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African Americans and COVID-19 Pandemic: The Inability to have a Proper Burial and Grieve After the Death of a Loved-One

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Abstract

Religion and spirituality have been an integral part of the African Americans' culture since slavery. The African American communities experienced more deaths and losses during the COVID-19 pandemic. African Americans' coping with death and dying is influenced by their culture and religious practices. However, during the pandemic, African Americans are not able to participate in sociocultural practices that facilitate their coping with death and dying. This paper is an analytical literature review of African Americans and contributing factors of the COVID-19 pandemic to their traditional cultural practices of death and dying. First, this paper will provide a conceptual perspective on African Americans' culture of (a) collectivism, (b) communalism, (c) interconnectedness, and (d) spirituality in their relationships with others in the community and the COVID-19 pandemic. Typically, African Americans experience grief and loss through the support of immediate family as well as extended family, and the larger community with an emphasis on the cultural tradition of faith and spirituality. The process of grieving for African Americans changed during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the lack of funeral services or the changes in their burial practices. The African Americans' funeral plays an important part in managing and coping with grief and loss. Mental health professionals need to be aware of African Americans' inability to practice their cultural traditions may interfere with their grieving process. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this disruption of the grieving process may increase the risk of complicated/ prolonged grief and contribute to mental health conditions. Future research studies need to address the cultural perspective of African Americans with death and dying after the COVID-pandemic

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Key Words: African Americans; grief; death and dying; COVID-19; pandemic; culture; complicated grief; spirituality.

Introduction

Historically, the majority of African Americans resided in rural areas of the South before 1910 (Kennedy, 2020). The black rural church became a prototype for much of the organized African American religion. During the Jim Crow era, black rural churches often played a key role by providing African Americans the skill in coping with racism and the frustrations related to poverty and economic exploitation. Funerals were extremely significant religious occasions that often prompt more ecstatic behavior than preaching services or even church revivals.

Death rituals and preparation for the dead of African Americans are based on the geographic regions of the United States, religious affiliation, level of education, and socioeconomic background (Kennedy, 2020). Most African American families believe in providing an elaborate funeral for the loved one if affordable. African Americans believe in the importance of “putting away” their loved ones by providing a nice funeral (Sneed et al., 2017). Most African American families do not believe in rushing the burial process. Typically, the funeral services and interment are elaborate. The African American families usually take 5 to 7 days before burial (Kennedy, 2020). The funeral services can be 4 hours long. African Americans believe in the importance of the messages from preaching and prayer in almost all their life situation. However, the COVID-19 pandemic changed the funeral services to no participation, limited participation, Zoom Services, and Graveside Services. Currently, African Americans are using social media for funeral services to include (a) an online

obituary, (b) mourning the loss of their friends, (c) and family members (Sneed et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the African American community provides support by having religious services through (a) video conferencing, (b) social media sites, and (c) assisting members with supportive services and resources. For example, since the COVID-19 pandemic, burial services may be limited to the mortician and immediate family.

Historically in the United States, African Americans' views on death and dying have been a holistic perspective (Kennedy, 2020). Their holistic perspective of death and dying views birth and death as circular instead of a continuum. However, African Americans believe you are born, you die, and then you transition to exist in the spiritual realm. Their loved ones "transition," or "passed" means that they have gone to the next life. In contrast to African Americans, Western Europeans view death from a more linear perspective. Western European culture views death as a final stage whereas, you are born and then you die.

The COVID-19 Pandemic killed more people of color especially African Americans (Hillis et al., 2021; Kennedy, 2021a). African Americans and underrepresented populations are at increased risk of getting sick and dying from COVID-19 infection because of long-term health conditions and social inequalities (Best, Fletcher, Kadono & Warren, 2020; Chen et al., 2020; Kennedy, 2021a; Tai, 2020). They have a higher rate of SARS-CoV-2 and are more likely to die if contract this disorder (Best et al., 2020; Kennedy, 2021a; Tai et al., 2020) In the United States, the infection rates of COVID-19 are

predominately higher in African American communities compared to White communities. Also, African Americans are more prone to contracting the disease because they have numerous chronic diseases (Azar et al. 2020; Kennedy, 2021a; Tai et al., 2020). Therefore, African Americans have increased death rates because of these comorbidities.

During the pandemic, children experienced grief due to the death of parents and caregivers (Hillis et al., 2021). Over 140,000 children in the United States lost a parent or grandparent caregiver because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Hillis et al., 2021). They became orphans as a result of the pandemic. Children of racial and ethnic minority groups (65%) lost their primary caregiver compared with 39% of the total population (Hillis et al., 2021). The loss of a parent or caregiver had a traumatic impact on these children's health and well-being. During the COVID-19 pandemic, African American and Hispanic children account for the major groups losing their primary caregivers. Therefore, these children experienced multiple losses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This paper is an analytical literature review based on contributing factors of the COVID-19 pandemic on African Americans' traditional cultural practices of death and dying. First, this paper will provide a conceptual perspective on African Americans' culture of (a) collectivism, (b) communalism, (c) interconnectedness, and (d) spirituality in their relationships with others in the community and the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, a literature review will be done on death and dying and funeral practices during of COVID-19 pandemic.

Last, African Americans' coping skills will be explored on death and dying during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods

A search of the literature was obtained from the databases such as ProQuest, MEDLINE, CINAHL Plus, PubMed, EBSCO, Cochrane Databases, google scholar, and ResearchGate. The period of the journal articles search was 2019 through 2021. Keywords used in the literature search are African Americans, Blacks, minorities, COVID-19, pandemic, coronavirus infection, spirituality, SARS-CoV-2, mental health, coping skills, death, dying, grief, and bereavement.

Conceptual Framework on the Cultural Perspective of African Americans

African Americans use (a) collectivism, (b) communalism, (c) interconnectedness, and (d) spirituality in their relationships with others in the community (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Kennedy, 2021a; Kennedy & Rhodes, 2018). The African American families placed emphasis on collectivism. Also, their decision-making process is based on collectivism with a sense of community. COVID-19 is gradually changing this African American culture of collectivism, communalism, interconnectedness, and spirituality. These cultural changes will be discussed individually.

Collectivism

The African American culture, overall, places a strong value on collective decision-making (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Kennedy, 2021a; Kennedy & Rhodes, 2018). In collectivist cultures, people value "community," as a good in itself, and

they believe in honoring members of their immediate community, especially the family (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Kennedy, 2021a). This principle promotes the significance of the extended family and the larger community in the development of African American families and individuals (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Kennedy, 2021a; Kennedy & Rhodes, 2018).

In collectivist cultures, people value "community," as a good in itself, and they believe in honoring members of their immediate community, especially the family (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Kennedy, 2021a; Kennedy & Rhodes, 2018). Thus, to make decisions without at least respectfully listening to and honoring other people's input is considered to be disrespectful. However, the family members often gather before making decisions about the health care of their loved ones. Family members of African Americans were not allowed in the hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic. African Americans feel a strong sense of obligation at the time of death or the period of dying to gather at the bedside for prayer. When someone is dying, there is a call for everyone encircling the bedside for a prayer for the dying person and giving them comfort when making the transition to the next life. However, since the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, this process of using collectivism in decision-making will make it difficult to plan for them during their hospitalization and death.

Communalism

Communalism is a key factor in the African-centered paradigm (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Kennedy, 2021a; Kennedy & Rhodes, 2018). It is defined as the sensitivity to the interdependence of people and group concerns that transcend

individual endeavors. This principle supports the importance of the extended family and the larger community in the development of African American families and individuals. However, the collective approach takes priority over individual needs. During the COVID- 19 pandemic, social distancing resulted in the decreased collective approach of this group. Family and community members remained mostly isolated for two years.

Interconnectedness

An additional component of the African-centered paradigm is that of interconnectedness, which recognizes that people are dependent upon each other (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Kennedy, 2021a; Kennedy & Rhodes, 2018). The interconnectedness principle is considered oneness. This practice is evident during struggling throughout their experiences. In most cases, their loved ones have died alone in the hospital not allowing the family, clergy, and significant friends to directly make medical decisions or remain at the bedside until their loved one transitions over. It is exceedingly difficult to reach a consensus in a group. For example, the first-line healthcare workers used cell phones for patients to communicate with their loved ones. Also, some family members were allowed to see and talked with loved ones outside the window of the health facility or room.

Spirituality

Spirituality is another critical component of the African-centered life (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Kennedy, 2021a; Kennedy & Rhodes, 2018; Kennedy & Rhodes, 2019). Therefore, spirituality can be defined as the sense of the sacred and

divine. From an African-centered perspective, the ability to connect with the spirit force is fundamental to the helping process (Harvey, 2001). African Americans use spirituality to interpret, define, and bring meaning to life events. It is recognized as a source of strength, a form of healing, and a viable coping mechanism (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Kennedy, 2018a). During the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing resulted in a lack of connection with others. However, African Americans reported a closer connection with *God* during isolation because they continued with constant mediation, prayer, praise, and studying the **Word of God**. Others reported that they continued to attend church and funeral services. Some attended church services while sitting in their vehicles. Because of the social distancing, many funerals were provided by Zoom Conference with online obituary and Graveside Services.

Review of the Literature

African Americans and Deaths

The African Americans church is the center for gathering when a death occurs in the community (Kennedy, 2020; Kennedy & Rhodes, 2018). The church will even serve non-members of the church if family members are affiliated with the church. When a death occurs in the African American community, the African American church generally serves as the central gathering place for the bereaved families. It is not uncommon to find the African American church providing comfort to families that have experienced loss, though the deceased may not attend church or lacked regular church attendance or membership. If the deceased

person's family members are active members, especially the parents, grandparents, or siblings, enough of a tie may remain for the African American church to extend its collective fellowship and support to the bereaved family. In the African American community, the church served as a center for religious and spiritual meetings for the family. Also, the church served as a place for community meetings. During the bereavement, relatives come from various locations to assist the families. The dying patient and family members are provided support by friends, neighbors, and religious community members. Also, these various groups will support the family until their loved one dies. During the pandemic, funeral services were limited at times just to immediate family members or friends. Also, funeral services were limited in attendance. Often, family members and friends local or from other states viewed the services virtually.

Funeral Practices of African Americans

Historically, African Americans have a strong spiritual and religious background which has a significant impact on their planning for death (Kennedy, 2020; Kim et al., 2017). Funeral services will vary depending on the diverse denominations. Historically, death in the African American family is a time of sadness (Kennedy, 2020). However, it is a period of rejoicing or a homegoing ceremony because the person does not have to endure the tribulations of this earthly world. Typically, the preparation for the burial is a series of events (Kennedy, 2020). Common events consist of notification of the immediate family, relatives, and friends. Also, the immediate family provides visitation from the

clergy, deacons, friends, and community members. In the African American family when a death occurs, the extended family and church members provide support to the family during a death. Extended family members include cousins, aunts, uncles, godparents, parents, and grandparents as well as their close friends. Family may be visited by their minister, deacons, and other parishioners during this period. Friends and community members assist the families with meals and maintaining the cleanliness of the living environment. The African Americans church is the center for gathering when death occurs in the community. African Americans considered a funeral service as a homegoing service instead of an ending of life (Snead et al., 2020).

Food is typically provided for the immediate family for several days leading up to the final burial by the church family and the community (Kennedy, 2020). Most of the time, there is a wake before the funeral for preparing the family before the final burial. During this wake, church family, friends, and relatives support the family (Kennedy, 2020). *Word of spiritual comfort and reflections* may take place during this ceremony. The funeral or homegoing service and final burial are often long-lasting approximately 4 hours. African Americans place emphasis on a “proper burial.” Typically, there are numerous flowers and an elaborate dinner after the burial (Kennedy, 2020). During the pandemic, the “proper burial” for African Americans changed tremendously. The elaborate cultural practices during the bereavement changed because of social distancing.

Planning for Death and Dying

Patients in the terminal phase of the disease have complex needs (Candy et al., 2011). The church, family, and friends may play a significant role in providing support (Candy et al, 2011). The church has always been a support system for the African American Community. However, during the pandemic, the clergy and family members are not able to visit the person because of the limitation of visitation. People may fear a long, painful death or illness caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. They may fear dying alone, fear dying in a hospital, and fear of leaving people they love. Another fear people may have was death itself, the process of dying such as pain, helplessness, and dependence. A person who is more spiritual and religious usually has fewer fears about death. Historically, in the hospital after the death of a loved one, the family members have several hours to spend time before the body is removed. This process helps with the grieving process. However, family members were not always allowed to even visit family in the hospital during the pandemic.

Church Leaders. The church leader needs to provide support to a family member when a patient dies in the hospital (Kennedy, 2020). To view, touch, and spend time with the deceased body are useful for the family with the grief process. Church leaders may assist the family members with the funeral and burial because of their incapacitated condition during the bereavement period. Funeral and burial arrangements may require guidance by their ministers. A church leader or other supporting ministries within the church need to continue to support the family by visiting and checking on them after the burials. Church

leaders may provide the following during the death, bereavement, and grief process:

- Visit the family during the immediate death of a loved one.
- Assist the families with meals and maintain the cleanliness of the living environment.
- Provide food for the immediate family for several days leading up to the family and after the funeral for a period if needed.
- Assist the family in planning the funeral service.
- Assist the family during the wake before the funeral preparing the family before the final burial.
- Assist the family in preparing the funeral services if needed and during the funeral or homegoing service.
- Provide prayer and *Words of Comfort* during the immediate death, bereavement, and after the burial.
- *Word of spiritual comfort and reflections* may take place during this ceremony and the funeral or homegoing services.
- *Provide* support and grief counseling if services are provided, recommend counseling or support groups in the community (Kennedy, 2020)

The pandemic changed the funeral practices because of social distancing for the African Americans, and these traditions and practices were immediately changed (Kennedy, 2020; Sneed et al., 2020).

African Americans ' Coping with Death and Dying

Novacek et al. (2020) proposed that clinicians and researchers need to address the mental health ramifications of African Americans who are disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of a high level of exposure to psychological stressors, African Americans display a high level of resilience. However, the upcoming mental health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on African Americans need to be addressed in the future.

The African Americans' cultural perspective plays a very important role in coping with death and dying related to (a) collectivism, (b) communalism, (c) interconnectedness, and (d) spirituality in their relationships with others in the community and the COVID-19 pandemic (Bent-Goodley, 2005; Kennedy, 2021a; Kennedy & Rhodes, 2018). However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, the process of grieving for African Americans changed because of the lack of traditional funeral services or the changed in burial practices. Also, multiple deaths of family members occurred during the pandemic.

African Americans' Bereavement, Grieving, and Spirituality

Bereavement is defined as the experience of being deprived of something meaningful and valued, such as the loss of a loved one by death (Kennedy, 2020). This emotion is often shared between family members in the African American family and can be a group experience. *Bereavement* is the feelings, thoughts, and responses of a loved one following their death. *Mourning* or *grieving* is the active process of learning to adapt to a loved one death (Kennedy, 2020). *Grieving* is a process of progressing through the grieving process allowing the family to

cope with death. In most cases, the emotional expression of grief openly takes place at the funeral in the presence of family and close friends.

Grieving and death are influenced by the culture and religion of African American families (Kennedy, 2020). The *African Americans' religion and spirituality* have been an integral part of the African American culture since slavery. However, since the pandemic, when African Americans cope with loss and grief, they are not able to participate in sociocultural practices that facilitate their coping with their loss (Sneed et al., 2020). African Americans experience grief and loss through the support of immediate as well as extended families emphasizing cultural tradition of faith and spirituality (Hardy-Bougere, 2008). Many, African Americans strongly believe that life exists after death. Typically, African Americans rely on their inner strengths such as spirituality and the belief in God along, and past experiences when coping with a loss of a loved- one. Often, African Americans' bereavement process takes place within the context of the church and families through their social interaction. This process has changed with the COVID-19 pandemic; however, some family members reported planning a memorial service later when this pandemic has ended. For example, some family members became aware of the loss of a family member later after the burial. The African American funeral plays an important part in managing grief and loss (Sneed et al., 2020). Because of the pandemic, African Americans are not just experiencing one loss but several losses (Sneed et al., 2020). For example, one African Americans funeral home operator stated that he went from one funeral a week to ten funerals a week. For some family members, the burial

service took place at the graveside with only the funeral home operator and/or the clergy.

African Americans and Mental Health

African Americans display a high level of resilience regardless of high levels of exposure to psychological stressors (Novacek et al. , 2020). However, African Americans experience more complicated grief/ prolonged grief compared to other ethnic groups (Glickman, 2021; Kennedy, 2020; Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). They spend less time talking about the grief to others (Kennedy, 2020; Kennedy, 2021a; Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this disruption of African Americans' grieving process may increase the risk of complicated grief or prolonged grief contributing to mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety. The DSM-V categorized *persistent complex bereavement disorder* formerly known as *complicated grief disorder or persistent complex bereavement disorder*. A person feels an extreme yearning for a deceased loved one, usually over a prolonged period (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These feelings of longing are often accompanied by destructive thoughts and behaviors, as well as general impairment in resuming normal life. Prolonged grief disorder is a disturbance following the death of a partner, parent, child, or other people close to the bereaved. There is a persistent and pervasive grief response characterized by a longing for the deceased or persistent preoccupation with the deceased accompanied by intense emotional pain (e.g., sadness, guilt, anger, denial, blame). This person has difficulty accepting the death, feeling one

has lost a part of oneself, an inability to experience a positive mood, emotional numbness, and difficulty in engaging with social or other activities.

In African Americans' culture, grief is believed to be complicated when there are social, psychological, and medical conditions (Kennedy, 2020). However, mental health professionals need to be aware of the complicated grief of African Americans because of the COVID-19 pandemic. A person experiencing grief may experience abnormal grief. In abnormal grief, thoughts may trigger feelings that can lead to depression or anxiety. Also, African Americans may use substances and overeat to deal with grief (Sneed et al., 2020). African Americans tend to keep their distress such as grieving a loss of a loved one in their own family or community instead of seeking professional help (Kennedy, 2020; Kennedy, 2021b; Kennedy & Rhodes, 2018; Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). Their family extends beyond the nuclear family or kinship to include others in their community or church family. Typically, in the African American community, the loved one may include members of the larger community and church family. These people may be just as important whereas in some cases more important than some blood relatives.

In African American culture, there is a continuing bond with the deceased loved one after the death of a loved one which needs to be taken into consideration when coping with grief (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). There is a common belief among African Americans in the Christian faith that death is not an end but a transition between this world to the next phase of life. Traditional grief has promoted accepting the death and relinquishing bonds with a deceased

loved one which will help them move on. Typically, African Americans accept the loss by building strengths in continuing bonds with the loved one (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). However, since family members were not allowed in the hospital because of the COVID-19 pandemic, this process may not take place. Behavior such as selective forgetting or blocking out memories of the loved one may exist. Rituals of burials will assist the family deal with the reality of the death.

Research has indicated that African Americans do not use professional services during grieving as other ethnic groups (Kennedy, 2020; Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). Their underutilization of mental health services is contributed to cultural mistrust of mental health services (Kennedy, 2020; Laurie, & Neimeyer, 2008). Also, traditionally in the African American community, the issue of grieving is dealt with informally, through their pastor or minister, and within the family system. Historical slavery brought about African Americans' endurance of trouble in this world, so they often view sorrow and suffering as a normal part of life. Therefore, African Americans will tolerate the difficult circumstance of this world rather than seek professional help.

African Americans are often reluctant to disclose personal information publicly (Kennedy, 2020; Kennedy, 2021b; Kennedy & Rhodes, 2018; Kennedy & Rhodes, 2019). Historically, a common perception of African Americans is that persons seeking mental health treatment as being "crazy" (Boyd- Franklin & Lockwood, 1999; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996; Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008; Kennedy & Rhodes, 2018). Also, historically in the African American community,

speaking about one problem is discouraged in public (Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1982; Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008).

Laurie and Neimeyer (2008) reported that African Americans experienced more complicated grief compared to their White counterparts. Despite their continuous bond with their loved one, numerous bereavements by homicide, a greater feeling of loss beyond immediate family, and a sense of support during bereavement, they spent less time talking to others about the death and seeking professional help for grief.

This stoicism in African Americans consists of the endurance of pain or hardship without the display of feelings and complaints (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). Therefore, stoicism may affect a bereaved African American's likelihood to self-disclose. Sorrow and suffering are often part of the African American worldview whereas trouble is to be expected which may be embedded in their strong religious orientation suggesting that difficulties and hardships in life are to be anticipated in life.

Mental health professionals need to beware that the inability of African Americans to practice the cultural traditions of bereavement may interfere with their grieving process (Kennedy, 2020; Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). Also, it is important for the religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and faith-based communities to provide spiritual support and guidance to the bereaved family guidance to assist with the coping and healing process (Clyde & Corpuz, 2021). Also, they are in a key position to provide counseling and make the appropriate referrals for counseling, health services, or social resources.

During the pandemic, the African American family experienced death sudden without the ability to have a proper burial. Also, African Americans experienced multiple deaths because of the numerous co-morbidities. A proper burial is important in the African American culture and assists with the death and the grief process (Kennedy, 2020). Goldsmith et al. (2008) proposed that the experience of the sudden death of a loved one in African Americans was associated with prolonged grief disorder. Therefore, treatment interventions are needed to identify the high-risk individuals and make the proper referral for culturally competent treatment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, limited research has focused on the cultural perspective of African Americans with death and dying. Typically, African Americans rely on their inner strengths of spirituality, the belief in *God*, and past experiences when coping with a loss of a loved one. Often, African Americans' bereavement process takes place within the context of the church and families through their social interaction. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the African American family experienced sudden death without the ability to have a proper burial. A proper burial is important in the African American culture and assists with the death and the grief process. The sudden death of a loved one in African Americans was associated with prolonged grief disorder. Therefore, treatment interventions are needed to identify the high-risk individuals and make the proper referral for culturally competent treatment.

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