ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: UNDERSTANDING THE VICTIM IDENTITY: THE PROCESS OF IDENTITY WORK IN HOMICIDE VICTIMIZATION

                                                  Dominique Austin, Bachelor of Arts, 2023

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Objective: This research proposed to examine the extent to which victim/survivor language has an impact on the identity development processes of family members of homicide victims. **Method**: This study is a qualitative research proposal. Using focus groups, this study aimed to gained insight into three domains: (1) Whether family members of homicide victims identify themselves as victims and/or survivors. (2) Whether informal social interactions play a role in family members' choice to align with a victim/survivor identity. (3) Whether interactions with formal institutions, like the criminal justice system, have an impact on a family member's choice to align with a victim/survivor identity. **Conclusions**: Because family members experience homicide vicariously, current literature lacks consensus when identifying family members as either victims or survivors. However, the linguistic connotations associated with the words victim and survivor suggest that both terms are ill fitting to describe these individuals' experiences. Future research is needed to understand how this language disparity could be a hindrance for vicarious victims to engage with victim/survivor oriented research and resources.

UNDERSTANDING THE VICTIM IDENTITY: THE PROCESS OF IDENTITY
WORK IN HOMICIDE VICTIMIZATION

by

Dominique Austin

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Acknowledgements

In lieu of a traditional acknowledgement section for this project, I wanted to instead take a moment to provide a positionality statement. I believe that it is essential for researchers to understand how one's racial/ethnic identity, education status, upbringing, etc. can influence not only what a researcher chooses to study, but how these aspects of one's identity can also influence the potential outcomes of one's research. As this is the first of many projects that I hope to develop, I want to acknowledge my biases both as a person and as a researcher. I believe that every piece of my positionality played a role within the decision making of this research, and it is my hope that future researchers, including myself, will continue to make a conscious effort towards understanding how one's background, and understanding of one's self, may influence one's research.

Positionality Statement:

The author of this study is a non-white passing, Black, queer, cisgender woman. I am a native born U.S. citizen, and I am from an upper middle-class background.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Family members of homicide victims are a population often overlooked by criminological research (Peterson-Armour, 2002). Despite the steady increase in the rate of homicides reported in the U.S. each year, there has been a limited amount of research pertaining to individuals who have lost a loved one to homicide (Uniform Crime Report, 2019; Peterson-Armour, 2002). The reason for this disparity undoubtedly lies within the construct of victimhood. Currently, there is no universal definition of the word victim, but a consistent theme found within victim definitions are the disenfranchisement of human rights (United Nations, 1985; Office of Victims of Crime, 2020). While this theme is highlighted in both legal and colloquial definitions, it is the intricacies of how an individual is victimized and whether they played a role in their victimization that makes each definition unique (Zaykowski, 2019). For the sake of clarity, provided is an example definition of victimhood from the United Nations (1985). A victim is a person or persons,

> who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws…The term "victim" also includes, where appropriate, the immediate family or dependents of the direct victim and persons who have suffered harm in intervening to assist victims in distress or to prevent victimization (United Nations, 1985).

Family members of homicide victims are a unique population to be studied within the context of victimization research. While these individuals can be legally conceptualized as victims, as seen by the above definition, those who have lost a loved one to homicide are not often socially recognized as victims. Research has shown that family members of homicide victims experience emotional and physical distress as a result of losing their loved one. They also report feeling as though their rights have been deprived or disenfranchised by the criminal justice

system (Spungen, 1998; Asaro, 2001a; Horne, 2003; Rheingold et al., 2012; Klass & Peach, 1987; Peterson-Armour, 2002). Although these individuals' experiences may coincide with legal definitions, family members often lack the social recognition of being viewed as a victim due to the vicarious nature of a family member's relationship to the murder, itself. Simply put, because family members are not the direct targets of the violence (i.e. they are not the deceased), these individuals do not immediately align with society's expectations of what it means to be victimized, and thus are often not socially recognized as such.

As a consequence of family member's vicarious relationship with homicide victimization, those who have lost a loved one to homicide may also be conceptualized as survivors. In fact, the majority of criminological research has taken to referring to individuals who have lost a loved one to homicide as such (Amick-McMullan et al., 1989; Asaro, 2001a; Asaro, 2001b; Hertz et al., 2005; Zinzow et al., 2011; Connolly & Gordon, 2015; Umbreit & Vos, 2000; Rheingold et al., 2012). However, despite prior literature's tendency to label family members as something other than a victim, using the word survivor to define these individuals' experiences is also not a perfect or absolute identifier.

The word survivor has several definitions, but according to the Cornell Legal Information Institute (2023), the word survivor can be legally defined as, "someone who lives after the occurrence of an event that entitles them to seek a distribution of property or income (e.g., a surviving spouse)." Family members of homicide victims are more often than not the individuals who manage the aftermath of their loved ones' death, and thus fulfill these legal criteria (Klass & Peach, 1987; Peterson-Armour, 2002). But by conceptualizing family members as survivors, rather than victims, it imposes the idea that family members who have lost a loved one to homicide are distinct from others who have experienced victimization. Contrary to this belief,

the vicarious nature of homicide "survival" does not buffer the detrimental effects of violence exposure. Homicide victim's families report experiencing harm as readily as other populations who have been directly exposed to violence. (Zinzow et al., 2011; Connolly & Gordon, 2015; Asaro, 2001b; Amick-McMullan et al., 1989; Horne, 2003; Rheingold et al., 2012). For instance, the research that showcases that about 1 in 5 family members experience PTSD, which is over three times the general population (Amick-McMullan et al., 1991).

While the referral of homicide victim families as either victims or survivors is not inherently problematic, the lack of consistency in accurately labeling and identifying this population is simply reflective of how homicide populations have been neglected by both the criminal justice system as well as criminological research. By viewing homicide families as exclusively victims or exclusively survivors it both affirms and contradicts these individual's legal standing. As seen with the above definitions, family members of homicide victims may fulfill one or both definitions of victimhood/survivorship yet neither of these categories comprehensively defines these individuals' lived experiences. Victimization literature posits that the ability to find the words to describe oneself after experiencing a traumatic event is stringent in the process of recovery (Dundas et al., 2021). Yet, despite these linguistic complexities, there is a disparaging amount of research examining whether identifying homicide victim families as *either* victims or survivors has had any impact on this population's ability to cope with this type of violence exposure (Johnson, 2014; Discola, 2020). To fill this gap in the literature, this study will apply what is known about how language impacts identity development in order to examine the extent to which this victim/survivor linguistic paradox affects homicide populations.

The purpose of this study is to understand the nuances between the words "victim" and "survivor" as well as the contexts in which individuals choose to identify themselves as such.

Because research on homicide victim's families is so sparse, this study turns to sexual violence research, for context, as discourse around the impact of victim vs. survivor language has only truly begun to take shape in this subfield (Dundas et al., 2021). This study will also use identity work as a theoretical framework in order to gain insight into the mechanisms in which one attempts to reevaluate their self concept after being exposed to violence. Identity work explains that not only do the linguistic connotations of the words victim and survivor have an impact on one's propensity to align themselves with a specific identity, but also that others' expectations and interpretations of one's experiences may impact the ways in which one views oneself after experiencing a traumatic event (Loseke, 2001; Crossley, 2000; Presser, 2009). Ultimately, the goal of this research is to understand how individuals who experience homicide vicariously come to understand themselves within the context of this victim/survivor paradox.

The relevance of this project is twofold: the first revolves around the influence of language on behavior and the second involves family members of homicide victims' unique linguistic positionality. Boyle and Rogers (2020) mention that the majority of crime data collection methods use the word "victim" to describe individuals who have been impacted by a crime. They also imply that the sole use of victim language may be a barrier to crime reporting (Boyle & Rogers, 2020). Fisher et al. (2003a) validate this claim finding that individuals who have been victimized may be reluctant to engage with formal resources if there is a disconnect between the way a person identifies themselves and the way that society defines that person's experience. Simmons et al. (2011) bolsters these findings positing that individuals who engage with victim services, only do so when they feel as though the agencies are providing programming relevant to their identities. If by only using victim language prevents individuals from seeing themselves accurately conceptualized within the resources available to them, then

this implies that the criminal justice system and/or victim services may be under-representing, or even overlooking, an entire population of people who fulfill victim criteria, but don't identify themselves as victims.

Given the lack of consensus about whether homicide victim families should be viewed as either victims or survivors, this further emphasizes the need to understand the implications of how identifying language affects vicarious victimization. By solely using victim language to conceptualize both direct and vicarious victimization, a vast and diverse group of individuals, the criminal justice system may be unintentionally perpetuating the dark figure of crime: further isolating people in need and preventing them from engaging with formal institutions because these individuals feel as though their experiences don't coincide with legal definitions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Identity & Identity Work

The construct of identity can be defined as the way in which an individual views and defines themselves in relation to others (Ascencio & Burke, 2011; Tennent, 2021). Criminological research has historically implemented the concept of identity by examining how victims and offenders come to understand the trauma that they face, and how this understanding of trauma can impact a person's subsequent point of view (Crossley, 2000; Presser, 2009; Tennent, 2021). The phrase identity work embodies this process; representing the ways in which an individual interprets and categorizes themselves within the context of their lived experiences (Loseke, 2001). Identity work involves two mechanisms. The first mechanism involves an individual's personal interpretation of a situation as well as the words they use to define themselves. The second mechanism involves others' perceptions, and how other's language influences how one views oneself.

The first piece of identity work most often refers to the modification of an identity from an individual's internalized point of view. An example of the effects of identity work can be seen in a study conducted by Boyle and Rogers (2020). In this study, a group of college students were surveyed about their use of the word "victim" and/or the word "survivor" to describe themselves after experiencing sexual violence. The results of this study showed that individuals who viewed themselves as victims were associated with greater negative emotional outcomes, increased depressive symptoms, and lower self-esteem. Conversely, individuals who identified themselves as survivors reported less negative mental health outcomes overall (Boyle & Rogers, 2020). These results showcase that an individual's capacity to conceptualize themselves within the

language of their choosing has an impact on one's subsequent mental wellbeing. The implications of this research suggest that people align themselves with a specific identity based on their own internalized definitions of the language that they chose.

The second mechanism within the identity work process is the influence of outside, social perceptions (Presser, 2009). Ruback et al. (1984) theorized that when an individual is deciding on whether or not to report their victimization to the police, a person is influenced not only by their own interpretations of the event, but also by the people around them who dispense their opinions and perspectives. Ascencio and Burke (2011) provide support for this concept, finding that people are more likely to align themselves with the appraisal of another when they view their relationship as important. For instance, Ascencio and Burke (2011), found that when a significant other perceived a person as a criminal, that individual was more likely to view themselves as a criminal, but when a prison guard appraised a person as a criminal there was no effect on that person's self perceptions. Other's perspectives and expectations of one's experiences thus play a role in the way that one views ones' self, especially if that relationship is viewed as important. Not only does an individual's internal perceptions influence one's identity work process, but prominent external perceptions play a role as well.

Victim vs. Survivor Language

The words victim and survivor are frequently used interchangeably in criminological research. More often than not, these words are also presented as if they have a shared meaning. Despite these words being used as synonyms in research, a growing body of literature argues that the connotations of these words, or the associations surrounding these concepts, actually make these words more distinct than their use in literature may suggest (Dunn, 2005; Hockett & Saucier, 2015). Barry (1979) claims that being a survivor and being a victim are two sides of the

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same coin. In both instances, the word "survivor" and the word "victim" bear a shared meaning of harm imposed onto an individual; however, there is a negative connotation alongside the word victim and a positive connotation around the word survivor (Best, 1997; Barry, 1979; Hockett & Saucier, 2015). The connotations of a victim depict imagery of an individual who maintains little responsibility or autonomy over their victimization (Boyle & Rogers, 2020; Best, 1997; Dunn, 2005; Hockett & Saucier, 2015; Papendick, & Bohner, 2017). Opposingly, survivors are individuals who are portrayed as being capable and active: individuals who advocate for themselves (Barry, 1979; Hockett & Saucier, 2015; Papendick, & Bohner, 2017). The implications of this distinction suggest that individuals deemed victims, and individuals deemed survivors, are similar in that they have experienced harm, loss, and/or grief in some way, but the interpretations of these words are starkly different.

Kenney (2010) reiterates this concept positing that sympathy is the key mechanism that drives the distinction between victim and survivor language beyond their linguistic connotations. Victims, unlike survivors, are individuals who garner a certain level of sympathy from outsiders (Kenney, 2010; Loseke, 2009). Leisenring (2006) provides evidence for this claim, finding that women who experience domestic violence may choose to align themselves with a victim identity because they want, "to demonstrate the harm they had suffered and to show they were worthy of social sympathy and support" (Leisenring, 2006). The interpretations of victim connotations thus evoke sympathy from others in a way that does not coincide with the connotations of survivor language. Kenney (2010) bolsters this distinction arguing that survivors can be viewed as victims, but victims cannot be viewed as survivors. In other words, an individual can initially identify as a victim and then subsequently a survivor, but not vice versa. The assumption is that once one identifies as a survivor and obtains autonomy, they are no longer associated with the

connotations of helplessness. Thus, while victim language evokes sympathy, the word survivor is designated only to those who have redefined their relationship with victimhood (Naples, 2003).

Another distinction between victim and survivor language remains within the concept of social deviance (i.e., a violation or defiance of socio-cultural norms; Kenney, 2010). Asaro (2001a) asserts that homicide "co-victims," or individuals who vicariously experience homicide may be perceived as socially deviant because co-victims often discuss their grief beyond what is considered a "socially acceptable" time frame. Because family members are usually the ones who are responsible for organizing funeral services, speaking to the media, and being representative of the deceased during court hearings, family members who have lost a loved one to homicide are often forced to place their own grief aside during the immediate aftermath of the homicide. Because family members lack the ability to prioritize their own grief, they often are still engaged in bereavement behaviors *after* others have finished grieving and have moved forward with their lives. Hence, individuals who vicariously experience homicide can be viewed as socially deviant because by the time they are given the opportunity to grieve, their grief is viewed as no longer socially appropriate (Asaro, 2001a). Dunn (2005) claims that "victims" of domestic violence who choose to stay in abusive relationships can also be perceived as socially deviant. When a victim chooses to stay in domestic violence relationship, despite knowing of resources to employ that will help them evade future harm, these individuals are conceptualized as socially deviant. Dunn (2005) claims that society's definition of a "true victim" is someone who plays no part in their victimization. Thus, victims of domestic violence are assumed to lack the autonomy needed to escape, and this perceived lack of autonomy is what provokes sympathy from others. But when victims know of methods to leave their abusive partners, and have the capacity to do so, yet choose to stay in an abusive relationship, these individuals' choice to "aid"

in their own perpetual victimization contradicts the construct of helplessness, and thus defies society's expectations of what it means to be a victim (Dunn, 2005).

Opposingly, survivor language is not associated with social deviance. This is in part because, unlike victim language, survivor language is not accompanied with the constructs of helplessness and sympathy (Dunn, 2005). Because survivor language is associated with agency or, "the capacity to master decision making and choice," behaviors and actions viewed alongside survivor language are assumed to have been made with a survivor's best interest in mind (Dunn, 2005). For instance, if a domestic abuse "survivor" decided to remain in an abusive relationship, it would be assumed that this survivor made this choice not from an inability to maintain or grasp autonomy, but because this was likely the most "rational" decision to be made for this situation.

Overall, victim/survivor language is quite discrete. Despite having similar origins of harm, the research reflects that the connotations of these words change their interpretations exponentially. Victim language is associated with negative attitudes and social deviance, and is used to evoke sympathy from others. Survivor language is viewed as more inherently positive and is thought to be a byproduct of a reconceptualized victim narrative.

Sexual Violence Literature

The subfield of criminological research that has explored the distinction between victim and survivor language, most in depth, involves populations that experience sexual violence. Sexual violence literature largely uses the word victim to describe a person targeted by violence. However, there is a growing body of research that advocates for the use of the word survivor to define individuals who fulfill the same criteria (Dunn, 2005; Hockett & Saucier, 2015). Research in this area has also found support for the theory that whether someone uses victim language

versus whether they use survivor language does in fact have a significant impact on a person's self-reconstruction, or identity work process, after experiencing a traumatic event.

Dundas et al. (2021) interviewed women who experienced sexual assault. When asked how these individuals rationalized their experiences, these women reported being apprehensive in aligning themselves with a victim identity. They feared being associated with the connotations of what it means to be a victim (i.e., fragile, helpless, etc.). They were also concerned that others' negative interpretations of their situation would encapsulate their identity in its entirety, and they feared that others would be unable to see them as the person that they were prior to the incident (Dundas et al., 2021). This fear was later validated because, for those individuals who initially identified themselves as victims, there was a subsequent process in which these women were forced to create a new identity that was distinct from their traumatic experience (Dundas et al., 2021). This suggests that people who experience sexual violence may choose to identify as a victim, but do so hesitantly, because in order to be seen as "more than a victim," or to not be forever associated with that stigma, one has to reevaluate their experiences and reconceptualize their identity for a second time (Dundas et al., 2021; Dunn, 2005; Thompson, 2000).

Hockett and Saucier (2015) find similar themes when examining sexual victimization literature more broadly. In their review, studies that described their participants as survivors were more likely to use positive outcome variables rather than negative outcome variables. For instance, studies that used survivor language measured outcomes such as perceived strength and self-growth whereas studies that incorporated victim language used outcome measures such as physiological pain and psychological distress (Hockett & Saucier, 2015). This reiterates the construct that survivor language is largely associated with positive connotations and thus alludes to the idea that the use of survivor language is associated with more positive implications. Cole

and Lynn (2010) find this to be true in their study on individuals who experienced rape. Their results revealed that individuals who identified as survivors reported less self-blaming behaviors and had more post traumatic growth than individuals who identified as victims. Hockett and Saucier (2015) also expressed that although the majority of survivor literature examines positive outcomes, like strength and resilience, some researchers choose to place emphasis on the fact that survivors are *still* individuals who have experienced a traumatic life event. Guerette and Caron (2007) claimed to use the terms victim and survivor language interchangeably throughout their work in order to highlight that identity work can be both positive and negative; emphasizing that individuals who experience sexual violence have the potential to identify themselves as a victim <u>and</u> survivor.

In terms of victim/ survivor language's effect on behavior, the literature reflects that language not only has an impact on mental health outcomes, but also has implications for behavioral outcomes as well. For instance, Fisher et al. (2003b) found that women did not disclose their sexual victimization to the police, despite qualifying for the legal definition of rape, because they did not readily recognize themselves as victims in the way that the law described them. Koss et al. (1988) and Pitts and Schwartz (1993) reported similar findings wherein a significant portion of their studies' sample met the legal criteria for rape, but these individuals did not perceive themselves as rape victims, as defined by others, and thus did not choose to report their victimization. These results suggest that the extent to which an individuals' identity is accurately represented by the criminal justice system is a key mechanism within the process of victimization reporting, but because these participants did not conform to the victim identities represented by the criminal justice system, it can be inferred that formal or legal definitions may not be inherently influential to the identity work process.

The overall findings of sexual violence literature suggests that the distinction between victim and survivor identities are reflective of their linguistic connotations. Individuals who experience this type of violence, vary in their willingness to align with a victim identity because the associations of a victim identity are largely negative whereas a survivor identity is viewed as positive. The transition from a victim identity to a survivor identity is complex, but the literature implies that the process is interconnected. Finally, outsider's perceptions do seem to have an impact on identity development, but this only extends to informal or social perceptions rather than more formal or institutional definitions.

Homicide Literature

Homicide literature lacks consensus on the use of the word victim or the word survivor to define the population of individuals who experience the loss of a loved one to homicide. There are currently two terms that envelop this population: co-victim and survivor. MacVane et al. (2003) claims that the term co-victim describes any individual who is a family member of a victim of homicide. Spungen (1998) claims that co-victims are not bound by familial ties, but are more generally the individuals who are responsible for representing the victim after death. Amick-McMullan et al. (1989) describes the same population as survivors, but does so on the pretense that these individuals are the remaining or "surviving" individuals left behind after a homicide occurs. Finally, the Office of Victims of Crime uses these terms interchangeably, expressing that, "a homicide survivor or co-victim is anyone who has been impacted by the death of a loved one by homicide. This includes a spouse, partner, children, siblings, and friends" (Office of Victims of Crime, 2020). While some research has taken to the latter of the three options and uses the terms co-victim and survivor interchangeably, more often than not, homicide research has taken to identifying this population as survivors (Amick-McMullan et al.,

1989). Currently, homicide literature lacks empirical data to support the notion that the labeling of this population as *either* co-victims or survivors, has any impact on identity work, but there is some discourse on the extent to which this population should be declaratively defined as victims.

Kenney (2010) theorizes that the family members of homicide victims are worthy of also being deemed victims. Although not the direct target of the violence, Kenney (2010) argues that the complexity of these individuals' grieving patterns can be conceptualized as socially deviant. Within the process of trying to put together funeral arrangements, managing finances, etc., these individuals often miss the window or "socially acceptable" time frame to mourn the loss of their loved one. Asaro (2001a) claims that, for individuals who lose a loved one to homicide, it can take three to five years for grief symptoms to even begin to subside. Thus, by the time these individuals truly begin their mourning processes, the majority of their social network has finished grieving, making their behavior seemingly socially inappropriate (Peterson-Armour, 2002).

In terms of survivor language, Hertz et al. (2005) claim that the phrase homicide survivor is, "an oxymoron." Hertz et al. (2005) claim that because family members of homicide victims are not the direct targets of violence, it is paradoxical to refer to this population as survivors. Discola (2020) supports this argument and instead claims that there are three major categories in which individuals can describe themselves after experiencing loss from a homicide: victims, survivors, and transcenders. In this study, individuals deemed victims aligned themselves with the linguistic connotations of the word, and expressed narratives that emphasized negative emotions. Opposingly, survivor's narratives only partially supported the linguistic connotations of the word wherein there was an initial acknowledgement of harm and loss, but unlike the connotations of survivor language, survivors as reported by Discola (2020) had narratives that

were not inherently positive or negative, but were more ambivalent towards the situation. Finally, transcenders' narratives embodied what was more readily associated with survivor language, expressing positive emotional outcomes (Discola, 2020). These findings suggest that individuals who have lost loved ones to homicide have the capacity to encompass a victim <u>and/or</u> a survivor identity, but the extent to which survivor language fully encapsulates their experience is not necessarily comprehensive because homicide survivors don't harmoniously embody the positive connotations that are traditionally associated with survivor language.

In regards to outsider's perceptions, little research has been done to examine the relationship between external views and identity development for vicarious homicide populations (Johnson, 2014). The majority of research related to outsider influence focuses on individuals' interactions with the media and the criminal justice system. Often forced to retell the traumatizing stories of their loss, and constantly being retriggered by the traumatic memories of the events, family members of homicide victims reported feeling "revictimized" when approached by the media (Spungen, 1998; Beard & Kashka, 1999; Asaro, 2001a). These individuals align with victim language in these instances because although they were not the direct target of the initial act of homicide, they are directly impacted by the media's portrayal of their loss. In terms of the criminal justice system, family members of homicide victims expressed that they felt "invisible" or unseen by most institutions (Klass & Peach, 1987). Again, because family members are not the direct targets of the violence, the criminal justice system does not readily view these individuals as victims (Peterson-Armour, 2002). Hence, family members reported feeling as though their rights were disenfranchised and that they were not seen as equally important within the process of restitution (Klass & Peach, 1987; Peterson-Armour, 2002).

The implications of this literature suggest that family members of homicide victims experience a unique type of harm that is not garnered strictly from the perpetrator, but from the trial of being forced to relive their trauma without the support or recognition that they have experienced pain. Although the literature does not reveal how outsiders' perceptions affect identity, this research does emphasize that, for family members of homicide victims, interactions with formal entities or institutions are more negative than positive.

Overall, homicide literature maintains two linguistic camps: co-victim and survivor. The majority of the literature conceptualizes family members of homicide victims as survivors, but arguments have been made that this population may more readily fit within the definitional criteria of a victim. Distinct from the sexual violence literature, it remains uncertain the extent to which social perceptions play a role in the identity work process of this population; however, it is overtly clear that family members of homicide victims have largely negative interactions with formal institutions.

Chapter 3: The Current Study

Given that homicide literature maintains little preference in the use of the words "victim" or "survivor" to identify family members of homicide victims, and little research has been done to examine whether or not this lack of consensus has had any impact on this population, this research proposal intends to investigate the extent to which victim/survivor language has an impact on the identity development processes of homicide victim families. Ultimately, this study poses the question: how does victim and survivor language play a role in the identity work processes of homicide victim families?

Prior literature has shown that the use of victim and survivor language can have starkly different implications. With victim language being perceived as negative and survivor language being perceived as positive, sexual violence research has showcased that the coping and mental health outcomes of a harmed individual reflected the connotations of the words, with victims reporting more negative outcomes and survivor reporting more positive outcomes. The literature also found that the use of victim/ survivor language from both formal and informal sources can also impact on one's propensity to align themselves with a victim and/or survivor identity. Even further, the literature implies that the interpretations of victim/survivor language may also be influential within the victimization disclosure process.

Thus, this study investigates whether family members of homicide victims' alignment with either a victim and/or survivor identity is congruent with sexual violence populations (i.e., whether family members interpret a victim identity as negative and a survivor identity as positive). This study also seeks to uncover the roles in which both formal and informal social interactions influence family members of homicide victims' identity development processes. Finally, given that family members have reported majority negative interactions with formal

institutions, this project, more specifically, examines the extent to which the criminal justice

system's perceptions of one's identity has an impact on the way in which one views oneself after

experiencing the loss of a loved one to homicide.

Chapter 4: Methods

The proposed study will be qualitative in nature. Through the use of focus groups, the intent of this proposal is to gain insight into the identity work processes of family members who have vicariously experienced homicide. A qualitative methodology was selected for this project because it allows for researchers to gain insight into the subjective experiences of unique individuals. The goal of qualitative research is to "explore, uncover, describe, and understand what lies behind any phenomenon about which may be little is known" (Cypress, 2015). Given that family members of homicide victims are an understudied population, a qualitative research is the most ideal method for extracting specific details about how these individuals come to understand themselves within the context of victimization.

Family members of homicide victims are an extremely difficult population to gain access to, which may be a reason as to why they are so infrequently empirically studied (Peterson-Armour, 2002). The mental and physical toll that losing a loved one to homicide has on a person can be extremely traumatizing and produce long term negative mental health effects (Zinzow et al., 2011; Connolly & Gordon, 2015; Asaro, 2001a; Amick-McMullan et al., 1989; Rheingold et al., 2012). On top of this, individuals who lose loved ones to homicide report changes in their societal perceptions, adopting a more negative worldview (Asaro, 2001b). Hence, this population is unlikely to build trust with outsiders and are even more unlikely to share their experiences with researchers.

To circumvent these barriers to access, this proposal suggests the use of focus groups to replicate the supportive and comforting nature of peer support groups. Peer support groups are often utilized by those who have lost loved ones to violence (Connolly & Gordon, 2015). Similar to group counseling or group therapy, peer support groups give family members and friends the

opportunity to discuss their recovery processes with others who have experienced a situation similar to their own (Connolly & Gordon, 2015; Asaro, 2001b). In doing this, peer support groups often foster a sense of community and informal social support that has the potential to aid in the coping process (Asaro, 2001b). Specifically for homicide victim families, "participation in a support group also may be helpful for those attempting to reconstruct their worldview after the murder" (Asaro, 2001b). Thus, the utilization of focus groups in this study will attempt to replicate the therapeutic conditions that peer support groups provide with the intent of fostering a sense of trust between the participants and the researcher as well as create a comfortable and familiar physical environment where participants can share their experiences.

In line with the recommended practice of focus group facilitation, one moderator and one to two assistant moderators or observers will be present during each focus group session (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). The moderator will ask participants predetermined questions (Appendix B) and manage the conversation in order to keep the discussion in line with this study's domains. The assistant moderator(s) will transcribe general notes from the conversation in real time. As well, the assistant moderator(s) will note information needed for later emotional coding such as each participants' tone, body language, general temperament, willingness to participate in the conversation, physical proximity to other participants, etc.

Sampling Strategy

The aim of this study is to gather approximately 8 to 12 participants or about 4 to 6 participants per focus group, as is recommended practice for interviewing individuals who are disclosing sensitive information (Tausch & Menold, 2016). Participant recruitment will utilize a convenience sampling approach, drawing from two separate homicide support group centers that provide support services within the state of Maryland. The Maryland Crime Victims' Resource

Center (MCVRC) is a non-profit organization that provides legal assistance, victim advocacy services, and mental health counseling to crime victims and their families. The MCVRC runs peer support groups for family members and friends of homicide victims and currently supports individuals who reside in Prince George's County, Maryland. The second organization that this study will include is Roberta's House: A Family Grief Support Center. Roberta's House is a community based nonprofit organization armed with the goal of providing bereavement services to family members affected by homicide. Roberta's House provides peer support groups for both adults and children and primarily caters to African American communities in Baltimore City, Maryland.

The rationale for choosing these organizations is twofold. The first reason is the use of language that is displayed on these organizations' websites. The second reason is the demographic makeup of the communities that each organization serves. On the MCVRC website, there is no direct mention as to whether the members that comprise the peer support groups identify as victims or survivors; however, the only language on the website, and used by the organization, is the word victim. Thus, an assumption can be made that an individual who vicariously experienced homicide and chooses to engage with MCVRC's services may in some way feel victimized or may be oriented towards victim language. Roberta's House, on the other hand, makes direct mention of the word survivor on their website. Both in relation to the peer support groups as well as the other services that they provide, Roberta's House aims to enhance resilience in the communities they serve. With resilience being a key connotation associated with survivor language, it can be assumed that individuals who engage with the services provided by Roberta's House have the potential to be more oriented towards survivor language. Because participants who seek peer support groups do so with the intent of finding identity affirming

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services, it is important to take into account the differences in the language used by these organizations, and to acknowledge that these differences may skew the perspectives of the participants in this study.

Sample Demographics

In terms of the demographic makeup of this sample, it is the intent of this study to have participants who are both geographically and statistically representative of individuals who lose a loved one to homicide. For instance, the MCVRC's clientele reside predominantly in Prince George's County, Maryland. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2021), the population of individuals who reside in Prince George's County are majority people of color. They state that 64% of the population identified as Black or of African descent, 20% were Hispanic or Latine, and 27% were White. The median household income was about $87,000 and about 9% of individuals living in Prince George's County were considered a person living in poverty.

In Baltimore City Maryland, where the majority of Roberta's House clients are served, the racial/ ethnic makeup of the population was 62% Black, 29% White, and 5% Latine or Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The U.S. Census Bureau (2021) also reported that the median annual household income was about $52,000 and about 20% of individuals were living in poverty. Because of the racial/ ethnic makeup of these counties, the sample of this study will be drawn in a way to emulate focus groups that are proportionate to demographics of these counties.

Considering the generalizability of insights drawn from the proposed study, this sample design is also cognizant of the more general, national level statistics related to homicide victim families. Research surrounding national level statistics have found that Black populations experience homicide at significantly higher rates compared to other racial/ethnic groups, and

both Black and Hispanic populations are often overrepresented within homicide "survivor" populations (Sharpe & Boyas, 2011; Rheingold et al., 2011; Zinzow et al., 2009). According to Bard (1982), when individuals experienced poor service, family members of homicide victims from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds reported more ambivalent attitudes towards the criminal justice system whereas White middle- and upper-class individuals reported feelings of disappointment and frustration. For these reasons, this proposal advocates for a sample that is not only racially and ethnically representative of local demographics, but also national level statistical data. Hence, the purpose of this study's convenience sampling approach, drawn from a minority heavy population with a diverse of socio-economic range (i.e., Baltimore County and Prince George's County), is to attempt to create a sample representative of these national level characteristics. It is the hope that by having a sample that is overrepresented by minority individuals, the experiences of those *most* affected by homicide are enveloped within this sample's narrative.

Finally, this study will include only adults aged 18 or older. While there is merit in including teens within this study, and while Roberta's House does offer services to children, this proposal is excluding individuals younger than the age of 18 because youth are not solidified in their identity development process (Erikson, 1994; Johnson, 2014). Youth are often still coming into their own and exploring their identities, more so than adults, and it is the intent of this proposal is to paint a concrete picture as to how homicides impact an individual's reconstruction of themselves. Therefore, an individual who has little understanding of their identities prior to the incident, may not fully be able to unpack the extent to which the effects of their reconstruction were solely the result of the murder.

Domains

The questions conceptualized for this study were categorized into three domains that model the identity work framework. The purpose of the domains in this study is to gain an understanding about the extent to which family members of homicide victims align themselves with victim and/or survivor language. More specifically, these questions seek to understand how these individuals came to perceive themselves in this way, and to what extent informal and formal social interpretations helped or hindered in the process of their discoveries.

The first domain involves individuals' personal interpretations of victim/survivor language and the second and third domains are in reference to outsider's interpretations, with the second domain involving informal social interactions, and the third domain asking questions about participants' formal interactions with the criminal justice system. The identity questions for this project were adapted from Boyle and Rogers (2020) and ask questions surrounding constructs of language perceptions as well as salience to specific identities (Appendix B). Questions regarding interactions with the criminal justice system and individual's bereavement processes were adapted from Goodrum (2000) and inquire about individuals' experiences and perceptions of the criminal justice system as well as how others perceived their identity work processes (Appendix B).

A pre-interview survey was also developed for this study in order to collect demographic and other relevant information from participants. In this survey, individuals will be asked about their racial ethnic background, the location where they have participated in the support group, the amount of time passed since the homicide, etc. (Appendix A). These questions were created with the knowledge that they will produce individual specific answers. They were not curated to be asked in a group setting, but rather were designed to gain insight into each participant's

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individualized identity and experience. All remaining questions were created to model appropriate focus group techniques as suggested by Krueger and Casey (2000), see appendix B.

Analytical Strategy

As suggested by Berg (2003), the analytical strategy or approach best suited for processing qualitative research involves deductive coding. Hence, the data collected from the focus groups of this study will largely involve deductive coding in relation to this project's three domains: language and identity, informal social perceptions, and criminal justice system perceptions. Once the focus groups have taken place and the discussions have been transcribed verbatim, the transcriptions, notes from the observers, and pre-interview survey data will be analyzed using Dedoose Mixed Methodology Coding software. Analyses run will produce codes based on any patterns or outstanding narratives in relation to the pre-set domains. Dedoose's statistical analyses will also compare the quantitative data produced from the pre-interview survey and the qualitative data from the transcriptions examining any potential mediating variables/relationships. For instance, whether participants' race, socio-economic status, relationship to the deceased, etc. significantly correlate with the thematic codes pulled from their narratives.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Potential Outcomes and Implications

The goal of this research was to understand the identity development processes of homicide victim families. More specifically, this project proposed to examine how family members of homicide victims interpret victim/survivor language within the context of vicarious victimization. This project also sought to understand the potential influence that both formal and informal social interactions have on one's self reconstruction after the murder of a loved one. Due to the proposed nature of this study, it is still unclear as to what mechanisms would influence participants of this study to identify as one identity over the other; however, given the binary nature of victim/survivor language this researcher proposes that there likely four potential outcomes in which participants could have chosen to identify themselves: (1) victim, (2) survivor, (3) both a victim and survivor, or (4) neither a victim nor a survivor. It is also likely that within homicide victim families' identity work processes, social interactions could have played either a significant or neglectful role in their choice to align with one of the four outcomes.

If participants were to identify as either of the four conceptual outcomes, these findings would validate the identity work framework's generalizability to vicarious homicide populations. The identity work framework posits that people use language and the contexts around them to make sense of themselves and their identities, assuming that language has a direct influence on identity development (Crossley, 2000). The findings of Fisher et al. (2003a) imply that not only does access to language play a role in the adaptation of one's self concept, but also the connotations associated with language are influential in one's willingness to accept or reject an

identity. As has been discussed throughout this paper, the words victim and survivor are the most prominent words used to describe individuals who have experienced harm as the result of a crime. Given that those who experience harm are constantly exposed to victim and survivor language via legal, research related, and/or colloquial definitions, this suggests that victim/survivor language is readily accessible for individuals to encounter, interpret, and incorporate into their self concept. Thus, if family members of homicide victims identified as one or more of the four proposed outcomes, this would emphasize the need to reframe the way that society recognizes, defines, and communicates about vicarious victimization.

Rock (1998) states that, "how people suffer, perceive, and respond to crime shapes its trajectory and its political and practical environments." By reframing the way that society recognizes and interprets victim/survivor language, this would help to better address the linguistic inconsistencies that individuals face when they encounter vicarious victimization. Within legislature, criminological research, and even colloquial conversation, discussions surrounding what it means to be a victim versus what it means to be a survivor are accompanied by their respective connotations. However, the binary nature in which victim/survivor language is constructed is not applicable to diverse populations. As seen within this research, family members of homicide victims have a unique linguistic positionality: one in which neither victim nor survivor language truly captures their experiences. The strict rigidity of the language that is used to describe crime and victimization is a gross oversimplification of the potentially complex relationships that individuals have in relation to violence, and this linguistic disparity is not just specific to homicide populations. For instance, Zaykowski (2019) describes the victim-offender overlap: a phenomenon in which individuals can be conceptualized as, and play both parts of, the victim and the perpetrator. While victimization can on the surface be perceived as very cut and

dry, the reality is that victimization is not as strictly distinct as the language suggests it should be. Hence, by reconceptualizing the way that society views and communicates about victims/survivors, expanding on the understanding that language has an impact on identity, this allows for both individuals and institutions to more acutely understand the complexities of vicarious victimization.

In terms of social interactions, if a family member of a homicide victim claims that social perceptions play a significant part within their willingness to use victim/survivor language, then this outcome would fill in a significant gap in the literature. Prior research suggests that outsiders' language use can have an impact on the identity work process of vicarious victims. Botta and Pingree (1997) found that women who had been raped were more likely to identify themselves as rape victims when they had a friend who also identified themselves as a rape victim. These findings imply that regardless of whether victimization is direct or vicarious, the motivations behind choosing an identity are likely linked to social perceptions and outsider language use. However, unique to homicide populations, social interactions are often limited as the stigma surrounding how a homicide occurred (i.e., gang violence vs. drunk driving) play a role in one's willingness to disclose the details of their loved ones' death (Asaro, 2001a). So, if participants disclose that social influence was a significant factor within their propensity to align with or distance themselves from victim/survivor language, then this outcome would highlight the demand for more inclusive policies and more comprehensive resources for vicarious victims.

Prior research has made claims that the language utilized by formal institutions could potentially be a barrier to access not only for individuals who are in need of resources, but also for researchers trying to more empirically understand victimization (Boyle & Rogers, 2020; Fisher et al., 2003a; Simmons et al., 2011). In acknowledging the discord between the

importance of social influence and negative pressures of stigma associated with homicide, this literature showcases the need for linguistic inclusivity from formal institutions. If it is the expectation that individuals who experience harm are to acquire resources or attain justice on their own accord, then it is pertinent for the criminal legal system/victim services to be perceived as institutions that are inclusive to all who are in need. In making a more valiant effort and being more attentive about how the language utilized by formal institutions can either be either facilitative or stigmatizing in the process of coping with violence victimization, this can help create a more harmonious and free flowing relationship between those who seek resources and those who help to provide them.

Gillum (2009) posits that the most influential and rehabilitative resources are ones in which both individual and institutional efforts are made to be inclusive, open, and understanding to the situations of its clients. This sentiment should be expanded outside of the realm of direct victimization. Individuals impacted by homicide face a multitude of negative mental health outcomes, socio-economic instability, and an overall mental shift towards a more negative worldview (Zinzow et al., 2011; Connolly & Gordon, 2015; Asaro, 2001a; Amick-McMullan et al., 1989; Rheingold et al., 2012). Not only are these outcomes a call to action for the creation of more programming that addresses these issues, but this research also emphasizes the importance of language within the curation of these resources. Extensive care is needed when creating programs in order to accurately capture the experiences of those in need: using inclusive language both in the marketing and recruitment of participants as well as within the training and education of the policy makers.

Finally, in regards to implications for research, this proposal highlights the need to adjust the way that criminological research is conducted. Throughout the construction of this piece, two major gaps were uncovered within the current literature: (1) despite the influx in the use of survivor language within "victimization" oriented research, victim language continues to dominate criminological research measures, (2) when accounting for vicarious victimization, there is a lack of consensus on whether vicarious individuals should be operationalized as victims and/or survivors.

Several arguments have been made by prior literature that the overuse of victim oriented language may be an unintentional barrier to access both within the recruitment of research participants as well as within access to truly valid and representative data (Boyle & Rogers, 2020; Koss et al., 1988; Pitts & Schwartz, 1993; Leisenring, 2006). Historically, the majority of criminological crime data collection methods only use the word "victim" to describe populations who have been harmed as the result of a crime (Xie & Baumer, 2019). Yet this research has shown that both victim and survivor language are influential within an individuals' self reconstruction after being exposed to violence. Thus, it is pertinent that crime data collection measures expand or reconstruct the way that victimization is operationalized and measured; potentially providing participants the opportunity to define themselves rather than assuming that a researcher's definition is the same as a participant's interpretation.

As seen with Koss et al. (1988) & Pitts and Schwartz (1993), these researchers surmised that participants would conceptualize themselves as "rape victims" given that the way the measures operationalized the a "rape victim" was the same as the way the participant's described their experiences, yet the opposite was true within their findings. Participants of these studies did not view themselves as rape victims in these instances despite answering yes to rape victim

related questions. The implications of this suggest that researchers' current measures may be neglecting to capture their intended population because individuals may satisfy victim criteria, but don't identify themselves as victims. Even further, researchers may unintentionally be jeopardizing the validity of their data because current measures don't examine the extent to which participant's truly feel represented within the language employed in their questions.

Given the paradoxical nature of victim/survivor language in reference to vicarious homicide populations as well as the added complexity that has resulted from criminological researchers' inconsistent labeling of vicarious individuals as either victim or survivors, it is unlikely that current victimization measures accurately represent, or are comprehensive in operationalizing all individuals who are harmed by violence. Hence, the language utilized within future measures needs to account for these linguistic discrepancies. Rather than assuming that someone would choose one identity over the other, or defaulting to victim language to describe every population that experiences harm, researchers should take more care and be more intentional when constructing their studies. This then ensures that participants' narratives are genuinely incorporated into the research, building trust between researchers and participants, as well as provides researchers with a truer perspective on the potential nuances that each individual's experience brings to their sample.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation within this body of research remains within the concept of individualized experiences. It is important to acknowledge that every individual is unique, and although a group of people may encounter a specific phenomenon, the ways in which each individual person interprets their own lived experiences may vary. Whether that variation is systematic, within the context of post homicide identity development, remains unknown due to the conceptual nature of

this project; however, the development of this research question ultimately opens the door for future research to examine homicide populations more empirically. Similarly, this proposal only intended to examine adult victimization, but more research is needed to understand the experiences of individuals in all developmental stages. The inclusion of adolescents and emerging adults is also needed, as these age demographics are also likely to encounter homicidal violence both directly and vicariously (Rheingold et al., 2012).

Another limitation of this research can be viewed through the conceptualization of vicarious victimization. Vicarious victimization is often used in reference to individuals who are not the direct targets of a violent encounter, but still suffer the consequences of the violence (e.g., psychological distress, the loss of a shared asset, etc.). While this paper solely focused on language, what this project lacks is an acknowledgement of the nuance of a vicarious experience. For instance, this proposal does not account for outstanding variables such as whether the participant was physically present during the murder. It also does not account for any difference in the cause of death of the deceased loved one (i.e., gang violence vs. vehicle manslaughter). Silverman and Kennedy (1987) found that homicide victimization can systematically vary by gender, location, relationship status, age, and mode of death. Future research is needed to examine the extent to which physical proximity and cause of death influence how an individual reframes their worldview.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which family members of homicide victims identify themselves as victims and/or survivors. Currently, homicide research lacks consensus as to whether these words adequately conceptualize these individuals' experiences, and little research has been done to investigate whether or not this lack of consensus has had any impact on this population. To fill this gap in the literature, this study proposed the use of a qualitative research methodology in order to garner insight from families who have lost a loved one to homicide. The goal of this study was to understand the true role that language has on one's self reconstruction after experiencing vicarious violence victimization, and to uncover the extent to which both formal and informal social interactions influence one's identity development process.

In an attempt to understand homicide victimization from a new lens, this study's final aim is to push future researchers to question the validity of the current systems in place. As has been implied throughout the entirety of this project, the language that researchers, criminal justice system agents, and policy makers use has the potential to impact the communities that they serve. This research has showcased that there is no one size fits all approach to linguistic inclusivity. By studying the impact of how language influences identity development, and analyzing the implications of language use on behavior, future criminologists can use this information to inform policy makers on how to more appropriately recognize victimization, create more adaptive programming for those who experience harm, and ultimately support individuals who are in need.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your racial ethnic identity?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your household income?
4. What is your relationship to the deceased?
5. Approximately how long ago did you lose your loved one?
6. What bereavement agency did you receive services from? (Roberta's House or MCVRC)

Appendix B

Part I: Identity Questions

1. Tell us who you are and describe your relationship with the deceased.
2. In reflecting on how you described your relationships with the deceased, I'm wondering if this role is something that you have more recently developed, or have you always viewed yourself in this way?
3. Traditionally, when we talk about loss, we would describe the deceased as the victim, but do you see yourself as a victim in this situation? Why or Why not?
   a. If not, what does it mean to be a victim in this situation?
4. Have you ever viewed yourself as a survivor? Why or Why not?
   a. If not, what does it mean to be a survivor in this situation?
5. Is it important to you to be viewed as a victim/survivor?

Part II: Bereavement Process Questions

1. What have been others' responses when you referred to yourself as a victim/survivor?
2. Who was a specific person (family, friend, co-worker, etc.) who significantly helped you heal the harm of your loss?
   a. What did they say/ do that helped you cope?

Part III: Criminal Justice Questions

2. Research tells us that there are things about the criminal justice system that makes it harder for families to cope with their loss. Do you agree with this sentiment?
3. Can you describe how criminal justice system agents (police, prosecutors, victim advocates, etc.) involvement in the deceased's case positively or negatively impacted you?
4. Do you believe that the criminal justice system can help you heal the harm of your loss? Why or why not?