

Grief and Loss Reactions across the Black Diaspora among Ghanaian and Jamaican Men

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Abstract

Historically, in literature, grief has been viewed, analyzed, and conceptualized through a westernized white-euro-centric lens. In an aim to center other grief reactions outside of white dominate grief narratives and theories, this article seeks to explore the experiences of grief and loss reactions among Ghanaian, and Jamaican, Black-identified men utilizing qualitative survey research methodology. In addition, the article seeks to expand the grief research across the diaspora. Utilizing surveys (n= 437) the article explores the experiences of grief across the African/Black diaspora among men. The result of the study highlights how imperative it is to understand the nuanced variations that exist within and across cultures, tribal affiliations, nationalities, and geographical locales of the Black male grief experience.

Keywords: Ghanaian, Jamaican, Grief, loss, African diaspora

1. Introduction

Despite the universality of grief, variation exists in how it is experienced and expressed among racialized Black identified men (RBIM) in the United States (Lipscomb, 2016). Racialization involves the identification, perception, viewing, categorization, or imposition of a racial context; for Black men, this translates into the simultaneous experience of their ethnicity and gender as substantially larger than their other identity factors. For RBIM, everything is viewed through the lens of dual marginalization. Thus, understanding the experiences of Black male grief necessitates awareness of socio-political oppression as a consistent factor. Although studies regarding grief and loss have helped identify stages of grief, loss and bereavement, empirical research has yet to examine these factors for Ghanaian and Jamaican identified Black men. This article will explore the grief experiences of Ghanaian identified and Jamaican identified Black men as it relates to significant losses (i.e., death, relocation, etc.). This is an expansion of exploring Black male grief experiences across the diaspora. There is a dearth in literature exploring the unique grief experiences of these racial and nationality groups. The lack of research in this area provides disparities in service provision and clinical efficacy with this underserved population thus this study is to expand my research of Black Male grief across the Black diaspora.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Ghanaian grief practices

As the meaning of death is hard to comprehend and cope with, it does not stop different cultures from celebrating one's life. In Ghana, the celebration of funerals is a tremendous deal as large number of mourners celebrate a dear one that has departed from life.

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Celebration is warranted instead of expressing sorry and red or black clothing is worn amongst the Ghanaian people to symbolize their grief. Funerals are held on weekends, Saturday being the most common day. An average funeral cost could be expensive as weddings, costing from \$15,000 to \$20,000. Along with that, the celebration is expressed through music and dancing. A Ghanaian mix of jazz, brass bands and African rhymes are used along with religious blessings and tribute speeches before the celebration begins. The deceased is represented inside unique personalized coffins that reflect their favorite interests and passions (e.g., lion, shoe, or chili pepper) (Owiredu, 2021).

Despite the funerals in Ghana being a party, not all Ghanaians can celebrate one's life without emotionally grieving. This is the case for a Ghanaian woman named Leonie Owiredu. She lost her father at a young age and attended a funeral full of family and friends celebrating his passing. Unfortunately, she looked pass the noise. As a child, losing her father was something she had to process alone as the participation in the funeral was decided for her. Her being excluded from the funeral was foreign to her as she was used to affirming her voice with her father. As she was surrounded by adults that tell you where to go, what to say, and then explain after the funeral. Leonie Owiredu explains it was almost like the adult's grief was higher than the child's She asked her eldest cousin why after-care for children wasn't considered. Her response was, "Obi nhwe obi ba": Nobody should look after anybody's child (Owiredu, 2021). A child's grief could be pushed to the side and as a result, create a repressed grief process that becomes a cycle. Especially when they are innocent emotional individuals. Leonie Owiredu explains the process of her grief was done in private to not inconvenience others. She began to deny herself of food and exercised more in pursuit of meddling to control feelings within her body. Her grief became a service to everyone else (e.g., friends and family) for support and advice as she knew what to say. It was three attempts to seek counseling and by her fourth therapist, she felt safe enough to navigate grief and recognize her emotions. It's important to understand that one's feelings towards grief is neither good nor bad; they simply need to pass (Owiredu, 2021).

2.2. Death Announcements in Ghanaian Culture

As Ghanaian traditional funerals celebrate one's life, death announcements are another way to honor and appreciate an individual. This informs the public of one's passing and thus, creates grief. It can be announced in different ways such as verbal announcements, electronic and print media, billboards, posters, handbills, and telephone (Manieson, 2014). However, death announcements are popular in newspapers. In Ghana, the aspect of how death announcements are presented is determined by age, gender, and socio-economic status. Questions that help shape the study of death announcements are the following: (a) How does the gender of the deceased influence the language of death announcements in Ghanaian newspapers? (b) How does the age of the deceased influence the language of death announcements in Ghanaian newspapers, and (c) What role does the status of the deceased play in the language of death announcements in Ghanaian newspapers? (Afful, 2020).

In the study conducted, it was found that age influences how death announcements are presented. Ghanaians who are higher in age (61 to 80 years) pass away more than adolescents (11 to 20 years). This may make the study biased as Ghanaian adolescent deaths are not often announced in newspapers. Age groups such as (19-39), (40-69), and (70+) had captions on their DA such as, "transition" and "obituary". Sentences such as, "He has passed on" and "His Glory Has Come" were common among the age groups. Individuals such as, Ebenezer Kodjo Baapeng, Faustina Odamtten, and Janet Adjei (ages 31, 69, and 84 years) had their death announced with the captioned word "Transition". It's common within age groups, adulthood, and old age to have captions such as "Call to Glory", "Celebration of Life", and "Home Call". For youths, "What a Shoch" and "Gone too Soon" are captions used to describe their passing (Benjamin, 2020).

Gender is another effect on DA as the study conducted found that Ghanaian male deaths were announced more than females. It could be either male die more often than females or female deaths was not being announced. Men were described by their accomplishments more than females as females were described or portrayed as daughters, sisters, or wives. As these appear as labels, socioeconomic status greatly influenced how a Ghana individual was represented in their death announcements. Even if they weren't of old age (below 70), they still had captions such as, "Celebration of Life" because of their socio-economic status. It was mostly used for public figures such as barristers, medical doctors, educationists, philanthropists, and political figures. Another way that socioeconomic affected DAs was by addressing an individual by their last name which was bolded to put emphasis on their status. This attracts more sympathizers for the family. The bolding of the last name represents the importance of family institutions within Ghana (Benjamin, 2020).

2.3. Ghanaian Coping Mechanisms

By investigating the coping mechanisms individuals provide for themselves, mental health professionals can provide services in the best way possible. The study that was conducted consisted of participants aged 18 years or older that represented Ghana. It was designed to collect data based on how they were able to cope mentally as the participants then described various activities they engaged in during the pandemic. It consisted of television viewing (45.5%), income-generating activities from home (35%), household chores (52.8%), sports activities (40.2%), and religious prayer (48.6%). These activities served as a stress-coping strategy as participants had to watch others (relatives and family members) and grieve death.

A coping strategy mentioned that helped the people of Ghana was their religious practices. A study was conducted to understand how these affected individuals in Ghana as normal church routines were affected. Religion is an important aspect in Ghanaian life as traditions, rituals, and practices help keep their faith alive. McCullough (2000) and Williams (1991) mention that religious activities have a positive impact on mental health and well-being. They can seek support, manage anxiety, and stress, and create an understanding during the pandemic (Pew Research Center, 2020; Wilson et al., 2020).

Two main impacts were identified among the participants on religious restrictions which was: (a) decline in spiritual life and (b) loss of fellowship and community (Osei-Tutu, Affram, Mensah-Sarbah, Dzokoto, & Adams, 2021). Participants made it a key point to mention that they noticed a decline in their religious practice which included prayer and listening to the word of God. Religious leaders noted that members of the church found it hard to maintain a spiritual routine outside of church. Participants have said, “there are a lot of people who cannot pray on their own and listen to the word of God on their own unless he goes to church and then pray...” Participants have also questioned their faith in God due to the pandemic and loss a sense of purpose and social value. Fellow members of the church created a community and helped others in need. The restrictions made it difficult to identify individuals who needed help (Osei-Tutu, et al, 2021).

2.4. Jamaican grief practices Spiritual Values and Practices

There are several coping mechanisms that Jamaican adults heal with the death of loved ones. Spiritual values and practices influence the grieving and coping process as it's an overwhelming issue in Jamaica. Jamaica was found to have high case numbers of death by murder than other regions in the world (ECLAC, 2008). After dealing with a traumatic loss, Jamaicans engage in spiritual practices as it gives them hope. A study that Campbell-Allman

(2019) has examined included studies about Jamaicans using spirituality over sudden or violent death in Jamaica. As a result, it was founded that this tactic was useful and can be heavily influenced by what rituals they possess and what they believe happens after death. While the literature is minimal on spiritual values and practices within Jamaican adults, we know that it plays a significant role in their life. Gire (2014) mentions that Christian belief describes faithful individuals as someone being rewarded with eternal joy in heaven and sinners will experience an eternal doom in hell. Jamaicans practice numerous of rituals and one of them is called the wake. A wake is a social gathering, and it is held before the funeral (Paul, 2007). It's also mentioned that Jamaicans participate in nine nights where they pay their condolences at the home of their loved one that has passed away. Although these rituals are promising and help Jamaican individuals cope, it affects the grieving process. They believe that death is not the end and go to great lengths to honor the deceased.

2.5. Narrative of Natasha Gordon's Grandmother

As the Jamaican ritual of 'nine nights' has been discussed, Natasha Gordon, an actor and writer explained in an article, “Grandma's traditional Jamaican wake brought me closer to the Windrush generation” sharing about her experience of nine night from when her grandmother passed. She describes her upbringing as 'hearing pan lids on a Saturday morning'. Her mother described home (Jamaica) as being involved in a different sense of identity. When her grandmother passed, her Jamaican family demanded for a nine night to honor her. However, Natasha felt as though her generation lost touch with the Jamaican traditional rituals. She describes her grandfather's shock of losing his wife and mentions him putting away the sound system. Natasha and her siblings began organizing the nine night and she describes the night being physically and emotionally draining. However, the stories she heard was the highlight of the evening (Rhodes, G., 2018).

Natasha Gordon has lived her life in Britain and mentions the differences between traditional British and Jamaican rituals. She describes it as not having all her senses being stimulated when attending cremations as grief is needed to be heightened so you can let it out (Rhodes, G., 2018). For many cultures, they all experience grief in different manners and within Jamaican culture, funeral services are held off for up to ten days or more. This allows remembrance and honor of the deceased. However, as Natasha Gordon has mentioned, Jamaicans have lost sight of the true meaning of nine night. Some have felt it's an excuse to show off wealth or party. Despite not knowing any individuals' intentions of nine night, overall, this could be a coping method in dealing with the grief of a Jamaican deceased.

3. Methods

The study consisted of 437 male participants in total: 157 Jamaican men and 280 Ghanaian men. Each participant was given a series of 11 questions about their experiences of responding to a significant loss in their life. Some identification and background questions were asked such as race/ethnicity and tribal affiliation, gender, age range, and highest education completed. Questions that helped identify what the participants go through during their experiences with the loss of a beloved one were: (a) How they responded to significant loss; (b) How long it takes them to adjust to the loss, what age did they experience loss; (c) How someone close to them would describe their reaction to significant loss; and (d) Who did they go to following a significant loss in their life.

4. Results

In the study that was conducted, it was found that Jamaican men had 42% of 56–65-year-old participants than Ghanaian men. Ghanaian men had 34.3% of adolescent/young adulthood participants (19-25 years old) than Jamaican men which were 3.2%. Ghanaian men contained older adults that were 66 and over (2.5%), but not as much as Jamaican men participants (29.3%). A question that was put into the survey was how Jamaican and Ghanaian men responded to a significant loss. 49% of Jamaican men responded to the significant loss with acceptance while 30% of Ghanaian men responded with acceptance. Most Ghanaian men (67.5%) tended to respond with sadness/despair while 42.7% of Jamaican men responded with sadness/despair. While both ethnicities had lower percentages of responding to loss with anger/aggression and being withdrawn, Ghanaian men were less likely to respond with anger/aggression than Jamaican men. Jamaican men said someone close to them would identify their reaction to loss as content/acceptance (35.3%). This could go parallel with how Jamaican men identified their reaction to a significant loss as being with content and acceptance. Ghanaian men, they were more likely to identify their reaction to significant loss with sadness/despair. Their response was parallel as well to how others would describe their response; tearful.

Figure 1. Race/ethnicity and tribal affiliation of Ghanaian Men

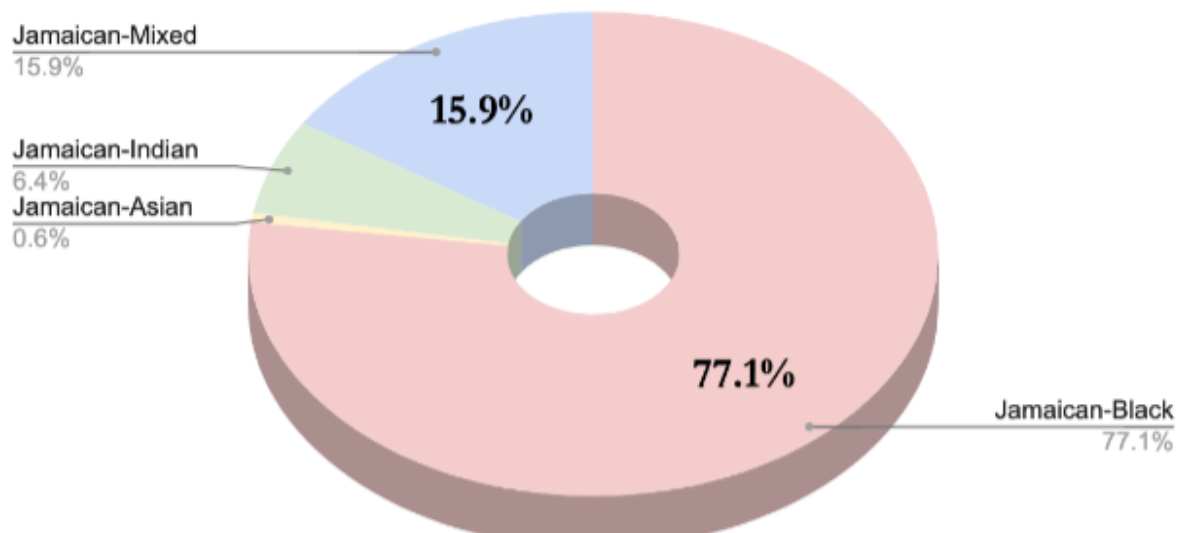
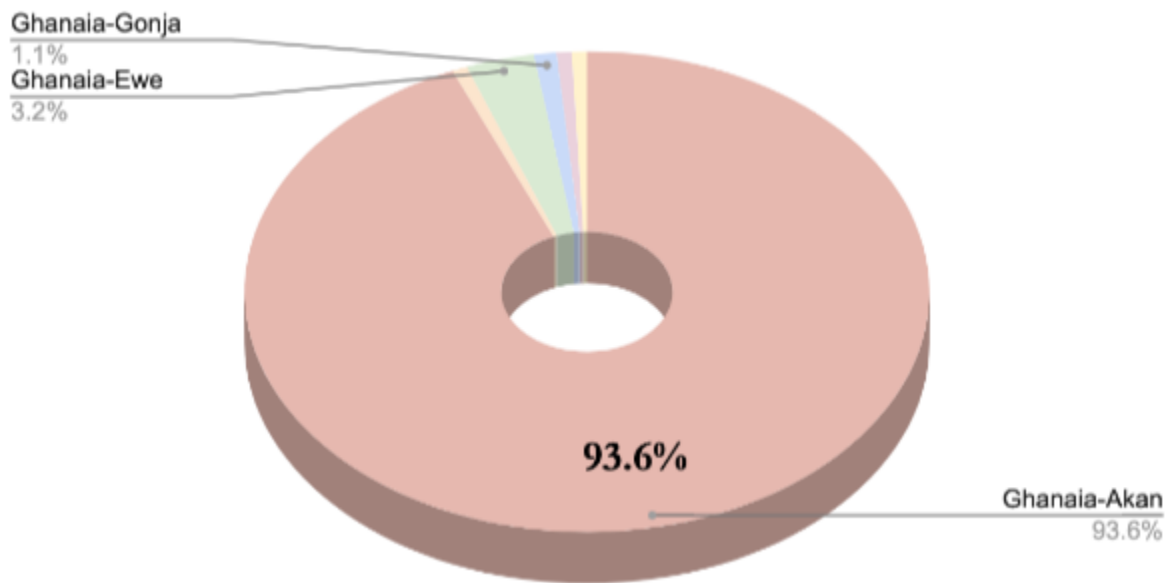


Figure 2. Race/ethnicity and tribal affiliation of Jamaican Men



In this study, most Ghanaian men went to their mothers for comfort (24.37%) following a significant loss in their life. As for Jamaican men, their comfort after a loss was turning to their faith and/or God (32.69%). However, Jamaican men turned to their spouses more than Ghanaian men. Both ethnicities did not turn to friends and family as much as turning to their spouse or faith. It was found that Jamaican men took longer than Ghanaian men to adjust to a loss of a loved one. Most Jamaican men responded to never adjusting to their loss more than Ghanaian men by 21.9%. 38.9% of Ghanaian men took 3-4 months of adjusting to a loss and cried about it (63.3%) during that time. Despite more Jamaican men taking longer to adjust to a loss of a loved one, 54.8% of the Jamaican men reported that they did not cry.

5. Discussion

Based on the results presented in the study, insight is given into how men of different ethnicities (i.e., specifically Jamaican, and Ghanaian), age groups, education levels, and how they respond to a significant loss. While there were some variations with age groups, the level of education did not play a significant role in how they responded to a significant loss and whom they went to for support. A question develops whether age group and/or ethnicity could have an influence on the difference in response to the questions in the study conducted. Even though all the questions in the study had significant importance, analyzing the short answer responses on the men's additional thoughts is crucial. The responses indicated that everyone is still grieving and hurt by the loss. Based on some answers, the Ghanaian and Jamaican men do not feel heard, validated, and seen as it relates to their grief experience. This study can open the mind of a professional when creating, implementing, and supporting the grief experiences of Ghanaian and Jamaican men.

6. Conclusion

The topics that were examined described the grief and loss Ghanaian and Jamaican, Black-identified men experience and how they can cope. As grief and loss are something every individual experiences universally, there is indeed a difference culturally. Everyone can experience grief or loss and their environment could influence their reactions. Some may not have the chance to grieve properly like Leonie Owiredu or need to have their senses stimulated to grieve like Natasha Gordon. In addition, cultural practices, and traditions as in death announcements, along with spiritual values and practices play a significant role in how Ghanaian and Jamaican men experience death. Death announcements have become popular in newspapers to honor one's passing and can be determined by age, gender, and socio-economic class. Spiritual values and practices influence the grieving and coping process as it's an overwhelming issue in Jamaica.

Overall, more research needs to be conducted to understand how Ghanaian and Jamaican men experience grief to better support and serve this community in the human services field and contribute to the literature in the field around grief.

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