***Disenfranchised grief and families’ experiences of death after police contact in the United States.***

This article examines the experiences of family members when a loved one dies after police contact in the US. It uses qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with the bereaved families of 43 US citizens who died after police contact and considers their experiences as covictims of homicide. It examines how they experience grief in the aftermath of such a death and considers Doka’s (1989) concept of disenfranchised grief in evaluating how social norms affect their grieving process. It argues that individuals affected by deaths after police contact are often unable to grieve in a way that is socially legitimised. The article finds that disenfranchised grief has a racial dimension with regards to deaths after police contact with non-white families being deeply affected by it due to their position within society, the context in which their loved one died, and in terms of how the deceased was socially constructed.

Key words: Disenfranchised grief, deaths after police contact, racism, the social construction of grief, covictims of homicide.

***Deaths after police contact and covictims of homicide in the US***

Deaths after police contact (DAPC) pose questions about the legitimacy of police and their capacity to protect and serve citizens (see, for example Katz, 2015; Rushin, 2017; Zimring, 2017). Scholars have written about these deaths from multiple perspectives, including (but not limited to) the disproportionate number of people of colour or with mental health issues who die after police contact (see respectively Desmond, Papachristos & Kirk, 2016; Mulvey & White, 2014); the relative lack of police accountability in the aftermath of such deaths (Katz, 2015; Zimring, 2017); the increasingly paramilitarised nature of US policing (Balko, 2014); and the excessive use of police deadly force (Campbell, Nix & Maguire, 2017). Articles have appeared as literature reviews (for example Desmond, Papachristos & Kirk, 2016; Dunham & Petersen, 2017); analyses of existing survey data (for example Campbell, Nix & Maguire, 2017; Klinger, Rosenfeld, Isom & Deckard, 2015); legal reviews (for example Cyr, 2016; Onyemaobim, 2016); through to theoretical pieces (see, for example Katz, 2015; Kleinig, 2014). A commonality noted in this literature is the lack of accurate federal data on the number of people who die after police contact in the US (for example Klinger et al. 2015; Katz, 2015; Zimring, 2017). In late 2015, the director of the FBI acknowledged that data compiled by the Washington Post and the Guardian’s online site ‘The Counted’ represented the most accurate available data on this issue (Rushin, 2017). The Counted states that cases of DAPC in the US numbered 1146 in 2015, and 1083 in 2016 (The Counted, 2015, 2016). Approximately three citizens per day die after contact with police in the US.

There is a lack of both qualitative and empirical academic research on these deaths, and no known research into the families left behind in the aftermath of such deaths. This article addresses both issues by discussing how families are affected when a loved one dies after police contact. It examines how Doka’s (1989) concept of disenfranchised grief might be relevant in understanding the processes and experiences families go through. The article considers the social construction of grief and the normative factors that affect how grief is either deemed to be socially recognisable or unrecognisable, and how this affects an individual’s capacity to grieve (Fowlkes, 1990). Whilst there is no known literature on families’ experiences in relation to DAPC, there is a limited amount of literature that considers families’ experiences of being covictims of homicide. This examines the effects on family members left behind in the aftermath of a homicide involving a close family member (see Hardesty, Campbell, McFarlane & Lewandowski, 2008; Peterson Armour, 2002a, 2002b; Sheehan, Murphy, Moynihan, Dudley-Fennessey & Stapleton, 2015; Spungen, 1998).

Peterson Armour (2002a, p.121) states: ‘Covictims of homicide are a hidden and substantial part of the United States population who are not accorded status in the criminal justice system or in society.’ She further asserts that there is no accurate federal data on this group of victims, which appears remarkable considering the number of people affected by homicides (of any type) annually in the US. FBI data states that 16,617 citizens died as a result of homicide or non-negligent manslaughter in 2017 (The Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2018). A national prevalence study in the 1990s found that 9% of adults sampled had close friends or family members who had been murdered (Peterson Armour, 2002b). Writing about covictims of homicide, Spungen (1998, p. xi) notes they are: ‘Subjected not simply to a conspiracy of silence but to a state of invisibility.’ This article uses interdisciplinary literature and empirical research into DAPC, disenfranchised grief and covictims of homicide to shine a light onto a previously overlooked group of victims in the US and the social processes that affect their capacity to grieve in the aftermath of cases of DAPC.

***Methods***

The article uses qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews with the families of loved ones who died after police contact in the US in the period 1999-2015. Interviews focused principally on how the deceased met their death, and how families attempted to secure justice for their loved one in the aftermath of that death. The recruitment of participants in this research project was initially driven by enquiries to locally based civil-rights or community-activist organisations. Personnel within these organisations identified relevant participants based on criteria supplied by the researchers. The key criterion of the research project was that participants should be family members of a citizen who died after police contact in the US. In addition, these organisations made an assessment about the suitability of individuals to participate in the interview process.

The majority of participants were recruited largely as a result of initial participants referring to known others who had similar experiences with DAPC, what Bryman (2012, p.201-2) terms “convenience sampling”. This type of sampling is typical when dealing with sensitive subjects and special populations (Bryman, 2012; Lee, 1993). Lee (1993) notes this technique often represents the only way of obtaining a sample on some issues. Research into covictims of homicide is similarly reliant on relatively small sample sizes (see Hardesty et al. 2008; Peterson Armour, 2002a; Sheehan et al. 2015). Numerous academic authors (Liebling, 2001; Snell & Tombs, 2011; Westmarland, 2011) note that research into sensitive subjects in the criminal justice system often depends on small sample sizes, but that the importance of the findings should outweigh the relative limitations of the sample size. The authors of this article argue that its findings are original and of importance not only to academia, but to wider society.

The project received ethical approval from Xxxxxxx University’s Ethics Committee. In advance of the interviews, participants were informed of the aims of the project by email via a participant information sheet, and spoke with the Principal Investigator by phone. The Principal Investigator used these calls as a way of informally assessing the participant’s emotional state and their suitability to be interviewed. Participants signed informed consent forms prior to conducting the interview. Before each interview, participants were made aware of the availability of counselling in the event of any distress they might feel during or after the interview process. Participants were fully aware they could withdraw from the interview process at any time. Interviews typically lasted one hour and were usually conducted face to face. Data recorders were used in the interview phase, and this data was later transcribed.

The data was analysed interpretatively, with the aim of uncovering subjective meanings and interpreting them within a variety of contexts. In this sense, a specific version of reality is revealed by the process of research as distinct to any definitive statement of such a reality (Bryman, 2012). Similar to Hardesty et al.’s (2008) research into covictims of homicide, the authors applied framework analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994) to the research data. Firstly, the authors became familiar with the corpus of data in order to gain an overview of the nature of its contents. Secondly, familiarisation enabled a thematic framework to be constructed using NVivo software; this identified the key theme of grief examined in this article. Thirdly, a process of indexing took place, in the form of sub-nodes in NVivo to break down the themes into case numbers and key issues or terms. Fourthly, charting enabled indexing to be used to make associations within and between issues and terms. For example, the link between social construction and the normative nature of grieving in this article. Finally, charting led to a process of mapping and interpretation. Maps emerged in the form of typologies such as identifying the links between disenfranchised grief, media representations, social contexts and stigma. The inductive nature of the research project meant that the researchers did not focus on the norms of grieving or disenfranchised grief either prior to, or during fieldwork being undertaken. These themes emerged during the analytical phase of the research project that mapped links between concepts.

***Disenfranchised grief as a social construct***

Doka’s (1989, p.4) definition of disenfranchised grief states it is: ‘a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported’. He identified three forms of disenfranchisement: when relationships between the grievers and the deceased are not recognised due to the insufficient or inappropriate type of the relationship; if the death is considered to be relatively minor in the grand scheme of things or ‘the reality of the loss itself is not socially validated’ (Doka, 1989, p.6); and when the griever is not recognised due to their unrecognised status as a griever (Doka, 1989). Disenfranchised grief is examined in various contexts: the grieving experiences of families of death row inmates (Jones & Beck, 2007); the elderly (Fenge & Fannin, 2009); pet deaths (Cordaro, 2012); AIDS-related deaths (Villa & Demmer, 2005); perinatal loss (Lang et al. 2011); adolescent loss after a romantic relationship (Kaczmarek & Backlund, 1991); and nursing (Anderson & Gaugler, 2007). Corr (1998) suggests other types of death might also be unrecognised by society due to the complexities of the death or other associated stigma. In considering the effects of DAPC on remaining family members, this article focuses on the lack of social validation for the loss of their loved one and how the context of the death and other associated stigma results in them experiencing disenfranchised grief.

The disenfranchisement of grief is ‘moulded by powerful social, political, economic and cultural forces operating outside of the individual as well as within them’ (Martin, 2005, p.154). This is reflected in the semantics underpinning the words “enfranchise” and “disenfranchise”; both being associated with the social regulation of behaving in a certain way (Corr, 1998). Therefore, the disenfranchisement of grief occurs as a result of a contradiction between the innermost experiences of the bereaved, including definitions of social identity and the context of the death; and the external social frames applied to those experiences characterised by the denial of legitimacy to grieve (Harris, 2009; Sawicka, 2016). This conflict between the interpersonal (outward, public) and intrapersonal (internal, private) mourning experiences of the bereaved individual can result in a negative societal reaction to the loss, according to Doka’s (1989) concept of disenfranchised grief.

Culture plays a significant role in the regulation of grief by prescribing what are deemed to be socially normative feelings and behaviours in specific contexts (Hochschild, 2003; Peterson Armour, 2002a). This process sets out cultural norms that function as a path guiding the individual through the grieving experience. The relatively unambiguous nature of this social construction may lead to disenfranchised grief, or ‘culturally void’ grief (Sawicka, 2016, p.232). For example, Piazza-Bonin, Neimeyer, Burke, McDevitt-Murphy and Young (2015) assert that African-American cultural norms dictate the griever is expected to demonstrate cultural stoicism and grieve privately. In these cases, expressions of grief are culturally validated and recognised but typically only at the time of the funeral and shortly after, the norm being to lessen expressions of grief over time (Lawson, 2014). This supports Corr’s (1998) argument that the disenfranchisement of grief is not only manifested in Doka’s (1989) definitional categories but that other manifestations of grief are mediated by society. Some aspects of grief may be legitimised, whilst other aspects remain disenfranchised (Piazza-Bonin et al. 2015). Conversely, Spungen (1998) asserts that attempts to label the grieving experiences of African-American communities as homogenous are simplistic and reductive.

Occupational culture can also affect the disenfranchisement of grief. Sugimoto and Oltjenbruns’s (2001) research into policing in the US found that police culture disenfranchises both officers and survivors from grief by not recognising the relationships between officers and the object of loss; by not recognising the loss (of both parties) as significant; and by not recognising either party as grievers (see also Spungen, 1998). Therefore, certain types of grief may be disenfranchised in one culture and legitimised in another, reinforcing the assertion that grief might not be disenfranchised in every context in the same way, and also reaffirming the notion that grief is a social construct (Grant & Green, 2008). Other authors (Bell, Stanley, Mallon & Manthorpe, 2012; Jenkins, Edmundson, Avarett & Yoon, 2014; McNutt & Yakushko, 2013; Todd, 2007) argue that social indifference is equally applicable to disenfranchised grief. Society might acknowledge the grieved relationship, the bereaved experience, or the griever, yet remain indifferent or completely ignore the loss and the grief (Jenkins et al. 2014). This indifference might result from the context of the death associated with the devalued object of loss; for example, in cases of suicides or criminals’ (or perceived criminals’) deaths (Bell et al. 2012). Societal indifference could also be a consequence of the perceived marginalised position of the bereaved, the deceased, or both within society (Grant & Green, 2008; Fowlkes, 1990). The apparent inability of the criminal justice system, media and societal groups to recognise grief is a manifestation of this social apathy (Jones & Beck, 2007; Spungen, 1998). Todd (2007) argues the limited research on the bereavement experiences of certain societal groups indicates the relative lack of value of the lives of the deceased, as might be further evidenced by the absence of accurate federal data on DAPC (Katz, 2015; Zimring, 2017).

***Stigma and the social construction of blame***

The social construction of grief is closely linked to the role of stigma and the social construction of blame (Bell et al. 2012; Corr, 1998; Lawson, 2014; McNutt & Yakushko, 2013). This relationship is two-fold in the sense that the stigma contributing to the disenfranchisement of grief could either be the result of prejudice held against societal groups prior to the fatal event (Jenkins et al. 2014); and/or could be associated with the type of death or the social status given or denied to the deceased (Redmond, 1996). In the former, the relative invisibility of certain sections of society may significantly affect how bereaved families’ grief is enfranchised or disenfranchised (Lawson, 2014). An example of this is Martin’s (2005) research into African-American parents of murdered children, which found poor black parents were treated less favourably by authorities in comparison to white families, this being linked to the concept of the ‘deserving victim’. The capacity to attain legitimate victim status is affected by factors such as race, class, gender and sexuality. This becomes problematic for social groups who exist on the margins of society, and may struggle to gain recognition, public support and sympathy (Edwards, 2014; Aradau, 2004). In this sense, victimhood is also socially constructed with a tendency for the blame placed upon victims for their own demise not necessarily related to their actions, but instead on the perceived moral worth of the deceased individual (Corr, 1998; Miers, 2007; Spungen, 1998).

The murder of criminals or perceived criminals, deaths due to gun-violence, drug and alcohol-related deaths, suicides and others can fall outside prevailing societal norms for grieving and can cause families to experience disenfranchised grief (Jones & Beck, 2007; Valentine, Bauld & Walter, 2016). This process of victim blaming could also be assigned to police and other justice agencies when their procedures discredit the victim’s status imputing a degree of culpability in an attempt to exonerate the institution and minimise their own role in the fatal event (Xxxxx, 2018, Xxxxx & Zzzzz, 2019; Martin, 2005). The social construction of blame can also be extended to bereaved families, turning them into covictims and potentially resulting in their consequent isolation (Jones & Beck, 2007; Peterson Armour, 2002a). Martin (2005) claims that the victimisation of bereaved individuals continues through their interactions with police and other authorities in their attempt to find answers for the cause of their loss (see also Redmond, 1996; Spungen, 1998).

***Entrapped Grief and Endless Battles***

The implications of these multiple social constructions, and the marginalisation of bereaved individuals can have negative impacts on their behaviour and increase levels of stress, anger, and feelings of powerlessness and guilt (Grant & Green, 2008; Peterson Armour, 2002b). This builds upon the concept of disenfranchisement from the grief process, and is considered by Finlay (2015) to be ‘entrapped’ grief and by Todd (2007) to be ‘silenced’ grief. The open-ended nature of these painful grieving experiences and endless battles in the aftermath of the death of a loved one after police contact can become overwhelming for the bereaved survivor (Peterson Armour, 2002b; Spungen, 1998). Entrapped grief might also be a coping response to the unexplained circumstances of death; the inability of apprehending the offender; and lengthy court processes, resulting in individuals putting their grief “on hold” (Peterson Armour, 2002a; Redmond, 1996). The internalisation of grief and inability to achieve closure are reinforced by the intrusion of law enforcement and the media into their lives and are thus indicators of secondary victimisation (Jones & Beck, 2007).

Disenfranchised grief, then, can be understood as a result of various social constructions. These include the perceived identity of the deceased in terms of their social status, which can consequently affect the perceived standing of their family; the context of the death; the relationship between the grieving family and wider society (interpersonal relationships); and the identity and beliefs of the grievers themselves (intrapersonal relationships). Grief may be disenfranchised as a result of social rejection or social apathy. To some degree, the social construction of blame mediates societal perceptions about what represents normatively acceptable grief, and we begin the discussion of findings with an examination of this issue as it links to participants’ perceptions of racism.

***Findings***

The research project examined 43 cases of DAPC, for which 58 participants in sixteen US states were interviewed. Of the 43, forty were shot dead by police, two died as a result of police restraint, and one died by suicide in police custody. Table 1 (below) sets out the demographics of the deceased by gender, ethnicity and age.

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***Racism and disenfranchised grief***

Whilst the great majority of the participants articulated a sense of disenfranchised grief during the interview process, a key finding was that non-white families expressed a clear belief that racism played a significant part in this experience. These participants felt they experienced significant levels of social prejudice, stigma and grief invalidation due to the context of their loved one’s death, but also due to their marginalised position in society. 27 out of 31 non-white family members stated that both the reaction of the criminal justice process and also the reaction of society to their loved one’s deaths was compounded by aspects of racism. They believed that the treatment they received reflected the relative lack of value of the deceased. A selection of typical statements from participants is set out below:

***Case 1:*** *“I am sad you don’t see my brother as a man because we are Indians. We are a waste of money, we are a waste of your tax money, you know.”*

***Case 7:*** *“I just felt like they just want to down play [the deceased] for the media so the community can be like, you know what, that’s another black person killed because they did it to themselves.”*

***Case 38:*** *“You cannot deem a police involved death a justifiable homicide without doing an investigation but what [the chief of police] probably thought [was] oh, he is another black male we can sweep over the case.”*

***Case 19****: “In my case they didn't care, no one cared. The way they saw it was it’s just another black man.”*

***Case 15****: “For [the District Attorney] to reduce [the charge against the officer] to criminal negligence, reckless endangerment, with 800 hours of community service, that's a slap in the face. That's saying that a human life, a person of colour's life, is not worth anything.”*

Non-white participants strongly perceived that police, justice agencies, and the media denigrated both the social worth of the deceased, but also of their grieving family due to their ethnicity. Whilst white participants noted processes of victim denigration by police and the media, they largely asserted that such processes focused on specific characteristics attributed to the deceased (for example, perceived criminality, substance abuse, or mental ill-health) rather than their ethnicity. In the comments above, participants’ views on the relative lack of worth of the deceased reflect their perceptions about their lower social status as non-white citizens, and the stigma and prejudice they experienced living in a predominantly white society. This perceived lower moral worth affected their capacity to grieve, not least due to typical societal reactions to their loved one’s death being marked either by hostility or indifference.

For these families, their treatment in the aftermath of the death of their loved one was - for them - unsurprising, as it reflected previous experiences of systemic and structural oppression they had faced, as expressed unequivocally in the following statements:

***Case 25:*** *“For black people this has been happening for years and years that they get treated differently.”*

***Case 41:*** *“When they say there are a few bad apples, it is a whole crop, we are dealing with a systemic racist society. Not much has changed over the last 400 years …racism is alive and well.”*

***Case 37:*** *“The rights we have are an illusion, and they wonder why a lot of countries don't like America…we are suffering [from] post-traumatic slavery disorder.”*

Many African-American participants felt their grief was complex and misunderstood by society. These participants stated they were expected to minimise their grief and move on from the death, whereas this feeling was much less common with white participants. African-American participants also felt that others within their own communities observed a hierarchy of grieving based on the context in which the deceased died. In this sense, a death after police contact was considered to be less worthy of extended grieving than other types of violent death. Consequently, these participants felt marginalised not only by wider society, but also within their own community, further reinforcing feelings of disenfranchised grief. Several African-American participants spoke of attending support groups in their communities with other parents who had lost children to violence, and finding that their grief was not understood in the same way as when they met parents of children who had died after police contact:

**Case 9:** *“This is different, this is totally different, this is not black on black crime or somebody killing somebody, a civilian killing your child. No, this is somebody who is supposed to serve the state.”*

**Case 8: “***They sent me an invite for a homicide meeting. When I get there, there’s a panel of police officers, there are other people who haven’t been killed by police, just regular people whose kids who have been killed by other individuals. So when they ask me to introduce myself I stood up and I told them what happened and they all turned peak red and I was never invited back again.”*

One could argue that some African-American participants not only felt disenfranchised grief as a form of racism, but also as a form of marginalisation from with their own communities. Typically, non-white participants spoke of their grief as an ongoing process, and often felt insulted by an assumed endpoint placed on their mourning period which acted as another form of disenfranchisement:

***Case 34:*** *“A lot of people will tell you need to get past that, but you can't tell me how to feel or how I should feel, you haven't walked in my shoes, you can't tell me.”*

***Case 10:*** *“We felt ostracised, we felt that we didn't belong anymore. The people we talked to eventually, you know, everyone gets on with their lives. We are still trying to come to terms with it, but we had this feeling that some people didn't talk to us and that after the investigation and the police report was out there that maybe this child had this coming.”*

***Case 35:*** *“You have been through relating to someone that has not been through it and doesn't know what you are talking about, and they are like you should be over that by now, and I am like are you out of your mind, it isn’t ever going to go away it’s 24/7, it is.”*

The expectation to express grief for only a short time-period following the tragedy could be said to be a socially embedded aspect of African-American culture. The indifference displayed towards these experiences is largely a product of social, political and economic practices deeply rooted in the socio-political and socio-legal realities in the US. Within a culture that has been characterised by inequality and oppression, one might argue it has become the norm for African-Americans to deal with their grievances privately.

The right to mourn, then, is mediated by ‘grieving rules’ ascribed by cultural and societal contexts. Grief and mourning are shaped by multiple factors, including the context of the death, race, media representations of the deceased and interactions with police, which can all contribute to disenfranchised grief. As a result, covictims appear to be denied the right to be acknowledged as legitimate grievers and experience social isolation as a result. The social construction of blame can be seen to shape the societal legitimation of grief in that it affects views of whether victims and/or their families are deserving of sympathy in the aftermath of DAPC.

***Disenfranchised grief and the social construction of blame***

The role of stigma and the social construction of blame in relation to disenfranchised grief has been established in this article. One normative social belief is that the fundamental role of the police is to serve and protect citizens. Therefore, in cases of DAPC, the nature of the death calls into question the character of the deceased, leading to a presumed criminality of the victim. It is these circumstances surrounding the death that contribute to stigma and negative judgement by others, causing the deceased to be seen as to some degree responsible for their own demise and thus emphasising the social construction of blame. As a result, society can also fail to recognise the legitimacy of covictims as grievers.

This view of the deserving victim is reinforced by negative media representations of the deceased. Accounts of the deceased were typically defined by police and the media and markedly different to those of participants, further creating disenfranchised grief. The deceased’s actions were portrayed as being disruptive of the social order, causing sections of society to view their death as either beneficial, or a minor loss in the grand scheme of things. In the following examples, the deceased were classified as persons with a mental illness; their loved ones reflect on how their deaths were portrayed:

***Case 42****: “The first newspaper article said that a man was killed by an altercation with a man [which was subsequently proved to be incorrect], and when the sheriff went to confront him he didn't give the right name, and he was jittery, and he was a convicted felon, and I am sure people cheered because that’s one less convicted criminal on the street because of the spin the media put on.”*

***Case 29****: “99% of the time the media gets all their information from the police department and the police department are going to say everything bad about that person, they are going to demonise them so the public don't have any sympathy for the person they have just shot.”*

The process of blaming the victim for their death can be further expanded to institutional authorities. A significant number of participants explained how they experienced falsification of evidence, lying and withholding information from police and criminal justice agencies:

***Case 17:*** *“We just want the truth and to this day it is still concealed from us and we can't have the public records that show the police lied and actually committed a crime.”*

***Case 41:*** *“If you read their narrative they said that (…) there was alcohol, drugs and a weapon in the vehicle that [name redacted] was in, they found none.”*

As a result, participants believed that the status of the deceased was effectively transformed into that of a criminal to exonerate police whose actions resulted in the death. By this measure, police were able to maintain public support through their status as a legitimate institution to individuals who had not been affected by these deaths. Participants typically believed that police portrayals of their loved one as variously being mentally unwell, dependent on substances, or behaving in an aggressive or potentially criminal manner constructed the deceased and their families as having a lower social status than other citizens. This in turn appears to prevent families from being enfranchised as legitimate grievers.

***Endless battles***

The social isolation and inability to openly mourn loss can have adverse psychological, physical and behavioural effects on families. The lack of recognition of participants’ trauma and the denial of a legitimate right to grieve, combined with the sudden and violent nature of their loved one’s death caused many participants to feel intense emotions of anger, guilt, self-blame and powerlessness which persisted years after the death:

***Case 24:*** *“Why does it have to be ‘kill him’? I still battle anger, I still battle guilt. Why didn’t I call? Why did I just ignore him?”*

***Case 19:*** *“A lot of people in [place redacted] blamed me and said I should have taken better care of him and I carry that guilt. I can't help it, the one time I let him go by himself that's what happened.”*

These feelings were exacerbated by interactions with law enforcement in the aftermath of the death which had a two-fold effect on families. Being in the presence of police officers acted as a constant reminder of their loved one’s death, for example:

***Case 10:*** *“I only drive my daughter to school and I don't do any shopping in [place redacted] because if I see a police officer or any of their vehicles it is just too difficult.”*

***Case 4:*** *“When I see an officer in uniform I do get heart palpitations and sweats because you know it’s a hard thing to absorb that this person that you are supposed to be able to work with or trust is a murderer and that represents my experience, you know?”*

Furthermore, the prolonged battles caused by attempts to gain justice and accountability appeared to prolong the grieving experiences of families and increase the emotional stress of their loss. As one participant describes:

***Case 31:*** *“It took about 4 years or 5 years before it hit me because we were so involved in trying to find answers and get things done.”*

Lacking the legitimacy to grieve, these emotions can become supressed and ‘entrapped’ within family members, leading to a more complicated and prolonged grief response. In the midst of coping with unexpected and traumatic loss, the ongoing fight for justice and closure is characterised by constant interactions with the police and criminal justice system and effectively becomes a form of secondary victimisation.

***Discussion and conclusion***

This article sheds light on the experiences of a largely overlooked group of victims in the US. It uses interdisciplinary literature and research on the issues of DAPC, covictims of homicide and disenfranchised grief to examine how DAPC affect the identities and social relationships of the bereaved families. Normative social constructions are at the heart of the article; they affect how society constructs blame, constructs victims, and constructs grief in the aftermath of a case of DAPC. Individuals’ position in society is seen to be indicative of their relative worth both before and after their death. In the aftermath of DAPC this relative worth can be seen to extend to the families of the deceased as their relationship with the deceased is perceived to affect their own relative worth. The conflict between the intrapersonal feelings of the bereaved families, and their interpersonal relationships with wider society produces tensions that result in powerful manifestations of disenfranchised grief.

Families’ perceptions of the racialised dimension of disenfranchised grief reflect how marginalised groups are further affected by socially constructed norms and values (see, for example van Denderen, de Keijser, Kleen and Boelen 2015). The experiences felt by African-American families affected by DAPC largely reflected their experiences with other structures in US society, and were, to some extent, not necessarily unexpected (see, for example Martin, 2005). Giroux (2006, p.175) notes that marginalised sections of society are expected to ‘not only have to fend for themselves in the face of life’s tragedies but are also supposed to do it without being seen by the dominant society’, causing covictims to experience a grief that is ‘culturally void’ (Sawicka, 2016, p.232). This appears to link to a secondary form of victimisation, or what Spungen (1998, p.10) terms the ‘second wound’.

Beyond the racialised dimension of disenfranchised grief, the great majority of participants perceived that those who died after police contact tended to be viewed as being more likely to have caused their own death, not only due to the context in which they died, but also as a result of their marginalised position in society prior to the death (see, for example Razack, 2015; Spungen, 1998; Xxxxx, 2018). Their marginalised position was constructed in some cases by the media (see Hirschfield and Simon 2010) but also by institutional authorities (see Martin 2005). Blame is more likely to be attributed to the deceased, and the denial of victim status is consequently perceived to be more likely as a result. Families felt that attempts to get justice for their loved ones and also to be able to grieve for them tended to be met with hostility, apathy or indifference on behalf of a dominant majority of society (see, for example Corr, 1998; Peterson Armour, 2002a; 2002b; Spungen, 1998). The lack of data on DAPC in the US, and also on covictims of homicide in the US appears to further reinforce the relative lack of importance of these groups from a governmental perspective. If one estimates a family unit to be an average of 5 persons and extrapolates from the available data on DAPC, it is reasonable to assert that these deaths have affected approximately 100,000 people in the US since the turn of this century. It seems an issue which affects a significant minority of the US population is of a relatively little relevance to governmental institutions and also to academic researchers. It might be said that non-white covictims of those who die after police contact represent a group that is multiply marginalised.

The article builds on the canon of literature on disenfranchised grief to demonstrate that it is a useful concept when examining the experiences of those affected by interactions with justice systems in the US. The effects of disenfranchised grief as a result of interactions with the justice system has been noted by numerous authors (see Jenkins et al. 2014; Peterson Armour, 2002a; Spungen, 1998; Redmond, 1996) From this perspective it seems likely that further research of a quantitative nature could be undertaken on these families’ experiences in an attempt to gauge the extent of the issue at a national level. Additional qualitative research could be undertaken which investigates disenfranchised grief in the aftermath of violent deaths from a racial perspective. Whilst the authors assert that their research is important because it is original, they acknowledge the findings presented in this article emerged from inductive processes in the analytical phase of the project, rather than as the result of an explicit research project into disenfranchised grief. Consequently, this work could be built on by future research to perhaps enable a more rounded understanding of how disenfranchised grief relates to those left behind in the aftermath of violent deaths. This might perhaps focus on the work of Finlay (2015) and Todd (2007) who found that entrapped grief led to a more complicated grief response. It suggests that research could be undertaken to understand the complexity of the grief response and provide an improved level of support for those affected by cases of DAPC. Spungen (1998, p. xi) believed that research on covictims of homicide could better inform victim support services in the US and remove covictims from the ‘state of invisibility’ in which they existed. Whilst this has not yet happened, the authors of this article would argue that it still could, and furthermore, that understanding more about the families of those who die after police contact might be one way in which the wider issue of DAPC might be better understood in the US.

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