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ABSTRACT

The process of military death notification is designed to explain the interactions between next-of-kin notifiers (NOKN) and the people that are being notified. This paper focuses upon a dramaturgical analysis of the notification process. Specifically, the use of props and the performances of the actors within this setting will be discussed in hopes of explaining the organizational constraints placed upon the notifiers, and to explain the patterned expectations and anticipations of the notifiers.

On January 16, 1991, President Bush ordered United States forces, along with the allied coalition forces, to begin the liberation of Kuwait. He ordered the action after months of preparation, here in the United States and in the Persian Gulf region. Many reservists were called to active duty; also called to duty were the services of Next-of-Kin Notifiers (NOKN)[1]. NOKN are those people in the military who notify the family and loved ones when someone has died on active duty.

This exploratory study will deal with a group that has not been studied. The existent literature deals primarily with police officers who notify the next-of-kin (NOK) (Eth, Baron, Pynoos, 1987; Hall, 1982) and ministers who administer to the NOK (Lohmann, 1977; Weinback, 1989; Wood, 1975). There is very little literature that deals with the notification process. This study is designed to study the process by which one particular branch of the military notifies the next-of-kin. This

research is also designed to supplement the literature that deals with the process of death notification in hopes of establishing more information that will further the study of this important topic.

Current Literature

There are numerous references in the literature that deal with the different aspects associated with death. Many researchers have studied the effects of terminal illness upon the patient and family (Glaser & Strauss, 1966a; 1968; Kavenaugh, 1988; Kubler-Ross, 1969). There is also a wealth of information that deals with the impending death of a loved one (Kubler-Ross, 1974, 1981, 1983).

There are two major studies that discuss the seldom reported phenomenon of death disclosure. Glaser and Strauss (1966b) studied the effects of a terminal illness disclosure on patients. They noticed that physicians relayed the news in short, blunt statements because the doctors did not have the communication skills to explain the specifics of the illness to working class patients. Also, by not giving details, the doctors would limit the amount of talk that would occur between themselves and the patient. Finally, the goal of the research by Glaser and Strauss was to study how hospital staff initiated the disclosure and how they tried to guide and control the response process through interactions with the patient.

In 1976, Charmaz studied death announcements made by the deputies assigned to rural coroner's offices. One of the underlying motives for the notification was so that kin could assume custody of the body for burial. The manner in which the deputy notified the family had a direct effect on whether the family assumed the responsibility for the body and for the burial costs. Two important features of the research include strategies for self-protection and strategies for announcement.

Self-protection strategies are employed to maintain a distance between the officer and the person being notified. As the deputies

> announce the death to the closest relative, possibilities arise for questions and concerns to be raised which might force the deputies to reflect upon death. . . . What is striking is the degree to which their views reflect typical cultural taboos. . . . [They] show an avoidance of death, and discomfiture over the expression of grief by survivors. (Charmaz, 1976, p. 68)

For self-protection strategies, Charmaz concludes:

> An aspect of self-protection consists of the effort to remain the polite, sincere, authoritative, but basically disinterested official. This stance becomes particularly apparent when the deputy's taken-for-granted notions of how the relative should respond are disrupted or negated. When the relative is lacking the usual proprieties of such occasions or fails to show the "proper" expression of grief, the deputy may feel constrained to normalize the situation for himself instead of for the relative.... When the relative appears to take the "bad news" with so little seeming effect, the deputy then has to make sense of the situation in order to integrate the discrepant information into his own view of reality. (Charmaz, 1976, pp. 69–70)

Strategies for making the announcement help the deputy remain in control of the situation and help him handle any extraordinary interactions that may occur. The deputy must make the announcement in a way that "logically fits so that it is effective and believable" (Charmaz, 1976, p. 75). Unlike a physician that must notify the next-of-kin, the deputy has no props (other than his uniform and official vehicle, both of which may convey a very different message), dramaturgical aids, prior relationships with the family, or even the prestige of the doctor. Therefore, the deputy must make use of impression management and of strategic disclosure of cues. Typically, the deputy tries to "announce quickly, to turn the responsibility of the body and its subsequent burial expense over to the family, and to determine that the person who received the news is holding up well or is with someone" (Charmaz, 1976, p. 75).

Methodology

The subjects under study here are men and women assigned to a Reserve Readiness Center in the southeast area of Texas. There is a 4-day duty rotation. Each duty group consists of two 4-member teams. On each duty day, one team is designated the primary team and the other is designated the secondary team. On the following duty day, the designations switch. If a notification has to be made, the primary team makes the preparations. If two notifications have to be made, both teams make the preparations. If more than two notifications have to be made, the

duty group from the previous day will be activated. During the "Gulf Crisis," no more than two notifications were required to be made by one duty group.

The study was conducted in two different phases. The first phase was a self-administered questionnaire that was completed during a duty weekend. The questionnaire dealt with demographic data, feelings about being a NOKN, and personal habits. The questionnaire took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

For phase two, 12 of the 24 subjects were chosen to be interviewed and consisted of members from two different duty groups. Initially, all 24 subjects were to be interviewed, but due to time constraints only 12 were chosen. Three of the six first- time notifiers were interviewed as well as other more experienced members. After some of the training sessions for the different groups were observed, face-to-face semistructured interviews were conducted at a place of the respondent's choosing. During the interview, the respondents were asked to re-create past notifications, and were asked about their feelings about being a notifier and about actual duty as a notifier.

The Process of Death Notification

The process of notification under study occurs in three distinct time-ordered phases.

The first phase deals with all of the preparatory work that takes place before the visit. Not only are the detailed logistical arrangements made, but this happens to be a time for personal preparation. Of the four members of the team, one person will be designated as the "talker." The talker is usually the leader of the group; in this case, leadership is not designated merely by rank but may rest upon experience as a NOKN. The responsibility of the talker is to officially state that the military member has died. The statement is similar to the following:

> I have been asked to inform you that your daughter has been reported dead in [city, state, country] at 0700 on August 26, 1991. [Briefly state the circumstances.] On the behalf of the Secretary of Defense, I extend to you and your family my deepest sympathy in your great loss.

During the visit, the other members of the team are there for support—support for the talker as well as support for the other members of the family. In some cases,

the talker may speak with the primary NOK (wife, husband, parents, etc.) and the supporting officers of the team may notify other people in the household (brothers, sisters, children, etc.).

The first phase is as important to the NOKN as it is to the successful completion of the task. The notifiers do various activities during this phase: putting on an inspection type uniform (one that has just come from the dry cleaners), finding directions to the house of the NOK, locating an official vehicle for the ride to the residence (if an official sedan cannot be found, a privately owned vehicle may be used or rented), praying or meditating, researching details about the death, and practicing the notification speech and fielding questions from fellow team members acting as the family to be notified.

> As soon as I am told that I have to make a visit, I pull out my rosary beads. I will go to the office furtherest away from all of the commotion, get on my knees and say the entire rosary. As I pray, I say dear Lord, don't make me the talker this time around. Once I am finished, I go back to the group and pick a piece of paper out of the hat. [This group will place four pieces of paper into a hat. On one piece of paper is written the word *talker*. The other pieces of paper are blank. Whoever draws the piece of paper with the word *talker* on it has to do the talking.]

This preparatory work is a necessity in order to "build up" the confidence of the notification team. According to one respondent:

> The quicker you get there and get it done, the better it is for you. If you get something screwed up before you get there, you arrive at the house already nervous and jumpy. Then you become double nervous and jumpy when they open the door. It just isn't a good feeling.

One respondent recalls:

> I remember one time that we got lost. It really should have been an easy job. This kid died while driving his car during the rain. He was going too fast around a curve and his car went off of the road and hit a tree. It should have been real easy. He lived in the country and our driver said that he knew the area where he lived. Well, we were about

> three hours later than we wanted to be. We finally got there, but I was sweating real bad and we were all on each others nerves. We finally got to the door, and the mother comes out to greet us. Here we are with sweat running down our faces and we have to tell this lady that her son is dead. I think that she felt worse for us than she did about her son being dead. To me that was the worst—you should never make the notified feel sorry for the notifier. It is too unprofessional.

The type of visit will be agreed upon during this phase of the process. Team members will gather as a group to read the official message traffic that specifies the details of the service member's death. After reading all of the relevant data, they will discuss potential problems with this particular notification. Upon completion of the discussion, the leader will delegate responsibilities to the other members of the team (most of the duties have already been completed; this is primarily done as a verbal checklist of the required responsibilities). Upon completion of assigned tasks, team members are instructed to inform the team leader when each member is prepared and ready to make the visit.

Once the preparatory work has been done, the actual visit (phase two) occurs—the drive to the residence, walking to the door, knocking or ringing the doorbell, and the notification. Yet, according to one respondent, there are different types of visits.

> As far as I am concerned, there are three types of visits that need to be made. The first is the "easy case" which is a wham-bam-thank-you-mam. In other words, you arrive and then you leave right away. The second type is the "problem case." Here, there is a difficulty with the visit. This time you end up staying a little longer because you end up explaining things to the family. The third type is the "gut wrench." In this case, there are a lot of problems associated with the visit. What's bad is that you can be there [at the residence] for hours.

Most respondents do have a rank order of the types of visits that are required to be made. Yet, these types are simply predictions, made by the team, and are based upon the expected responses of the family and the circumstances regarding the death. Even though the titles may vary, all of the respondents rate the visit as it affects them (the notifier) and not as it affects those who are notified. When asked about examples of the different types of visits, most respondents said that the type

of visit is decided upon on a case-by-case basis. Yet, the underlying motif for the type of visit is the "cause" and "honor" of the death and the condition of the bodily remains.

Examples of the "easy case" are those deaths that occur honorably or those deaths that are due to normal or ordinary causes. Death by natural causes, death due to enemy fire (during a time of war), natural disasters (earthquakes, etc.), driving accidents (even if caused due to the service member's drunkenness) all fall under the category of "easy cases."

Examples of "problem cases" include deaths caused by dishonorable means or deaths caused by extraordinary means. Suicide is, by far, the most common case in this category. Death by "friendly fire" and military related deaths during peacetime (training accidents, etc.) also fall within this category. One reason suicide may fall under this category is the stigmatization that is associated with this type of death within American society. Another reason may be the feeling of helplessness that the family experiences.

Finally, examples of "gut-wrench cases" include those causes of death that leave no remains or only mutilated remains. Death by mutilation, unfound drowning victims, or any death that leaves a partial body fall into this category. There may be several reasons why these cases may be the most difficult. First, some people or families feel that they must have a complete body to mourn over (this idea may be due to religious reasons, or may be related to a sense of finality of the death). Secondly, some anguish may have been caused knowing that the victim may have suffered during the final hours (e.g., torture victims).

There are two important aspects of this typology. First, the type of visit is determined by the notification team due to effects that it will have upon themselves. Even though most notifiers can or will empathize with the families, they view the visit as: how much time will I have to spend? or how much extra paperwork will I have to do? Secondly, the typology is linear in nature. As the difficulty of the visit increases, so do the number of problems associated with the visit. The final classification of the visit depends upon the interactions that occur between the NOKN and the person being notified. If the family does not react in the manner that was anticipated, the final classification may revert to a less difficult classification. Also, the family may not react "appropriately" (as determined by the team) and the final classification may escalate into a more difficult type.

The final phase of the notification process is the exit of the team. Not only does the team leave the premises, but each team member assesses the success of "the mission." There is an unwritten rule that is passed down from training session to

training session, and it is one of the most important aspects of the final part of the visit: the team cannot leave until they feel that everything is "under control." In other words, if the team leader does not feel comfortable with the manner in which the family has taken the news, the team must stay on the premises until someone takes control of the situation (e.g., a local minister, a close neighbor, or a family member) or until the team members are escorted off the premises. The greatest conflict between the team members occurs because of this waiting period. The more difficult the case, the more likely that the team will remain on the premises. Yet, the length of the wait is subjectively determined by the team leader.

> I used to be on a team that was the pits. Our team leader was one of these people that wore his heart on his sleeve. He always felt sorry for everyone. We had to make a visit and this lady answers the door. We tell her that her son has died and she starts crying. We asked her if there was anything that we could do and she said that there wasn't. She was still crying—so we asked her if we could come inside and she said no. We asked her if there was anyone that we could call and she said no. So here we are standing in the lawn at this woman's front door in our uniforms. We must have stood there for twenty minutes and watched this lady cry. Finally the lady turns around and shuts the door and we leave. As soon as I got into the car I asked the team leader, "What the fuck were you doing out there? We should have left 25 minutes ago." He replied, "I just didn't think that she was ready for us to go." I replied, "What did you want us to do—wipe her tears for her?" Later that week, he resigned as team leader and I was appointed as the new team leader.

During the assessment of the visit, each team member recalls good and bad aspects of the visit. Usually, the assessment takes place in a public place (e.g., restaurant, fast food eatery, bar). A public place is chosen in order to ensure that a team member will not "break down." Members are less likely to display emotional feelings while in uniform, in public arenas.

After all assessments have been made, all members return to the duty station to complete the duty day. The team leader completes the paperwork necessary to report the completion of the notification. Also, a summary report of the details of the notification are recorded. The higher the difficulty of the visit, the longer the summary report will be. In the summary report, any aspect that was extraordinary must be explained in great detail.

Normally, if only a single notification has been made during the day, the notifying team will be allowed to go home (after all paperwork has been completed) and the remaining team will remain on duty.

Discussion

Perhaps the phenomenon of next-of-kin notification can best be understood from an interactionist's perspective; in other words, a concentration upon the experience and behavior of the actors in the situation and the shared, and unfortunately, unshared meanings of these actors. In the situation of a death notification, there can be no assumptions that culturally shared meanings exist or that motivations are uniform across all of the participants. Clearly, the notification team is bound to accomplish their task as a collateral duty associated with their military obligations. On the other hand, the next-of-kin have a far wider range of acceptable behaviors because grief, while culturally conditioned, is nevertheless a very individualistic behavior.

More specifically, next-of-kin notification rests upon symbolic interaction. For the notifiers, uniforms and the official vehicle have sign significance and convey the seriousness of what is about to be acted out. The seriousness of the occasion can even be noticed in the carefully chosen words spoken by the talker. Beyond the interaction defined by this deliberately choreographed attempt to define the situation by the notifiers, the remainder of the interaction must be negotiated. As Mead (1934) suggested, social interaction is like a game; but, in this particular interaction the rules are far less flexible for those initiating the interaction (beginning the game) than those with whom the game is played out. Johnson (1989) states, "The symbolic interaction perspective makes us aware of these small details of social life through which we, as individuals, move through the world, using symbols to present ourselves to others and affect what people think, feel, and do" (p. 24).

The attention to the minute details reported by this research verify this notion and are therefore crucial to the "successful" notification. The "interaction event" in this case is the successful completion of the notification. Yet, success is defined differently by this particular branch of the Armed Forces and the notification team. For this branch of the Armed Forces, success is the most humane dissemination of the death notification; for the notification team success is a notification that has the least effect upon themselves. In keeping with this theoretical perspective, a

dramaturgical approach has been employed to examine the process of death notification as a performance, to gain insight into the presented images of the actors, actresses, and the audience, and to study the constantly changing definition of self by the participants as they reevaluate themselves (and their audience) throughout their performance. From Goffman's point of view, the notifiers, as well as the notified, are who they present themselves to be. The players are not wearing a "mask" because during the relatively brief encounter, the mask does not hide the individual but rather *is* that individual.

To quote Johnson (1989):

> Goffman's perspective makes the important contribution that although social situations carry certain expectations, we are always in a position to manipulate, circumvent, and resist them. The dramaturgical perspective makes us aware of how creative we often are as social actors, bringing to each role our own particular "touch," creating and maintaining the impressions we want, and affecting other people's perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and behavior. (p. 25)

The data reported here illustrate a fundamental point by Goffman (1959)—actors cannot blithely assume, when they project their definition of the situation to others, that these others will not by their behavior/interaction "contradict, discredit, or otherwise throw doubt upon this projection" (p. 12). When this occurs, as seen with what were called problem cases and more clearly by what were described as "gut wrench" cases, interaction itself can in Goffman's words, "come to a confused and embarrassed halt" (p. 12). At times when the situation proves to be incorrectly defined, or undefined by the participants, some of the actors may feel discredited. Feeling that one's presentation has been discredited may be associated (according to Goffman) with feelings of hostility, shame, unease, out of countenance, embarrassment, and anomy—all of which can prove disadvantageous to the notifiers in this already emotionally supercharged situation.

Two of Goffman's concepts are particularly appropriate to an analysis of next-of-kin notification—the concept of performance and the concept of team.

Performance

Goffman (1959) defines the concept of performance in the following manner:

> When an individual plays a part, he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them. They

> are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. In line with this, there is the popular view that the individual offers his performance and puts on his show "for the benefit of other people." (p. 17)

Belief in the Part One Is Playing

The performers may be completely convinced of, or totally detached from, the reality they are trying to establish or create. One may be committed to the role or perform it very cynically. Among next-of-kin notifiers studied here, this also appears to be the case. Although all tried to convey the sorrow of the country and to share the grief of the family, to appear warm, compassionate, and caring, some reported that inside they just wanted to complete the job (mission). Others reported being truly touched by the sadness and sorrow of the family, experiencing, albeit to a lesser and controlled degree, an emotional response.

Front

Attendant to the conception of performance is the notion of "front." As in a drama, there are props, stage settings, appearance, and manner. Historically, a military death was announced by a telegram from the War Department. In contemporary usage, the appearance of the notifier team in a vehicle marked with official insignia, and personnel, in uniform, who may or may not carry some "official" looking documents can all be considered as defining the "scene." The stage on which the drama is acted out is never known beforehand to the notifiers but rather is literally "home base" for the next-of-kin and may be replete with all manner of "props" which will exaggerate the impact of the situation, e.g., photos, a letter being written, etc. As this study indicates, appearance is carefully controlled; the uniforms of the notifiers warn and demark their status. For the next-of-kin, appearance is more problematic because they may still be in a robe and slippers or some other informal attire. The "manner" for the notifiers is a carefully rehearsed presentation, because the parts to be played by the team have already been delegated. The notifier has a specific duty to perform, which is an official act of government. There is the latitude, however, to modify the performance somewhat with looks and gestures to soften the bad news. In any case, the manner for the

notifier is far more restrictive than it is for the next-of-kin. If a sufficiently military manner is not maintained, the notifiers may leave the next-of-kin with no sense of direction or understanding of how to proceed with the process of grief, mourning, and burial. Overly military bearing (manner) may create anger and resentment.

As an aside, it should be noted that military recruiters are more widely distributed geographically than notifiers. However, it would be totally unsound, in a Goffman sense, to have the same individual who talked the family into letting their loved one join the service be the one to call on them and to advise them of the death. Defining the situation would be impossible.

Idealization

In social encounters, Goffman (1956), writing on deference and demeanor, explains that social interaction may be symmetrical or asymmetrical; the former is characterized by more or less egalitarian expectations, and the latter rests on the differential treatment of the parties. In a notification, this point may be the occasion for the definition of the situation to be contested. Given the uniforms and the "official business" which brings them into the home, the notifiers would expect deference and would expect that the next-of-kin would defer to the notifiers. However, given the nature for the visit, both the next-of-kin as well as the notifiers may perceive that it is the family who should receive deference. The grief and distress of the family may be seen as the overriding definition of the situation and thereby superseding the official reason for the visit. Therefore if the principal ideal of the team is to be realized, deference to the family may be utilized in order to complete the mission. In such a case, "a sacrifice is made not for the most visible ideal but rather for the most legitimately important one" (Goffman, 1959, p. 45).

Maintenance of Expressive Control

In the performance, performers must maintain "expressive control" because the audience may look at the most minor, unintentional, and meaningless cues to guide them. Unfortunately, this creates a problem in that accidental, incidental, and inadvertent gestures or verbal events may be seen as more meaningful by the audience than by the designated performer. According to Goffman (1959):

> In response to these communication contingencies, performers commonly attempt to exert a kind of synecdochic responsibility, making

> sure that as many as possible of the minor events in the performance, however instrumentally inconsequential these events may be, will occur in such a way as to convey either no impression or an impression that is compatible and consistent with the over-all definition of the situation that is being fostered. (p. 51)

On one occasion the notification team became hopelessly lost when trying to find the home of the family to be notified. They arrived much later than anticipated and they were dripping with sweat and were somewhat disheveled. This is not the crisp, sharp military bearing called for during a notification.

Misrepresentation

This lack of military bearing may lead the audience—in this case, the person being notified—to doubt the performance. The failure to believe in this particular performance causes the team members to doubt their own confidence in the notification.

This reduction in confidence can lead the audience to discredit the performance entirely. Once a minor "chink" in the "symbolic armor" occurs, the audience may also question the sincerity, truthfulness, genuineness, and validity of the interaction event. When a minor discrepancy between the "fostered appearance" and reality occurs, the delicate and fragile nature of the notification can be seen.

Reality and Contrivance

Even though the team may be well-rehearsed, the reduction in confidence, due to extraneous events, may result in a bad performance. One of the most important features of the notification process is the fact that the talker is simply an impromptu actor. If the audience is simply receptive, the dramatization of the event becomes a well-rehearsed scenario by an actor to a charitable audience. As the difficulty of the notification increases, on the other hand, so does the ambiguity of the situation. In this case, the actor must be dependent upon a repertoire to successfully complete the "mission." In other words, the actor becomes dependent upon personal skills—e.g., management of voice and facial expressions, previous scenarios, and previous stage directions. By not knowing how the audience will react, the actor hopes to have learned "enough pieces of expression to be able to 'fill in' and manage, more or less, any part that [is] given" (Goffman, 1959, p. 73).

Team

Goffman refers to a performance team as that group of players who cooperate to "stage" a routine—defined by this research as a notification. Although this notion of multiple actors sharing the same definition of the situation would facilitate having the audience share such a definition and would allow for dealing with the practical matters such as support for the central character (the talker) and permitting different segments of the audience to be addressed separately, it also contains the roots of two potential flaws. On the one hand, it means that there are that many more people who can disrupt the situation by failing to properly act their part. In this regard, since notification teams are frequently made up of officers of different rank, often a notification may require cutting across structural barriers in the military. (Goffman spoke of this possibility directly regarding treatment teams in mental hospitals.) On the other hand, Goffman points out that if members of a performance team are all cooperating to maintain one definition of the situation for an audience, they will be hampered in maintaining it for each other. This factor makes the informal debriefing after a notification so important.

> Since we all participate on teams we must all carry within ourselves something of the sweet guilt of conspirators. And since each team is engaged in maintaining the stability of some definitions of the situation, concealing or playing down certain facts in order to do this, we can expect the performer to live out his conspiratorial career in some furtiveness. (Goffman, 1956, p. 105)

For Goffman, performance teams were seen to have a director. This holds true for notification teams as well—for the talker becomes the director (regardless of his/her military rank). Goffman also suggests that, over time, performance teams give rise to a "star"; the same principle was observed for notification teams.

Conclusions

There are many other aspects that could follow in a dramaturgical analysis of military death notification. The interaction event is not comprised solely of "performance" and "team." Due to length constraints, other features, which are clearly applicable—i.e.,"backstage, region, etc., were excluded from our analysis.

Also, since a branch of the Armed Forces sponsored the research and the questions were designed to study the effects upon the notifiers, any analysis of the perceived effects on the people being notified would bias any findings regarding the NOK.

The manner in which the military informs the next-of-kin is very important in the overall understanding of the phenomenon of death notification. There is no easy way in which to notify the next-of-kin. Glaser and Strauss (1966a) tell of one doctor who creates a dying scenario for the family of a young man who had already died during surgery. The doctor's reasoning was that the family needed some time to absorb the impending loss of their son. The three-step approach to the notification process seems to be very sound. The first stage must be preparatory in nature—simply a collection of facts of the death. Also in this stage must be the preparation of the notifier. The second stage should be the notification or visit. The specifics should be left up to the individual making the visit—appropriate attire, time of day, and the wording of the actual notification. Having alternate members for support seems justified as well. The final stage must include some type of assessment of the visit.

Yet, there does seem to be a need for some type of formal training by a professional. Training may include communication skills, knowledge of benefits that are due to the survivors, and training to discern how the notifier feels about death in general. In closing, the process of death notification will be important in the future. The process can be made applicable to a variety of settings: hospice settings, nursing homes, hospitals, police departments, corporate settings in which death may occur, and agencies which must notify that death has occurred due to natural or human-caused disasters. With the increased number of deaths occurring outside of the home, more people will be required to learn the process of death notification.

NOTE

1. For the sake of anonymity, the job designation has been changed to Next-of-Kin Notifier. If we had used the original job designation, we would have violated the initial agreement between ourselves and the specific branch of the Armed Forces that granted permission for this study.

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The Sociologist as Expert Witness*

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ABSTRACT

The role of the expert witness in court proceedings is an important part of the American judicial system. Sociologists can make substantial contributions to the way in which the law as an institution evolves if they increase their availability and participation in legal proceedings. One way to do this is as an expert witness. In court, expert witnesses can do what no other witnesses can do: they may offer *opinions* and *conclusions* based solely on their professional training and expertise. This provides them with a special role and opportunity to *define* areas of the law, such as what constitutes a family, what the "best interests of the child" are in a custody determination, or when incarceration in a treatment facility would be efficacious. To be effective in this role, sociologists must understand what courts look for in an expert witness, the limitations of court procedures, and the best way in which to present testimony. Additionally, sociologists can be "experts" as consultants to attorneys in the preparation of cases for trial, and as adjuncts to the judiciary in serving as clinicians or investigators for the courts. The sociological perspective has much to offer, and the application of that perspective as an expert witness is an interesting and appropriate role for the sociologist who wishes to help define reality beyond the classroom.

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