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## **Psychological Impact of Court Trials on Families of Murder Victims: An Exploration of Emotional and Cognitive Antecedents**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the experiences of families of murder victims as they navigate the complexities of judicial trials. It seeks to understand the profound psychological, financial, and social impacts on these families, highlighting their emotional struggles, financial burdens, and the social isolation they face throughout the legal process. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the research captures the detailed, lived experiences of 10 participants, including parents, spouses, siblings, and children of murder victims.

Psychological distress emerged as a dominant theme, with participants experiencing grief, anxiety, and depression. Many faced mixed emotions and long periods of bereavement. Financial strain was another significant concern, with participants burdened by exorbitant lawyer fees and the loss of income due to the death of an earning family member. Participants

also expressed feelings of helplessness and pessimism regarding the judicial system, citing prolonged trials, threats from the murderer's family, and non-supportive legal personnel.

Despite these challenges, some participants exhibited resilience, relying on religious coping and personal motivation to face court trials. Social isolation and a lack of support from relatives and neighbors further compounded their struggles, intensifying feelings of anxiety and insecurity. This paper emphasizes the need for comprehensive support systems that address the psychological, financial, and social concerns of families involved in homicide cases, providing resources to facilitate healing and recovery.

**Keywords:** Murder victims, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Judicial Trials

## Introduction

Murder has a catastrophic and far-reaching impact on the psychological well-being of family members (Burke et al., 2011). Beyond the immediate trauma of losing a loved one, these families often endure further emotional turmoil through the legal processes that follow the crime (Yardley, 2017). Court trials, which are designed to determine guilt or innocence through the presentation of evidence and legal arguments, can evolve into lengthy and complex proceedings that profoundly affect the mental and emotional state of the victim's loved ones (Chakraborty, 2021). As these trials frequently span years, family members find themselves caught in a prolonged state of uncertainty, with feelings of hopelessness, anger, and frustration intensifying as they await a verdict (Bailey & Shayan, 2016). The repeated postponements, adjournments, and rescheduling of hearings often hinder their ability to process grief or find closure, leaving them emotionally suspended and unable to move forward (Marchetti Mercer, 2012). Furthermore, attending court proceedings, offering testimonies, and navigating the complexities of the legal system introduce unique psychological stressors. The exposure to graphic evidence and distressing testimonies can evoke vivid and intrusive memories, compounding the emotional burden for families (Reed & Caraballo, 2022). The court trial itself plays a pivotal role in shaping the psychological experiences of these families. Factors such as the duration and complexity of the trial, the behavior of the accused, and the demeanor of legal professionals can intensify emotional distress (Bandes & Salerno, 2014). Additionally, the support provided by the justice system, including victim advocacy services and accommodations for the families' needs, critically influences their psychological resilience and overall well-being (Connolly & Gordon, 2015).

The psychological challenges faced by murder victim families are much more severe compared to those faced by victims of other types of crimes (van Wijk et al., 2017). While much research has focused on murder and its impacts, little is known about how the legal process affects the families of victims as they frequently endure mental and emotional distress, often exacerbated by prosecutors who compel them to attend trials and appeals, and follow a rigid system marked by delays, setbacks, and emotional strain. In underdeveloped countries like Pakistan, where the legal system is often slow and complex, families of murder victims experience compounded dissatisfaction and a sense of alienation from a judicial process that frequently overlooks their needs and concerns. This neglect in the administration of murder cases intensifies their emotional distress, leaving them feeling unsupported and marginalized. As families increasingly participate in the criminal justice system, it becomes vital to explore the psychological and emotional toll this process imposes on them. By

examining how the drawn-out nature of legal proceedings, repeated delays, and complex courtroom dynamics affect their mental and emotional well-being, understanding the psychological impact of court trials on families of murder victims is essential for recognizing the emotional and cognitive challenges they face throughout the legal process.

Exploring how the judicial processes in Pakistan impact the families of victims as they pursue justice, cope with their tragic loss, and try to rebuild their lives is essential to comprehending the broader effects of murder on communities. This exploration aims to shed light on the emotional toll, cognitive strain, and the broader psychological consequences these families endure as they navigate the aftermath of a murder and seek justice for their loved ones.

## **Methodology**

The focus of the current paper was not to generate a theoretical perspective of how victims of the murderer's family experience life after the murder of their loved ones. Instead, this study aimed to capture the detailed, nuanced accounts of individual experiences from the point of view of those targeted families and to learn how they make sense of their personal experiences of judicial trials after the murder of their family member. For this purpose, this study utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore how family members of murder victims make sense of their experiences during court trials. IPA, rooted in phenomenology and hermeneutics, focuses on individuals' interpretations of significant life events. The goal was to capture the personal and emotional accounts of family members involved in ongoing court proceedings. Semi-structured interviews were analyzed, offering a detailed understanding of the participants' emotional and cognitive experiences. A purposive homogeneous sampling strategy selected 10 participants, including parents, spouses, siblings, and children of murder victims.

To conduct in-depth interviews, a series of open-ended questions were asked from the victim's families about their lived experiences. These questions were designed to gather information drawn from existing literature. The open-ended format allowed participants to critically respond and share various perspectives on their life experiences. The primary purpose of the interviews was to collect qualitative data to explore the multiple impacts of the murder on their lives.

## **Findings**

## 1. Psychological Concerns

Eight subordinate themes emerged under the superordinate theme of “psychological concerns”. The subordinate themes were “psychological distress”, “mixed emotions”, “grief and depression”, “bereavement period”, “memories of the deceased”, “crying spells while recalling incidents”, “apprehensions”, and “anxiety (other members might be killed as well)”. Under the central theme of psychological concerns, the first theme that emerged was psychological distress. Psychological distress was widespread among participants who experienced such traumas. For example, the participant expressed his thoughts as: “We are experiencing symptoms of trauma, grief, and depression, such as insomnia, disturbed eating and sleeping patterns, lack of focus, and constant anxiety.” Another participant expressed the same feelings: “We fear that if the accused will be released, we may face harm again, which leads us to anxiety, depression, and negative thoughts.” The second important theme identified was mixed emotions. Mixed emotions mean that participants exhibited tendencies of bipolar mood disorder during the period of grief. It is common among individuals who suffer the loss of loved ones that they often experience fluctuating emotions and emotional instability. Under the central theme of psychological concerns, the next subordinate theme identified was grief and depression. It was observed that participants who experienced the murder of their loved ones felt intense grief and depression. Commonly, the loss of loved ones causes depression in surviving family members. For example, participant Han revealed: “The whole family is under life threat during the bereavement period and unable to go outside for earning purposes.”

Similarly, individuals remained in a bereavement period after such losses. The bereavement period was the second subordinate theme that emerged in psychological concerns.

## 2. Financial Problems

The second important superordinate theme identified was “financial problems.” Under this wide domain of financial problems, the following subordinate themes emerged: “lawyer’s fee” and “loss of earning family member.” The first subordinate theme was the burden of lawyer’s fees. Many participants revealed that they felt the burden of huge lawyer’s fees due to having financial problems. For example, Nadia revealed: “Dealing with lawyers increased the grief due to their highly demanding fees for case fighting.” Similar problems were faced by Kashif, who expressed his thoughts as: “Dealing with lawyers and police increased our grief, depression, and stress due to their

highly demanding requirements/fees for case fighting.” Due to the loss of a family breadwinner, they were also at high risk of life threats, and that added constraints to earning money. Another financial problem among participants was the loss of an earning family member. For example, Naveed said in an interview: “My whole family is under life threat during the bereavement period and unable to go outside for earning purposes.”

### **3. Feelings of Helplessness and Pessimism in the Process of Seeking Justice**

In Pakistan, security agencies and police also do not properly support murder victims' families. They remain under constant life threats from their enemies, pressuring them not to pursue justice. For example, Nadia said: “During the court trials, the victim's family is receiving threats from the murderer's family and also being pressured to withdraw the case against the murderer.” Zain also expressed his thoughts: “We are living with life threats after the murder. We also feel insecure about paying debts to other people.” Some issues related to the judicial system and employees associated with the judiciary were also examined in the interviews. It was found that “prolonged legal proceedings,” “non-supportive lawyers,” “lawyers taking bribes from opponents,” and “transfer of judges at final stages of court trials” were recurring problems. These issues were often interlinked. Many participants expressed negative concerns regarding the judicial system of Pakistan. For example, Mr. Zohaib expressed mistrust in the police and judicial system: “We don’t trust the justice system because police are mistreating us during court trials, and court proceedings are also very slow.” Similarly, Mr. Noman shared his concerns about legal proceedings: “Legal proceedings or investigations exacerbated feelings of fear, anxiety, and shame.”

### **4. Resilience / Coping**

In the current study, another superordinate theme emerged was “resilience/coping”. Under this umbrella superordinate theme, the following subordinate themes were identified including “ready to face court trials”, “God is the ultimate refuge”, “justice is of the Lord's”, “closer relationship with God”, “religious coping”, and “personal motivation”. Resilience and coping are important factors that individuals develop during their post-traumatic growth. Some individuals may be more resilient than others. Similarly, some individuals use better coping mechanisms in managing traumatic life events. As Mr. Yaseen revealed, “We have mostly engaged in supplications, seeking His forgiveness, justice, and the strength to cope with loss. Some participants use religious coping.” Another participant also

exhibited his feelings: “We turn to religious duties for solace, but we don't feel uplifted to a significant extent.”

### **5. Lack of Social Support / Social Concerns**

Lack of social support and social concerns were also major concerns of the participants of murder victim families. Social functioning was reduced as a participant expressed, “We have reduced our interaction with relatives, avoid social gatherings.” Social isolation was also a factor behind mental health issues among participants. For example, Hannan said, “Social isolation and the negative response of neighbors caused fear and anxiety. Societal negative attitudes toward families of murder victims create social barriers between families of murder victims and society. Social bullying is also one of the examples. As Kashif said, “The avoidant, hypo-critical and bullying attitude of our relatives made us more stressed and anxious.” This attitude causes feelings of insecurity as expressed by a participant: “The major distress is life threat, insecurity, frustration, lack of tolerance, trust issues, and suffering from many other mental health issues.”

## **DISCUSSION**

Based on the findings of the current study, it was found that psychological concerns were the first superordinate theme identified in this research. Participants of the study exhibited psychological concerns in the form of psychological distress, mixed emotions, grief and depression, facing a bereavement period, memories of the deceased, crying spells while recalling incidents, apprehensions, and anxiety. Survivors of murder victims may experience psychological pressures, stigmatization, fear of recurrence, anxiety when reminded of the incident, negative ideas about themselves and the world, and feelings of shame and responsibility, much like other crime victims (Mobasser, 2019). These stressors may contribute to the risk of mental health problems among homicide survivors (Fox & Zawitz, 2007).

The second important concern of adults with murder victim family members was financial problems. The main two financial problems experienced by participants were huge lawyer's fees and loss of

earning family members. This supports the claim that, like murder itself, grief by homicide disproportionately affects the less advantaged groups in society. As this research revealed, families bear a heavy financial cost as a result of murder. Such families will be more dependent on public services like housing, welfare benefits, and criminal injuries compensation to help them deal with costs associated with homicide because they will be less able to handle increased costs and the loss of earnings that inevitably results from a traumatic bereavement (Zinzow et al., 2009). Some had to relocate because they couldn't continue to live where the murder occurred, while others had to stay somewhere else for lengthy periods due to the investigation or trial, or because they needed more space to take care of new childcare obligations (Thompson et al., 1998).

Another concern of murder victim survivors identified in this study was feelings of helplessness and pessimism in the process of seeking justice. This includes life threats, mistrust in the police and judicial system, prolonged legal proceedings, non-supportive lawyers, lawyers taking bribes from opponents, and the transfer of judges at the final stages of court trials. Less than half of the participants said they were kept informed about their case, that the police or crown attorney had respected their opinions, or that the police had safeguarded their security, identity, and privacy. Participants were largely unsatisfied with the court system (Roebuck et al., 2020). Almost half of them believed they were believed by the police and the crown attorney. Instances involving male victims of intimate partner abuse earned the lowest satisfaction scores across all categories, while instances involving homicide had the highest chance of keeping the public informed (Roebuck et al., 2020).

In this study, a fourth superordinate theme that emerged was resilience/coping. The coping mechanisms adopted by murder victim survivors included being ready to face court trials, believing that God is the ultimate refuge, trusting that justice is of the Lord, having a closer relationship with God, religious coping, and personal motivation. Through the process of grieving, the psychological, social, and physical repercussions of catastrophic loss are expressed (Walter & McCoyd, 2009). The circumstances of the homicide, the availability and use of medical and mental health services, the use and availability of informal support systems (such as family members and friends), the involvement of the criminal justice system, the nature of the relationship with the deceased, and religious and/or cultural beliefs are just a few of the variables that affect how people grieve (Park & Benore, 2004).



Another problem faced by murder victim survivors was a lack of social support and social concerns. This includes reduced social functioning, less interaction with family, relatives, and friends, feelings of insecurity, perceived discrimination, isolation, social bullying, derogatory attitudes of society, and offensive comments by people. Previous research has looked at victim services and informal assistance (Roebuck et al., 2020). The majority of research participants sought out informal support like friends and family after encounters with violent crime. Different victim services, which frequently prioritize prompt crisis response, were the most frequently mentioned formal assistance, followed by conventional mental health and medical care. Although some people found the expense to be exorbitant, longer-term mental health assistance like having access to a psychologist or therapist was highly valued (Roebuck et al., 2020).

This paper highlights the complex challenges faced by adults with family members who were victims of homicide, focusing on their psychological, financial, and social struggles. The emotional toll of grief, anxiety, and distress was a primary concern, compounded by financial strain from legal fees and lost income. These difficulties were further aggravated by the justice system during court trials, where legal frustrations, feelings of powerlessness, and skepticism about achieving justice added to their emotional and financial burdens. A lack of community support and social prejudice during this time deepened their sense of isolation. Despite these hardships, many displayed resilience, preparing for legal battles while striving for economic stability. The findings emphasize the urgent need for justice systems to integrate comprehensive support structures that prioritize the psychological, financial, and social well-being of those affected by homicide, helping them navigate court trials and fostering their recovery and growth.

### **Limitations & Suggestions**

This paper has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small, with only 10 participants, which limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Although the purposive homogeneous sampling strategy allowed for in-depth insights, the diversity of experiences among families of murder victims may not have been fully captured. Future research should consider expanding the sample size and including participants from diverse geographic and cultural backgrounds to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences of murder victims' families during judicial trials.

Longitudinal studies would also be beneficial to track the psychological, financial, and social impacts over time, providing a deeper exploration of coping mechanisms and post-traumatic growth. Additionally, participants were selected from a specific region, which may have influenced their experiences due to regional cultural and legal factors, further limiting the study's applicability to other contexts.

Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data through semi-structured interviews. Participants may have experienced recall bias or hesitated to share sensitive details, potentially affecting the accuracy of their responses. Employing mixed methods, such as combining qualitative interviews with quantitative measures of psychological distress or financial burden, could enhance the richness and validity of the data. Moreover, the emotional intensity surrounding the subject matter may have led to difficulties in fully articulating their experiences during the interview process. Implementing support programs or interventions for families navigating judicial trials could be explored, with research focusing on their effectiveness in alleviating psychological and financial strain.

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