2025 SICASH MULTICONFERENCE

Psychology International Conference (PSYCIC)

Available online at: **www.sicash.sliit.lk**

Beneath the Sentence: A Deep Dive into Post-Homicidal Mentality and Coping Strategies on Sri Lanka's Death Row Inmates

Chathumi Madanayake[1], Hareesha Perera[1], Chathuni Samarakoon[1], Tharushima Athapaththu[1], Apsara Attanayaka[1], Yenuli Weeramanthrie[1], Tihara Sandupama[1], Naren Deepan Selvaratnam[1,2], Lakmal Ponnamperuma[1,2]*

[1]*School of Psychology, Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT), Malabe, 10115, Sri Lanka*
[2]*Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo, Colombo 07, 00700, Sri Lanka*

Corresponding author*: lakmal.p@sliit.lk

Abstract

This study explores the post-homicidal mentality and coping strategies of individuals convicted of homicide and sentenced to capital punishment in Sri Lanka, a context marked by stressful conditions of incarceration and cultural stigma. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), in-depth interviews were conducted with six male inmates at Welikada Prison to understand how they perceive and manage their acts (i.e., homicide) and extended detention under the threat of the death penalty. The results showed a variety of signs of psychological distress after a homicide, such as guilt, anxiety, disorientation, and emotional numbness. In order to deal with guilt, control intrusive memories, and adapt to prison life, participants used coping strategies, particularly religious surrender, creative engagement, and moral reframing. According to these findings, death row inmates face significant psychological difficulties, and the correctional system in Sri Lanka urgently needs culturally competent mental health services and rehabilitative frameworks. The study contributes to the limited qualitative literature on the inner experiences of death row prisoners, offering insights for policy development and clinical practices aimed at supporting psychological adaptation in highly punitive environments.

Keywords: Coping strategies, post-homicidal psychosomatic responses, death row inmates

Introduction

The act of homicide, broadly defined as one individual causing the death of another (Petherick & Petherick, 2019), precipitates severe and enduring psychological repercussions for offenders. Such experiences often lead to intense emotional turmoil, including symptoms related to post-traumatic stress, such as sleeplessness, anxiety, and despair (Haney & Lynch, 1997). This research refers to this complex psychological state as post-homicidal mentality, encompassing the cognitive and emotional responses individuals experience after committing murder. A specific form of trauma, perpetration-induced

https://doi.org/10.54389/EOCW1226

traumatic stress (PITS), directly results from causing harm or death, profoundly altering self-perception and potentially leading to psychological fragmentation, depression, and psychosis (Ferrito et al., 2020).

Incarceration following such acts further amplifies psychological distress. Prison environments, characterized by chronic stress (Haney, 2001), intensify this burden. For individuals on death row, the anticipation of execution creates a distinct psychological burden known as the "death row phenomenon," which can evolve into "death row syndrome," marked by emotional numbing, helplessness, and a profound loss of life meaning (Bandes & Hoffman, 2020). Prolonged confinement also contributes to "social death," eroding social roles, future orientation, and personal agency (Jewkes, 2005).

In Sri Lanka, these universal psychological challenges are compounded by specific legal and carceral realities. Capital punishment, prescribed under Sections 296 and 297 of the Penal Code, deepens psychological strain amidst punitive societal attitudes. The carceral system itself faces systemic challenges like overcrowding and social isolation (De Zoysa & Rajapaksha, 2023), exacerbating psychological vulnerabilities. The psychological impact extends beyond the individual, severely affecting families through financial hardship, emotional distress, and social marginalization due to deeply ingrained cultural stigma (Ali et al., 2023).

Despite these challenges, individuals within these settings exhibit diverse coping strategies. Religious and spiritual practices, such as Buddhist meditation and other faith-based activities, are vital for psychological survival and meaning-making among Sri Lankan inmates (Jayasundara, 2015). Peer support also forms essential informal therapeutic networks, as inmates often confide in fellow prisoners over institutional staff due to fears of judgment (Hickson et al., 2023). However, professional mental health care remains largely inaccessible due to cultural silence around mental health issues and persistent societal stigmas, as highlighted by vivid accounts of the severe conditions and isolation faced by death row prisoners in Sri Lankan facilities ('The "Death in Limbo" Plight of Death Row Prisoners, 2022). Most inmates do not view formal counseling as significant, indicating a shortfall in systemic support for psychological adjustment (Amila Suranga & Vidanapathirana, 2022).

The traditional concept of "rehabilitation" often proves inadequate for those facing irreversible sentences. Instead, psychological adaptation for these individuals shifts towards internal meaning-making and identity transformation (Johnson et al., 2014). However, effective rehabilitation in Sri Lanka faces systemic barriers, including limited resources and a disconnect from real-life environments (Sachitra & Wijewardhana, 2020). Many offenders come from backgrounds marked by poverty and limited education, which restricts access to psychological literacy or alternative coping models (Jayasundara, 2022).

This study may hold significant academic and practical importance by aiming to understand the under-explored psychological landscape of individuals convicted of homicide within the unique Sri Lankan context. Despite quantitative insights into distress, a critical lack of qualitative, in-depth research persists regarding the inner lives, identity work, meaning-making processes, and specific coping strategies of adult death row inmates in Sri Lanka.

Present study

This study is driven by the main research question: How does a homicide perpetrator make sense of and cope with the post-homicidal mentality? This research, therefore, aims to fill this critical gap with the following objectives:

1. To investigate the post-homicidal mentality of individuals convicted of murder and facing the death penalty in Sri Lanka.
2. To explore the specific coping strategies adopted by these individuals in response to their prolonged imprisonment and the reality of impending execution.

Materials and methods

This study explored the post-homicidal mentality and coping strategies of individuals convicted of homicide and sentenced to capital punishment in Sri Lanka, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This qualitative approach was selected to gain in-depth insight into how participants interpret and assign meaning to their actions and incarceration, especially under conditions of trauma, guilt, and existential uncertainty.

Six male inmates from Welikada Prison were purposively sampled, ensuring all had been convicted of homicide and exhausted their legal appeals. Sample diversity in incarceration length (ranging from 2.5 to 23 years) allowed for the exploration of how experiences and coping strategies evolved over time. Ethical approval was obtained from SLIIT University, with the prison authority cooperation ensuring participant recruitment and data security.

Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted on-site. Due to security restrictions, audio recordings were not permitted; therefore, real-time manual transcription was carried out by trained research team members. Questions focused on participants' emotions post-homicide, evolving self-perception, and coping strategies during incarceration.

The analysis followed IPA's four-stage process: initial reading and annotation, theme identification, cross-case synthesis, and interpretative exploration using textural and structural descriptions. Themes were validated through peer review, cross-checking, and Van Kaam's validation method. Double hermeneutics ensured awareness of researcher bias, supported by reflexive journaling throughout the process.

Additionally, the researcher positionality was explicitly considered throughout the study. Given the sensitivity of interviewing death row inmates, the research team maintained reflexive journals to track personal assumptions, emotions, and potential biases. Peer debriefing was also employed to minimize interpretive bias and strengthen credibility.

Due to security restrictions, real-time transcription was adopted instead of audio recording. While this method inevitably limited the depth of verbatim detail, the research team cross-checked transcripts against field notes and engaged in collaborative reviews to enhance accuracy and preserve data richness.
The coding process followed an iterative cycle: initial open coding of participants' transcripts, grouping codes into clusters, and refining them into higher-order themes. For example, expressions of guilt ("I tried to shoot myself") and surrender ("I leave everything to God") were first coded separately but later merged into the broader theme. This stepwise process ensured analytic rigor and transparency.

Results

Post-homicidal mentality: Abrupt emotional and behavioral shifts

Participants described a range of abrupt emotional and behavioral reactions following the act of homicide. These responses reflected the psychological turmoil and attempts to come to terms with the magnitude of their actions. Common themes included emotional numbness, anxiety, guilt, and in some cases, disturbing calmness or detachment. Participant 4 recalled an episode of disorientation, stating: "*It has been about forty-five minutes since I put my hand on my head from a bench, and I didn't know*." In contrast, Participant 2 revealed an acute sense of guilt, marked by suicidal ideation: "*I tried to shoot myself when the wife died*." While most participants showed distress, Participant 3 reported a sense of moral urgency: "*I went to the police as soon as I killed him.*" Such accounts suggest that the psychological aftermath of homicide can manifest differently depending on the individual's emotional processing, prior life context, and moral frameworks.

Coping Strategies: Managing guilt and incarceration

The participants employed a variety of coping strategies to navigate guilt, remorse, and the isolation of incarceration. Strategies fell under three main categories: religious surrender, creative engagement, and habitual distraction. Participant 2 described his faith-based coping: "*I surrender everything to God. I keep myself occupied with work since the incident comes to mind when I pray or do nothing*." Participant 1 turned to literature: "*I read books like 'Bauddhayage Athpotha'* (Buddhist's Handbook)." Participant 5 emphasized merit-making and philosophical reflection: "*Every dark cloud has a silver lining. I do live with that thought. So, I do merit*." Creativity also played a central role for several participants:

> "*I do music. I create lanterns. I construct ships… I work because of this*." (Participant 2)
> "*I craft to keep myself occupied… now when those thoughts arise, I make room for new ideas to arise*." (Participant 5)
> "*I smoked two or three packs of cigarettes. By now I've stopped it and read books instead*." (Participant 4)

These coping strategies function as psychological scaffolding, helping participants manage recurring memories of the homicide and adjust to long-term incarceration.

Discussion

This study investigates the post-homicidal mentality and coping strategies of Sri Lankan death row inmates, emphasizing how psychological trauma intersects with prison stressors and cultural context. Consistent with Haney and Lynch (1997) and Ferrito et al. (2020), participants displayed trauma-related symptoms such as disorientation, anxiety, and intrusive memories, aligning with perpetration-induced traumatic stress (PITS). Dissociative experiences and psychosomatic stress mirrored earlier findings on the bodily manifestations of trauma (Haney, 2001). Harsh prison conditions, including overcrowding, isolation, and limited mental health resources, intensify these effects, echoing international research on "death row phenomenon" and "social death" (Bandes & Hoffman, 2020; Jewkes, 2005).

In terms of coping, the findings corroborate Jayasundara's (2015) work on the centrality of Buddhist practices in Sri Lankan prisons, where religious surrender and spiritual narratives, such as *Angulimala's* redemption, provide inmates with meaning and psychological resilience. Similarly, the reliance on optimism and moral rationalization parallels Ferrito's (2015) observation that offenders often reconstruct narratives of necessity or justice to reduce guilt. However, the dominance of faith-based strategies in Sri Lanka highlights a cultural divergence from Western contexts, where access to professional counseling or peer-support programs is more emphasized (Hickson et al., 2023). Overall, this study situates inmates' coping within a culturally specific framework, while reinforcing and extending global literature on post-homicidal trauma and adaptation.

Although personal interviews provided valuable, context-specific insights, the study's design presents several limitations that affect the depth and generalizability of the results. Notably, the absence of female participants, the lack of audio recordings, and minimal follow-up are significant constraints. These methodological issues limit our capacity to fully understand the nuances of participants' experiences and may introduce researcher bias, highlighting the necessity for more comprehensive future research.

Conclusion

This study examined the psychological impact of committing homicide and facing the death penalty in Sri Lanka, highlighting how offenders cope with emotions like guilt and fear through culturally influenced strategies such as religious rationalization and self-defense justifications. Beyond these specific findings, the research also emphasizes the critical mental health needs of death row inmates and the importance of rehabilitation. Future recommendations include involving female participants, conducting longitudinal studies, and implementing mental health counseling and restorative justice reforms in the correctional system.

Acknowledgment

This research was made possible with the invaluable guidance and support of our supervisor, Mr. Lakmal Ponnamperuma, and Senior Lecturer Dr. Naren Selvaratnam. We also extend our sincere gratitude to the Welikada Prison Authority for granting us approval and to the dedicated prison staff who provided essential security and support throughout the data collection process. This research is self-funded and authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

Ali, S. M., Nasir, A., Ayyub, H., & Rasheed, M. (2023). A phenomenological analysis of the experiences of death row inmates: an exploratory study from Pakistan. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology*, 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/14789949.2023.2170907

Amila Suranga, M., & Vidanapathirana, J. (2022). Suicides among prison inmates in Sri Lanka: prevalence and associated factors of suicidal behavior. *MedNEXT Journal of Medical and Health Sciences*, *3*(2). https://doi.org/10.54448/mdnt22207

Bandes, S., & Hoffman, M. B. (2020). The myth of the dispassionate decisionmaker: Emotion and capitalsentencing. *UC Davis Law Review, 53*(2), 1239–1274.

De Zoysa, P., & Rajapaksha, R. (2023). Overcrowded but lonely: Psychological well-being of prisoners in SriLanka's Welikada Prison. *Journal of South AsianCriminology, 9*(1), 44–60.

Ferrito, M., Needs, A., Jingree, T., & Pearson, D. (2020). Making Sense of the Dark: A Study on the Identity of Men Who Committed Homicide. *Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice*, *20*(2), 163–184. https://doi.org/10.1080/24732850.2020.1714399

Haney, C. (2002). *Psychological Impact of Incarceration: Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment | Office of Justice Programs*. Www.ojp.gov. https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/psychological-impact-incarceration-implications-post-prison

Haney, C., & Lynch, M. (n.d.). *Regulating prisons of the future: a psychological analysis of supermax and solitary confinement*. https://socialchangenyu.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Craig-Haney-Mona-Lynch_RLSC_23.4.pdf

Hickson, A., Banks, M., & White, D. (2023). Peer support and prison mental health: A qualitative study of emotional resilience among inmates. *International Journal of Prisoner Health, 19*(2), 152–168. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPH-09-2022-0042

Homicide - an overview | ScienceDirect Topics. (n.d.). www.sciencedirect.com. https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/homicide

Jayasundara, M. W. (2015). Rehabilitation of Prisoners through Vipassana Meditation. *Proceedings of*

International Conference on Humanities and Social Sciences, *1*. https://journals.sjp.ac.lk/index.php/IRCHS/article/view/2290

Prof. M.W. Jayasundara; D.M. Gamini Samarakoon. (2022). Study on Effectiveness of Community-Based Corrections Mechanism in Sri Lanka as an Alternative Method to the Custodial Punishments. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, *6*(12), 625–634. https://ideas.repec.org/a/bcp/journl/v6y2022i12p625-634.html

Jewkes, Y. (2005). Loss, liminality and the life sentence: Managing identity through a disrupted life course. In A. Liebling & S. Maruna (Eds.), *The effects of imprisonment* (pp. 366–388). Willan Publishing.

Johnson, R., Kanewske,L., & Barak, M. (2014). Death Row Confinement and the Meaning of Last Words. *Laws*, *3*(1), 141–152. https://doi.org/10.3390/laws3010141

Sachitra, V., &Wijewardhana, N. (2020). The road to develop prisoners' skills and attitudes:an analytical study of contemporary prison-based rehabilitation program in Sri Lanka. *Safer Communities*, *19*(1), 15–34. https://doi.org/10.1108/sc-01-2019-0002

The "death in limbo" plight of death row prisoners. (2022, June 7). Latest in the News Sphere | the Morning; Liberty Publishers. https://www.themorning.lk/articles/206009