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Review of Hidden Victims: The Effects of the Death Penalty on Families of the Accused

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Hidden Victims: The Effects of the Death Penalty on Families of the Accused. By Susan F. Sharp. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005. xv + 224 pp. Appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00 cloth, \$23.95 paper.

The debate over capital punishment is driven by data and stories. Social scientists have amassed and analyzed mountains of data on issues like deterrence, public opinion, racial bias, and financial cost, data that have convinced most social scientists and much of the general public that the death penalty ought to be abandoned. But support for or opposition to capital punishment is not guided by a dispassionate analysis of data alone. It is also fueled by stories. There are the stories of the murderers and their horrible crimes. There are the stories of the victims whose lives were tragically cut short, and the stories of their families who must cope not only with the loss of the person they love but must also come to terms with how the victim's life was ended. The development of DNA identification has added another set of compelling stories to the debate: those of people who have been wrongly convicted of capital murder and have spent years

on death row waiting to be killed for crimes they did not commit. In her groundbreaking book, Susan F. Sharp adds the stories of the families of death row prisoners to those of victims, murderers, and the wrongly convicted.

It is often forgotten (or not deemed worthy of concern) that prisoners condemned to die are not only murderers but also sons and perhaps brothers, fathers, and husbands. The foundation of this book is a data set consisting of 68 in-depth interviews—most conducted in Oklahoma, a state with one of the highest rates of executions—with the forgotten families of people convicted of capital crimes. Professor Sharp, a sociologist at the University of Oklahoma, has analyzed these interviews to illuminate the poorly understood experience of those who suffer along with the condemned. A key aspect of that experience is being tainted by association. Because of their connection to a person judged to be so evil that he must be exterminated, families are treated as less deserving of compassion, or even as being partially responsible for the terrible crimes of their relative. Sharp argues that this sense of “otherness” distorts and disrupts the coping of family members. She traces the long and unpredictable process of coping that begins when a prosecutor decides to charge a defendant with a capital crime and continues beyond the execution, exoneration, or commutation. Along with showing the parallels to the psychological adaptation process employed by other traumatized groups, Sharp reveals the distinctive challenges faced by these neglected families, challenges created by the stigmatized, shamed status of the family member; a lack of social support (compared, for example, to the assistance provided to families of victims); the multiyear process of appeals and waiting; dealing with people who clamor for the execution of the person they love; and, for many, watching their loved one being killed at the appointed time.

As a principled researcher, Sharp is careful to point out the limitations of her data. She notes, for example, that because family members are difficult to locate and often reluctant to talk with researchers, her sample may not be fully representative of families of the condemned. And, because the sample is relatively small, it did not allow for systematic comparisons between subgroups (e.g., parents versus siblings). Despite these limitations, her sample is—to my knowledge—the most extensive yet compiled. Her research is pioneering and raises many important issues that other researchers might pursue. The moral legitimacy of the policy of capital punishment relies on a simple narrative: we are acting to restore justice by killing the evil person who has caused such terrible suffering. Like the stories of the wrongfully condemned,

the stories of the families of the condemned complicate that narrative and undermine the moral legitimacy of capital punishment. For those who seek to understand the complexities of the death penalty, this thoughtful and often moving book is a unique and indispensable resource.

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