Exploring Grief

Towards a Sociology of Sorrow

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In immortal friendship and loving memory of Keith Tester (1960–2019) – you are missed!

11 Suffocated grief, resilience and survival among African American families

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Introduction

African American youth and families are disproportionately bereaved by multiple losses across development related to the intersecting forces of individual and institutional discrimination (Jones 1997) and oppression (Bordere 2018; Harris 2009–2010; Rosenblatt and Wallace 2005a; Rosenblatt 2014). In historical and contemporary contexts of pervasive racism and sexual exploitation, where Black lives and deaths do not seem to matter, profound disparities exist in death rates (Umberson et al. 2017), health outcomes (Carter et al. 2017; DeLilly 2012), and grief experiences for African Americans. African American youth and families are uniquely bereaved by disparagingly high rates of premature deaths and nonfatal injuries of male youth (brothers, friends) due to gun violence (Bordere 2014, 2018; Murphy et al. 2002). Homicide loss survivors cope with grief complicated by many external factors (stigma, legal system, media, etc.) and accompanying secondary losses (e.g., loss of safety, control, privacy).

African American families have consistently been confronted with a plethora of tangible and intangible non-death losses and bereavement tied to dehumanization in sexual assault (loss of pre-assault life, loss of trust) and objectification of female youth and young adults (Bryant-Davis et al. 2010; Collins 2000; hooks 1989). Parents and caregivers of African American youth simultaneously contend with loss of peace connected to their challenged ability to protect their children and themselves from loss and injury incurred through prejudice, discrimination (police shootings), and internalized oppression.

In the face of cumulative complex losses connected to racial trauma, African American families across social economic classes have limited options for accessing culturally responsive support. In a study of counsellors who serve individuals coping with race-based trauma, Carrie Hemmings and Amanda M. Evans (2018) found that many counsellors lacked training both in identifying racial trauma and providing services to address this challenge with people of colour. Paralleling the dearth of scholarly literature addressing social justice issues in loss among marginalized groups, many clinicians lack or have limited education and training in this area. It is critical to address this deficit. Researchers studying African American youth and family bereavement have found that meaning-making around loss was rooted in perceived racism and discrimination (Bordere 2018; Holloway 2003; Rosenblatt and Wallace 2005a).

In this chapter, research, theory, and case studies are utilized to critically explore historical and present-day patterns of race-based trauma, unjust loss (Harris and Bordere 2016), 'suffocated grief' (Bordere 2014:169, 2016a:14), and coping among African Americans. Bereavement is situated within social, political, and cultural contexts to examine losses and complications to grief and mourning processes that occur as African American youth and families navigate various institutions (e.g., educational settings, health care systems) (Bronfenbrenner 1977) that serve to oppress and suffocate grief. 'Suffocated grief' or discriminatory penalties disproportionally imposed on marginalized individuals and families (Bordere 2014:169, 2016a:14) are addressed and balanced with patterns of survival and resilience demonstrated amid past and present-day death and non-death loss experiences. The chapter concludes with implications for research and practice.

Disenfranchisement and suffocated grief

Grief around intergenerational and contemporary trauma and loss for African Americans is complex and multifaceted yet largely disenfranchised or unacknowledged (Doka 1989) and suffocated through socially imposed penalties in broader cultural contexts of privilege and systemic oppression (Bordere 2014, 2016a). Privilege is an 'unearned advantage' afforded to majority populations (White, male, able-bodied) (McIntosh 2007:281). It includes the social and political power to create and shape prejudiced beliefs and discriminatory policies and laws, as well as influence societal decisions about the value and legitimacy of Black lives and Black deaths, Black grief and sorrow.

Privilege affords the social power to both disenfranchise and suffocate grief. Disenfranchised or unacknowledged grief (Doka 1989) is influenced by prejudicial beliefs regarding who and what deserves to be mourned. I conceptualize disenfranchised grief as a complementary concept and precursor to suffocated grief (Bordere 2014, 2016a) much like prejudice is a precursor to discrimination. It is one thing to walk by and *not acknowledge* a beautiful street memorial created by a Black adolescent male. However, it is another to arrest and charge him a fine as *penalties* for creating the memorial, hence suffocating grief. These penalties exacerbate and create further losses while attempting to disempower already marginalized individuals. Power hierarchies are maintained through limits and penalties imposed on marginalized groups that challenge scarce resources (emotional, cognitive) and deny access to tools (e.g., voting rights, culturally responsive mental health care) central for upward mobility, optimal health, and day-to-day functioning. The concept of suffocated grief allows for a broadened understanding of the complexities associated with grieving diverse losses (e.g., sexual assault, homicide) in contexts permeated by social injustices (see Bordere 2017).

African American individuals are regularly confronted with socially imposed, reconstructed conceptualizations of their historical and present-day experiences that discount the impact of racial terror and institutionalized slavery

(economic losses), and loss and grief on families across generations. That is, *it's not your loss or grief if you were not physically present at the time of slavery. It's not my privilege because I was not physically present to participate in the enslavement of African Americans.* To be underrepresented, existing in the margins of society, is to be questioned and invalidated. It is to have your experiences with loss, your identity, your worth and values, your achievements, your grief, your trauma, your intentions and behaviours regularly interrogated and delegitimized.

Historical perspective

Experiences with dehumanizing losses and suffocated grief can be traced through a brief historical account. Individuals of African ancestry entered the United States through forced migration. Their ability to survive life (Bordere 2014) and show resilience through multiple, complex, cumulative losses (violent death, loss of land) is remarkable, but the legacy of disenfranchisement and grief bred through forced migration and slavery cannot be understated. The transatlantic slave trade and institution of slavery created multiple, sudden, traumatic non-death and death losses for families of African ancestry. It was designed to dismantle and disempower families and communities in an effort to dominate and exploit (economically, sexually) (Gutman 1976). In an effort to disorient and disempower, conditions for domination, family and community ties were severed.

African individuals were seized and separated from individuals who shared similar dialects. They were tightly packed on the floors of ships with no food or shelter in inhumane, unsafe, unsanitary conditions, often bond by chains next to the decaying bodies of deceased individuals who did not survive the horrific journey. Individuals who were captured were intentionally brought to an unfamiliar land with a different language and customs, and forced to participate in gruesome unpaid labour. This institution of forced free labour among individuals of African ancestry would disenfranchise African American populations while benefitting and privileging European American families in ways visible and invisible, conscious and unconscious, for centuries to follow.

Individuals and families of African ancestry endured countless violent deaths (e.g., lynchings), non-death losses, and associated trauma (Eyerman 2004) under the institution of legalized enslavement. For example, females of African ancestry were treated like sexual objects (Gutman 1976), often sexually assaulted in front of male spouses who could not offer physical protection. On any given day, mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons were seized from family units, put on auction blocks, and sold like livestock to the highest bidders. Unless it benefitted slaveholders to keep family members in close proximity, individuals removed from families and sold through slavery would often be relocated to distant or unknown locations never to be reunited with their families of origin or fictive kin (Chatters et al. 1994). The pain of familial separation was further complicated by the ambiguous circumstances surrounding the loss. According to Pauline Boss (1999, 2010), ambiguous losses are those that are unclear, traumatic, and externally driven. In the context of slavery, family members were left to wonder if they

would ever see their cared about persons again. Lack of clear information around losses impedes grief and mourning processes. *Do I hold on to the hope that my cared about person is alive and we will be reunited under the institution of slavery? Or, conversely, do I begin grieving our forever physical separation through space or actual death and contemplate reuniting in heaven?*

There are numerous parallels between losses, suffocated grief, and survival in historical and contemporary contexts for African Americans. In this chapter, I argue that two types of losses in particular, the loss of time and loss of energy, intersect with all death and non-death losses related to racism and sexism, as well as other forms of discrimination to further complicate and lessen coping resources paramount to survival and resilience for African American youth and families. Although ongoing disparities in death loss is a major source of grief, non-death losses related to systemic oppression remain an underexplored source of bereavement. Historical non-death losses and systems created to maintain power hierarchies continue to impact and limit opportunity structures for African American populations in contemporary society.

Loss of credit and benefits

Throughout history, from the time of slavery to the present, African American populations across diverse family structures and socioeconomic classes have contended with non-death losses related to improper credit attributions (e.g., inventions) and benefits (financial profit) in discriminatory institutions. In professional environments, for example, it is a common experience for African Americans to present original ideas in group settings (e.g., meetings) in which they are underrepresented and experience a loss of credit and the benefits that would accompany their contributions (job promotion, pay raise). As a researcher and educator, I have participated in meetings in a variety of settings in which my vocalized ideas were taken and repeated verbatim only minutes later by individuals of race and gender privilege and credited to those individuals as if they were being spoken for the first time. This baffling experience can be explained by the perceived invisibility of African Americans, who remain devalued and psychologically absent to individuals of racial, gender, and socioeconomic privilege amid visible physical presence and active engagement.

Managing everyday encounters with racism and loss requires additional time, energy, and risk-taking of marginalized groups. African American individuals are charged with the daily challenge of deciding which losses and microaggressions, or subtle forms of discrimination (Sue et al. 2007), to address and which ones to abandon by playing it 'cool' or seeming unaffected (Smith 2015:6; Majors and Billson 1992). Each option comes at a cost. Self-advocacy around unjust loss and disenfranchisement may be met with spoken or unspoken stereotypes (e.g., 'The Angry Black Woman'), discrimination, and other forms of resistance. Grief is suffocated in environments in which communication of a loss (credit) is reframed, negatively mislabelled (e.g., aggressiveness), and penalized. For example, grief may be suffocated through experiences with 'White Fragility' (DiAngelou 2011;

see Patton and Jordan 2017). Robin DiAngelou (2011) conceptualizes 'White Fragility' as the response of European American individuals when confronted about racism or inequalities. According to DiAngelou:

> White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation.
>
> (DiAngelou 2011:54)

Another compelling example of non-death loss related to racism is illustrated in the experiences of African American professionals in academia who are differentially expected to participate in 'invisible labour' or service (mentoring unrepresented students); labour that is culturally significant but not valued or counted for promotion (June 2015). Mentorship of disenfranchised students to improve their chances for matriculation through college is not valued as a source of 'productivity' through the lens of privileged entities who created policies that defined what and who is valuable to universities and the broader society. African American professors underrepresented at predominantly White universities experience the loss of protected time and the ability to be productive free of the additional expectations to provide campus and community service and education, often around issues of diversity and cultural sensitivity, and mentorship of underrepresented students. Their experiences are decontextualized and penalized, as in suffocated grief, at the time of promotion when they are compared to peers of racial privilege who did not bare the extra burdens of unprotected time, racialized stress, isolation, and accompanying losses of emotional, cognitive, and physical energy.

Loss of protection

A loss of protection is a familiar experience for African American youth and families. African American youth are entitled to childhoods in which they are able to engage in developmentally appropriate activities and social interactions. They are entitled to safe environments and protections to prevent and reduce their vulnerability to harm and exposure to violent death scenes and the resulting trauma and grief. Yet, throughout history and in contemporary society, African American youth have not benefitted from protections that should accompany childhood (see King 2011 – 'Stolen Childhood'). In research with college students, Phillip Goff and colleagues (2014) examined whether Black male youth were afforded protections associated with childhood similar to those afforded to same age peers. The researchers found that a label or childhood descriptor (children) was less often applied to Black youth than White peers. Black boys were viewed as older and less innocent than peers from other racial groups. This perception transcends into adulthood for African American men, who despite their actual size and stature, are often labelled by racial majority individuals as 'big' (i.e., big Black guy). Similar

descriptors are not utilized in reference to White men. According to Phillip Goff and colleagues (2014), racialized perceptions regarding age and degree of innocence translate to receipt of fewer protections (e.g., less police protection) and other benefits of childhood for Black youth, thereby increasing their risk for harm.

Further, African American youth encounter losses and suffocated grief related to limited protection and support in educational institutions. They are disproportionately impacted by astounding homicide rates, personal vulnerability to death by violence, and losses related to racial, gender, and economic inequities (e.g., low resourced schools). Losses due to homicide are stigmatized and thus students may be less likely to share their loss experiences with teachers or explain their grief around the complexity of their experiences of intersecting losses and trauma. Youth spend a large portion of their weekdays in school, and thus their grief (distractedness, anger, fatigue) and trauma (hypervigilance) are brought into classrooms and school environments. In the absence of information and the presence of stigmatization of African American youth, their normal reactions to loss may be misdiagnosed (misbehaviour, cognitive deficits) and penalized when protections (i.e., bereavement-sensitive policies on attendance, makeup assignments) and supports (schools trained in loss and grief support) are not consistently in place to ensure their academic success and school engagement (Bordere 2014).

In a study of patterns of racial, ethnic, and gender differences in school discipline over time (1995–2005), racial minority students were two to five times more likely to be given suspensions or expulsions than White and Asian American students. John M. Wallace and colleagues (2008) found that despite a decrease in disciplinary actions taken within that time period, there was an increase in disciplinary actions for African American students.

Sense of duty and loss

Recognizing limitations in the extent to which protection can be offered to youth within African American families and communities, multiple socialization forces (families, church) transmit a sense of duty among African American youth to work towards improvement of social conditions that advantage some while disadvantaging other groups. Youth are socialized to understand their responsibility in 'doing the work' or continuing the efforts of ancestors and others who endured great suffering or died in pursuit of basic rights that they would not experience in their lifetime (e.g., Dr./Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks). However, in this realm of social justice promotion lurks further pain and bereavement.

Loss and trauma related to 'doing the work'/ emotional costs of 'doing the work'

Loss and trauma accompany attempts to uncover social and economic inequalities and advocacy efforts aimed at improving social conditions. These losses are compounded when social justice efforts are met with both disenfranchised grief and

suffocated grief in lieu of validation of loss and social change (protective policies) as illustrated in the following case.

Case: resisting oppression: college student protests

In the fall of 2015, student protests at a Midwestern university and other institutions ignited renewed attention to long-standing disparities (racial, ethnic, religious, gender) and inequities in university settings across the nation. Protests (marches, sit-ins, walkouts) around the country designed to highlight concerns for marginalized African American students and allies around unaddressed experiences of racial trauma and loss on college campuses were met with further loss and disenfranchisement. Students participating in the protests experienced myriad losses including loss of time, loss of energy, and loss of relationships, as well as losses related to missed classes and assignments (see Lumpkin and Cole 2018 – 'The Costs of Campus Activism'). African American and other marginalized students experienced suffocated grief when their otherwise normal cognitive, behavioural, and emotional grief expressions were mislabelled and penalized through overtly racist messages of hate, invalidation, and isolation, as well as police presence to restrict and intimidate, and community threats of physical harm, including death. In response to the grief of African American students around race-based trauma (Bryant and Ocampo 2005a; Sanchez-Hucles 1998) and loss, some institutions have implemented policies that restrict the physical spaces and places for protests (i.e., visible grief expressions) on college campuses.

Instrumental or cognitive-behavioural expressions of grief (Doka and Martin 2010) and loss through student protests and activism at other points in history have similarly been criminalized in lieu of validation, enfranchisement, and protection. Sit-ins designed to disrupt institutional oppression have consistently been penalized, in some cases through serious disciplinary actions and arrests of large numbers of protesters (Johnston 2015). Social and institutional resistance to student demands for basic rights to inclusive and safe educational spaces and places on college campuses affirm the continued existence of inequities and oppression of marginalized student populations.

African American individuals and families have resisted oppression and undoubtedly shown cultural resilience, but it has not been without costs. Attempts to disrupt broader systems of oppression have been met with collective grief in the assassinations of prominent civil rights leaders including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, and the more recent 2015 death of 28-year-old Sandra Bland. She was a visible advocate for law enforcement accountability in the shooting deaths of African American youth (Davis and Heilbroner 2018). Bland was arrested following a traffic stop and died by asphyxiation (hanging) in a prison cell; details around her death remain a mystery. Bland's family has vocalized their grief around her death and the ambiguous circumstances, and the secondary losses of time and energy as a function of 'outrage fatigue' (Yang 2018) in the absence of answers (see Rosenblatt 2014). In terms of context, the sheriff charged with investigating Bland's death had previously been fired from his position as police chief

following allegations of racism and police brutality and accusations of police misconduct (Graham 2015). Thus, there was a loss of ability to have an investigation conducted by someone with limited bias.

Ongoing race-based trauma, loss, and suffocated grief compromise mental, physical, cognitive, and social health outcomes for African American populations across social locations (e.g., social economic class, gender, age), generations, and development (Barrett 1998; Bordere 2017; Rosenblatt and Wallace 2005b; Umberson 2017). The stress and despair of the endless struggle of 'doing the work' is evident in the death of one well-established Black Lives Matter activist who died by suicide on the steps of the state house (see Lowery and Stankiewicz 2016). MarShawn McCarrel's early death (age 23) has brought increased attention to the toll of inequality on marginalized populations, activism, and mental health, with attention to depression.

Cultural values, behaviours, and survival

African American families have long demonstrated the ability to transform contextual experiences orchestrated for their demise into opportunities to revise current survival strategies or to develop new ones consonant with cultural values (e.g., dignity). Cultural values among African Americans remain rooted both in African ancestry and adaptations made in contexts of social, educational, and economic inequities, as well as health disparities and disproportionality in preventable death rates. Common values that cut across gender and socioeconomic lines for African American families include spirituality or belief in a higher power (e.g., God), collectivism, interdependence, ancestral pride (racial, ethnic, gender), present-time orientation, self-discipline, education, social support, and social status.

Religious institutions and familial relationships, including extended family (e.g., aunts, uncles) and fictive kin, or individuals perceived as family but are not related by blood or marriage (Chatters et al. 1994), have served as primary socialization agents and protective factors for African American youth and families.

Spiritual coping and the Black church

Without a clear end in sight for the eradication of institutionalized slavery, and the accompanying trauma and loss, African American families persisted in their faith and belief in a higher power (i.e., God). We have seen this same faith and determination serve protective functions for African American families across time as illustrated in the following case.

Case presentation: Jesus take the wheel

Mrs. Linda, an 85-year-old African American female, was hospitalized. Her heart was not pumping effectively, and she was accumulating fluid around her lungs. Her doctors were giving medications to help decrease the fluid. Mrs. Linda and her family informed the medical team that she was being honoured at church the

next day (Sunday). The team offered a more aggressive procedure at the bedside to drain the fluid to try to get her to the event. After draining the fluid, the physician asked Mrs. Linda to hum, advising that briefly humming while they remove the catheter makes it less likely to have a complication. She closed her eyes and began humming 'Amazing Grace'.

After a moment, the catheter was out. Mrs. Linda was told she could stop, but she persisted with an even more spirited hum, this time united by the harmonious humming of family members who joined in from the hallway. Mrs. Linda had emerged from the procedure focused on the same faith and source of strength and protection with which she entered it. Her hum/song was her testimony (Griffith et al., 1980) that she went through a trial and made it through the experience. Her family's social support through their collective post-surgery hum was symbolic of the call-and-response characteristic of the Black church wherein the response functions as validation; a bear-witnessing to experience.

In contexts of limited social and political power, African American individuals and families have maintained belief systems rooted in spirituality and the sense of community and support offered through participation in the Black church and mental health support from Black ministers (Taylor et al., 2000) and congregants to aid in coping processes and survival (Kim 2017; McAdoo 2007). Thus, amid the uprising of White Nationalism, hate crimes, and dismantling of human rights policies under the current presidency, many African American individuals have been vigilante but focused on a higher power and religious community support instead of the resurgence of White power. The values that have sustained African American populations are reinforced in the Black church. Faith, hope, patience, endurance, belongingness, interdependence, and self-love are fostered in a variety of ways. The minister/pastor's sermon describes everyday struggles (relationships, economics, racism) balanced with triumphs to promote hope among congregants. The sermon is usually interactive and communal in that it entails a 'call-and-response' (Smitherman 1977; see Pipes 2007) between the minister and congregants. For example, the minister says, 'Can I get an amen?', and congregants respond with affirmations such as 'Amen!' and 'Preach!'.

The music is similarly built around call-and-response communication and is designed to evoke emotional release among individuals who share experiences of social disadvantage and suffocated grief. The notable Bishop Paul S. Morton and The Greater St. Stephen Mass Choir, for example, sing 'Your Tears', which validates emotional expressions of grief in a context free of penalty:

> Your tears are just temporary relief.
> Your tears are just a release of the pain, sorrow, and grief.
> Your tears are expressions that can't be controlled.
> A little crying out is alright,
> But after a while you won't have to cry no more;
> Don't you worry, God's gonna wipe every tear away.

It continues with a reminder of faithfulness ('You've got to hold on') and the promise of better days to come ('A brand new day is dawning!'). The emotionally laden song is a lengthy eight minutes and sixteen seconds intentionally allowing ample time for protective defences (playing it cool, being strong) utilized in the broader society to be lowered so that emotional release is more probable among congregants.

Hymns and other songs promote connectedness ('Never Alone') to offset isolation that comes with disadvantage, racism, and grief. Other songs such as 'I Go to the Rock', 'Hold On, Help Is on the Way', and 'The Battle Is Not Yours, It's the Lord's' reinforce faith and hope and some freedom from the social responsibility to manage and address all social ills and injustices.

Personal power or power over our thoughts and perceptions is also promoted in the church. For example, having a personal relationship with a higher power through prayer. In a broader culture of disenfranchisement and invisibility, a higher power (God) will notice, listen, and value you ('His eye is on the sparrow, so I know he watches over me' – song). This sense of belongingness and community is also fostered through behavior in the form of social support and language in which church members are conceptualized as the church family and titled 'sister' and 'brother' (e.g., Sister Price, Brother West) in keeping with the collectivist nature of African American families.

Within this church family, the opportunity structure is broadened for individuals across development. African American youth have opportunities for mentorship and leadership development that may not be readily accessible in other settings. For example, youth coping with father loss or father absence have access to models and support from adult males within the church. Aging congregants gain social support through the Black church but are bidirectionally valued sources of historical memories and models of resilience. They are often called on to offer testimonies or stories about historical lived experiences with race-related struggles, losses (e.g., health), grief, and triumphs (Griffith et al., 1980) that provide education and promote positive racial identity among younger members. My grandfather gave a testimony about his experience with cancer as he neared the end of his life. He recounted the trials associated with cancer, including his perceived vulnerability in medical systems embedded in individual and institutional racism (see Bordere 2016b; Jones 1997), and his anticipation of a 'better life' and reunion with his siblings in heaven. Providing this testimony in front of the congregation allowed the church family and biological family present to bear witness and offer validation of loss and his anticipated gain in the afterlife.

Funeral rituals are often celebratory in nature (Bordere 2008–2009). Survivors celebrate the life of the deceased and the better life beyond this earth that s/he will experience with God in her/his heavenly home (funeral as 'homegoing'). This 'better life' entails freedom from suffering and oppression. In fact, African American funerals are designed to enfranchise and, in some cases, offer social status that was not achieved in the individual's lifetime due to limited opportunity structures (Bordere 2008–2009; Holloway 2003; Rosenblatt and Wallace 2005a).

Familial socialization

Family and extended kin are highly valued as important sources of socialization and protection for African Americans. With the painful awareness of ongoing sudden losses, African American families prepare themselves and their youth for survival amid these realities and the grief and racial trauma that, for their safety and well-being, cannot be allowed to consume them. For example, enslaved individuals were vulnerable to both disenfranchised grief (Doka 1989) and suffocated grief (Bordere 2014, 2016a) wherein normal grief reactions (e.g., fatigue and distractibility) to losses (e.g., familial separation, death) were not recognized in this dehumanizing context. An especially fatigued enslaved person was misperceived and mislabelled as lazy and less productive and hence penalized (e.g., flogged). This pattern continues today when bereaved African American youth are disengaged from school, in lieu of support, and put in a school-to-prison pipeline through which they are disproportionately incarcerated and imprisoned (see Equal Justice Institute – 'From Slavery to Mass Incarceration', https://eji.org/videos/slavery-to-mass-incarceration). As once stated by Mahatma Ghandi: 'Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will' (Gandhi 1920:259).

African American individuals and families were not meant to survive the horrendous experiences and conditions of forced enslavement. Yet, they did. Similarly, in the broader contexts in which African American youth and families are faced with microaggressions (Sue 2010; Sue et al., 2007), they are able to utilize this remarkable feat of ancestral survival and resilience through loss to draw the necessary strength and resolve to function. The institution of slavery produced profound trauma (Eyerman 2004) and losses (e.g., economic, educational, relational) for African American populations, ever-present in their historical memories (Kansteiner 2002) and ongoing disenfranchisement, while facilitating privilege maintenance for members of majority groups. Despite unacknowledged loss, families are able to utilize historical memories to recall and transmit narratives of racism and loss across generations. In research with bereaved African American adults, participants recounted experiences of racism faced by their deceased cared about persons during their lives (Rosenblatt and Wallace 2005a, 2005b).

Familial socialization strategies that provide historical perspectives on disenfranchising losses and suffocated grief are balanced with tools for survival and messages of hope and enfranchisement. Racial and ethnic pride, interdependence, and personal power; self-discipline, self-dignity, spirituality, and educational attainment are emphasized and important in social contexts in which African Americans may be stigmatized by some individuals and institutions. As a young child, I was taught and memorized poems that reinforced these tools for survival. One such poem is William Ernest Henley's (1988) 'Invictus':

> Out of the night that covers me,
> Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
> I thank whatever gods may be
> For my unconquerable soul.

> In the fell clutch of circumstance
> I have not winced nor cried aloud,
> Under the bludgeonings of chance
> My head is bloody, but unbowed.
>
> Beyond this place of wrath and tears
> Looms but the horror of the shade,
> And yet the menace of the years
> Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.
>
> It matters not how strait the gate,
> How charged with punishments the scroll,
> I am the master of my fate:
> I am the captain of my soul.
>   (Henley 1988:56)

These messages are transmitted across generations. A poignant example of the intergenerational communication of values promoting survival and resilience is found in the following letter written by my great-grandfather in December 1966 to my mother and her male siblings:

> Dear Grand Childrens
> You can See By this We have Received you all letter and was
> very very Glad to hear from our Grand Childrens
> and know that you all Were Well at this time also to know that
> our Grandchildrens is *Getting along Good in School*
> I am Glad indeed Because *Boy or Girl without Education* have little or
> No change [chance] to make or [a] *Good Living for hisself*
> or his family the same is for the Grils[Girls] you Can Make or [a]
> Good Living for self and For your family *Without So Much Hard Work*
> *if put Somthing in you all Head* and the *Good lord in Heart*
> Then you all cant mist the Good Ways this letter leave us
> We Will Be Down to See you all and that house
> I wont say when I hope it Will be Soon
> Give our love to your father and mother.

My great-grandfather, reared in the late 1800s, was not permitted to receive the education that he promoted among his grandchildren in this letter. Yet, his messages are clear. The letter symbolizes remnants of oppression and his survival while his messages were designed to promote resilience (e.g., social mobility) among my mother and her male siblings. It highlights his pride and recognition of their academic achievements and emphasizes the equal importance of education for African American males and females to circumvent struggles related to low educational attainment within already oppressive social contexts. Similarly, the letter reinforces the value of spirituality or belief in a higher power and family

cohesiveness as central to successfully navigating life. Finally, the letter begins and ends with attention to personal power and ownership. The letter includes the full names of each grandchild; names intentionally created by their parents. During slavery, African Americans did not have the right to name their children. He concludes the letter with a tone of pride in property ownership as expressed in his anticipation to see 'that house', one of several homes that my grandparents would own. Like my great-grandparents, my grandparents were also limited in their educational opportunities in the contexts of the Deep South. However, they worked and invested in property that would create the economic stability and legacy of prosperity owed but denied to previous generations.

Conclusion and implications

This chapter presented a historical and contemporary examination of death and non-death loss, suffocated grief, and survival for African American youth and families in social and political contexts of systemic oppression. As highlighted in the chapter, the intersection of racism and sexism is central to the grief narratives and lived experiences of African Americans across social locations (e.g., religious affiliation). Safe spaces are needed for this population to be able to express their experiences of racial trauma, loss, and grief free of the additional worry of being stereotyped or revictimized by white fragility.

The issues presented in this chapter have implications for researchers, practitioners, and educators. Each entity has a role in policy development and implementation that could enfranchise grief through both recognition and policy changes. More research is needed that explores the role of discrimination and social disadvantage in the loss (death and non-death) and suffocated grief experiences of African American youth and families in different contexts (school, employment). Further, in socially just practice, it is important for researchers to confirm and share their findings with populations under study and in the communities in which they are served (e.g., churches, youth organizations) (see Bordere 2016a).

In clinical practice, greater training is needed in identifying race-based trauma as well as education around the roles of historical legacies and contemporary patterns of loss and suffocated grief among African American and other marginalized populations for culturally responsive service provision (see Bryant-Davis and Ocampo 2005b). Opportunities to assess awareness of personal privilege and disadvantage and impact on service provision are also central to culturally responsive care. Further, partnerships are needed between trained clinicians and pastors of Black churches. This allows pastors to access resources that support congregants who do not wish to utilize formal support services. It also allows pastors to make referrals to clinicians who offer trustworthy support in which clients can share testimonies of injustices in their loss narratives and explore cultural and personal strengths that promote optimal functioning in their immediate environments and the broader society.

Training opportunities are needed in educational institutions that advance knowledge of racial trauma, student loss, and bereavement and offer concrete

support options. It is important for administrators and staff to review school and classroom policies, making necessary adjustments, to ensure that they accommodate the needs of bereaved students, families, and staff in ways that promote academic success and school functioning through both normative and disenfranchising losses. For example, Caregiver-Teacher conferences offer opportunities to check in regarding family transitions or anniversaries that may trigger grief. Loss and survival can be addressed in normal curriculum (social studies – violent losses, power hierarchies) and during holidays (Memorial Day).

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12   Grief in an individualized society

A critical corrective to the advancement of diagnostic culture

Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Anders Petersen

Introduction

We hold it to be neither provocative nor suggestive to claim the following: it is by now a truism that we live in an individualized society in which individuals are held accountable and responsible for seeking answers to a vast array of societal challenges and problems. Although the perspectives vary slightly – and the addressed consequences of the development differ – prominent sociological scholars have pinpointed this situation for some decades now (Giddens 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Bauman 2001). The overall rationale of individualization is that individuals, in several historical tempos, have become emancipated from societally sanctioned and supported types of collective life-forms and (traditional) communities in which they were previously embedded. Nowadays, instead, society is supportive of – and even demands – individuals who are responsible for creating and realising their own lives, competences and potentials vis-à-vis institutions such as education, work and family. As Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim famously formulated it: 'The individual is becoming the basic unit of social reproduction for the first time in history' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:xxii).

This does not, however, entail the complete dismantling of societally enforced norms and rules but rather the emergence of a situation in which individualization has become the structurally imposed norm that individuals have to strive for and live by. Individuals living in contemporary society cannot choose individualization; they are forced to choose it. One cannot escape individualization; it has now, for all practical intents and purposes, become a *task*, as Zygmunt Bauman (2000) so poignantly puts it. Perhaps we can clarify this a bit more by pointing to a fundamental concept that captures the central component of individualization – namely, autonomy. In our historical epoch of enhanced individualization, we cannot escape autonomy – rather we are forced to being autonomous. French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg explains this interconnection by claiming the following. The realization of one's personal autonomy in contemporary society has become a specific form of societal discipline (Ehrenberg 1991). That is, individualization is an overall societal demand, formulated as an ideal that each individual ought to follow. Hence, in an individualized society, the autonomous person is heralded as