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FAMILIES OF MURDER VICTIMS' PERCEPTIONS OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT:  
A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF WHAT FAMILY MEMBERS SAY FOLLOWING  
EXECUTIONS

By

Corey Daniel Burton  
M.S., University of Louisville, 2012

A Thesis  
Submitted to the Faculty of the  
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Master of Science

Department of Justice Administration  
University of Louisville  
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2012

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A Thesis Approved on

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all of those who have lost a loved one to homicide or those who have lost a loved one to execution.

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## ABSTRACT

### FAMILIES OF MURDER VICTIMS' PERCEPTIONS OF CAPITAL PUNISHMENT: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF WHAT FAMILY MEMBERS SAY FOLLOWING EXECUTIONS

Corey D. Burton

April 10, 2012

Two common assumptions are that the family members of murder victims will achieve closure and perceive a sense of justice following the execution of their loved one's murderer. These assumptions, however, may be unfounded. Using family member statements from newspaper articles reporting on 138 executions in the United States from 2006-2011, the current study examines family member post-execution feelings and attitudes as reported in the media. Results indicate that family member closure and perceived justice following the execution, although the most preeminent themes that emerge, are still relatively uncommon. The results of the current study are discussed in the context of previous literature on media studies examining post-execution family member feelings and attitudes, the death penalty process and public opinion and perception of the death penalty. Societal as well as policy implications are discussed.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The present study addresses two distinct, but related research questions. First, the study addresses the question “According to newspaper reports following executions, what are the feelings and attitudes most prominently expressed by family members of murder victims whose loved one’s killer is subsequently executed?” The second research question, drawing on the same data and perspective, but differently focused asks, “Are some feelings and attitudes more widely reported by newspapers than others?” Two common assumptions are that family members of murder victims will achieve closure and perceive a sense of justice after their loved one’s murderer is executed. However, current research in this area is limited primarily to a small number of non-empirical assessments, and even those studies which are scientific are limited both in quantity and applicability. The purpose of the current study is to attempt to further our understanding of how family members of murder victims feel following the execution of their loved one’s murderer. The current study broadens our understanding of family member feelings and attitudes utilizing a defined methodology. The methodology employed in this study avoids the bias that other researchers may show if seeking out family members who are known to be strictly for or against the death penalty (King, 2003). The current study involves a content analysis of family member statements from

newspaper articles reporting on 138 of the 273 executions that occurred in the United States from 2006-2011. Two broad analyses were conducted in this study. The first was intended to get an overall view of the frequency in which family members (through individual and collective family statements) were reported by the media as describing various feelings and attitudes. The researcher also conducted a sub-analysis looking at which feelings and attitudes are most commonly expressed when a family member or collective family statement also mentions the length of time between commission of the crime and the execution. In the second analysis, the researcher shifted the unit of analysis away from the individual family members or collective family statements to the individual news articles. Examining the news articles, as opposed to the individual and collective family statements, allows the researcher to get a better sense of which feelings and attitudes are being disseminated over a wide geographic area.

From a policy perspective, understanding the feelings and attitudes of the family members of murder victims may address fallacies in prosecutors' arguments to juries and also may inspire changes in policies which currently allow families of murder victims to view executions. From a prosecutorial perspective, part of achieving justice for the families of murder victims may be centered on seeking the death penalty and ultimately winning a conviction. Prosecutors are often willing to make the argument that execution is the only means of achieving closure and justice for the families. However, it is possible that families have a different sense of justice which may not involve executing their loved one's murderer. Thus in a system that ultimately seeks justice, it may be useful to examine the feelings and attitudes of the family members and for prosecutors to consider the familial perspective when making decisions to seek the death penalty or making

arguments based on the assumptions of family member closure and perceptions of justice. Considerations of post-execution feelings and attitudes of family members may also help assess whether allowing family members to view the execution of their loved one's murderer is good policy. If ultimately little is achieved in the way of closure or justice for the families, it may be possible that allowing families to view the execution may be more of a distraction which will not improve their sense of justice or feelings of closure in the long run. Unfortunately, little is understood with regards to how executions ultimately affect the families of murder victims and the general attitude of this population towards capital punishment. However, the mere existence and longstanding reputation of organizations such as Murder Victims' Families for Reconciliation (comprised of family members of murder victims who oppose the death penalty in all cases) which works to influence legislators to abolish the death penalty (among other responsibilities) undermines any assumptions that families of murder victims unequivocally support the death penalty. Thus a deeper understanding of this group in addressing policy issues is useful.

Two previous groups of researchers (Vollum & Longmire, 2007; Gross & Matheson, 2003) conducted studies of family member feelings and attitudes reported by newspapers. This study expands on previous work by including a nationwide sample of news articles as opposed to articles covering executions only in one state (Vollum & Longmire, 2007) and by covering a longer time frame than three and a half years (Gross & Matheson, 2003). In addition to these two studies, another study which addresses the feelings and attitudes of family members at different stages (from death row to post-execution) was conducted by Burns (2006). In her study, Burns (2006) acquires family

member feelings and attitudes through the use of semi-structured interviews as opposed to a content analysis of family member statements.

The results of the current study will be discussed within the context of the previous literature on media reporting of family member responses following the execution of a loved one's murderer, the death penalty process and the media's influence on public perception and opinion. With regards to the media's influence on public perception and opinion, it is possible that the most predominant themes that emerge in the current study, disseminated over a wide geographic area and across multiple media markets, play a significant role in shaping a generally pro-death penalty attitude in the United States.

Finally, achieving a better understanding of family member post-execution feelings and attitudes allows one to address common assumptions about the post-homicide experience of surviving family members. One assumption is that family members of murder victims achieve closure in executions. Another assumption is that family members who view the execution of their loved one's murderer will realize a positive, cathartic effect. Finally, an assumption that prosecutors in capital trials often try to sell to juries is that conviction and subsequent execution will bring about closure for the victims' families.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

It is widely assumed that for the family member of a murder victim, the execution of their loved one's killer is the final chapter of a long process that allows the family member to move on from the crime (Berns, 2009; Armour & Umbreit, 2006). However, looking at family member closure through the lens of media reporting in the days following the execution may be a step in addressing assumptions about family member feelings and attitudes. In addition, examining post-execution feelings and attitudes through media reporting along with how the media may influence public perception could provide some insight as to whether media reporting of family member feelings and attitudes influences the broader public's opinion of the death penalty.

In order to understand how executions affect the views of the family members, it is first useful to establish a general understanding of what family members experience emotionally when losing a loved one to homicide. In addition, it is also useful to examine how various experiences in the death penalty process (leading up to the execution) affect already bereaved family members. After examining family grieving patterns following the murder of a loved one as well as the effects of the various events that occur throughout the death penalty process, it is useful to look at how the execution itself affects the feelings and attitudes of the family members. Taken together, looking at

family member feelings and attitudes in this way provides information about how such feelings and attitudes may change over time and with different events.

Although limited to what newspaper writers are willing to report, one way that at least some understanding of post-execution perspectives can be achieved is through an examination of what family members say to the media following the execution of their loved one's murderer. Looking at family member sentiments through the lens of media reporting may offer at least a preliminary opportunity to understand what family members experience emotionally at the close of the judicial process. Finally, establishing a potential link between media reporting of family member feelings and attitudes, death penalty perceptions and public opinion involves an examination of how the media influences public opinion in criminal justice matters and specifically with regards to capital punishment. It is possible that what the media most commonly reports with regards to family member sentiments helps shape the public's support for the death penalty based on the ideas of closure and justice for the survivors of homicide victims.

#### Family Member Feelings Following the Murder of a Loved One

Much research attention has been focused on the overall feelings of individuals who have lost a loved one to homicide. These feelings can be broadly categorized as falling into the areas of frustration with the criminal justice system, personal grief, stigmatization by family and associates, apathetic attitudes about the world and psychological maladies. Each of these feelings could undoubtedly hinder the healing process, arguably making the loss of a family member to homicide far worse than a family member's death caused by more natural phenomena.

A common sentiment expressed by family members of murder victims is that they are treated poorly by the criminal justice system (Armour, 2002; Redmond, 1989). A qualitative study by Armour (2002) suggests a number of reasons family members feel this way. Family members may feel as though the criminal justice system is non-responsive to their needs (particularly with regards to information about the case) because the justice system views the crime as an offense against the state and not against the secondary murder victims (Armour, 2002). Family members are often curious about aspects of the case including information about the suspect, autopsy results and the progress of the investigation (Armour, 2002). In addition, family members may also feel as if they have a limited right to see justice done as the procedural aspects of the case assume a greater importance than the needs and wishes of the family. Although family members of homicide victims have a right to be naturally curious about the progress of a particular case, the criminal justice system also has the right to protect information that is crucial to investigations. If the police, for instance, release information about a suspect or details of an investigation to the family, they have no control over to whom the family members may further disseminate that information. Therefore, family members of homicide victims should not interpret the withholding of information about a case as a personal affront but rather a necessary condition of conducting a proper investigation.

In addition to perceived maltreatment by the criminal justice system, family members of murder victims also encounter a range of sociological, psychological and psychiatric issues. Losing a family member to homicide has been linked to recurring nightmares (Rando, 1993), Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Zinzow, Rheingold, Byczkiewicz, Saunders & Kilpatrick, 2011; Amick-McMullan, Kilpatrick & Resnick,

1991), survivor's guilt (Rando, 1993), negative personality issues (Rando, 1993), the perception that the world is an unfriendly place (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), an intense feeling of trauma that overrides the ability to mourn (Clements, Asaro, Henry & McDonald, 2005; Parks, 1993; Rando, 1993; Rynearson & McCreery, 1993; Spungen, 1998), a feeling of social stigmatization (Hatton, 2003; Doka, 1988), difficulty coping (Allen, 1996) and physical illness (Baliko & Tuck, 2008). Each of these reactions experienced individually or in combination with other reactions should not be surprising. The trauma associated with losing a family member to homicide is characterized by the suddenness with which it occurs and the feeling that the individual's life ended well before it should have. It is not surprising, then, that while family members try to make sense of and accept what has happened to their loved one, the process of normal mourning is replaced with trauma. Family members feel as if the world is unsafe and unfriendly and other family members or associates (who may not have experienced a similar loss) distance themselves from the grieving family member due to a lack of understanding of the issue.

An understanding of the overall feelings, attitudes and grieving patterns of family members following a loved one's murder is useful in beginning to understand the next step. That is, how do various experiences of bereaved family members throughout the death penalty process leading up to the execution affect their feelings and attitudes?

#### The Effects of the Death Penalty Process on Families

Much of what is known about the death penalty process (between commission of the crime and execution) and the potential effects on the family members of murder victims is limited to research that is non-empirically based. If research is scientific, it is often limited in explanatory power as well as generalizability. However, an

understanding of what researchers report about family members based on non-empirical or limited scientific research is still important. Family member accounts of their experiences in the death penalty process following the murder of their loved one may guide future policy centered on family member-offender dialogue.

One event in the death penalty process that may positively affect family members is having the opportunity to speak in person with the condemned individual responsible for the death of their loved one prior to the execution. Umbreit and Vos (2000) found that family members feel positive about having the opportunity to personally address the condemned. More specifically, family members felt as though the opportunity to address the condemned individual was a significant step in their healing (Umbreit & Vos, 2000). These findings, however, should be viewed cautiously as they are based on “mediation sessions” involving 3 survivors of homicide victims and 2 death row inmates in the state of Texas. This is hardly representative of all surviving family members or their feelings and attitudes following such interventions.

Other researchers view the process of capital punishment as having potentially negative effects on the surviving family members. Armour (2002) and Redmond (1989) have argued that family members may perceive maltreatment by the criminal justice system. Although many family members have a deep-seated desire for revenge or justice through retribution (Lifton & Mitchell, 2000; Sarat, 1997), the death penalty can also leave family members feeling slighted if the prosecution does not seek the death penalty in a particular case (Adcock, 2010; King, 2006; Radelet & Borg, 2000). Even when the death penalty is sought, it may actually prolong the period of grieving (King, 2003; Kanwar, 2002; Lifton & Mitchell, 2000; Dicks, 1991). One reason for this prolonged

period of grieving may be due to factors such as that proposed anecdotally by Goodwin (1997). In his study, Goodwin (1997) proposed that continuous media coverage may harm the family members during a prolonged period of grieving. King (2006) argues that the death penalty may cause dissension within families if some family members favor the death penalty and others do not. In sum, the available research suggests the possibility of both positive benefits and negative consequences during the death penalty process.

Whatever positive or negative outcomes family members may experience throughout the death penalty process, what is less certain is what effects the execution itself will have on the family members. Research in this area has been extremely limited. Burns (2006) assessed the feelings and attitudes of the family members of murder victims whose loved one's killer was executed or was scheduled to be executed. Vollum and Longmire (2007) and Gross and Matheson (2003) each identified thematic categories of family member feelings and attitudes reported by the media at the time of the execution.

#### Interviews with Families of Murder Victims

Previous interview research has focused on the families of offenders on death row (Jones & Beck, 2006; Smykla, 1987). However, researchers have paid little attention to the families of murder victims. Burns (2006) conducted the first truly empirical assessment of the feelings and attitudes of murder victims' families employing semi-structured interviews in a way that avoids the bias of King (2003). In her work, King (2003) conducted a qualitative study employing interviews but primarily sought out family members who opposed the death penalty. Although Burns (2006) addresses the issue of family member closure within the framework of satisfaction with and responses

of the criminal justice system and victims' rights, the study yields interesting insights into the views and perspectives of the family members of murder victims.

In a series of twenty-three semi-structured interviews, Burns (2006) acquired a wealth of information about family member closure, justice and forgiveness. Burns (2006) stated that all of her interviewees believed there could never be full closure, primarily because the family member was still gone. The majority of her respondents said they could not forgive their loved one's killer (although it is unclear what percentage constitutes a majority in this study), and all of her interviewees favored the death penalty in some fashion (information yielded from the interviews), suggesting that they believed either the impending or subsequent execution to be just (Burns, 2006). In addition, most (again, with no indication of exactly how many) of the respondents in Burns (2006) stated that the offender deserved the punishment he or she was receiving. This also implies that the respondents believed the impending or subsequent execution to be just.

Although Burns (2006) gathers extremely useful insights into the feelings and attitudes of family members of murder victims, there are various elements missing from her analysis that make any comparison of her results to the results of the current study difficult. Burns (2006) conducted twenty-three semi-structured interviews with family members whose loved one's murderer was on death row at the time, had previously been on death row or had already been executed. Her study does not mention how many family members fall into each category nor does it attempt to distinguish between the feelings and attitudes of the family members at each stage of the death penalty process. This is understandable given that this was not the intent of her research. Even if it were known how many family members fell into the latter category (offender had already been

executed) there is no indication in her study of how much time had passed since the execution. Since the current study focuses exclusively on post-execution feelings and attitudes, a direct comparison of her findings to the findings of the current study is difficult. However, the findings of her research are still highly useful in obtaining a deeper understanding of family feelings and attitudes, which would be difficult to attain using the methods of the current study, and are also useful in guiding future research.

#### Previous Media Studies of Family Members' Post-Execution Feelings

Although research involving the family members of murder victims with regard to feelings of closure and justice has been sparse (Thompson, Norris, & Ruback, 1998; Freeman, Shaffer, & Smith, 1996; Amick-McMullan et. al, 1991) researchers in recent years have employed content analysis in order to ascertain family member feelings and attitudes following executions (Vollum & Longmire, 2007; Gross & Matheson, 2003). These two studies, along with Burns (2006), represent some of the first attempts to scientifically understand family member feelings and attitudes following the execution of a loved one's murderer. The current study, however, is unique in that the data are drawn from a nationwide sample of news articles as opposed to articles from one state (Vollum & Longmire, 2007) and the time frame under examination covers a longer period than just three and a half years (Gross & Matheson, 2003). In addition, both groups of researchers report their findings as percentages of the executions (cases) under study and do not examine family members or the number of news articles as the unit of analysis, which is what the current study attempts to do.

Vollum and Longmire (2007) examined 320 executions in the state of Texas from December 7, 1982 to March 3, 2004. The authors gathered post-execution family member

statements from newspaper articles covering 159 (49.5%) of the 320 executions during this time. As their lone source, the authors gathered statements from the *Huntsville Item*, a newspaper which regularly sends a reporter to attend executions occurring in Texas. Using content analysis, Vollum and Longmire (2007) organized their data into 10 primary themes (Healing and Closure, Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction, Justice/Revenge, Memorialize/Honor Victim, Removal of Condemned, Forgiveness, Sympathy, Rationalization, Death Penalty Support/Opposition and Religion). Statements were further subcategorized into secondary themes falling into one of the larger primary themes.

Vollum and Longmire (2007) found that in 40.9% of the 159 cases, family members expressed that the execution brought a feeling of closure. In 28.9% of the cases, the family members stated that the execution did not bring a feeling of closure. With regards to justice, in 22.6% of the cases, family members whose statements were reported by the media expressed that the execution represented “justice for society.” In 11.9% of the cases, family members expressed forgiveness for the executed person.

Gross and Matheson (2003) conducted a similar study in which they examined family member statements from newspaper accounts on a national level. The authors’ data were drawn from news stories covering 100 of the 101 executions that took place in the United States between January 2001 and June 2002. Of the 100 executions under examination during this period, the authors found family member statements listed in news stories covering 68 of the executions. In addition, the authors gathered statements from news stories covering 70 of the 183 executions that took place in the United States in 1999 and 2000. In total, the authors gathered family member statements from news

reports covering 138 executions over a three and a half year period. Although Gross and Matheson (2003) are not explicit in their description of their analytic process, their study ostensibly employed content analysis similar to Vollum and Longmire (2007).

Gross and Matheson (2003) found that the most common issue raised by the family members in media reports (found in more than one-third of their cases) was closure, or the hope that the execution would allow the family member to put the murder behind them or the fear that they would never be able to do so. In about one-fourth of the cases, the family members were quoted by the media as stating that the execution represented justice. Finally, in about one-sixth of the cases, the family is reported to have asked for clemency for the condemned person or to have expressed compassion or well wishes for the executed person's family.

Although the preceding studies may provide some insight into how family members feel following the execution of their loved one's murderer, it is also important to understand the limited generalizability of these studies. The studies provide some of the first-empirically based figures on family member post-execution feelings and attitudes. However, each are based on what the media chooses to report and thus are limited in their full explanatory power. This is not to say, however, that the results of these studies are not useful. Even if based on media reporting, the degree to which post-execution news accounts either affect or do not affect public attitudes regarding the death penalty is a line of inquiry worth examining. It is possible that some of the most common feelings and attitudes expressed by the family members of murder victims reach some media consumers and shape their views of capital punishment.

## Media Influences on Public Perception and Opinion

Examining the potential link between media reports of post-execution family member feelings and attitudes, and public attitudes about capital punishment, begins with an overall examination of how the media influences public perception and opinion of crime. Although it is useful to understand that the media influences public perception and opinion of crime, for the current study it may be more useful to understand the link between the media and public perception and opinion of capital punishment.

To begin, the work of Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorielli (1980) examined the effects of watching television on peoples' formulation of how they perceive their world. Gerbner, et. al (1980) presented what would be referred to as "Cultivation Theory," which postulates that television is not merely part of the mainstream, rather it is the driving force behind what is considered mainstream. The authors suggested that the media is controlled by a class of dominant elites with the influence to shape social norms through the presentation of stereotypical images which reflect the views of the dominant class. If, in fact, Cultivation Theory explains a process in which cultural elites shape the mainstream, it is possible that these same elite individuals help shape public perception and opinion about crime and capital punishment.

Prior research has established that the media can influence public perception and opinion on crime in general (Finkel & Groscup, 1997; Sprott & Doob, 1997; Haghghi & Sorenson, 1996; Daly, 1995; Surette, 1992; Ouimet & Coyle, 1991; Knowles, 1987; Fishman, 1978). In fact, research shows that people most commonly get their information and knowledge about crime from the mass media (Daly, 1995; Knowles, 1982; Skogan & Maxfield, 1981). Unfortunately, given that the media is often selective in what they

choose to report (Chermak, 1994; Hans, 1990), peoples' knowledge about crime that is gleaned from the media is often inaccurate in comparison to what actually occurs (Finkel & Groscup, 1997). This may be particularly true in cases of homicide reporting and reporting of other acts of violence. For purposes of newsworthiness, the media often embellishes random acts of violence to make them seem bloodier or more perverse (Haghighi & Sorenson, 1996). In addition, the media may also give people an inflated sense of the prevalence of serious crimes. Surette (2007), Daly (1995) and Roshier (1973) all report that people are more likely to hear about serious crimes than other, less serious crimes that occur more frequently. If people are more likely to hear about serious crimes, it is possible that the public overestimates the actual occurrence of serious crime. Sprott and Doob (1997), Surette (1992), Ouimet and Coyle (1991) and Knowles (1987) all report that people tend to believe that overall crime is more inflated than it really is, which undoubtedly includes serious crimes such as homicide. The media may also promulgate the existence of a "crime wave" (Fishman, 1978). According to Fishman (1978), media outlets (using a combination of information contained in police reports and information from other media outlets) identify common themes of locally-occurring crimes and begin reporting on such crimes more than others. Crimes that may be over-reported, for example, include muggings and auto thefts and over-reporting of such crimes may lead to the perception of a wave of muggings or auto-thefts. Media presentation of crime waves may then, lead to increased public fear when the crime being reported as rampant may be relatively rare (Fishman, 1978).

Research has also shown that the mass media may influence what is important to the public through a phenomenon called "agenda setting" which was outlined in the

seminal work of McCombs and Shaw (1972). Agenda setting refers to the process in which editors, news room staff and broadcasters collectively decide which messages will be presented and to what degree those messages will be presented. Although this work examined the media's ability to influence what political issues are important to the public based on the type and degree of political messages presented in the media, the concept may be applicable to criminal justice issues as well such as in Fishman's (1978) work outlining media promulgation of crime waves.

Some researchers have noted that research in general is lacking tests to show the existence of a direct media/public opinion link (O'Connell, Invernizzi & Fuller, 1998; Ericson, 1991). However, media presentation of crimes that are most prevalent can shape overall public opinion about crime (Douglas & Ogloff, 1996). Other researchers have shown that the media can influence the results of crime-related questions on public opinion polls (Fredericks & Arenson, 1992). These questions may be those that relate to the public's ascription of crime to various racial, ethnic, social and age groups as research has shown that the media can influence the public to associate crime with different groups (Gordon, 1993; Lawrence & Homel, 1992).

However, it is not only with crime in general that the media can shape the public's perception and opinion. In examining the issue of capital punishment, the media can exert similar influences. The foregoing research shows that what is presented in the media can influence how the public views crime in general. If the media has the ability to influence the public's view and perception of crime, it may also be that the media can influence the public's view and perception on responses to crime, notably the decision to sentence a convicted murderer to death.

The issue of public support for the death penalty came to the forefront following the United States Supreme Court's decision in *Furman v. Georgia*, 408 U.S. 238 (1972). In his opinion, Justice Thurgood Marshall spelled out three hypotheses related to the issue that continue to be debated today. Justice Marshall hypothesized that 1.) The public is ill-informed about the death penalty 2.) The public would oppose the death penalty if they had more knowledge about the practice and 3.) Those who support the death penalty based on retribution would be affected very little in their opinions even with increased knowledge. One of the main reasons that capital punishment is still used in the United States is due to broad public support for the practice. Bohm (2003) suggests that public support influences legislators to frame the laws so that the practice can persist. Some ways in which the media influences public opinion on the death penalty has been established in previous research. Most broadly, Niven (2002) asserts that the media essentially shapes public opinion of the death penalty by presenting it as an issue that is almost unequivocally supported by the American public. One way the media does this is to leave out discussions of Americans who support life in prison without the possibility of parole to make it seem as though there is a small minority of people who favor this option (Niven, 2002). Recently, Rosenberger and Callanan (2011) found that the media can influence whether people in general will choose punishment, deterrence or incapacitation over rehabilitation as the most effective means for dealing with criminal offenders. Although punishment, deterrence and incapacitation encompass more than just the death penalty, these researchers' findings suggest that the media can influence the public to choose harsher sanctions for criminal offenders based on what is reported, which may include the ultimate sanction of the death penalty. Providing support to the findings of

Rosenberger and Callanan (2011) are the findings of Haney and Greene (2004). Interestingly, Haney and Greene (2004) found that the content of media reports can affect peoples' support for the death penalty. Public support for the death penalty can be influenced by media stories that discuss elements surrounding the crime itself as opposed to mitigating circumstances surrounding the offender such as upbringing or other social contexts (Haney & Greene, 2004). Fan, Keltner and Wyatt (2002) also found that public support for the death penalty is influenced by the content of media stories but in a different way than what was found by Haney and Greene (2004). Fan et. al (2002) found that media coverage which focuses on offender innocence may decrease support for the death penalty.

Regardless of exactly how the content of media reporting affects the public's support for or attitude about the death penalty, it is possible that part of this influence has to do with the emotional responses to the content of the media reports that helps shape public opinion. Ellsworth and Gross (1994) argue that people are more likely to base their opinions of the death penalty on emotions rather than facts. It is possible that such emotional appeals occur when the media focuses exclusively on the elements of the crime or the mitigating factors for the offender. If so, then the findings of Haney and Greene (2004) and Fan et.al (2002) may be supported by Ellsworth and Gross (1994).

In sum, what the media chooses to report in stories about the death penalty can influence the public's perception and opinion of the practice. Regardless of which side of the issue the media chooses to report, the influence over media consumers can be profound. Therefore, it is useful to examine capital punishment through the lens of media

reporting of families of murder victims in order to see the potential effects that this group exerts over public opinion.

### The Current Study

First, the current study seeks to expand upon previous work by Vollum and Longmire (2007) and Gross and Matheson (2003). This study will examine a nationwide sample of newspaper articles in order to ascertain the post-execution feelings and attitudes of family members of murder victims as reported by the media. This study expands on previous work by examining a nationwide sample of newspaper articles as opposed to focusing on one newspaper in one state (Vollum & Longmire, 2007) and does so covering a broader range of time than a previous study that also examined a nationwide sample of newspaper articles (Gross & Matheson, 2003). In addition, the units of analysis in the current study will shift from executions or cases to individual family members as well as individual news articles.

Second, this study's results will be discussed within the framework of previous media studies of family member feelings and attitudes, the death penalty process and the media's potential link with public perception and opinion of the death penalty.

Finally, the study will seek to examine common assumptions about the feelings and attitudes of family members of murder victims. These assumptions cover those made by the general public and actors of the criminal justice system regarding the positive cathartic effects and perceptions of justice for family members of having their loved one's killer executed.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

#### Data

The present study addresses two distinct, but related research questions. First, the study addresses the question “According to newspaper reports following executions, what are the feelings and attitudes most prominently expressed by family members of murder victims whose loved one’s killer is subsequently executed?” The second research question, drawing on the same data and perspective, but differently focused asks, “Are some feelings and attitudes more widely reported by newspapers than others?”

The data collected for the current study were direct quotes published in local newspapers given by the family members of murder victims whose loved one’s murderer had recently been executed. These quotes were given in various forms including: individual family member statements at post-execution press conferences, collective family statements given post execution at press conferences and individual and collective family statements given in phone interviews and letters. Quotes were extracted from local newspaper stories that were published within three days following the execution that discussed the execution itself and does not include stories related to appeals, stays of the execution or pre-execution interviews with the condemned person or the victims’ families. Local newspapers included those that are located in the city in which the execution occurred or in other cities generally located in the same state as where the

execution took place. Focusing on local news stories and those related directly to the execution provided some degree of consistency when searching for news stories covering executions. For example, *The Huntsville Item* (located in Huntsville, Texas where the state carries out its executions) regularly reports on all executions in the state of Texas. However, there is no guarantee that national outlets such as MSNBC or Reuters would do the same. In addition, newspapers from outside the immediate area of the execution may very well cover the event and conduct interviews afterwards, but this is more likely to occur with executions that receive national media attention. For example, the 2009 execution of John Allen Muhammad (one of the Washington, D.C. Beltway Snipers) received coverage from local newspapers in New York City even though the execution occurred in Virginia. This, however, tended to be the exception as opposed to the rule. Most of the executions under examination received the most public and media attention in the immediate area where the crime and subsequent execution occurred. Thus the consistency and richness of the information gleaned from local news stories made examination of these outlets most appealing. In examining local news stories, no distinction was made between stories written by local writers and by members of the Associated Press, as articles written by either local writers or Associated Press authors reflected the family members' post-execution attitudes in similar ways. If a local newspaper decided to publish a story written by an Associated Press writer, the story was considered appropriate for examination.

At times, quotes from newspapers outside the state in which the execution occurred were used if the newspaper from which the quotes were gathered was located in relatively close proximity to the state. For example, if an execution took place in South

Carolina and a writer from the local newspaper in Augusta, Georgia (which is located on the Georgia/South Carolina border) chose to cover the execution, family member quotes were gathered from this news story if available. It is not unreasonable to surmise that one's murder, the defendant's court proceedings and the subsequent execution occurring in South Carolina would receive any less attention from the locale of Augusta, Georgia, than from other local jurisdictions in South Carolina simply because Augusta is located in another state. The close proximity of Augusta to South Carolina makes this exception reasonable.

In gathering the quotes, the researcher focused on those quotes in which a particular family member expressed an attitude about their post-execution feelings of emotional closure, their perception of justice, the workings of the criminal justice system and its actors, the length of time between the commission of the crime and execution, their degree of forgiveness towards the condemned person, their level of compassion towards the family of the condemned or the condemned himself (all executed persons were male) as well as their general reactions to the executed person's demeanor in the minutes leading up to the execution if they were in a position to make this observation (i.e. they were present at and viewed the execution).

The researcher initially focused on all quotes which reflected the feelings and attitudes of the murder victims' family members regardless of whether it could be ascertained exactly when the quote was given. For the final analysis, however, the researcher only included quotes from family members in which it could be gleaned from the news story were given within three days following the execution. The primary reason for making this distinction was so that the families' feelings could be ascertained after the

final step in a long process between the crime and the execution. The quotes used for analysis were those that patently expressed one of the post-execution attitudes of a particular family member listed above (post-execution feelings of emotional closure, their perception of justice, the workings of the criminal justice system and its actors, the length of time between the commission of the crime and execution, their level of forgiveness towards the condemned, their level of compassion towards the family of the condemned or the condemned himself-all executed persons were male-as well as their general reactions to the executed person's demeanor in the minutes leading up to the execution if they were in a position to make this observation) and thus appropriate determination of whether they would be suitable for inclusion in the study is likely to be consistent upon replication.

#### Data Collection Procedures

Beginning in March 2011, the researcher compiled a list of all executions that had occurred in the United States between 2006 and 2010 from the Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC) website. After compiling this list, the researcher began searching for news stories covering the executions utilizing Google® searches and cross-referencing these searches with information contained on the Clark County (IN) Prosecutor's Office website, beginning with the first execution in 2010 and working from January to December each year through 2006. Roughly half-way through the data collection process, the researcher compiled a list of all the executions that had occurred up to the present date in 2011 from the DPIC website and began searching for news stories covering these executions, working from the first execution of the year to the most recent. As more executions occurred in 2011 during the data collection process, the researcher added the

news stories covering the executions and their corresponding quotes to the data. Data collection was completed in December 2011 to ensure that all executions and quotes from their related news stories would be included in the study. Including all persons executed and related news stories between 2006 and 2011 protects against researcher bias.

In searching for news stories related to each executed person, the researcher began with a Google® search of each person. The text used in the search was the same in each search attempt to ensure consistency. For example, when trying to locate news stories related to the execution of Angel Resendiz, the researcher typed “the execution of Angel Resendiz” in the search term box. The researcher then examined the first 10 pages of “hits” yielded by the search, looking for news stories published in local newspapers in which it could be ascertained from the title of the search result was a story that covered the execution after it had occurred. Limiting the search to only the first 10 pages of hits provided the researcher with a degree of consistency to ensure that the process could be replicated. When a suitable news story was located, the researcher examined the article for quotes given by family members of the murder victim or victims (mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, grandparents, stepparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, cousins as well as collective family statements) which expressed the feelings and attitudes of the family member or members.

After conducting a Google® search for news stories related to the execution of an individual, the researcher then cross-referenced the person with records and news stories published on the Clark County (IN) Prosecutor’s Office website, which regularly maintains an updated list of all persons executed in the United States as well as news stories related to the execution. Some of the news stories located on this site were the

same stories located in the Google® search of the individual yet this site also regularly provided additional stories not yielded in the Google® search.

Regardless of the source (Google® or the Clark County Prosecutor), once a quote was identified, the researcher copied the quote directly from the article and pasted the quote onto the data page. This was intended to ensure that the researcher included the entire quote and did not only select certain parts of it. Quotes were filed on the data page under the executed person's name and identified with the relationship of the person to the murder victim who gave the quote. For example, the researcher would record "Victim's Mother" and place the quote next to this label. Each quote was also put into brief context. For example, once a quote was included in the data, the researcher noted after the quote "statement made following the execution" or "statement made 2 days following the execution" or another label that would put the quote in appropriate context. In the end, quotes were gathered from news stories covering 138 of the 273 executions that occurred in the United States from 2006-2011.

### Variables

After completing the data collection process, the researcher examined the quotes and coded the data into themes that reflected the feelings and attitudes of the murder victim(s) family members the day of or in the days immediately following the execution. In examining the data, several key themes emerged. Family members commonly mentioned the length of time between the crime and the execution, the fact that the execution would not bring their loved one back, the leniency of the death penalty in comparison to what their family member suffered, whether or not they could forgive the executed person and the general demeanor of the condemned person leading up to death

if the commenting family member viewed the execution. A complete list of all the initial themes can be found in Table 1.

### Analytic Approach

The analytic approach utilized for the current study is a content analysis of family member quotes given to the media within three days following the execution of their family member's murderer during the period under observation (2006-2011). Content analysis involves the examination of various forms of written, audiovisual or photographic materials in order to identify themes or patterns in the data (Berg, 2009). More specifically, Berg (2009) states that content analysis is "any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying special characteristics of messages" (pg.341). With the current data, the researcher attempted to identify the most common individual themes present in the entire collection of family member quotes (see Table 1) and subsequently aggregated these themes into larger variables (see Table 2).

Content analysis of family member quotes given to the media is useful and appropriate for answering the research questions for a number of reasons. First, quotes given to the media shortly following the execution give the reader a sense of the individual's feelings following the final chapter of a long process between commission of the crime and the execution. This is a time when the family member(s) may be experiencing emotional extremes and be most expressive about their feelings and attitudes. Thus any cathartic effects that are to be realized as the result of the execution may very well be expressed to reporters after the event given that this is often the first opportunity that the family member has had to express their feelings following the execution. Second, given the potential value of quotes as a representation of the cathartic

or non-cathartic effects of the execution, a content analysis of the quotes written in news stories over a 6-year time span allows the researcher to identify the most common patterns that emerge on an individual level and on a news story level. Essentially, what the researcher has is a compilation of an outpouring of feelings and emotions from the family members over a significant period of time in which common themes manifest. It is possible then that these expressions of feelings and attitudes reach a wide geographic range of consumers who read the online news stories. Third, utilizing media accounts of family members' feelings in post-execution interviews or press conferences allows for the avoidance of the intrusive measures involved in one on one interviews. It is possible that bereaved family members are more willing to share their feelings about the crime, condemned and the execution at a time when emotions are at their peak given that the execution is receiving maximum attention. Fourth, quotes given to the media are often straight-forward and explicitly express the feelings of the family member at the time the family member gave the quote at an interview, over the phone or in letter form. Even if the individual newspaper writer chooses to report some family members' quotes and withhold others, the quotes that are reported are usually easy to interpret.

## CHAPTER IV

### ANALYSIS

#### Introduction

The present study addresses two distinct, but related research questions. First, the study addresses the question “According to newspaper reports following executions, what are the feelings and attitudes most prominently expressed by family members of murder victims whose loved one’s killer is subsequently executed?” The second research question, drawing on the same data and perspective, but differently focused asks, “Are some feelings and attitudes more widely reported by newspapers than others?” The primary difference in these questions is that the first only addresses the feelings and attitudes of the family members while the second expands on this focus to examine how widely these feelings and attitudes are being reported geographically across multiple media markets.

The first step in answering these research questions was to describe the type of data under study, outline the procedures by which the researcher collected the data, introduce specific themes that emerge in the data and discuss why content analysis is an appropriate technique for making sense of the data. This has been presented in Chapter III, METHODS. The second step is to discuss with more depth the families’ feelings and attitudes and how these specific feelings and attitudes reflect larger conceptual issues that can be used to describe broader post-execution views while also addressing how widely

disseminated these views are in terms of geography. Before coding the data, it was necessary to eliminate quotes that were not given by family members and quotes in which it could not be ascertained from the news articles were given within three days of the execution. Utilizing *open* and *axial* coding--which according to Berg (2009) are two coding methods appropriate for content analyses--the researcher attempts to organize the data in such a way that descriptive statistics may be ascribed to the broader concepts that are revealed and a more complete understanding of the data achieved.

After data coding was complete, the researcher performed two separate analyses of the data, each addressing one of the two guiding research questions. The first was an examination of the most prominent themes that emerged among individual family members as reported by the media. This allowed the reader to get an overall sense of how the family members of murder victims feel following executions according to the media reports. The second analysis was intended to examine in how many news stories the various themes emerged regardless of which family members expressed their feelings and attitudes. In this regard, the second research question focuses on what messages are communicated to the public by newspaper stories about executions. The results of this analysis provide an idea of how widespread (in terms of geography) the most prominent feelings and attitudes are and may give the reader a sense of which themes are being most widely presented to consumers of news articles. An understanding of what information is most widely presented to the public may help the reader form a deeper understanding of the public's view of capital punishment.

## Coding

In the first step of the analytic process, the researcher examined the data for quotes that were not appropriate for analysis and eliminated them from the data set. As stated above, these quotes included those that were not given by family members of the murder victim(s) or those in which it could not be ascertained from the news articles were given within three days following the execution. After eliminating quotes deemed inappropriate for analysis, statements from 196 victims' family members across 138 of the 273 executions occurring in the United States from 2006-2011 were coded and included in the final analysis.

The second step in the analytic process was to conduct open coding with the quotes that remained. Open coding, according to Berg (2009), is a process in which the researcher examines his data for any and all possible themes or patterns that emerge in the data, however minute. With the current data, the researcher initially open coded for 40 different post-execution "feelings and attitudes" that emerged in the quotes, regardless of the frequency of their appearance. Table 1 lists these feelings and attitudes.

**Table 1**

Original Coded Feelings and Attitudes (Open Coding)

<b>Execution does not bring victim back</b> Execution does not bring emotional closure	<b>Punishment was too lenient in general</b> Punishment too lenient compared to victim suffering
<b>Family can never feel emotional closure</b> Family member cannot forgive	<b>Family member would have inflicted more severe punishment</b> Justice had not been served
<b>Execution does not change what happened</b> Family expressed condolences/Well wishes to executed person's family	<b>Execution is first/next step in healing</b> Family will try to move on from everything surrounding the crime and emotionally
<b>Family believes the executed person may find salvation/peace</b> Positive step in healing (no more appeals)	<b>Family did not get to say goodbye to their loved one</b> Family felt bad for the executed person
<b>Family is happy with justice system/entities</b> Family perceived justice had been served with the execution	<b>Family member did not get pleasure from viewing or experiencing the execution</b> Closure only comes from God/forgiveness
<b>Executed not sincere in apology or showed no remorse</b> Executed was sincere/remorseful before death	<b>Family mentioned that the executed never admitted fault or wrongdoing at any point</b> Expressed belief in the death penalty
<b>Family glad executed apologized</b> Family wished executed had apologized (Prior to execution)	<b>Expressed opposition to the death penalty</b> Family had already forgiven the executed person and put the crime behind them
<b>Family wished they could have spoken with executed person beforehand</b> Time between crime and execution was lengthy or too long according to the family	<b>Family has no feelings or care for the executed person or their family</b> Executed person deserved to die
<b>Family member feels closure/relief</b> Family believes the victim can now rest in peace	<b>Family wished for admission of guilt</b> Family is now crushed or ruined
<b>Family member forgives executed person</b> Family can now celebrate life of the victim	<b>Execution is better for executed person than for the victim's family</b> Family unhappy with justice system/entities

After conducting open coding, the researcher performed axial coding. Axial coding is a process (performed after open coding) in which the researcher sorts smaller attributes into larger identifiable themes or variables (Berg, 2009). Table 2 lists these larger themes or variables (7 total) and the smaller attributes from Table 1 that fall within these categories.

**Table 2**

Final Variables (Axial Coding)

**Variable 1: Execution Represents Closure, Healing or Step Towards Either**

Positive step in healing (no more appeals)  
 Family member feels closure/relief  
 Family believes the victim can now rest in peace  
 Family can now celebrate life of the victim  
 Execution is first/next step in healing  
 Family will try to move on from everything surrounding the crime and emotionally  
 Family believes the executed person may find salvation/peace

**Variable 2: Execution Does not Represent Closure, Justice or Positive Feelings**

Execution does not bring victim back  
 Execution does not bring emotional closure  
 Family can never feel emotional closure  
 Family wished they could have spoken with executed person beforehand  
 Family unhappy with justice system/entities  
 Justice had not been served  
 Family did not get to say goodbye to their loved one  
 Family member did not get pleasure from viewing or experiencing the execution  
 Family member cannot forgive  
 Family is now crushed or ruined  
 Execution does not change what happened  
 Execution is better for executed person than for the victim's family  
 Family has no feelings or care for the executed person or their family  
 Expressed opposition to the death penalty  
 Closure only comes from God or forgiveness

**Variable 3: The Execution Represents Justice**

Family is happy with justice system/entities  
 Family perceived justice had been served with the execution  
 Expressed belief in the death penalty  
 Executed person deserved to die

**Variable 4: The Punishment was too Easy**

Punishment was too lenient in general  
 Punishment too lenient compared to victim suffering

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Family member would have inflicted more severe punishment

**Variable 5: Family Expressed Well Wishes, Condolences and Forgiveness**

Family expressed condolences/Well wishes to executed person's family

Family member forgives executed person

Family had already forgiven the executed person and put the crime behind them

**Variable 6: Family Expressed Negativity About the Executed Person's Demeanor**

Family wished executed had apologized (Prior to Execution)

Executed not sincere in apology or showed no remorse

Family mentioned that the executed never admitted fault or wrongdoing at any point

Family wished for admission of guilt

**Variable 7: Family Expressed Positivity About the Executed Person's Demeanor**

Executed was sincere/remorseful before death

Family glad executed apologized

Family felt bad for the executed person

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It is important to note here that quotes provided by several family members fell into multiple categories. For example, many family members expressed both feelings of closure and perceived that the execution represented justice. As another example, some family members did not feel a sense of closure and concomitantly expressed negative attitudes about the executed person. It is appropriate to list individuals into multiple categories since they are expressing feelings that do not offset or contradict one another (i.e. they do not express a feeling of closure in one statement while saying that they will never find closure in another). The feelings expressed by individuals who fall into multiple categories do not show a contrasting relationship.

Analysis One

For the first analysis, the researcher examined the variables listed in Table 2 that emerged among the individual family members giving quotes to the media and compared the frequency of these variables to the total number of family members under study (N=196). For this analysis, utilizing the family members as the unit of analysis was determined to be more appropriate than using the individual quotes. The primary reason

for this determination is that using this unit of analysis helps most directly answer the research question about the media's reporting of how family members feel. In addition, even those family members who gave multiple quotes following the executions generally expressed the same types of feelings. For example, family members giving multiple quotes typically would not express a feeling of closure in one quote only to contradict themselves in another. As another example, family members who expressed belief that the execution was just would not restate in another quote that the execution was unjust. The same types of feelings were consistent among individual family members. If differences in feelings did emerge, these differences did not contradict one another. For example, several family members expressed a feeling of closure or relief while also expressing that the condemned person deserved the punishment he had received.

The final part of the first analysis involved examining the family members that comprised the attribute "Time between Crime and Execution was Lengthy or Too Long according to the Family" (see Table 1) and looking for other feelings or attitudes expressed alongside this belief. This particular variable is noteworthy because it does not in and of itself express a family member's sense of satisfaction with the execution or how they feel as a result of the punishment. However, a number of family members mentioned that the time between the crime and the execution was too long or simply mentioned the fact that the process from crime to execution was lengthy without expressing any further opinion about it. There is no indication in reading these quotes individually whether this perception of a lengthy judicial process had any effects on the seven variables under examination. Thus the researcher wanted to examine any potential effects. The results of this analysis are noted in Chapter V (RESULTS).

## Analysis Two

The second analysis shifts away from an examination of individual family members and collective family statements to examine the number of news articles that report the feelings and attitudes expressed by the family members. Here, the unit of analysis shifts from the individual family members providing the quotes to the news articles in which the quotes are reported. An analysis of the number of news articles reporting family member feelings and attitudes gives the reader an idea of how widely reported the seven variables under examination are. It is useful to know how family members of murder victims feel after executions according to media reports. This knowledge provides a basis for policy and future research and addresses common assumptions about family member responses to executions. However, simply knowing how family members feel does not give any indication of how widespread these reported feelings may be. For instance, if an examination of family members' feelings reported by the media reveals that a significant number of family members express emotional closure following an execution, it may be that this feeling is endemic to a particular geographic area. A separate analysis of how many news articles are reporting various post-execution feelings and attitudes adds an additional piece of information that goes beyond merely how family members feel that may give the reader a sense of how the media reports to the public (in multiple media markets) the feelings and attitudes of the family members.

Utilizing the seven variables listed in Table 2, the researcher examined the total frequency of the variables and compared these numbers with the total number of news articles from which the quotes included in the final analysis were drawn (N=177). There were instances in which quotes from family members or collective family statements

after a particular execution were drawn from multiple sources. For example, some family members' quotes or collective family statements for an execution occurring in Texas may have appeared in both Dallas and Houston newspapers. This provides strength to the findings of the current analysis given that family members' feelings and attitudes reported by the media reached consumers in multiple media markets. Similar instances of newspapers from different parts of an individual state reporting family member feelings and attitudes can be seen in other states as well.

### Summary

After the researcher collected all data according to the procedures outlined in the previous chapter and determined which family statements were appropriate for analysis, the next step was to conduct the processes of open and axial coding (Berg, 2009). Open coding involves examining the data for all potential themes while axial coding is a process which aggregates the smaller themes into broader ones. The researcher identified seven broad themes or variables using axial coding (Execution Represents Closure, Healing or Step Towards Either; Execution Does not Represent Closure, Justice or Positive Feelings; The Execution Represents Justice; The Punishment was too Easy; Family Expressed Well Wishes, Condolences and Forgiveness; Family Expressed Negativity About the Executed Person's Demeanor; Family Expressed Positivity About the Executed Person's Demeanor). Once the broader themes were established, the researcher analyzed the data in two ways. In the first analysis, the researcher (using the family or collective statements as the unit of analysis) calculated a percentage value for each of the seven variables. The researcher then conducted a sub-analysis which took into account how many family members mentioned the length of time between commission of

the crime and execution. For all statements in which family members mentioned length of time, the researcher calculated percentage values for each of the seven variables. Finally, for the second analysis, the researcher shifted the unit of analysis from the individual or collective family statements to the news articles. The researcher calculated percentage values for the number of news articles which expressed each of the seven variables.

## CHAPTER V

### RESULTS

#### Results of Analysis One

In the first analysis, the researcher addressed the following research question: “According to newspaper reports following executions, what are the feelings and attitudes most prominently expressed by family members of murder victims whose loved one’s killer is subsequently executed?” Addressing the first question involved examining the number of individual family members or collective family statements given to and reported by the media within three days following the execution of their loved one’s killer. Based on content analysis and two separate processes of open and axial coding (Berg, 2009), statements were divided into seven conceptual variables or categories (see Table 1) and compared to the total number of family member statements or collective family statements in order to ascertain which types of statements are most commonly expressed by family members in news articles.

After the researcher completed the open and axial coding processes, the seven variables under examination were determined to be “Execution Represents Closure, Healing or Step Towards Either,” “Execution Does not Represent Closure, Justice or Positive Feelings,” “The Execution Represents Justice,” “The Punishment was too Easy,” “Family Expressed Well Wishes, Condolences and Forgiveness,” “Family Expressed

Negativity About the Executed Person’s Demeanor” and “Family Expressed Positivity About the Executed Person’s Demeanor.”

Table 3 displays the frequency of each of the seven variables of individual family statements or collective family member statements under analysis appearing in newspaper articles.

**Table 3**

Percentage Breakdown of the Seven Variables versus Total Family Members

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Percent</b>
The Execution Represents Justice	35%
<b>Execution Represents Closure, Healing or Step Towards Either</b>	<b>31%</b>
Execution Does not Represent Closure, Justice or Positive Feelings	19%
<b>The Punishment was too Easy</b>	<b>13%</b>
Family Expressed Well Wishes, Condolences and Forgiveness	11%
<b>Family Expressed Negativity About the Executed Person’s Demeanor</b>	<b>9%</b>
Family Expressed Positivity About the Executed Person’s Demeanor	4%

Table 3 shows that the highest percentages of family member feelings and attitudes reported by the media fall into variables that generally represent positive feelings (35% for “The Execution Represent Justice” and 31% for “Execution Represents Closure, Healing or Step Towards Either”). Other family member statements (as reported by the media) represent negative feelings: 19% state the execution does not represent closure, justice or positive feelings, 13% state that the punishment was too easy and 9% express negativity about the executed person’s demeanor before the execution. Others speak positively about the executed person’s demeanor (4%) or express well wishes, condolences or forgiveness (11%).

Overall, Table 3 shows that the media more readily reports executions as being positive for the family members of murder victims as opposed to negative. Nearly one-third (31%) of the family members quoted in stories about the execution expressed feelings of closure or healing to the media compared to only 19% of the family members who expressed that the execution did not represent a step towards closure or justice. In examining these two variables, it is important to draw distinctions between closure and healing as well as closure and justice. Closure is typically expressed as a feeling in which the family member will no longer have to deal with the emotional pain or be constantly reminded of the murder and the events leading up to and including the execution. This feeling is typically expressed in terms of finality as opposed to healing which is a process towards complete closure. These two feelings are appropriately categorized into one larger variable because in spite of one being more final than the other, the two feelings represent positive emotional responses. When family members state feelings of non-closure or non-justice, it is also important to make distinctions between these individual feelings. Non-closure is essentially the opposite of the feeling of closure, as defined above. The execution does not bring final closure nor does it represent the beginning of a process of healing. A feeling of non-justice refers to any feeling that reflects the idea that the execution can neither induce a positive response regarding the justice system or its actors nor can the family member philosophically believe that the execution was a fair punishment, even for murder. These two feelings are appropriately categorized into one larger variable because they both represent negative responses about the execution itself.

Within the data, these sentiments were expressed in a number of ways. Family members who stated that the execution represented closure or healing often viewed the

execution as the final chapter in a long process of appeals, stays of execution or media accounts of the murder. In addition, these family members expressed a more spiritual belief that their loved one could now rest in peace as the final step in the process towards justice was now complete. As an example, one victim's son in a 2011 quote stated, "It means finally, my dad's soul is put to rest after 33 years." Individuals expressing the belief that the execution did not bring about closure or justice commonly expressed the fact that the execution does not bring their loved one back, does not change the crime that transpired or the more extreme view that nothing will ever bring about full emotional closure. This sentiment is clearly expressed in the 2011 quote of one victim's wife who stated, "...Understanding, this execution will not bring Richard back nor will it give me the closure I am looking for..." In addition, some family members were left with a sense of emptiness in that many expressed their unfulfilled desire to speak with the condemned person prior to the execution. Others simply stated that the execution (whether they viewed the execution or not) did not bring them pleasure. In a 2010 quote, one victim's father stated, "...I didn't expect pleasure, and I didn't receive it." Another victim's daughter was quoted in 2009 as saying, "This is a difficult day and there are no winners on either side..."

Providing further support to the notion that the media more readily reports executions as being positive for the family members of murder victims is that 35% of the family members stated that the execution was just. In expressing this view, family members very commonly stated that "justice has been served," voiced their appreciation to the actors in the justice system or stated that the condemned person deserved the punishment he had received. Several examples of this sentiment can be found throughout

the data. In a 2010 quote, one victim's stepmother stated, "Speaking for my husband and I, we are glad justice has finally been done, and we can close this chapter." Another quote given in 2009 as part of a collective family statement reads, "...What a great state to live in to know justice was served." Also in 2009, one victim's father stated, "I'm not a person that likes harm done to anybody, but I believe in justice being done." What these statements collectively show is that an execution can represent a necessary step in the completion of justice, a step which people expect the state to take even if that means killing another human being.

Perhaps providing additional support to the idea that the media reports executions as being positive for the family members is that only 13% of the family members quoted in the news articles felt as if the punishment was too lenient. This view was expressed in a couple different ways. Family members stated that they would have chosen to inflict more severe punishment upon the condemned or that the punishment was too easy compared to what their loved one suffered during the murder. A 2008 quote which clearly expresses this idea was given by one victim's mother who stated, "It was too easy. It's as much justice as we're going to get, as much closure as we'll get, but it was just too easy." Another victim's sister in 2009 stated, "I myself think it went too smooth. I think he should have gone through some pain for what he did."

Perhaps not surprisingly, only 11% of family members were reported by the media as expressing well-wishes, condolences or forgiveness. A 2011 family statement released by one victim's brother said, "We have no anger towards Mr. Bradford and forgive him." In 2010, one victim's mother simply stated, "I forgive him."

Finally, a much smaller percentage of family members are reported as commenting negatively (9%) or positively (4%) about the executed person's demeanor prior to the execution. In terms of negativity, one victim's sister in 2011 stated, "It was fake, he wasn't sincere." This statement was referring to the condemned individual's apology prior to being executed. Also in 2011, another victim's sister stated, "My understanding is he had no remorse, he was unrepentant." Other family members expressed more positive feelings. In 2009, one victim's sister stated, "I really do think he was sincere..."

An additional sentiment a number of family members expressed in their post-execution interviews with the news media was that the length of time between the commission of the crime and the executions was too long or simply mentioned the fact that the process from crime to execution was lengthy without expressing any further opinion about it. One such quote in which it is difficult to assess the family's feelings comes from a collective family statement given in 2009 that reads, "... We have waited nearly 14 years for this day." Another quote given by a victim's mother in 2009 reads, "I miss my son dearly and have waited for this day to finally get here." But did this individual express anxiety for the arrival of the execution because she felt as though it would bring her closure or that justice would be served? From this quote alone, it is difficult to say. Because this sentiment was commonly expressed and because merely expressing this feeling does not always give a direct indication of whether the family member feels better, worse or the same following the execution, the researcher wanted to examine additional feelings that were expressed alongside this sentiment. Thus if a family member mentioned the length of time between the commission of the crime and

the execution in any capacity, the researcher wanted to address the question “What other feelings and attitudes does this particular family member express in their post-execution dialogue with the media?” Table 4 shows the frequencies of the family members who expressed this sentiment while also expressing each of the seven variables under examination.

**Table 4**

Percentage Breakdown of Seven Variables versus Family Members Addressing Length of Time between Crime and Execution

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Percent</b>
The Execution Represents Justice	42%
<b>Execution Represents Closure, Healing or Step Towards Either</b>	<b>27%</b>
Execution Does not Represent Closure, Justice or Positive Feelings	12%
<b>The Punishment was too Easy</b>	<b>9%</b>
Family Expressed Well Wishes, Condolences and Forgiveness	6%
<b>Family Expressed Negativity About the Executed Person’s Demeanor</b>	<b>6%</b>
Family Expressed Positivity About the Executed Person’s Demeanor	0%

Overall, Table 4 shows that even when family members mention in some capacity the length of time between commission of the crime and the execution, the feelings associated with this sentiment still tend to be more positive than negative (42% of the family members still believed that justice had been served while compared to 12% of the family members whose comments reflect the category “Execution does not Represent Closure, Justice or Positive Feelings,” 27% of the family members expressing this sentiment believed that the execution represented closure, healing or a step towards either). Table 4 also shows decreasing percentages in the remaining variables when

comparing those who mention length of time between the crime and execution with the overall values listed in Table 3. Overall, 13% of the family members were quoted as stating that they felt the punishment was too easy but when the additional variable of time is considered, this number falls to 9%. Similar decreases are shown in the variables “Family Expressed Well Wishes, Condolences and Forgiveness” (a decrease from 11% to 6%), “Family Expressed Negativity About Executed Person’s Demeanor” (a decrease from 9% to 6%) and “Family Expressed Positivity About the Executed Person’s Demeanor” (a decrease from 4% to 0%).

Table 4 shows that the media may present the image of a family member that acknowledges the length of time between the commission of the crime and the execution yet does not have that recognition affect their perception of justice in a significant way. Forty-two percent of those family members who mentioned the lengthy process also stated to the media that the execution was just according to the articles. An example of a 2011 quote illustrates this point. In this particular quote a victim’s mother stated, “...Twenty-three years is a long time and this needed to happen. Justice is served today.” Another victim’s mother expressed this sentiment in two separate quotes given in 2008 stating, “Seventeen years is way too long to wait for justice. And without justice there is no closure.” In a subsequent quote from the same news story this individual stated, “The universe has brought about balance, justice and the law of consequence...”

Additionally, Table 4 shows that even when family members mention the length of time between the crime and execution, the media is more likely to report that family members realize a positive emotional benefit instead of negative feelings. Twenty-seven percent of the family members who mentioned the length of time between the crime and

the execution still felt as though the execution represented closure or healing. One victim's mother in 2009 stated, "It's been a long time coming, after tonight it will be relief." In 2006, another victim's brother stated that the execution was "long overdue" and subsequently stated, "We're all relieved that it's all over with." In comparison, only 12% of those family members who mentioned the length of time between the crime and execution associated feelings of non-closure or justice along with this sentiment. In 2010, one victim's father stated, "...Seventeen years is a long time to have something eating on you like that. We think about those girls every day." This same individual subsequently stated, "We can say it's the end, but it's never going to be closure...The execution doesn't really make me feel any better..."

Not surprisingly, some family members (9%) were reported as mentioning the length of time between the crime and execution and a corresponding belief that the punishment was too easy. One victim's mother in 2008 expressed this sentiment by stating in one quote, "Seventeen years is way too long to wait for justice..." while in another quote in the same article stating, "That was the most peaceful passing I've ever been to, and I wish I could know that my son passed as peacefully."

### Results of Analysis Two

In the second analysis, the researcher addressed the research question of "Are some feelings and attitudes more widely reported by newspapers than others?" Drawing on the same data used in the first analysis, the researcher addressed this question by shifting the unit of analysis from the individual family member statements to the news articles from which the quotes were drawn. The researcher wanted to ascertain what percentage of the news articles reported family members expressing feelings and attitudes

falling into one of the seven main conceptual variables. The purpose of conducting the analysis was to get a better understanding of how widely disseminated various family member feelings and attitudes are across multiple media markets.

Table 5 shows the percentage that each of the seven variables represents among the victims' family member quotes presented in newspaper articles about executions.

**Table 5**

Percentage Breakdown of Seven Variables versus Total News Articles

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Percent</b>
The Execution Represents Justice	37%
<b>Execution Represents Closure, Healing or Step Towards Either</b>	<b>34%</b>
Execution Does not Represent Closure, Justice or Positive Feelings	26%
<b>The Punishment was too Easy</b>	<b>15%</b>
Family Expressed Well Wishes, Condolences and Forgiveness	13%
<b>Family Expressed Negativity About the Executed Person's Demeanor</b>	<b>7%</b>
Family Expressed Positivity About the Executed Person's Demeanor	5%

Overall, Table 5 shows that the messages being disseminated most widely throughout the articles are those of closure or healing (34%) and justice (37%). Interestingly, a larger percentage of articles (26%) convey messages of non-closure or no justice than the percentage of individual family member or collective family statements (19%-See Table 3). The number of articles conveying the message that the punishment was too easy (15%) and that the family members expressed well-wishes, condolences and forgiveness (13%) are also slightly higher than the percentages of such types of statements among those expressed by victims' family members, as reported above in Table 3. Finally, the percentage of articles that describe family members expressing

negativity about the condemned person (7%) and describing family members who express positivity about the condemned person (5%) remain comparable to the figures shown in Table 3.

Table 5 illustrates that across all news articles, the most widely disseminated feelings and attitudes about executions are that they tend to be more positive than negative for the family members of murder victims. In 37% of the news articles, the media reported that at least one family member expressed their belief that the execution was just. Again, feelings of justice were expressed through the family member's belief that the condemned person deserved the punishment he had received or by simply stating that the execution represented justice. One victim's mother in 2011 simply stated, "I can finally say justice has been served..." Another victim's brother quoted in 2009 stated, "I think it was justice" referring to the execution. After describing one executed person as "...being spiteful to the very end" one victim's father in 2008 stated, "It just shows how much this was warranted and justified."

Adding additional support to the idea that positivity is commonly expressed in news articles covering executions was that just over one-third (34%) of the articles quoted family members who expressed feelings of emotional closure or relief following the execution. Again, these feelings were expressed by family members who believed that the execution represented the final chapter of a long process between commission of the crime and the execution, voiced their sense of relief in not having to (continue to) relive the murder during the process of appeals and stays of execution or stating a more spiritual belief that their family member could now rest in peace. In a 2010 quote, one victim's father stated, "It was something that had to be done" and as a result felt

“relieved.” Another victim’s son stated in 2007, “I have closure. I can finally get on with my life, raise my kids, run my business and love my family.” This is compared to only 26% of the articles in which family members’ feelings of non-closure or justice were reported. Again, these feelings were expressed in a number of ways including the idea that complete emotional closure is impossible, the execution does not bring the person’s loved one back, the execution does not change the crime that was committed or that justice could never be served. Part of one collective family statement in 2011 reads, “Unfortunately, we will have to continue to live with the scars of this cruel and senseless attack.” Another, perhaps more telling quote given in 2008 by one victim’s father states, “When you lose a family member like we lost, it never escapes your mind. It’s the first thing on your mind in the morning and the last thing on your mind at night.”

#### Summary

Overall, the results of each analysis indicate that the most prominent post-execution sentiments reported by the media when quoting the families of murder victims tend to be more positive than negative. The first analysis shows that closure and justice are the two most salient themes overall and while a separate analysis which considers the time between commission of the crime and execution changes the percentages of each of these concepts being expressed and reported, the issue of time does not seem to affect the final outcome with regards to which themes are most prominent. In either case, the dominant themes of closure and justice are expressed in a number of ways. With regards to closure, family members often stated that they were simply relieved or expressed a spiritual belief that their loved one’s soul could rest in peace. Those expressing feelings of justice simply stated that justice had been served or were thankful that their state

carried out its duty in achieving justice. Other, less salient themes, were also expressed in the data. Family members were reported as feeling a sense of non-closure (expressed by stating that the execution would not bring their loved one back or did not give them pleasure), believing that the punishment was too easy (such as being easier than what the family member was forced to suffer), expressing well-wishes, condolences or forgiveness (often by stating that they had forgiven the condemned person) as well as expressing views about the positivity or negativity of the condemned person's demeanor prior to the execution.

The second analysis shows that overall, the greatest percentage of articles report family members' feelings of closure and justice. While the variable relating to non-closure or lack of positive feelings becomes more prominent in this analysis, closure and justice remain the most dominant themes. Each of the remaining variables (punishment was too easy, family expressing well-wishes, condolences or forgiveness, and expressions of negativity or positivity about the condemned person's demeanor) was less prominent in the second analysis than in the first.

## CHAPTER VI

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

The results of the current study indicate that the most dominant themes in family member feelings and attitudes as reported by the media center on the execution being more of a positive experience than a negative one. The reader, however, should exercise caution in interpreting the results. Although two themes (closure and justice) are the most prominent in both analyses, the results indicate that even the most dominant themes are only possible rather than inevitable given that the percentage values are still less than a majority. The current study is not without limitations, which is to be expected given its exploratory nature. However, the study yields important implications as well as establishes the need for further research on the topic.

#### Comparing the Results of the Current Study with Previous Research

The first analysis of this study examined what percentage of family members reported various feelings and attitudes to the media within three days following the execution of their loved one's murderer. Again, the results of this analysis reveal that the media reports family member feelings and attitudes following the execution to be more positive and just than not. Nearly one-third (31%) of family members were reported as feeling a sense of closure, healing or a step towards either while another 35% of the

family members were reported as expressing a belief that the execution was just. This is compared to only 19% of the family members being reported by the media as feeling that the execution did not bring closure, was not just or was not associated with positive feelings. Other results from the first analysis include the media reporting the families' feelings that the punishment was too easy (13%), expressions of forgiveness, well-wishes or condolences (11%), the families' expressions of negativity about the condemned person's demeanor prior to the execution (9%) and the families' expressions of positivity about the condemned person's demeanor prior to the execution (4%).

The preceding results are not entirely dissimilar to previous studies employing similar methodologies as the current study. Although previous researchers utilized a different unit of analysis (the number of executions or cases) which the current study does not examine, some important comparisons can be made. Vollum and Longmire (2007) found that in 40.9% of their cases under examination, family members were reported as feeling closure while in a smaller percentage of cases (28.9%) family members were reported as feeling non-closure. In addition, Vollum and Longmire (2007) found that in 11.9% of their cases, family members were reported as expressing feelings of forgiveness. This result is nearly identical to the finding in the current study in which individual family members or collective family statements expressed feelings of forgiveness, well-wishes or condolences (11%). Similarly, Gross and Matheson (2003) found in their study that in slightly over one-third of their cases, family members were reported as mentioning closure or the hope that they would achieve it. This is nearly identical to the 31% of the family members in the current study that were reported by the media as feeling closure, healing or a step towards either. In addition, 16% of the cases in

Gross and Matheson (2003) reported family members having asked for clemency, implying that they had forgiven the condemned. This is most similar to the result of the current study in which 11% of the family members were reported as expressing forgiveness, well-wishes or condolences although the issue of clemency was not examined in the current study. In sum, several themes in the previous research on the topic (Vollum & Longmire, 2007; Gross & Matheson, 2003) emerge to about the same degree as in the current study. The difference in the numbers and the degrees of the themes' presence in the articles could be explained by a number of factors including differences in the units of analysis, differences in how the researchers coded their data as well as which family members were included in the analyses.

In conducting the first analysis, the researcher noted that the media reported many family members as mentioning that the length of time between commission of the crime and the execution was either long or unnecessary. The researcher wanted to examine these family members to ascertain whether the above reported feelings were affected in any significant way by the mentioning of length of time between crime and execution. Although the numbers change slightly, the two most dominant themes remain closure and justice. Of the family members who are reported by the media as mentioning length of time, 27% reported that the execution represented a feeling of closure, healing or a step towards either compared to 12% of these family members who were reported as stating that the execution did not represent closure or positive feelings. With regards to justice, 42% of these family members were reported as stating that the execution was just. Other results of this analysis include family members feeling that the punishment was too easy (9%), expressing well-wishes and condolences to the condemned person or their family

(6%) and speaking negatively of the condemned person's demeanor prior to the execution (6%). No family members falling into this category were reported as expressing positivity about the condemned person's demeanor prior to the execution. In previous studies examining media reporting of family member feelings and attitudes following the execution of the families' loved one's murderer (Vollum & Longmire, 2007; Gross & Matheson, 2003), the researchers did not examine feelings and attitudes of those family members mentioning the length of time between crime and execution, ostensibly making the current study the first to do so.

The second analysis involved shifting the unit of analysis away from individual family members and collective family member statements to examine the news articles themselves, regardless of which family members were expressing particular feelings. The purpose of the second analysis was to try to establish which feelings and attitudes were being disseminated in newspapers over a wider geographic area. If looking at only family member and collective family statements as the unit of analysis, it is possible to know which themes are most prominently reported but it is possible that various feelings and attitudes are endemic to one geographic area. Examining the articles (which were gathered from newspapers covering executions throughout the United States) provides a better basis for establishing that the results truly indicate which family member feelings and attitudes are being disseminated across multiple media markets. The results of the analysis indicate that although the figures change slightly from the first analysis, the two most dominant themes remain closure and justice. Although the theme of no closure, no justice or positive feelings is slightly more prominent when looking at the articles than in the first analysis (26%), the feeling of closure, justice or a step towards either remains

more dominant with 34% of the articles reporting these feelings. In addition, 37% of the articles reported family member feelings of justice. Other results from the second analysis reveal articles that report family members feeling that the punishment was too easy (15%), expressing well-wishes and condolences to the condemned person's family (13%), stating something negative about the condemned person's demeanor prior to the execution (7%) and expressing positivity about the condemned person's demeanor prior to the execution (5%). Previous research examining media reporting of family member post-execution feelings and attitudes (Vollum & Longmire, 2007; Gross & Matheson, 2003) has only examined the number of executions or cases as the unit of analysis. The current study appears to be the first on the topic of family member feelings and attitudes in criminal justice to examine news articles as the unit of analysis and to identify which messages are being most widely disseminated across multiple media markets.

#### The Results of the Current Study and the Death Penalty Process

Umbreit and Vos (2000) found that family members of murder victims tend to feel positive after having the opportunity to meet with their loved one's murderer between the time of conviction and execution. Although their study is very limited (only examining 2 death row inmates and 3 homicide survivors) and would need to be supported with further research employing more participants, it does raise interesting questions. For instance, what portion of the 31% of family members reported by the media to have expressed closure or a step towards healing in the current study had the opportunity to meet with the condemned prior to execution? Of equal importance, what portion of the 19% of those reported by the media to have expressed non-closure in the current study had the opportunity to meet with the condemned prior to the execution?

What about the 11% of the family members reported by the media to have expressed forgiveness or condolences and well-wishes? Additional research which expands on the methods employed by Umbreit and Vos (2000) as well as a post-execution examination of family members who met with the condemned prior to execution would be beneficial. From the current data, it is difficult to ascertain which family members met with the condemned prior to execution and if so, the degree and outcome of such a meeting. If data about post-execution feelings and attitudes were available from family members who were known to have visited with the condemned, it may provide support to Umbreit and Vos (2000) and could serve as the basis for policy which encourages family members to meet with their loved one's murderer for the potential cathartic effect. However, encouraging family members to meet with the condemned may be difficult. According to recent interview data from Burns (2006), most family members have little to no desire to meet with the condemned person prior to the execution.

Armour (2002) and Redmond (1989) find that a common complaint by the families of murder victims is that they are mistreated by the criminal justice system throughout the process. It may be beneficial to examine whether negative feelings associated with perceived exclusion by actors in the criminal justice system affect post-execution feelings and attitudes. Is it possible that those who feel negatively following the execution were those who perceived maltreatment by the criminal justice system or that those who feel positively following the execution were treated better? This line of inquiry would be worth examining in future research as a policy matter which aims to make actors in the criminal justice system more responsive to the needs of the families.

Finally, King (2006) argues that the death penalty may cause dissension within victims' families if some family members favor the death penalty and others do not. Another interesting line of inquiry would be to examine those family members who were reported by the media as stating that the execution represented justice (35% in the current study), represented closure (31%) or did not represent closure or justice (19%) to ascertain if other family members hold opposite views. If so, what are the effects on the relationships between family members?

#### The Results of the Current Study and Public Perception and Opinion

An examination of the relationship between the current study's results and what they mean with regards to public opinion and perception of the death penalty lends itself to an examination of the feelings and attitudes expressed in the greatest percentage of the news articles (Table 5). The results of the second analysis reveal that the two most predominant themes are closure (34%) and justice (37%). Although neither of these themes is presented in a majority of the articles, the fact that they are the two themes most likely to be presented compared to the other variable is important.

Drawing on findings from other researchers that the media can influence people to favor harsher, less rehabilitative sanctions (Rosenberger & Callanan, 2011), that the content of media reporting can affect peoples' views and opinions of the death penalty (Haney & Greene, 2004; Fan et al., 2002) and that people tend to base their opinions of the death penalty on emotion rather than facts (Ellsworth & Gross, 1994), the feelings and attitudes most widely reported by the families of murder victims in newspaper articles almost certainly exert influence over the public's perception of the death penalty. Bohm (2003) argues that the continued use of the death penalty is related to wide public

support for the practice, support that could play a role in influencing legislators to draft laws which continue the use of the death penalty. This continued support for the death penalty could come from a number of sources. One of these sources, according to the results of the current study and prior research, is almost certainly print media. Given that articles are more likely to report family members of murder victims who feel closure, relief or a sense of justice following the execution of their loved one's murderer, it is not surprising that a public which has been shown to base their opinions of the death penalty on emotional appeals and the content of media reporting would draw upon print media as a source of support for capital punishment.

#### Limitations

Although the current study can provide a wider empirical basis for our understanding of victims' family members' post-execution feelings and attitudes, the current study is not without limitations. The limitations of the current study are centered on the media microscope under which family member feelings and attitudes are reported, the close proximity with regards to time following the execution in which the data were gathered, the limited nature of the quotes with regards to quote length, analytic limitations and representativeness.

The findings of the current study are based solely on what is reported in the news stories. It is possible that there are additional feelings and attitudes, perhaps divergent feelings and attitudes that for one reason or another are not being reported. Unfortunately, agenda setting, presentation of information and the fact that articles are limited in the amount of space in which they can cover issues will continue to limit any future studies employing similar methodologies.

Family member feelings and attitudes are only those reported in news articles published within three days following the execution. The current study does not address how family members feel several months or years following the execution. Given that family members are often at an emotional peak or trough at the time of execution, it is possible that as their emotions either subside or exacerbate with the passage of time, their feelings and attitudes could reflect these changes. This is an area where future qualitative research employing one on one interviews or focus groups conducted several months or years following the execution may very well capture these changes in feelings and attitudes. In other words, qualitative research which expands on the work of Burns (2006) would be beneficial.

The family member feelings and attitudes expressed in the media are limited to short quotations. The methods employed in the current study do not provide the researcher the opportunity to acquire a deeper understanding of the feelings and attitudes that could be obtained using follow up questions in a one on one interview or focus group setting. Again, future qualitative research (expanding on the work of Burns, 2006) utilizing these methods at any time following the execution would certainly enhance our understanding of family member post-execution feelings and attitudes.

Additionally, the data in the current study were not subjected to review by an independent coder. Thus there could be some questions with regards to researcher bias or error in calculating the results. However, a large percentage of the quotes collected for analysis were not ambiguous in meaning and thus very easy to interpret.

Finally, this study is limited as a matter of representativeness. Information cannot be gleaned from this study regarding the views of murder victims' family members who

either do not attend the execution of their loved one's murderer or choose not to give statements to the media in the days following the execution.

### Implications

In spite of the limitations of the current study, the study does yield important societal and policy implications. The implications of this study are centered on our perceptions of family member post-execution closure, the potential lack of benefits for family members who view executions and the arguments that prosecutors make in their closing arguments during capital trials as well as family member involvement in the decision to seek the death penalty.

Often, it is assumed that family members of murder victims will find emotional closure or perceive a sense of justice once their loved one's murderer is executed by the state. The results of the current study would lend support to the possibility that family member perceptions of closure and justice (although the most prominently expressed feelings and attitudes to the media following the execution) are not absolute. These findings are supported by those of Burns (2006). Future qualitative research (one on one interviews and focus groups) should expand on the work of Burns (2006) and examine the intensity of these feelings and attitudes as well as how they change over time. If in the future, research shows closure and justice discourse to be more of a myth than reality over periods of time that span well beyond the time of the execution, then policies and practices that are driven by this assumption may need to be reexamined.

One such area is that of policies which allow immediate family members of murder victims to view the execution of their loved one's murderer. If future research, employing less limited methodologies supports the current research or expands on the

idea of a closure or justice myth, it is possible that policies which allow family members to view executions may need to restrict or completely eliminate such viewings.

Additionally, prosecutors may need to be restricted in the arguments they make to juries during their closing arguments that are centered on closure discourse. If juries are emotionally swayed by this discourse, then it is possible that they could base their decisions of guilt or innocence at least in part on family member closure, which could undermine due process for the defendant. In addition, if judges are emotionally swayed in the same ways as juries, it may difficult for them to make impartial decisions during the sentencing phase of a capital trial.

Prosecutors may also (as a general rule) need to be more responsive to the needs of the families. An area which is grossly under researched deals with the role the families of murder victims play in the prosecutor's decision to seek the death penalty. It may be useful to examine whether and to what extent prosecutors confer with family members in making the decision to seek the death penalty and also to what degree perceived family member closure and justice play a role in these decisions. Justice in capital cases involves actors in the justice system using available knowledge and resources in the most efficient manner possible to restore harmony to the victims (primary and secondary) as well apply the proper sanctions against the offender. If the family members of a murder victim vehemently oppose the death penalty or do not believe it would bring them the desired end of closure or perceived justice, then perhaps prosecuting attorneys should take this into consideration even if their subjective belief is that offender committed a crime or crimes so heinous that the offender should be made an example of to society. It may be that prosecutors do in fact consider family member feelings about the death penalty in

these decisions but again, this area is under researched. If prosecutors are seeking the death penalty for strictly personal or political reasons, it may be that justice is compromised because the secondary victims of homicide (the family members) are having their wishes ignored.

### Summary

The current study employed the use of content analysis to examine media reporting of post-execution feelings and attitudes of the family members of murder victims. This methodology is not dissimilar from previous methodologies employed by Vollum and Longmire (2007) and Gross and Matheson (2003). Although the units of analysis utilized by Vollum and Longmire (2007) and Gross and Matheson (2003) are different than those used in the current study, there are interesting comparisons that can be made between the results of those studies with the results of the current study (especially with regards to the first analysis of the current study). When looking at the sub-analysis of analysis one and the second analysis, it is impossible to make comparisons between the results of the two previous studies and the results of the current study given that this study appears to be the first to analyze the data in a way that considers the length of time between commission of the crime and execution and the news articles themselves.

Other researchers have asserted that family members may benefit from meeting with the offender prior to the execution (Umbreit & Vos, 2000), family members may feel mistreated by the criminal justice system (Armour, 2002; Redmond, 1989) and that families may experience dissension when some family members favor the death penalty

and others do not (King, 2006). Each of these assertions raises interesting questions which could guide future research.

Drawing on previous research which establishes a potential link between media reporting (especially with regards to content) and the public's opinion and perception of the death penalty may lend support to the idea that feelings and attitudes most commonly expressed by family members as reported by the media could be one of many factors that help shape death penalty opinion. It is possible that continued support for the practice is at least in part fueled by the wide reporting of the two most predominant themes in this study: closure and justice.

Finally, even with the limitations of the current study in terms of the media microscope under which family member feelings and attitudes are reported, the close proximity with regards to time following the execution to which the data refer, the limited nature of the quotes with regards to quote length, analytic limitations and representativeness, the study yields important societal and policy implications. These implications center on our perceptions of family member post-execution closure, the potential lack of benefits for family members who view executions, the arguments that prosecutors make in their closing arguments during capital trials and the potential need for prosecutors to consider family member needs in their decision to seek the death penalty.

## CHAPTER VII

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the current study was to expand on previous research that attempts to broaden our understanding of what family members of murder victims feel following the execution of their loved one's murderer. Data for the current study (direct quotes from individual family members or collective family member statements) were drawn from local news stories covering 138 executions from 2006-2011. Using content analysis, the current study finds that the most dominant themes reported by the media are family member feelings of closure and justice while the less prominent themes centered on non-closure, leniency of punishment, forgiveness and negative as well as positive views of the condemned person's demeanor prior to the execution. This is true when examining the individual family member or collective family statements as the unit of analysis and after shifting the unit of analysis to the individual news articles.

The results of the current study were discussed within the context of previous media studies of family members' feelings and attitudes, the death penalty process and the relationship between media reporting and its influence on public opinion and perception of the death penalty.

Overall, the results of the current study do share some similarities to the results of previous studies by Vollum and Longmire (2007) as well as Gross and Matheson (2003). Differences between the results of each of these studies are likely due to factors such as

coding, which units of analysis were used as well as which family members were included for examination in each study.

With regards to the death penalty process, previous research on the effects of the death penalty process between the commission of the crime and execution is extremely limited in both quantity and applicability. However, previous research shows that family members may benefit from pre-execution dialogue with the offender, family members may feel as though the criminal justice system mistreats them and there may also be dissension within families in which some family members favor the death penalty while others oppose it. Although the current study does not directly address any of these issues, the results of the current study may open lines of inquiry for future research in which family members who express various feelings and attitudes are asked about their experiences with the offender, criminal justice system and other family members.

Public opinion and attitudes have been shown in previous research to be affected by peoples' emotions as well as the content of media reports. The content of media reports may contribute to increased public support for the death penalty if the content is centered on elements of the crime or decreased public support for the death penalty if the content is centered on mitigating circumstances surrounding the offender. The results of the current study suggest that print media is most likely to report family feelings of closure and justice with other feelings such as non-closure, ease of punishment, forgiveness and negative or positive attitudes about the offender's demeanor prior to the execution being less prominent in such reports. It is likely then, that at least part of the public's continued support for the death penalty is due to media reporting of the most dominant feelings and attitudes.

In spite of the study's limitations which are centered on the media microscope under which family member feelings and attitudes are reported, the close proximity with regards to time following the execution in which the data were gathered, the limited nature of the quotes with regards to quote length, analytic shortcomings and representativeness, the study yields important societal and policy implications. Family member closure following the execution of their loved one's murderer may not be absolute which could affect policies which allow family members to view executions and perhaps should limit what prosecutors in capital cases are allowed to tell juries about closure. The last point is especially important if it negatively affects the jury's ability to make an objective determination of guilt and sentencing recommendations.

Overall, this study addresses lines of inquiry which are not well understood because prior research on the topic (the plight of family members of homicide victims following the executions of their loved one's murderer) is extremely limited. Although future research employing varying methodologies would need to be undertaken in order to corroborate the findings, the current study addresses important implications and opens several possibilities for future research.

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