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Kelly D. Meade
Transcending Culture:
The Universality of
Grief

ABSTRACT

This study explored how culture influences the grieving process. This study was undertaken in part to expand on the limited research on this topic. Some of the literature, including various studies, indicates that social context affects the experience and expression of grief (Catlin, 1992).

Twelve individuals who had lost their “loved ones,” defined by the researcher as a significant other, family member or close friend, at least two years but not longer than five years ago were interviewed for this study. Participation included answering questions regarding their experience of grief and various factors that influenced their grieving process.

The results of this study showed that various feelings associated with and manifestations of grief are the same or similar regardless of race, ethnicity, culture or religion. In this study, each individual defined culture themselves, making it difficult to determine how much a more specific definition of “culture” might have affected their responses regarding its influence on the grieving process.

TRANSCENDING CULTURE: THE UNIVERSALITY OF GRIEF

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Kelly D. Meade

Smith College School for Social Work
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

2007

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Most importantly, I would like to thank you, Mum. In life you taught me how to hang on; in death, you have taught me how to let go. I miss you.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Everyone, at some point in his or her life, will be subjected to the death of a loved one. When people suffer a major loss, they typically experience some form of *grief*, defined by Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005) as “the healing process that ultimately brings us comfort in our pain” (p. 203). *Loss* in this study refers specifically to “loss by means of death.”

Although the grieving process is personal and some aspects are different for each individual, there are certain experiences, feelings and themes that are common to mourners in general, regardless of race, ethnicity, culture or religion. There are many factors that affect how someone grieves. Through the use of minimally structured interviews, participants who have lost a “loved one,” meaning a significant other, immediate family member or close friend, shared their individual experiences of grief and the various factors that have influenced their grieving process. The specific question this study sought to answer was: “How does culture inform the grieving process?”

The definition of *culture* in Webster’s Dictionary (1993), is “a form of civilization, particularly the beliefs, arts and customs.” Joan Laird (1998) stated that “culture cannot be defined” (p. 27) and “is an individual and social construction, a constantly evolving and changing set of meanings that can be understood only in the context of a narrativized past, a co-interpreted present, and a wished-for future” (p. 28). For the purpose of this study, Webster’s definition of culture will be used as a guideline

while it is taken into consideration that the participants would have their own individual definition of culture.

Although there is an abundance of information regarding different aspects of grief and death in general, including the grieving process, how bereaved people react to grief and general attitudes toward death, the research regarding “the impact of culture on the experience of grief” is scarce and most of it is theoretical (Catlin, 2001, p. 173).

The hope is that this study will broaden the understanding of grief in general and the influence of culture, if any, on the grieving process in particular. Those who will benefit from this study include clinicians who work with the bereaved; that is to say, *all* clinicians since death is a natural and expected part of life; individuals who have suffered a loss and individuals who know someone who has suffered a major loss.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to explore how culture influences the grieving process. To date, there is relatively limited research on this topic.

The first major section of this chapter focuses on literature about the grieving process in general including definition of key terms, stages of the grieving process, responses to grief and gender differences in grieving. The second major section of this chapter reviews the literature about the influence of culture on the grieving process including definition of key terms, religious and cultural differences in grieving, attitudes toward death and reactions to the bereaved.

The purpose of reviewing these topics was to obtain a better understanding of the experience of grief in general as well as to call attention to the paucity of literature on the influence of culture on the grieving process.

Oltjenbruns studied grief responses of Mexican American and Anglican students in 1998. He wrote, "While there has been a notable increase in the research done during the last 20 years examining the grief response, little attention has been given to ethnicity as a possible intervening variable" (p. 142).

Catlin, in a study comparing the United States' and Spain' understanding of the effects of the death of a loved one among college students quoted Averill and Nunley, 1988 and Rosenblatt, 1988: "Although [the above] explanations of grief are relatively

universal in their application, it is also apparent that the experience and expression of grief are shaped by the social context” (1992, p. 174).

The Grieving Process

There are many factors that influence the grieving process. These include, but are not limited to: suddenness of death, family relationships, number of children in the bereaved family, relationship between the person who died and the mourner and inner resources of the bereaved (Riorden and Allen, 1989; Shneidman, 1984). This section on grief is comprised of several key areas of inquiry. These areas of inquiry are: definition of key terms, the stages of the grieving process, responses to grief, gender differences in grieving and responses to the bereaved.

Definition of Key Terms

According to Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005), “Grief is the healing process that ultimately brings us comfort in our pain.” (p. 203). Although there are many reasons for a person to grieve, this study will focus on *grief* as the result of a loved one’s death.

Attig (1996) made an important distinction between *bereavement* and *grieving*. He said that *bereave*, by definition means “to deprive, to dispossess or strip from” (p. 32). *Grieving*, on the other hand, is a coping process. Attig’s definition of grief and grieving varied slightly from that of Kubler- Ross and Kessler: “the specific emotion, grief, differs from the coping process, grieving” (p. 33). In this review and throughout the study, grief, grieving and bereavement are used interchangeably.

It is widely accepted that bereaved people go through various stages of the grieving process. Bereavement is an individual and personal process, one that many would argue is never completely finished. However, most individuals at some time reach the point of acceptance (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, 2005). When an individual does not reach the point of acceptance, complicated grief may develop. *Complicated grief* occurs when there is a delay in the process of resolving conflicts related to grieving (Cutcliffe, 1998).

Stages of the Grieving Process

Much has been written about the stages of the grieving process. Although there is some discrepancy regarding the actual stages of grief, it is commonly known that grieving people do go through some sort of “process.” Here we examine models developed by Kubler-Ross, Pincus and Staudacher. It is important to note that while each theorist described different stages and/or phases of grief, they are all in agreement that grieving is a process that has neither a time limit nor a chronological order. Mourners tend to move in and out of the various stages, though the most painful effects of the loss are typically felt sometime within the first six months to two years (Staudacher, 1991).

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross was the first to come up with the notion that there are various stages of grief. Her model is perhaps the best known and most widely accepted. According to Kubler-Ross (1969), there are five stages of grief: 1) denial and isolation, 2) anger, 3) bargaining, 4) depression and 5) acceptance. Her stages of grief, when initially introduced, focused more on the person who was dying as opposed to the person who lost a loved one; later, the stages were used to describe a bereaved individual’s grieving

process. Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005) described the five stages of grief as “part of the framework that makes up our learning to live with the one we lost.” (p. 7).

In the first stage, *denial and isolation*, or simply *denial*, a bereaved person may be paralyzed with shock or feel numb (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). These feelings, or lack thereof, help a bereaved person to get through each day and to let in only the amount of information the he or she can handle at a given time (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). A bereaved person in the *anger* stage is beginning the healing process. Anger may be directed toward any number of people, including the mourner herself, and it may be illogical or invalid (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). In the *bargaining* stage, the bereaved explore various “what if” and “if only” statements (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). Bargaining moves from the past (before the loved one dies) to the future (e.g. bargaining to see our loved ones in heaven or to be exempt from illness or tragedy) (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). *Depression* is a normal, healthy and necessary stage of grief (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). Kubler-Ross & Kessler (2005) wrote, “...in grief, depression is a way for nature to keep us protected by shutting down the nervous system so that we can adapt to something we feel we cannot handle” (p. 21). During the *acceptance* stage, the mourner learns to live with the reality that his loved one is physically gone and acknowledges the loss (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2005).

Lily Pincus (Shneidman, 1984) identified several stages of grief. *Shock* is a universal reaction that is more acute when the death is sudden and unexpected. *Searching* is an unconscious action for the bereaved, often manifesting itself through restlessness, lack of interest in topics unrelated to the deceased, and in dreams. *Finding* refers to having a sense of the deceased’s presence. *Depression and despair* is a stage that

mourners may move in and out of with each relapse shorter than the previous if the grief is “uncomplicated.” *Anger/hostility* may be directed toward medical personnel, the deceased or other loved ones (or anyone else, for that matter) and also may seem “irrational” at times. *Guilt* can be both justified and unjustified. *Restitution* is specific to a mourner who did not treat the deceased well in life. *Idealization* occurs when the bereaved and deceased did not have a solid relationship. *Identification*, also connected with idealization is a means of “internalizing the lost person” (p. 407). During *regression*, a mourner may exhibit childish and irrational behavior. That is, if others are not supportive during this time, the mourner may get stuck in this phase. Finally, *adaptation* is necessary to complete the mourning process in that mourners must have as much time as they need to grieve and be able to grieve in their own way.

Staudacher (1991) divided the grieving process into three major phases: retreating, working through and resolving. *Retreating* happens immediately after the death of a loved one as a way of temporarily managing pain and anxiety. Common experiences and feelings during this phase are shock, numbness, disbelief, confusion, disorientation and denial. *Working through* is the next phase, during which a mourner confronts, endures and works through various grief responses, including sadness, confusion, despair, feelings of abandonment, powerlessness, loss of control, helplessness, specific and unspecific fear, anger, guilt, auditory or visual hallucinations, depression, and poor concentration and memory. Working through these responses helps the mourner enter the *resolving* phase, during which mourners reorganize and restructure their lives to adjust to an environment of which the loved one is no longer a part.

This study is grounded in Kubler-Ross's stages of the grieving process. Kubler-Ross developed her stages of grief to help people identify, understand and accept feelings associated with loss. It is important to acknowledge that no loss or reaction to loss is typical and that "our grief is as individual as our lives....Our hope is that with these stages comes the knowledge of grief's terrain, making us better equipped to cope with life and loss" (Kubler-Ross and Kessler, 2005 p. 7).

Responses to Grief

The various stages of grieving listed above describe some of the feelings and reactions typical of the bereaved. Other responses include physical symptoms, such as headaches, giddiness, weakness, nausea, breathlessness, weight gain, hair loss, ulcerative colitis, arthritis and skin disease, weight loss, anxiety, confusion and insomnia (Cims, 1999; Shaw, 1994). There are also various responses to grief that, depending on the culture of the bereaved, may or may not be considered acceptable.

Western cultures are made up of people from many different cultural and religious backgrounds who react to death and experience bereavement in different ways (Ata & Morrison, 2005). In spiritually-oriented societies, rituals are used as healing methods for the bereaved. Western psychiatry tends to view "culturally sanctioned expressions which are considered by many migrant communities as coping strategies, including passivity, euphoria, aggression, submissiveness, extroversion, self-flagellation, non-assertiveness, psychological martyrdom, hierarchical dependence, hearing voices, masculinity and femininity" (p. 4) as pathologies (Ata and Morrison, 2005).

In other parts of the world overt expression of grief is not only accepted, but is actually expected. In India, for example, the women of the household of the deceased gather around the body right before the funeral procession. “Their faces swollen, they wail, they cry, they sob; a few of them are inconsolable. They seem unwilling to part from their dead. There is a hallowed expectation that women should not only cry but be seen to be crying at the death” (Luangani, 1996, p. 194). A study by Kalish and Reynolds (1976) as cited in Oltjenbruns (1998), “found that Mexican Americans were more likely to report that they would allow themselves to cry in public than the Anglo, Black or Japanese Americans included in the study.” (p. 150). This result supported Oltjenbruns’ finding that the Mexican Americans in the 1998 study exhibited a more intense response to grief.

A bereaved person’s reaction to the death of a loved one may be influenced by other people’s expectations regarding how long the grieving process is “supposed to” take. Machin and Spall’s (2004) study showed that 10 out of the 94 bereaved participants felt pressure from others to contain their grief. According to Martin and Doka (2000), as cited in Machin & Spall (2004), “...cultural norms not only influence the experience of grief but the expression of grief, too” (p. 13). The bereaved participants were influenced by others in terms of their grieving process, including how they viewed their own feelings of grief and how they expressed their grief to others. These “others,” in turn were influenced by some aspect of culture. In this study, “culture” actually referred to *care culture*, specifically a voluntary bereavement counseling agency, where Machin (2001) proposes that “a current ‘overwhelming’ experience of grief might well be the catalyst for self-referring for help” (Machin and Spall, 2004 p. 14) as opposed to a medical setting,

“where the management of symptoms is by pharmaceutical and therapeutic removal of distress [and] clients may reflect the need to subdue unwanted feelings, thoughts and behaviour that indicate a 'sick' state” (Machin and Spall, 2004 p. 14).

Rosenblatt et al (1976) examined the death customs of 78 societies in order to gather cultural perspectives regarding the psychosocial inadequacy and inappropriateness of mourning patterns in the United States. The findings showed that crying is the most common expression of grief. Anger was less common than they anticipated, with only 76% of the societies reporting over-expression of anger. Rosenblatt et al (1976) attributed this to the fact that most societies have rituals that help the bereaved to channel their anger (Palgi and Abramovitch, 1984). Other rituals include discarding or destroying property, placing a taboo on the name of the deceased, changing residence and funeral ceremonies (Palgi and Abramovitch, 1984). So, while some rituals and grief manifestations may be different, there are also apparent similarities across cultures.

Schoka et al (2003) proposed that grieving, which is an individual process, is influenced by the bereaved person's relationship to others, particularly family members. Cultural and societal norms and values, which we learn from the family system, also influence how we cope with loss (Schoka et al, 2003). In this study, 61 people who had recently experienced the death of a parent or spouse were interviewed 4-5 weeks after the death and again at 6 months to try to determine “whether the grief process affects the characteristics of relationships within the family system or, alternatively, whether family characteristics affect the experiences of grief symptoms” (Schoka et al, 2003 p. 575). One important result suggests that “families who are more aware of and able to express their emotions with one another report less intense grief over time as compared with more

stoic families” (Schoka et al, 2003 p. 593). Schoka et al (2003) pointed out that “the ability to experience and express one’s emotions is a major construct that is important in both the theories of the grief process and the field of family systems” (p. 593).

Catlin (2001) conducted a study examining differences in the experience of grief between subjects from the University of Massachusetts in the United States and the University of Madrid in Spain, paying particularly close attention to the role of culture in the grieving process. The findings showed that bereavement is shaped by cultural context (Catlin, 2001). For example, the Americans in the study reported that the death of a loved one had a negative effect on both their self esteem and their liking and trust of others; the Spaniards also reported a negative effect on their self esteem, but indicated that their liking and trust of others was positively effected (Catlin, 2001). One proposed reason for this response is the differences in how self and relationships are viewed within the two societies, specifically the emphasis on autonomy of the individual in American society versus the notion that family and community ties are key components of one’s identity in Spanish culture (Catlin, 2004).

Gender Differences

There are certain gender related expectations that individuals in the Western culture are exposed to. Men are typically expected to be strong and reserved in terms of expressing their feelings (Staudacher, 1991). Perhaps this expectation factors into the sex differences in emotions during bereavement, namely that women tend to cry and self-mutilate as an expression of grief while men turn their anger and aggression away from themselves (Palgi and Abramovitch, 1984). One theory suggests that because it may be

easier to socialize women not to be aggressive, crying and self-mutilating is perhaps representative of female anger (Palgi and Abramovitch, 1984). Although, generally speaking, women may *appear* to be more affected by the loss of a loved one, this does not mean that their symptoms of grief are stronger or more severe than those of men. In fact, one major difference in the way that men and women grieve is how they appear to be coping with their loss. Women tend to communicate more about their loss while men generally keep their thoughts and feelings to themselves (Staudacher, 1991). So, while a woman's grieving process may appear to take longer than a man's grieving process, this is not necessarily the case and actually, the opposite may be true because repressing or suppressing grief actually prolongs the grieving process (Staudacher, 1991).

A study by Stroebe, Stroebe & Schut (2001) that explored gender differences in health outcomes, concluded "men suffer relatively higher consequences of partner loss than do women" (p. 78). These consequences include high levels of depression, high risk of being disabled and even a high mortality rate (Stroebe, Stroebe & Schut, 2001). The findings also showed that while women are more likely than men to confront their emotions, this does not necessarily mean that this coping style is more effective and "that gender differences in bereavement outcomes are due to the fact that external constraints prevent women but not men from exclusively engaging in their preferred style of coping" (p. 78).

Influence of Culture on the Grieving Process

The first section of this chapter focused on the grieving process in general. This section will focus specifically on how culture influences the grieving process, namely

definition of key terms, religious and cultural differences in grieving, attitudes toward death and reactions to the bereaved.

Definition of Key Terms

The definition of *culture* in Webster's Dictionary (1993), is "a form of civilization, particularly the beliefs, arts and customs." Joan Laird (1998) stated that "culture cannot be defined" (p. 27) and "is an individual and social construction, a constantly evolving and changing set of meanings that can be understood only in the context of a narrativized past, a co-interpreted present, and a wished-for future" (p. 28).

Religious and Cultural Differences

Religious rituals, while helping to give meaning to death and comfort to the survivors, also serve to put a time limit on grieving (Mims, 1999). The following is a description of how different religions and cultures, such as Judaism, Islam, African American, Buddhism, Native American and Catholicism cope with death.

Judaism

In some Jewish communities, mourners observe *shiva*, Hebrew for "seven", a seven day *full mourning* period followed by one month of *partial mourning* (Mims, 1999). *Shiva* concludes with the family saying their final prayers for the week together and then taking a short walk. This custom serves both as an announcement that the initial mourning period has ended and a reminder to the family that it is time to rejoin the outside world (Cytron, 1993). There are two more mourning periods in the Jewish tradition: *sheloshim*, Hebrew for "thirty," which is the 30 days following the funeral and

also the entire year, beginning on the day of death and ending on the first anniversary (Cytron, 1993).

There are two main values that inform the rituals of death and mourning in the Jewish tradition: 1) kavod hamet, the requirement to “honor the dead,” and 2) nichum avelim, the obligation to “comfort the mourners”(Cytron, 1993, p. 115).

Islam

In the tradition of Islam, the following must occur immediately after someone dies: the body must be turned to face toward Mecca; someone sitting near the body must read the Koran; the body’s mouth and eyes must be closed and the eyes and face covered up; both legs must be straightened and both hands must be stretched by the sides; the death must be announced immediately to all friends and relatives; and the body must be bathed quickly and covered in white cotton (Gilanshah, 1993). Professional mourners are called upon to encourage the bereaved to express their grief (Mims, 1999).

African American

Although certain aspects of African American funerals differ depending on religion, location, educational background, and socioeconomic background of the families and communities involved, there are some aspects of the funeral that are considered universal (Perry, 1993). For instance, there is pressure to attend the funeral, regardless of familial relationship or geographical distance. Even acquaintances are expected to attend the funeral (Perry, 1993). In terms of mourning practices, those of African Americans “exemplify some of the most organized and elaborate efforts to aid mourners during their various stages of grief” (Perry, 1993, p 59). These practices include people arriving at the home of the mourners, including women from the church (known

as “sisters”), who bring and prepare meals and take care of other household responsibilities, members of the church who come and talk about the dead, the church “nurses” who go with the family members to view the body and the pastor, funeral director and assistants- all there to help the mourners work through their grief (Perry, 1993).

Buddhism

There are variations of Buddhist practices and rituals regarding death and dying, though preparation for death is an important aspect of the process in all Buddhist countries. The most elaborate preparation ritual is found in Tibetan Buddhism, where

the purpose of the preparation extends beyond calming and focusing the mind. It serves as an initiation of the dead or dying person to the transition from death to rebirth. Instructions are read to the dying person and later to the corpse to help guide it through the *bardo* (transition state) between life forms. The goal is to initiate the consciousness of the dying one to the great opportunity of *nibbana* that lies ahead. Elaborations of this ceremony continue for 49 days until rebirth is assured. (Truitner, 1993, p. 125)

Although death is generally viewed as positive, Buddhist customs nonetheless require a display of grief (Truitner, 1993). Family members typically “wear the traditional white cloth and openly show grief, even wailing at times” (Truitner, 1993 p. 133). In America, a funeral service, planned by family members, is held at the funeral home or temple; lay persons (sometimes with monks, though this is not required), chant sutras. The body is not embalmed as Buddhists do not believe in the resurrections of the body. Friends and family members bring fruit or flowers and incense is burned. A large photograph is traditionally placed on a stand or table near the casket and family members are known to wear white headbands and armbands and carry sticks, a symbol of the support they need in their time of grief (Truitner, 1993).

Native American

Native Americans identify themselves according to the tribe or nation they belong to, rather than thinking of their ancestry in terms of Native Americans as a distinct and unified group of people. Each nation has a different set of values and beliefs. In terms of death beliefs, for instance, “the Apache regard a dead person’s body as an empty shell, while the Lakota speak to the body, visit it, and understand it to be sacred. The Navajo do not believe in an afterlife, while most of the other Native American nations do.”

(Brokenleg & Middleton, 1993, p. 103)

Catholicism

There are various beliefs Catholics share in terms of death. For instance, when someone dies, she does not cease to exist or lose identity. This is known as the “immortality of the soul.” The “communion of saints” describes the ongoing bonds between a living and deceased person. During one’s time of loss, the church “is there to embrace and comfort” the person. This is called the “unity of the faithful.” Catholics also believe in the “resurrection of the dead” (Johnson, 1994, p. 85).

The family is typically involved in the planning of a Catholic funeral. In the days before the funeral, there is a waiting process known as a “wake.” During the wake, the casket is arranged so that visitors can come and pay their respects. Families may opt for open or closed casket wakes. The funeral is held in a church several days after the actual death. A Mass is said, complete with a liturgy of the Word, readings from the Bible, a eulogy, homily and Eucharist. There is a funeral procession to the cemetery after the Mass (Butler, 1974).

Attitudes Toward Death

Laderman (2003) wrote, “By the start of the twentieth century, the relationship between the living and the dead in America had begun to change dramatically” (p. 1). He proposed several reasons for this: “changes in demographic patterns, the rise of hospitals as places of dying, and the growth of modern funeral homes” (p. 1).

In the early part of the twentieth century, mortality rates decreased and life expectancy increased. This shift meant that families had less exposure to death than in previous times (Laderman, 2003). The increase in the utilization of hospitals also contributed to the decreasing exposure families had to death. Before the early twentieth century, doctors would typically make house calls and people would die at home. At that time, “a new perspective on death began to take hold in the United States: Life must be sustained at all costs, with death viewed as a devastating defeat” (Laderman, 2003, pp 3-4). The funeral home industry emerged and flourished as a result of these social trends. Many of the tasks involving death, once taken on by the deceased’s family, were becoming the responsibility of the funeral home staff. In this sense, “the dead were beginning to lose their traditional familiar place in the world of family relations” (Laderman, 2003, p 5).

The views on death and dying in Western society, unlike other societies, do not view “death and its rituals as a right of passage to be compared with birth, coming of age, marriage and retirement” (O’Gorman, 1998, p. 1132). This Western view is evident in the workplace, where employees are often allowed to take time off for funeral services (although not always *paid* time off), but are not offered much, if any support upon their return (Eyetsmitan, 1998). According to Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005), “we live in a

new death-denying, grief-dismissing world now” (p 205). Palgi and Abramovitch (1984) believed that whether Americans in particular have a denial of death or are apathetic toward death and do not know what to do in death related situation, “the general consensus... is that Americans do have a problem dealing with death” (p. 400).

People in Buddhist countries, however, do not appear to struggle as much with the issue of death and dying. Truitner (1993) stated that in these countries, “death becomes the highlight of life, a great opportunity for realizing pure enlightenment through attainment of the Buddha mind” (p. 130). The Hmong, on the other hand, believe that “life in human form is very desirable” (Bliatout, 1993, p. 83). This is not to say that the Hmong do not take death seriously. In fact, proper burial and worship of ancestors is believed to influence the health, safety and prosperity of the living (Bliatout, 1993).

Reactions to the Bereaved

The effect of social support on the grieving process is not yet clear. Stroebe et al (2005) concluded that “there is limited evidence for the widely held assumption that social support buffers the bereaved against the impact of the loss experience and/or facilitates recovery” (p. 1030). Cohen and Willis (1985) as cited in Stroebe et al (2005) discussed the importance of determining the *functions* provided by relationships the bereaved has with others when assessing the usefulness of social support. In order for social support to be useful in the grieving process, the function provided must meet the coping needs of the bereaved individual (Stroebe et al, 2005). Therefore, simply having a group of friends does not necessarily mean that the bereaved will get the support they need, especially when various societal attitudes toward death are taken into consideration.

In Balk's (1997) study of 18 bereaved students at Kansas State University, he found that participants' expectations about recovering from grief changed once their grief work began. They found grief to be harder, sadder and to take longer than they had expected. These participants also "perceived that their friends expected recovery should come easier, involve less sadness, and take less time.... All the students indicated that prior to struggling with bereavement their expectations about grief recovery mirrored the expectations of their unaffected friends (p. 215).

Despite previous research pointing out there are individual differences related to grief, many people still tend, even if subconsciously, to judge a bereaved person by how they are grieving, implying that there is a "right" and "wrong" way to grieve (Oltenbruns, 1998). When these value judgments occur, the bereaved may question whether their individual reactions are legitimate or appropriate (Oltenbruns, 1998). Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005) emphasized that grief is an individual process, one that does not adhere to timelines. They stated, "Our society places enormous pressure on us to get over loss, to get through the grief" (p. 203).

In a bereavement study conducted by Lowton and Higginson (2003), thirteen school staff working in inner-city schools in Southeast London participated in interviews that focused on the impact of bereaved children on the school and how teachers responded to these children. One interesting finding which is relevant to the present study was, "British society, culture, local communities, and the family were significant influences in these teachers' involvement with the bereaved students" (Lowton and Higginson, 2003, p. 717). In one case, bereavement issues were never even brought up with the surviving parent because the student's behavior was not an issue. This lack of

behavioral change, or even a perceived improvement in behavior “in some bereaved students, may compound the silence from society that surrounds their bereavement” (Lowton and Higginson, 2003, p. 728).

Experience or lack of experience, with death may also influence how someone reacts to a bereaved individual. One teacher in Lowton and Higginson’s (2003) study described his lack of ability to discuss bereavement with his students’ surviving parent:

I was stumped, I really didn’t know, and that’s maybe why I left it [talking about the death] because I was reluctant to pursue it because I didn’t have the experience and I didn’t know what the reaction would be, so I left it (p 729).

The teachers in this study who had been bereaved themselves felt strongly about the importance of reaching out to the bereaved children (Lowton and Higginson, 2003). One participant lost her mother at age 9 and no one ever spoke to her about her mother again, though she believes now that she desperately needed communication at that time (Lowton and Higginson, 2003).

Summary

Reif, Patton & Gold (1995) stated, “... little scientific data exist about the important elements of the bereavement process as a phenomenon in its own right (p. 292). One of these elements is the role culture plays in the bereavement process. As evidenced by this literature review, much has been written about various rituals, traditions and expectations of the bereaved; it is still unclear, however what, if any, role these factors play in the actual grieving process. Several authors cited in this chapter found connections between culture and the grieving process and stated that more research was needed in order to come to any conclusions about correlations between the two.

Given the above, it seems that reactions to the bereaved is an important aspect of the grieving process and may be influenced by the reactor's experience with death. There is also evidence that people of Western cultures have more difficulty dealing with death than people of other cultures.

So, is the experience and manifestation of grief universal or does culture have a major impact on this process? Are there other, perhaps more important or more significant factors that influence the grieving process? This study will attempt to clarify these questions.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Study Purpose and Question

The purpose of this study was to explore how culture influences the grieving process. Although there is an abundance of information regarding different aspects of grief and death in general, including the grieving process, how bereaved people react to grief and general attitudes toward death, the research regarding “the impact of culture on the experience of grief” is scarce and most of it is theoretical. (Catlin, 2001, p. 173). One of the purposes of this study, then, is “to refine our understanding of new or ill-defined phenomena.” (Anastas, 1990, p. 60). This study attempted to answer the question “How does culture influence the grieving process?”

Everyone, at some point in his or her life, will experience the death of a loved one. According to Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2005), “...loss and the grief that accompanies it are very personal, different from anyone else’s” (p. 29). There are many factors that affect how someone grieves; this study will focus on how culture influences a bereaved person’s grieving process. The definition of *culture* in Webster’s Dictionary (1993), is “a form of civilization, particularly the beliefs, arts and customs.” Joan Laird (1998) stated that “culture cannot be defined” (p. 27) and “is an individual and social construction, a constantly evolving and changing set of meanings that can be understood only in the context of a narrativized past, a cointerpreted present, and a wished-for future” (p. 28). For the purpose of this study, I will use Webster’s definition of culture as

a guideline while recognizing that the participants will have their own individual definition of culture.

The proposed study is a qualitative, inductive, exploratory study. This design and research methodology was chosen because it was expected that themes would unfold as the interviews are conducted. In flexible method research, “the researcher, the people and the phenomena studied, and the inferences made about them are seen as part of an open, interactive, potentially fluid situation.” (Anastas, 1990, p. 61). Therefore, I will use an interview guide consisting of semi-structured, open-ended questions (Appendices A and B).

The data collected from this study will be used for my thesis, a requirement for the Master’s of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work, for future presentation and publication on the topic and to obtain a better understanding of the experience of grief in general as well as to call attention to the paucity of literature on the influence of culture on a bereaved person’s grieving process.

Research Method and Design

In this study, a qualitative, inductive, exploratory design with a flexible method was used to examine how culture influences the grieving process. It was therefore expected that themes would unfold as the interviews were conducted. The interview guide consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions.

Sample

The selection criteria for the sample, which consisted of 12 participants, were that participants had experienced grief over the death of a loved one, meaning a significant other, family member or close friend and were at least 22 years old. The death of this loved one must have occurred at least 2 years but not more than 5 years ago, so that participants would not be in the acute stages of the grieving process. Participants identified as male or female and the sample was racially, ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse.

After obtaining approval in the form of a written letter from the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Board, the researcher began the recruitment process, which consisted of e-mailing a description of the study to friends, colleagues and acquaintances and verbally describing the study to various individuals. The researcher was able to obtain a diverse group of participants by word of mouth recruiting. Once prospective participants were identified, they were contacted them for an initial phone screening. During this phone screening, the researcher briefly explained the purpose of the study as well as what would be expected from them during the interview. Prospective participants were informed of the demographic questionnaire and informed consent form, that names would be kept confidential and that they could withdraw from the study any time before June 1, 2007. After confirming that they were still interested in participating, the researcher screened for inclusion criteria by asking the following questions: 1) What was your relationship to the person who died? 2) When did s/he die? 3) How old are you? 4) How do you identify in terms of gender? 5) How do you identify in terms of culture? 6) Are you available to participate in a one hour interview sometime

between March and May? 7) Do you have any concerns about participating in this study or questions about the study purpose?

Risks and Benefits

The researcher took into consideration potential risks of participating in this study. The interview questions may have brought up some painful memories of participants' grieving process and it may have been stressful to talk openly about their grieving process. In an attempt to put the participants more at ease, they were informed that if at any time during the interview they did not want to answer a question, they had the right to decline to do so. A list of referral resources was attached to the consent form in the event they wanted to speak to someone further about the feelings that came up for them before, during or after the interview.

The potential benefits of participating in this study included allowing participants to share their experiences during the grieving process in a safe and confidential manner. They may have also felt a sense of comfort or even pride that their contributions will provide important information that may be utilized by professionals working with individuals as they are going through their grieving process.

Data Collection

The researcher contacted potential participants who met selection criteria to set up interviews, which were held at a mutually agreed upon venue or conducted over the phone, and to gather demographic information. The researcher sent each participant an informed consent form (Appendix C) and the interview guide (Appendix B), so they

would know what questions would be asked and have time to think about their responses if they chose to do so.

Individuals who participated in face to face interviews were asked to bring the consent forms with them to the interview; individuals who participated in phone interviews were sent a self addressed, stamped envelope or e-mailed the consent form and were asked to return the form prior to the interview. All participants were given a second copy of the informed consent for their records.

During the interviews, participants were asked to share their experiences of grief and their healing process in relation to their culture. Thirteen semi-structured, open-ended interview questions were used during the interview (Appendix B). These interview questions were self-developed and emerged from the research question and the relevant previous research. The areas of inquiry included the nature of the relationship with the deceased, the cause and nature of death, the ceremonies and rituals pertaining to death, the grieving process, the cultural traditions and expectations pertaining to the grieving process and the impact on current relationships of the bereaved. The participants also had an opportunity to add additional thoughts or comments and were asked what it was like to talk about this topic.

The interviews were digitally recorded. Assigning transcriptions of the interviews a number and removing any identifying names and locations from the transcript assured confidentiality. Some illustrative quotes were used for publication and reported in relation to some demographic information, however participants' names and specific geographical locations were omitted to protect their privacy. The researcher was the only handler of all data including recordings and transcripts.

Using the model of open-ended, semi-structured questions allowed the researcher to ask clarifying questions during the interviews. The approximate range in length of the interviews was 30-60 minutes.

One factor that may have influenced data collection was when and to whom the researcher asked follow up questions. In some cases, the researcher asked participants to elaborate on their responses but she did not do this with each participant or every question. The researcher did de-brief with each participant after the interview had officially ended and a few participants had additional thoughts or comments they wanted to include.

Data Analysis

Demographic data was categorized by question and reported in the aggregate. All digitally recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed by the researcher. A content/thematic analysis was done in order to uncover common themes, including differences in responses to specific questions.

The researcher coded the content of the interviews, breaking down the transcripts by each question, and then pulling out common words, phrases, ideas and themes. It was important to sort out and then report the race, ethnicity, culture and/or religion of the respondents. Once themes became apparent, illustrative quotes were used to support interpretation of the data.

Limitations

There were several limitations for this study. For instance, the small size of the sample made it difficult to determine whether participants' responses regarding the

grieving process were a reflection of cultural influence in particular or an attribute of some other factor. The sample also could have been more random because each participant was either known to the researcher or referred by someone who knew the researcher. Inclusion criteria for this study was relatively broad; more specific criteria, such as type of loss, for instance mother, father, sibling or grandparent and nature of death.

Finally, personal experience with loss and grief may have contributed to research bias. The researcher decided to study this topic as a result of the loss of a loved one which occurred less than 2 years ago. The researcher may have had certain pre-conceived notions about aspects of the grieving process and reactions to the bereaved.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from 12 interviews conducted with people who have lost to death a loved one at least 2 years ago but not longer than 5 years ago. The definition of *culture* found in Webster's Dictionary (1993), "a form of civilization, particularly the beliefs, arts and customs," was used as a guideline for the purpose of this study, though it was accepted that the participants would have their own individual "definition" of culture.

One major finding was that all participants, whether or not they identified strongly, or at all, with a specific culture or religion, utilized some type of ritual or tradition to either help them work through their grieving process or to remember their loved ones. Most reported that their grief manifested itself in some way. All but one participant attributed some aspect of their grieving process to their culture or religion, but only five talked about culture or religion without specific follow up questions to their initial responses.

The interview guide was designed to open up conversation about how culture influences the grieving process. Participants were asked thirteen open-ended questions relating to the death of their loved ones and their experience of grief. These questions explored the relationship between the bereaved person and the person who died, the

manner of death, ceremonial recognition of death, participation in ceremony, coping mechanisms to work through and manifestations of grief, ability to express grief, cultural rituals and traditions, grieving rituals of other cultures, cultural expectations of the grieving process, the impact of the loss on current relationships, additional thoughts and what it was like for the participant to talk about this topic. Ten of these interviews were conducted in person and two were conducted over the phone. The data from these interviews are presented as follows: demographic data of participants, the nature of the relationship with the deceased, the cause and nature of death, the ceremonies and rituals pertaining to death, the grieving process, the cultural traditions and expectations pertaining to the grieving process, the impact on current relationships of the bereaved and additional comments.

Demographic Data

Twelve bereaved individuals, identifying as either male (7) or female (5), participated in this study. Eight individuals were native to the United States and four came from other countries: Canada, Morocco, the Netherlands and the Philippines. At the time the interviews were conducted, 9 participants lived in the United States: 1 in Rhode Island, 1 in New Jersey, 1 in Connecticut and 6 in Massachusetts and 3 lived in other countries: 1 in Iraq, 1 in the Netherlands and 1 in the Philippines. The average age was 33.66 years, with ages ranging from 25 to 54 years of age. No participants had the same identity in terms of culture: military; European-Dutch; Filipino; Judaism, Eastern European; Liberian *and* American; Italian *and* American; White female, spiritual, not in an organized religion, Canadian Montrealer, English Quebecois; White American male;

Moroccan roots influenced by American culture; African American; White upper middle class. Race and ethnicity were also quite varied (White Irish; White Dutch; Asian; Jewish Caucasian; Black, African American Liberian; White Italian American; White Canadian; Caucasian, Portuguese, English; White American; Moroccan; African; White). One participant did not identify with any particular culture and only one responded with exactly the same answer for both questions. Participants reported being affiliated with the following religions: Roman Catholic, Catholic, Judaism, Christian Methodist, Baptist, Muslim, and Buddhism. One participant was raised as a Protestant, but is not currently practicing; one was baptized as a Methodist but was not affiliated with any organized religion. Seven participants were actively practicing their religion to some degree. Of the 5 who said they did not practice, 3 claimed to have some sort of spiritual belief system. Eleven participants identified as straight or heterosexual and 1 identified as gay. Four participants described their socio-economic background as middle class; 1 described growing up upper middle class but currently being middle class; 1 described growing up poor but currently being middle class; one described being considered upper class in one country and middle class in the U.S.; 1 described growing up middle class but currently being working class; 1 described being upper class; one described being upper middle class. Most (8) participants' loved ones died approximately two years ago; one participant's loved one died three years ago, one four years ago and two five years ago.

Nature of Participants' Relationship with the Deceased

Three individuals lost their mother and two lost their father. The remaining participants lost a stepfather, fiancé, first cousin, aunt, best friend, grandfather or

grandmother. Each participant was asked to describe his or her relationship with the person who died. Half the participants (4 White, 1 Asian, and 1 Moroccan) described their relationship as being, to some degree, “close.” Two of these participants felt a special bond with the person who died:

It was a very close relationship. He was my best friend.... [we] had a very emotional relationship with one another. We had a lot of deep conversations often and he was the person in the world that I connected to the most and to this day still feel like I connect to the most and respect the most....he really loved me and I knew that he knew I was special and I knew he was special and there was just always a lot to talk about.

...I was really close with my mom.... As far as emotional support I was always very in tune with her, where I could tell when she was having a bad day and she could tell when I was having a bad day. And in the past, I wasn't really one to talk; I never really let anybody in and my mom was the one person in my life....I would call her but I wouldn't really have to tell her why I was calling, she knew I was kind of having a bad day... I never really let anybody else in, my mom was the only one and so that made the tough times even tougher after she passed away.

Two participants described how the deceased loved ones viewed them: “She acted like a mother; not even like an aunt at all,” and “He referred to me as his daughter all the time- I wasn't his stepdaughter or anything.” One said the person who died “...was the best friend I ever had.” Another said that it was a “fairly decent relationship....a really healthy relationship.” One participant replied, “We had a very good relationship.” One interviewee described the nature of the relationship (fiancé) and how they met.

Cause and Nature of Death

Half of the participants lost their loved ones to cancer: 3 to pancreatic cancer, 2 to breast cancer, and 1 to Hodgkin's lymphoma. Two loved ones died from a heart attack,

although one of them also had lung cancer, one from Crohn's disease, one from medication taken for rapid heart beat, one of old age and one was murdered.

Eight participants' loved ones were sick before they died, though at least 5 of these participants were surprised by some aspect of their death. One participant explained the events leading up to her loved one's death in this way:

We all had different understandings of how sick she was....she pulled me aside and talked to me about what she wanted in terms of the funeral.... A couple of weeks before she called me and said she didn't want to live anymore.... She said I'm not going to kill myself. But she did stop eating.... So I wasn't shocked.

Another participant was also prepared for his loved one's death, though not for the time frame in which it happened:

...we expected it to happen. But for me personally, I didn't know when it would happen. I knew that it would happen eventually because she had gone through so many different types of ...treatment... those things didn't work. And each time I saw her, she looked more deteriorated than the last time I saw her. So at that point, I knew it was going to happen, but I didn't know when....when it happened, it still took me off guard.

One participant, whose loved one had been sick for as long as she could remember said when she found out he had died, "I fell on the floor- I couldn't believe it, [I] had no idea that this was it..." Another participant's love one had also been living with an illness for many years, but he described her death in this way:"...it all happened so quickly....she just died. I mean, nobody saw it coming; [she] didn't see it either....there was not one sign that made you think that [she] would die in a few hours." Five participants said that the death was "quick," "unexpected," "shocking" or they "could not believe" that the person had died.

Ceremonies and Rituals Pertaining to Death

The findings in this section present participants' responses to two questions: 1) Was there some type of ceremony to recognize (this person's) death?; and 2) Did you attend or participate in this ceremony? All participants said there was some type of ceremony to recognize their loved one's death. Only two did not actually use the word "funeral." Seven participants, all of Christian faith and identifying as White or Caucasian (4); African American (2); or Asian (1) talked about having a wake *and* a funeral.

All of these participants described a burial ceremony and four were impressed by the number of people in attendance, specifically at the wake. One said, "There were hundreds of people there; it was amazing." Another felt that the number of people in attendance spoke volumes about his loved one:

...as far as wakes go, it's kind of weird to say but I feel like it was a good wake. A lot of people came; a lot of people from work came. A lot of people had great things to say about my mom.... One big thing that spoke to me about the wake was people from work came, clients came and that really said a lot about who she was and what her life was all about.

One participant, whose loved one was in his early 20's when he died said, "So the service up here was jam packed, I'd probably say there was over 200, 300 people....he was well liked in the community." Another said, "... [there was a] big mass of people that cared about my dad....it was nice to know so many people cared." Two participants felt that the reality of their loved one's death had not set in at the time of the wake:

...I don't think I ever really felt the hurt at that time- it was too much to take in for me.... I was shocked; I mean I cried my eyes out the day of, the day he died and then the next couple of days I didn't cry at all. And then the next couple of days I see him laying in the casket, I started bawling again. And then I was fine. And I was the same person I am, you know joking around, so it was very strange. It was very, very odd....It was way too surreal.

I can say that it wasn't real. It was... to me like... it's hard to explain but like it didn't- I don't think really it had sunk in yet....I do remember I had trouble standing in line when people would come in for the wake. A lot of times I wouldn't be there and I kind of regret that now, that I wasn't there to greet a lot of people.... I couldn't really stand still. I just didn't want to believe that it was really going on.

Four participants, 2 White, 1 Moroccan and 1 Asian of Jewish, Muslim and Catholic faith (one said he was not currently practicing any particular religion) described various ceremonies that were held after the initial ceremony to recognize the person's death. One ceremony, typical in the Jewish religion and culture, is called a *Shiva*. The interviewee described the Shiva in this way:

Shiva is typically 3 days. Sitting Shiva means to come support the family at the house wherever they decide- it was at my mom's house. [Sometimes people designate] certain times of the day, but the door is kind of always open. [People come] to bring food and tell stories and really mostly just be emotionally supportive to the family, to get them through the really, really rough time to support the family.

Another participant, of Muslim faith, also described a three day period during which people come and stay with the immediate family, as well as other ceremonies:

...there is an immediate gathering of the whole family [which lasts for three days]... when someone passed away they had to wash them all so... you wash the whole body and then you wrap them in a white cloth and they put some perfumes with them and that smells good...put them in a box and right before that their loved ones can come see them for the last time... they take them to the mosque...and everybody will pray for them at the mosque.. So after they pray... they take them to the grave...it's an open casket so their loved ones can see them before. Their face is shown in the beginning, but then after the mosque, it will all be covered...and then there's another [gathering] 7 days after that, for further family that knows [the deceased], pretty much everybody who knows her will come then. And then there's another ceremony after 40 days where everybody gets together.

Another participant also described a 40 day ceremony that takes place for Roman Catholics in the Filipino culture:

....And then after that there's what's called a 40th day death anniversary... I don't why 40 days. Maybe it's the resurrection or something? But what I know is on the 40th day, you hold this special Mass in honor of the deceased. So what I remember was for my [loved one] they had a 40th day Mass celebrated for him. So then everybody gets together...for dinner afterwards.

There were other ceremonies, which all took place in the U.S., where her loved one was living at the time of his death. She described the ceremonies as follows:

[In the Philippines] the funeral parlor is open 24 hours and there is always someone who stays with the body...there's a room that's like a bedroom... complete with a shower, a bed- everything....So normally what happens is you stay there ...every night. And people are there... visitors will come until like 11 pm or something and people are there until like midnight and then everybody goes home and then some people will go home. Others, like 2-3 people will stay and sleep there. We couldn't stay [at the funeral home] for 24 hours, but we had to ask for a little bit of an extension for the hours to be there first thing in the morning and then to stay until maybe.. let's say the funeral parlor closed at 5...if we could stay until 8 so that-it's like keeping him company. So someone's always there. There are always people there. All the grandchildren spoke at the eulogy- not at the eulogy, but the night before his cremation, there was a Mass held and the family said something. Like a testimonial. This was at the funeral home.

One participant could not specifically describe the initial ceremony, as he did not attend. He said there was a "ceremony with family and a few friends...and it was to celebrate her life. She was Jewish." He did, however attend another ceremony which took place a few weeks later:

...the spreading of her ashes....Her [family and another friend] and I were there and we had a day that we spread her ashes in [a park where they] grew up and some other places...where she liked to shop so we spread the ashes in the street where she liked to shop and where she got her nails polished.

All but one participant participated at some level in at least one ceremony. Eight participants, 5 White, 2 African American and 1 Asian, of Catholic, Jewish, Buddhist, Christian Methodist and Baptist faith, and one who is not currently practicing, spoke during the service. Six, 1 Asian, 2 African American, 2 White, 1 Moroccan, talked about

food playing a major role, specifically after the main ceremony. Five, 4 White and one African American, of Catholic and Buddhist faith, and two who are not currently practicing a particular religion helped with planning and 5- all men; 4 White and 1 African American; 3 Catholic, 1 Christian Methodist and one not currently practicing any particular religion were pallbearers. Four mentioned that scripture readings, hymns and other songs were an important part of the ceremony.

Grieving Process

Participants were asked three questions specifically pertaining to their grieving process: What were some coping mechanisms you used to work through your grief? Do you feel that you were able to express your grief? Why or why not? How did your grief manifest itself?

The majority (10) of participants said that talking to others about their grief was an important aspect of their grieving process, though at least two mentioned that there were only certain people they could talk to or that certain people did not understand what they were going through. One participant ultimately found only one person he could talk to about his loved one's death:

I talked a lot about it with everyone....but every time I tried to talk about it with anybody around here- stuff like death and stuff- there's a lot of insensitivity. People just don't really care.... I've tried to talk about it in the past with the people I work with now.... They don't want to hear it. [I have a good friend] here, very similar situation. [He] lost his mom one week after high school graduation. He's only about a year, 2 years younger than me. And we've talked a lot about it. He's the one guy I can talk to. We've talked numerous times about it, but he's an individual. He's one person that wouldn't be like that, it seems, because he can relate.

Another participant, who lived in a different country than his loved one, was only able to talk about his experience with people who had known his loved one:

...it was difficult; I couldn't talk about it with practically anyone. Nobody had met [her] so... it was difficult to talk to anyone about her because no one knew her apart from photos and what I told them...I talk about it with family or friends of [my loved one] and it helps me to talk about it. It helps me because we have the same experience. It helps.

Five participants, 2 men and three women, all White but with varied religious backgrounds, said they still talk to, or try to talk to, their loved ones. One participant not only talked to his loved one, but also kept her teddy bear collection and talked to them as well:

Teddy bears. These are [her] children. She always called them her children...I brought them [home] and I talk to them every day. There's a photo on the bookshelf and we talk to it. When I get home from work, we talk a little.

Five participants, 3 male and 2 female from different racial and religious backgrounds, talked about using work or other distractions as coping mechanisms. At least two ultimately felt that these distractions were not helpful, such as this one:

...at first, work helped me, but not really. I mean work helped me survive day to day but I was so busy that I wasn't dealing with any of it. So [when] things started to slow down a little bit at work...I think that's when it kind of hit me...

Another participant was not accustomed to focusing so much on work: "I think I've consumed myself more with making money, which is kind of shitty for me because I'm not like that. You know, [consuming myself with] going to work and doing my job..."

Three participants found it helpful, at least in the beginning of their grieving process, to think about their loved ones, for instance, "to feel grateful for the time I had with her and to consider myself lucky that I had the time that I did with her and to concentrate on the good things."

One participant keeps some of his loved one's ashes and lights a candle for her every evening. Another occasionally writes letters to the deceased. One writes about the deceased; one keeps pictures of his loved one to remember him. Other coping mechanisms that participants used to work through their grief included denial, laughing, praying, having a spiritual life, "pouring out emotions" and sitting with feelings of sadness.

Nine participants, 5 White, 2 African American, 1 Asian, 1 Moroccan, of Baptist, Buddhist, Catholic, Christian Methodist, Jewish, and Muslim faith said that sadness and/or depression were manifestations of their grief, such as this participant who earlier talked about people's insensitivity regarding death: "When I talked about it, I would get sad and I would cry, but when I didn't, I would get frustrated just thinking about it, trying to understand it."

Another participant who had some previous experience with mild depression explained, "So it was typical depression. Like having a tough time getting out of bed in the morning and you know just being really irritable, tough time sleeping." Yet another participant had not experienced depression before the death of her loved one:

And after that, what happened was... what I now know what depression must be like; I've never been depressed, but I think that must be what it's like, where- well, the biggest thing I remember is that I couldn't remember anything. I literally lost my keys like every day. And I couldn't remember where things were, I couldn't get places.... [I] had no confidence, I couldn't make a decision; I was very indecisive. I also felt kind of lost.

One participant said that although he "thought about it and talked about [his grief,]" he didn't "see any specific signs." The majority (9) of participants, 4 White, 1 Asian, 1 African American and 1 Moroccan, of Catholic, Jewish, Christian Methodist,

Muslim and Buddhist faith said that crying was either a way to cope with their grief, a manifestation of their grief, or both.

One participant found himself crying for different reasons: “Sometimes I would cry for no reason....sometimes something would set that off like a certain song or a smell... that would remind me of her or get me upset. Sometimes talking about it would make me cry.” Another talked about the intensity with which she cried: “I bawled. I bawled a lot. I cried harder than I ever cried before or after. I didn’t know I had the capability to cry as hard as I did.” One participant who lost his loved one two years ago still cries about his loss: “I cry every day. I cry on the way to work and I cry on the way home in the car.”

At least five participants, 3 men and 2 women, disclosed that they did not usually express or talk about their feelings (in general and specifically in terms of their grief), especially to people they did not know well. When initially asked if he was able to express his grief, one participant replied, “I’m pretty closed. I don’t express my feelings that quickly.”

Two participants talked specifically about grieving in private. One said, “I’m not someone who publicly shows a lot of my grief, so you know....when I do it’s to family or friends...” The other described his grieving process in this way:

Some people grieve without showing it. For me, personally, when I’m grieving, I’ll cry a little bit at first, but the rest I’ll just keep to myself. So you may not know- I may be sitting with you and grieving, but you don’t know I’m grieving. It’s not something I’m going to show.

Two participants spoke about sharing their emotions in general. One said, “I’m not someone who tends to show emotions. I keep it inside and processes things on my

own.” The other disclosed, “I never really had let anybody into my life like that, never had that emotional tie with anyone.... I had an emotional wall up big time.”

Four participants said they were able to express their grief. One participant, who also said he didn't necessarily grieve in public, explained that in his culture, it is acceptable for the bereaved to express their grief:

[I felt I was able to express my grief], certainly....People were very receptive to that.... in our culture when someone passes, when people come to sympathize, they purposely come to listen to what you had to say about that person. They come to give you consoling words. You're crying, maybe someone might get up and put their hands around you and give you some words of encouragement.

Two participants thought they were probably able to express their grief, but were not really sure and two did not feel they were able to express their grief. One of these individuals tried to, but felt that people would not understand because they had not met his loved one. The other described himself as a closed person and did not necessarily try to outwardly express his grief. One participant was “not really” able to express her grief. One participant felt that it depended on the person he was speaking with:

I think that sometimes I did and sometimes I didn't [feel comfortable expressing my grief]. I think that when it was someone who could relate, expressing that to them , I felt like I could express how I felt but then a lot of times when I was frustrated I couldn't, I couldn't express it.

This participant also felt that expressing his grief became more difficult as time went by:

Every month that goes by it's almost like it gets harder...because [people] think all this time's passed, why don't you just get over it. And that's hard and I can see why people don't want to hear it... they got their own problems.

Conversely, another participant felt that it was easier to express her grief after some time had passed:

Later on I was [able to express my grief]. I was [someone else's] sole support so I couldn't then as much....about a year or so into it I'd say [she] became more emotionally available too and we all sort of came back a little bit.

Cultural Traditions and Expectations Pertaining to the Grieving Process

Participants were asked to describe rituals or traditions pertaining to their culture that they had utilized since the death of their loved ones. Five said they pray, 3 said they have a memorial Mass on or close to the anniversary of the person's death and 2 said they visit the cemetery.

Three participants described one day a year that is designated for remembering people who have died. Although the religions and cultures were different (Christian Methodist Liberian American, Muslim Moroccan and Roman Catholic Filipino) and the actual day of remembrance different for each, the descriptions were similar:

On November first, you go to visit them in the cemetery.... and it's like a party... people are there and...aside from saying their prayers, they'll eat and you'll hear music playing and people are singing with their guitars and eating and drinking.

In Liberia, there's a certain day- I think it's the second Wednesday of April. It's called Declaration Day, and you go to visit the cemetery. You clean the cemetery, carry flowers and take care of the people you've lost.

Well, there is this- the one time of the year that it's kind of like a must to go visit everybody in the graves....you dress up little kids, you buy them stuff and families go visit each other.... Actually it's the day that Mohammed was born, the messenger....that's when you go and visit your loves who died....you will go and [bring] fresh flowers and wash their grave and have a little peace time with them...

Four participants (3 Christians and one of Jewish faith) talked about remembering their loved ones on their birthday instead of or in addition to the death anniversary:

...normally on their birthday...there's a picture of him [and] they'll put a candle and then they'll also put out a favorite food with a little platter and a fork. So, again, it's to remember them and to keep them or to remember their earthly likes

and things like that. To remember to say 'we still remember you, you're still a part of the family, we haven't forgotten you.'

...what the Jewish tradition often does...is to light a Yule tide candle.... I lit the candle and I put all the photos- this was kind of an extra touch- of [his family] and a lot of the people that he cared about and my aunt and I put fake animals- he loved animals- and kind of just made this shrine and let the candle burn all day, it's a 24 hour candle.

Last year, we went to the cemetery on her birthday. We brought flowers and cleaned up the grave a little and remembered her on that day.

...this year we went out for drinks on her birthday and... we talked about it as a family, have talked about more so...getting together on her birthday as opposed to on the day she passed away to kind of remember her life than to remember her death....when we went out for her birthday, we cheered, you know drank to her.

Two participants talked about remembering their loved ones on holidays; one participant talked about remembering her loved one by doing things in her name:

I have done... for example a friend of mine just ran in [a marathon] and we filled out stars and I said I miss you mom and I filled out a star for her and I sewed, I worked really hard on it for her. And I've done a couple of things that have to do with cancer...

Three participants talked about the custom of mourning for a year, though they did not necessarily practice this custom themselves and at least 2 mentioned that most people do not follow this custom anymore. Each said this was a custom specific to their religion or culture:

One thing in Jewish tradition is that you mourn for a year. In the old days, people used to wear black...for a year; the widow and... the immediate family. And I got a pin, we had a pin, a black pin that was sort of symbolic and that's some kind of tradition to show; it's a more modern sign of showing that you're mourning. I wore it for like a day or two and I felt weird wearing it. I didn't want people asking me about it and I didn't want pity and I'd never seen anyone else do that...it looked like a bow; little black dot. It was some part of something from the ceremony, I think. I kept it for a year and that was sort of my way of having it. But I always felt guilty it was in a box and not on my shirt. And I always felt like I was hiding my mourning, that I was supposed to be more public about it.

In Liberia for instance, when a person dies, [for instance] if the man in the home dies, the wife would wear black and gray or all gray for a year. And that is to show that the person is in mourning. And after a year, they take the black off. What they do most times is they'll go to a church. Say the one year is a Wednesday, the following Sunday they'll go to service and take the black off. They go to church and pray- no one has to know. So they go to church that Sunday in black and they take it off after church. When [someone in my family died], I had a black piece of cloth that was tied around my chest... for a week... a husband will take a black cloth and pin it to his shirt for about a week or so. But things have changed now.

...in the Jewish tradition, they dictate pretty much the whole year for what the widow and...children as well. So we went to the gravesite and read out of their Bible. And there are certain passages that we were supposed to read. And we read them...then we were supposed to have the veiling of the tombstone at a certain time [and] we did that.

When asked if they were familiar with grieving rituals of other cultures, 3

participants (all White, of Catholic and Buddhist faith) said they were not and 9 said they were (at least somewhat). One participant said he was familiar with grieving rituals of other cultures from what he has seen on television and compared them to his own culture:

[My culture] is more simple, down to earth, not the weeping hysteria in other cultures. Like I said, family comes over, friends come over to say goodbye to the deceased. If the person is in an open coffin, you can say goodbye and that's it actually. It's not like... I think it's in the Jewish culture, the family sits 7 days- we don't have something like that...I respect every culture and every culture has its own ways of grieving processes or... I don't have any judgment about it. But you do what you have to do and I am respectful of it.

Another participant appreciated certain rituals of the Muslim faith:

I'm familiar with the Muslim people. I think what they do is when someone dies, if they died before 2 pm, I think, I might not be correct, but they're buried the same day. And what they do is they wrap the person in a piece of white cloth, but if you die later on that day, after 2, they preserve the body until the next day and then bury the person the next day. They don't have any major ceremony, like a funeral and dress the person up in a suit. As a matter of fact, I think what they do is just wrap that person in a white cloth, that's it. And I think they have like a week, it seems like they have a whole week of celebrating and I think that might

include praying and eating and after that one week they wait for 40 days and the 40 days will begin from the day that person died and they have a whole day of feasting. For me personally, I think when a person dies there is no need to spend a ton of money taking that person to a funeral home. I mean, you give money for no reason and I don't see any reason why that person should be taken to a funeral home, get a nice casket and be buried. I don't agree with that, I think it's a complete waste of money because that person is dead and they don't know what's going on back here. I think we do that to please ourselves. I think when you die, you should be buried right away [so I like that part of the Muslim culture].

A participant originally from another country compared Christian grieving rituals in the United States to Muslim grieving rituals in Morocco:

...I'm familiar with the ones over here with the American [meaning Christian] culture. I think it's similar in a way, I mean we all pray to one god, we believe in one god, so... I've been to a few of them over here just to support friends and I think it was pretty much similar. You know, similar- you go there, you talk about the person, how great they were, you pray for them. I think it's quicker over here and it's not too involving. And that's all. Compared to... the way we do it back home, there's a lot more to it because you have people over for like 3 days and... I think it's similar, but it's shorter, which is not bad, I don't think... That's why I don't mind the way they do it over here either.

Three participants from other countries said that death ceremonies in the United States are less elaborate than in their countries. One of these participants said she was not too familiar with other cultures' rituals, but did compare Western culture in general to other cultures: "You might say ours is more involved...than...Western cultures. Like the wake, being at the funeral parlor for 24 hours..." Three participants felt that death ceremonies are for the people left behind rather than the person who died. Another participant, native to the U.S., compared Jewish and Christian religions:

The big thing that comes to mind is wakes. I've been to wakes and seen the body and how sort of exposing [for the person who died] that seems to me... I think in the Jewish tradition you can go up and talk to the family when you're ready whereas at wakes it seems more awkward. I think there's a line or something, or...when you go up to the casket there's people there. And say you don't know the person that well, I know I've been very uncomfortable at times, wanting to say the right thing, the person not wanting to talk to me and I feel bad for the person,

so I think I appreciate my religion.... No one expected me to be friendly [and they expect that in other religions]

One participant, who was only familiar with grieving rituals of one other culture, talked about the role religion plays in attitudes regarding death. Though he was not sure what he believes in terms of what happens when someone dies, he said that religion, not culture had an impact on the grieving process:

[Irish and Italians] come from the same religion and I think that religion has a lot to do with the grieving process. [I learned in a sociology class that] grieving is a mechanism for coping with death. It's one of the most unique ways of looking at religion.

Participants were asked if they felt there were certain expectations of them in terms of their grieving process in relation to their culture. All but one said they did feel some expectations, though they did not all relate the expectations to any particular culture. The one participant who did not feel there were any expectations, a White person who has a spiritual belief system but does not currently practice, said, "No, I don't think there were any expectations. I think grief is an individual thing."

Half the participants, from varying races and religions, felt that people expected them to "get over it," to "move on" and "deal with it." One found this attitude helpful and said, "I did appreciate [people saying to move on]; it was more of a support..." Five experienced this expectation in a negative way. One attributed this expectation to his culture: "Yeah, I think that actually expectations are to... especially my culture being in the military...is to suck it up and drive on...put it behind you and man up...get over it- those are the expectations." Another participant talked about "culture" in a more general way:

I think the culture is that everyone...has different views of grief....Some people think you should be over it in 6 months or definitely a year and a lot of people don't take into account how people grieve differently and how much time it can take.

One participant talked about expectations of friends in particular:

Some friends think you're over it after 3 months or so and expect you to be the same person, but that's not really the way it goes. Some people expect that you're over it in a few weeks or a few months.

Another talked about one specific friend:

I had a best friend who used to listen to me but I always felt like she didn't get it and was annoyed and I felt like she wanted me to get over it, so I sort of stopped talking about it.

One participant felt that there were more general expectations of her during her time of grief: "So yes, I felt a ton of expectations; getting back to work, getting back to...whatever."

Five participants, all White; 2 Catholics, one person of Jewish faith, one Buddhist and one who is not currently practicing any particular religion, said that people who had not suffered a major loss were not able to understand how they felt. One participant said:

I felt it was sort of difficult to deal with [his significant other] because she's never really dealt with the loss of a loved one, so she didn't really know how to act and it was kind of difficult at the time.

At least one participant said that people who had not specifically lost a parent would not be able to relate to her:

I don't know a lot of people who had lost their mother and were my age. So when I told people my age or younger, literally they check out... like I'm touching on something that will probably happen in your life and you don't want...almost everyone couldn't hear it so I was like, 'Oh, if you didn't have a parent who died I can't really talk to you about this. There's like a club and I'm...in it... forever. But if you're not in it... you don't get it.... There's something about... I don't

believe that about everything, but I feel like if you haven't experienced the loss of a parent, you have nothing to say to me, you have nothing to give me.

Some of these participants said that when someone they know suffers a loss, they treat them differently than they would have before they had suffered their own loss, such as this individual who reached out to a friend who had lost his father:

It's totally affected the way I respond to death with my friends. My friend's dad died a year or two ago. At the time we weren't that close; I think it's one of the things that solidified the friendship....I didn't have to go to the funeral....I heard about it through a friend, so I called him and said, "I'd really like to come." He said I didn't have to, but I told him I really wanted to come....He didn't even assume I would come. I know that everyone who has had someone close to them die wouldn't complain about someone reaching out to them. And you can always say no, leave me alone...

Five participants, all of Christian faith, said that the length of time or depth of grieving depended on the relationship to the deceased and how they died, such as this participant who lost her grandfather:

I think it was different because he was my grandfather, and he was [old], so it was like...although it was a shock to all of us it was like, 'Okay, it was time.' So it wasn't that tragic in that sense that...a big shock...

One participant, whose loved one was sick for a long time before she died, feels that suddenness of death affects the length of time during which a bereaved person grieves:

...If the death of the person was sudden, it takes a while before people who were close to that person actually calms, ceases with all the crying. But if it was something that was expected, say the person was sick, had some terminal illness, it was something that everyone expected would happen sooner or later. But even though with someone that you do expect, it still hurts, but I would think that in that instance, the grieving and the crying might be more controlled and it's not as prolonged as if the person's death was so sudden.

Another participant, who lost his loved one shortly after she was diagnosed with a terminal illness shares similar thoughts regarding suddenness of death:

I don't think anybody would fault me or be surprised or expect that I could still be having a tough time with it....[the person] passed away very quickly ...I would

think the expectation would be that the individual would be able to deal with it a little more quickly as far as “getting over it”... if they had a prolonged battle with an illness....Not to say that it’s easier, but just to me feels like it would be a little easier to deal with.

This respondent, who lost her loved one unexpectedly, felt that the circumstances under which someone dies is important:

...But you think that maybe it shouldn’t affect you as much or bother you as much, but it’s also circumstances of how they died, too. So there’s a lot of...not just the person’s death, but the circumstance of how it happened.

Another interviewee felt that the relationship to the deceased influences how a person grieves:

I ought to grieve her a little bit for the rest of my life....I think I would have felt [that I should have gotten over it faster] more if it was a different person in my life, but because it was my mother...

Three participants said they felt comfortable expressing their emotions in terms of their loss, although two of these participants felt some other expectations. The same two participants attributed the ability to express their emotions to their cultures’ openness about feelings. The first participant said, “I think that it’s okay to be open about pain in the Jewish tradition.” The second explained, “Generally in the Liberian culture people tend to mourn more than in the American culture.”

Four participants, 2 African American, 1 White, 1 Moroccan- all male, talked about the expectation of presenting themselves in a certain way, specifically right after the death and during the ceremonies. One individual said that people “expect... that you present yourself as so sorry about what happened...” Another felt “weird because I feel like people expected to see me cry at some point....so... I felt like there was that...expectation and for whatever reason, I didn’t cry.”

Three of these participants, 1 White, 1 African American and 1 Moroccan, talked about needing to be “strong.” They not only felt this expectation from others, but also expected it of themselves. Two described this as a gender related expectation:

...I feel like there are males versus females. I feel like the stereotype is and the expectation is that I would be ‘stronger’ than my sisters would be. I feel like that’s true. That’s an expectation and that’s something that even played into my own family... it’s the type of thing where I felt...because I was a male, I needed to step up and take more of a role in terms of the planning and take care of things in terms of the funeral and the arrangements and making sure that everything was all taken care of....[but] that was something I wanted to do anyway.

It’s like the men don’t cry thing....men are the strongest ones and I definitely felt like I couldn’t show any of that or I couldn’t be weak because everyone around me was so weak and I was literally the strongest one there... emotionally....you can’t, in my opinion, when someone is on my shoulder crying, well I can’t cry because who is going to support them? Because then I would think, well, I’m not doing my job as a supporter, of supporting them in their time of need.

Two participants said they didn’t feel any expectations in terms of their grieving process because they didn’t outwardly show their grief and one said that “most people are understanding of [the experience of grief].” Two participants felt that they were expected to visit the cemetery; one hadn’t gone back since the funeral and one did not “make it a point to go to the cemetery.”

Impact on Current Relationships

In response to the question, “How has the death of your loved one affected your current relationships?” half the participants said that the person’s death brought them closer to people, particularly their family members, such as this participant who lost his mother: “I think it brought my siblings...much closer than we were before. I think it had a good effect that way.” Another participant also felt closer to his siblings as a result of

his loved one's death: "...actually, in my own relationship with [my siblings], it has brought us extremely closer to one another....Before this we were kind of distant, we lived different life styles.... I think it brought us together." Another participant felt closer to his siblings as well as his significant other: "...it's affected my relationship with my [siblings] and my [significant other] in a very, very, very, very, very positive way." One participant seemed to struggle with the fact that she became closer to others after her loved one died: "...it's kind of hard to say, but I feel closer to many people as a result [of her death]."

Four people talked about other positive effects their loved one's death had on them, such as being "conscious of the time you have left (with the people in your life)," "letting go," "not being so jaded," "appreciating people more" and "thinking positively about people." Two participants talked about not seeing other people as much and two believe that they will never find anyone to replace the person they lost, such as one participant who said, "I don't have a best friend anymore. I probably never will." Another participant describes what her loss meant to her: I sort of had to replace it, but I haven't been able to find...I'll never find a *him*.

One participant mentioned that she felt more "guarded" and has a "hard time trusting people" since her loved one died and one said he fights more with his wife. Two participants viewed others who suffered a loss differently since their own loss and one said he learned how to treat people from his loved one: "...I learned from my mother the whole "do unto others" that if you give to people, it'll come back... so I think it affected the people I meet now, the new people."

Additional Comments

At least 3 participants talked about different stages or phases they went through during their grieving process, such as this participant:

The difference of where I am now...so there were 3 phases. The first year was like a lot of grief. Second year I was like 'I don't know how to feel, I think I'm losing touch with him.' I think I was in a little bit of denial. The third year was like the acceptance phase- I felt connected to him all of the sudden. So I started feeling better for the last 2 years and not feeling sorry for myself; a lot of that is gone, I used to always think about my wedding day, he's not going to be there, my kids... you know just feeling really sad. Sad for myself, sad for him. And that's when it went away, it's still there a little bit, but it changed dramatically.

And this participant who felt that she didn't get back to "herself" until over two years after her loved one's death:

It's so funny I feel like, it was stages for me...the first week after she died, I had no idea what time it was, I didn't know what day it was and I'm a super planner, [but] I didn't know and I didn't care. Time passing was weird, it was just really strange....when I [moved to another state, a few months after the person died], I remember reading stuff about grief and being like, 'oh, oh.' Like it said you have no confidence, I couldn't make a decision; I was very indecisive. I also felt kind of lost....Actually what I remember is this: Six months, almost to the day like around Christmas, I'm driving in the car and I thought 'Oh, I feel like myself.' And [before that moment], I just thought, 'This is who I am without my mother.' ...And that's what I thought it was, I didn't know.... I started to feel like myself around December or January. I feel like- it's so hard too, because then, you know I didn't attribute it to grief but I feel like we didn't make friends or settle for probably 2 years after we were here, and that's a long time for somebody who... can make friends with [anyone].

Several participants mentioned feeling "lonely," "alone," or "on my own" after their loved one died, such as this participant: "...a lot of times I felt alone and I didn't understand it." Another participant, who earlier described not being able to express his grief to people who had not known his loved one said, "...so you're pretty much on your own with it.... it's difficult sometimes." One participant had not experienced feeling so alone before:

...and I felt very alone. I felt sad... I felt acutely alone for 6 months....It was a pretty serious thing.... I felt really, really, really lonely. I felt completely alone, it didn't matter if they were Jewish or not.... I knew when he died that I was alone in this world for the first time. I had never felt that before in my life. Never felt alone in my life... not deep solitude.

In response to the question, "What was it like to talk about this topic today?" five participants said that it brought up memories, took them back to the time of their loved one's death or helped them to think more clearly about the circumstances of their loved one's death. Two participants said that it was harder than they had anticipated:

It was a little hard. Harder than I thought it would have been. I almost cried a couple of times. To remember her, to really talk-I guess I don't do it as much as I should- to really talk to someone about her. About how great she was. It just reminded me of her. Things came to my mind during this that I haven't thought about in a long time.... loss of family and stuff. Just a huge change in the way everything is.

It was kind of like re-living it again. So, it wasn't... when I first spoke to you I thought no, whatever, it will be easy but as I'm talking and trying to remember things, I was like 'wow.' It was kind of difficult.

Two indicated that it was easier than they had expected:

It wasn't too hard. I just had to think a lot about [the questions]. But it was okay. A little therapeutic I guess. You know, because I don't talk this much... I don't go too in depth when I talk to people. I say my dad died. When it comes up, I say "oh yeah, my dad died."

[It was] easier than I would have thought it was. But again, I think that goes to the fact that I've been getting some help and doing better with dealing with a bunch of this stuff.

One participant did not feel "incredibly sad or happy" when talking about this topic and one felt both sad *and* happy. One said that it was "less emotional" and "more academic" than she expected and one said that it was sad and emotional to talk about this topic. Two said that it was good to talk about it. One participant shared her views talking

about death in general: “It was fine. It was nice to talk about it. I feel like people don’t really want to talk about the dying and the dead.” Another talked about the interview in particular: “It was the right questions. It was good to talk about it... I think it’s the whole picture. It’s good to talk about [her] so...”

Summary

This chapter presented 12 bereaved individuals’ experience of grief. These individuals, who lost their loved ones to death at least 2 but not more than 5 years ago, responded to questions intended to open up conversation about how culture influences the grieving process. Most participants did not specifically relate their grieving process to their culture unless prompted to do so.

The following Discussion chapter will look at the findings in relation to the literature thus far. Some topics of interest are whether or not culture does influence the grieving process, strengths and limitations of this study and implications for further education and practice.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore how culture influences the grieving process. Findings were categorized by the nature of the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased, the cause and nature of death, the ceremonies and rituals pertaining to death, the grieving process, the impact on current relationships of the bereaved and additional comments.

This chapter compares and contrasts the findings of this study with previous literature and research regarding the grieving process. The findings and literature indicate there are various factors that influence the grieving process, including the relationship of the bereaved to the deceased, the nature and cause of death, and the attitudes of the bereaved and people interacting with the bereaved toward death. It seems that while specific cultures dictate certain traditions and rituals pertaining to death, the experience of feelings related to grief are similar across cultures.

Participant Demographics

The sample, consisting of 7 males and 5 females, was also diverse in gender. Several questions elicited similar responses from participants of the same gender. For example, in regards to expectations participants felt in terms of their grieving process, four male participants said they needed to be “strong.” These responses support

Staudacher's (1991) statement regarding the expectation of men to be strong in terms of expressing their feelings.

Although the sample was diverse in many ways, most participants were from the U.S. or had been living in the U.S. for some time. The general "American culture" (that is, as described by several participants, the *Christian American Culture*) may have influenced all participants' grieving process in some way; all but two participants' loved ones died in the U.S. and each participant had extensive exposure to the U.S.

Nature of Participants' Relationship with the Deceased

Riorden and Allen (1989) and Shneidma (1984) proposed that the relationship between the person who died and the mourner, among other factors, influences the grieving process. There were 6 participants who described their relationship with the deceased as "close." This included 4 out of the 5 participants who lost a parent. One of these participants, who lost her mother, talked about the significance of losing a parent specifically. Another participant, who lost a grandparent, stated that it was "different" to lose a grandparent because it was something that was expected. This is not to say that the loss of any loved one is not difficult, however the participants in this study who lost a parent, and the one who lost his fiancé, did seem to be affected in a different way than the other participants. Perhaps the nature of the relationship determines the nature of the grieving process.

Cause and Nature of Death

Suddenness of death is another factor that Riorden and Allen (1989) and Shneidma (1984) explored in terms of the grieving process. Three participants mentioned suddenness of death playing a role in not only their own grieving process, but also how others reacted to them. Two of these participants, one who lost his loved one suddenly and one who did not, each implied that it would take longer to “get over” the loss of a loved one if the death was unexpected or happened quickly. Is this because the bereaved did not have a chance to say good-bye to the deceased? Or maybe there were relationship issues that were not resolved. It would also be important to determine the nature of the relationship to the deceased. If someone loses his or her mother after a long illness would that person be less affected than, for instance, someone who lost an uncle to a heart attack?

Ceremonies and Rituals Pertaining to Death

Participants described various ceremonies and rituals pertaining to death. Catholicism was the only religion with which more than one participant identified, and even these participants had slight variations in terms of death ceremonies and rituals after death. It seems that they may have incorporated ceremonies and rituals from their ethnic cultures and families.

It was interesting to learn about certain similarities in ceremonies and rituals between different religions. For instance, the participants of Jewish and Muslim faith each described a three day period after the death of a loved one during which friends and family members come to the home to bring food, talk and console the bereaved. The

participant of Muslim faith and one of Catholic faith celebrated a “forty day ceremony, where everybody gets together.”

Also of interest was that participants did not mention certain aspects reviewed in Chapter II, of the Jewish, Catholic and Muslim traditions. For instance, Cytron (1993) talked about *sheloshim*, a 30 day mourning period following the Jewish funeral. Johnson (1994) described three Catholic beliefs: the “immortality of the soul,” “communion of saints” and “unity of the faithful,” none of which were described by the participants who identified as Catholic. And finally, Mims (1999) explained that in the tradition of Islam, professional mourners were called upon to encourage the bereaved to express their grief. Of the two participants who identified as African American, only one described the ceremonies and traditions in almost exactly the same way as Perry (1993) in Chapter II. This participant spoke specifically about expectations to attend the funeral and friends, family members and acquaintances bringing meals and taking on household responsibilities.

It is not clear whether the discrepancy between the literature and actual practice in terms of death ceremonies, rituals and beliefs for certain participants is representative of their particular race, ethnicity, culture or religion or if these particular participants do not follow traditional customs.

Grieving Process

Nine participants, including at least one participant from every race and religion represented in the sample for this study said that crying was either a way to cope with their grief, a manifestation of their grief, or both. This finding is similar to Rosenblatt et

al (Palgi and Abramovitch, 1984) who noted that crying is the most common expression of grief. Five of these participants are men and 4 are women. It is of particular interest that at least 1 of the men also talked about the expectation to cry, specifically at his loved one's wake. One of the two men who did not say that crying was a part of his grieving process spoke about the expectation to be strong and specifically referenced the "men don't cry thing." This statement reiterates Staudacher's (1991) theoretical belief that men are typically expected to be strong and reserved in terms of expressing their feelings.

Others said they felt like they cried for no reason or that their crying was extensive, which may indicate that they at some point felt an expectation *not* to cry.

Nine participants in this study, some of whom also talked about crying, mentioned feeling depressed and/or sad as a result of their loss. This finding concurs with literature by Kubler-Ross (1969), Pincus (Shneidman, 1984) and Staudacher (1991), who all agreed that depression and/or sadness is an important aspect of the grieving process. The three participants who did not actually use the words "depressed" or "sad" to describe how they were feeling certainly conveyed these feelings through body language, affect or by using different words to describe their experience.

Impact on Current Relationships

Another factor that influences the grieving process, according to Riorden and Allen (1989) and Shneidman (1984) is family relationships. Half of the participants mentioned that the death of their loved one brought them closer to people in their family. Although the interview guide did not include a specific question regarding the closeness of family relationships before the loss, several participants implied or actually said they

were not previously especially close to their family members. It would be interesting to find out if the participants who said they felt closer to their family members after the death of their loved one also felt they were able to express their emotions. Schoka (2003) found the expression of emotions with family members was an important aspect of the grieving process.

Stroebe et al (2005) noted that general social support, in and of itself, is not necessarily helpful in terms of working through the grieving process. At least six participants in this study confirmed this finding. While each of these participants found at least one person with whom they could talk about their loss and subsequent grief, they also had a general consensus that some people “just don’t get it.” It is interesting to note that most agreed that it was those people who had not suffered a major loss who “didn’t get it.” Why is that? Perhaps it is easier for people who have not lost a loved one to downplay the intensity of feelings of grief because they do not understand what grief feels like. Or maybe recognizing someone else’s grief would somehow make the possibility of losing a loved one themselves more real.

Regardless of the reasons behind these actions, some participants did say that certain people felt a sense of discomfort in terms of how to react to them in the time of their grief. It seems that at times, people do not know what to say or how to act. It is easier to ignore the proverbial elephant in the room than to address this difficult topic. People who have suffered a major loss, however, seemed more able to “handle” participants’ grief.

Implications for Social Work Practice

As evidenced by this study, there are many factors that influence a bereaved person's grieving process and there are many and varied customs, rituals and traditions that may help the bereaved work through their grief. By the same token, grief, including its manifestations and coping mechanisms used to work through it, is highly individualized. Familiarity with the particular race, ethnicity, culture or religion of a bereaved individual may help clinicians have some understanding of what the individual is experiencing, or how they will experience it. It is, however, important to keep in mind that other factors, such as the nature of the relationship to the deceased, the cause and nature of death, and the reactions the bereaved receive from others, will also be a significant influence.

More intense and specific training regarding grief, including the above factors would help all clinicians, including bereavement counselors and clinicians who don't necessarily specialize in bereavement, understand and help their clients. Interestingly, the five participants who said they did not typically express or talk about their feelings, in general and specifically in terms of their grief, were open and expressive during their interviews. Since participation in this study was voluntary and involved no financial benefit, participants were not in any way obligated to volunteer. This may speak to the desire of the participants, particularly those who self-identified as not being able to talk about their feelings, find a space to share their experiences, to keep their loved ones' memory alive and to process their grief. Clinicians may want to take this into consideration when working with clients who have suffered a major loss. Are we, as

clinical social workers, ill equipped to talk about grief? Do we need more education in this area? Does the field of social work make room for those who are grieving?

Implications for Theory

Although there was not a specific question pertaining to stages or phases of the grieving process, at least 3 participants actually named what they were going through as such. Two of these participants lost their loved ones 5 years ago. They were the only two participants who suffered their loss as long as 5 years ago, which may say something about time putting things in perspective. Other participants did talk about certain stages, such as denial, anger, depression and acceptance, though they did not specifically refer to these feelings as “stages.”

The intensity with which participants reported feeling their grief right after the death of their loved ones and the subsequent fluidity and timelessness of their grief stages concurs with Staudacher’s (1991) theoretical belief that mourners tend to move in and out of the various stages, while feeling the most painful effects of the loss sometime within the first six months to two years. Staudacher (1991), Kubler-Ross (2005), Pincus (Shneidman, 1984) and other theorists agree that grieving is a process that has neither a time limit nor a chronological order.

Recommendations for Future Research

There are several aspects of this study that can be further studied. The sample, although diverse in many ways, was small and because no two participants identified in exactly the same way in terms of race, ethnicity, culture and religion there was not an

opportunity to compare and contrast responses between same or very similar backgrounds. The sample also could have been more random because in this study each participant was either known to the researcher or referred by someone who knew the researcher.

Participants in this study had experienced grief over the death of a “loved one,” defined as a significant other, family member or close friend. The death of this loved one must have occurred at least 2 years but not more than 5 years ago. Having more specific criteria would be helpful in terms of determining what factors specifically influence the grieving process. For instance, it would be worth investigating the type of loss, such as mother, father, sibling or grandparent. Other aspects to consider include how the person died, the age of the bereaved when the loss occurred and length of time between the loss of the loved one and the time of the interview.

It is important to note that while a racially, ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse sample was desired for this study, there were some limitations in having a sample in which no two participants shared the same racial, ethnical, cultural and religious background. This did not allow for comparisons between same or similar backgrounds, making it difficult to determine whether participants’ responses were influenced by their race, ethnicity, culture, religion- or some other factor.

Personal experience with loss and grief may have contributed to research bias. The researcher decided to study this topic as a result of the loss of a loved one which occurred less than 2 years ago. The researcher may have had certain pre-conceived notions about aspects of the grieving process and reactions to the bereaved.

Although the interview guide was sent to each participant prior to the interview, only one participant actually reviewed it beforehand. Due to the nature of the questions, some preparation would have been useful; several participants offered additional thoughts and comments at the end of the interview or even after some time had passed. A follow up interview, perhaps 2 weeks after the initial interview, may have elicited more in depth or even different responses.

The results of this study indicate that various feelings associated with and manifestations of grief are the same or similar regardless of race, ethnicity, culture or religion. That being said, it is not the researcher's belief that cultural aspects do not influence the grieving process, rather that the influence of culture may not have been significant within this particular sample.

As discussed earlier, Joan Laird (1998) proposed that culture cannot be defined and "is an individual and social construction, a constantly evolving and changing set of meanings that can be understood only in the context of a narrativized past, a cointerpreted present, and a wished-for future" (p. 28). In this study, each participant had their own individual definition of culture, which also made it difficult to determine how much a more specific definition of "culture" may have influenced their grieving process.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide Part 1

1. How old are you?
2. How do you identify in terms of gender?
3. How do you identify in terms of race and ethnicity?
4. What is your sexual orientation?
5. What is your religion?
6. Do you currently practice? Please describe.
7. Is there a specific culture with which you identify?
8. How would you describe your socio-economic background (poor, working class, middle class, upper class, etc.)?
9. Where do you currently live (city/state)?

Appendix B

Interview Guide Part 2

1. Please describe what your relationship with (your loved one) was like.
2. How did (your loved one) die?
3. Was there some type of ceremony to recognize (this person's) death? Please describe.
4. Did you attend or participate in this ceremony? Please describe.
5. What were some coping mechanisms you used to work through your grief?
6. How did your grief manifest itself? (e.g. crying, being angry, sleeping, feeling depressed).
7. Do you feel that you were able to express your grief? Why or why not?
8. Tell me about any rituals or traditions pertaining to your culture that you have utilized since the death of your loved one.
9. Are you familiar with grieving rituals of other cultures? How are they different from those of your culture? How do you view these differences?
10. Do you feel that there are certain expectations of you in terms of your grieving process in relation to your culture?
11. How has the loss of your loved one affected your current relationships?
12. Would you like to add anything?
13. What was it like to talk about this topic today?

Appendix C

Informed Consent

Dear Potential Research Participant:

My name is Kelly Meade and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work in Northampton, Massachusetts. I am conducting a study on grief, specifically on how culture influences the grieving process. Your perspective is important and valuable to further the development of research on this topic. This study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the Master's of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work, and for future presentation and publication on the topic.

You are being asked to participate because of your unique perspective as an individual who has experienced grief over the loss of a loved one. If you choose to participate you will be asked to answer a brief demographic questionnaire and return it to me, as well as participate in an interview that will last approximately one hour. The demographic questionnaire will take approximately 5 minutes to complete and will be used to describe the aggregate sample and no information that identifies individuals will be included. During the interview, you will be asked to share your experiences of grief and your healing process in relation to your culture. In order to participate, you must be at least 22 years old, have lost a loved one (immediate family member, spouse/partner, or close friend) through death and are not experiencing serious symptoms associated with grief (depression, anger, excessive tearfulness).

The interview will be audiotape recorded. Confidentiality will be assured by assigning the tapes a number and removing any identifying names and locations from the transcript. Some illustrative quotes may be used in the report; however, your name and specific geographical location will be omitted to protect your privacy. I will be the main handler of all data including tapes and transcripts; any person assisting with transcription will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement. I will keep the tapes and transcripts in a secure location for three years, consistent with federal regulations. After the three year period has expired, all material including tapes and transcripts will be destroyed. The study information will be used for my master's thesis and may be used for future presentations and publications.

There will be no financial benefit for participating in this study. However, participation will allow you to share your experiences during the grieving process in a safe and confidential manner. Your contributions will provide important information that may be utilized by professionals working with individuals as they are going through their grieving process.

There are some potential risks of participating in this study. The interview questions may bring up some painful memories of your grieving process. It may be stressful to talk openly about your grieving process, particularly with someone you've never met. If at

any time during the interview you do not want to answer a question, you have the right to refuse to do so. I will honor that request without repercussions to you. A list of referral resources is included with this consent form should you like to speak to someone further about the feelings that come up for you during or after the interview.

You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time: before, during, or after the interview, until June 1, 2007, when the report will be written.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the above information; that you have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study, your participation and your rights; and that you agree to participate in the study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

Referral Sources:

(obtained from the Massachusetts Commission on End of Life Care
<http://www.endoflifecommission.org>)

The following websites provide information, on-line support, and links to other helpful websites.

GRIEF AND LOSS:

www.grief-recovery.com
www.growthhouse.org
www.bereavement.org
www.centerforloss.com
www.goodgriefresources.com

CHILDREN AND GRIEF:

www.childrensroom.org
www.grievingchild.org
www.cgmaine.org

WIDOWS AND WIDOWERS:

www.widownet.org

www.aarp.org/griefandloss

www.yww.org

LOSS OF A CHILD:

www.compassionatefriends.org

DEATH OF A BABY:

www.aplacetoremember.com

DEALING WITH THE LOSS OF A PARENT:

www.alexandrakennedy.com

**FAMILIES AND FRIENDS WHO HAVE HAD A LOVED ONE DIE FROM
SUICIDE:**

www.survivingsuicide.com

LOSS OF A SIBLING:

www.counselingstlouis.net

www.adultsiblinggrief.com

Appendix D

HSR Approval Letter

March 1, 2007

Kelly D. Meade
103 Elm Street, Apt. 2
Quincy, MA 02169

Dear Kelly,

Your revised materials have been reviewed and you have done a good job of amending the study and focusing it. We are now able to give final approval to your study.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with this very interesting project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Jean LaTerz, Research Advisor