

A Life of Grief: an Exploration of Disenfranchised Grief in Sex Offender Significant Others

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Abstract In criminal justice, researchers have identified disenfranchised grief, or the denial of empathy and social support during the grieving process, in family members who have lost relatives through imprisonment and execution. Although both of these situations involve the physical removal of the offender from the family members' lives, non-physical losses may also prompt the grieving process. One of these non-physical losses is a psychosocial loss, in which the person the family members knew is now gone. Given the public stigma of the label "sex offender" and the collateral consequences that occur as a result of that label, it is possible that sex offender significant others experience a psychosocial loss. The current research is an exploratory study that used qualitative interviews with 29 spouses and significant others of convicted sex offenders to explore if and how disenfranchised grief impacts sex offender partners. Findings support both the existence of and the detrimental impact of disenfranchised grief on sex offender partners.

Keywords Sex offenders · Collateral consequences · Disenfranchised grief · Criminal justice policy

Introduction

Society plays a large role in the grieving process. As mourners attempt to process the changes in their lives, and come to an acceptance of their new situation, individuals seek social support from people in the community (Attig, 1991; Doka, 1989; Silver, Wortman, & Crofton, 1990). Not all losses are considered socially acceptable, however. In these cases, social support is withheld during the mourners' grieving period as a result of the disapproval towards the type of loss being grieved, the person being grieved, or the griever themselves (Doka, 1989). This is called disenfranchised grief. Mourners are

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disenfranchised during their grieving process by the active rejection or discouragement of grieving expressions from the griever (Attig, 1996; Doka, 1989; Lenhardt, 1997), including statements such as “You’re better off without them,” or advising them to “get over it.” Described as “empathic failure” (Neimeyer & Jordan, 2002), disenfranchised grief can occur as the result of both physical deaths and non-physical losses. Individuals suffering from disenfranchised grief typically experience amplified and extended grieving periods as a result of their inability to resolve emotions. Mourners may also pull away from others, socially isolating themselves and further decreasing their own social support opportunities (Attig, 1996; Kauffman, 1989).

Given the social stigma directed toward crime and criminal offenders, it is not surprising that family members of convicted offenders suffer from disenfranchised grief in some circumstances; this includes incarcerated family members and death row inmates (Arditti, 2005; Jones & Beck, 2006; Travis & Waul, 2003; Turanovic, Rodriguez, & Pratt, 2012). In both situations, a convicted offender is physically removed from the home, but the stigma of the offense prompts a community reaction that emphasizes how the loss is better for the family rather than a socially supportive, empathetic reaction. Clear, Rose, and Ryder (2001) found that the disenfranchisement continued for family members of incarcerated offenders even after the offender’s sentence ended and they were returned to the community.

Although previous research of disenfranchised grief within criminal offender populations has focused on physical losses, it is also possible that conviction itself creates a loss for the family through the application of the label “offender” onto a loved one. This may be particularly true for family members of convicted sex offenders because legislatively, sex offenders are treated as one of the most dangerous types of offenders and are severely restricted by state legislation. Understood to be criminals who only rape and murder young children (Sample & Kadleck, 2008), these individuals are believed to have high recidivism rates. Due to this misconception, sex offenders are subject to a variety of post-conviction restrictions that are not required of non-sex offenders, including public registration and notification, lifetime supervision, GPS monitoring, and residency restrictions (Terry & Ackerman, 2009). Scholars have noted that these enhanced restrictions have resulted in sex offenders experiencing collateral consequences such as social isolation, harassment, shame, employment difficulties, and housing instability (Ackerman & Furman, 2012; Lasher & McGrath, 2012; Levenson, D’Amora, & Hern, 2007; Robbers, 2009; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). Scholars have also noted that these consequences are not limited to the offenders themselves; family members of sex offenders experience many of the same collateral consequences as a result of their association with their sex offender loved one (Farkas & Miller, 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009). What is unknown is whether family members also experience disenfranchised grief while dealing with these consequences. The current study uses qualitative interviews to identify the presence of and consequences that occur as a result of disenfranchised grief for sex offender significant others and spouses.

Background

When people suffer a physical or emotional loss, they go through the active process of grieving, a multi-stage process in which the griever acknowledges the loss, processes

the pain the loss creates, and adapts to the new life circumstances created by the loss (Attig, 1991). When a person is unable to express his or her grief, he or she experiences disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989; Lenhardt, 1997). This active rejection is often displayed through actions that downplay the grief, such as telling the person they are better off now without the lost loved one or advising them to “get over it.” Disenfranchisement is not always initiated by others. Out of shame or fear of people’s reactions, grievers may suppress their own grief, thereby self-disenfranchising their emotions (Doka, 1989; Kauffman, 1989; Silver et al., 1990). This suppression is done based on the griever’s perception of their future social support, so it may occur even in situations where the griever would not face rejection if they solicited support.

The result of disenfranchised grief is an enhancement of the normal emotions involved in the grieving process; anger, guilt, sadness, and loneliness (Doka, 1989; Lenhardt, 1997). Under normal grieving circumstances, social support networks would assist individuals in processing these emotions and relearning how to navigate their world in the face of their loss (Doka, 1989; Silver et al., 1990). However, the reluctance of societal members to recognize the loss represses the expression of these emotions, leading to the intensification of the griever’s emotional responses. Individuals suffering from disenfranchised grief typically experience increased anger and guilt as well as shame and helplessness. The lack of support also prolongs the grieving process and may create situations where the griever becomes socially isolated (Attig, 1996; Kauffman, 1989).

Doka (1989) explained that grief becomes disenfranchised for three reasons: the relationship between mourners and the lost individual is not recognized as legitimate, the loss is not seen as significant, or the mourner is considered unable to grieve. While physical death could be included in any of the three pathways, physical death is not required. Losses that are not seen as significant include two types of non-physical loss. First, social death (Sudnow, 1967) occurs when someone remains alive but is removed from society and treated as dead, such as institutionalized people and comatose patients. Second, psychosocial death occurs when the “deceased” remains physically alive but is physically and/or emotionally altered so the “person they once knew” is lost, such as is the case with dementia or Alzheimer’s patients (Doka, 1989).

Just like physical death, social and psychosocial deaths require family members and friends to reestablish “normality” in the face of the loss. Families experiencing social death must establish routine patterns that do not include the incapacitated individual while families experiencing psychosocial death must reestablish intimacy with the new personality of their former loved one (Doka & Aber, 1989). Because psychosocial deaths do not have the official death and subsequent mourning rituals of physical losses, achieving normality can be a lengthy, difficult process. Boss (1999) uses the term ambiguous loss, describing how mourners are frozen in the grieving process due to the sustained physical presence of the individual and the lack of supportive rituals for saying goodbye. Social and psychosocial losses create their own consequences for the family; family members report experiencing negative feelings towards the “lost” individual (Doka & Aber, 1989), who is ultimately responsible for the changes in their life. This in turn leads to additional feelings of guilt and shame by the family member. Non-physical deaths can also create financial burdens, depending on the severity of the personality change and the impact on the individual’s ability to continue previous employment (Lenhardt, 1997).

Disenfranchised Grief and Offender Populations

In literature relating to criminal offender populations, discussion of disenfranchised grief has been confined to situations where family members physically lose an offender. Jones and Beck (2006) examined disenfranchised grief in family members of death row offenders. They reported that family members of executed inmates suffered social isolation, conflict within the family, feelings of criminalization, and guilt as a result of their association with their loved one. Other scholars have found similar results when examining losses through incarceration (Arditti, 2005; Travis & Waul, 2003; Turanovic et al., 2012). Although the loss of incarcerated offenders is not permanent like the loss of family members by execution, family members of incarcerated offenders report interactions with others that are hostile or strained as a result of association with their incarcerated loved one (Arditti, 2005; Clear et al., 2001). These negative interactions continue even after the offender is released back into the community (Clear et al., 2001).

Although the physical losses sustained by offenders' family members may stimulate a grieving process, the stigma associated with criminal offenders denies family members' the needed social support to process their loss. Oftentimes, the loss is downplayed as being better for the family (Arditti, 2005; Jones & Beck, 2006), so the family becomes unable to voice their expressions of grief, causing disenfranchised grief. Arditti (2005) also reported that in some cases, social support and empathy were not offered to offenders' family members because they were believed to knowingly participate or encourage offenders' illegal activity and therefore were deserving of the consequences they received. Like disenfranchised grief for non-criminal losses, family members may self-disenfranchise themselves out of shame or fear of retribution. Jones and Beck (2006) noted that family members discussed not telling other people about their situation because they were afraid of experiencing the stigma of having a loved one on death row.

Disenfranchised Grief and Sex Offenders

Although the previous literature focuses on physical losses, the unique condition of convicted sex offenders within the criminal justice system may result in disenfranchised grief even without the physical removal from the home that has been studied with other offender populations. Sex offenders are perceived as serious, repeat criminals that require intensive supervision and monitoring in order to control their behavior within the community (Sample & Kadleck, 2008; Terry & Ackerman, 2009). These assumptions have resulted in legislative controls such as intensive community supervision, public notification, civil commitment, residency restrictions, lifetime supervision, registration and notification laws (Braddock & Renzema, 1998; Cain, 2008; Cohen & Jeglic, 2007; Daly, 2008; English, Jones, Pasini-Hill, Patrick, & Cooley-Towell, 2000; Petrunik & Deutschmann, 2008; Pratt, 2000; Terry & Ackerman, 2009; Wright, 2008), all of which place additional controls and sentence enhancements onto the offender beyond what you would find with a non-sex offense. Researchers generally find little to no support for the efficacy of these restrictions (Caldwell & Dickinson, 2009; Huebner & Bynum, 2006; Prescott & Rockoff, 2011; Renzema & Mayo-Wilson, 2005), and several unintended consequences have been identified as a result of these policies. Sex offenders have reported public harassment (Klein, Rukus, & Zambrana, 2012; Levenson

et al., 2007; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006), isolation (Tewksbury, 2005), loss of friends and family (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006), as well as employment and housing difficulties (Ackerman & Furman, 2012; Klein et al., 2012; Lasher & McGrath, 2012; Levenson et al., 2007; Robbers, 2009; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). Additionally, these restrictions treat all sex offenders the same, creating a group identity that homogenizes a wide variety of sex crime types, including sexual assault, child molestation, electronic solicitation, public indecency, and rape (ten Bensele & Sample, 2016). The adoption of this group identity may create a psychosocial death for family members, who lose the person, and the life, that they knew prior to the sex crime conviction.

Like family members of Alzheimer's or dementia patients, sex offender family members must adapt to this "new" life with a labeled sex offender, living with someone who is viewed as a dangerous criminal who deserves to be totally ostracized both socially and physically (Cain, Sample, & Anderson, 2015). Furthermore, the sex offender label restricts major family decisions, including family vacation trips, childcare options, and residence choices. Assuming that society feels a similar lack of empathy for convicted sex offenders within the community as they do for incarcerated offenders, it is likely that family members of convicted sex offenders will experience disenfranchised grief. Additionally, few understand the pathology, motives, or rationalizations for sex offending, so the public is unlikely to legitimize the grief that those who are associated with sex offenders experience, thereby making it difficult for family members to create or maintain social support systems.

In addition to creating the original grief, the legal restrictions imposed on sex offenders may also increase the disenfranchisement that sex offender family members' experience. Jones and Beck (2006) found that the height of disenfranchisement occurred for death row families shortly after the arrest and trial, which proved to be the peak regarding heightened awareness of the offense and the offender among community members. Due to the unique legislation applied to convicted sex offenders, offenders convicted of sexual crimes experience a similar, but sustained, publicity beyond their arrest and trial. The Jacob Wetterling Act and Megan's Law require all states to maintain a publically available database listing identifying information of convicted sex offenders. Although registry content varies by state, registries can include offenders' residential, employment, and school addresses, license plate numbers, and photographs (Terry & Ackerman, 2009). Since registration and notification laws require the continual, public dissemination of sex offender information, sex offender family members may experience a similar heightened awareness persistently, thereby increasing the degree of disenfranchisement.

Current Study

The current study is a qualitative exploration of former and current sex offender significant others to determine if and to what extent disenfranchised grief is present. Although prior research suggests that all family members may be affected by the labeling and stigmatization surrounding sex offenders, this study focuses on spouses and significant others because they are more likely to experience disenfranchised grief than parents, siblings, and children of registrants due to the intimacy and interconnectedness of their romantic relationships with convicted sex offenders. The primary source of data was informal, conversational interviews with sex offender spouses

collected using snowball sampling as part of a larger project involving registered offenders and their family members in Nebraska. Interviews were triangulated with a variety of sources including interviews with sex offender spouses, online blogs, and newspaper comment boards. Data analysis used a hybrid approach to thematic content analysis, which allowed for the identification of both inductively- and deductively-deducted themes.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine if 1) the application of the sex offender label created a psychosocial loss for sex offender spouses and 2) whether or not spouses experienced disenfranchised grief as a result of this loss. Using a pure naturalistic-qualitative strategy (Patton, 2002), interview, observational, and written narrative data was used to examine disenfranchised grief among spouses whose loved ones have been convicted of a sexual offense but currently reside within the community and have not reoffended per official and self-report data. Naturalistic qualitative methodology focuses on the observations of naturally occurring behaviors rather than relying on researcher manipulation, similar to grounded theory, but also allows for the inclusion of deductive reasoning in the analysis process. Qualitative interviews are particularly well-suited for this type of research because they provide opportunities for both verbal and observational data, allow participants the opportunity to expand upon and clarify answers, and have been used previously by other scholars to examine relationships in various populations (Comfort, 2008; Farkas & Miller, 2007; Jones & Beck, 2006; Naser & Visher, 2006; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006; Turanovic et al., 2012).

The interview data was then triangulated with interviews from sex offender spouses, blogs, and public commentary on news articles. The qualitative methods used enrich this study's findings by reinforcing the internal validity of the identified measures, a quality particularly important due to the limited examinations of sex offender social support networks (Farkas & Miller, 2007). While this strategy enhances the internal validity of the concepts under study, it comes at the expense of external validity. The goal of the current examination, however, is not generalization. Rather, informed by the themes identified in this exploratory study, quantitative measures can be developed to further explore the extent of disenfranchised grief in the whole sex offender family member population.

Sample

This project was part of a larger sex offender study ($N = 148$) that involved qualitative data collection from registered sex offenders and their family members. The larger study recruited participants using a two-stage sampling method that used population sampling of the Nebraska State Sex Offender Registry to recruit registered sex offenders and their family members, and then purposive snowball sampling to recruit additional study participants. Although snowball sampling limited the generalizability of the final sample, it was the best sampling method to help overcome the typical low response rates from sex offender-related populations (Burchfield & Mingus, 2008; Mercado, Alvarez, & Levenson, 2008; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006,

2007; Tewksbury & Zgoba, 2010). Additionally, there are no publically available lists of sex offender family members that can be used to randomly sample this population so alternative methods were necessary (Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009). Snowball referrals also worked well with this population because referrals by family members who had already been interviewed helped reassure potential participants of the level of professionalism, neutrality, and confidentiality of the research.

The current study uses 29 sex offender spouses and significant others.¹ A majority of the sample (97%) were white females. Fifty five percent (55%) of the sample began their relationship with their sex offender loved one before the conviction, and 45% of the sample began their relationship after the sex offense conviction. The average participant was 46 years old and had been married or cohabitating with the offender for 12 years. The breakdown of spouse characteristics is provided in Table 1. Total and follow-up contact hours include time spent in formal interviews as well as time spent in email communication, phone calls, and participant observation at advocacy group meetings. On average total contact hours for each participant was 2.0 h. Follow-up interviews lasted an average of 1.9 h.

For purposes of inter- and intra-group comparisons, participants were categorized by relationship type and crime type. Relationship type was divided into two categories: 1) spouses whose relationships with offenders began prior to the sex offense conviction; 2) spouses whose relationships began post-conviction. Crime type was divided into four categories based on the age of the victim and the degree of physical contact: 1) adult victim with no physical contact; 2) adult victim with physical contact; 3) child victim with no physical contact; 4) child victim with physical contact. This type of categorization has been used by other researchers examining sex offender populations due to the lack of homogeneity in the population regarding offending patterns (Sample & Bray, 2003).

Although this sample size remains too small for generalization, qualitative studies generally attempt to obtain saturation of information, which is reached when responses across categories become repetitive (Gibbs, 2007). Saturation of information typically occurs within 10 interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1997) and was achieved for both pre- and post-conviction spouses. Saturation was also achieved for crimes that included physical contact with a child victim, but was not achieved for the other crime types.

Data Collection

Qualitative interviews with sex offender spouses served as the primary data source for this project. Interviews were transcribed for data analysis purposes,² and provided both narrative and observational data. In order to augment interview reliability and provide contextual information, data was also collected from interviews with registered sex offenders, written narratives, and public commentary/reactions to sex offending media

¹ The sample contains sex offender spouses who were currently or formerly married to a convicted sex offender as well as significant others who were currently or formerly engaged in long-term relationships with convicted sex offenders. For brevity, the term “spouse” is used throughout this paper to refer to both populations.

² To ensure confidentiality, all participants were assigned a pseudonym and all additional identifying information provided during interviews such as family member names, locations, or police departments, were changed/removed from final transcripts. All quotations in this article have had the names and locations changed for confidentiality purposes.

Table 1 Demographic Traits of Sex Offender Spouses

Family member characteristics	Number	Percent
White	28	97%
Female	29	100%
Relationship type		
Pre-conviction significant other	16	55%
Post-conviction significant other	13	45%
Crime Type		
Contact offense against child(ren) under 19	18	62%
Non-contact offense against child(ren) under 19	5	17%
Contact offense against adult	2	7%
Non-contact offense against adult	0	0%
Unknown crime type	4	14%
Average age ^a	46.3 years	
Average time married or cohabitating ^a	12 years	
Average total number of hours of contact	2.0 h	
Average number of hours of follow-up contact	1.9 h	

^a Due to the lack of identifying information for some participants, averages were obtained using the overall range for known individuals

stories. In accordance with qualitative methodologies, data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently so preliminary findings could be used to guide further data collection (Patton, 2002).

Qualitative interviews were conducted in two stages. Initial interviews were conducted in-person, by telephone, or by email. The use of multiple collection techniques was done in order to expand the sample to spouses living in rural areas with limited mobility and/or access to the city, as well as to allow for anonymous contact through email for spouses who continued to be hesitant about confidentiality. When possible, observational data was recorded such as tone of voice and emotional reactions like crying, yelling, and embarrassment. These were transferred to the completed transcript at the appropriate point to avoid loss of context during content analysis (Gibbs, 2007). Interview mediums were not specific to each subject, and many participants communicated with the researcher in multiple formats.

This project used informal, conversational interviews, an unstructured format that allowed for interview questions to be tailored to the specific life and experiences of each participant (Patton, 2002). Initial interviews opened with a short explanation about the nature of qualitative interviews, in which the researcher discussed the concept of being a “traveler” (Kvale, 2007; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) in the participant’s story, and assured the participant that they were free to share any information they perceive to be relevant to the topic of the study. The researcher would then ask the opening question: “Please share your story of how the sex offender registry came into your life.” This was the only consistent question between interviews, as the remaining probes were developed to explore the unique experiences of each participant as they related their story.

In order to determine whether or not disenfranchised grief existed in the sample, probing questions were developed to explore participants' lives both before and after the sex offense was discovered (for pre-conviction spouses) as well as after legal changes impacting their loved one's sex offender status were completed (for pre- and post-conviction spouses). To determine the impact of disenfranchised grief, if present, probing questions were also crafted to explore the emotional and physical effect of these changes on the lives and the social support networks of each participant.

Initial interviews lasted approximately one hour and thirty minutes, although there was considerable variability in initial interview length (range of 30 min to 3 h). Once initial conversational interviews were completed, follow-up interviews were scheduled as needed. Follow-up interviews were achieved with five participants (17%), but were unable to be completed with a majority of participants due to subject reluctant, scheduling conflict, and out of date contact information. In total, 38 h of family member interviews were conducted, resulting in approximately 1000 pages of transcript. Fifteen email interviews were also collected.

Triangulating Data Sources

In addition to qualitative interviews with sex offender spouses, triangulating data was gathered from a variety of sources, including interviews with the registrants, opinions and commentary posted by spouses to media accounts, and Internet blogs. Like participant interviews, triangulating data was collected through participant referral. For example, in one interview a participant disclosed that she kept an online blog detailing the events of her life after her husband's arrest for child pornography. She then went on to describe how two additional bloggers were an important support resource for her. After the interview was concluded, the participants' blog entries were collected for analysis, as were the blog entries from the other bloggers named during the interview. This same process was used to collect opinions and public commentary by spouses on media accounts. A total of 667 blogs entries written by spouses/partners and fifteen public comments on media accounts of sex crimes or legislation were included in this study for triangulation purposes, along with eleven sex offender interviews. Eight sex offender interviews were conducted concurrently with spouse interviews and three were conducted separately, generating two hours of additional interview time.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was completed in MaxQDA using a hybrid approach to thematic content analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The hybrid approach utilizes both inductively- and deductively-deduced codes in order to obtain the most comprehensive analysis possible. Since qualitative data analysis is a circular process, with results informing future data collection procedures (Charmaz, 2006; Gibbs, 2007), open coding was conducted on the transcripts from the initial interviews as they were collected. Probes relating to themes identified during early open coding were included in initial interviews for later participants as well as follow-up interviews for those participants who had been interviewed previously.

In addition to spouses' descriptions of their life changes, researcher inference was also important in determining the prevalence and impact of disenfranchised grief.

Inferences made from what participants did not say or how they described the changes in their lives was just as important for data analysis as their verbal description of those changes. Coding took into account inferences drawn from things such as whether or not the spouse discussed the offense itself and if so, how the offense was presented (a misunderstanding, a mistake he's paid for, just some touchy-feely, etc.), as well as what topics the participant chose to discuss at length and what topics they skipped over or played down. Triangulating data sources were subject to the same analytical process as qualitative interviews, a process that improved the quality of research findings by allowing for confirmation or falsification of interview material through analysis of a variety of sources (Flick, 2007).

Results

The results of this study support the existence of disenfranchised grief in sex offender spouse samples, although there were variations across participants depending on whether the relationship began pre- or post-conviction. In addition, the results varied based on whether the spouses remained supportive of the offender or chose to leave the relationship. Findings are discussed below.

The “Death”

In order for disenfranchised grief to be present, spouses must discuss a death, physical or psychosocial, for which they would grieve. During the analysis of spousal narratives, it was clear that pre-conviction spouses experienced a psychosocial death with the disclosure of the sexual crime. Spouses discussed the trauma they experienced upon the revelation of the crime. Nadine's blog describes the distress she experienced as a result of her husband's crimes being revealed to her.

“Grief is the other part of what I'm feeling. I shouldn't say ‘other’ since my emotions are all intertwined. I should say that sometimes my ever-shifting array of emotions resembles grief. The husband I thought I had as died in my mind and heart, over and over. The worst part is that it never stops because he is actually still alive. It's like having a ghost haunting you in the image of someone once dear to you. It keeps the pain fresh.” (Nadine, blog entry, March 2012)

Nadine's description of her loss as she mourns the husband she thought she had fits the psychosocial death definition perfectly. Nadine describes a death in which an image or a personality becomes deceased, even though the actual person remains physically alive. This death, although not appropriate for a funeral or other formal mourning rites, still evokes the grief she would experience if her husband had physically died. Other wives' descriptions evoked similar images as they described the “new” person their loved one became as a result of the sex offense conviction.

“Since all this has happened he's a little bit different. I mean, he gets angry. He used to be like a duck, things just go ... but now I notice he gets a little bit more angry. Sometimes I wish that old [husband] was back.” (Missy, April 2014)

Often times this loss was synonymous with the execution of a search warrant or an arrest warrant for offenders. The trauma these individuals experienced upon learning about the crime was intense for these wives. Even after several years, many of the women I interviewed became upset while describing that first day they learned of the sexual accusation, crying at parts of the narrative and/or using excessive hand gestures and raising their voice as they described their experience. The trauma of the search warrant experience was also observed based on the level of detail present in the spouses' descriptions. Of the five women that discussed the search warrant process, every one of them was able to describe that day in detail and also named the exact date it occurred. It became clear that this day becomes the point of psychosocial death; the day that their loved ones, and their lives, changed as a result of the revelation of the sex offense accusations.

“It began eight months ago when police hammered at our door with a search warrant. It was before 6:30 a.m. and I had just come downstairs to bring in the newspaper and make breakfast before taking the kids to middle school. Oatmeal in the microwave, scrambled eggs on the stove, newspaper on the table, kids upstairs getting ready for the day, my retired husband still asleep.

The police yelling about a search warrant made no sense to me. Obviously, they had the wrong house. I opened the door and they pushed me back out of their way. I don't know how many officers there were. Too many. All wearing black jackets and—dear God—the first one through the door aimed his gun at our dog as she came growling toward the door. I threw myself toward her, shouting ‘Don't shoot the dog!’

As I held the dog back, I saw my daughter come down the stairs with her hands up. Bless her heart, she gave her usual eye-roll at the stupid adults. Her brother followed her with his hands up, trying to look his cool self.

I demanded to see the search warrant and was told they would show me as soon as they ‘secured the premises.’ I was aware that the police were everywhere in the house but I kept my eyes on the children. That is all I could think about. That and asking again and again to see the search warrant. After we were all gathered in the kitchen and the cops were satisfied that they were safe, I realized that my husband was there with us. He was quiet, not looking at anyone.

The police took me aside, showed me the warrant, told me the [police] were looking for child porn. There was a roaring in my head. This made no sense. I said something like, ‘Okay, but you won't find any here.’

That is how it began. Chaos, shouting, frustration, guns. Fear and anger.” (Marie, blog entry, January 2012)³

³ Transcripts from family member blogs, newspaper articles, emails, and other written documents were taken verbatim. Spelling and grammar errors in these quotations were included in the original.

“Today is the anniversary of the first time that Jake was arrested. [Father-in-law] and [Mother-in-law] and I didn't need to acknowledge that to each other. We all feel the grief more strongly today for good reason. I was going to use this post to tell you about what happened that day, one year ago, but it will have to wait a day or two. I'm still just so tired and I don't think I can face it right now.” (Nadine, blog entry, February 2012)

Although the above information was from pre-conviction spouses, the experience of loss was not exclusive to this group. However, the source of the loss was different. Post-conviction spouses did not display characteristic of disenfranchised grief as a result of the sexual conviction because these women fell in love with a man already labeled and stigmatized as a sexual offender, so the label itself did not create a psychosocial death. However, as a result of continued enhancement of sex offender restrictions, many convicted sex offenders have faced extensions and other alterations to their original sentence (Lytle, 2016). The way post-conviction spouses described these retroactively enforced policies, and the subsequent impact on their lives as a result of the policy changes, had many similarities to the psychosocial deaths described previously from the arrest itself.

Of particular concern for sex offender spouses were changes to the sex offender community notification requirements. In the late 2000s, the passing of the federal Adam Walsh Act caused state registries to alter both the types of sex crimes that would be listed and the length of time sex offenders would be required to register (Terry & Ackerman, 2009). Nebraska changed from a risk-based system, where low risk offenders were kept off the public registry, to an offense-based system where the original charge was the only determinate to whether or not the offender was publically listed on the sex offender registry, regardless of individual risk. Some wives related how their husbands, previously classified as low risk and off the public registry, became publically outted as sex offenders when the offense-classification system became active. These situations, in which the registrant's label remained the same but the publicity of that label increased, created situations that mimic the psychosocial death described previously. Spouses felt traumatized by the enhanced disclosure of the offense to more people. Jeanette, a post-conviction spouse, discussed how, upon entering the marriage, she and her husband decided who to disclose the sex offense.

“Family-wise, my sister, I have one sister, and that's never been a great relationship. She's kind of difficult person. She's got 3 kids, and when we got married my parents knew his background and all that. We talked to them about, ‘What do you think about talking to my sister?’

They said, ‘I don't know that that would really go very well.’ It wasn't public on the registry and he was going to be off shortly, or in 5 years at that point. We talked to his counselor that he was still seeing. We talked to his counselor about it. We talked to our pastor about it. All of them said, ‘As long as you have a safety plan, where the kids are not alone with him. You don't leave him to babysit the kids.’ They were not little kids, they were older. You just don't want to ever have any cause for questions. As long as you have all these other people know about it, you really don't have to tell your sister. If you think she's going to ostracize you,

then don't tell her. And we're taking a chance it wasn't going to become public, but that was what we decided.” (Jeanette, April 2014).

Although Jeanette never intended on disclosing the crime to her sister, her husband's addition to the public sex offender registry forced them to disclose the situation. That disclosure resulted in the complete severing of the relationship between Jeanette and her sister. Her parents, who were also affected by the separation, had to hold separate family gatherings so that they could still visit with both daughters. Hillary faced something similar; married to her husband when the law changed and her husband's registration information went public, Hillary's situation changed overnight. She described how, for two years, her husband had been successfully participating with activities at her daughter's school, but once the registration information became public he was asked to refrain from participation.

“[Daughter] went an entire year of school in 2009 with no problems whatsoever. All through the 2010 year no problem. Then, 2011, ‘You can't go to the field trip because you're on the list.’ I freaked out. This whole time since end of 2009 on, I stopped having [inaudible]...and I'm a mature girl. I stopped having my periods. I only had them 6 times a year because I was so stressed out and crying pretty much every single day, looking at the forum where they would talk about how all sex offenders should die and people that marry sex offenders are scum of the earth [starts crying] and I hated that. I would try to tell the story. My husband only wanted his son and that was all because he lost his dad when he was 19 because his dad had cancer and he wanted to be there for his son and people would say that I was sick because I thought it was okay that I was married to a sex offender.

It finally got to the point where my friends forbid me from going on the Internet during the day at work and they would say, ‘No, stop!’ because they knew exactly what I was doing, looking at those forums and so I stopped. I just kept crying and crying.” (Hillary, June 2013)

For wives like Jeanette and Hillary, the cause of their grief was not their husband's original offense but rather the legal changes regarding sex offender notification that significantly altered their lives. The trauma of that event is similar to that trauma experienced by pre-conviction wives upon learning about the crime, although not as specific in relation to a particular date.

Disenfranchisement

Since both pre-conviction and post-conviction spouses discussed a psychosocial loss, the next step was to determine whether or not participants experienced disenfranchisement while they were attempting to deal with that loss. There was support for disenfranchisement within the spousal participants, although the current relationship of the spouse to the sex offender created variation in the degree of disenfranchisement. Spouses who divorced or separated from the offender were not disenfranchised, but those spouses who remained in a relationship with their sex offender loved one were

actively disenfranchised by law enforcement and broader society. In some cases, this disenfranchisement followed immediately after the sex offense disclosure.

“Health and Human Services would come over and the social worker says, ‘Well let me know when you’re ready to get the divorce and I’ll help you with it,’ not thinking that I’d stay with my husband, but I wanted to stay with him. I mean he’s a good man. I may love him but I don’t love his crime or what he did.” (Missy, April 2014)

The expectation of divorce sent a strong message to these women immediately; divorce was the “culturally acceptable” option upon learning of a sex crime accusation and staying with the offender is not. This message was reinforced by the negative treatment that women described receiving from friends, family members, law enforcement, and society as a whole after they decided to stay with the offender. During the interviews, multiple wives spoke very bitterly of the fact they had been accused of “denying” and “minimizing” their husband’s crime. These accusations, often from the therapist or counselor allegedly supporting them, created situations where wives felt judged and lost valuable clinical support.

“I realize there are victims. I’m not dumb and I don’t ... I quit going to counseling because my counselor alluded that I was minimizing his crime. She works a lot with victims of sexual abuse, and I finally just told her one day. I said, ‘I don’t think I can come here anymore, because you’re very biased,’ and then my son was going to a counselor at the same place too, and she said, ‘Don’t you realize that what your husband was doing was perpetuating the market for child pornography?’ He never paid for anything, he didn’t solicit anything. He didn’t ask anybody for anything. He looked at the pictures that were already there. I got up and left. I need to go back and deal with that situation, because my counselor was really helping me a lot, and just ... And she still felt like I was minimizing stuff, but I’m like, ‘You’re maximizing stuff.’” (Nisa, June 2014)

[Discussing the first day of a therapy group session for all offender wives]

“Now of course I didn’t go into the FULL story the first day... that’s always a catch 22. Tell whole story and have people pick it apart and judge you and make them uncomfortable OR tell them the mere basics and have the look hubby up and then they get mad b/c I’ve “hidden things from them”. That I’m deflecting and down playing and making excuses for him and his behavior. Now if you’ve been reading my blog you know I’ve never said what he did was right, it was dumb and stupid, (biologically understandable but socially and morally wrong) But one lady had to go look my hubby up and she got all upset b/c “you don’t just happen to become a level 3”. Well no duh!! His path has been pretty messed up, but that’s another story. So there I was feeling very attacked and judged, and the leaders commended the group for its openness, honesty and “good work”. I was not aloud to defend my husband. I was not aloud to tell his story b/c its only supposed to be about MY feelings. Well ya know what?! Ya know what I’m feeling? I’m feeling unstable because no one will higher my husband because of his past. I’m

feeling judged by who I choose to marry, and I'm feeling rejected. Rejected by my family, by my friends, by this group everywhere I turn. I crave that extended family... I crave that sense of community, but I've never had this...and it seems that I'm probably never really going to find this.” (Meara, blog entry, April 2014)

“I've heard other stories, from other people, who ... Another woman's husband. Same kind of story. He was retired, he was depressed, he had too much time and ... same story. I've heard that from 2 or 3 people. She went to see a Christian counselor, and the counselor said to her, ‘So, did your husband also molest your daughters?’ Because the assumption was that if he was looking at pictures, he was also touching children. So she had 2 or 3 stories like that, of counselors that she went to, who simply didn't get that she needed support for what she was choosing to do.” (Marie, May 2014)

In many cases, wives who remained in a relationship with their sex offender husband were perceived as being just as bad as or even worse than the sex offender themselves. Wives spoke of how the public labeling of sex offender spouses resulted in accusations and insinuations about the wife for allowing continued abuse.

“Interviewer: Now have you told the ... your older one's school about the situation?”

Pauline: Yes.

Interviewer: How did that go?

Pauline: Horribly.

Interviewer: Oh, that's not good.

Pauline: You are immediately blacklisted. I was doing it to try and ... I just thought that her teachers would be first line of defense if something did go wrong, but no. Instead we got threatened with being turned in for it.

Interviewer: Turned in for what?

Pauline: I guess, for living with one.

Interviewer: My goodness.

Pauline: Because my children's lives are in danger. I was like, if you look at all of the studies that are the recidivism rate are less than one percent for like real recidivism, not violations.” (Pauline, August 2014)

The end result of many interactions with state professionals was the disenfranchisement of wives from potential support outlets. Sometimes the disenfranchisement occurred as the result of spoken words and actions from other individuals, such as in

Nisa and Meara's counseling experience described previously. For others, the negative experiences simply confirmed a perception that help would be unavailable to them. This would result in further self-disenfranchisement, as wives cut themselves off from potential support outlets, assuming help would not be forthcoming.

In the fall, we attended a high school football game. As friends and acquaintances clambered to their seats around us, toting popcorn and hotdogs, I realized that their cheerful hellos would be a thing of the past once they all knew. The grief was overwhelming. Grief for easy friendships become wary, grief for trust become suspicion. I don't know what their reaction will be. All I know is that the world will change. People will never see our family the same way again.

Now, whenever our family attends an event, I look around and wonder which people in this group—church, school, neighborhood, family—will remain friends with us. This makes me wary of them before I know they deserve it.

At work, I stop going out for lunch with friends. Instead, I get in my car and drive. I find a park where I can sit alone and think. I use the time to talk to the attorney, arrange appointments with therapists, read articles I printed off the internet.

I am isolated.” (Marie, blog entry, February 2012)

In contrast to current wives, former spouses who had stated their intention to divorce or who had actually begun the process of removing themselves from their sex offender loved one experienced relatively limited disenfranchisement. Like current spouses, they faced questions about their complicity in the crime, questions that still caused shame and guilt for former spouses as they discussed how they wished they had figured out the crime earlier.

“To this day, I'm still greeted by many with looks of pity or masked sympathy, when I know that the unspoken question from so many is ‘how could she not have known? How could she have married such a monster? What kind of issues does she have to have been attracted to someone like that?’ I don't kid myself into thinking that people really don't make those kind of judgements.” (Guest post, Nadine's blog, December 2013)

Unlike current wives, however, the choice to divorce their sex offender husband gained former spouses support rather than the accusations of denial and minimization so common among the former. This support took the form of both financial and emotional support. One of the data sources that most clearly showed the distinction in social support between former and current spouses came from public commentary on sex offender spouse blogs. On the blogs of most former spouses, comments were often from family members or other known individuals and were strongly supportive of the women's divorce decisions. Blog comments were supportive, positive, and encouraging. I could not find one overtly negative comment on former wives' posts.

“You are making the right choices for you and your baby. Stay focused on yourself and your family. Things will get better. Good luck.” (Anonymous commenter, Joy’s blog, July 2010)

“I read your blog whenever I get the chance. I am continually amazed at your strength through this whole ordeal. And I know plenty of people that would have used this circumstance to make excuses for not doing certain things. Yet you have continued to pay your bills, continue your education, and make a job change. I feel like you and I have very similar personalities and I hope that if I’m ever faced with such a horrific trial in my life that I will face it head on with all the grace you have in your trial. I look forward to the day that you post the trial is over and the sentencing has been made. You’re always in my thoughts!” (Commenter, Angie’s blog, October 2012)

On the other hand, commentary on current spouse blogs like Marie’s, who allowed all postings unless they contain extreme vulgarity, regularly used the anonymous posting feature when commenting. Several commenters attacked Marie and her decision to stay.

“If sick slime balls like your husband weren’t creating a market for child porn, then it wouldn’t be readily available. Your arguments are null and void, and you deserve all the hate mail you’re surely receiving right now.

How can you be attracted to a man that gets hard and masturbates to children being tortured and abused? You two sick f...s deserve each other, but your kids deserve a real family, with parents who don’t get turned on by their bodies.” (Anonymous commenter, Marie’s blog, October 2012)

“You know what your problem is? You’re invaded by fear BECAUSE YOU HAVEN’T LEFT YOUR HUSBAND. So you SHARE the consequences of his CRIME.

Maybe you should focus a little less on defending the grown adult who knowingly engaged in a criminal act that victimizes children and a little more on the CHILDREN WHO WERE HARMED in the creation of the images that your husband sought out for his personal use.

Once you stop seeing yourself/your husband as the victim and start empathizing with the REAL victims, maybe—just maybe—you’ll be able to move on. But for God’s sake...stop polluting the internet with this vomit.” (Anonymous commenter, Marie’s blog, March 2013)

“Are you for real? Or is your blog an attention seeking joke? You are just as disgusting and pathetic as your husband. And I don’t name call lightly. Too bad the authorities left ‘fear’ at your house. Your husband is scary, but you’re even more so because you defend him with your young children in the other room. What would I do if it were my husband, brother, father? Be sad, mad, horrified,

and destroyed.....while kicking them out of my life. PERIOD. And yes, I know this as fact.” (Commenter, Marie’s blog, March 2013)

Your profound denial of the truth astonishes me. Your husband viewed images of children being terribly hurt and victimized. They had no choice in participating. They were forced, possibly drugged, threatened, and physically injured. Your husband liked this...what isn't wrong about that??? What if this were your children? Seriously, what if? What if someone videotaped your kid getting drugged, left on the road and intentionally run over by a car...and people watched that video and got off on it? Wouldn't you think these people are total sickos who need to be kept away from any and all children, and all reasonable and halfway intelligent adults? Having had an experience with a pedophile and the devastating after effects, I can honestly say that your deluded reality is nothing more than pure selfishness. Your kids alone will pay their parents' price.” (Commenter, Marie’s blog, August 2014)

Not all the comments on Marie’s blog were negative. Marie and Tammy’s blog, two current spouses, both contained many positive messages. The difference between these supportive comments and those of the former spouses came from the commenter; supportive comments on current wife blogs were almost always from other current wives/significant others of sex offenders and involved a description of their own difficulties and trials as a result of a loved ones’ sex offender status.

“Dear [Tammy], I am so glad that you are sharing your story with us. My husband and I got married in nineteen seventy seven and in January of two thousand and nine it will be thirty two years for us. We were high school sweethearts. My husband did seven years in prison. But for seven years we talked on the phone to each other and wrote letters. I had to write in Braille because I am blind from birth. While he was in he took a Braille course. And the thing to me that’s the hardest is that the stigma that you and I get for standing by our men. If guys land in jail for sex crimes every one that thinks that they can not be loved or forgiven or given a second chance at life. I am like you. I also think that any man or woman no mater how long they have been in prison deserves a second chance at life. When my husband first got arrested the church I used to go to said that everything was my fault. How stupid and wrong they are. I had to endure five years of probation and it was no picnic. My husbands name should be off the registry in February if they do not pass any more dumb laws. I love my husband very much. But when we are out in public and people are talking about sensitive issues its hard for me to cope. Your story touched my heart. I hope you and your husband have a great marriage and a wonderful life in spite of all this.” (Anonymous commenter, Tammy’s blog, September 2008)

The blog commentary supports the findings of disenfranchisement identified from the qualitative interviews. Wives who chose to leave the relationship were supported, both financially and emotionally, by family members and strangers who encountered their story online. Wives who chose to stay, however, perceived that they were attacked by the public and received a majority of their support from other sex offender spouses and

significant others. This perpetuated wives' perception that most of society does not care about their suffering and that only individuals in the same situation as them are able to empathize and provide support.

The Result of Disenfranchisement

This sample experienced similar effects from disenfranchised grief that previous researchers found with different samples, namely isolation, guilt, and persistent grieving symptoms (Doka, 1989; Doka & Aber, 1989; Lenhardt, 1997). Wives suffering from disenfranchised grief felt like no one understood what they were going through and that no one empathized with their situation. They were carrying the grief for the husband and life they lost as a result of the sex offense conviction, but when they reached out for assistance they felt judged for their decision to stay married to the offender.

“Not knowing what the sentence, when you go through sentencing and stuff and what’s going on and all that turmoil that goes on in your head. ‘What if I’m sentenced to prison or jail or whatever or what’s going to happen?’ It’s sad to say that you wish death for your husband. I mean, because it would be easier than to have him go through that hell. I remember that time... You can’t be there with [the offender] you know because I still have to take care of the kid or her and her wellbeing, because that’s what’s important...” (Missy, April 2014)

“My biggest fear is that that compassion will be lost when I express how I wish the system would change in order to give sex offenders- at least some sex offenders- a pathway back to a productive life. Ruining my ex husband just makes things harder for me and my children. It makes it less likely that I’ll get any child support. Even if that weren’t the case, I still feel that he deserves another chance. I hate him right now. I can’t stand to look at him. I went to the jail today and stood where I could see the children but I didn’t have to look at him through the window. I hate that my life feels so impossible. I wish I were dead. I wish I could remove myself from this world without it doing further damage to my children. I hate him for making my life one that I can’t stand to live. Please don’t tell me to get help because whatever help out there is for people with time, money, and resources. I’m just saying that I wish people could find some compassion in their hearts for offenders. Most of them didn’t just wake up and decide to screw up their lives for fun.” (Anonymous commenter, Nadine’s blog, April 2014)

Isolation occurred from the active disenfranchisement of spouses, as their support networks withdrew or pushed them away as a result of their relationship with the sex offenders. Isolation was also self-imposed as spouses refused to seek out support, friendship, or assistance in expectation of being denied support. For instance, Noelle wanted to volunteer with the Big Brothers, Big Sisters organization, but when the organization stated that volunteers should bring their Little Sisters home to the volunteer’s house, Noelle withdrew her application. As she explained, she never actually discussed her particular situation with the organization, but withdrew her application in expectation of her husband’s sex offender status being a problem.

“I didn't explain the situation, but I think it was because, at the time, I was really feeling like that wasn't my situation to explain. I didn't want to be that girlfriend that was like, ‘Oh, yeah, my husband's a sex offender and, you know, it's been really hard but I just deal with.’ I didn't want to put his business out there and that's just inappropriate so I was like, ‘The business that I have is personal, but it sounds to me like it's something that I'm not going to be able to do because of what you're telling me.’” (Noelle, June 2014)

There was one positive outcome from the general disenfranchisement that sex offender spouses experience. Judged by society as a whole, most of these wives turned to other sex offender spouses for support. During the course of this project, a large network of spouses and significant others was identified that supported one another through online blogs, Facebook groups, and other online media. Their comments to and about one another showed how the shared experience of being a sex offender spouse resulted in increased understanding and awareness that outsiders could not provide.

“I am reading all of these stories and realizing that I am not alone. What a great feeling! Some sounded just like mine, with little differences here and there. I have started my own blog to vent and give info and education to anyone who cares to listen.” (Commenter, Tammy's blog, January 2011).

“My husband and I do communicate very well, and we always have. We do talk to each other, but I think both of us need somebody else to talk to. He's terrible about reaching out to people and really going to somebody. Me, my support group is on Facebook. I have a huge support group through church, and people listen, but nobody else really gets it like my other offenders' wives do who've been through this. I've used Facebook a lot over the last three years, to talk about what's going on in my life. I have, I probably told you guys this, but I have a secret Facebook page just for our family junk that I feel like everybody in that group that I've added to that group I can trust. Right now there's about 155 people in that group, who are getting a huge education on what the sex offender life is like. Then I'm also a part of that, the same, another secret group that's made up of offenders' wives.” (Nisa interview, September 2014)

“I happened to follow your link off a comment you posted to an article about [legislator's] new yahoo bs to make convicted sex offenders put their crimes up on social media sites. I wish I could meet you in person. Our stories are very similar, and I have no one who understands or gets the situation, let alone an outlet for all the anger and hurt I feel for my boyfriend. You have given me So much strength” (Anonymous commenter, Lori's blog, July 2012)

Although the use of snowball sampling inherently created a degree of association within the sample, it was surprising just how connected these spouses were to one another beyond the specific individual who had invited them to participate in the study. There were several instances of networking through blogs in which current spouses from the sample would post on other current spouses, and vice versa. The networking between sex offender spouses showed how comfortably connected this community had

become. It is possible that a large majority of this networking was spurred by the disenfranchisement that this population felt from broader society members. Feeling that no one else was willing or able to support them as they dealt with the effect of the sex offense in their lives, spouses turned to other sex offender spouses for support. As Nisa's quote portrays, these support networks were often hidden or private to protect the identities and privacy of the individuals involved.

For the most part, this online support community was segregated into two groups, current spouses and former spouses, although there were a few instances where online networking occurred between both groups. The rare overlap between current and former spouses most likely stemmed from each group's different perception of sex offenders. Usually, former spouses expressed hostility and anger towards the sex offender spouse. On Angie's blog, she never used her ex-husband's name, referring instead to him as "The Monster." The tone of her blog entries made her animosity towards her former spouse clear, such as when she wrote, "I am going through 36 albums deleting The Monster out of our life. I wish life had a delete button. I could simply push a button and completely delete him from this world" (Angie's blog, June 2012). The spouses she connected to online were those who also made the decision to leave their sex offender spouses. For example, Angie proclaimed solidarity with another former spouse as "only parents" because they both had severed the parental rights of their sex offender spouse.

"One friend...shared a blog link with me...This gal found herself in a very similar situation as I did. There are some minor differences, but we both found out the person we married was not who we thought and we are both now 'only parents.' Right away I read through her blog. She is a little ahead of me on our path. However, I went back and read all her posts and was able to relate 100% to her thoughts and feelings. I didn't feel so alone anymore. I knew I had to email her and get in contact with her. I finally was able to email her and we've been emailing every since. We are F-book friends too. I enjoy reading her blog because I understand her 100%. I can relate to her, and she understands my blog too. We've shared lots of comments and emails back and forth." (Angie's blog, April 2012)

As can be expected given the content on Angie's blog, there was no overlap between her blog and current sex offender spouses. However, other former spouses were less hostile and more encouraging of communication with current spouses. Nadine was a pre-conviction spouse who blogged about her struggles after her husband was convicted of sexual assault of a minor. Over time, Nadine came to the decision that the best option for her was to divorce her husband. Her blog describes the benefits in her new life as a former sex offender spouse, and it is clear that she believes this was the best decision for herself and her family. However, Nadine accepted and remained sympathetic throughout her journey with those women who made different decisions.

"It is a tough road to find out that your spouse is a sex offender. It breaks your heart and tears up your family. But there is a second chance that is born out of it. The biggest blessing is being given choices. I had several wise people encourage

me to start making decisions based on what is best for me and my children. It took a long time for me to grow into that idea, but it has served me well. My life is incredibly flawed right now, but I feel so free compared to the situation I left. I wouldn't go back for all the money in the world. And I won't settle for a flawed relationship, even with a near-perfect man. I like having my choices and I like having a second chance. I hope that every spouse of a sex offender finds this personal freedom. You don't have to choose to leave your spouse - just make sure your choice is really best for you and not just a guilt reflex from that "till death do us part" line. I'm guessing that vow was already broken by the sex offender and it isn't your job to fix it." (Nadine's blog, May 2013)

Nadine's attitude was one of acceptance, regardless of the individual wife's decision to stay or leave. As a result, Nadine's blog became a source of comfort and networking for both current and former sex offender spouses.

Conclusion

The current research supported the existence of disenfranchised grief among sex offender spouses and significant others, particularly those who continued to support their sex offender loved ones within the community. Sex offender spouses experienced a psychosocial death, or a non-physical loss, as a result of their partners' sex offender status. This psychosocial death initiated a grieving process for the sex offender spouse, but the social stigma of sex offenders limited the capability of spouses to seek out and receive social support. This disenfranchisement then impeded spouses' successful progress through the grieving process.

One important finding of this research relates to the source of the psychosocial loss itself. While pre-conviction spouses suffered a non-physical death as a result of the sex offense itself, the existence of psychosocial losses in post-conviction spouses highlights how the continued revisions and amendments to sex offender legislation can themselves create a non-physical death for sex offender spouses. Traumas like Jeanette's, who was forced to disclose her husband's sex offense to her sister as a result of a legal change that made her husband's conviction publicly available, are not unique given the large numbers of registrants affected by retroactive applications of sex offender policy. For Jeanette, this situation, along with the dissemination of her address and vehicle license plate across the internet, created a psychosocial loss similar to that of a pre-conviction spouse learning of the offense for the first time. Policy changes regarding sex offenders are not rare. States are continuously revising sex offender legislation, producing everything from minor, housekeeping revisions to major wet-widening and procedural revisions (Lytle, 2015, 2016). Considering the fact that there are almost 860,000 registered sex offenders in the United States as of 2016 (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, 2016), it is likely that many spouses have and will continue to experience a policy-triggered psychosocial loss. Although legal changes themselves will likely continue to occur, recognition of the trauma related to these changes could help criminal justice agencies be proactive in trying to reduce psychosocial loss and later disenfranchisement. Currently, family members lack any formal support as they deal with the impact of legal changes. When Nebraska implemented

the new sex offender registry guidelines, sex offender spouses described receiving letters in the mail notifying them after the change that the registration period of their loved one was now lifetime. This impersonal notification, along with the lack of forewarning, blindsided families and heightened their feelings of stigmatization. Implementing an early notification policy about future sex offender policy changes would allow sex offender families to take steps to prepare for the legal alteration. While this would not completely eliminate the psychosocial loss, it may lessen the trauma and provide time for spouses and significant others to seek support before their lives are altered.

In addition to reducing the trauma of the psychosocial loss, we should also seek to lessen the disenfranchisement that sex offender spouses experience as they attempt to cope with that loss. Since supportive family members reduce recidivism risk (Bersani, Laub, & Nieuwbeerta, 2009; Blokland & Nieuwbeerta, 2005; Horney, Osgood, & Marshall, 1995; Sampson, Laub, & Wimer, 2006), attempts to decrease the disenfranchisement of sex offender spouses may help promote public safety by increasing social support for convicted sex offenders and promoting desistance. Ideally, we would decrease disenfranchisement by reducing the public scorn and condemnation that sex offenders and their families face. This could be done by limiting the availability of registered offenders' information to the public, increasing family privacy and thus reducing the public stigma for sex offender families. Public education about the realities of sex offending, including the contradiction of myths regarding high recidivism, dangerousness, and homogeneity of the sex offender population, may also decrease the negative reactions of citizens toward sex offender spouses by decreasing the heightened levels of fear these offenders invoke. Sex offender spouses might then be less inclined to self-isolate themselves from potential support networks if they perceive their audience as empathetic or understanding. However, given the role of media in the continuation of these myths, the efficacy of this public education option is questionable (Galeste, Fradella, & Vogel, 2012; Proctor, Badzinski, & Johnson, 2002; Quinn, Forsyth, & Mullen-Quinn, 2004).

What may be more practical is the creation of non-judgmental environments where spouses can seek support and empathy. Many of the spouses in this study did not perceive traditional counseling sessions as a safe space in which they could share their fears and concerns. They shared stories of counselor accusations about denial, minimization, and family harm. Instead, participants found safe spaces in groups that contained other sex offender family members. They felt that this population was the only one that could truly understand what their concerns were and empathize with their stories. By supporting the creation of sex offender social support groups outside of formal therapy organizations, we could help reduce the isolation spouses feel and help them process their grief in a safe and non-judgmental environment. Some sex offender advocacy groups have created in-person social support groups for sex offenders and their family members. These meetings allow family members to network with others, sharing their experiences without feeling stigmatized, labeled as unwanted, or making other people uncomfortable by their revelations. While this form of support does not offer the enfranchisement within broader society that public education would allow, sex offender specific support groups do provide a grief outlet for spouses suffering disenfranchisement elsewhere. Further development and recruitment of additional support networks would likely improve quality of life for many sex offender spouses,

which in turn may promote high quality relationships between spouses and their sex offender loved ones.

If face-to-face meetings are not possible, these results suggest the use of social media through blog postings, emailing, and other Internet venues can also benefit registrant spouses. Online media was a strong source of social support, in part due to the anonymity that participants could achieve and the ease of long-distance connections. This is consistent with previous research identifying the anonymous nature of online communication as appealing to those suffering from disenfranchised grief (Gilbert & Horsley, 2011). Creation and promotion of online support networks would therefore help eliminate some of the disenfranchisement that sex offender spouses face without physical contact. This may be a particularly useful avenue for supporting rural or elderly sex offender families, who may not be able to attend more traditional face to face support meetings.

Future Research

Although the body of literature into family member consequences of sex offender legislation is relatively small, a majority of researchers in this area use quantitative instruments to gather information from family member populations (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009). To date, none of these instruments addresses the presence or extent of disenfranchised grief, although the effect such as isolation, family adjustment, and other emotional changes have been addressed separately (Farkas & Miller, 2007; Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009). The findings of this study support the need for additional measures to capture the full experiences of sex offender spouses, including the existence of psychosocial losses and the extent of disenfranchisement. Although the sampling methodology used in this study limits generalizability, the presence of disenfranchised grief in this small sample suggests that this phenomenon may have high rates of occurrence in the broader sex offender spouse population. Given the exclusive focus on spouses in the current research, it is unknown if or in what way other sex offender family member populations like children, parents, or siblings of registrants experience disenfranchised grief. However, these populations may also experience disenfranchised grief to some extent since researchers have documented the impact of collateral consequences in non-spousal family member populations (Levenson & Tewksbury, 2009). Future studies that use randomized methodologies and include larger, more diverse samples of family members may be better able to identify the full extent of disenfranchised grief within the sex offender family member population. Future research that examines how disenfranchised grief impacts family member's ability to provide social support for the sex offender loved one should also be explored, as this continued support is important for community safety and sex offender desistance.

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