

“ . . . 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

D like 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

to achieve membership in either category (Birenbaum 1992). Consequently, "it is generally easy to convince stigmatized persons that they are shameful precisely because most stigmatized persons hold the same beliefs about identity that 'normals' hold" (Barton 1988, 91). Interview data suggests that having once belonged to a community of normal families, interviewees were in a strong position to know the meaning of their new social status as murderers' relatives.

You have changed. You are now a murderer's Mum. You [became] a completely different person. (Wagstaff mother)

I've always been so proud of my respectability, and it worried me that that seemed to have gone. I felt very degraded—as though everything I had strived to be, a respectable person, had all gone. I felt a criminal. (Jackson mother)

The central position of stigmatization to their experiences was common among all interviewees, manifest in a dramatically altered self-perception and fear of others' responses. If their relatives' convictions can be understood as formal degradation ceremonies (Garfinkel 1956), the aftermath for the interviewees was an informal degradation and one that carried potential peril. For most, this remained a perceived threat rather than an actuality. But just as the fear of crime has been shown to be significant in the perception of vulnerability (Best 1999), so too was the fear of stigmatizing interactions for interviewees. The perceived jeopardy arising from their toxic relationships shaped the interpretations they made of others' actions, even though they sometimes suspected that their fears were of their own making. One of the mothers quoted above went on to say,

You just feel so self-conscious. They possibly weren't staring at me because of that, but you feel that they are. You're just incredibly susceptible to anything like that. I think you can misinterpret a lot of things, because of your state of mind. And any contact I did have I immediately distrusted. Because the shame you feel over what's happened, you can't imagine anyone thinking kindly about you. You see it's all in your mind, a lot of it. (Jackson mother)

These fears may well have been all in the mind—but they could never be sure. And this reveals the centrality of power relations to the experience of stigmatization. Their exclusion from the imagined community

of "normal" families rendered them powerless to control the definitions they believed others made of them.

MANAGING STIGMA

Analysis of awareness contexts (Glaser and Strauss 1964) offers the opportunity to understand how an individual's social status can shift between open awareness contexts, in which toxic relationships are publicly known, and closed awareness contexts, where others are incognizant of this toxicity. This suggests that an individual may have some scope to manage the stigmatization experience by regulating the social context of interactions and the degree of awareness in others. Such regulatory endeavor represents the attempt to reassert social power and reclaim self-determination. This article will now go on to examine this scope and will focus on three metastrategies: managing space, information, and self-presentation.

OPEN AWARENESS CONTEXTS: MANAGING SPACE

Within open awareness contexts, it may be possible to avoid potential exposure or confrontation with the "rejection, pity or aggression of normals" (Breakwell 1986, 109). The newly stigmatized may be able to manage the space in which interactions with others occur and so evade socially threatening contexts. Among interviewees, the ability to avoid certain contexts rested on a clear distinction drawn between the safety offered by private space and the danger of public space. The desire for safety and the terror of public danger made the choice clear, as the following mothers' comments illustrate:

I was two months off work when it happened. I couldn't face people, I couldn't go out shopping, I daren't go out on my own. I was terrified that someone would come up and start shouting at me. I was extremely frightened. (Jackson mother)

At that time, I daren't go out of the house. . . . I went looking round, seeing if anybody was about before I even went to the dustbin. Writing to Paul, posting it at four o'clock in the morning. Before this happened I

never dreamt of going out at four o'clock in the morning on my own! But then I knew there'd be nobody about. (Wagstaff mother)

At times, their safe havens were invaded by abusive telephone calls, damage to property, or passersby who peered into their homes. These intrusions—similar to those discussed by Cooney (1994)—strengthened their perception that “out there” was a world of danger and that their private safety needed to be physically reinforced: closing curtains, changing telephone numbers, and, in one case, changing residences enabled the continued avoidance of public space. When interviewees had to leave the safety of their home, before they perceived themselves to be free of danger, a common response was to extend and make mobile their private safety. Visiting their incarcerated relatives or going shopping, for example, was made possible only when a relative, friend, or probation officer accompanied them, as the mother of the only female offender in this research revealed.

I'd get in the car with our Nick's wife. I'd get in the car with my brother-in-law. I'd get in with the social worker. But I'd not go on the street on my own. (Maltby mother)

Similarly, returning to work would also generate anxiety, and one mother ensured the protection of a colleague both in the journey to work and movement around the workplace: “I traveled to work with Doreen, my supervisor. She held my hand as we walked together through the shop floor to the office” (Jackson mother).

But much as they desired to stay hidden forever, most of those interviewed could not maintain isolation for more than several weeks or months because practical circumstances prevented it. The responsibilities of life—work, friends, relationships, and children—meant that staying at home was not feasible in the long term. Over time, therefore, interviewees selectively avoided specific people, contexts, and spaces in which their social capital was weaker than that of others who held different perspectives on the murders. One sister, for example, continued to live in the same small town as the victim's family. To escape confrontation with them—and possibly their implicit challenge to her reading of her brother's crime—she controlled her own and her children's movements.

I avoid the places that I know they work; I avoid the places I know they go. I would never dream of taking my children to school where [the victim's] sister's children are. I take mine out of the area. (Kellett sister)

When reentering the outside world, interviewees commonly selected particular social contexts as sites of comparative safety; these were contexts in which they were known prior to their relatives' crimes, such as work, pubs that they frequented, and social clubs they were members of. Reemergence into these communities generated support and sympathy from many people, which seems to suggest that interviewees may have been reintegrated after a period of shaming and social withdrawal: an expression of penance (Braithwaite 1989). Having made initial steps back into public space, it became less frightening, confirming other research that suggests that long-term avoidance of specific social contexts can maintain stigmatizing social distance and so reinforce the perceived threat (Arluke 1993). Total avoidance of public space, while an effective strategy of immediate self-protection, appeared to be both undesirable and infeasible in the long term. However, rather than becoming obsolete in a career trajectory of stigma management, it seems that space management is open to selectivity over time and may be returned to to avoid very particular unsafe contexts.

CLOSED AWARENESS CONTEXTS: MANAGING INFORMATION

In closed awareness contexts, it may be possible to maintain others' ignorance by concealing all signs of and information about stigmatizing attributes and therefore pass as “normals.” Compared with other stigmatized groups, the families of murderers may be well positioned to conceal their socially dangerous relationships. The subject of murder may not arise very often in everyday conversation, for example, and when it does, there may be acceptable ways of closing the subject. Indeed, interviewees were very able to avoid such conversations. But the problem was that they felt dishonest when they did so. Confronted by their relatives' crimes, they commonly experienced a loss of respectability. In an attempt to retain the last vestiges of prior rectitude, maintaining honor was important. Moreover, while passing might enable individuals to escape their potential discredit, it can also reinforce the psychological stress that surrounds the dilemmas of concealing and

revealing and so highlight the perception of difference and stigmatization (Richardson 1981). Finding the balance between concealing, revealing, and maintaining honor was of great importance. In seeking this balance, research participants engaged in a "dynamic and continual process of moving between coming out and passing" (Richardson 1981, 122) based on context-specific assessments of risks and benefits. There were four nonexclusive methods that interviewees employed: re-presentation, selective disclosure, therapeutic disclosure, and preventative disclosure.

Re-presentation

It may be possible to partially conceal information by re-presenting the signs of one's discredit as signs of more acceptable attributes (Goffman 1963). In a symbolic hierarchy of criminality, being convicted of a nonserious offense may be less unacceptable than a murder conviction. Allowing others to know of a relative's criminal conviction and incarceration but not disclosing the nature of the offense was one way in which it was possible for interviewees to be truthful—and so retain their honor—but at the same time protect themselves from the worst of others' judgments, as illustrated by the mothers of two male offenders in their early twenties.

We don't tell any lies; we just don't inform them. If it comes up, "Yes, I have a son in prison." But I won't tell them why he's in prison. I'll let them go on in ignorance. (Wagstaff mother)

If we are talking about the family and they happen to say "What's your son do?" I'd just be honest. But I don't know if I would [say what he's in prison for], to be honest. (Duncan mother)

Selective Disclosure

Selective disclosure (Herman 1993) refers to individuals' decisions to conceal from or reveal to specific others their truths. For the relatives interviewed, the risks were perceived to be high: disclosers feared rejection and abuse. Even when contexts were assessed as safe, they could not be guaranteed to remain unriskey: as one father said, once a disclosure is made, the disclosee "might think, 'Well, why didn't they tell us right from the beginning?' They might slag you off behind your

back." Also, some contexts were judged to be perennially risky, the power imbalance so great as to be unalterable. Because they were financially dependent on maintaining employment, for example, many interviewees would not reveal the nature of their toxic relationship at work for fear that they would be sacked or that their positions would be made untenable. But at the same time, the potential rewards were also perceived to be high: revealing offered the opportunity to be accepted regardless of one's relationship to a murderer. Consequently, decisions to conceal or reveal often revolved around intimacy. Where intimacy existed, disclosure was possible; where intimacy was desired, disclosure could be the vehicle; where intimacy neither existed nor was desired, concealment was the norm. As the following two parents make clear, decisions would be made within the intimate context of a specific relationship:

[Whom do you tell?] Family, people you feel comfortable with. [But] making new friends [is] very difficult for us because what do you tell them? It depends how far you're going into the friendship, how close you're going to be, the length of time the relationship has been going, and how deeply you feel about them. If the friendship got to where you were being honest with each other . . . you would probably tell them. (Wagstaff father)

Different people, different times. Obviously I wouldn't tell a casual friend . . . [but] when you meet someone and you get closer, you sort of feel the need to tell them so they know you. There's people I wish I could tell, because I'm sure it would help our relationship, that they'd understand me a little better if they knew that I'd got this in my life. (Jackson mother)

Therapeutic Disclosure

At times, the need for support, intimacy, or simply the catharsis of telling can override both the desire to conceal and the fear of the consequences of revealing. For example, disclosure may offer opportunities for an individual to off-load one's troubles and garner support (Blum 1993), as the Duncan sister said:

I had two friends where we used to live. Eventually they asked why I'd got two photos of [my brother]. I was quite open. You feel some days it's a burden off your shoulders if you'd spoken about him.

In addition, disclosure can help to improve self-esteem (Breakwell 1986) and aid the renegotiation of "personal perceptions of the stigma of 'failing'" (Herman 1993, 311):

I always feel dead chuffed when I do tell someone. And that I've achieved something by doing it. I feel very brave. I'm always ever so glad that I've done it. (Jackson mother)

Preventative Disclosure

Individuals may also decide to disclose information early on in a relationship to prevent longer term problems, because it can be less painful to be rejected by an acquaintance than by an intimate (Herman 1993). Some killers' relatives interviewed employed forms of preventative disclosure in the attempt to prevent questions and gossip. It may be that neither sister quoted here was successful in these attempts, but what is significant is that their perception of success enabled their continued social participation.

People that I didn't know from that time [will] say to me, "We're doing such and such on Sunday, do you want to come?" And I'll say, "No, I'm going out, I'm going to see my brother in jail. And before you ask, he's in prison for murder." They don't ask what happened; they just leave it at that. Because I think I would feel intimidated by someone who came out and told me something like that. I wouldn't dare ask them any more questions after that. I think that's why I do it, because I don't really like talking about it. (Doyle sister)

When [my brother] got arrested, I knew the news would get around soon enough. I knocked on everybody's door, and I said, "My brother was arrested for murder this morning. I'm just telling you, because I don't want to hear anything added or anybody gossiping about it. If you want to know something, you come and ask me." And to be quite honest, I haven't heard anybody gossiping. (Stevens sister)

The conceal/reveal dilemma experienced by interviewees continued long after their relatives' conviction and was raised every time new people came into their lives or they entered new contexts. Various closed-awareness contexts generated significant moments of opportunity to pass or come out. Anticipating these opportunities could engender strain (Birenbaum 1975), allowing them to pass generated feelings of

anxiety or failure while capitalizing upon them generated self-esteem and often enabled relationships to flourish. Decisions to reveal or conceal appeared to be based on the perceived risks and rewards that these moments of opportunity offered. These decisions, then, were neither fixed nor predetermined but emerged within ongoing interactions. Importantly, these decisions offered opportunities to assess and shift the balance of power in interactions: to reveal or conceal was to take self-determining action.

OPEN AWARENESS CONTEXTS: MANAGING SELF-PRESENTATION

Another means by which individuals can seek to mitigate stigmatizing experiences may be through the management of self-presentation (Goffman 1959, 1963) and the attempt to influence others' impressions. But the problem facing the killers' relatives interviewed was that they were confronted not simply by the informally powerful responses of individuals and groups within their communities, for example, but also by the formal power of the law. In their attempts to resist the imposition of a murderer's relative master status, interviewees divided into two clusters. ¹¹ First, dissension: one cluster challenged the application of the master status, arguing that their relatives were not murderers. Second, collective support: these interviewees accepted their relatives' murder verdicts and sought more sympathetic audiences for their self-presentations.

Dissension

Interviewees in this first cluster believed that their relatives should have been found guilty of manslaughter, not murder. First, they argued that their relatives were not culpable for murder because they did not intend to kill anyone. Second, they believed their relatives' culpability was mitigated because the victims were not wholly innocent—the actions of the deceased were presented as evidence of understandable provocation. Finally, the murder verdicts were perceived as capricious because critical players within the trial—juries, judges, and legal advocates—had the power to affect trial outcome, depending on their own motivations and agendas.

Among these interviewees was a perception that the relatives of real murderers were so ashamed of their offending family member that they repudiated their relationships and withdrew from their social worlds. The interviewees who rejected their relatives' murder verdicts also resisted pressures to fulfil the role set attached to the status of a murderer's relative. To conform to these perceived behavioral expectations would confirm their relatives as murderers (Goffman 1963; Breakwell 1986). The following quotes show some interviewees' attempts to challenge these expectations:

I went to places where I never go. There's a pub he used to drink in. I just walked in and pushed the door open. I knew every one was going to turn round and look, so I did that on purpose, and they turned 'round, and I said, "Yes, it's me! Well, it's had the opposite of what all you lot expected. I'm fine and so is he. This won't turn me against him." (Doyle sister)

[Over time] I thought, "Bugger them." If they want to stare at someone, let them stare. If they want to point their finger, well point your finger. If they want to talk about me, well talk about me. If they want to throw stones, then let them. (Maltby mother)

If anything, [my brother's conviction] made [me] go out more, to put up a face. (Stevens brother)

That these interviewees felt powerful enough to act contrary to expectations to express shame and penance rested in part on their perception that others shared their accounts of manslaughter. Berger and Luckmann (1967) point to the importance of not just significant others in the maintenance of social reality but also a chorus. Interviewees in this cluster identified a wide network of people whose understanding of the killings appeared to correspond with their own.

To hear how this thing happened, everyone knows it was an accident. (Doyle sister)

Everybody's been very good. . . . They're all behind him at church. In fact, one of the ladies used to sit on the magistrates bench. And she's said all along there's something wrong here. (Duncan mother)

On the estate, everyone knows [my brother]. There's no way in their minds that anybody can make them believe Mark did anything. He was a well-liked person really. Even the dead lad's family said that it's not Mark they're after, it's [his codefendant]. (Stevens sister)

Empowered to challenge perceived expectations of normals, these interviewees acted to both reinforce their accounts that rejected their relatives' murder convictions and resist a stigmatized identity. While these interviewees did not challenge the validity of the label *murderer's relative* in general, they rejected its application to themselves and, like others "who find themselves in marginal and stigmatized situations against their will" (Musgrove 1977, 15), sought to confirm their historical normality.

Collective Support

In contrast, those interviewees who accepted their relatives' murder convictions were placed in more precarious social positions. They symbolically located themselves as murderers' relatives and, therefore, outside the powerful imagined community of normal families they had previously identified with. Embedded within their accounts was the tellers' sense of exclusion and social powerlessness to influence other's perception of their relatives as nothing more than murderers. It was in this context that interviewees in this second cluster sought the help of the support group Aftermath.

Aftermath offered joiners two means by which they could manage their identities. First, Aftermath offered a narrative of homicide, which by focusing on the death outcome of the violence, retained notions of the offender's absolute culpability and the deceased's absolute victimization. But at the same time, the narrative challenged the notion of evil murderer because it located explanations of offenders' crimes within their life and familial experiences (May 1999). Joiners were able to start making sense of an action they had previously thought to be evil and otherwise inexplicable: "All we can do is look for reasons behind it. That's what Aftermath has taught us. There's always reasons behind it" (Wagstaff father).

Second, Aftermath joiners found a community where their trauma was normalized and where they gained support, acceptance, and a new

chorus to support their construction of events (Berger and Luckmann 1967). The relatives of different offenders quoted here had similar normalizing experiences in different parts of the country and at different times.

[Acceptance] is what Aftermath is all about. None of us are any better or any worse; we're all in the same boat. (Thorpe aunt)

[When I first went to an Aftermath meeting], everybody in that room so was so nice. You didn't feel vulnerable, because you knew everybody in that room had got somebody in a similar situation. And I think that is what you need, somewhere where you feel safe to talk. (Jackson mother)

There's nobody to point their finger at you, because they're all in the same boat. You don't need sympathy; you need understanding from someone who's gone through the same feelings you went through at the time. With Aftermath, you feel lighter in yourself. (Wagstaff father)

Consequently, joiners were empowered to develop a critique of the way in which society understood and excluded them as murderers' relatives. Involvement in this normalizing community authorized interviewees to challenge the simplistic meanings ascribed to murderers' relatives by unknowing others. In this way, joining such groups can be understood as a form of collective stigma management, entering into a process of defining themselves in a "more positive, non-deviant light according to their own . . . constructed set of standards" (Herman 1993, 320).

Although the two clusters of interviewees—which I have termed *dis-sension* and *collective support*—used different tactics of self-presentation management, they nonetheless sought a common aim: resistance to the stigmatizing identity of a murderer's relative. Both groups drew on narratives of culpability and victimization and their own accounts of their relatives' crimes to contest the meaning of their new social status. In different ways, then, all interviewees were engaged in attempts to manage the ways in which others could understand the murders and, therefore, their own social location.

CONCLUSION

This article has first explicated the significance of the concept of toxicity to understandings of stigma. With reference to the relatives of people convicted of murder, this can be understood as rooted in everyday assumptions regarding familial responsibility for the behavior of its members. Consequently, relatives of murderers may be perceived—by themselves or others—as causally connected with the offenders' violence. The seeming moral failure of such families renders them stigmatized and excluded from the imagined community of normal families to which they believed they had once belonged.

This article has also consolidated existing knowledge concerning the processes of managing stigma and offered systematic ordering to this knowledge by identifying three metastrategies of stigma management: management of space, information, and self-presentation. In this, the article has shown that all three metastrategies were selectively and non-exclusively implicated within a career of stigma management; context-specific assessments of potential risks and rewards would determine managerial responses to moments of strain and opportunity.

This interweaving of tactics suggests that the processes of stigma management and identity negotiation are continuing and complex and represent an ongoing series of adjustments based on struggle, conflict, and uncertainty (Shaw 1991). It may be that there are few formal rights of passage out of an informally deviant identity (Birenbaum 1992). Indeed, is it really possible for murderers' relatives to renegotiate social identity in the face of the formal and informal powers of definition embedded within, for example, both the criminal justice system and the news media? Link, Mirotznik, and Cullen (1991) argue that the power of the normal hegemony may be so great compared to that of marginalized individuals or groups that their stigmatizing experiences cannot be managed. In the case of those interviewed, this may be so—the formally and informally powerful may continue to perceive murderers' relatives as little else. Yet, this article has shown that the individuals interviewed had a strong perception of success in status negotiation within certain social networks and demonstrated knowledge and skilled avoidance of more socially problematic contexts.

This suggests a need to understand the processes and experience of stigma as contradictory. On one hand, stigmatization can generate

vulnerability, insecurity, and exclusion. On the other hand, some groups and individuals have been shown to experience renewed meaning in life, improved relationships, and increased self-esteem in challenging stigmatization (Herman and Miall 1990). The interviewees in this research sought to reject the label *murderers' relatives* and commonly experienced this resistance to be successful. This perception of success was, in part, rooted in the support for their accounts of murder and manslaughter that significant others and a wider chorus (Berger and Luckmann 1967) offered. These families appeared to realign their social networks along this cartography of support, defining for themselves the criteria of inclusion and exclusion.

But it is important to acknowledge that the size and makeup of the interviewee group renders problematic wider generalizations. As a result, this article is notable as part of an exploratory project, offering a conceptual framework and agenda for future research in this previously unresearched topic. Future research that is focused on the families of murderers needs to be based on wider and more plural populations to provide more systematic knowledge of the experiences of and responses to this particular stigma. In addition, the political and social significance of support groups such as Aftermath should be explored further. The limited interviewee base in this research has also restricted wider theoretical claims for understanding stigma and its management—in particular, how joining groups such as Aftermath, which offer collective means of mediating the stigma experience, may also offer pathways into explicit forms of political activism (Musgrove 1977). Finally, how stigma is socially structured remains underexplored. This article has started to outline the significance of power relations in the processes of status negotiation, and it is important that future research seeks to explicate who has the power to do so, what is it that empowers them, and how gender, race, age, class, and sexuality are embedded within these processes.

NOTES

1. With the exception of the Stevens' sister and brother, all interviews were carried out simultaneously in accordance with the expressed wishes of the interviewees. The Wagstaff mother and father did not want to be interviewed for a second time. The Doyle sister was willing to be reinterviewed but was too ill for the duration of this research. All

other singly interviewed relatives were unavailable for a second interview. Note that all names are pseudonyms.

2. The U.K. term *serious* is used in reference to violent offenses—homicide, armed robbery, kidnap, and rape—which attract longer sentences, including life.

3. In 1966, Myra Hindley and Ian Brady were convicted of the kidnap, torture, and murder of three children. In 1987, Hindley confessed to the murder of an additional two children.

4. At the age of eleven in 1968, Mary Bell was found guilty of the manslaughter of two younger children in Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom.

5. In 1993, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson—both age ten—murdered two-year-old James Bulger in Liverpool, United Kingdom.

6. Jeffrey Dahmer was convicted in 1992 for the murder of seventeen men in Wisconsin during a period of thirteen years.

7. Gilmore's brother, Gary, was convicted of killing two men in Utah in 1976. In demanding his right to be executed by the state, his case was constitutionally significant. The U.S. Supreme Court had recently reinstated the death penalty as constitutional, and Gary Gilmore became the first person to be executed as a result.

8. It is possible that there are significant differences in such perceptions of responsibility experienced within families. In particular, parents are likely to have a stronger sense of responsibility than are other family members. But parenting is gendered, and other literature suggests that mothers accept greater culpability for their offsprings' actions than fathers do (Richardson 1993). Unfortunately, the interviewee group was not large enough to be able to untangle such complexities, raising questions for future research.

9. For example, in England and Wales the homicide rate per one thousand people was 1.42 in 1997, which accounted for about 2 percent of all violent crimes (Criminal Statistics 1997). In the United States, the homicide rate is nearly five times higher at 6.8 per 1,000, and yet known homicides accounted for approximately 0.2 percent of all violent crime (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1998).

10. By the term *true crime*, I refer to the vast industry of films, books, and magazines that tell and retell the extreme and extraordinary stories of infamous killers.

11. It is important to acknowledge that the borders between such clusters are blurred with overlaps and contradictions. By referring to clusters, an analytical illustration of responses, interpretations, and experiences is made, reflecting different explanatory emphases.

12. To be culpable for murder in English and Welsh law, it is enough to prove that the defendant intended to harm the victim—as long as it can also be proved that the probable outcome of the defendant's violence could be death and that the defendant recklessly ignored this fatal potential (Clarkson and Keating 1990).

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