

## **Grieve Little BRUH: Exploring Traumatic Grief with African American/Black Boys Utilizing BRUH Approach Therapy and Narrative-Art Based Therapy**

**Allen Eugene Lipscomb, PsyD, LCSW<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract:**

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This article explores an emerging honoring-based practice approach called Bonding, Recognition, Understanding, and Healing (BRuH) therapy, combined with narrative art-based play therapy to address traumatic experiences in Black boys. Case study/qualitative design is used to explore the overall experiences of (N=6) participants and the value of Bruh Approach Therapy (BAT) and Narrative Art-Based Play Therapy in addressing traumatic grief among African American boys. The BRuH model for Black boys has been adapted whereby merging play therapy and narrative art to establish a secure and supportive environment conducive to healing, fostering bonding, facilitating emotional recognition, promoting understanding of trauma, and enhancing overall well-being. The intervention utilized draws on trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy, play therapy, and narrative art-based therapy. By integrating these approaches, the BRuH model aims to address the unique needs of African American/Black boys in an antiracist and anti-oppressive therapeutic and culturally responsive way. The results from the study included (1) increased trust and emotional rapport; (2) improved emotional vocabulary and creative expression; (3) enhanced insight into personal trauma narratives; (4) reduced symptoms of trauma-related distress; and (5) enhanced psychological functioning and resilience.

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**Keywords:** African American, Boys, Trauma, Grief, Therapy

### **1. Introduction**

Traumatic grief experiences disproportionately affect African American/Black boys in the United States, leading to adverse psychological and emotional outcomes (Baker, & Mott, 2016; Gaylord-Harden & Cunningham, 2019). This article explores the intersection of traumatic grief experienced by African American/Black boys and the application of art therapy as a therapeutic modality to address their unique needs. Traumatic grief is a complex and multifaceted experience that affects individuals differently based on various factors, including cultural background, age, gender, and societal systems exacerbating oppressive and marginalized practices. African American/Black boys face unique challenges and barriers in processing grief due to systemic inequalities, racial discrimination, and cultural norms. Understanding their grief experiences and developing culturally sensitive interventions is essential for promoting their well-being and resilience. This research report provides an overview of recent studies examining grief among African American/Black boys and interventions aimed at supporting their grief recovery process. Grief therapy is a vital aspect of mental health care, particularly for vulnerable populations such as African American/Black school-aged boys, who may face unique challenges in expressing and coping with grief. This literature review aims to examine existing research on grief therapy interventions tailored specifically for this demographic group, highlighting current practices, gaps in the literature, and areas for future research.

### **2. Literature Review**

#### **2.1 Current Research on Grief Therapy for African American/Black Boys**

Research on grief therapy for African American/Black boys is relatively limited in the literature. Several studies have explored the impact of grief on this demographic group and the effectiveness of various therapeutic approaches. Bryant-Davis and Wong (2013) conducted a qualitative study examining the experiences of African American boys aged 9-11 who had lost a parent. The findings highlighted the

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<sup>1</sup>Professor  
Allen.Lipscomb@csun.edu  
California State University, Northridge  
Department of Social Work

importance of culturally sensitive grief interventions that acknowledge the intersection of race, gender, and age in shaping boys' experiences of loss. The study emphasized the need for interventions that fostered emotional expression and provided opportunities for peer support. Another study by Carter and Boehm (2016) explored the use of narrative therapy as an effective approach for African American boys grieving the loss of a loved one. The findings suggested that narrative therapy facilitated the boys' exploration and reconstruction of their personal narratives surrounding loss, promoting healing and resilience.

In addition to therapeutic interventions, researchers have also examined the role of cultural factors in shaping grief experiences among African American/Black school-aged boys. Stewart et al. (2018) explored cultural rituals and practices as coping mechanisms for African American boys grieving the loss of a loved one. The study underscored the significance of cultural identity and community support in the grieving process. Reaves and Ennis (2017) provided an integrative literature review on bereavement experiences within African American families, emphasizing cultural influences on grief expression and coping strategies. Shelton and Harold (2019) explored the pathways linking childhood trauma to adult depression among Black men, stressing the importance of early trauma intervention. Hawkins, Williams, and Graves (2020) conducted a literature review on grief experiences among African American boys, highlighting the need for culturally competent interventions and community support.

Stewart, Leffer, and Johnson (2018) investigated cultural rituals as coping mechanisms for grief among African American boys, emphasizing the role of cultural identity and community support. Baker and Mott (2016) explored the impact of parental incarceration on the grief process of African American male adolescents, shedding light on unique challenges faced by this demographic group. Dill-Shackleford and Crego (2017) examined the effects of racial discrimination on the grief process of African American youth, emphasizing the need for culturally sensitive interventions. West and Donovan (2019) proposed a resilience intervention to help African American youth cope with racism-related stressors, while Gaylord-Harden and Cunningham (2019) explored the impact of racial discrimination on the mental health of African American boys, advocating for trauma-informed interventions.

## **2.2. Prevalence of Trauma in Black Boys**

Trauma in Black boys can result from various sources, including exposure to community violence, racial discrimination, family disruption, and socioeconomic disparities. Research consistently highlights the higher likelihood of Black boys experiencing trauma compared to their counterparts of other racial backgrounds (Hines-Martin et al., 2013). Traumatic experiences can have profound and lasting effects on the mental health and well-being of Black boys. These effects may manifest as symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and conduct disorders (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2006). Trauma can also contribute to academic challenges, low self-esteem, and difficulties in interpersonal relationships.

## **2.3. Art Therapy as an Intervention**

Art therapy is a well-established therapeutic approach that utilizes creative expression, including visual arts, music, and storytelling, to facilitate emotional processing and healing. For Black boys who may face cultural stigma associated with mental health treatment, art therapy offers an alternative means of exploring and addressing trauma (Grinshteyn & Sacco, 2017). Art therapy provides a safer and nonverbal outlet for Black boys to express complex emotions and experiences that they may struggle to communicate verbally (Lusebrink, 2013). Art therapy can incorporate cultural symbols and themes, making it culturally sensitive and relevant for Black boys (Hays & Singh, 2012). Engaging in creative processes empowers Black boys to regain a sense of control over their narratives and experiences (Jones, 2006). Disparities in access to mental health services, including art therapy, remain a significant barrier for many Black boys (Garland et al., 2005). Art therapists need to be culturally competent and aware of the specific needs and experiences of Black boys to provide effective therapy (Thomas & Gibbs, 2017).

## **2.4. Gaps in the Research**

Despite the valuable contributions of existing research, several gaps in the literature on grief therapy for African American/Black school-aged boys remain. Most of the research in this area relies on qualitative methodologies, highlighting the need for more empirical studies to evaluate the effectiveness of grief therapy interventions for this demographic group. While some studies acknowledge the intersection of race, gender, and age in shaping grief experiences, further exploration of how these intersecting identities influence therapeutic outcomes is warranted. There is a need for greater emphasis on culturally competent approaches to grief therapy that acknowledge the cultural norms, values, and beliefs of African American/Black communities. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine the long-term impact of grief therapy interventions on the mental health and well-being of African American/Black school-aged boys. Research should also

address barriers to accessing grief therapy services among African American/Black boys, including stigma, limited resources, and systemic inequalities in mental health care.

## **2.5. Theoretical Framework**

The BRuH (Bonding Recognition Understanding and Healing) Approach Therapy model, developed by Dr. AllenLipscomb, offers an honoring-based, culturally responsive, antiracist, and anti-oppressive therapeutic framework specifically designed to address the unique psychological and emotional needs of African American men, youth, and boys (Lipscomb, 2020). This theoretical framework aims to contextualize the BRuH Approach within existing psychological theories and highlight its relevance and innovation in addressing the mental health disparities faced by this demographic.

### **2.5.1. Cultural Contextualization in Therapy**

The BRuH Approach is rooted in the recognition that traditional therapeutic models often fail to adequately address the cultural and social realities of African American individuals. It integrates principles from Afrocentric psychology, which emphasizes the importance of cultural heritage, community, and collective well-being (Nobles, 1986). Afrocentric psychology posits that mental health for African Americans cannot be fully understood or treated without acknowledging the historical and ongoing impacts of racism, discrimination, and systemic inequality (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). The BRuH model incorporates these elements by creating a therapeutic space where clients' cultural identities and lived experiences are central to the healing process.

### **2.5.2. Bonding and Attachment Theory**

The first component of the BRuH model, Bonding, draws on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), which suggests that secure attachment relationships are crucial for emotional development and mental health. In the context of African American men, youth, and boys, bonding involves creating strong, trust-based relationships with therapists and peers. This approach acknowledges the historical trauma and mistrust of mental health systems among African Americans (Williams, 2018), and it emphasizes the need for therapists to establish genuine, empathetic connections with their clients.

### **2.5.3. Recognition and Self-Esteem**

Recognition, the second component, is grounded in theories of self-esteem and identity development (Erikson, 1968; Coopersmith, 1967). For African American males, recognition involves validating their experiences and affirming their identities in a society that often marginalizes them. This process is crucial for building self-esteem and resilience. The BRuH model incorporates culturally relevant narratives and role models, helping clients see themselves positively reflected in their community and broader society.

### **2.5.4. Understanding and Cognitive-Behavioral Theory**

Understanding, the third component aligns with principles from cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) (Beck, 1976). It involves helping clients develop insight into their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. The BRuH Approach adapts CBT techniques to be culturally responsive, recognizing the specific stressors and cognitive patterns that may arise from the African American experience, such as dealing with white supremacy, oppression, marginalization, and microaggressions or internalized racism (Sue et al., 2007). By fostering a deep understanding of these dynamics, clients can develop healthier coping mechanisms and thought patterns.

### **2.5.5. Healing and Trauma-Informed Care**

The final component, Healing, integrates trauma-informed care principles (SAMHSA, 2014). This aspect of the BRuH model addresses the pervasive impact of trauma in the lives of African American men, youth, and boys, which often stems from both personal experiences and collective historical trauma (Brave Heart, 1998). Healing involves creating a safe and supportive environment where clients can process and recover from trauma. The BRuH Approach emphasizes the importance of community and cultural rituals in the healing process, drawing on practices that promote communal support and resilience.

### **2.5.6. Integrative and Holistic Approach**

The BRuH model is inherently integrative, combining elements from various psychological theories to create a holistic approach to therapy. It acknowledges the complexity of African American identities and experiences, and it strives to provide a comprehensive framework that addresses mental, emotional, and

cultural dimensions of health. By doing so, the BRuH Approach aims to empower African American men, youth, and boys to achieve psychological well-being and resilience in the face of societal challenges.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Participants

The study involved (n=6) African American/Black identified boys age range from 6 yrs. old – 16 yrs. old who were selected based on their exposure to traumatic grief experiences (i.e., witness a death of a loved). All participants were recruited through local community organizations, schools, and mental health clinics. Informed consent was obtained from the participants' legal guardians, and assent was sought from the children themselves.

#### 3.2. Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the experiences of each participant and the effectiveness of Bruh Approach to Therapy (BAT) and Narrative Art-Based Play Therapy in addressing traumatic grief.

#### 3.3. Intervention

BRuH Approach Therapy (Bonding, Recognition, Understanding and Healing) and Narrative Art-Based Play Therapy was utilized as the primary therapeutic intervention. This approach combines traditional play therapy techniques with creative narrative elements, facilitating the expression of emotions, thoughts, and experiences through various art forms, including drawings, storytelling, and role-playing. Each participant engaged in 10 weekly sessions lasting approximately 45-60 minutes, with a licensed and experienced play therapist.

#### 3.4. Procedure

1. **Assessment:** Each participant underwent a pre-intervention assessment that included a clinical interview, standardized measures of grief and trauma, and a genogram to explore their family dynamics.
2. **Treatment Planning:** Individualized treatment plans were developed for each participant, focusing on their specific grief experiences and developmental needs. Goals included emotional expression, trauma processing, and grief resolution.
3. **Therapeutic Sessions:** Weekly sessions began with rapport-building activities to establish trust. Participants were encouraged to choose from a range of art-based activities to express their feelings, memories, and thoughts related to the traumatic grief experiences. The therapist used these activities to facilitate storytelling and guide participants in creating narratives around their grief.
4. **Integration:** Therapists helped participants integrate their narratives into their lived experiences, providing a framework for understanding and coping with their grief.
5. **Evaluation:** Post-intervention assessments were conducted to measure changes in grief and trauma symptoms. Feedback from participants and their legal guardians was also gathered to assess the perceived effectiveness of BAT and Narrative Art-Based Play Therapy.

#### 3.5. Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using content and thematic analysis via an iterative process. Transcripts of therapy sessions, artwork, and post-intervention assessments were reviewed to identify common themes related to the participants' grief experiences and the impact of the intervention.

#### 3.6. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring the confidentiality and well-being of participants. Any signs of distress were promptly addressed, and participants were provided with appropriate resources for ongoing support.

By employing a case study design and the Narrative Art-Based Play Therapy approach, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how this intervention can effectively address traumatic grief in Black boys across different age groups.

### 4. Results

The results of the qualitative case study revealed five emerging themes from the experiences of the six African American/Black identified boys aged 6, 9, 11, 12, 13, and 14 who had been exposed to traumatic grief experiences. Participants were recruited through local community organizations, schools, and mental health

clinics, with informed consent obtained from their legal guardians and assent sought from the children themselves. Employing a qualitative case study design allowed for an in-depth exploration of each participant's experiences and the effectiveness of the BRuH Approach to Therapy (BAT) and Narrative Art-Based Play Therapy in addressing traumatic grief.

The intervention, which combined BRuH Approach Therapy and Narrative Art-Based Play Therapy, aimed to facilitate bonding, enhance emotional recognition and expression, promote understanding of traumatic experiences, support the healing process, and evaluate the efficacy of the intervention in improving overall well-being and resilience. Each participant engaged in 10 weekly sessions lasting 45-60 minutes with a licensed and experienced play therapist. The analysis of the data yielded the following five emerging themes:

- a. Increased Trust and Rapport:** Participants demonstrated enhanced trust and rapport with the therapists as evidenced by their willingness to engage in therapeutic activities and express their emotions openly. The BRuH model facilitated bonding between the Black boys and the therapists, creating a safe and supportive environment for exploration.
- b. Improved Emotional Vocabulary:** Through the utilization of narrative art-based play therapy, participants exhibited improved emotional recognition and expression. They demonstrated an expanded emotional vocabulary and utilized creative outlets such as drawing and storytelling to express their feelings and experiences.
- c. Insight into Personal Trauma Narratives:** Participants showed increased understanding of their traumatic experiences through storytelling and metaphorical representation. They gained insight into their personal trauma narratives, allowing them to make connections between past events and current emotions.
- d. Safer Space for Exploration and Validation:** The therapeutic sessions provided a safer space for participants to explore, validate, and process their traumatic experiences. The supportive environment facilitated healing by allowing participants to explore and express their emotions and experiences in a non-judgmental setting.
- e. Decrease in Symptoms of Trauma-Related Distress:** The intervention resulted in a decrease in symptoms of trauma-related distress among participants. They exhibited reduced levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms, indicating progress in the healing process.

Figure 1. Five emerging themes

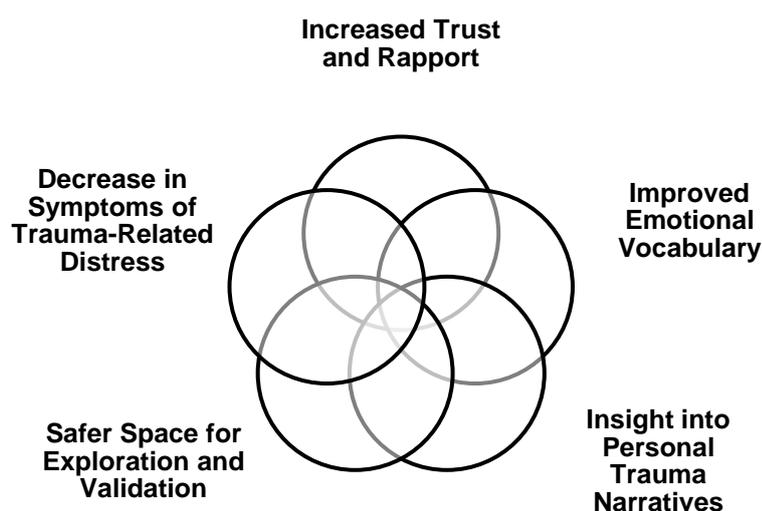


Figure 2. Photos of expressive art intervention



Overall, the findings suggest that the BRuH model, in conjunction with Narrative Art-Based Play Therapy, was effective in addressing traumatic grief among African American/Black identified boys. The intervention not only promoted emotional healing and resilience but also provided valuable insights into the experiences and needs of this demographic group.

## 5. Discussion

The emerging themes from this study highlight the significant impact of the BRuH model and Narrative Art-Based Play Therapy in addressing traumatic grief among African American/Black identified boys. The discussion will delve into each theme and its implications for therapeutic practice, as well as the broader context of supporting this demographic group through grief and trauma. Firstly, the increased trust and rapport observed between participants and therapists underscores the importance of establishing a strong therapeutic alliance in facilitating healing. The BRuH model played a crucial role in fostering this connection by emphasizing bonding and recognition, creating a safer and supportive environment for exploration. This finding aligns with existing literature highlighting the significance of trust in therapeutic relationships, particularly among marginalized populations who may have experienced historical distrust of mental health services.

Secondly, the improvement in participants' emotional vocabulary signifies the effectiveness of narrative art-based play therapy in enhancing emotional recognition and expression. By providing creative outlets such as drawing and storytelling, participants were able to articulate their feelings and experiences in ways that traditional verbal communication may not allow. This highlights the importance of incorporating culturally responsive and expressive techniques into therapeutic interventions to meet the unique needs of African American/Black identified boys. Furthermore, the insight gained into personal trauma narratives speaks to the power of storytelling and metaphorical representation in processing and making sense of traumatic experiences. Through narrative exploration, participants were able to connect past events with current emotions, fostering a deeper understanding of their grief. This emphasizes the value of narrative-based approaches in facilitating meaning-making and resilience in the face of adversity. The provision of a safer space for exploration and validation was essential in supporting participants' healing journey. The therapeutic sessions provided a non-judgmental environment where participants felt heard, understood, and validated in their experiences. This highlights the importance of creating culturally affirming and supportive spaces for grief work, where individuals feel empowered to confront and process their emotions without fear of judgment or stigma.

Finally, the observed decrease in symptoms of trauma-related distress underscores the effectiveness of the intervention in promoting emotional healing and resilience. Participants exhibited reduced levels of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress symptoms, indicating positive progress in their recovery journey. This highlights the potential of the BRuH model and Narrative Art-Based Play Therapy as viable interventions for addressing traumatic grief among African American/Black identified boys.

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study offer valuable insights into culturally responsive and holistic approaches to grief therapy, emphasizing the importance of trust, emotional expression, narrative exploration, and providing a supportive therapeutic environment. In addition, the BRuH model, in conjunction with Narrative Art-Based Play Therapy, holds promise as an effective approach for supporting African American/Black identified boys experiencing traumatic grief. By promoting trust and rapport, enhancing emotional expression, facilitating narrative exploration, providing a safer space for validation, and reducing symptoms of trauma-related distress, this intervention offers valuable insights into culturally responsive and holistic approaches to grief therapy. However, further research is needed to explore the long-term efficacy and generalizability of these findings across diverse populations and settings.

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