questions about meaning in the world to the questions about meaning of their own lives. The focus shifts “from a concern with the randomness of the universe to the recognition of value in one’s life” (Janoff-Bulman et al., 1997, p. 99). Finding benefit in the experience can be part of the later stages. Janoff-Bulman et al. (1997) propose that meaning-making occurs through a process of recognizing and appreciating significant aspects of one’s daily life where “previously underappreciated elements of the survivor’s life now appear positive, pleasurable and worthy of considerable investment” (Janoff-Bulman, 1997, p. 99). Interestingly, Davis et al. (2001) came to the conclusion that finding meaning (sense making) and finding benefit are two distinct processes in adjustment process after loss and they represent two distinguishable psychological issues for the bereaved. “Whereas making sense of loss involves the task of maintaining threatened worldviews (or assumptive worlds), finding benefit seems to involve the task of maintaining or rebuilding a threatened sense of self” (Davis et al., 2001, 737).

It should be noted that the way a person understands and explains the world to oneself can take very different forms according to one's worldview. In this study "worldview" is defined as "the interwoven system of beliefs, assumptions, expectations related to oneself, others, and the world that provide a sense of coherence and meaning" (Wortman, Silver, & Kessler, 1997, p. 364). The worldview can be influenced by variety of factors including one's culture, family history, upbringing, religious beliefs, life experience etc.

In this spirit, Wheeler et al. (1993) proposed that the understanding of the process of coping with traumatic loss has to, first and foremost, consider the impact of a traumatic loss on one's worldview or meaning system. According to Wheeler et al. (1993) the kind of assumptions that constitute a person's worldviews is not so important. The more important factor is whether or how much a traumatic loss has challenged this assumptive structure, and whether the reinterpretation of the event will be sufficient or the entire worldview/assumptive structure should be changed. This interpretation allows for reconsideration of the differences in vulnerability and adjustment to the traumatic loss. Individuals who have an internal locus of control, "people who have considerable coping resources – successful, control-oriented people who have a history of accomplishment and who have generally been rewarded for their efforts" (Wheeler, 1993, p. 365) might have greater difficulties adjusting to a traumatic event.

If an event can easily be reconciled with one's assumptions about the world, meaning is already present, and an active search is unnecessary. For examples, the "timely" death of an older parent or death from a natural cause might not represent a serious challenge to the assumptive structure and thus will not initiate a search for

meaning. Similarly, if a bereaved person was previously accustomed to experiences of loss or was faced with major stressors on an everyday basis due to socio-economic disadvantages, he/she can develop a worldview that sees losses and stressors as a part of life and the search for meaning in a loss might be not so important for coping.

For the purposes of this study meaning making is conceptualized using the framework of assumptive structure and the framework proposed by Janoff-Bulman et al. (1997). In sum, meaning making involves: 1) making sense of an event (cognitive mastery or meaning as comprehensibility); 2) finding value or worth in an event or post event experiences (meaning as significance); 3) possible adjustment or change of an assumptive structure; 4) finding benefit in the experience.

Prevalence of Meaning Making after Traumatic Loss

Davis et al. (2000) reviewed the research and clinical literature and have identified three prevailing assumptions regarding the understanding of the role of meaning making in the context of a major loss:

First, it is often assumed that following personal losses, especially those that are sudden and traumatic in nature, most if not all people will be motivated to search for meaning in the event. Second, it is widely believed that over time, most people coping with such losses are able to find meaning in the experience, resolve what has happened, and move on with their lives. Third, many researchers and clinicians maintain that finding meaning is critically important for successful adjustment or adaptation to a major loss (p. 499).

In order to test those assumptions, Davis et al. (2000) conducted a large scale study of two groups of bereaved individuals: 124 parents coping with the death of their infant due to the sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS study) and 93 adults who lost a

spouse or a child to a motor vehicle accident (MVA study). This study supported the assumption that meaning is an important concern for the majority of those who have experienced a loss. At the same time, the findings also indicated that the search for meaning is not a universal phenomenon among bereaved people – 14% of participants in the SIDS study and 25% of participants in the MVA study indicated that they never searched for meaning (Davis et al., 2000).

Among those bereaved people that do search for meaning in their loss finding meaning seems to be generally beneficial. For example, Murphy, Johnson and Lohan (2003) argue that parents who have found meaning in the death of their children had lower scores on mental distress scale, reported higher marital satisfaction, and better physical health. At the same time, Davis et al. (2000) find that looking for meaning in a traumatic loss but not finding it yields the worst outcomes. In fact, people who never searched for meaning and those who did search and found meaning showed similar results on the measures of psychological adjustment, while those searching for meaning but not finding it did significantly worse.

Timing of Meaning Making after Traumatic Loss

The question when meaning making occurs and how long it takes has been a matter of debate in the literature. In the sample of Murphy et al. (2003), with time more bereaved parents were able to find meaning: 12 % of 138 parents whose child died of accident, suicide or homicide found meaning within one year of the death, and 57% found meaning within 5 years post death. By contrast, other researchers (Davis et al., 2000; Davis et al. 2001) find that the majority of those who found meaning in their loss

did so within the first 6 months after death. Davis et al. (2000) propose that “people who persist in their need to find meaning tend not to experience the reprieve from emotional distress that those who find meaning earlier report” (p. 511).

Factors Mediating Meaning Making after Traumatic Loss

There are several factors that in the opinion of researchers could possibly influence one’s willingness and ability to search and find meaning in a traumatic loss.

To start with, extreme forms of grief – traumatic grief – may impede meaning making altogether. Armour (2003) has suggested that traumatic grief with its adverse effects of intrusive imagery and avoidance can impede the adaptive process of meaning making.

Another factor that may forestall efforts of meaning making is a conflictual relationship with the person who died. In this case, the bereaved can experience a sense of relief (so-called “conflicted grief”) and not be motivated to search for meaning (Davis et al.2000; Kitson, 2000). For example, in his study of widows whose husbands died unexpectedly, Kitson (2000) finds that widows who experienced tense marital relationships before the death of the husband reported less emotional distress and better adjustment after the death and were not motivated to make meaning of this loss.

The question whether religious and spiritual beliefs assist in finding meaning in the traumatic loss and hence aid the adjustment has been another area of debate. Davis et al. (2000) point out that “most [religions] have doctrines that explicitly address the meaning of death” (p.514). Murphy et al. (2003) and Davis et al. (2000) find that religious parents were more likely to find meaning in their children’s death.

In regards to coping after traumatic loss in general, most researchers find that religious beliefs are beneficial for the coping after bereavement (e.g., Murphy, Johnson, & Lohan, 2003; Hathaway & Pargament, 1991; Siegler 1998, quoted by Thomson & Vardaman, 1997). However, the empirical evidence is contradictory. Thomson et al. (1997) find in a study of 150 homicide survivors that religious coping activities, with the exemption of religious support, were negatively related to well-being. As Thomson et al. (1997) note, perhaps these latter results can be explained by reverse causation, because those who are more distressed use more religious coping; the study's setup did not include controls for this. Another possibility raised by Thomson et al. (1997) is that the form of religious belief may matter – forms that involve faith in a loving and caring God may be associated with positive outcomes whereas forms that emphasize obedience to a punishing God may relate to negative outcomes.

Meaning Making After Homicide

While there is a considerable number of studies dedicated to the topic of grief after homicide, only one study undertaken by Armour (2003) specifically focuses on meaning making after homicide. Armour (2003) interviewed 38 survivors of homicide victims in order to explore how families of homicide victims make meaning in the aftermath of homicide. Armour (2003) reasons that because survivors perceive violent death as meaningless they are “blocked” from finding meaning in the traditional cognitive system and use other methods to deal with the incoherence inherent in violent death. This conceptualization shifts the focus of the analysis to performative dimension of meaning making (meaning making grounded in action) as opposed to the cognitive

dimension. Homicide survivors cope with the loss by intentional acts that have symbolic meaning: “the implied purpose is to restore or find meaning in a changed life through problem solving or striving to attain visionary goals” (Armour, 2003, p.525).

The ultimate finding of the study by Armour (2003) is that survivors make meaning by intensely pursuing that what matters for them in their lives. The “intense pursuit of what matters” is represented in declarations of truth (e.g., denouncing of hypocrisy), fighting for what is right, and living in ways that give purpose to the loved one’s death. Even if there is no meaning in a child’s death, survivors exhibit certain behaviors in their post-loss life that are resulting in creating meaning and giving the survivors the sense of control and mastery. Armour concludes that it is possible that “the accumulation of actions over time may give family members the base off of which to construct coherent narratives in which their experience is central” (p. 535).

In my study I will investigate how survivors of homicide victims make meaning after the traumatic loss, with particular focus on a population of people of Color. The study also has as a goal to investigate whether the results of the study conducted by Armour (2003) can be replicated with a different population: 92% of the participants in Armour’s study (2003) were White.

Summary

Traumatic loss represents a major challenge for a person’s mental functioning and post-loss life. The research has focused on several factors that influence coping after traumatic loss, such as mode of death, age, race and timing of death. There is no consistent evidence regarding which factors complicate or aid the adjustment process.

However, the literature consistently supports that generally young people, women and those affected by sudden and violent death perpetrated by another human are suffering from the most severe mental health symptoms after the loss.

There is a growing number of studies exploring the adverse effects of homicide on the community of survivors, especially family members of homicide victims. In the clinical literature survivors of homicide victims are described as suffering from both grief and PTSD reactions.

Meaning making is thought to play a major role in the coping after a traumatic loss. Although several studies suggest that searching for meaning after traumatic loss is not universal, many people do initiate the search for meaning. Among those who search for meaning those who find meaning in their loss and/or life after the loss show better psychological adjustment than those who are not able to find meaning, and those who do not search for meaning in the first place show good adjustment results as well.

While several conceptualizations of meaning making exist, there is no unified theory that explains this phenomenon. Generally, the literature postulates that every person has an “assumptive structure” that provides a person with the explanation system to function in the world. This assumptive structure usually includes views and beliefs about the world and about the self in the world. After a traumatic loss occurs the assumptive structure can be challenged or even destroyed and a search for new assumptive structure that will help to decrease the randomness of the world is initiated. Janoff-Bulman & Frantz (1997) developed a theory of the mechanism of meaning making, which refers to two ways by which people make meaning: by “making sense” of an event or experience (meaning as comprehensibility), and by finding value or benefit in

it (meaning as significance). The current study uses the concept of assumptive structure, as well as the concepts developed by Janoff-Bulam et al. (1997).

At the moment there is only one study on meaning making after homicide. Armour (2003) suggests that meaning making after homicide occurs primarily in the performative dimension and is grounded in action.

This study is an attempt to expand on knowledge about the role of meaning making in the grief process after the homicide of a loved one. The study will focus on survivors who are people of Color as the numbers of homicides in the communities of people of Color are high, and also because previous studies (Armour, 2003) have focused on White populations.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes methods used to recruit the sample population, as well as collect and analyze the obtained data.

Research Design

The purpose of the current study was to expand on knowledge regarding the meaning making phenomena among survivors of homicide victims with particular attention to survivors of Color. The research strategy for the current study consisted of flexible qualitative methods employing semi-structured interviewing. Generally, flexible methods of research allow for exploration of an understudied phenomena “in context and detail” (Anastas, 1999, p.60) and are warranted in a study of a phenomena that is not “rigorously examined, or measured (if measured at all), in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 4).

The flexible qualitative research strategy was chosen because limited data is available on how survivors of homicide victims, and particularly survivors of Color, make meaning in the aftermath of homicide. Open-ended semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to capture the unique personal experience of participants. The

choice of semi-structured interviewing reflects the assumption that in qualitative study “informant’s knowledge and experience of the phenomena of interest should guide the dialogue” (Anastas, 1999, p.353).

Sample

The study population was recruited as a non probability sample of convenience. The sample was homogeneous with respect to the characteristics of a survivor of homicide victims and to recruitment (through a non profit agency), but heterogeneous with respect to other characteristics, such as gender, age, race, relationship to the victim. 12 adult (18 years or older) English speaking individuals were recruited, whose family member by blood, marriage or domestic partnership was murdered by a stranger. At the time of the interviews all participants resided in Massachusetts.

Participant’s Characteristics

Nine women and three men in the age range from 22 to 72 were recruited. The mean age of participants was 46, 8 years old. The inclusion criterion for time since homicide was at least 6 month. The time that passed since the homicide ranged from 6 month to 14 years.

The participants were 4 mothers who lost a son, 1 mother who lost a daughter, 1 stepfather who lost a step son, 2 sisters and 1 brother who lost a brother, 1 grandmother who lost a grandson, 1 step grandfather who lost a step grandson, and 1 female participant who lost an uncle and two cousins. Two families related to the same victim were interviewed. In one case participants were mother, sister, grandmother and step

grandfather of a murdered young man. In another case participants were mother and cousin of a murdered young man.

Among the participants 10 were African-American and 2 participants were White.

Answering the question about the religious identification 2 participants identified themselves as Baptist, 1 person as Catholic, 1 person as Christian, 1 as Quaker, 1 as Pentacostal, 1 participant reported not being religious but believing “that there is God”, 2 participants did not answer the question, and 2 participants did not identify formal religion.

8 participants reported that their income is more than 25 000, 3 indicated their income less than 25 000 and one participant reported her income as 25 000.

Victim's Characteristics

The age of victims ranged from 15 to 39 years old.

The types of homicide involved: three victims were stabbed during an argument or robbery, 6 victims were shot in an assault or robbery, and one victim was beaten to death in an assault.

Recruitment

All subjects were recruited through the non profit organization Louis D. Brown Peace Institute, a training and resource center for survivors of homicide victims. The Louis D. Brown Peace Institute is a grass root peace promoting organization in Dorchester, MA, which provides financial, psychological and advocacy assistance to the survivors of homicide victims. The selection procedures consisted of randomized

selection of participants from the data base of the organization according to the selection criteria. Then the phone calls were made to solicit participant's agreement to participate in the study. Additionally, the snowball sampling was used to recruit participants.

The researcher tried to ensure for the diversity of participants' characteristics, such as gender, age, and relationship to the victim. The majority of participants were people of Color, but due to the time constraints it was not possible to recruit 100% people of Color for participation.

The selection bias in the current study pertained to recruiting through an organization dedicated to the advocacy on behalf of survivors of homicide victims. People who agreed to participate in the study were generally active members of survivors' community who were involved in the advocacy work to some extent and were using the support of the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute on a regular basis or at some point after the loss. Those aspects should be considered as part of the sample bias, where survivors who were not connected to the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute – and who therefore were not represented in this study – could differ systematically from those who have contact with this organization.

Overall, however, the sample can be considered as reflecting the segment of general population of survivors of homicide victims with the prevalence of people of Color and females, especially mothers, due to the high number of young males of Color being murdered.

Confidentiality Procedures

All of the subjects were voluntary. All subjects agreed to participate in the study and signed the Informed Consent Form (Appendix A). All subjects agreed to complete a semi-structured interview as well as demographic questionnaire (Appendix C). Subjects were informed that they can withdraw from the study at any time during the data gathering process and their information would be discharged from the research pool. Questionnaires were coded with number to ensure the anonymity and to allow for participant's withdrawal if requested. None of the participants requested their information to be removed from the study.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview and a short demographic questionnaire were used to obtain the data. The interviews were conducted either at the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute or in the homes of the subjects. Before the interviews the investigator introduced the purpose of the study and answered participant's questions.

All interviews were audio-taped. The interviews lasted approximately 20 to 40 minutes. Before audio taping the interviews participants were asked to fill out the demographic questionnaires (Appendix C). During the interviews participants were not address by names to ensure confidentiality. However, during the interviews participants sometimes used names of individuals or places. All the names were removed from the transcripts. All the interviews were transcribed by a professional transcriber, who signed the confidentiality agreement.

Reliability

Questions for the semi-structured interview and the demographic questionnaire were formulated by the investigator. The reliability of the interview was ensured only by testing it with help of another social work student who is non-survivor. Due to the time constraints and ethical considerations the interviews were not tested on survivors who were not participants of the study. During the data collection process, however, wording of some question was adjusted in order to make questions more clear for understanding.

Validity

The question of validity should be considered as central for the findings of this study since the concept of meaning making is abstract in nature and does not have consistent definition of its attributes in the literature. The abstract nature of the concept of meaning making makes it especially difficult to develop an interview guide with high face validity since individuals interpret meaning making very differently. An attempt to ensure the validity of the interview guide was made by thorough review of literature. However the complex nature of the concept of meaning making calls for an expert opinion on how to compose an interview guide in the future.

Data Analysis

After completion of 12 interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed with attention to emotional states, pauses, intonations and breaks that were evident in the interviews in order to ensure that all information, including non-verbal, would be

analyzed. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the transcribed narrative data. First, the researcher reviewed the transcripts while listening to the recordings in order to ensure the quality of the transcriptions, as well as to better familiarize herself with the data in its entirety. Second, data reduction was performed by creating a table for every interview. This table consisted of the questions and answers regarding meaning making, as well as included the demographic data for each participant. Subsequently, the answers were coded thematically and a list of categories in every question was generated in order to organize comparisons between observations. Because the research question was focused on a particular phenomenon, certain categories had been already established for the purpose of data collection, but those categories required confirmation in the data. At the same time, qualitative methods often involve the acquisition of data which cannot be accommodated within the pre-existing categories (Dey, 96). Information not solicited by the questions but presented by participants in relation to any aspect of meaning making was also captured by categories. Finally, the categories were analyzed by the researcher for the similarities, differences and contradictions, as well as compared with the research questions in order to test the preliminary assumptions stemming from the literature.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which survivors of homicide victims, with particular attention to survivors of Color, make meaning in the aftermath of homicide of a family member. A total of twelve participants were interviewed. Each research question and relevant findings from the interviews are addressed in this chapter.

Question 1

The prevalence of searching for meaning after homicide.

Participants were asked the following question: “Have you ever asked yourself why the homicide happened?”

Findings

Fifty percent or six participants reported that they did ask themselves why the homicide happened. Four participants reported that they did not ask this question because they already knew the answer. One participant stated that he never asked himself the question why the homicide happened. One participant reported “I don’t think I can answer that question”.

Summary: Half of the respondents did initiate a search for an explanation of the homicide and four participants did not need to ask the question since they already knew the answer. Since searching for a reason for the homicide can be conceptualized as a part of the meaning making process, those responses can be interpreted as supporting the assumption that meaning making after traumatic loss is an important part of post-loss experience.

Question 2

Importance of searching for meaning after homicide.

Participants were asked the following question: “Is making sense of why the homicide happened important to you?”

It should be noted that this question did not always receive answers regarding the meaning ascribed to the homicide by participants. It seems that many participants interpreted this question as asking about the concrete circumstances of the homicide and whether they knew exactly what happened at the day of the homicide. Researcher’s rationale in choosing the question “why” was to make the concept of meaning making more concrete so participants understand what they are asked about. In the future this question should be adjusted if used in a study of meaning making.

Findings

Among those participants who searched for an answer to the question why the homicide happened, three participants reported that for them it was not important to know why the homicide happened. Two of those three participants reported that having an answer why their family member was murdered is not important to them because it will not restore the loss or alleviate the pain from it. For example, participant 11 stated:

If I was able to make sense, like you know if like I said oh maybe God wanted him, or maybe it was just his time to go, or it was meant to be; I don't think it would do anything for me, because that void is still there, its not gonna change the pain, its not gonna change anything for me.

Three of those five participants reported that to search for a way to stop violence is more important to them than knowing why the homicide happened:

Participant 1: Mostly I am searching for a way to end the violence, that's mostly what is more important to me now is how do we keep other young people from being killed?

Participant 2: Um, no, because I already know why. I need to know what the solution is gonna be, you know, because I, I was very familiar with the issues on the street back in the 90's when we had the highest number, supposedly not ever seen this level of crime since the 90's, and I was, you know, in the community then, and a lot of people were arrested, and that's not a solution, it's just, you know, those people are gonna come home and continue doing what they do, so you have to do some kind of preventative work to keep people from doing those things.

Only one participant among those who searched for an answer why the homicide happened clearly stated that knowing why the homicide happened is important. Two participants reported that it is important for them to know more concrete details of the incident than it is to know why it happened..

Among those participants who did not search for an answer to the question why the homicide happened, two participants reported that it would be important for them to know the answer.

Two participants reported that for them it is not important to have an answer to this question. As participant 10 put it:

I don't think it's important, because I think everyone has a certain time and I just think his time was up that's all. So I saw it like that.

One participant reported that it is not important to know why the homicide happened, but it is important to find ways how to stop homicides from happening.

Participant 7: Well, to me it's not so important to explain why it's happening but its important to be part of the solution. So, I mentioned something back in 1999, but you know, I'm currently involved in, in supporting uh, you know, uh, uh, an orphanage in Kenya and seventeen orphans that are not in the orphanage, but are being raised in a family, again, because I think we have to be instruments of peace, and to help each other, that's why we are here on this earth, to help each other.

One participant was not asked this question due to the interviewer's mistake.

Summary: In terms of how important it is for participants to make sense of why the homicide happened the answers seem to fall in two equal groups: five participants for whom finding an answer to the question why the homicide happened is important either in form of finding out more details of the incident or making sense in more abstract terms; and five participants for whom it is not important to know the answer to the question why the homicide happened. Of the latter five follows the group of four participants who found it more important to search for an answer how to prevent homicides from happening or "be a part of the solution".

However, one could assume that the number of those trying to understand why the homicide happened was greater since all participants provided either an explanation of why the homicide happened or were wondering about it.

Participant 1: Um, yeah I do think about why it happened, it's really not anything that makes too much sense, um, I mean it happened out of drug greed on their part. It happened because they were at—the young man who actually stabbed my son, I believe, was not, um, experienced enough in what he was doing and he panicked. But there's no...I really believe that everything happens with purpose, but I still can't figure out what purpose makes it worth someone getting murdered, particularly my son, to me.

Participant 10: There's just really no explanation to it. I don't, I don't think of that, its just something that just happened.I don't think it's important [to have an answer to the question why the homicide happened], cause I think everyone has a certain time and I just think his time was up that's all. So I saw it like that.

Question 3

Making sense in the homicide.

Participants were asked the following questions “What makes sense for you if you think about why the homicide happened in your life?” This was a key question, as it may identify the relationship between searching for meaning and finding it.

Findings

Two participants reported searching for an answer why the homicide happened and finding it. Two participants reported searching for an answer and not finding it. Three participants reported not searching for an answer. Three participants reported that they did not search for an answer because they already had an explanation for why the homicide happened. Two responses can be interpreted as contradictory where

participants reported searching for an answer and being not able to find an answer to the question of why the homicide happened, but at the same time those participants provided an explanation for why the homicide happened.

Participant 5: And I just couldn't understand when I look at them: how could you take my son's life away from me? What did he do? And I just couldn't understand ...I couldn't understand, I still, like I say, I don't understand all, my conclusion was that it was just evil, wicked, evil wicked kids. One had 2 parents in court, the other one I just saw 1 parent, the father, and I raised my son, I'm a single mother, and the father was out of his life since he was 5, um, I had a boyfriend at the time who was very involved with my kids and cared about my kids, and I did all the structuring..my son knew right from wrong, he knew that he don't just go and rob someone, he is not the kid that was capable of doing that, so all I can say is these kids were just evil, evil kids. Just evil..um, the parents I don't understand how you can raise a kid—both parents—and the kid can be like this, I, I can't understand, I know these parents who raise the kid the right way and the kids can go astray, but I just can't understand how these 2 young men can do what they did.

The Ways Participants Made Sense of the Homicide

Participant's responses to the question what makes sense if they think why the homicide happened in their life were represented by several themes:

Explanations grounded in social perspective taking (taking the perpetrator's perspective).

Participant 4:...for me in order for you to be able to, to kill someone or to even like do people bad, something's not right in your life.

Participant 12: I was able to, to put things into perspective and to look at these kids who are just as young as him and who did this, you know, I had to be able to say okay, you know, I forgive them because, and believing that that wasn't their intent, that's not what they intended to do, I believe they intended to, you know, they were in a fight situation and they intended to hurt him, and it all went bad.

This explanation was encountered in four responses.

Explanations grounded in religious or spiritual beliefs.

Explanations grounded in religious and spiritual beliefs were represented by participant's statements about understanding the loss as an act of God, the meaning of which is not in people's capacity to comprehend.

Participant 4: I just keep telling myself that God don't make mistakes... it was meant for him to be here, then God would have chose for him to be here.

Participant 12: It was divine order, and strange enough, uh, it, its, you know, and we question ourselves about that, about divine order and how could, you know, such a thing happen, and why would that be ordained by God, you know, but we don't know, we don't know why somebody steps out on the curb and gets hit by a car and dies. We don't know why these kids are out here shooting at each other and they're killing each other and they're dying out there. We don't know why that's happening but it's biblical, I believe.

Explanations grounded in religious or spiritual beliefs were represented in three responses.

Explanation grounded in understanding that victim's life was not taken in vain.

In those explanations the meaning was ascribed to victim's death as bringing benefit to the living.

Participant 4: I could say that I know that his life wasn't taken in vain. You know, when I see people changing their life because of what happened to him, you know, as a parent it makes me feel good that I know that, you know, that he was a good kid, and his death has changed a lot of people's lives.

Participant 12: He would want us to move on in his name, and do good things in his name, and help other kids so that they don't have the same tragedy and that he would, he would be happy to see that happen.

This explanation was represented in four responses.

Behavioral explanations.

Explanations grounded in behavioral understanding were represented by three themes, where a particular behavior was thought to somehow contribute to the incident.

Those responses can be divided in three groups:

(1) victim's behavior

Participant 3: my brother wasn't no angel.

Participant 6: These kids [young victims] trust too many people that they think they are friends, and they'll set them up in a minute...

(2) survivor's behavior (behavioral self-blame).

One participant spoke about allowing her daughter to live off campus in an apartment with friends where she was murdered.

Participant 9: I always have a sense of guilt because of the fact that when my daughter was accepted for college, she also received placement to reside on campus and was assigned, ah, a roommate and a dorm, um, my daughter begged and begged and begged that I allow her to move off campus into an apartment with her other two friends that she went to high school with for the last four years. ...I feel just a little guilt with, uh, I should have just stayed firm as a parent and just said 'No, I want you to remain on campus for your first year cause this is a strong, highly recommendation for all out of state students, and then if in fact you are still interested in moving over or moving in with your friends at that time, then I will consider it'.

(3) behavior of perpetrator's parents

Participant 5:...the parents... I don't understand how you can raise a kid—both parents—and the kid can be like this, I, I can't understand, I know these parents who raise the kid the right way and the kids can go astray, but I just can't understand how these two young men can do what they did.

Behavioral explanations were mentioned by four participants.

Explanations grounded in societal causes.

Participant 1: Many of the young people in our community are young men of color, and, um, so I think that their anger is righteous, it's misdirected, severely misdirected, and that they take it out on each other, and that they are taking it out in violent ways. You need to put these quotes into contexts. Introduce all your quotes instead of letting them float like this. You may know them well because you've read all of the materials but the reader does not.

Participant 2: I just think it's the climate, you know, I work in the field with young people so I know that a lot of the programs have been cut due to the funding going to the war efforts, and, you know, the city's answer is to put, put more police out there rather than prevention programs, and that plays a major role.

This explanation was represented in two interviews.

Summary: Although less than a half of participants reported searching for an answer why the homicide happened and only two reported finding it, the rich variation in the responses among all participants evidence that the majority of survivors are looking for answers in one or another way. The major ways participants were making sense of the homicide were: social perspective taking, religious and spiritual explanations, belief that victim's life was not taken in vain, and behavioral explanations.

Question 4

Change in the worldviews after the loss.

Participants were asked the following question: "Do you think your worldviews changed after the loss?"

Findings

The majority of participants, eleven, reported that their worldviews changed after the loss. One participant reported that her worldviews did not change after the loss. In reply to the question: “Do you think your entire worldview, how you understand your world, did it change after that happened,” she replied,

Participant 5: Not really, um, but it just kind of make me wonder how can people be so evil, what, what possessed them to do the kind of evil things that they do to people, people that they don't know, that they never met, I, I kind of wonder what kind of mentality they have, uh, the world is a beautiful world, but the people, the kind of people, Change in the worldviews was represented by following themes:

Losing the sense of invulnerability in the world after the loss.

Participant 11: I always thought that me and him [survivor's murdered brother] would always be together no matter what, and I thought since we were young, you know, nothing could happen to us. I used to think that we were invincible. And like when I heard things on the news it really never affected me like that, I'm like wow that's sad that that happened, but you know it really didn't hit me like that. And then once that happened I realized that I'm not invincible any more, like, you know, bullets have no name, and it could happen to anybody, even if, you know, people are not involved in anything...I didn't think anyone was invincible anymore.

This theme was encountered in five responses.

Heightened empathy towards others especially towards other survivors.

Participant 12: I think I am more sensitive to what people are going through now, and want to help them.

This theme was encountered in four responses.

Perceiving life as more precious and valuable.

One participant reported valuing her own life as well as life of others more after the loss:

Participant 1: Losing my son has magnified how important and precious my life is and, and the lives of—everybody’s lives—and the lives of people around me who I love...

One participant reported questioning the justice of life:

Participant 2: I think that its like if you believe that if you are a good person then bad things don’t happen to you or to anyone in your family, so I guess, um, it changes in that respect, that, you know, if that can happen then sometimes you wonder ‘what am I doing this positive stuff for?’

Summary: the findings regarding the change of worldviews suggest that survivors of homicide victims experience such a change. The most frequent changes are loss of the sense of invulnerability in life and heightening of empathy towards others.

Question 5

Change in the understanding of relationships.

Participants were asked the following question: “Did your understanding of relationships between people change after the loss?”

The majority of participants reported some change in how they understand relationships and/or relate to people. Six participants reported becoming closer to the family and cherish human connections more.

Participant 11: I think that, you know, because of what happened I got a closer relationship with my cousins parents.

Participant 3: I just want to be more responsible in the family dynamics, you know what I mean, trying to get the family together.

Participant 1: I think for me , um, relationships, I consider myself a very relational kind of person, that my style is relational, and for me trust and relationship building is key in any work that I do, in any friendship that I have, um, it's worth spending time and effort on. And I think that losing my son has only intensified those feelings for me and intensified my need to, um, promote that as important.

Participant 10: I think I isolate myself more. Um, I'm not that family oriented like I used to be. I think, like when someone important dies in the family it either brings the family closer together or it pulls a family apart, and for me it pulled the family apart.

Participant 11: I think I became closer to the family, because like I feel like that support is something that's important.

Three participants reported increased alienation from people including family due to the loss of trust to people. Participants also reported feeling misunderstood by non-survivors.

Participant 6: I just stay away from them [non survivors] There's sometime, you know, the one kind I feel is um, what I call the, no, I can talk with people who have been through this. We gets along very good, and I have this closeness with them, um...

One participant reported becoming more transparent to others about how he feels about other people.

Participant 8: I try to make it more clear about how I may feel about the other person to just let them know, you know, this is how I feel about you, this is how close I think you are to me, so that if they do pass that they knew in their mind how I felt about them and, you know, what our relationship was.

One participant reported valuing material things less.

Participant 5: It made a little difference in the sense of material things, I don't care about it, because those things can be replaced, but...Because losing him—he's not replaceable. If I remember something---my car drove up somewhere and maybe I hit the bottom of it, and I, that didn't bother me, and maybe before he

died it might have bothered me, and said “oh my God, I damaged...”. You know, it just changes you in some ways where certain things doesn’t mean anything, because his loss is the biggest loss I can ever experience.

One participant reported that after the death of her son she wanted to focus on helping other young people.

Participant 4: For me right now I just, I don’t know how I’m gonna do it or you know I pray about it, is that I want to work with young people. I’m not um, I’m even more eager to work with young people, because for me in order for you to be able to, to kill someone or to even like do people bad, something’s not right in your life.

Summary: The majority of participants reported that after the loss their understanding of relationships and/or relationships themselves changed. Both increasing and decreasing connectedness to other people can be found among participants. The majority, however, reported an increase in connection with people, also evident in survivor’s wish to help others with their experience.

Question 6

Change in the meaning of participant’s own life after loss

Participants were asked the following question: “Was there any change in how you make sense of your own life after the loss?”

Findings

The participants’ answers to this question mostly repeated the answers received to the questions about the worldviews, relationships and change in life goals (see further). The responses characteristic only for this question referred to the change in participant’s

character: participants reported increased emotional vulnerability after experiencing the loss, such as becoming less outgoing, more agitated, forgetful and less happy. This theme was represented in three responses.

Participant 6: It's like my whole system has been shocked. ... and I'm like irritable and agitated a lot. Um, I can laugh sometimes, you know, and sometimes I'm just agitated, forgetful, and um, I seem to don't be thinking, like sometime I'm driving, I might not see a car coming, um, or you got, um, like turn out too fast, or forget to look in the mirror. ... I don't seem to be happy, um, twice we went over seas, ...but I always take all the kids pictures with me, and then my mind is always back in Boston.

Question 7

Change in life goals after the loss.

Participants were asked the following question: "Did your life goals change after the loss of a family member?"

Majority of participants, eight, reported that their life goals changed after the loss. Four participants reported that their life goals did not change. For six participants the new goal in life was to actively involve in an effort to help other people in the community, either survivors or young people. Importantly, three participants who did not report change in life goals already saw helping people and community activism as their life goal. Two participants reported that their goal was to live for their remaining children.

Summary: Answers to the question about the change in life goals show that most survivors experienced a change in their life goals. The most frequent change was a decision to engage more actively in an effort to help others.

Mediating Factors

Religious beliefs as factor mediating meaning making.

Mentioning of God or spirituality was encountered in the responses of six participants. All six participants reported preserving their faith in the face of the loss. Three participants reported that their spiritual and religious beliefs directly influence the way how they make sense in the homicide, which is that the victim died because it was determined by God.

Participant 12: I think that I was able to make any kind of sense of this, and also the only way that I think anybody can make any sense of this is to draw on, on their spirituality.

Two participants who mentioned God provided responses that can be interpreted as questioning God's will; however none of the participants directly expressed feelings of anger towards God:

Participant 10: I'm not mad at God or anything like that, you know, I don't have that kind of anger, but maybe I just get mad because I wonder why I have to go through this.

Participant 3: I didn't lose faith in God but man I did....a lot of times when I hear 'oh, God gives people second chances' and it bothers me... if a person is not doing that well in their life and they say God always gives another chance. And it bothers me, and I know that he does, but it bothers me sometimes to hear it, because I asked him that for my brother and he died. So sometimes at like just a statement brings back like the prayer part that I did for my brother not to die.

Activism

11 participants mentioned activism as an important part of their experience after loss. Activism was defined by survivors as community involvement against violence,

educating young people about the impact of violence, and helping other survivors with their experience.

Participant 4: It's to try to help save the world or something. Its part of that, you know. It's like this: the violence is not gonna stop. I mean it's just like, you, listen you gonna have to be a magician to say stop killing, so if that's not gonna stop, the other side of it is helping the people—the survivors, because you're gonna have survivors all over the city, all over the world, you know what I mean?

Factors mediating grief after loss.

When sharing their experiences, participants commented on aspects that made it easier or more difficult for them to deal with the loss. Those explanations can be considered as a part of meaning making as they ascribe particular meaning to the loss or post-loss experience. They can be divided in two groups: (1) beliefs and actions related to the pre loss experience and (2) beliefs and actions related to the post loss experiences.

In talking about what made it easier to deal with the loss participants mentioned following factors:

Pre loss:

(1) Good life that a deceased person lived before being murdered (reported by one participant)

Participant 4: I use X.[murdered son] as an example. X. went to school, he graduated from school, um, he wasn't out there in the streets like that, and look what happened to him, you know, so if you are living your type of life, this can happen to you too, but how can I say what I am trying to say...for me it eased my pain to know that my son wasn't like that.

(2) Believe that the loss was predestined (reported by two participants)

Participant 10: So its like I probably would have done worse but I, I've had a long while to envision this in my head, its like I said I felt like I knew it was gonna

happen, you know, not because he was on the streets or he was a bad kid or anything like that; for some reason I knew he was going early, you know, I don't know why but I did, I really truly did.

(3) Survivor's previous experience with losses or death (reported by two participants)

Participant 7: I feel like I was a bit immunized from the trauma that the rest of the family feels because in 1990 I was involved in a 50-mile-an-hour head-on collision with a truck and had a near-death experience, and, uh, I look at....the transition from life to death to life as, as a joyful thing.

Participant 12: I at least had that experience of having lost people close to me

Post loss:

(1) Keeping the victim's memory alive, including in form of post-loss arrangements or ceremonies (reported by four participants)

Participant 11: But as long as we keep his memory alive then I feel like, you know, it makes it a little bit easier, not easy, but a little bit easier than it would if we would just be like, you know, we gonna try to forget about it, cause you can't forget, you know, this was someone who was part of us and who will always be in our heads and I will continue to pass it down when I have kids and let them know about him and who he was and how much he meant to us.

(2) Forgiving the perpetrator and not caring about the revenge (reported by two participants)

Participant 10: So I thought well, usually people would, you know, be out for revenge and would want a person to pay and pay, be in jail, but I never, um, I never cared about that, and I think I did, I was better off feeling that way, not worrying so much about the punishment for the next person and stuff like that, and I, I really never cared about that, so. And I was told by my, by my, um, the prosecutor, of people who think like I do, did, usually do a little better.

(3) Belief that the victim is in a better place with God (reported by two participants)

Participant 4: And that's what I think about when I'm trying to get through rough moments—that he's in a better place, you know... when I pray, God just always gives me signs that he's okay, and I don't have to worry about him anymore, he's in a better place.

One participant also reported that the knowledge that the murder happened accidentally and not on purpose helped her to deal with the loss

Participant 10: I think I'm doing a little bit better with it because I know it wasn't intentionally for him, it was an accident, I really believe that.

Other Findings

Many important narratives emerged throughout the interviews not in direct response to any particular question.

Benefiting from the experience.

Five participants mentioned specific gains in their experience which they perceived as beneficial. Those benefits were described as (1) gaining deeper understanding about life or society, and (2) positive changes attained in one's life.

Participant 4: The main thing I got out of my brother's murder is that the adverse can be reversed. Like if something bad....something good can come out of something bad, make sure that this experience that I bring to someone in this community somewhere...something good out of it is helping me. That's the main part that is helping me right now, because I am doing a whole lot now that I haven't done.

Participant 8: I just always say that it happened for a reason, and sometimes, especially after his death, there were so many things that happened that unraveled for the good and positive ways that worked out for me and my mother and the rest of my family.

Participant 12: My life changed, um, I, you know, strange and oddly enough my life probably changed for the better in a sense, you know. Initially it seemed as though my life got worse, ... the sense that I mean that it, it made my life better, in that sense, because I was able to at least have, have some degree of understanding about it.

Change in the assumptive structure.

Several themes identified in the responses provided additional information about the nature of the assumptive structure of the participants. Four participants expressed a notion that a death of a young person from homicide does not make sense because it is not natural as opposed to death from natural causes or age, like death of an older parent.

Participant 5: His [son]loss is the biggest loss I can ever experience—beside my parents—you know but they were old and the end of their life; I miss them, but he was so young, and it was just a tragic death for him, it wasn't like he was sick, or I would have come to terms with that, I would be prepared for it. But this sudden tragedy, violent death, it felt very sad for my son to know that he had to die like that, yes.

Three participants reported their belief that bad things are not supposed to happen to a good person (assumption about the justice of outcome in life):

Participant 2: You believe that if you are a good person then bad things don't happen to you or to anyone in your family, so I guess, um, it changes in that respect, that, you know, if that can happen then sometimes you wonder 'what am I doing this positive stuff for?

Three participants reported that they never thought that a homicide can happen in their family (assumption about the invulnerability):

Participant 3: I always thought it was, unfortunately, something that happened to other people, you know, but it just goes to show you it could happen to anyone.

Three participants reported that they believe things happen for a reason, but that sometimes people do not know what this reason is.

Participant 8: Sometimes there are things that happen for a reason and there's just no way to explain why.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The following chapter will review the findings of this study in light of relevant literature. Special considerations will be paid to the prevalence and perceived importance of meaning making after the loss, factors mediating meaning making, and particular ways of meaning making represented in survivor's responses. The limitations of the study, implications for the clinical social work practice, as well as recommendations for future research will be presented.

Prevalence and Importance of Meaning Making after the Loss among Participants

In the current study, half of the respondents did initiate a search for an explanation of why the homicide happened and four participants did not need to search for an answer to this question because they reported they already knew the answer (because the loss was "predestined by God"; because the victims "wasn't angel, because "everyone has a certain time and I just think his time was up"). Since searching for a reason for the homicide or already knowing it can be defined as part of person's meaning making structure, more particularly the cognitive mastery or making sense of the event, those responses can be interpreted as supporting the assumption that meaning making after traumatic loss is an important part of post loss experience. The findings of this

study also support findings by Davis et al. (2000) that searching for meaning, in this case searching for an answer to the question why the homicide happen, is not universal since not all participants reported searching for an answer why the homicide happened.

Making sense of why the homicide happened was important for five participants and not important for the same number of participants. A significant finding was that four participants found more important not to search for an answer why the homicide happened, but for an answer how to prevent homicides from happening or “be a part of the solution”, which corresponds to the overall high rate of responses regarding proactive stance in the post-loss experience. This proactive stance aimed at helping others might be evidence of what Armour (2003) identified in her study as a behavior “that helps survivors to cope with the negative conditions created by homicide” (p.534) and can represent a particular form of meaning making after homicide. Those behaviors give survivors a “sense of mastery and control in the midst of conditions that may not be within a person’s control” (p.535).

Two participants directly stated that even if they would find meaning in their loss, it will not make the grieving easier. This finding might possibly contradict the assumption that finding meaning in a traumatic loss (Davis, 2000) is beneficial for the process of adjustment to loss, however, since the participants did not look for finding meaning in their post loss experience it is not clear whether finding meaning in the loss would have benefited them.

However, one could assume that finding an answer to the question why the homicide happened and hence, searching for meaning was important for more participants than reported. Although almost half of the participants reported that they

were not looking for an answer why the homicide happened (and even more considering the number of those who were looking for a solution to stop violence instead for an answer why the homicide happened) and only two participants reported finding an answer why the homicide happened, the majority of participants did provide some explanation of what makes sense in the homicide.

Assumptive Structure and Meaning as Comprehensibility

Meaning as comprehensibility refers to "making sense" in the event or experience (predominantly by means of cognitive mastery) so that the event "fits with the system of accepted rules or theories" (Janoff-Bulman et al., 1997, p.91), or with the assumptive structure. Sometimes, however, the event has such traumatic impact on the assumptive structure of an individual that the assumptive structure has to be reconsidered.

Worldviews, relationships and life goals were considered the most salient parts of the assumptive structure of a person according to the literature review. Questions about the change in the worldviews in general, as well as change in and understanding of the relationships, and change in life goals were asked in order to investigate if and how the assumptive structure of participants changes after loss.

Regarding the question if survivor's assumptive structure changes after loss, the findings of this study support that the majority of participants go through the change in their worldviews. Their understanding or quality of relationships change as well and they also report change in life goals. This finding suggests that survivors of homicide victims experience change of the assumptive structure. It can be theorized that loss of a family member to a homicide has such a global impact on a person's assumptive structure that it

should be reconsidered in order to create a new meaning structure for the post loss experience.

Data about the pre-loss assumptive structure of participants also provided support of the hypothesis that participants' assumptive structure did change after the loss. The pre-loss assumptive structure included beliefs that a death of a young person from homicide is not natural, assumption about the justice of outcome in life, and assumption about the invulnerability, as well as believe that things happen for a reason although sometimes an unknown one.

However, participants who reported they did not search for an answer why the homicide happen or were not trying to find meaning in it because they already knew the answer did not have to reconsider their assumptive structure as it already could integrate their loss experience.

Regarding the question how does the assumptive structure change after the loss, the participants' responses to the question "What makes sense for you if you think about why the homicide happened in your life?" should be considered. Those responses consisted of explanations through social perspective taking, seeing the homicide as predestined act of God, belief that victim's life was not taken in vain and behavioral explanations.

According to Janoff-Bulmann et al. (1997), adaptation of the assumptive structure serves the purpose of minimizing the randomness of the world. One of the most frequent changes in the worldviews reported by participants was the loss of the sense of invulnerability in life (the other one was heightened empathy towards others). While the lack of an explicit question on this point does not allow to draw any strong conclusions, it

appears that some participants perceived the world as more random and less secure after the loss. In light of the above mentioned understanding proposed by Janoff-Bulmann et al. (1997) the participant's responses might mean either that the assumptive structure did not in fact adapt, or that it did adapt but the adaptation did not have the postulated effect of minimizing the randomness of the world. This finding, if confirmed, would represent an important addition to the theory of assumptive structure and meaning making.

To sum up the major findings regarding the change in assumptive structure and meaning making through meaning as comprehensibility, it seems that the majority of participants did experience change in the assumptive structure.

Assumptive Structure and Meaning as Significance

Meaning as significance refers to perceiving an event or experience as having some "value or worth" and interpreting it as beneficial in some aspect (Janoff-Bulman et al., 1997; Davis et al., 2001).

An important finding of the study was that high number of participants (five) identified some beneficial aspects in their experience. Those benefits were understood by survivors either as gaining deeper understanding of life or society, or as attaining positive changes in their lives. According to the meaning making model proposed by Janoff-Bulman (1997), finding benefit in the post loss experience constitutes the final stage of meaning making after a traumatic loss and represents a significant integration of the pre and post-loss realities that allow for more coherence in life of the survivors.

Meaning Making Grounded in Action

The most frequent answer provided by participants in regards to meaning making was activism (reported by eleven participants). Activism was described by participants as different forms of community involvement, such as participation in peace efforts and volunteering. Additionally, almost all participants mentioned different behaviors that can be considered as meaning making grounded in action and are broader than activism per se. For example, participants mentioned that after the loss they wanted to share their experience with young people to prevent them from violence, or as one of the participants said:

I think I take the extra mile now when I know that someone is reaching out for help.

Similarly, keeping the victim's memory alive and perform the post-loss ceremonies, such as visiting the victim's grave, was the most frequently reported activity that helped survivors to deal with the loss. This finding is consistent with Armour (2003) who argues that survivors of homicide victims employ action as a way to make meaning of the homicide and their post-loss experience. Armour (2003) defines the meaning making grounded in action as "a form of coping composed of intentional acts that have symbolic meaning" (p.525). For example, in the current study talking to a teenager about the loss of a family member has a symbolic meaning of making sure the victim's loss was not in vain.

Importantly, however, the consistency of the finding regarding meaning making grounded in action should be examined against the sample bias mentioned above of

recruiting participants through a grass-root activist peace promoting organization. For three participants, for example, helping others and participating in the community peace effort was a life goal even before the homicide happened.

Factors Mediating Meaning Making After Traumatic Loss

Religious and spiritual beliefs as factor influencing meaning making.

The role of religious and spiritual beliefs in post loss coping, as well as in meaning making has been an area of debate in the literature (Kitson, 2000; Murphy et al., 2003; Thomson et al., 1997). In the current study more than half of participants, or seven participants, mentioned God in connection to their understanding of the homicide or as part of their post-loss experience. Those who mentioned religious or spiritual beliefs as part of their post-loss experience were more likely to provide an explanation for why the homicide happened and reported to find meaning in it as those who did not report religious or spiritual beliefs as part of their experience. One could assume that possessing religious and/or spiritual beliefs assists in finding meaning in the loss and life after loss.

Demographic Factors

It was difficult to come to any conclusions about the influence of gender, time since the homicide happen, age and relationship to the victim since the findings did not seem to indicate any patterns according to those characteristics. For example, the participant who experienced the loss 8 month ago and the participant who lost a stepson 14 years ago reported to have searched and found the meaning in their loss. The

youngest male participant (22 years old) as well as the oldest participant (72 years old) reported not searching for the reason why the homicide happened. One out of two male and five out of nine female participants searched and found the meaning of the homicide, while three females and one male did not initiate the search as they already knew the answer.

Race

One of the main purposes of this study was to explore the experiences of people of Color as a population suffering the most from the high number of homicides.

The findings of the present study are very similar to the study on meaning making after homicide by Armour (2003), in which 92% of the participants were Caucasian. In the present study several survivors of Color mentioned religion as a way how they make meaning after their loss. In Armour's study there is no mention of participants making meaning of the homicide or their post-loss experiences through explanations grounded in spiritual or religious beliefs, unlike in the present study. Perhaps, the difference might be attributed to different race of the participants. Such conclusion must immediately be followed by the caveat that different instruments were used to obtain data in the two studies. Also, Armour (2003) used the hermeneutic phenomenological paradigm and her analysis was much more thorough. The sample in Armour's study (2003) was also three times larger as in the current study.

Other Findings

Several of the issues discussed in the literature showed up in the interviews. For example, one participant reported:

Even though it [the homicide] was bound to happen, no matter how a person lives their life, no matter what...it still don't matter; once they gone or they was murdered, it don't matter... murder is murder, you lost your loved one, cause you still love them no matter what they do, none of that matters.

This would stand in contrast to findings by Kitson (2000) regarding “conflictual grief” and contradict the assumption that conflictual life of deceased and/or relationships with him or her before death ease the grief process. However, no conclusion can be drawn from this finding as this response was encountered only in one interview.

Summary

To summarize, the major findings of the study were: (1) Meaning making is an important part of survivors' experience after the loss of a family member to homicide. (2) Survivors made meaning through several ways. The prevalent ways of meaning making after the homicide were: adjustment of the assumptive structure, benefiting from the experience (meaning as significance) and finding meaning through action. Those finding were consistent with theoretical and empirical literature. (3) Apparently, possessing religious beliefs assisted survivors in finding meaning in the loss and their life after the loss.

Limitations of the Study

Several important limitations of the study should be considered.

First, findings of this study can be generalized beyond the actual sample only with limitations. 10 out of 12 participants in this study were African-Americans and 9 were women, which confirmed the researcher's assumption made before the data collection that the majority of the participants will be women of Color from low income communities since those communities experience higher number of homicide cases and the victim's rate is much higher for males than females. Researcher made an effort to recruit male participants, but because there are many more females among survivors the 2 male participants out of 12 probably reflect the gender representation in the general population of survivors. Another factor possibly contributing to the higher number of women in the sample was that women are more likely to seek help in time of crisis (Parkes, 2001). However, even though internally the sample reflected the tendencies in the general population of survivors, it also differed from it since all participants for the current study were recruited through the grass root activist organization. This can also explain the high number of participants who mentioned activism as part of their pre and post loss experience. It can also be expected that those individuals could show higher level of resilience after the loss of a family member due to the ongoing support of the organization and their own active commitment to "healing through helping".

The second limitation of the study relates to the instruments of the study. Since the concept of "meaning making" is not strictly defined in the literature and has a very complex nature, the questions that were used to solicit responses about meaning making could have been interpreted by participants differently than by researcher. Due to the

complexity of the concept, interview questions also did not ask directly about “meaning”. Additional limitation was that the validity of the questionnaire was not tested before interviewing the survivors.

Considering the limitations of the study its results should be seen only as the first step to study of meaning making after homicide among people of Color.

Areas of Future Research

Areas of future research regarding the issues of meaning making after homicide include more detailed studies on the multiple factors mediating the meaning making. Although meaning making is a highly individualized experience, an attempt should be made to study what factors impede and support the meaning making process. Such factors as race, family dynamics, different spiritual and religious beliefs systems, age and gender in relation to meaning making should be closely studied to determine what factors assist or impede the process of meaning making and how they influence adjustment.

Implications for Clinical Social Work

Clinical social work is concerned with helping people to make painful experiences more acceptable and make the unbearable bearable. The helping process is not an outside effort geared only by clinician' expertise or credentials. It is an interpersonal act where client's experience possesses the central role.

The concept of meaning making can serve as a framework for understanding the post loss experiences of survivors of homicide victims. The results of the current study suggest that the ways survivor make meaning of the homicide and their life after loss are highly individual, which was evident in the variety of responses to particular questions.

Finding meaning in the loss is not a priority for every participant. For everybody the meaning that they ascribe to particular events or feelings will be influenced by their unique experiences and personalities. Individual meaning making attempts should be considered as a guiding principle for the helping effort. The high number of survivors who were involved in helping or activism effort should encourage social workers to reconsider what it means to be helpful for people who lost their family member to homicide, as it seems that survivors need to empower themselves by helping others and not necessary by receiving help.

In interviews survivors asserted the authenticity of their experiences:

I just felt like people, people who are not survivors, you can only imagine, and imagine is not good enough. Because if you could just imagine then it makes you just, just, multiply that by a million and that's us. This is my own experience, you know, so, that's what I think, I, I prayed that you know, there are more survivors that feel like I do, so that we can all get together and to do, and help other people rather than always having to go to the people from the victims or homicide to come in to speak who don't know what we're going through, or whatever other agencies they might have to come in, and we said, we'll, it would, it would, um, we would feel better as a survivor knowing that one of those agencies—that somebody there is a survivor and truly know what you're going through.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form

Dear Participant,

My name is Anna Eliseeva and I am a current Master's of Social Work Student at Smith College School for Social Work in Massachusetts. I am conducting a study of how survivors of homicide victims make meaning in the aftermath of homicide. Through interviews with participants I hope to be able to research how survivors of homicide victims make meaning of their life after homicide and if and how meaning making influences their coping with the loss of a family member. The purpose of this study is to provide new and valuable information to those who work with survivors of homicide victims, so that they can better serve them and meet their needs with empathy and understanding. Obtained data will be used to formulate a thesis, which will be presented at Smith College as a part of dissemination process.

If you are interested in participating in this study, you must be 18 years or older, be related to the victim by blood or marriage or domestic partnership, and be fluent in English. The study will only involve cases of homicide committed by a stranger and will not include sexual crimes. If you choose to participate, I will ask you to engage in an interview process that may take anywhere from 40 to 60 minutes, depending on your time constraints and the wealth of information you have to share. The interview will focus on questions about how you make meaning of the incident and what has changed in your life since the homicide happened. In addition, I will ask you to provide demographic information about yourself. During the interview I might take notes. You will be asked to describe your experience in any order and form you wish and are encouraged to tell your story as comfortable as possible. Audio taping will be used to document the interview. Tapes will be transcribed by a professional transcriber who will not have access to your identifying information and will sign an assurance of research confidentiality. I may also telephone you after the interview for the purposes of further clarification and/or elaboration if necessary.

Due to the emotional content of these interviews, it is possible that you may become upset, stressed, or overwhelmed. If you feel uncomfortable or unable to complete the interview process, you may choose to take a break, refuse to answer any questions, or withdraw from a study without penalty. Enclosed in this mailing is a list of psychotherapy resources in Massachusetts that you may refer to if you experience psychological distress as a result of participation in this study.

The interview process intends to validate your individual's subjective experience. You will be offered the opportunity to step back and examine your experience as a survivor. Additionally, your participation will contribute to the knowledge of clinicians and other professionals who need to be better informed about how to assist survivors of

homicide victims in the healing process. Unfortunately, I cannot offer monetary compensation for your time.

Your participation in this study is anonymous and confidential, except for the fact that I will know your name and contact information in order to be able to contact you. However, your name or contact information will not be revealed to anybody. After audio taping the interview I will label audio tapes, interview notes and questionnaires with a code number instead of your name. My research advisor as well as transcriber will have the access to the information, but your identity will not be revealed since no identification information will be attached to the transcript of the interview. Although the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute referred you, whether or not you participated will remain confidential. In order to maintain your confidentiality I will lock audio tapes, interview notes, questionnaires consent forms, in a file drawer during the thesis process and for three years thereafter, in accordance with Federal regulations. After such time all data including audiotapes and transcripts will be destroyed. The professional transcriber will receive the audio tape of the interview without any identifying or demographic information. Additionally, the transcriber will sign a confidentiality pledge. In the written thesis, I will not use demographic information to describe each individual; rather I will combine the demographic data to reflect the subject pool in the aggregate. In this way, participants will not be identifiable in the written work. In the future possible presentations of the thesis the data will be presented as a whole and if the brief illustrative quotes or vignettes will be used, they will be carefully disguised.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer all or some questions at the interview process. You may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty by calling me at 857-413-8792. You can withdraw from this study at any time prior to March 31, 2007. In case you decide to withdraw from the study, all materials pertaining to your participation will be immediately destroyed.

You will be asked to sign this form if you agree to participate in the research. You and I will each keep a signed copy of this consent form. The signed consent forms will be kept in a secure cabinet for three years after the conclusion of the study.

If you have any further questions or wishes to withdraw please contact Anna Eliseeva at

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Researcher _____

Participant _____

APPENDIX B

Approval Letter From the Human Subject Review Committee

February 2, 2007

Anna Eliseeva
30 Irving Street, #22
Cambridge, MA 02138

Dear Anna,

Your revised documents have been reviewed. You have done a careful job and all is now in order (there is a small typo in questions three on your questionnaire that you probably want to correct). We are now glad to give final approval to your study.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your very interesting study.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Yoosun Park, Research Advisor

APPENDIX C

Demographic Questionnaire

1. Gender
2. How old are you?
3. With which racial or ethnic group do you identify, if any?
4. What is your annual income?
 - a. less than 25 000
 - b. more than 25 000
5. With which religion do you identify, if any?

APPENDIX D

Interview Guide

1. What was your relationship to the person that died?
2. Could you tell me about how that happened?
3. Could you tell me about your life after this happened?
4. What was the major change for you? For your family?
5. Have you ever asked yourself why that happened?
6. Is making sense of why this happened/homicide important for you?
7. What makes sense for you if you think about why the homicide happened in your life?
8. Do you think your worldviews changed after the loss?
9. Did your understanding of relationships between people change after this loss?
10. Was there any change in how you make sense of your own life after the loss?
11. Did your life goals change after the loss?
12. Would you like to add something to what you said?

APPENDIX E

Script for Initial Phone Contact with Possible Participants

Hello, can I speak to ...?

My name is Anna Eliseeva. I am a graduate student at the Smith College School for Social Work. I received your phone number from the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute. I am working on a Master's thesis and I am interested in studying experiences of survivors of homicide victims. The goal of the study is to help people in helping professions, such as social workers, to be able to serve survivors better.

The study involves an interview in person, which will last about an hour and will be audio taped. All information will be treated strictly confidentially.

I was wondering if you would be interested in considering participation in this study?

If yes: Would you like to meet with me so that I will give you the informed consent which describes the study and the process, including for example your possibility to withdraw from the study at any time, if you so desire?

Thank you so much,

I am looking forward to meeting you!