Summary: Ethnic Differences in Loss and Grief

Danielle Jensen, Samantha Need, & Katie Wagner

Bowling Green State University

The research project we performed is the *Ethnic Differences in Loss and Grief.* My name is Danielle Jensen, and I am presenting with my co-research partners, Samantha Need and Katie Wagner. We are a part of the social work program here at Bowling Green State University. The background of our study was based on Clayton (2008), creating three stages of grief that people go through; numbness, depression, and finally, recovery. Meaning, each person after experiencing a loss, in our case a spousal loss, goes through these stages before moving on with their life. Furthermore, our hypothesis to this was that African American culture and Caucasian American culture grieve differently. Not everyone experiences the same grieving process. Does race have an impact on how people cope with a spousal loss? The purpose of this study was to determine just that. As well as determining the ethnic differences of loss and grief between the African American population and the Caucasian American population.

To collect the data for our research, we used written surveys as well as open-ended questions. The surveys were conducted in person if possible, but we also gave participants the option to fill the survey out online and over the phone. We had a total of 55 Caucasian and African American participants. Of the 55 total participants, 60% (33) were Caucasian American, and 40% (22) were African American. Our research shows that there are more similarities when comparing the two ethnicities than previous research stated. We found that both Caucasian Americans and African Americans rely heavily on religion, family, and friends to cope with spousal loss. Thus, our findings contradict previous research which stated that African Americans relied on religion while Caucasian Americans turned to family and friends. Our research also found some important differences that could affect how these two ethnicities cope. A lack of accessible transportation could prohibit someone from joining a support group. A few other differences that could affect how a spouse copes is the amount of marital conflict, if they pretend the loss didn’t happen, and if they seek out any type of therapy. These are all important points to consider when creating any type of grief recovery program. It’s important to know which resources are lacking, like transportation, or what coping mechanisms certain ethnicities rely on most so one can best help them.

Adding our research findings to previous research we viewed, we found that religion is common amongst both ethnicities. Caserta, Utz, and Lund (2013), explain that there is no indication of different grief, loneliness, and depression levels amongst African-Americans and Caucasian-Americans. Our research also led to the conclusion that the quality of a relationship shapes how the individual moves through the grieving process. Expanding on that idea, marital strain can cause a grief that is more extreme due to lack of closure in their relationship or possibly less grief due to a sense of relief. In addition, poor health conditions in grieving spouses could lead to greater strain on the individual during their grieving process. Generally speaking, overall, there are no differences in levels of grief between African and Caucasian Americans. However, to improve for future research, it would be ideal to gain a larger sample size, expand the time gap since the loss occurred, and expand the age range to all individuals who have lost a significant other, rather than only individuals who are 40+. Some study limitations are as follows: individuals choosing to opt out of the study for personal reasons, memory loss in the older adult population leading them to have a faint memory of their grieving process, and the lack of participants as a whole.

During our research, we often turned to 3 online journals; Research on Aging, Psychology Today, and Death, Illness, Crisis & Loss. Through our journal resources and our research conducted, data shows that there are no major ethnic differences when coping with loss and grief amongst African-American and Caucasian-American individuals; both ethnicities turn to religion, family, and friends. Things that need to be put into place for the grieving community are adding and providing resources tailored to each gender while providing accessible transportation for all.