

“ . . . the perception of stigma among people who have a relative convicted of murder is shaped by their own sense of shame, their own suspicion of toxicity.”

“MURDERERS’ RELATIVES”

Managing Stigma,
Negotiating Identity

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Drawing on in-depth interviews with the relatives of convicted murderers, this article interrogates the concept of stigma through an everyday notion of familial toxicity and commonsense understandings of murder. Identifying moments of stigmatizing strain, the article examines moments of opportunity for managing stigma through three metatactics: management of space, information, and self-presentation. However, due to the problems in carrying out sensitive research with a hidden population, there are limits to how far arguments made can be generalized. Therefore, the article concludes by raising questions for future research.

This article explores how stigma may be experienced and the processes by which the experience can be ameliorated through the prism of a particular stigmatized group: relatives of people convicted of murder. Their experience of stigma will be shown to emerge from two key domains of common sense: first, that everyday understandings of the cause of crime generally and murder specifically are rooted within perceptions of poor parenting and bad familial socialization. Notions of such familial toxicity (Lefley 1987) may be implicated in the stigma experienced by the parents of a murderer: a moral stigma of the “failed family.” Connected to this, a second source of stigma is derived from commonsense notions of what murder is. It will be seen that everyday constructions of murder focus almost exclusively on the dangerous stranger. Murder is understood as the evil actions of unknown predators. People who have a toxic relationship with this commonsense construct of murder may be causally implicated in the violence itself. This article will suggest that the perception of stigma among people who have a relative convicted of murder is shaped by their own sense of shame, their own suspicion of toxicity. *

Attempts to lessen or mitigate any experience of stigma can involve a range of tactics and strategies. However, there are no formal avenues toward an ex-deviant status for the informally deviant such as relatives of convicted murderers. Moreover, their acute vulnerability—actual or perceived—to negative or threatening interactions will be seen to have generated intense social isolation for most relatives interviewed. Similar to other newly stigmatized groups (Arluke 1993), interviewees had

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no stigma management skills when their relatives were first convicted. Nonetheless, this article will show that in their quest for nondeviant statuses, relatives of people convicted of murder became similar to more experienced stigmatized groups: they developed into "strategists, expert managers, and negotiators who play active (although not always successful) roles in the shaping of deviant outcomes" (Herman 1993, 324).

This article will first explain the process by which it was possible to make contact with interviewees. It will then explore the significance of both familial toxicity and notions of murder in the experience of stigma among relatives of convicted murderers. Finally, the article will discuss tactics of stigma management and re-present their multiplicity as instances of three metastrategies: management of space, information, and self-presentation.

INTERVIEWING RELATIVES OF CONVICTED MURDERERS

This article draws on in-depth interview data with relatives of eight people convicted of murder. In all, fifteen relatives were interviewed, and eight members of six families were interviewed twice (see Table 1).¹

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Having two rounds of interviews allowed interviewees the opportunity to reflect on issues raised and further develop responses. This also enabled the researcher to first establish contact and some degree of rapport through initial unstructured, exploratory interviews and, second, develop a semistructured interview guide for following interviews based on a preliminary analysis of emergent data and concepts. Interviewees were only included in the research if they had defined themselves as related to the offender at the time of the killing. Significantly, it was the women who arranged the interviews and acted as the point of contact between their families and the researcher—reproducing a gendered pattern of familial communication with the offenders themselves. All but two offenders (Doyle and Kellett) lived in the parental home at the time of the killings.

Reaching interviewees was problematic. This reflected, first, the sensitivity of the research. Key commonalties in interviewees' experiences were trauma, bereavement, and stigmatization, and most potential interviewees were unwilling to risk unnecessary social exposure. A second problem was the hidden nature of the research population—

TABLE 1: Interview Data from Relatives of Convicted Murderers

Family ^a	Relative Interviewed	Notes
Doyle	Sister, once	Twenty-five-year-old brother convicted of stabbing a man in the course of a robbery. Accessed via Probation Service.
Duncan	Mother, twice Father, twice Sister, once	Twenty-three-year-old son/brother convicted of beating a naked stranger on the street. Accessed via Probation Service.
Jackson	Mother, twice	Sixteen-year-old son convicted of beating an elderly female neighbor following solvent abuse. Accessed through Probation Service; involved in support group Aftermath.
Kellett	Mother, twice Sister, once Niece, once	Son/brother/uncle convicted of strangling his estranged wife. Accessed through Probation Service.
Maltby	Mother, twice	Fourteen-year-old daughter convicted, with a friend, of stabbing a male acquaintance from a neighboring village. Accessed through Probation Service.
Stevens	Sister, twice Brother, twice	Twenty-one-year-old brother convicted, with a friend, of beating a male acquaintance. Accessed via Prison Service.
Thorpe	Aunt, twice Cousin, once	Nephew/cousin, convicted of shooting a friend having escaped from prison. Accessed through Aftermath.
Wagstaff	Mother, once Father, once	Twenty-three-year-old son convicted, with a friend, of beating this friend's father. Accessed through Aftermath.

a. Family names are pseudonyms.

relatives of offenders have no statutory relationship with any organization. At the time of seeking access, there was only one U.K. support group for the families of serious offenders.² Aftermath. But most families of serious offenders do not turn to Aftermath for help, and neither the probation service nor the police refer offenders' families to the group. As a result, Aftermath calculates that it has helped only a small proportion of serious offenders' families (Aftermath 1995).

Seeking a hidden population to carry out sensitive research meant that it took twenty-one months to reach and interview members of eight families, three of whom had sought help from Aftermath. Two families were reached directly through Aftermath. The other six families were reached through two English Probation Services and the Prison Service. These organizations allowed access to the offenders only, whose permission to approach their families was required. As a result, the access process involved three layers of gatekeepers: prison/probation management, prison/probation officers, and the offenders themselves.

The high rate of offenders' refusals (a little more than one hundred offenders were approached) reflects the convoluted access process, the shame and stigma commonly experienced by offenders' relatives, and the problems life-sentence prisoners have in maintaining contact with their families of origin.

Limitations
 It is important, therefore, to recognize that those who agreed to be interviewed represented a particular subgroup of offenders' relatives. They all had good relations with their offending relatives; they were likely to have good relationships with their relatives' prison and probation officers, who implicitly selected "suitable" offenders and their families for inclusion; and none of these interviewees or their families had prior criminal records. Excluded subpopulations were families in which the victims were also members—the largest group of homicide survivors (Criminal Statistics 1997; Bureau of Justice Statistics 1998), who had lost contact with incarcerated relatives for other reasons and/or were more familiar with criminality and violence among its members.

EXPERIENCING STIGMA

The experience of stigma emerges from an interactive process in which a negatively valued aspect of an individual's life comes to dominate her or his social identity and self-concept. This is a powerful social label that operates as a master status, obliterating other dimensions of social identity, at least within interaction with others. Consequently, stigmatized interactants are diminished and discounted as "tainted" persons (Goffman 1963, 12). However, as Goffman's seminal work emphasized, the experience of stigma cannot be divorced from the social context in which stigmatizing interactions can occur. In different social settings, "an attribute that stigmatized one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another" (Goffman 1963, 13).

With respect to homicide, this can be illustrated in a number of ways. A person who kills in the name of a community's political claim—for example, Loyalist and Republican para-militarists in Northern Ireland—may be valorized within his or her community yet reviled in the other. The meaning of such killings alters across these communities with shifting implications for perpetrators' interactions and those of their relatives. A second example illustrates the significance to the stigmatizing process of social distance between interactants (Ericson

1977). People who are socially distanced have limited knowledge of each other and their full complement of identity dimensions. When someone breaches social rules, socially distanced others may only have access to the identity information relating to this deviance. This can be seen in the contemporaneous responses to the "Moors Murders" and Myra Hindley³ among people living in the Gorton area of Manchester. Marchbanks argues that "half a mile away they were calling Myra Hindley a 'beast' and a 'monster,' but in Taylor Street she was still Nellie Hindley's daughter" (Marchbanks 1966, 125). A final example demonstrates the possibility that the passage of time can also change the meaning and experience of stigmatization. At the time of her conviction for manslaughter, Mary Bell⁴ was understood as a damaged child and her actions as an aspect of this tragedy. In the aftermath of the Bulger⁵ killing, however, Mary Bell's case has been reevaluated and she has been reconstituted—in the press at least—as an evil murderer with perilous implications for her and her family (Sereny 1998). We can see, therefore, that the experience of stigma is differently constituted across time, space, and social context.

For the interviewees, the experience of stigma appeared to be rooted in two factors. The first of these two factors was some form of familial toxicity. With reference to relatives of people with serious mental illnesses, Lefley (1987) argues that experiences of stigma are based on others' view of family members as the primary toxic agents (p. 556). This identifies the family as the site of predominant causal factors and gives members "a message of their own culpability in generating or precipitating the devastating illness of a loved one" (Lefley 1987, 557). It may be possible to argue that the relatives of people who have murdered perceive themselves and are perceived by others to be intimately and causally connected with the violence itself. Public discourse (e.g., see Quale 1992) and social theory (e.g., see Heide 1999), for example, have routinely identified the family as the key explanatory site of homicide, citing various forms of poor parenting and bad familial socialization as dominant factors. This can translate into an everyday blaming of parents specifically and family in general: a powerful message of culpability. This is visible in both the self-blame of some offenders' relatives and the perceived blame of others. Jon Venables' mother, for example, has talked about where she went wrong in her mothering (BBC2 1994), while Jeffrey Dahmer's father⁶ has written that people responded to him as if he "was the accused . . . an agent in [his] son's crimes, perhaps their

ultimate cause" (Dahmer 1995, 203). More generally, Gilmore⁹ has referred to a symbolic toxic relationship: a normative assumption that

anybody who has emerged from a family that yielded a murderer must also be formed by the same causes, the same evil, must in some way also be responsible for the violence that resulted, must also bear the mark of a frightening and shameful heritage. (Gilmore 1994, 358)

Similarly, the following quotes reveal interviewees' own perceptions of responsibility and causality or their awareness of others' perception of this toxicity:⁸

We're all classed as "Well, it's the family's fault. It's got to be their fault." And the families get blamed. Come out of the same mould, you're all the same. (Thorpe aunt)

You've got so much guilt, you just feel an utter failure in everything you've done. I was the one who actually bore David. I was pregnant with David, I brought him into the world, and if I hadn't, he wouldn't have grown up and done that. Everything comes back to you . . . you know David had done something wrong, and I'd told him off and I'd smacked him, and you think, "I shouldn't have done that. I was violent to him; have I taught him violence?" (Jackson mother)

You blame yourself. I do. I do. No matter what anybody says, I still to some degree blame myself. (Wagstaff father)

A second source of stigma for interviewees was rooted within homicide itself and the nature of everyday constructions of murder. Although feminist research around violence has highlighted the potential danger that men pose to women they know (Maynard and Winn 1997), and homicide research shows that men too are more likely to be killed by men they know (Polk 1994), this has not necessarily translated into a routinized fear of friends, relatives, and lovers. Indeed, this knowledge appears to have had "little or no impact upon the hegemonic image that 'real' violence and crime is something that occurs on the street, in public, and is committed by strangers" (Stanko 1994, 34). The notion of the dangerous stranger is, therefore, central to commonsense constructions of murder. In part, this is because most people have no experiential knowledge of homicide. Even where rates are comparatively high, homicide is relatively rare and accounts for a small proportion of

violent crime.⁹ As a result, the dominant source of information and knowledge about homicide comes from news media and fictional and "true crime"¹⁰ output. But these media exaggerate the incidence of stranger homicide while almost ignoring far more frequent intimate homicides (Best 1999).

Interviewees tended to subscribe to similar notions of murder. While intimate homicides were seen to be tragic, they were nonetheless understandable events emerging from the tensions of long-term relationships. In contrast, stranger homicides could not be contextualized within relationships and were seen to be without reason, inexplicable, and cold blooded—and it was these characteristics that were used to identify murder. This is illustrated by the following quote in which an interviewee refers to her brother's murder of his wife:

You'd like to think you'd be able to walk away and it didn't bother you. But you don't know . . . when you're in a relationship, you love someone so much. . . . I could never understand why he got murder rather than manslaughter. I always think in domestic things, that it's deeper. [To me it's different] if you go out and cold bloodedly murder somebody for no reason. (Kellett sister)

Understanding murder as the purposive seeking of victims held consequences for interviewees' perceptions of murderers. To be a murderer obliterated all other dimensions of the person; all that was left was an evil master status. While most interviewees illustrated this by reference to well-known convicted murderers in the United Kingdom, one mother was more general in her perception of what it is to be a murderer.

Murderers are these people who just walk about and beat somebody senseless and to a pulp, walk away and do it again to somebody else. Because they're murderers, they're evil. (Wagstaff mother)

Interviewees' experience of stigma, therefore, was not simply located in notions of familial toxicity but also with reference to the specific understanding of the crime that they feared they had precipitated. Sensing their responsibility for generating evil, interviewees were concerned that others would see them as nothing more than murderers' relatives—a master status of failed families. Stigma-related literature advises that those in marginal and vulnerable social locations are fully aware of the meaning of "normality" and "deviance" and what it means

