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Disenfranchisement and Ambiguity in the Face of Loss: The Suffocated Grief of Sexual Assault Survivors

Grief, loss, and social injustice are vital elements in the distinct yet intersecting stories of sexual assault and post-assault survivorship. Yet survivors must frequently cope in isolation or in programs and therapeutic settings informed by literature that does not consistently account for grief and loss as central to their experiences. Utilizing a feminist framework, I review and critique literature on sexual assault survivorship and loss with focus on factors related to disenfranchisement and suffocated grief among young adult females. I also explore how these factors further complicate grief and mourning processes. Implications for socially just and culturally appropriate research and practice with bereaved sexual assault survivors are provided.

> There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.
>
> —Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on the Road*, 1969

Sexual assault survivors are among the most disenfranchised populations, coping with narratives of multiple losses, uncertainty, and grief that frequently go unacknowledged (Doka, 1989). An alleged perpetrator gleefully walked across the stage at college graduation, cheered on by an audience, some of whom, aware of the assault, applauded nonetheless. Meanwhile, the assault survivor, disoriented and betrayed by a system and society designed to protect offenders, struggles with grief that is suffocated by a system filled with penalties (Bordere, 2016b) around missed days at work, delayed class assignment submissions, and oppressive stigma stemming from the assault. The survivor is left to contend with losses of trust and physical and emotional safety. She faces the agony of knowing that despite the perpetrator's nefarious actions, he will experience the freedom to participate in a life of possibilities and protections with few or no social, educational, or legal sanctions—a luxury that, in an instant, was violently seized from the survivor.

This article is a call for more activist research (see Cancian, 1993) employing feminist perspectives and promoting social change that benefits female sexual assault survivors (hereafter *survivors*). There is a need for more social justice research and practice "promoting social change and performing social action that advance psychological prevention, psychoeducation, and well-being" (Warren & Constantine, 2007, pp. 231–232) for survivors. Such work moves beyond the standard practice of writing research largely for the purposes of disseminating information to academicians or colleagues (Cancian, 1993).

Although grief, loss, and social injustice are inextricably intertwined with sexual assault survivorship, few empirical studies, conceptual

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models, and programs address these issues as interrelated. A small body of literature conjoins sexual assault and grief (e.g., Schultz & Harris, 2011; Whiston, 1981), and even less scholarly attention has been paid to grief support as a socially just practice in sexual assault survivorship (e.g., Bordere, 2015). These disconnects in the literature have looming implications for our ability to meet the needs of sexual assault survivors in educational settings, programming, and policy.

In this article, I review, critique, and synthesize literature and knowledge on grief, loss, and sexual assault. I utilize social justice, cultural contextual, ecological systems, and feminist perspectives to argue that sexual assault (i.e., sexual violation occurring in adulthood) is a non-death loss experience. An important premise underlying this article is the notion that support for loss is a basic right or "unearned entitlement" of survivors (McIntosh, 2007, p. 281). In the course of discussing disparities in the experiences of individuals and families affected by sexual assault, I explore losses commonly associated with sexual assault and issues of disenfranchisement and suffocated grief that serve to further complicate meaning-making and coping processes for survivors. In doing so, this article delineates relevant grief and loss concepts and applies them to literature on survivorship.

Grief, Loss, and Complicating Factors in Sexual Assault Survivorship

Grief is a normal response to loss and is indeed a part of sexual assault narratives. The experience of grief, in general, is universal and entails internal (e.g., cognitive, emotional) and external (e.g., physical, social) processes. Although universal, grief is contextual and expressed in diverse ways (Bordere, 2016a; Rosenblatt, 2007). Further, grief stemming from loss is rarely uncomplicated, especially when the loss is associated with sexual assault survivorship. A multitude of intersecting factors complicate the grief process for survivors, posing unique challenges for navigating life.

Losses in Sexual Assault Survivorship

Losses associated with sexual assault are numerous, cumulative, and multilayered. The *primary loss* is the loss of one's pre-assault life and worldview. There are also a multitude of secondary or accompanying losses that may be both visible (e.g., friendship loss) and invisible (e.g., loss of trust). Secondary losses in sexual assault include, but are not limited to, loss of trust in self and others, such as beliefs about the goodness of others (Ranjbar & Speer, 2013; Shakespeare-Finch & Armstrong, 2010); loss of self-identity, freedom, and independence (Whiston, 1981); loss of control and autonomy, such as in the timing of reporting (Ranjbar & Speer, 2013); loss of a sense of safety and security (Frazier, Conlon, & Glaser, 2001; Whiston, 1981); loss of positive self-concept or self-esteem (Macy, 2007; Van Bruggen, Runtz, & Kadlec, 2006); loss of finances and job (Frazier et al., 2001); loss of social capital such as friends and social networks or intimate partnerships (DePrince, 2005; Frazier et al., 2001; Zamir & Lavee, 2014); and loss of sexual interest and other sex-related losses (Stappenbeck, Hassija, Zimmerman, & Kaysen, 2015; Whiston, 1981).

In interchanges with the legal system, there may be multiple losses. There may be a loss of ability to present one's case in court (Payne, 2009). Among cases that make it to trial, survivors may lose the ability to tell the assault narrative in a coherent and meaningful way because stories of survivors are often dismantled in court, where survivors are instead expected to respond to yes–no questions (Herman, 2003). Additionally, there are losses of privacy and time in legal proceedings; court trials often continue for months or even years with no clear ending or resolution (Herman, 2003), which may prolong or delay grief (Parkes, 1998). The grief process may be further complicated in cases where there is a loss of conviction; survivors are revictimized when the verdict reached is experienced as unjust.

Sexual assault survivorship also entails nonfinite loss in that there is a continuous presence of loss that is often hidden, invisible, and ongoing in nature. The "ongoing sense of loss may be exacerbated because the circumstances surrounding the loss result in recurrent pain, grief, or intense distress involving, for example, shame, self-consciousness, or social isolation" (Schultz & Harris, 2011, p. 240). This ongoing sense of loss is often met with great uncertainty in the aftermath of experiences such as sexual assault. Boss (2010) has described this uncertainty as ambiguous loss, which refers to losses that are unclear, traumatic, and externally

caused. When sexual assault is committed, there is a loss of the assumptive world or once held views of the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992); previously held assumptions about the trustworthiness of people and safety are shattered. Female assault survivors are faced with numerous sources of ambiguity and loss, including the loss of a sense of certainty about their safety in spaces where their safety was not in question before the assault. Survivors may also question their future safety when there is a lack of certainty about whether they will see the perpetrator or where they may encounter the circumstance of loss and trauma (e.g., work, college campus, social events) again.

Further, sexual assault is considered an uncommon loss. Unlike common losses or losses that affect everyone (e.g., death of family member), uncommon losses may occur with high prevalence but are not experienced by most people within a population (Schultz & Harris, 2011). Thus, despite the substantial impact that sexual assault has on many women's lives and communities, as an uncommon loss, it garners less recognition and support opportunities than other losses.

Disenfranchised Grief and Bereavement in Survivorship

The lack of recognition in loss experiences, such as those occurring through sexual assault, has been described as "disenfranchised grief" (Doka, 1989, p. 4). Grief is disenfranchised when it is not openly acknowledged or publicly supported through mourning practices or rituals because the experience is not valued or counted as a loss. In cultural contexts in which acknowledgment and support for death losses can be difficult to obtain, recognition of nondeath losses, such as sexual assault, are even more likely to go unnoticed. For example, there are systems in place in every culture to deal with death losses (Kastenbaum, 1973). Rituals (e.g., second-line funerals; Bordere, 2009) are established aspects of death systems providing opportunities for recognition and markers for transition to a life of new normals for work, school, social participation, and the like following loss. However, with non-death losses such as those occurring with sexual assault, there are few or no established rituals for acknowledgment or transitional markers of support through the journey of survivorship.

Although often unrecognized as bereaved, sexual assault survivors are indeed among this population. They are left to cope with implications of forced physical, emotional, social, and cognitive violations occurring when rights to their own bodies and decision making are obstructed and seized in sexual assault. Indeed, "bereavement conveys a sense of deprivation, that some part of ourselves has been stripped away against our will, that we have been robbed" (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2015, p. 343). All sexual assault survivors are affected by this criminal violation. However, I argue that the sense of being "robbed" has different cultural meanings and implications for coping among racially privileged and marginalized populations on the basis of their assumptions and lived experiences in the world. Assault survivors whose pre-assault worldviews were situated from positions of privilege (e.g., racial privilege among White females), and who viewed and experienced the world as more just or fair than populations from multiple intersecting marginalized social locations (e.g., African American or Latina females), may be in a less familiar position after assault to cope with their experience of injustice. They may have to navigate a cognitive process of "accommodation" or adjustment of their once-held views of the world (Piaget, 1954), related to their conscious or unconscious experiences with racial privilege status. That is, they must accommodate their worldviews of space as safe, as long as safety measures are employed and fair provided justice is pursued. This adjustment from a position of privilege to recognition and experience of social and legal powerlessness both in the act perpetrated against them and in the possible lack of justice through the legal system that could further complicate the grief process.

Racially marginalized populations are also substantially affected by sexual assault. However, African American women, for example, with multiple intersecting marginalized identities, exist in social contexts in which African American bodies continue to be exploited and dehumanized in the absence of justice. Thus, African American females may have distinct expectations that fewer unearned entitlements (McIntosh, 2007)—namely fewer protections (e.g., police protection)—are accessible to ensure their safety pre- and post-assault. They may likewise have lowered expectations for outcomes that are just in interactions with

social and legal systems following assault. Religion and spirituality have instead served important protective functions for many African Americans coping with ongoing "race-based trauma" (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005) and injustice. Several researchers found that African American female sexual assault survivors have been able to rely on religion and spirituality as coping strategies that have contributed to their psychological well-being (Bryant-Davis, Ullman, Tsong, & Gobin, 2011).

The defining features of bereavement and grief are echoed throughout sexual assault literature as survivors have described this violation as being "robbed" or like one's "soul [has] been murdered" (e.g., Lord, 2008, p. 127). Yet the lack of connection between the experience of sexual assault as a narrative of bereavement is most poignant in Shakespeare-Finch and Armstrong's (2010) study exploring trauma types and post-trauma outcomes. The researchers studied survivors of three groups experiencing trauma from three sources: sexual assault, motor vehicle accidents, and bereavement (death loss). Although all three groups meet the definition of "bereaved" presented in this article (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2015) in addition to their "trauma" narratives, the researchers defined bereavement as losses due only to death. Contrary to that example, I argue here that sexual assault is a non-death loss and bereavement experience and should be classified as such in research and practice.

Neglecting to identify all groups as bereaved in the aforementioned study had implications for the type of intervention provided to the three groups. Sexual assault survivors, not properly defined as bereaved in the study and hence considered a separate type of trauma group from the bereavement group, were not provided the grief-support group intervention. Given that they were bereaved, the sexual assault survivor group was disenfranchised in this study when their grief experiences were not acknowledged.

Disenfranchised, unrecognized grievers (Doka, 1989) often miss out on resources and interventions in research from which they may have otherwise benefited. Sexual assault survivors may have benefited from the grief-support intervention and the sense of connectedness to others had Shakespeare-Finch and Armstrong (2010) utilized a more inclusive definition of bereavement or had an understanding of sexual assault as a type of bereavement. Following the interventions, differences were found in outcomes for the "sexual assault survivors'" group and the "bereavement" group. That is, the bereavement group, which received the grief-support intervention, reported the highest mean score for levels of post-traumatic growth. Comparatively, the sexual assault group, which did not receive the grief-support intervention, showed the lowest mean score for levels of post-traumatic growth, lowest mean score on "relating to others," and the highest mean score on level of post-traumatic stress. Thus, in exploring the framing of this study and its method, the implications of appropriately defining sexual assault as bereavement and offering fitting interventions that enfranchise grief become apparent.

Oppression of Bereaved Sexual Assault Survivors

This notion of growth through loss that Shakespeare-Finch and Armstrong (2010) used as an outcome measure can be problematic. The widely held social expectation of growth through loss imposes a timeline upon survivor healing (Granek, 2016; Harris, 2009–2010). This expectation, in the absence of an understanding of time allocation for processing loss, transcends into programming for assault survivors. In a study proposing a three-stage model of coping, Macy (2007) expected sexual assault survivors to complete complex tasks of mourning that take time, such as "search for meaning," "regain mastery over the event and life," and "feel good about self again" all within the very first stage of coping (i.e., adaptive coping). These expectations were held without consideration of survivor time in liminal space, the place of transition, "of no-longer and not-yet" (Carson, 2002, p. 180). Survivors need time to process the fact that they have been violated and to establish new norms (e.g., Borja, Callahan, & Long, 2006) in post-assault life.

Scholarly Oppression in Survivorship

Following the premise of social justice, this article emphasizes that grief-related support should acknowledge loss and provide protection from future emotional and physical harm as a basic right for sexual assault survivors. Drawing from Bell's (1997) definition, *social justice* entails a society in which everyone

feels psychologically and physically safe. However, instead of acknowledging experience and providing support informed by grief and loss literature, female sexual assault survivors have been further oppressed in the scholarly literature. Female survivors have been renamed, relabeled, and repackaged as "episodic drinking women" (e.g., George et al., 2014, p. 655) whose alcohol consumption contributed to their assault (Messman-Moore, Ward, Zerubavel, Chandley, & Barton, 2015) and whose struggles with emotion regulation and management (Teppenbeck, Hassija, Zimmerman, & Kaysen, 2015; Walsh, DiLillo, & Scalora, 2011) will cause them to be revictimized.

In place of recognition and support of loss, survivors have been expected to become accountable for their own protection from future externally imposed losses through assault, in what has been described as a "hunting ground" for male perpetrators (Dick, 2015). Survivors are offered few external protections and little or no promotion of self-focused protective strategies such as self-care (e.g., mindfulness practice) and cultural self-humility (e.g., self-compassion) in grief. For example, survivor responsibility is clear in a study of psychological mindedness and revictimization in sexual assault survivorship (Zamir & Lavee, 2014). *Psychological mindedness* involves self-awareness (Applebaum, 1973; Beitel, Ferrer, & Cecero, 2005) and other awareness and the ability to reflect on one's own and others' motivations for thoughts, behaviors, and feelings. Zamir and Lavee (2014) studied female graduate students who had been sexually assaulted and concluded that psychological mindedness "may indicate a woman's ability to process and understand the past and make a conscious decision to avoid re-experiencing victimization" (p. 854). Emotional awareness is important for distinguishing between safe and less safe situations. This finding reinforces the necessity of accessible supportive services that allow survivors the opportunity to process thoughts, emotions, and experiences related to sexual assault. However, it also reinforces survivor responsibility for self-protection from future assault. In essence, if women would be more self-reflective and conscious, and have an awareness of what a dangerous situation or person might look like, they could avoid being revictimized. This line of thinking both minimizes community responsibility for protection from sexual assault and discounts the complex realities in the lived experiences of survivors coping with loss and trauma. For example, research on loss and trauma indicates that survivors are physiologically affected in the form of neurological changes to the brain. Specifically, the brain is on high alert as a result of bereavement and trauma but with low awareness, which makes it difficult to decipher between danger and safety (Buckley et al., 2012; Howard & Crandall, 2007), even for people who are otherwise self-reflective. This part of survivor narratives deserves further attention in research and programming if we are to provide a more complete picture of their complex experiences and bereavement support needs.

Survivors have been "oppressed by imposition" such that their narratives have been labeled in a way that detracts from their emotional and physical well-being (Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000).

> Wellness is a positive state of being brought about by the simultaneous, balanced and synergistic satisfaction of personal, relational, and collective needs . . . . Wellness cannot flourish in the absence of justice, and justice is devoid of meaning in the absence of wellness. . . . We require "well-enough" social and political conditions, free of economic exploitation and human rights abuses to experience quality of life. (Prilleltensky, Dokecki, Frieden, & Wang, 2007, p. 19)

External oppression becomes internalized (e.g., self-questioning, self-blame) when marginalized populations are consistently characterized with negative or distorted social messages by dominant groups (e.g., White heterosexual males) and institutions (e.g., legal systems). Domination involves objectification (Collins, 2000), and this is found among sexual assault survivors; their realities as "objects" are defined and misrepresented by dominant groups (hooks, 1989) who are unlikely to be proximate to the experience of survivors (Stevenson, 2014) but who have the social power to decide and control policies, ideologies, and opportunity structures that might otherwise acknowledge loss and provide support (Bordere, 2016b; Harris, 2009–2010).

The survivor appears to move through devastation, masking grief that was met with microaggressions, or subtle forms of prejudice and discrimination (Sue et al., 2007; Sue, 2010), such as "stigma threat" (Miller, Canales,

Amacker, Backstrom, & Gidycz, 2011). The survivor may be struggling while encountering positive feedback and patriarchal censorship (Walter, 2000) that demands that she contain and conceal emotions and behaviors that need outlets for expression (e.g., "She is handling it all so well—good for her!"). The noted social justice poet and historian Paul Laurence Dunbar (1896) captured the *mask* that belies oppression in the face of grief for survivors, such as those coping with sexual assault, through his seminal work, *We Wear the Mask* (excerpt):

> WE wear the mask that grins and lies,
> It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
> This debt we pay to human guile;
> With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
> And mouth with myriad subtleties. (p. 167)

Culture, Disenfranchisement, and Mistrust

Attention to cultural frameworks must be employed in research and practice designed to understand disenfranchisement and complications to the grief process for survivors. It is all too often the case that unacknowledged or disenfranchised grief is related to lack of assault disclosure among individuals from more marginalized social locations (e.g., African American, female). For example, African American women socialized in cultures that value collectivism for survival may experience disenfranchised grief because of cultural and social expectations that they protect African American male perpetrators (Neville & Pugh, 1997; Washington, 2001). This expectation is upheld at the expense of the survivors' rights and needs for validation and justice. Further, one study found that unacknowledged assault was associated with increased alcohol usage and a higher likelihood of being assaulted again within 6 months relative to those whose assault was acknowledged (Littleton, Axsom, & Grills-Taquechel, 2009). It is tragic but not surprising that female sexual assault survivors are at increased risk for self-harm (Ranjbar & Speer, 2013), given that the costs for self-harm or harm to others in these populations is much less costly than the effort required to counteract long-standing oppressive patriarchal systems. Punishment for working against privileged populations and systems is often swift and severe. For example, a female assault survivor on a college campus who pursues charges against a star football player, seemingly one individual, would actually be working against multiple systems of oppression (e.g., athletic system, legal system). In pursuing her basic right of recognition and justice, she may be publicly maligned and faced with a case in which the perpetrator, supported by multiple systems that support male privilege and oppression of women, is not convicted.

Disenfranchisement also has implications for help seeking among survivors coping with loss. As a result of stigma and discrimination, survivors may be reluctant to trust helping professionals who may have been similarly untrained in grief and loss and socialized in contexts of misinformation and biases, such as "rape myths" (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994) around assault. Cultural mistrust may be particularly salient for individuals representing multiple intersecting marginalized identities (e.g., African American, female; Bordere, 2016a, 2016b; Whaley, 2001); for example, African American women have historical memories and current images of practices wherein African American women have been assaulted, stigmatized as "sexually loose" (White, Strube, & Fisher, 1998), or pathologized in health-care settings.

Pathologization and Medicalization of Grief in Sexual Assault Survivorship

Although grief is a normal reaction to loss, that grief is often pathologized and medicalized (Granek, 2016). Grief and depression may look similar and can both coexist as well as exist as separate conditions. However, grief and loss are often not provided as response options relevant to survivor experiences; depression is a commonly noted experience of survivors across the literature (Kennedy, Davis, & Taylor, 1998), but this may be because depression most closely represents the emotional and behavioral expressions survivors experience from among the response options provided. The "conflation of grief and depression and the overuse of medications to treat grief" (Granek, 2016, p. 118) mean that individuals who have been sexually assaulted, and hence are experiencing context-specific depression or grief around loss, may be given antidepressants to treat major depression. Such treatment plans are in lieu of support that would have otherwise helped them unpack and process a variety of cognitions, feelings, and behaviors around trauma and

losses related specifically to the assault. The practice of medicalizing (Granek, 2016) and policing (Walter, 2000) grief reflect the aforementioned "growth" after loss model, which reflects capitalistic norms of valuing productivity and outcomes that hasten the pace that survivors are expected to return to work or class (Harris, 2009–2010).

Sexual dysfunction has been noted in the literature as a variable related to assault (Van Bruggen, Runtz, & Kadlec, 2006). Survivors who are (mis)diagnosed as depressed are likely to be prescribed antidepressants. It has been well documented that antidepressants have numerous side effects, including sexual dysfunction (Outhoff, 2009). Thus, although sexual interests may decrease for a period of time following assault, this change in behavior may in fact be conjointly or singly related to side effects from antidepressants. The psychologized and pathogenic attribution of dysfunction (of being tainted) to the survivor consequent of the sexual assault violation, without exploration of other variables (e.g., the influence of antidepressants), can be viewed as yet another form of disenfranchisement.

Power of Naming and Validation in Loss and Grief

There is great power in language and being able to name our experiences. Survivors who have not been acknowledged in cases of assault have reported uncertainty about how to label their experience (Littleton et al., 2009). It is when individuals are able to appropriately name and identify (e.g., "You are experiencing grief due to losses and changes consequent of sexual assault") their experiences and be validated (e.g., "The assault was not your fault") by trusted others (Draucker, 1999), particularly when losses are ambiguous (Boss, 2010; Boss, Roos, & Harris, 2011), that they are able to move forward, strategize, and seek out informal or formal supports for processing and coping (Ranjbar & Steer, 2013; Whiston, 1981).

Families may occupy important roles in the grief process for assault survivors. In family contexts, norms around emotional expressiveness (Walter, 2000), sharing (discouraging the survivor from discussing the assault), or cultural acceptance of rape myths (Morrison, 2007) may limit the ability of assault survivors to share their stories and feel validated and supported. In a study of survivors, Ranjbar and Steer (2013) found that participants who felt supported and validated felt less guilt and self-blame. These findings illustrate the power of social messages in various contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) for contributing to or reducing trauma and internalization of oppression among bereaved individuals impacted by sexual assault (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Harris, 2009–2010). Families can serve a major support function by believing survivors who otherwise exist in social contexts in which they will be questioned, blamed, and invalidated.

The lack of acknowledgment and ambiguity of information with which the survivor must contend also have implications for family and friends as secondary survivors of sexual assault. Family members may feel unsupported and invalidated when their own grief experiences around the assault of their cared-about person are not recognized (Morrison, 2007). Families may also be faced with stigma, not being believed, and being questioned. It is important for families to surround themselves with trusted allies who believe in both the veracity of the survivor's sexual assault experience and the family's grief.

Further, in work on assaultive violence and homicide loss, Rynearson (2001) found that in the absence of information, surviving family members and friends often filled in missing information through reenactment stories or reoccurring thoughts about what they perceived may have occurred in their cared-about person's last moments. Given the nature of the circumstances surrounding sexual assault, survivors may disclose but not describe the experience at length to family and friends. As a result, in the absence of such details, family members may similarly engage in psychological autopsies (Jordan, 2009), or experience reenactment stories in an effort to understand their cared-about person's thoughts and feelings (e.g., fears, devastation) in the moments before, during, and following the assault (Rynearson, 2001). There may also be secondary stories with the intent of undoing the event or making the event "unhappen" (Rynearson, 2001; Rynearson, Correa, Favell, Saindon, & Prigerson, 2006). Secondary stories include "stories of remorse" (personal sense of responsibility for assault), "stories of retaliation" (thoughts about getting even with the perpetrator), and "stories of protection" (desire to keep others close so that they are not also

harmed), which may occur alone or in combination with the other stories.

Secondary stories may affect both the survivor and family members as secondary survivors. The loss of a sense of independence and freedom (Whiston, 1981) among survivors because of the assault and family hypervigilance may be related, in part, to the story of protection in families following assault. Stories of remorse may contribute to guilt or self-blame among family and friends (e.g., "I didn't do enough to protect the survivor") and may be related to the story of protection, whereby families seek to keep the survivor close in an attempt to protect her from future harm. In the absence of information, survivors and their families may benefit from education about sexual assault and its impact on the survivor and their family. Education will also allow for survivors and families to advocate for survivor rights around grief and loss as well as the family's rights as secondary survivors across different settings (e.g., school, work).

Family members and friends may also serve an important role in enfranchising grief and increasing their understanding of the survivor's story by engaging in "cultural humility" (Rosenblatt, 2016)—that is, listening with compassion, without judgment, and without a plan to hurry grief along, to "fix" or "make it better" (Bordere, 2016; Rosenblatt, 2016). The mourning process of integrating losses into ongoing life (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2005) takes time as well as physical and emotional energy. The survivor may physically look the same given the invisibility of the trauma and losses, but she is not the same. In a study of bereaved individuals, Gerra (2003) found that cortisol levels (stress hormones) were elevated for approximately the first six months of loss. Increased cortisol levels affect sleep (Buckley et al., 2012), immune functioning, cognition (i.e., lower memory performance), and mood (Howard & Crandall, 2007).

The survivor, as with family and friends, may wish to return to life as it was before the assault (e.g., same activities, emotional state). For example, in a college atmosphere, the survivor may go social events (e.g., parties, clubs) after the assault to avoid compounding the trauma with social isolation. However, in the attempt to return to life as it was before the assault, survivors with greater self-awareness may be particularly affected by the difference that they notice between their pre- and post-assault selves (e.g., affected by triggers at social events, such as a safe person who resembles the perpetrator). An A student who was highly focused before the assault may struggle to maintain a similar level of focus or achievement after the assault due to fatigue, changes in memory, or increased rates of illness. As these examples suggest, it is normal in bereavement to experience a variety of feelings, perceptions, and behaviors across time related to expected and unanticipated changes and transitions (e.g., post-assault life changes).

Families may support survivors by engaging in "culturally conscientious practice" or being open to evolving knowledge (Bordere, 2009) of the survivor and her diverse needs across time. It is common for individuals to hide their grief in an effort to protect family members (e.g., parents) from stress or grief. Thus, checking in on survivors across time might allow for sharing and support across the mourning journey. Additionally, familial promotion of "cultural self-humility," wherein survivors are encouraged to bear witness to their own experience and feelings free of judgment and self-blame (Bordere, 2015), may be another helpful way to aid survivors. In supporting survivors, family members may benefit from external support for their own grief around the assault. Support will help with guilt and self-blame related to "stories of remorse" and the establishment of a new normal for the family. Self-care and support will allow family members to be present for the survivor (see the Appendix for suggested ways families and friends can support survivors). In seeking such support, it is important for sexual assault survivors and families to find entities that are educated and trained in sexual assault, trauma, and grief and loss. All said, however, further research is needed with secondary survivors of sexual assault to learn more about grief, loss, and coping among this population.

Disparities Uncovered in Sexual Assault Literature Search

Although sexual assault is a pervasive violation through which a multitude of losses occur, the exploration of sexual assault from a loss perspective did not appear in the scholarly literature until the early 1980s. That said, although Whiston (1981) extensively described multiple losses, the concept and condition of grief was mentioned only one time, and scant literature and

research has appeared on the topic since Whiston's publication. A search for peer-reviewed articles pertaining to sexual assault and grief, using the Boolean search term "sexual assault and (grief or bereavement or mourning or loss)" produced only one empirical study (Bletzer & Koss, 2006) with *mourning* in the title and one study (Shakespeare-Finch & Armstrong, 2010) that included *bereavement* in the title. However, the condition of being bereaved was not part of the study's pre-imposed narrative of conditions around sexual assault. One other study exploring sexual violations was found that included *loss* in the title (Bourdon & Cook, 1993), but it did not meet criteria for this review as it focused on adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse rather than adulthood sexual assault.

Further, in the scholarly literature, language and labeling of sexual violations is ambiguous and inconsistent. Some studies do not indicate whether samples experienced sexual abuse (childhood violations), assault (adulthood violations), or both (e.g., Macy, 2007), and some studies use the terms *sexual assault* and *sexual abuse* interchangeably (e.g., Shakespeare-Finch & Armstrong, 2010). Although different concepts are used, *sexual assault* is most consistently presented in varied sources as the umbrella term for all sexual violations (Bourdon & Cook, 1993; Frazier et al., 2001; Macy, 2007; Miller et al., 2011; Ranibar & Speer, 2013; Whiston, 1981). This is problematic because the particular aspects of different sexual violations become blurred, as do individualized goals for loss and grief support and care, when an umbrella term is applied to all violations.

Regarding inclusion of grief- and loss-related language within the text of articles that explored sexual assault survivorship, a number of studies have highlighted losses that occur. However, few applications have been made in which "grief" was connected or even mentioned in the context of loss in a consistent way throughout an article (Morrison, 2007; Stappenbeck et al., 2015; Whiston, 1981).

Explanations for Limited Focus on Sexual Assault, Loss, and Grief

Although development involves growth, change, and navigation of various losses across the life span, we live in a largely thanatophobic or death- and loss-denying society, with little understanding of the place of loss in life and the provision of grief support in cases of loss (Fowler, 2008). Additionally, literature around grief has historically placed greater focus on death losses rather than on non-death losses such as sexual assault. Grief literature on non-death losses is ever increasing (Boss et al., 2011); however, the non-death loss and grief literature is nearly replete of a focus on bereavement stemming from sexual assault or, more generally, having something suddenly taken away by a force that disrupts life. A notable exception is the work of Schultz and Harris (2011) exploring sexual assault from a non-death loss and grief perspective.

Suffocated Grief: The Costs of Social Expectations for Bereaved Sexual Assault Survivors

The experience of suffocated grief is complementary to Doka's (1989) conceptualization of disenfranchised grief, but goes beyond lack of recognition in its reference to penalties assessed for grief and mourning expressions that are devalued and misinterpreted or misdiagnosed (Bordere, 2014, 2016b). Mourning is a laborious process requiring exorbitant amounts of emotional, cognitive, social, and physical energy of the bereaved in processing not only the event (e.g., assault), but also life preceding and following the trauma and loss. That is, the survivor is faced with processing and reconciling life before the assault (e.g., feelings of greater certainty, trust, safety) and *surviving life* (Bordere, 2014) following the assault (e.g., societally imposed regrets and self-blame, uncertainty, longing for previous life and functioning—"What do I miss most about my life before the assault?"). Thus, it is likely that persons who have been sexually assaulted will be more fatigued, will be distracted, will experience difficulty concentrating, and will demonstrate increased or decreased social participation. A college student, for example, bereaved by losses stemming from sexual assault, who comes to class displaying normal grief reactions, namely "distracted" and "fatigued," may be improperly labeled and penalized by the professor for being "inattentive and nonparticipatory" and have no recourse for such a penalty.

Suffocated grief and disenfranchisement are interrelated in that bereaved survivors are situated in larger cultural contexts that often place stigma and penalties around mere

acknowledgment of loss. This is noteworthy, as injustice around stigma goes far beyond hurt feelings; stigma has implications for inequities (Johnson, 2006) and discriminatory behaviors against bereaved survivors. There may be suffocated grief and internalized oppression around sexual assault disclosure, wherein survivors feel a sense of self-blame when they are unjustly penalized for reporting, or are accused of falsely reporting, a sexaul assault (Ranjbar & Speer, 2013).

The concept of suffocated grief also refers to penalties for violation of rituals and rules (e.g., social, political, religious) around grief and mourning. Although a growing number of universities have instituted policies on student bereavement leave, these policies tend not to offer protections and accommodations for students following non-death losses such as sexual assault. For example, a sexual assault survivor who misses or leaves class because of loss and grief reminders or perceived threats (e.g., alleged perpetrator in same classroom or close proximity, topic of assault comes up in class) may be penalized for leaving class or missed work. Consistent with conditions of oppression or being caught between two negative alternatives (Frye, 2007), the student may wish to disclose the experience to the professor but avoid doing so out of fear of potential stigma (e.g., being doubted, blamed) or discrimination. Title IX is supposed to provide protection from sex discrimination in federally funded institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). However, Title IX does not provide clear and consistent guidelines to professors stipulating that they must make accommodations for sexual assault survivors. One example is Colorado State University's (2015) accommodation description on the university's Title IX webpage, which states that in the event of alleged sexual assault or sexual violence, it is possible to explore "reasonable" changes in student academic and living situations (Title IX, Sexual Assault, Sexual Violence, & Sexual Harassment). Similarly, Georgia Gwinnett College's Policy (2016) states that "the University will work with the Complainant to put interim measures in place to ensure a safe, hostile free environment for the student" and that if the alleged violation is determined to have occurred then "more permanent accommodations and safety measures may be implemented" (Diversity, Institutional Equality & Title IX).

Note, however, that in both policies the language around accommodations is tentative and ambiguous.

Survivors are unfairly penalized in yet another way when the needs of bereaved sexual assault survivors on college campuses go unnoticed or are incorrectly perceived, and this may intensify academic challenges and even contribute to attrition. For example, in a study of college students bereaved by death losses, bereaved students were more likely than non-bereaved students to be identified with a "problematic academic standing" (e.g., probation, withdrawn from the university; Servaty-Seib & Hamilton, 2006). Importantly, however, students who were provided support during the semester of the loss experience achieved greater academic success than students not receiving such support.

Purdue University, which has an explicit Student Bereavement Leave Policy (see Purdue University Grief Absence Policy for Students, 2011), has a clear support and advocacy policy for survivors (see Purdue University, *Title IX—Procedures for Resolving Complaints of Discrimination and Harassment,* 2015). Consistent with the needs of the bereaved, Purdue's policy accounts for ongoing support of the holistic needs of survivors, including academic accommodations, assistance accessing health and counseling services, and education for family and friends on how to support sexual assault survivors. This support in college settings is essential for survivors who may attend a school that is located far away from their families and centers of support. Institutions of higher education throughout the country should follow Purdue's lead in this way with the addition of clear inclusion of the rights and needs of sexual assault survivors (see the Appendix for suggested ways to support students in academic settings).

Conclusion

The journey of sexual assault survivors includes multiple losses, grief, and injustices. However, scant research, conceptual models, and programming exists that address the interconnections among these dimensions of post-assault trauma. More feminist perspectives and interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary collaboration is needed to establish a more holistic understanding of sexual assault survivorship, including loss, grief, and support. The neglect of researchers and

practitioners to connect these important bridges thus far has further disenfranchised survivors (Doka, 1989) and suffocated the grief (Bordere, 2016b) experiences of sexual assault survivors as well as secondary survivors (e.g., families, friends). Educators, researchers, policy makers, and program developers rely on scholarly research to develop programming. We cannot hope to meet survivors' bereavement needs in this programming if the scholarly literature has not acknowledged survivors' lived realities of grief and loss.

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Appendix

Supporting and Enfranchising Loss and Grief Experiences for Sexual Assault Survivors

Setting	Unhelpful Comments		Helpful Comments	
Family/friends	Use of ambiguous language (e.g., clichés, labels)	*Maria seems to be down in the dumps since the assault.*	Naming and labeling using loss and grief language and communication	*It is normal to experience grief or to have many different feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, like sleeping or eating more or less, when dealing with losses that happen with sexual assault.*
Academic settings		**Class lecture:** *Women have serious mental health issues after assault.*		**Class lecture:** *Due to the violations that occur when women are sexually assaulted by male perpetrators who use this experience to feel powerful, female survivors are left to cope with multiple losses and the accompanying grief.*
Family/friends	Avoidance of person coping with loss and grief related to sexual assault	Not calling Kelly after the assault or inviting her to lunch or other routine activities.	Acknowledge the loss experience	*Thank you for sharing your experience with me. I am sorry that you are coping with multiple losses and transitions as a result of this assault experience.*
Academic settings		Professor Smith, who has in the past had consistent contact with Kelly (student), has canceled two meetings with her and ignores her e-mails since she disclosed an assault.		
Family/friends	Benefit reminding	*You'll have a great story to tell now that you have been sexually assaulted and are bereaved.*	Space and time for sharing when you can provide it	*I know you really liked journaling. Would you like to come with me to this women's writing group on Saturday? It's been a safe and healing space for me and others to write about our lived experiences.*
Academic settings		*Megan, this assault experience will likely increase your social conscience and further inspire you to work even harder in class.*		*Thank you for sharing your experiences with me today. I know it takes energy and courage each time you disclose your experience and grief around it. I have attached a list with diverse supportive resources so that you have options on and off campus for ongoing support and can pick the one(s) that works best for you.*

Appendix
Continued

Setting	Unhelpful Comments		Helpful Comments	
Family/friends	Oppressive tolerance	*I can understand why she was so angry and sad, but it's been 2 weeks now. It's time to move on.*	Support through meaning making	*Sometimes very well-meaning people will encourage you to move on before you are ready or to make the best of this unfortunate experience. Offer yourself time and compassion, and surround yourself with people who "get" that grief is a process.*
Academic settings		*I already gave you two "extra" days to prepare for the last exam since you were assaulted. It's midsemester now! I can't give you an additional day to take this next exam because of something that happened to you 2 months ago.*		*Marissa, I just wanted to check in again with you now that we are at midsemester to see how things are going and to reassure you that you have my continued support across the semester. If it is less distracting to also take the next exam during my office hours, you are welcome to do so.*
Family/friends	Comparison of nonnormative and normative life experiences that minimize loss	*I understand what it's like feeling alone after sexual assault. Sometimes I don't have anyone to have lunch with, and I feel isolated too.*	Be aware of and sensitive to reminders or triggers (e.g., anniversary of assault)	*I know that today is the anniversary of the assault. Can I bring you dinner or go for a walk with you today on the trail?*
Academic settings		*When a student takes another person's work for her or his own satisfaction, it's like a rape has occurred.*		*Next week in class we cover the topic of sexual assault, female survivorship, and grief, which affect large numbers of women on college campuses. Different people respond in different ways when issues are covered that relate directly to their experiences. Some students find it helpful to be present in class or even to educate others in class about their experiences. Other students prefer an alternate format (e.g., online readings) when this issue is covered. There is no right or wrong way to participate in class if this issue impacts you, only a most appropriate way for you. I ask that you e-mail me or come to office hours so that I can best assist you.*

APPENDIX
Continued

Setting	Unhelpful Comments		Helpful Comments	
Family/friends	General offers	*Call if you need anything.*	Offer concrete support and follow-through	*Can we come by and walk your dog with or for you on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday evenings at 8 p.m. for the next two weeks.*
Academic settings		*E-mail me if you need anything.*		*I will allow you to schedule a makeup exam for next week.*
Family/friends	Encouraging graciousness	*You're so lucky that you* only *got assaulted. Some people get assaulted* and *have their wallets stolen!*	Reassurance regarding fault	*The assault was not your fault.*
Academic settings		*Fortunately for you, this assault got you* extra *study time for the exam.*		