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Witness to a Homicide: Experiencing Vicarious Trauma at an Execution



Sandra Joy, Ph.D., LCSW

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of my study is to analyze data that I gathered during a 10-month sabbatical, when I took off in my RV and drove across the nation to interview witnesses of state and federal executions. The primary focus of my interviews was to examine the response of all parties present at an execution, in order to determine the extent and nature of vicarious trauma found among these witnesses.

CATEGORIES OF WITNESSES INTERVIEWED

DOC Personnel (Wardens, DOC Communications Directors, Corrections Officers, Executioner)

Journalists

Spiritual Advisors/ Death Row Chaplains

Defense Attorneys/ Prosecutor

Family/ Friends of the Executed

Family/ Friends of the Murder Victim

Former Death Row Inmates

SAMPLE

Throughout my journey, I interviewed (and filmed) 107 individuals from the categories identified below. More information about each of the people I interviewed (e.g., pictures, videos, publications and bios) can be found at the following website for my project: www.bearingwitnesses.com

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

This study is significant in that it will contribute data to the national conversation we have been engaged in regarding whether the death penalty is a humane punishment or if it is inhumane and should be abolished. The number of state executions have declined significantly over the last two decades, just as public support for the death penalty has dwindled. In the midst of growing opposition to the death penalty, President Trump rushed to oversee 13 executions of federal death row inmates in the final months of his presidency. If he is reelected to the presidency in November, he has threatened to resume federal executions. We are at a critical point in our history as we assess the effectiveness of the death penalty, and the harm that it brings to our society.

INITIAL FINDINGS

Vicarious trauma results from being exposed to secondhand trauma and manifests when an individual internalizes the emotional experiences of others as though that individual had personally experienced them.

(Many of the witnesses displayed symptoms of trauma after witnessing the execution, if not from watching the homicide of the condemned, then from the traumatic responses displayed by other witnesses)

Vicarious trauma can lead someone to change their worldview, challenging their sense of justice and safety in the world.

(Many of the witnesses expressed a change in attitude toward the death penalty after witnessing an execution)

(see handout for additional preliminary findings)

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(see handout for full list of references)

