Crime Victims' Attributions for Survival

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There is a substantial body of work on attribution theory, which describes the processes by which individuals determine the causes of events and their outcomes; however, little is known about survival attributions. To ascertain the kinds of attributions made by survivors of violent crime, we collected and analyzed televised interviews with survivors. Our analysis of 51 interviews indicated that crime survival attributions took one of two forms: survival because *statements and* survival for *statements. Survival because statements detailed* how *individuals survived, and* survival for *statements described* why *they lived. Interviewees mentioned surviving* for *their families, justice, and the greater good. Survival because statements emphasized the roles that God, family, emergency workers, and the victims, themselves, played in their survival. The discussion articulates possible explanations for these findings.*

Keywords: Attribution Theory; Crime; Media Content; Trauma; Victimization

Fifty years after its inception, attribution theory (Heider, 1958) still enjoys widespread use. Researchers across disciplines use the theory, which describes the processes by which individuals determine the causes of events and their outcomes, to understand and explain a wide range of communicative phenomena (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). For instance, scholars commonly employ attribution theory in studies of provider-patient communication (e.g., Elwy, Michie, & Marteau, 2007), disclosure in online and offline environments (e.g., Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011), student-teacher interactions (e.g., Kelsey, Kearney, Plax, Allen, & Ritter, 2004), media effects (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick & Taylor, 2008), and crisis

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communication (e.g., Hwang & Jeong, 2012). A central concern of these and other studies in this theoretical tradition is the impact of attributions on well-being and behavior (Weiner, 1986). For example, attributing personal failures or negative outcomes to internal (i.e., the self), stable (i.e., ongoing and unchanging), and global (i.e., generalizable across situations) factors is linked to mental health problems, such as depression, substance abuse, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Massad & Hulsey, 2006); whereas, attributing negative experiences to external (i.e., situational), unstable (i.e., transient), and/or specific (i.e., particular to the situation) factors seems to afford some degree of psychological protection (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999). Likewise, attributing personal success to internal, global, and stable characteristics is associated with high self-esteem, expectations of future success, and academic achievement (Chandler, Lee, & Pengilly, 1997).

Despite this ample body of research, more work remains to be done. First, although outcome valence is central to the theory (Weiner, 1986), far fewer studies attend to attributions for positive outcomes than to explanations given for negative occurrences. Moreover, consequences of attributions are measured and framed largely in terms of pathologies and psychological deficits (Peterson & Park, 2009). The tendency in the literature to accentuate the negative limits our understanding of the attribution process and its full range of effects. Another criticism of attribution research is its focus on internal versus external causes. Critics (e.g., Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983) contend that this dimension of causality is overemphasized and overly simplistic. As Malle (2007) and others have argued, "The person-situation dichotomy just doesn't capture the full nature of people's explanations of intentional action" (p. 4). Despite these criticisms of the internal-external dimension of causality, few researchers have attempted to distinguish between different varieties of internal and external causes (Furnham, 2009). Finally, the literature on attribution theory has been criticized for an overreliance on experimental designs and quantitative data (Murray, 1996). Taken together, these limitations suggest that alternative measurement procedures and methods of inquiry as well as emphases on positive outcomes are needed in attribution studies. As such, we designed a qualitative investigation of the attributions given for a positive outcome—surviving a violent crime. In the following sections, we describe the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of this project and the unique context of our investigation.

Attribution Theories

First proposed by Fritz Heider in 1958, attribution theory has been extended and revised by multiple theorists. These multiple revisions and extensions led Kelley and Michela (1980) to conclude that there is no "single theory of attribution" but rather that multiple attribution theories exist. At the core of these theories is the concept of attributions, or people's causal explanations for events and their outcomes. Initial formulations of the theory (i.e., Heider, 1958) centered on an event's causal locus, or whether the cause was internal or external to the attributer. Subsequent versions of the theory contributed three additional dimensions of causality: stability,

controllability, and generalizability (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). Weiner (1979) contributed the dimensions of stability, which refers to the permanence of the cause, and controllability, or the extent to which the cause is under one's volitional control. One final dimension, generalizability, "describes how applicable the attributed cause is to the varied situations confronted by the individual throughout his or her life" and ranges from global (i.e., all-encompassing) to specific (i.e., situation-specific) (Levy, Chung, & Canavan, 2011, p. 438). This dimension, proposed by Abramson, Seligman, and Teasdale (1978), is a key component of learned helplessness theory, one of many attribution-based theories.

Additional aspects of the theory worth mentioning include attributional antecedents and consequences and outcome valence. Although several different attribution theories exist, each with its own foci and assumptions, they share the same general view of the attribution process. Attribution theories assume that people rely on existing information (i.e., antecedents) to interpret the causes of observed events and their outcomes and that those interpretations determine responses (i.e., consequences) to what was observed (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Whether the observed outcome was positive or negative, otherwise known as outcome valence, is also factored into this process. Heider (1958) predicted that positive outcomes would be attributed to the self but negative outcomes would be disavowed and ascribed to situational factors. These predictions served as the basis for future writings on the self-serving bias, one of many attributional biases described in the literature (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008).

Attributions for Crime and Trauma

Researchers have utilized attribution theory, in its various instantiations, in numerous studies, some more relevant to the present investigation than others. Two relevant lines of research concern people's attributions for crime and trauma. There is a substantial body of work on the perceived causes of crime, criminality, and victimization; however, the majority of this research focuses on public perceptions rather than on the criminal's or victim's perspectives (Ruback & Thompson, 2001). For example, several studies suggest that the public's attributions for crime influence their attitudes toward crime sanctions, such that those who attribute crime to internal factors support more punitive measures and those who ascribe crime to external causes favor rehabilitation and crime prevention programs (Templeton & Hartnagel, 2012). Attributions of fault and responsibility for specific crimes, such as rape and child sexual abuse, also have been linked to important outcomes, such as juror decision making and sentencing recommendations (Finch & Munro, 2005; Kanekar, Pinto, & Mazumdar, 1985). One consistent (and worrisome) finding in this literature is observers' tendencies to blame the victim rather than the perpetrator of a crime (Bieneck & Krahe, 2011). This finding is particularly robust in the context of rape, with numerous studies demonstrating observers' tendencies to denigrate the victim (Grubb & Harrower, 2009).

Research on television crime programming content and effects suggests that these programs shape public perceptions of and attributions for crime and victimization.

Television news, fictional programs, and reality shows are replete with references to crime and law enforcement (Holbert, Shah, & Kwak, 2004). Media effects researchers contend that these programs influence viewers in myriad ways, including cultivating views of a mean and dangerous world (e.g., Gerbner & Gross, 1976), priming racial stereotypes (e.g., Dixon, 2006), and shaping attitudes toward law enforcement and crime-related public policies (e.g., Holbert et al., 2004). Framing theory and research indicates that media messages about crime and victimization also influence viewer attributions of responsibility, such that episodic frames (i.e., a discussion of public issues in terms of specific instances or people) lead to victim blaming and thematic frames (i.e., a discussion of public issues in more general terms) prompt viewers to ascribe responsibility to external factors (Ben-Porath & Shaker, 2010). These attributional tendencies are particularly troubling given that the vast majority of crime news stories are episodic in nature (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2005). Although researchers (e.g., Moor, 2007; O'Hara, 2012) argue that the media and the public's propensity for victim blaming has negative effects on crime survivors, this hypothesis has not been empirically tested.

Despite the lack of research on the effects of victim blaming on victims, there is a substantial body of work on self-blame experienced by survivors of rape and other crimes. These studies suggest that self-blame is a common consequence of crime victimization (Ruback & Thompson, 2001). In fact, Moor and Farchi (2011) stated that self-blame "is noted in over 50% of survivors" (p. 448). This tendency to blame oneself for victimization has been linked to numerous negative outcomes, including depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, suicidal ideation, shame, social anxiety, and revictimization (Kubany et al., 1995; Moor & Farchi, 2011). Fear of victim blaming also decreases the likelihood that victims will report the crime to authorities (Grubb & Harrower, 2009). Although some scholars (e.g., Janoff-Bulman & Lang-Gunn, 1988) view certain forms of self-blame as functional or adaptive responses to trauma, the available data indicate that all types of self-blame are maladaptive (Frazier, 1990).

Prevalence and Effects of Violent Crime

The prevalence and severity of violent crime in America make these findings even more concerning. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) tracks and classifies violent crimes of four types: murder, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault. In the last decade, less than 2% of violent crimes resulted in deaths, meaning the vast majority of crimes leave survivors. In fact, over 700,000 individuals fell victim to aggravated assault, nearly 368,000 people were robbed, and more than 84,000 rapes were reported between 2001 and 2010 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2012). For these individuals, surviving the attack is only half the battle; in its aftermath, crime victims must cope with the physical injuries they incurred as well as the emotional and social costs of victimization (Kelly, Merrill, Shumway, Alvidrez, & Boccellari, 2010). In total, violent crime has touched (and irrevocably changed) the lives of 1.2 million Americans over the past decade (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2011).

The fact that victims survived is often overlooked in studies of crimes and its effects. For example, a wealth of research attends to survivors' attributions for the crime and the influence of those attributions on postcrime adjustment (Falsetti & Resnick, 1995); whereas, few, if any, studies explore victims' attributions for their survival—a positive outcome of an otherwise negative event. As such, little is known about how "survivors answer the painful existential questions—what meaning have I found in my own survival? And, why did I survive when" others did not (Goldenberg, 2005, p. 532)? Some answers to these questions might provide survivors with a sense of comfort, safety, and/or control—critical components of trauma recovery—but other attributions for survival could prove problematic in the recovery process (Goldenberg, 2012). Given the lack of research in this area, an important first step in determining the impact of these attributions on recovery and adjustment involves identifying the types of attributions made for survival. As such, we designed a project around the following research question: To what do crime victims attribute their survival?

Method

Attribution researchers commonly rely on quantitative methods, a practice that has drawn criticism (Finlay & Faulkner, 2003). Moreover, "there is growing recognition that qualitative research may be particularly important for understanding the 'why' of some behaviors" (Beese & Stratton, 2004, p. 267). To answer our research question as well as calls for qualitative attribution research, we designed a study involving interview data and constant comparative analysis. In the following sections, we detail our approach to data collection and analysis.

Data Collection

Rather than recruit and interview survivors of violent crimes, we elected to collect and analyze televised interviews with survivors. Several factors influenced our decision to rely on publicly available interviews. For example, one issue that concerned us (and our Institutional Review Board) was the risk of re-traumatizing survivors by asking them to recount their trauma and related attributions. Also of concern was the research team's physical safety, which might be compromised by venturing into crime-ridden neighborhoods for recruitment and data collection (Maxfield & Babbie, 2012). By studying televised interviews with crime victims, we were able to subvert these threats. The potential for media representations of victimization to contribute to the dominant discourse on crime and public perceptions of victims also influenced our decision to rely on televised interviews (Taylor, 2009).

To collect our sample, we randomly selected episodes of the television show, *I Survived*, to view and transcribe. The 1-hour program, which debuted in 2008 and quickly became the Biography Channel's highest-rated show, features 20- to 25-minute interviews with individuals who survived life-threatening events. Each episode focuses on two to four survivors who describe what happened to them and why they think they survived. Not all of the survivors featured on the show had their lives

threatened by crime; some interviewees described narrowly escaping death from accidents and animal attacks. After removing interviews with accident and animal attack survivors from our sample, we were left with 51 interviews with crime survivors for analysis. Of the 51 survivors, 11 were male, and 40 were female. The majority were Caucasian (78.4%); whereas, 17.3% of the sample was African American and 3.9% was of mixed race. On average, 10.5 years (range 1–30 years) passed between the crime and the survivor's interview. The average age at which victimization occurred was 35.7 years old (range 9–66 years). Survivors described crimes, ranging from kidnapping to attempted murder, that occurred in 22 states, the District of Columbia, and four foreign countries. Verbatim transcription of these survivors' interviews produced 299 mostly single-spaced pages of text, and interview excerpts relevant to the research question filled 13 pages.

Data Analysis

For these data, we relied on the constant comparative method, an approach to qualitative data analysis associated with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The constant comparative method entails inductive category development through the identification and comparison of units of meaning or themes (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Themes are compared and grouped into like categories through open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss, 1989). After transcribing each interview verbatim, we began the open coding process in which "data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 62). During open coding, each author independently read the transcripts to identify and classify survival attributions. After the independent review of the transcripts, we met to discuss our findings and to construct an exhaustive list of the attributions we identified. Then, we returned to the transcripts for axial coding, which involved identifying the dimensions of and linkages between the categories that emerged during open coding (Charmaz, 2006). During axial coding, we focused on similarities and differences between the attributions we identified and grouped like attributions into the same category. After meeting to compare our findings and to construct our category system, we returned to the data once more for selective coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This step involved determining core categories and subcategories and assessing the system's exhaustiveness. During this stage, we realized that, while our core categories were mutually exclusive, there was some overlap in the subcategories. What follows is a detailed description of the mutually exclusive core categories—*survival for* and *survival because* statements—and their subcategories.

Results

Although each survivor's story was unique, we were able to identify some commonalities between interviewees' interpretations of events, including their attributions for survival. Upon closer examination of these attributions, we noticed subtle differences in their foci and form. We found that survival attributions took one of two

forms: *survival for* statements and *survival because* statements. Each of these categories and their associated attributions are described more fully below. The following quotations were derived from the television show, *I Survived*.

Survival for *Statements*

When asked why they survived, some survivors described what or whom they survived *for*. Individuals who explained their survival in this manner focused less on the specifics of the attack and more on their general purpose in life. These individuals described surviving for their families, justice, and the greater good.

"I survived for my family"

All of the interviewees endured horrific crimes, some of which claimed the lives of family, friends, and coworkers. In several cases, however, the interviewee was the sole victim of the crime. Separated from friends and family, these individuals questioned whether they would live to see their loved ones again. Christine credited her love for her mother for keeping her alive after being shot and run over by a man whose affections she had spurned: "I believe I survived for the love of my mother and my family and my friends. I wanted to see them again. I did not want to go and part with this Earth." Latoya, who was attacked by a neighbor intent on stealing her unborn fetus, echoed Christine's comments. Latoya remarked, "I survived for my children. God gave me the strength to know that I came through that for my children." Surviving for one's children was frequently mentioned in the interviews. For example, Penny, who was raped and severely beaten at the restaurant she managed, stated, "I survived that night for my daughter. I could not die and leave my 16-year-old daughter without a mother." Teri also attributed her survival to her children. Teri was savagely beaten by her husband and left to die in an ice-filled trashcan. She explained, "I believe that my love for my children was a huge part of what kept me going and kept me fighting. I needed to be there for them. And, and I made it." Although not physically present during the crime and, thus, unable to affect its outcome, family gave survivors like Teri the will to live.

"I survived for justice to be served"

Survival for statements emphasized one's purpose in life. For some, that purpose was to see justice served. Brandy's interview provides one such example. At 16, Brandy was forced into a car by two men who raped her. She explained:

> I made the choice to be raped and live rather than to be raped and die, and I remembered every detail. I remember thinking that, if I'm going to make it out of this alive, I have to remember every detail. If they're going to catch them, I have to remember everything about what happened tonight. I don't know what told me to do that, but it got them caught the very next day. And, I guess we got justice.

To Chris, getting justice meant living to tell his side of the story. Chris was dating a woman whose behavior became increasingly erratic. After falsely accusing him of

domestic violence, his girlfriend broke into his home and shot him multiple times at close range. When interviewed, Chris commented:

> If she had finished her job and killed me, then she could have said whatever she wanted to. I needed to let my mother know that I was still the son she'd raised and that I wasn't an abuser. So, being able to tell my story and living through it was very important to me.

Some survivors believed that they lived so that they could keep their attackers from harming anyone else. For example, Kristine, whose boyfriend stabbed her in the head and chest, commented:

> I believe that God had a purpose for me to survive this—so somebody else doesn't have to go through it. And, he can't threaten anybody while he is in jail. If it wasn't me, it would be somebody else.... But, I was able to be strong enough. And, I was able to live, and he was able to be in jail where he belongs.

"I survived for the greater good"

Survival gave meaning and purpose to some victims' lives. These individuals thought that they survived in order to serve some greater good. For example, Jesse, who was severely beaten and run over with his own car by two strangers, stated, "There is something that I'm supposed to do, and I haven't quite done it yet." Earleen also believed that she survived because she had something left to accomplish. While working the nightshift at a hotel, Earleen was accosted by a man who beat her and slit her throat. In her interview, Earleen explained, "God has other plans for me; he has something for me to do." Like Jesse, Earleen believed that God had an intended purpose for her.

Some survivors spoke of more specific purposes. For Terry, that purpose was to help others. Terry's wife and children were slaughtered and set on fire by two assailants, one of whom was Terry's teenage daughter. As Terry explained:

> Now, I speak to young people at churches and schools and warn them of the dangers of running with the wrong crowd and staying off drugs and alcohol. I believe there has been a reason for me to survive, and that's to be able to help others.

Susan expressed a similar desire to help others. One fateful night, three armed men broke into Susan's home and shot and killed her husband. In her interview, Susan commented:

> I believe I survived because, one reason, is telling my story for other people. So, that somebody else that was as scared as I was before this happened may act and react the way that I did and save their own life. And, I think, in some ways, that's why I've survived—to tell my story.

In summary, many survivors believed that they lived for a reason. Reasons for living included being there for one's family, seeing justice served, and serving a greater good.

Survival Because Statements

Unlike *survival for* statements, which focused on the future, *survival because* statements emphasized the past. Interviewees who made *survival because* statements mentioned specific factors that contributed to their survival. In effect, these individuals explained *how* they survived, not *why* they lived. Interviewees attributed their survival to one of three factors: divine intervention, personal characteristics, and outside assistance.

"I survived because of divine intervention"

Although some believed that their survival was part of God's plan, others insisted that God had a more direct hand in their escape. Teka was one such survivor. When Teka was 7 months pregnant, she was kidnapped and disemboweled by a woman intent on stealing her baby. In her interview, Teka commented:

> I survived because I was coming to a point in my life where I started to love myself, and respect myself, and cherish life. And, I also survived because of God . . . I know that God loves me. And, like they say, "God looks after babies and fools." And, at that time, I had a baby, and I was a fool.

Philip, a missionary shot by Haitian rebels, also spoke of God's love. Philip stated, "I believe that I survived because God's hand is on my life, and it would bring him more glory for me to survive than it would have brought for me to die." Maggie, who, at 15, was kidnapped, raped, and shot five times, made a similar comment: "I never had control over this from the start. I never had control over that day. It was always in God's hands."

"I survived because I'm a survivor"

Although tautological, this statement captures the views expressed by several individuals, all of whom thought that they, alone, were responsible for their survival. For instance, April attributed her survival to quick thinking. April was beaten, raped, locked in the trunk of her own car, and set on fire. As the flames engulfed her, April sprang into action. She explained, "I survived because I watched a show with a lady who had gotten kidnapped, and she lived by getting out of her trunk with the emergency release . . . That saved my life." Danielle was another survivor who managed to escape her attacker. On her way home from a theater performance, Danielle stopped and picked up a young hitchhiker. She thought he seemed harmless—that is, until he drew a gun and shot her in the head. Before he could shoot her again, Danielle leapt from the moving vehicle. Danielle reasoned:

> I survived because I didn't let him take me to wherever it was he intended to take me. I've said that I have no doubt that he intended to kill me, and I stand by that. Had I not jumped out of that car and ran, I would not be sitting here today.

Although some survivors, such as April and Danielle, were able to escape, others had no choice but to stay and fight. For example, Susan fought and killed her attacker—a hitman hired by her ex-husband. She noted:

> It's a very humbling thing to know that somebody wants you dead, especially after 17 years. It's humbling to know that you've had to kill a man. I survived because I had training in how to avoid injury in violent situations and, when you combine that with the fear of knowing that someone is trying to kill you and the power of adrenaline, I had all the tools that I needed to survive.

For some, surviving meant more than just fighting back; it meant being a fighter. Lois was one interviewee who described herself in this manner. While working as prison guard, Lois was taken hostage and raped by two inmates. As she explained, "I survived because I looked at myself as a fighter and not a victim." Mary also considered herself a survivor, and for good reason. When Mary was 15, she accepted a ride home from a stranger. Instead of taking her home, he drove her to a desolate area where he raped and stabbed her. When Mary fought back, he severed both her arms and threw her off of a cliff. Miraculously, Mary lived to tell her story. She said, "I'm just glad that I'm given another chance at life—that I didn't die. I'm a survivor; I survived."

"I survived because someone came to my aid"

In a few cases, interviewees attributed their survival to the actions of others. These individuals believed that they owed their lives to others, including emergency personnel and family members. When Joyce, a restaurant manager, intervened in a domestic dispute, she was shot in the abdomen. Joyce credited others with keeping her alive: "I survived because of the fast-acting people, all the way from the police officers, from the people in the dispatch, from people everywhere. Everybody came together." Police also came to Julie's aid. Julie was dating a man named Paul, who became extremely possessive. When she broke off their relationship, Paul broke into her home and stabbed her. Julie managed to get out of the house, but, as she ran down the street screaming for help, Paul tackled her and slit her throat. Luckily, an off-duty police officer heard Julie's cries and came to her rescue. As Julie succinctly stated, "I survived because of a police officer who was awake with her sick dog."

Some survivors believed that they would be dead if not for the actions of certain family members. Jennifer's interview offered one such example. When Jennifer was taken hostage and shot in her own home by an ex-boyfriend, her 8-year-old son quickly called 911. Jennifer credited her survival to her son's actions. She stated, "I survived because of my son. He's my hero. I don't think that I would be alive if it wasn't for what he did for me." Franklin credited his survival to his wife. The couple were passengers on Ethiopian Airlines flight 961, which, after being hijacked by three gunmen, ran out of fuel and crash-landed in the Indian Ocean. While others were panicking, Franklin's wife kept her composure. As Franklin explained, "I survived because I had a wife that was competent in giving instructions on how to prepare

for a plane crash.'' In review, survivors credited their lives to God, their own actions, and the actions of others.

Discussion

For this study, we analyzed televised interviews with individuals who survived violent crimes. These interviews evidenced the depths of human depravity and, perhaps, more importantly, the power and resilience of the human spirit. The interviews also demonstrated how survivors made sense of the senseless. Our analysis of these interviews focused on one important sense-making process: the attribution of causality. In particular, we were interested in interviewees' attributions for their survival. We found that these attributions took two different forms: *survival for* statements and *survival because* statements. Interviewees described surviving *for* their families, justice, and the greater good. *Survival because* statements emphasized the roles that God, family, emergency workers, and the victims, themselves, played in their survival. In the following sections, we review each of these findings and their implications for research and practice.

All interviewees provided an account of their survival; however, these accounts differed in their forms and foci. For example, we noticed subtle differences in how survivors completed the phrase, *I survived.* Some followed the phrase with the preposition *for*; whereas, others used the conjunction *because.* Closer examination of these statements revealed that they contained more than just semantic differences; they represented different temporal orientations. *For* statements placed an emphasis on future plans and goals. In contrast, *because* statements were framed in terms of past events, namely those that led to one's survival. In effect, *survival because* statements detailed *how* individuals survived, and *survival for* statements described *why* they lived. These differences between *survival for* and *survival because* statements parallel distinctions made between reasons and explanations in a recent extension of attribution theory. Dissatisfied with how Heider (1958) and others described attribution, Malle (2004) proposed an alternative model of the process and called it the ''folk-conceptual theory of behavior explanation.'' Unlike Heider, who characterized attribution as a cognitive process, Malle viewed behavioral explanations as speech acts and focused his attention on explanatory modes. Although he identified four explanatory modes, two—reasons and enabling-factor explanations—are particularly relevant to this study. According to Malle (2007), reasons clarify an agent's motive to act; whereas, enabling-factor explanations focus on ''what enabled the action to succeed'' (p. 11). These modes of explanation might account for the differences we observed between *survival for* statements, which could be considered reasons, and *survival because* statements, which could count as enabling-factor explanations.

In these data, some factors were both motivating and enabling. For example, interviewees described surviving *for* their families (i.e., a motivating factor) and *because* of their families (i.e., an enabling factor). Family *motivated* survival by giving victims a reason to live through the attack and *enabled* survival by providing tangible assistance

during the attack. These findings complement and extend recent research on the role of the family in trauma prevention and recovery. Although few, if any, studies examine crime survival, including the effects of or on the family, there is growing recognition of the importance of family support for those considering suicide and/or coping with traumatic losses (e.g., Kiser, Nurse, Lucksted, & Collins, 2008). Suicide prevention experts (e.g., Malone et al., 2000) contend that family support offers some protection from suicidal thoughts and behaviors by giving depressed individuals a reason to live. In fact, the Reasons to Live Inventory, commonly administered to at-risk individuals, includes a subscale focused entirely on the family (Linehan, Goodstein, Nielson, & Chiles, 1983). Our findings suggest that family also drives individuals to fight and survive a violent attack. Family support is equally important in the aftermath of a violent crime. In a meta-analysis of the research on adverse reactions to trauma, low social support emerged as strong and significant predictor of posttraumatic stress disorder in trauma victims (Trickey, Siddaway, Meiser-Stedman, Serpell, & Field, 2012). In light of this finding, the authors concluded that posttrauma social support was a "factor of potential great importance to the successful resolution of traumatic experience" (p. 136). Additional research is needed, however, to determine the effects of support provided during traumatic events on coping processes and outcomes.

Attributions to God also were common in this dataset. *Survival because* statements positioned God as an active agent, capable of affecting the circumstances and outcomes of the crime. These findings echo those of recent studies on religiosity and attributions to God. For example, recent research indicates that these attributions are more common among religious individuals and in response to positive events (Mallery, Mallery, & Gorsuch, 2000). Individuals also tend to credit God for extreme or unlikely outcomes (Gorsuch & Smith, 1983). This study offers some support for these assertions and is in line with the God of the Gaps Hypothesis, a philosophical perspective in which God is portrayed as a causative agent (Lupfer, Tolliver, & Jackson, 1996). The "gaps" in question are "explanatory lacunae," or that which defies explanation or understanding. According to the hypothesis, we use God to fill in these gaps—explaining the unexplainable as an act of God. Although extensively criticized by scientists and theologians (McGrath, 2010), this hypothesis resonated with some survivors who, when trying to explain the unthinkable crimes they endured, used God to fill in the gaps. These attributions to God also problematize the person-situation distinction made in attribution theories and research, as "God may be perceived as acting through either medium" (Gorsuch & Smith, 1983, p. 350). This makes it difficult to predict the effects of these attributions. As such, attribution theories and research should be expanded to better account for attributions to God and their likely effects.

In addition to crediting family and God, interviewees attributed their survival to their own actions. Survivors saved themselves by running, fighting, and escaping a locked and/or moving vehicle. Some of these individuals mentioned that they participated in televised interviews in hopes that viewers would learn to act and react in the same manner. These data cannot speak to the effects of viewing televised survival

stories; however, April's story suggests that viewers can learn self-protective behaviors from television. After being kidnapped and beaten, April was forced into the trunk of a car and set on fire. As the flames engulfed her, April was reminded of a television program in which a woman freed herself from the trunk of a car. By imitating what she had seen on television, April managed to escape the trunk and her captors. April's observation and imitation of another person's actions is suggestive of observational learning, a concept central to social learning theory and media effects research (Bandura, 2009). Although social learning theory has been used to account for the negative effects of viewing violent media content (Signorielli, 2005), media effects researchers have yet to consider what viewers might learn about survival from the media. It stands to reason that individuals can learn just as much about resisting aggression as they can about performing it from violent media content. This possibility warrants closer attention and examination by media effects researchers.

A discussion of study limitations is also warranted. The data we collected are limited in several ways. No response to our repeated attempts to contact the producers of *I Survived* meant that we were unable to ascertain how interviewees were recruited, how the interviews were conducted, how much editing or coaching was involved, and if and/or how these factors affected the sample, data, and analysis. For example, certain recruitment strategies could produce sampling biases, including self-selection by and undercoverage of certain groups. The gender composition of the sample does seem indicative of an undercoverage bias. Despite US Bureau of Justice statistics documenting higher rates of victimization among men than women, females comprised the majority of our sample. Different recruitment methods might have produced a sample that was more representative of the general population of crime victims. Self-selection, however, is quite common in trauma research (Nicholls & Dutton, 2001) and might have been difficult to avoid no matter what recruitment methods were used. Editing or coaching also could skew study findings. For example, the different forms and foci of survival attributions that we identified could be artifacts of the interview or production process. In addition, our reliance on televised interviews meant that we were unable to collect demographic or health information from survivors. We determined demographics by collecting newspaper stories on each of the crimes recounted in the interviews, but these stories may contain inaccuracies. Finally, without health-related information from interviewees, we could not determine if and how health status affected or was affected by survival attributions. These issues should be considered in future work on survival attributions.

Despite these limitations, this study suggests several theoretical and practical implications. For example, our use of qualitative methods, which is atypical in attribution research (Murray, 1996), yielded some findings that support attribution theory and others that complicate it. Victims crediting their survival to their own actions offer clear and compelling examples of internal attributions; however, survivors' attributions to God evidence the limitations of the internal-external distinction made in attribution theory. Moreover, none of the dimensions of causality discussed by Heider (1958) and others fully captures the distinctions we made between *survival for* statements, which focused on *why* the individual lived, and *survival because*

statements, which emphasized *how* the individual survived. These findings problematize attribution theory and suggest a need for further conceptual and theoretical development in this area.

In addition to supporting and extending attribution theory, this study could be used to inform trauma interventions and counseling efforts. For instance, eliciting and examining survival attributions could prove useful in survival resource training (SRT), a therapeutic technique rooted in cognitive and positive psychology (Miller, 2006). Clinicians who employ this technique argue that "victims often dwell on their mistakes and overlook what they did right in terms of surviving the ordeal and coping with the aftermath" (Miller, 2008, p. 132). As such, the clinician's role in SRT is to remind survivors of their adaptive coping efforts. To accomplish this, clinicians usually begin by having survivors recount the traumatic events and end by asking, "What did you do to survive the encounter?" (Miller, 2006). Incorporating a discussion of the "why" and the "how" of survival into SRT could help survivors and clinicians identify survival attributions that facilitate or hinder coping efforts. Although victims of violent crime face numerous challenges to their health and well-being, this study and SRT underscore the importance of focusing on survivors' resiliency, not just their vulnerability.

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