

# Unveiling the shadows of meaning: Meaning-making for perpetrators of homicide

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## Abstract

Human beings are thought to have unique capacities to interpret and make meaning after major life events. However this process may be complicated and difficult after events that involve anger and aggression and when dangerousness and destructiveness come to the fore. Meaning making may be especially challenging when such an event is incomprehensible to the victim's family and society, due to the perpetrator's irreversible actions and the painful awareness that a human life has been lost. Meaning-making for the perpetrator, including owning of responsibility, in the aftermath of a serious and violent crime remains under-explored; perhaps this is because violent death is an extraordinary behavior with tragic consequences on the victim that invokes enormous anxiety at the thought of exploration. The aim of this paper is to draw upon criminological, forensic and psychology literature to provide a unified perspective on meaning-making processes and what meanings are made for and by the offender in the aftermath of homicide. From the perspective of the perpetrator, challenges might include how sense can be made of the tragedy, including how a redemptive story can emerge and in turn lead to pro-social identity changes. The paper concludes by highlighting consequences and lack of adjustment following incomprehensibility.

## 1. Introduction

Human beings have evolved to have expanded neocortical function which allows them to reflect and make meaning of environmental stressors, including events that threaten or change the way they live their lives or relate to others. Meaning-making is a fundamental aspect of the human condition and as Baird (1985) noted, creating meaning is distinctive to being human. Yalom (1980) observed that “the human being seems to require meaning...[as] to live without meaning, goals, values, or ideals seems to provoke considerable distress” (p.422). It has been recognised increasingly that such aspects (and related facets such as agency) must be understood in a context of social interaction and social embeddedness that demonstrates that ‘mind’ does indeed extend beyond the individual (De Jaegher and Froese, 2009 ; Varela, 1979). This has important implications for understanding the situation of homicide perpetrators and how issues such as reconciliation may lead to renewed development.

Meaning-making is a challenge to define, and there are a variety of definitions (Klinger, 1998) with a lack of standardized terminology (Park, 2010). It has been conceptualized as a process and an outcome (Park, 2010), entailing “[the] coming to see or understand [a] situation in a different way and reviewing and reforming one's beliefs and goals in order to regain consistency” (Park & Ai, 2006, p. 393). In recent decades, the study of meaning-making has been explored extensively in relation to events that involve

coping with trauma, loss, and grief (Armour, 2003; Currier *et al.*, 2006; Edmonds and Hooker, 1992; Gillies and Neimeyer, 2006; Janoff-Bulman and McPherson, 1997; Neimeyer, 2001; Park, 2010; Park and Folkman, 1997). McAdams (2001a) argued that storytelling and narratives create meaning and continuity in our life after traumatic or negative events, a process that has been harnessed in therapy (e.g. Meichenbaum, 2006). We construct our sense of identity, meaning and purpose by creating and editing events in terms of a narrative that encompasses both experience and choices. However, when we experience a traumatic event, our propensity for meaning-making is challenged, as our basic assumptions about the self and the world are shattered (Burnell *et al.*, 2011; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Joseph and Linley, 2005).

To date, there has been little formal study of meaning-making processes for those who inflict catastrophes on others, who commit offences that cause trauma, grief and loss; this includes those who may experience trauma and bereavement due to the loss they have caused. Yet, those who work in the rehabilitation of offenders acknowledge that perpetrators of serious violence often experience changes in self-identity, values, and how they connect with others (Drennan and Alred, 2011; Giordano *et al.*, 2002; Laub and Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Stevens, 2012). There is some evidence that accomplishing meaning-making is associated with positive outcomes for perpetrators of interpersonal violence (Gilbert, 2006; Maruna, 2001; McAdams *et al.*, 1997; Wright *et al.*, 2007).

It could also be argued that constructing meaning-making following criminal offending is at the heart of desistance from offending. For example, Maruna (2001) argued that understanding their offending in terms of a meaningful pattern can offer perpetrators a way to reflect on meaning and change actions in the future. Thus a perpetrator might seek a way out of an encircling sense of shame and guilt by helping others; this then provides an alternative source of meaning and helps to maintain prosocial actions in the future. Clark and Crossland (1985) developed Harré's (1975) argument that suggested how one comes to act is dependent on unlocking behavioral capacities that come to fruition under certain conditions. It is apparent that offenders have a range of values and goals that ultimately can direct them to living a fulfilling life (Maruna & LeBel, 2003), whilst identifying the conditions that enable prosocial action and the procedural knowledge with which it is achieved can give rise to understanding of how this new direction is made meaningful by the perpetrator. Similar processes might of course be implicated in offending behavior, for example a well-established pattern of drinking to excess can have a bi-directional relationship to negative affective states, especially when there are deficits in self-regulation (Day, Howells, Heseltine, & Casey, 2003). Accompanied by contextual details and reminiscences, it is likely to be reflected and elaborated as part of the narrative of an individual's life (Needs & Neale, 2016). The narratives of offenders can provide important insights into the nature, dynamics and genesis of violent offending (Presser, 2009; Youngs and Canter, 2013).

Maruna's (2001) work with offenders who desist from crime indicates that those who can make meaning of their criminal life choices as part of a story of ultimate transformation and redemption are more likely to desist from crime than those who cannot. Heintzleman and King (2013) observed that definitions of the construct of meaning typically refer to three aspects: purpose (goal direction), significance (mattering) and coherence (the presence of reliable connections). It could therefore be suggested that the process of constructing meaning has the potential to lead offenders to face their future with openness and renewed hope (Ferrito, Vetere, Adshead, & Moore, 2012), more likely to access opportunities for growth and 'making good' (Maruna, 2001).

Although there is little formal study of the experience of homicide perpetrators, data on the nature and circumstances of individual cases collated from perpetrators who committed homicide (e.g. Cullen and Newell, 1999; Sparks, 1999; Ferrito *et al.*, 2012 ; Parker, 1995), demonstrate that there is growing trend in favor of exploring meaning-making in offenders. This is a group of people who are of real interest, given the concerns about what they have done and what they might do in future. Homicide perpetrators are likely to serve longer in prison than other violent offenders, are under license and scrutiny for years after release and are at high risk of suicide compared to the general population (Lindqvist, Leifman, & Eriksson, 2007). Their lives are irrevocably changed after an event that changes their identity for ever, an event that professionals call the 'index offence' (i.e. the offence that literally 'points to' and marks them out). The index offence not only leads to a series of legal and criminal justice consequences such as detention, but also to profound social, emotional and psychological repercussions. The 'facts' as portrayed by the media and the subsequent meaning the public create are also aspects that impact on the process of meaning-making for the perpetrator.

Understanding both the index offence and mental aftermath demands serious psychological investigation, including the process of meaning-making. The perpetrator's narrative often functions as a way of organizing their history in relation to their index offence and in the present, and can indicate acceptance or refusal of responsibility and guilt. The journey towards the creation of meaning, which includes sense-making, benefit finding and identity change (Neimeyer, 2006ab) is an intensive process and inherently a personal endeavor that must also sit within social experience as the process of meaning-making unfolds in the social structures in which it is embedded.

The present paper aims to uncover how offenders come to terms with having committed homicide, focusing on meaning reconstruction processes and the resultant meanings attained. Theoretical perspectives will be used to discuss how offenders who committed homicide cope with and come to terms with this experience, as well as the consequences for their well-being and adjustment when they are unable to make sense of these experiences.

## **2. Life after homicide: offending as trauma**

Common initial psychological responses to having seriously offended include periods of disbelief, detachment and numbness (Brunning, 1982; Horne, 1999). This detachment can develop into denial or it can set in motion the subsequent stage of partial acceptance (Horne, 1999). Coming to terms with the reality of the offence requires 'full acceptance', where the person fully acknowledges and develops a sense of agency and responsibility. Cox (1974) describes the process of taking responsibility retrospectively, and how this is intimately linked with the development of insight and the capacity to sustain emotional disclosure.

Several studies have found that homicide perpetrators may be traumatized by the homicide event itself and suffer from a range of post-traumatic psychopathology (Adshead, 2003; Papanastassiou *et al.*, 2004; Adshead *et al.*, 2015; Harry and Resnick, 1986; Rynearson, 1984; Thomas *et al.*, 1994). Suicide rates are known to be high, both immediately after arrest and persistently throughout trial and detention. Perpetrators of homicide can feel stuck, and develop psychiatric difficulties, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), complicated grief, and clinical depression in response to their offences (Adshead *et al.*, 2008; Papanastassiou *et al.*, 2004; Pollock, 1999). They can also experience particularly high levels of guilt (Papanastassiou *et al.*, 2004), avoidance (Curle, 1989; Pham and Willocq, 2013), decreased concentration, and increased agitation (Curle, 1989), with the experience of shame being closely linked to the development of traumatic symptoms (see Taylor, 2015). Homicide offenders are also found to be highly susceptible to the development of acute stress disorder (ASD) which is characterized by severe anxiety, dissociative states, and reduced emotional responsiveness (Pham & Willocq, 2013). It differs from PTSD in that it is usually a more immediate, short-term response to the trauma that lasts between two days and four weeks, and if ASD symptoms persist for more than a month, then a PTSD diagnosis is usually considered (Bryant & Harvey, 2000).

Extensive evidence highlights that violent offenders have often experienced a history of trauma and childhood abuse (Coid, 1992; Heads *et al.*, 1997; Ferrito *et al.*, 2012; Maruna, 2001; McFarlane and Yehuda, 1996; Perry, 1999; Presser, 2008; Van der Kolk *et al.*, 1996). These findings are important when considering that the Diagnostic Statistical Manual-IV (DSM-IV) field trials have indicated that childhood interpersonal trauma is a strong predictor for developing chronic or complex PTSD and DES or DESNOS (disorder of extreme stress not otherwise specified: American Psychiatric Association, APA, 2013). Although there is a considerable overlap with the formal diagnosis of PTSD, complex PTSD highlights additional issues, such as interpersonal impairment and self-destructive behaviors (APA, 2013). There is a recognized body of literature that documents the relationship between child abuse/early trauma and subsequent aggressive and criminal acts (Widom and Maxfield, 2001; Smith *et al.*, 2005; Skowrya and Cocozza, 2007). The continuing role of past traumatic experiences on the lives of perpetrators may be further marked by re-enactment of trauma through behaviors such as self-harm, depression or suicide and/or harming others

and involvement in criminal activity (Yoder, 2005), which is also described using the term of 'compulsion to the trauma' (Van der Kolk, 2007; Van der Kolk *et al.*, 2007). The trajectory of subsequent outcomes in terms of meaning-making is affected by a range of influences, and the nature and continuity of the difficulties in processing will most of the time need psychological treatment to unpack the trauma that overshadowed the potential for meaning-making.

Those who experience trauma may be offered psychological therapy to help them manage symptoms and to recover or improve their mental health. Confronting and attempting to understand trauma is often a journey that starts in psychotherapy. Once a core activity of many psychologists in prisons, in recent years it is often the case that little has been offered to homicide perpetrators beyond standardised programmes aimed at building skills and changing attitudes; even analysis of index offences in risk assessment or to aid in identifying treatment needs can be relatively cursory (West & Greenall, 2011). Certainly there is, a paucity of empirical studies of therapeutic interventions specifically for people who have taken someone's life. However, Brunning (1982) described running a group in prison for homicide perpetrators, Hillbrand and Young (2008) and Adshead, Bose, and Helliwell (2012) report on therapy groups for people who have killed either a parent or a family member or partners. Adshead *et al.* (2015) also explain how they set up a group for men who had killed a stranger. In the group the process of meaning-making is supported through the group members telling their story; narrative re-telling with a focus on metaphorical language, and the use of reflective, attachment theory-based therapies, shifts the content of their narration from 'thin' to 'thicker' stories that include the context and other features required more fully to understand the violent behavior (Adshead, 2014; Adshead *et al.*, 2015).

### **3. Sense-making and meaning reconstruction in identity change**

After a violent offence, the processes of arrest, trial and detention change the offender's life fundamentally. The story that the offender constructs and reports will influence how the offender will live with people and how he/she will cope with the knowledge that he/she has killed. Meaning-making involves storytelling (McAdams, 2001a), and in order to understand oneself, people reconstruct their life story by using their narrative memory (McAdams, 1987; McAdams, 1990; McAdams, 2001b; Singer and Salovey, 1993). Their history is, therefore, conveyed through "language that is commensurate with meaning" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.7) that becomes the vehicle of how the narrative is reported; this presents an example of the way in which actions can be understood through semantics (Anderson, 1997). Ultimately, the unfolding of the narrative structure within the story will centrally illuminate the individual's personality (McAdams, 1996). Evidence suggests that the index offence has meaning to the perpetrator and can be understood in the context of the perpetrator's internal world, developmental history and relationships (Ferrito *et al.*, 2012; Maruna and Copes, 2005; Presser, 2008).

Presser (2008) highlighted that perpetrators of violence often frame their lives in terms of a narrative of 'heroic struggle', whereby they had gone through some ordeal but redeemed their past to themselves and others. Similarly, Maruna (2001) who has studied how criminals reform and "go straight", has suggested that criminals who re-story their struggle with life can experience changes in meaning and new opportunities for growth and 'making good' can occur. The author describes how the offender's new story has to be "logical, believable and respectable" in order to justify the turnaround (p.86), whilst Rotenberg (1987) emphasized the need to have to return and re-establish the "old me" that is conceptualized by the ex-offender as a self that entails positive qualities. The analogy "find the diamond in the rough" used by one of the participants interviewed by Maruna (2001, p 95) described how the offender had to disentangle the self ('the diamond') from the 'rough' (i.e. negative environmental influences). Some of the difficulties in achieving this in an environment where individuals can adopt a false persona in place of the pre- prison self are outlined by Schmid and Jones (1991).

In the clinical literature, Gillies and Neimeyer (2006) explicitly considered identity change in the context of grief as a form of meaning reconstruction. The idea of meaning reconstruction in relation to identity changes is less explicitly articulated in the criminological literature, although it has been suggested that offenders can move beyond the identity conferred on them by their manner of offending to redefine and rediscover themselves when they acknowledge responsibility for their role in negative past experiences (Adshead *et al.*, 2015; Drennan and Alred, 2011; Vaughan, 2007). Similarly, Vaughan (2007) highlights that desistors fashion a "narrative identity" by engaging in a moral assessment of their past and dedicating themselves towards a better future by enhancing a sense of personal agency and self-reflection which directs them to what truly matters to them (p.390).

Related work concerns the dramatic impact of trauma on self-continuity and the unfolding sequence of identity (Zepinic, 2012). Self-discontinuity in this case is demarcated in terms of "the smooth flow of individual lives (which) can be interrupted, bent, and sometimes broken by the history in which they are embedded" (Broman, Hamilton, & Hoffman, 2001, p. 4), leading to "self-discontinuity". This can be defined as a "sense of disjointedness between one's past and present self" (Sedikides, Wildschut, Routledge, & Arndt, 2015, p. 2015). Perpetration of homicide in this case can also lead to another facet of self-continuity, the loss of a social identity. This can have negative implications in relation to mental health (Bonanno *et al.*, 2001; Cruwys *et al.*, 2014; Sani, 2008; Jetten *et al.*, 2002). Specifically, discontinuity generates anxiety, negative mood and compounds ineffective coping (Zimbardo, 1999) whilst increasing the risk of alcohol misuse, violence and suicide (Chandler and Proulx, 2008; Sadeh and Karniol, 2012; Sedikides *et al.*, 2015) and impairing future adjustment (Sadeh & Karniol, 2012).

Another perspective is provided by research on 'possible selves' (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The possible self or future self, defined "as the self, one would like to become or the self, one would not want to become or

fear that one might become” is a working identity, subject to change and based on a balance towards benefits versus costs (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009, p. 1113). Paternoster and Bushway (2009) argue that the offender's working identity will become less satisfying as he/she perceives future failures if he/she continues to abide by the criminal offender identity. Markus and Nurius' (1986) original formulation differentiated possible selves (PSs) which refer to what we want to become (hoped-for selves) and those that prompt movement away from undesired outcomes (feared selves). Hoyle and Sherrill (2006) highlight that PSs provides a “roadmap” which guides what one can do to both achieve the positive future self and avoid the negative possible self. Crucially, these changes to personal identity and self-narrative cohere with formulations of the process of desistance from crime (Giordano *et al.*, 2002; Laub and Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Stevens, 2012).

#### **4. Benefit finding: ‘making good’ and the redemptive narrative**

The consideration that there might be ‘benefits’ or growth for the perpetrator through their actions can be difficult to contemplate when there is a person that has died and families and other victims who are grieving. Research on meaning-making suggests that people may often demonstrate resilience, growth, and prosocial behaviors in response to extremely negative life events (Gilbert, 2006; Dunlop *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, the clinical literature describes positive changes following trauma, loss and suffering (Duck, 1982; Harvey, 2008; Neimeyer, 2006b; Orbuch, 1992; Stroebe *et al.*, 1993; Weiss, 1988; Wethington, 2003). Baumeister (1991) reported that when people experience negative or unexpected events, they tend to start searching for meaning. In this regard, the individual might realize what it is they want to do in the future because of dissatisfaction with crime and past life that is experienced as an accumulation of displeasure or what is known as “crystallization of discontent” (Baumeister, 1994).

One form of benefit-finding is the redemptive narrative (McAdams & Bowman, 2001). Ferrito *et al.* (2012) observed that offender patients' personal strength enabled them to shift from focusing on a discouraging past to facing the future with openness and renewed hope. These findings are consistent with literature on positive psychology which emphasizes how people who become active agents can recreate and reshape themselves, their environment and their future (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Hence, reinterpreting circumstances and reconstructing meaning can reveal the importance and value of life (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Taylor, 1989). Joseph, Linley, and Harris (2005) describe the positive changes that can follow from trauma and adversity such as increased spirituality, compassion and personal strength. In many ways, this idea also resembles what Mamali and Dunn (2011) call “crucial experiences” that describe the qualities of critical and decisive life experiences that challenge existing reality and have the potential to reveal new meanings (p.103).

Research with offenders who desist from crime suggests that desistors find meaning in a life that has been deemed a waste, by turning their experiences into a newfound redemptive narrative (Maruna, 2001). The

argument is that for something to be redeemed, it has to be re-evaluated, and the suggestion is that this re-evaluation is a positive one (Radzik, 2009). Throughout history, there are examples of people who find solutions to problems in the most adverse conditions (Frankl, 1984). Emerging literature on desistance from offending is based largely on McAdams, 2001b; McAdams, 2006 ideas on transformation of identity after negative events. Maruna (1997) describes how men who desist from offending turn their negative experience (e.g. a family member dies) into a positive narrative (e.g., a person develops greater empathy for others). This positive narrative is subsequently described as the 'redemption' script (or recovery story), and refers to the social processes of this script as a way of making good. By contrast, a 'contamination' sequence encodes the opposite movement – from good to bad.

In secular language, redemption is often implied in such expressions such as: 'every cloud has a silver lining', 'time will heal all wounds', 'where there is a will there is a way' and 'putting the past behind'. All these metaphors, according to McAdams (2006) convey a move from a negative state or standing to a positive one. Making good implies a reconstruction of the self. Maruna and Ramsden (2004) describe five themes that underpin the redemption narrative process. The first theme is reparation and generativity that encompasses acts of "reciprocity, mutual obligation, restitution, making amends and carrying the message to others" (p.142). Generativity was defined by Erikson (1950) as the concern for, and commitment to promoting the next generation. Generativity is linked with desistance (Maruna, 1997; Maruna *et al.*, 2004). The focus on generativity is about looking-forward to the future rather than dwelling on anger and guilt about the past, which functions as "a process of repentance" (Peteet, 1993, p. 265).

The second theme of redemptive narratives involves tragic optimism and providence. Tragic optimism (Frankl, 1984) has been conceptualized as the active capacity to hope in spite of tragic experience, or the belief that there is value to be gained by virtue of having experienced a trauma (Lerner, 1980), with the possibility of accessing agency in places where there is limited resource and options. Furthermore, in the redemption script, the past becomes a useful opportunity for a positive present and future (Maruna & Ramsden, 2004). Other scholars such as Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) pioneered the concept of 'posttraumatic growth' (PTG) that is defined as "the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises" (p. 1). Emerging evidence has shown that PTG is associated with desired therapy outcomes among offenders (Guse and Hudson, 2014; Mapham and Hefferon, 2012; Van Ginneken, 2014). It has also been identified following psychological treatment for offenders (Mapham & Hefferon, 2012), the initial entry shock of being imprisoned (Van Ginneken's, 2014) and during incarceration (Guse and Hudson, 2014; Elisha *et al.*, 2013).

The third theme is acknowledgment of vulnerability and mutual dependency. This involves the individual recognizing imperfection and sharing this vulnerability whilst drawing strength from others (Maruna & Ramsden, 2004). This theme has parallels to the growing body of literature that meaning can emerge when views and vulnerability are shared within a safe and supportive social context; this has been reflected in

research with veterans (Brinn & Auerbach, 2015); Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) (Brickman et al., 1982); and even in group therapy for homicide perpetrators (Adshead et al., 2015). In these social contexts shared norms, goals and aspirations alleviate the sense of rejection and stigma experienced and also provide a source of shared perspective, and a space to evaluate the self (Cruwys *et al.*, 2014 ; Jetten *et al.*, 2014). Another theme is embeddedness, in which the person begins to feel as an equal member of the community, and finds inner peace and serenity. Also, the process of re-socialization is important for desistance, and as such is associated with shifts in values (Farrall & Calverley, 2006). Uggen, Manza, and Behrens (2004) suggest that the self-concept of being a reforming citizen is the principal mechanism for interpreting role transitions and desistance from crime.

The final theme of coherence and internal integration is characterized by internal cohesion, personality integration and a sense of wholeness (Emmons and King, 1988; May, 1988). This theme focuses on the offenders' positive well-being and health rather than on pathogenesis and illness. Psychological trauma can pose particular challenges to enabling re-evaluation of one's life into a redemption narrative. Trauma can result in disturbances in a wide range of psychological processes including attention, cognitive–affective reactions, failure to make meaning of one's experience and beliefs, memory, coping strategies and social support. As a result, a number of information-processing analysis theories (emotional processing theory: Foa and Riggs, 1993; Foa and Rothbaum, 1998; dual representation theory: Brewin, 2001; Brewin *et al.*, 1996; cognitive theory: Ehlers & Clark, 2000) have been proposed that draw attention to the role of impaired or incomplete processing of the cognitive and emotional aspects of the trauma. These theories suggest that more complete processing is crucial for the integration of emotional and cognitive elements that have been disrupted and in order to reconcile experiences into coherent memories, to construct more adaptive meaning and to assimilate trauma into consciously accessible verbal memory (Brewin *et al.*, 1996; Ehlers and Clark, 2000; Horowitz, 1986; Janoff-Bulman, 1992). However, it has been argued that assumptions about fragmented or incomplete processing of traumatic memories are based on methodologically flawed empirical findings (Rosen & Lilienfeld, 2008), and vulnerability to development and maintenance of PTSD is dependent on social bonds (Charuvastra & Cloitre, 2008). In this regard, meaning-making has a central role in understanding how people adjust to stress and trauma. Park (2010) suggested that the meaning we attribute to particular events might be different from that of our more general belief systems (in terms of predictability, safety or fairness); reconciliation is necessary to reduce the distress associated with this discrepancy and to bring a sense of order and coherence.

##### **5. Meaning in action: behavior change**

Emerging literature is highlighting the potential of providing opportunities for activities and experiences that create new pathways for developing meaning and identity. These include the 'Listener' scheme in which prisoner volunteers trained by the Samaritans offer face to face emotional support to their peers (Perrin & Blagden, 2014). Perrin and Blagden (2014) also reported how the experience of being a listener

enabled prisoners to experience profound changes in self-identity and gain meaning and purpose in their lives. Arguably, the meaning of the story and the function it serves for the speaker becomes central in providing unity and purpose to the prisoner's life. This, in turn, helps in the development of a 'healthy' and coherent life story and a positive direction in relation to autonomy and relationships with others, laden with hope and possibility. In addition to influencing identity (Singer, 2002) it also provides crucial experiences of using and consolidating a new role and associated perspective (Giordano et al., 2002).

On the other hand, questions might be raised concerning the extent to which previously held meanings and identities can be replaced or left behind. The idea that narrative influences criminal action (Canter, 1994; Canter and Youngs, 2012; Youngs and Canter, 2011; Youngs and Canter, 2012) can also be true in relation to an offender's narrative with regard to being an instigator of crime (Presser, 2009). Violence can be related to an offender's attempts at internal agency, whilst the emotional qualities of the event for the offender (Youngs and Canter, 2012 ; Katz, 1988), including moral emotions, can contribute to violent acts seen in terms of defending communal values and moral imperatives such as 'honor' (Katz, 1988). Also relevant to this process are violent offenders' implicit theories about violent acts (Ward, 2000) and enduring cognitive schemas about self and others (Beck et al., 2004) that reinforce normalization of violence (Polaschek, Calvert, & Gannon, 2009) and consequently lead to lack of self-control (Gottfredson and Hirschi, 1990; Lynam *et al.*, 2000; Moffitt, 1993; Wilson and Herrnstein, 1985). Arguably, this raises the issue whether narrative change is more or less difficult when the initial narrative, identity and associated schemas are strongly or weakly held (Stein & Markus, 1996). Furthermore, identity can also perpetuate criminal behavior through labelling. Labelling theories (Goffman, 1963; Lemert, 1967; Schur, 1971) consider the impact of social audience in imposing a label that influences and creates the basis of one's identity. Although not all individuals labelled as criminal behave accordingly (Asencio & Burke, 2011), one outcome of labelling may be that the imposition of a label renders the person less able to access opportunities to construct an ongoing and fruitful story (Presser, 2009).

## **6. Factors conducive to meaning-making**

Changes in criminal behavior are significantly related to positive marital and parental attachment as well as job stability (Sampson and Laub, 1993; Sampson and Laub, 2003). Hence, stronger family ties and constructive connections to employment are linked to reduction in criminal behavior (Sampson & Laub, 2005). Life-course studies also suggest that imprisonment may constitute a turning point in the incarcerated offender's criminal trajectory (Sampson & Laub, 1993). When these areas of social control (through employment, marital and parental attachment) are reduced, offenders have a smaller incentive to abstain from reoffending (Graham and Bowling, 1995; Sampson and Laub, 1993). Indeed the role of negative life events, such as relationship breakdown, that are antecedents to many homicide offences has been largely neglected in the psychological and criminological literature (Needs, 2015).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that human beings have a “need to belong”. This suggests that we function best when we have secure relationships characterized by loving concern and frequent interaction. Furthermore, relationships that promote a sense of belonging are especially likely to promote meaning (Lambert et al., 2013). Interpersonal relationships and social connectedness are an integral aspect of human psychological functioning. Consequently, the form and content of individual narratives can be seen as emerging from interactions between the self and relationships but also within the broader social-cultural influences within which the individual is embedded. Trauma itself can be seen as socially mediated (Charuvastra and Cloitre, 2008; Needs, 2016; Sharp *et al.*, 2012). However, the process of re-socialization is not easy and exclusion might be imposed or elicited.

Related research on moral injury on war-related trauma suggests that possible dissonance between “fundamental assumptions about how things should work and how we should behave” (Litz et al., 2009, p.699) and inability to integrate an event within existing self- and relational schemas can lead to reluctance to utilize social support, or an individual may in turn be rejected as a result of perceived moral violation. More generally, research on veterans supports the idea that symptoms of PTSD might reject or discourage social support (Sippel, Pietrzak, Charney, Mayes, & Southwick, 2015) further contributing to a socially-disturbed or limited processing following exposure to extreme, morally challenging experiences.

The arguably pivotal role of perceived social acceptance and acceptability (Needs, 2016) has been noted elsewhere. Williams, 2001; Williams, 2007 argued that ostracism threatens four fundamental needs: the need to belong, self-esteem, need for control, and meaningful existence. As a consequence this leads to a decrease of positive affect and an increase of negative affect (Cohen and Wills, 1985; Leary, 1990; Williams *et al.*, 2000). Of particular relevance to offending, several laboratory studies found a causal connection between various forms of exclusion and aggressive behavior (e.g. Twenge *et al.*, 2001; Twenge *et al.*, 2007b; Twenge *et al.*, 2007a ; Warburton *et al.*, 2006). Hence, whilst social withdrawal and anger may make less accessible the social support which is important for the restoration of resilience in the context of trauma (King *et al.*, 2006 ; Ozer *et al.*, 2008), this may also make continued offending more likely.

Researchers such as Burnell *et al.*, 2006; Burnell *et al.*, 2010 have looked at veterans' narratives of meaning-making and reconciliation. Specifically, they argued that social support is a vital factor in the reconciliation of traumatic memories (Burnell et al., 2010). They have used the term reconciliation in terms of how traumatic events can be integrated into the overall life story, increasing coherence and reducing the intensity and prevalence of traumatic memories (Burnell *et al.*, 2006; Hunt, 2010). Research into processes of reconciliation and meaning-making in homicide perpetrators is largely absent.

## 7. Reconciliatory interventions in the criminological arena

Definitions of reconciliation are typically linked to retributive justice, restorative justice, political and social justice perspectives. The dominant public discourse of reconciliation is associated with Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) that promote social recovery through reconciliation, centred upon disclosure in a public forum, following societal conflict (Androff, 2010)..

Other literature on health and illness, has conceptualized reconciliation as development (Wiklund, 2008a; Wiklund, 2008b; Trenvåg and Kristoffersen, 2008; Pennebaker and Seagal, 1999) and as a transition to a new way of looking at life, from what it has been to what it is now (Gustafsson, Wiklund-Gustin, & Lindström, 2011). This highlights Ricoeur's (1984) argument that the person and their understanding of life are continuously developing and changing over time. Other literature on caring for people that suffer from chronic diseases, described reconciliation as finding harmony with oneself, as a move forward towards acceptance (Delmar et al., 2005) and as a reevaluation of one's earlier identity as well as earlier life (Asbring, 2001). This bears a resemblance to the concept of PTG referred to earlier in that the emphasis is on reporting growth outcomes in the aftermath of traumatic circumstances (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Stephen Fraley (2001) looked at the meaning of reconciliation for prisoners serving long sentences. Fraley (2001) posits that it can be very difficult for criminal offenders who are serving long sentences to achieve reconciliation with those to whom they brought suffering and pain, especially if their offending has been homicide and direct reconciliation with the victim is therefore impossible. Nonetheless, Fraley (2001) reported that offenders often attempt to make amends in other aspects of their life and the lives of others. For example, strengths-based activities, such as helping others who are less far along in the recovery/reintegration process can allow offenders or ex-offenders to attempt to reconcile with society for their past crimes (Maruna and LeBel, 2009; Aresti *et al.*, 2010; LeBel, 2012; LeBel *et al.*, 2015). Of particular interest, Rotella, Richeson, and McAdams (2015) suggest that engaging in redemption narratives can encourage reconciliatory intentions among perpetrators.

Additional insights can be gained from the framework of 'identity, meaning, control and belonging' proposed by Ashforth (2001) for understanding organizational transitions. Ashforth's ideas center upon how one disengages from one role (role exit) and engages in another (role entry). As the individual makes a transition into, within or out of a role they must find working reconciliations in relation to finding purpose and significance in the role (meaning) as well as gaining understanding of the nature of the role (Brief and Nord, 1990; Morin, 1995). Moreover, for the role to consolidate, Ashforth (2001) argues that the motive for control, a drive to master and to exercise influence in the role and the motive for belonging, a desire for connectedness with and commitment to others (similar to generative goals) are both important for the role to gain permanence and predominately reflect the importance of the shared social identity. In the new role

the person engages with 'self-in-role' schemas that direct thought, feelings and action. The implication is that defining oneself in terms of role identity requires making sense of oneself in the new role.

This understanding is pertinent to the desistance literature, which underscores the individual as an active agent of their own destiny (Vaughan, 2007). It is the individual that chooses, for example, to engage in employment; this aids the individual to adjust to the expectations of the new role and facilitates the enactment of law-abiding behaviors (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Additionally, emotions play a crucial role in directing (Archer, 1995) the individual towards the values and concerns most relevant to them and encourage reconciliation with a denounced past, hopeful present and ideal future. Even major psychological symptoms can be seen as a form of sense-making that is equally dependent on inherently social processes (Kyselo, 2016).

### **8. Consequences and adjustment following incomprehensibility**

The emergence of insightful, coherent and constructive meaning-making is not evident for every offender who has committed homicide. It is not uncommon for an offender to engage in 'techniques of neutralization' such as denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of condemners, and the appeal to higher loyalties (Sykes & Matza, 1957). Engaging in neutralization might be unsurprising, especially in the initial aftermath of committing homicide, as remorse can be painful, not least because of the level of shame that is instigated in the aftermath of such deeds (Gobodo-Madikizela, 2002). Neutralization techniques are, on the other hand, also important as they aid the formation of narrative coherence and the development of self-narrative (Maruna & Copes, 2005). Neutralization techniques are ways of warding off shame, in the face of an individual believing that their life has been potentially worthless (Lofland, 1969). Defining the self in terms of shame and internalizing a negative identity (e.g. I am bad) results "in a loss of face, loss of a sense of self-continuity, and feelings of ego fragmentation and coming apart in terms of moral integrity" (Wilson, Droždek, & Turkovic, 2006, pg. 133).

Enduring struggles with painful feelings of social shame, humiliation and feelings unworthiness due to awareness of wrongful behavior (Velotti, Elison, & Garofalo, 2014) may result in social connections becoming removed and distant, in particularly with family members (Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2004). Jean Baker Miller (1988) coined the term "condemned isolation" to describe the hazards of isolation and aloneness that create remoteness from human connection and feelings of immobilization regarding reconnection with others. This entrapment in functioning can be the result of intensification of psychopathology (i.e. PTSD) and identification with shame, as the dimensions of the self-structure (i.e. continuity, coherence, connection, autonomy, energy, vitality) continue to be negatively affected (Wilson, 2005). Twenge, Catanese, and Baumeister (2003) also highlighted how meaningful thought is disabled as social exclusion comes to the fore. With this might come an exacerbation of loneliness in the wake of

trauma (Stein & Tuval-Mashiach, 2015) which can be reinforced through the failure of being able to articulate painful experiences (Bar-On, 1999; Scarry, 1985).

As such, the antidote to shame is a system of nurturing support and communication which enables the restoration of a sense of belonging (Burnett & Maruna, 2006). Specifically, individuals in this situation require what Adshead (2002) delineated as a 'secure base', entailing healthy therapeutic boundaries, ways of regulating affect both in staff and patients and the importance of reflective spaces for staff among other elements. A secure base also mirrors the conditions of support and scope for a degree of autonomy necessary for the exploration associated with secure attachment (Needs & Adair-Stantiall, in press). The role of supervision has been highlighted as crucial for renewed exploration and development, when working with people presenting with challenging behaviors (Moore, 2012; Adshead *et al.*, 2015; Adshead *et al.*, 2012 ; Bowers, 2002) and especially when there are concerns of being a victim of an attack and/or of being identified as the aggressor (Doctor, 2008). Democratic therapeutic communities (DTC), that house residents identified as personality disordered, have been described as environments that promote change and encourage some of the aspects mentioned above by helping the men to come to terms with their offender identity and its origins within a "supportive and affirmative social climate" (Shuker, 2010, p.463).

## **9. Conclusion: Implications for practice, policy and research**

This paper has suggested that there is evidence that meaning-making is both a process and an outcome that can be applied to those who perpetrate violent offences, such as homicide. A violent and fatal offence can be traumatic for the perpetrator in that it is sudden, unexpected, out of the ordinary, and threatens one's future life and general wellbeing (McCann and Pearlman, 1990; Tennen and Affleck, 1990). It also constitutes a "moral injury" in the sense described by Litz et al. (2009).

Literature lends support for reinforcing the rehabilitative process through the development of new resolutions of identity, encouraging agency, and providing opportunities for healthy connections to develop. The roles of pre trauma vulnerability, trauma-related and post-trauma factors in relation to the evolving narrative and meaning making are also aspects of value in informing therapeutic interventions and rehabilitative aims. We have suggested that it is vital to explore the meaning that violent offenders make of their offences because of the opportunities for psychological growth in suffering and trauma which in turn provides information about how to promote safety and monitor risk of violence in future.

We conclude that the value in the process of meaning reconstruction for homicide perpetrators and its role in relation to wellbeing, and possible risk reduction, supports the provision of opportunities for perpetrators to critically reflect upon their narrative and share their life story. Practice-based insights as advanced by Ward and colleagues (Ward, 2002; Ward *et al.*, 2007; Ward and Marshall, 2007) through the Good Lives Model (GLM), support this proposition.

There is a danger that this work may be interpreted as ignoring the suffering of the victims, or families or the wrong and harm done by perpetrators. However, we do not believe that attention to the perpetrator implies lack of attention to the victim, just as there is a difference between explaining and excusing. Indeed, in our work so far, we have found that offenders gain more insight and sense of personal responsibility if their attempts at meaning making are encouraged in a supportive context than if they are left to 'do their time' in silence in a manner which can discourage reflection, renewed exploration and connectedness to others.

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