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## "Sealing the Bond": A Qualitative Study of African American Funeral Rituals

Danielle (Grant) Graham  
*University of Central Florida*



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“SEALING THE BOND”:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FUNERAL RITUALS

by

DANIELLE CHARMAIN GRAHAM  
B.A. University of South Florida, 2012

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Nicholson School of Communication  
in the College of Sciences  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Death is a universal phenomenon; yet, reactions to death are uniquely diverse. Handling the loss of a loved one has the potential to completely change how an individual sees their world, and their response to death can vary by race, religion, gender, and culture. The bereavement process in many ways is culturally guided, and understanding how culture guides the bereavement process through rituals is imperative. Despite cultural difference, responses to death within the academic community are only representative of one group of people. This study looks at funeral rituals seen within the African American community, and addresses possible meanings behind the rituals discussed. Through the use of focus groups participants were asked about their experiences while attending African American funerals the meaning behind specific rituals. It was found that within African American funerals there are certain acts that hold special significance for the community and work to strengthen the community. Funerals have a larger symbolic meaning to the African American community and those symbols and meanings are discussed within this study.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

A special thank you to my parents listening to me constantly worry about the quality of this research. Thank you to my wonderful husband for pushing me to get things done in a timely manner. Thank you to my committee for spending time on this research, and lastly a huge thank you to Dr. Sally Hastings for being such an understanding and patient thesis chair.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

In my 25 years of living I have attended over a dozen African American funerals, each funeral unique in its own right, but always familiar. Growing up in an African American church attending funerals was rarely personal, but rather obligatory as I was a part of a community where individual grief symbolized collective loss within the church. I would watch passively as family members of the deceased would sob openly over the casket, touch the deceased, and bicker with other family members, which were all behaviors that I had become accustomed to and never thought twice about. It wasn't until I was asked to actively engage in the behaviors I had observed for so long that I began to question their significance. When I was 20 years old I experienced personal loss for the first time in my life, as a close friend of mine was gunned down in his vehicle while driving home. My friend's killing made death personal, and his funeral made grief real. It is his funeral that drives my curiosity as I look for the significance of specific rituals within the African American community during the time of bereavement.

Death is universal across all cultures, genders, and races, but responses to death vary greatly by culture. Dealing with the loss of a loved one due to death can be a life altering experience, and the tactics individuals use to work through grief vary between people of different sexes, personality types, cultural backgrounds, and race. While the unique nature of grief seems to be the perfect topic for analysis, there has been little research about how grief differs culturally. Research on this subject largely concerns how different cultures within the White community handle death, and most of these studies are done quantitatively. For the purpose of this paper the term African American refers to an American individual "having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011, pp. 2). As an African American who has incurred loss due to death the experiences I have seen firsthand were not adequately

outlined within academic literature, and this was disheartening. This oversight in academia marginalizes the experiences of African Americans regarding bereavement and neglects the cultural significance of death. While death is handled differently varying from individual to individual the construction of culture and community cannot only be addressed from one group's experience.

Very little research has been conducted on the different cultural communicative acts that surround bereavement. Taking a social constructionist view of grief throughout this project, the cultural influences that surround the death of a loved one have very profound effects on the grief experience. Culture informs how music is expressed (Banjo & Williams, 2011), religion is experienced (Daniel & Smitherman, 1990), and how the hardships of life are processed as the construction of grief among a community is hardly solely based on an individual. As an African American who has attended numerous funerals I was unaware that the rituals and acts that surrounded the grief processes could be considered unique by other cultures. This study looks to bridge the gap that exists between grief and ritual as it pertains to the African American community due to the unique history that is shared among African Americans. Dating back to slavery, the Black community has had to overcome many obstacles to be seen as equal in America. Some of the rituals and traditions that date back to slavery can be tied to slaves' desires to overcome adversity; these include the events that surround funerals.

This thesis applies the cultural perspective on ritual developed by Philipsen (1989) in efforts to better understand the unique ties between funeral practices and grief in the African American community. Gerry Philipsen's definition of ritual will be used to guide the conversation as well as add insight into the different acts that happen culturally while at an African American funeral. While this study will look at funeral practices it is important to note

that many of the acts and rituals that accompany funerals are considered outward expressions of grief and for the purpose of this study will be handled hand in hand with one another. This study will look critically at the actions that take place during and after funerals, as all have implications and offer insight to what happens at a funeral and how the African American community handles death. Looking at the cultural codes that exist within the rituals will help to understand how bereavement should be regarded within the community and help both outsiders to the community and insiders, better understand its significance within the African American community.



## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVEIW**

African American culture has been researched at length in many different contexts using varied theoretical perspectives. This study will apply The Ethnography of Communication (EoC) to better understand how culture is interwoven into the deeply meaningful practices of dealing with grief within the African American community. The rituals and grief portrayed within the African American community in many ways are reflexive of the African American identity that I have encountered my whole life, and being that funerals foster a culturally rich environment EoC was seen as the best theoretical foundation for this inquiry. As social constructionism is the paradigm guiding this research the literature review will begin with a brief overview of its tenets and how it relates to the African American culture and bereavement rituals and then the literature review will move into further explanation of the theoretical background, previous literature, African American culture, and the links between rituals and grief . The theoretical foundation of EoC is also reviewed because it is the heuristic framework used to facilitate interpretation of the data. Next, Philipsen's definition of ritual is explored, then placed within the context of the meaning funeral rituals have within the African American culture. The community built by African Americans can be described as diverse and unique in many respects. Despite the lack of literature specifically addressing how African Americans process grief, this review looks at different findings that contribute to construction of African American identity.

### **Social Constructionism**

Social constructionism works from the premise that social reality does not exist until individuals come together to create it (Pearce, 1995). As autonomous beings we all seek to situate ourselves in various situations to feel a sense of ease and belonging. In efforts to make

sense of how to fit within a group we rely on interactions with others (Jackson, 1999). This paradigm provides a very unique perspective when looking at culture because while there is a strong sense of community in the Black culture the actions and traditions that exist within the community can differ in interpretation and meaning from group to group. Social construction allows for grief to exist in every culture yet be experienced differently, because it allows for numerous realities to forge together and create something unique (Pearce, 1995). Social construction allows for individuals to have a say as to what reality is created and how order functions within different groups (Allen, 2007). The social construction of race and culture are at the center of this paper and how these constructions have a place in both how African Americans construct culture and how the African Americans express grief at funerals.

In looking at race and culture as social constructions it is important to look at the influencing factors that contribute to constructing certain beliefs and behaviors. How African Americans conduct themselves, much like every other race, depends on the environment and situation (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998). Race is mediated and in many ways informed through media. An example of this is how authenticity of blackness has been constructed through hip-hop music (Fenster, 1995). Construction of what it means to be authentic in the African American culture can be traced to ideologies found within popular music (Hecht, 1993), for example in how African Americans speak, dress, and behave. Social construction helps explain the culmination of how individual identity and group identity come together to create culture.

Social constructionism provides insight not only into how race functions within society, but also how communities respond to death. Losing someone due to death in many cases can challenge the way that an individual constructs his or her world (Neimeyer, 2001). It is during bereavement that individuals look to others to help memorialize and remember the deceased

(Carmon et al., 2010). People use narrative to make sense of their loss and reconstruct their world in the absence of the deceased (Neimeyer et al., 2014). Despite the personal feelings that accompany loss, community is vital in understanding the loss. While community can aid in the healing process the norms that are constructed within the group can dictate ways of responding and handling death (Walter, 1999). Social construction helps bind culture and loss together and to provide a picture that desperately needs further research within academia.

### **Ethnography of Communication**

The Ethnography of Communication (EoC) developed by Dell Hymes is the theoretical foundation that guides the analysis and methods presented in this study. EoC specifically looks at culture's position within both verbal and non-verbal communication and how all language is culturally guided (Hymes, 1962). Culture and language cannot be separated because according to EoC all communication serves a specific function within culture, which works to solidify a person's stance within a specific context (Saville-Troike, 1989). This form of analysis branched from anthropology as its purpose is to gather an authentic view of how people within specific cultures communicate. This theoretical foundation is dependent on Hymes' idea of a "speech community" which is a group that works from a similar set of cultural codes, these codes allow for norms to be established and enables meaning to flow between those within specific groups (Milburn, 2004). For example, those who have attended African American funerals and have participated in the joint production of symbolic meaning would comprise a speech community.

Hymes developed levels of analysis when looking at communication in cultures. Within this research the concepts of speech events and speech acts will be looked at in concordance with Hymes' SPEAKING mnemonic (1972). Speech events refer to "the interaction of several

components of which language is only one” (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005, p. 342), and speech acts are all of the things that are done when a person is speaking (Schmidt & Richards, 1980). Each one of the letters within Hymes’ mnemonic provides insight into the speech acts and events taking place within a community. While all of the elements in the SPEAKING mnemonic are considered important in research, only the S, P, A, and N were used for analysis. The S, P, A, and the N were used because these were the most relevant elements of the SPEAKING mnemonic seen within the data collected. S in the mnemonic stands for setting which describes the physical setting or the psychological scene of an event (Hymes, 1972). The P stands for participants, which are those that are taking a role within the event (Hymes, 1972). A describes the act sequence which outlines the order of specific occurrences within a speech event (Hymes, 1972). Lastly is N, which describes the norms within a community surrounding a specific event (Hymes, 1972) Much like the Daniel and Smitherman study this study will specifically utilize EoC to better understand race (Daniel & Smitherman, 1990).

## **Previous Literature**

There has been some research on grief as it pertains to different cultural groups, but the amount of information is limited as this is not a widely studied subject. The majority of the literature reviewed how grief experiences differ among different cultural groups or focused on a specific perspective of how African American funerals are handled. Mourning practices of different cultures such as African Americans and Latino/a Americans vary greatly as African Americans place more importance on the spiritual portion of death, which aids them in dealing with the loss while Latino/a Americans often seek their families in times of grief (Schoulte, 2011). The ways in which African Americans’ experience grief is also different from other

cultures as more African Americans experience loss due to homicide, which has an impact on how grief is experienced because of the sudden loss (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). Moving beyond grieving very little research has looked at the rituals occurring during African American funerals and the research that has been done only looks at rituals through a specific point of view. An example of this is Moore's (2003) research looking at how pastors can better advise those who have lost loved ones due to death through the usage of religion and church community. Other research looks specifically at the importance of African American owned funeral homes. African American funeral homes' primary job is to provide comfort and loyalty to the family of the deceased (Bunch-Lyons, 2015). Funeral homes' presence is seen as needed throughout the entire grieving process. Funeral homes are involved from the arranging the funeral to the funeral service as at the funeral service they represent physical support for those who are bereaved as they are often stationed near the family during the funeral service to help in times when grief physically overwhelms mourners (McIlwain, 2002). The importance of community for African Americans during the bereavement process is paramount as African Americans bond over shared loss and common struggles shared between not only them and the deceased, but also between mourners (Rosenblatt & Wallace, 2005). While there has been research looking different aspects of African American grief none of this research looks at grief rituals shown within an actual African American funeral.

### **African American Culture**

Many of the traditions and acts evident within the African American community today can be traced back to roots that took hold during slavery. Due to the traumatic events that surrounded both the abduction of Africans and the act of being sold into slavery African

Americans sought identity from other aspects of their lives (Painter, 2006). With no education offered to slaves, and no ways to formally record history and traditions, less formal forms of expression took root within the community. Songs, poems, and dance became the primary mode of information within oral tradition giving slaves an outlet to express the emotions that accompanied the struggle of slavery (Papa, 2008). The physical enactment and rhythmic nature of the stories told and the songs sung served as preservation of tradition and an outlet for many (Owen, & Ehrenhaus, 2014). This verbal and overt form of expression has basis in almost every sector of the African American experience.

**Racism.** “Racism is a global hierarchy of human superiority and inferiority, politically, culturally and economically produced and reproduced for centuries by the institutions” (Grosfoguel Oso & Christou, 2015, p.636). Using this definition of racism allows for an exploration of how racism plays a part within the African American community, and what implications racism has on the rituals and expressions made within funeral practices. Following the end of the Civil War which marked the end of slavery, the victory that bestowed freedom was short lived as Blacks were released into a segregated world where they had little to no education, few employment opportunities, and were sanctioned to live in some of the poorest areas in the U.S. (Danzer, 2012). The disadvantages that faced African Americans extended past the initial pain of being released into an inequitable world, but continued as African Americans felt as though the government, police, and social services around them didn’t work to protect or help the community, but rather punish it, which aided in creating a deep seated mistrust for these types of establishments (Grogan & Proscio, 2000). This type of mistrust caused African Americans to tightly knit together as they were each other’s greatest resource. This formation of

community in many ways extended from racism, and has implications as to how African Americans view themselves and the world that surrounds them (Parham, White & Ajamu, 1999).

Despite the community that arose from racism the concept is a doubled edge sword as it also causes division within the community. Symptoms of internalized racism and decades of oppression are the ideas of coming from nothing and having to protect everything, which included negative stereotypes that surround Blacks (Harper, 2006). These protective instincts can make African Americans hyper vigilant to racism causing issues to arise that could have been avoided (Danzer, 2012). As nearly 300, 000 African Americans died in 2013 (Xu et al., 2016), racism has bearings on funeral practices and grief because the external racism and the internal racism experienced by African Americans causes them to both cling to their identity in times of grief as well as bring out signs of mistrust for not only their own race, but their family members as well.

**Community and Religion.** The importance of family, extended family, and mutual aid can be traced back to the slave trade when families were torn apart thus creating a need for additional help from others that were not blood relatives (Painter, 2006). Vital to the mental maintenance of slaves was the comfort in knowing that there was a support system to lean on throughout the struggle of slavery, and these bonds were formed through not only their work but also shared religion (Daniel & Smitherman, 1990; Painter, 2006). The interaction between self and community became a delicate balance that helped to construct how slaves saw their world and how they behaved within it.

The importance of religion within the Black community is a prime example of this balance. As seen in Daniel and Smitherman's analysis of the tradition Black church, religion

incorporates a mixture of “we” and “I” expression that not only solidifies personal identity but also the collective identity of the individuals involved (1990). Religion warrants the freedom of expression and cooperation that mends and affirms communal identity (Barnes, 2005). As seen in the call and response in the traditional black church, taking turns to express emotion validates the experience of the individual as well as their stance within the community (Daniel & Smitherman, 1990). An example of call and response behavior seen within the African American church could be as simple as the preaching saying, “Can I get an amen here?” in the middle of a sermon, to which the congregation would respond in unison, “Amen!”. The interactions that take place within African American religious institutions are reflective of the cultural history that helps to mediate identity for some African Americans (Barnes, 2005; Daniel & Smitherman, 1990). The concept that feelings are transcendent, and reach beyond just one individual can be argued as comprising the glue that holds the African American community together. Contributing to the sense of community is thought that African Americans endure similar struggles of racism, loss, and life (Collins & Doolittle, 2006).

As discussed previously, verbal forms of expression can be considered a vital artery within the heart of African American culture. At the height of expression is music in all of its forms, reaching from Negro spirituals all the way to hip-hop. Music helps blend the individual identity with corporate cultural identity (Banjo & Williams, 2011). Music encompasses the feelings at the root of the frustrations felt by many. The struggles felt within everyday life can be vocalized within songs and provide a sense of peace. The thought of struggle being an important part of the Black experience is one that can be traced from African American’s experience of enslavement all the way to the resistance embodied within the Harlem Renaissance and the frustrations captured by the hip-hop rap group Niggaz Wit Attitudes (N.W.A.) This concept of



struggle has endured because it has meaning and importance to each generation of African Americans. With struggle comes an air of authenticity and credibility that resides within the community (Alim, Jooyoung, & Carris, 2010). “True” blackness can be attained through the struggles a person has endured within their lifetime (Edgar, 2014). In many ways the struggles expressed through music have helped African Americans define themselves and have also assisted other cultures in understanding blackness (Fenster, 1995).

Understanding these different aspects of African American culture is vital to understanding how the Black community handles the loss of a loved one due to death. The rituals, expressions, and sense of community that are evident in the culture on a seemingly normal basis come together in a unique fashion surrounding death. Funerals and the events surrounding the event have strong cultural significance as they have served to preserve some of the customs that have existed since slavery (Herskovits, 1958). Slaves had very few opportunities to freely express themselves, and funerals were one of the opportunities slaves had to express emotion in a manner that was not suppressed (Painter, 2006). Outward expressions of grief such as weeping, shouting, and singing were signs of admiration and love for the deceased (Perry, 1993). Songs and sermons given at funerals become a narrative of the struggles and triumphs that the individual experienced in life (Collins & Doolittle, 2006). These traditions have transcended generations and can still be seen in modern African American funerals. Within African American culture, outward expression is a form of ownership and funerals can serve as a microcosm of these expressions (Kochman, 1990). Funerals serve as a celebration of life for the person who passed and a time for those affected by the death to mourn collectively (Collins & Doolittle, 2006).

**African Rituals.** Some of the traditions and acts seen within an African American funeral can be considered to have links to African funeral rituals. While some of the rituals discussed can be considered unique within American culture things like open expression of emotions and the desire to touch the body can be found in burial rituals in certain groups in Africa. An example of this type of behavior can be seen as within African culture during the onset of a funeral as women are expected to begin weeping loudly in conjunction with touching the body to lift the body up (Gufler, 2000). Within an African American funeral the body of the deceased is considered a focal point of the funeral and is kept intact because of its importance (Reitz & Callender, 1993), this tradition also coincides with African ritual of keeping the body intact to perform the burial so that persons spirit can properly be laid to rest (Lee, 2012).

Funerals within African culture are often times when the family can show how much they cared about the deceased through material means (Smith, 2004), and these same sentiments can be seen at African American funerals. Not only are there similarities between the treatment of the body and the emotions displayed at both African funerals and African American funerals, but also both cultures share a common belief that having interaction in the funeral process, whether it be through planning or interaction had within the funeral has significance (Appel & Papaikonomou, 2013). Some of the burial rituals seen in African culture can also be seen in African American culture, and being that many African Americans ancestral roots can be traced back to Africa some of these rituals have persevered through time to have significance within today's African American culture.

## **Ritual & Grief**

Ritual and grief are discussed in tandem because in the evaluation of funeral practices and the Black community the traditions and rituals that are discussed are considered expressions of grief. The definition of ritual being used is “A structured sequence of actions that correct performance of which pays homage to a sacred object.” (Philipsen, 1993, p. 108). Within African American culture rituals serve to give respect to the person that passed. An example of this can be seen in the ritual of placing importance on the material things left behind by the deceased (Harper, 2012). Rituals revolving around funeral practices help in bridging the gap between grief and healing and show how those who have passed away have places in the lives of those mourning (Valentine, 2008).

Scholarly research has skimmed lightly over the topic of African American funeral rituals. Rituals have been seen to have significant bearings on grief (Bordere, 2008). As documented by Boyd (1998) the importance of assuring that funerals are taken care of properly cannot be understated. The importance of the funeral within the Black community carries so much meaning that historically there have been organizations established to ensure that the deceased body is properly taken care of (Frazier, 1937). An example of the body’s importance can be seen in the ritual of keeping the body intact after death, which can be due to religious superstition (Reitz & Callender, 1993). The body not only being intact, but also treated with the utmost respect after death contributes to reasons why African Americans typically choose to have other African American funeral homes handle the body (Boyd, 1998). The careful treatment of the body can be seen in actions during in the funeral as it is not unusual for attendees to interact with the body as if it were still alive as people hold the hand of the deceased, cry over the deceased and, in some cases, kiss the deceased (McIlwain, 2002).

Within the African American community having all family, friends, and acquaintances around helps with the grieving process (Carmon et al., 2010). As discussed earlier, extended family's importance extends back to traditions established in slavery, which helps to explain why it is deemed important for all who cared for the deceased to attend the funeral. There typically is a weeklong gap between the person's passing and the funeral service (Collins & Doolittle, 2006). The significance of community can be seen in several traditions that are evident before, during, and after the funeral. Before funerals providing food for the family and giving the family the opportunity to reflect on memories is a ritual that can be observed within different cultures but all have similar purposes, which is to share a sense of community (Smith & Bird, 2000). Having the support of the community allows for freedom of expression and is seen as promoting peace. For example, McIlwain (2002) overviews the importance of having funeral homes station workers near the family during the funeral as an extra layer of support in the event that a family member becomes overwhelmed with emotion. After the funeral having food provided to the family including leftovers can be considered an outlet of continued care for the family of the deceased (Siegfried, 2006). The rituals surrounding the death of a loved one within the Black community acknowledge both the deceased and the surviving loved ones affected by the loss. Due to the fact that so little is known about how different aspects of African American culture are displayed at a funeral this type of exploration is desperately needed. This brings importance to the research question posed in this paper.

### **Research Question**

**RQ1:** How do African American funerals constitute culturally meaningful rituals?

## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

Due to the lack of research regarding funeral rituals within the African American community combined with the research interest in exploring cultural meanings guiding practices, collecting qualitative research was chosen. This study specifically calls for individuals to reflect on their unique experiences and narrate the observations and feelings that surround funeral practices.

### **Recruitment and Participants**

Four focus groups were completed within a one-month period. Participants were recruited from a small African American Christian church located in the Southeast region of the United States. Before moving forward it is important to address that I am a part of this religious faith based organization. I have attended this organization for over twenty years and grew up amongst many of those interviewed, and my family and I have been members since 1995. I also serve the church as a sound engineer where I have had the opportunity to observe many of the funeral practices later discussed.

To gain access, I first talked to the leader of the organization to obtain permission, and upon the approval of the organization's leader I then personally made an announcement and gave the congregation my contact information for individuals who wished to participate in the study. Due to the focus of this research, only individuals who identified as African American and had personally attended an African American funeral were asked to participate. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix A) approved the study and the script used to recruit within the faith-based organization. Participants were told that I would provide refreshments for those who desired to participate but no other compensation would be provided.

In total, 25 participants were recruited and chose to take part in one of four focus groups. In the first focus group there was a total of 7 participants, the second one had 8 participants, the third had 4 participants, and the final focus group had 6 participants. Two of the participants were 18-25 years of age; 3 were between the ages of 26-35; 4 individuals were between the ages of 36-45; 6 were between 46-55; and 10 reported being over the age of 55. All 25 participants identified as African American and identified as Christian when asked their religious affiliation. Of the participants recruited, 5 were male, and the remaining 20 were female. The participants were asked to disclose their highest degree of education. Seven individuals reported having a high school diploma, 5 participants had obtained their Associate of Arts degree, 7 people reported obtaining their Bachelor's degree, 5 participants reported having a Master's degree, and 1 person reported having another degree not listed on the demographic sheet.

### **Data Collection**

Upon arrival, participants were encouraged to partake of the refreshments before the focus group started. Each participant was given a name tent and was asked to write either their first name or a pseudonym they would like to use throughout the duration of the focus group. Once participants completed their name tent the researcher explained the study and the topics that would be discussed during the conversation. Following the explanation of research I informed them of their rights as participants in the study and then they were each asked to fill out a demographic sheet. I notified the participants that they were taking part in the study of their own free will and could withdraw from the study at any time.

Due to the sensitive subject matter I also stressed that if any of the questions made the participants uncomfortable in any way they were not obligated to answer the question. I

informed the focus groups that the discussion would be audio recorded for transcription. Upon receiving verbal consent from each individual in the group I turned on the recording devices. The recording devices used for this study included the voice memo applications on three apple devices. I took on the role of focus group moderator, and facilitated the conversation while also offering personal examples and observations as basis for conversation throughout the focus groups. Some questions asked within the interview guide were question like, “In your experience what is the typical sequence of a funeral?”, “What types of self-expression normally occur at a funeral?” , and “What parts of a funeral have special meaning for you?”

### **Focus Groups**

Data was collected through focus group interviews. Focus group interviews are “small groups of people with particular characteristics convened for a focused discussion of a particular topic” (Hollander, 2004, p. 606). This method was applied to promote a sense of community among the participants, considering the sensitivity of the subject. Focus groups were also determined to be the best method of data collection to promote story building amongst the groups. Due to the discussion of bereavement, focus groups allowed for groups to have a collaborative discussion about the feelings and rituals they had observed and compare and contrast their experiences with others. The researcher used an interview guide (Appendix B) so that there was an opportunity for follow-up questions and better explanation of things stated within the discussions. The interview guide utilized a funnel approach and started with questions asking about general observations at funerals and became more specific as the interview progressed. The topics the interview covered were how the participants dealt with loss and the rituals that surrounded funerals. At times where the conversation could have been expounded

upon the research asked probing questions such as “can you explain what you mean by that”, “why do you think that’s is”, and “could you give me an example of what you just described”.

### **Analysis Procedure**

Hymes’s SPEAKING mnemonic was used as an organizing principle when reviewing the data. Patterns were sought among the responses relevant to each part of the mnemonic. After discerning themes according to the SPEAKING mnemonic, interpretive analysis that was autoethnographically influenced was conducted. Interpretive analysis, thematic analysis and autoethnographic methods were used to better understand the data provided. In total, there were 78 pages of transcribed data. Interpretive analysis was guided by Hymes’ speaking mnemonic, specifically the Scene, Participants, Act sequence, and Norms were analyzed within the mnemonic. Interpretive analysis can be defined as “notions used by the fieldworker to explain the patterning of first-order data” (Van Maanen, 1979, p. 541). Using this definition, the researcher was able to use the knowledge acquired throughout the study to denote meaning from the literature. The data relating to participants, act sequence, and norms were separated from the transcriptions and were placed on separate documents. From that point an open coding system which helps to “categorize a chunk of data on the basis of its coherent meaning- its standing on its own- not by an arbitrary designation of grammar” (Spiggle, 1994, p. 493), was used to begin to understand the relevant themes within the data. Thematic analysis was also used for analysis. Thematic analysis is qualitative form of data analysis in which the researcher sorts information into codes that allow for categorization of data to take place (Boyatzis, 1998). This was used to understand the patterns presented within each focus group and allowed for a comparison between



the different groups. Thematic analysis allowed for themes to be categorized, and important subjects could be given special attention.

Autoethnographic methods were used to fill in gaps that existed within the data. Autoethnography can be described as a form of self-reflexive writing in which researchers take from their personal experience and implement their experiences into a wider social and cultural context (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnography was used because the interview guide did not specifically address the physical location and the general set up of the space where funerals took place. Due to my being present at many of the funerals mentioned in the focus groups I can set the scene for the readers, so that the readers can better understand the implications settings have on speech events. Through the use of autoethnography I am able to provide “privileged knowledge” as described by Hamdan (2012), which allows for insider knowledge to be had, which would in other circumstances, go unknown. My insider status within the culture adds a level of analysis that can aid in helping better understand the interpretation of results as some the information given is culturally guided.

### **Ethical Consideration**

Before beginning focus groups, the study was submitted to and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researcher understood that the nature of this research could be considered uncomfortable for some individuals, and communicated this to the participants. The researcher took the necessary precautions to maintain the confidentiality of the participants, and ensured that the focus groups were aware that the transcriptions and the recordings of the conversations would be protected on the researcher’s personal password protected computer. The participants were given resources for a counseling center prior to the

focus groups in the event that the conversation caused an intolerable amount of discomfort. Although the participants may have shared their first names on the name tents provided, the researcher did not record the names of the participants. After the focus groups, participants were assigned pseudonyms.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESULTS**

The results revealed within the focus groups were organized using terminology derived from the Hymes SPEAKING mnemonic. The findings within the different portions of the mnemonic were then discussed as themes. The findings discussed within the results are the setting, act sequence, norms, and participants. The setting refers to the physical location where the funeral is being held and the psychological environment that is fostered. The act sequence deals with the typical sequence of events that happen within a funeral and how the acts result in homage being paid to the deceased. The norms refer to the things that participants have come to expect during a funeral and my analysis of the themes that arose from their observations. Lastly, the participant section describes the focus groups observations of others at funerals and the themes that emerge within their observations are analyzed.

### **Setting**

While none of the interview guide questions addressed the physical setting of the funerals discussed the setting and layout of typical African American funerals is important to address. As stated within the introduction I have attended over a dozen funerals and, given my membership in this church community, I have attended many of the funerals mentioned within the various focus groups. To better understand the speech event of an African American funeral I will briefly describe the physical layout of the church where the focus groups and many of the funerals referenced were conducted. The descriptions about the physical setting of this specific church also mirror other church layouts that I have been to. Within my church I serve as a sound technician and spend the majority of my time during a funeral in a small room to the left of the sanctuary, ensuring that there is proper sound quality. This provides me with a unique

perspective, as I often am not directly involved with the funeral proceedings but often observe what is going on within the service.

A foyer leads into the sanctuary of the church. It is in the foyer where family typically meets to line up for the processional before the funeral begins. In the foyer it is common to see dozens of family members talking among themselves quietly waiting to begin their walk into the sanctuary, which marks the beginning of the funeral. The foyer leads to double doors that provide entrance into the sanctuary where mourners make the transition to waiting for the funeral to start to being completely immersed in the funeral service. Once in the sanctuary there are three aisles, one directly down the middle of the square building and two outside aisles on both the left and the right side of the building. In my observations once the funeral has begun those in the processional line walk down the center isle leading directly to the casket. There are rows of pews located on both sides of the sanctuary. The family of the deceased tend occupy the first three to four rows of pews closest to the pulpit as these rows are the closest to the body of the deceased.

I have never been to an African American funeral where the body of the deceased was not present, and there was only one mention within the focus groups of a funeral where the deceased was cremated. The physical body of the deceased is at the center of the service calling for this to be the focal point of everyone's attention. This focus on the deceased is exemplified as the individual is typically dressed in their favorite color and the casket in many cases matches the color that the deceased will be buried in. This act of color coordination serves as a non-verbal sentiment to show that the deceased's memory was honored as being buried in their favorite color, which shows a level of care from those who arranged the funeral. The casket is located in the very middle of the church and the coffin is often covered and surrounded by flowers from

family friends expressing condolences for the family of the deceased. The flowers are often colorful and match the colors that the family has chosen to be the theme throughout the funeral.

Behind the casket is a stage or pulpit area equipped with a podium from where the preacher will speak. The stage area is typically slightly higher than the floor where the casket is, and in many ways as the sermon is meant to provide hope this elevation could be seen as symbolic as mourners are often called to rise above their grief and focus on moving forward. The podium is also in the center of the church directly behind the casket. Behind the podium are chairs for the preacher and other ministerial staff to sit throughout the service. Behind the chairs for the ministerial staff are the chairs for members of the choir. In my role as sound technician the majority of what I assist with lies within the stage area, as the most of the microphones are located in this area. Also on the stage to the right or left are musical instruments, which typically consist of an organ, piano/keyboard, and drums.

### **Act Sequence**

In African American funerals there is a typical sequence of events that adds a sense of order to a funeral. While these events help to provide order, they also hold significant ritualistic importance to the participants. The three themes derived from focus group data involving important elements of the act sequence are: the final viewing/processional, reflections, and the sermon. These themes were the parts of the funeral that showed consistent overlaps across focus groups. Before explaining the parts of the act sequence that the participants referenced most commonly, I will draw upon my own experience to overview the typical sequence of events that take place during a funeral.

Before the funeral begins families typically meet in the foyer and talk quietly amongst themselves. It is also common for family members to receive the attendee's condolences in the foyer. The formal beginning of a funeral service traditionally starts with the family walking in behind ministerial staff of the church. With the musicians playing softly, one minister will begin reading scripture that deals with death as they walk up to the pulpit while the family follows behind. The person who was closest to the deceased; which can include the spouse of the deceased, mothers, fathers, siblings, and children, usually lead the family in the processional line. One by one each person in the processional line is given a chance to look at the body of the deceased before taking a seat. Once all of the family members in the processional line have walked down the aisle and viewed the body and have been seated, the funeral ushers bring up those individuals who viewed the body first (which once again can be spouses, children, and parents) and these individuals return to the casket to say their final goodbyes. The ushers assist those family members in closing the casket for the final time. The ushers from the funeral home offer physical support to the bereaved, they stand beside the family members who are closing the casket and often fan these family members and hold them closely to prevent them from falling as the deceased's loved ones close the casket. Once the casket has been closed the Officiant will read another scripture and ask the choir for a selection.

Once the choir has finished singing the Officiant will come back up and ask for reflections from those designated by the family to speak. In my experience three people are asked to speak representing different aspects of the deceased's life. For example a family member will be asked to speak, a co-worker/friend will speak, and if the deceased had ties within the church a church member will reflect on the deceased. Upon the conclusion of the reflections the Officiant will ask for the attendees at the funeral to direct their attention to the program to

read the deceased individual's biography during this time music is being played softly while people look through the program, which can include the order of service, a brief biography of the deceased, and pictures of the deceased with family and friends.

After a few minutes of silence, the church secretary is invited to read the resolutions. Resolutions can be described as condolences from various churches and organizations that the deceased had dealings with; these condolences are written out and sent to the church where the funeral is taking place. Resolutions are traditionally sent with flowers, which are arranged around the deceased's casket. As the resolutions are read the ushers from the funeral home hold up the flowers that were sent by the organization whose resolution is being read. Once all of the resolutions have been read the choir or a soloist is asked for another song, after which the sermon is given.

Once the sermon has been delivered if the funeral is in a church setting the doors of the church are opened, which is a symbolic gesture signifying an invitation to those who may not be saved. By opening the doors of the church people are given a chance to give their lives to Christ. Following the doors of church being opened the musician again begins to play softly and the funeral directors begin taking all of the flowers from around the casket and taking them out to the hearse. Once the flowers have been removed those who have been asked to serve as pallbearers arrange themselves to carry the casket out to the hearse. As the casket is being carried out the ministerial staff and family follow behind. Once the family has exited the attendees at the funeral can then begin exiting. The themes of the processional/final viewing, reflections, and sermon were given special significance by the focus groups participants.

**Processional/Final Viewing.** The processional and the final viewing of the body are discussed in tandem because they both serve similar purposes within a funeral setting. The

processional gives all family members the opportunity to say goodbye to the deceased, while the final viewing gives those closest to the deceased an opportunity to say their goodbyes and metaphorically assist in sealing their bond with the deceased as they close the casket. The viewing of the body has much importance in the African American community as it signifies the last time a person will ever see the deceased. This part of the funeral ritual pays homage to the deceased because it works as a seal for all of the memories that a living person has with the deceased. Different focus groups demonstrated consensus that the final viewing combined with the closing of the casket held special significance, yet the perception of this event was viewed as holding both positive and negative influences in the grieving process. Discussions of this portion of the funeral were often prompted by the question, “what parts of an African American funeral have special significance?” It is here where it is seen that the processional and the closing of the casket have meaning but possible different perceptions.

First, looking at the negative associations that some hold regarding the closing the casket Tony’s interpretation:

Tony- I’ve wondered you know the whole if you go to different churches they do go through the whole make a spectacle if you will of the closing of the casket, you know particularly in African American churches and funerals they make were the family comes back up and I know it’s supposed to symbolize a symbol of closures and things along those lines but I would say that.

While Tony did not specifically say that he saw the closing of the casket as negative he refers to the closing of the casket as a “spectacle”, which has negative connotations. In this instance this ritual doesn’t serve its intended purpose of bringing homage to the deceased but rather is turned



into another aspect of the “show” referenced throughout all of the focus groups. This ritual, while being important, also can take away from the purpose of why individuals are there.

Another perspective is that the closing of the casket provides closure. Nikki offers a more positive interpretation of this part of the funeral.

Nikki- The part that touches me the most, even for me personally ... I don't talk about it much, was the death of my son. When they close the casket, that just does something to me. That's the last time ... I'm about to choke up, I'm sorry. That's the last time you will see them physically. To touch them. In one funeral, I was a child at St. Matthew, and Ms. Rose had died. She was very pivotal in our church. Every Sunday she fed us. Some big, nice, fed us. She died. She had like ten kids. When they closed that casket, her daughter stood up. It's like she was trying to reach out to her. Like this is the last time I'm going to see my mother. They closed it, she just sat down like somebody just took a piece of her that she will never get back again. I think that is one of the most pivotal parts of the funeral. When they close that casket, because that family, "that's the last time I will physically see you."

For Nikki the closing of the casket and the act of being brought up to the casket by the funeral home to close the casket is a sign of closure forever cementing what that person meant to you. The need to touch the deceased as a part of the final viewing process also holds deep meaning for African Americans who are undergoing the grieving process. The act of touching was described as “sealing the bond” between two people, and in many ways could be a necessary act needed by some to process the grief people feel at the conclusion of the funeral.

Much like the action of closing the casket the act of touching was described as both positive and negative. While Kelly described touching the deceased as “sealing a bond” Denise

described it as a cause of grieving harder and hurting more, “I think we grieve a little harder also from that touch, because we are expecting answers.” From this perspective this ritual causes more pain and does more harm than good. The meaning and usefulness of specific rituals within funerals can vary from person to person. In a positive light touching the body can help pay homage to the deceased but in other instances it can further hurt those who were left behind.

**Reflections.** While many of the rituals discussed had conflicting opinions about the ritual’s usefulness, the ritual of having family and friends reflect on the deceased was met with overwhelming positivity. Reflections allow for individuals to showcase the very best parts of the deceased and perfectly coincide with the definition of ritual defined within this paper. People’s memories of the deceased pay homage to the deceased and also work to bring closure to the families further solidifying communal identity.

As described by the focus group participants, reflections allow for different sides of the deceased to be honored, and this shows the importance of being seen as a multifaceted individual within the African American community.

Dana- I like when they have the friend speak the family member speak and the church member or business worker or whatever. Yea I like that because you get to see another side of the person that you may not know.

The importance of seeing the entirety of a person is seen in Dana’s quote. Up to this point the focus of participant’s recollection of funerals have been points where people felt pain and sorrow, but reflections allow for a break in the tension and the sorrow. In many cases the recollections made by family and friends are not ones of sadness but of laughter and happiness. Taking an abstract view of this ritual helps when looking at the type of interaction that the

audience is asked to have with the deceased. When looking at this ritual in terms of interaction people are asked to think of a time that they had with the deceased that is positive.

The remembered interaction adds a level of union between the deceased and each individual person, and also through the sharing of stories and memories the congregation participates on a collective level as people laugh together, respond together, and act together when someone is speaking about the deceased.

Cam- I remember feeling the necessity to get up at Stone's funeral and speak because Stone leaving us was so unexpected. You know me. I like to joke, and I like to make you all laugh. I felt compelled to get up and speak about my brother Stone. I said I want the people not to feel sad. It's a home going. I know Stone is in heaven. I hope he's listening now, but to draw a smile from the people. I said, "Stone was a good man, but I got to tell you all something. This man could not sing." He was in the choir.

Cam's statement helps clearly identify the type of atmosphere that is sought after when individuals give reflections. Reflections alter the tone of the funeral by helping to cleanse the palate of sorrow felt by many attendees for a few moments. Despite the feeling of grief that may have been blanketed over the service prior to the reflections, the reflections offer an opportunity for individuals to be grateful for the deceased in the midst of their grief.

**Sermon.** Much like the speech event of reflections the purpose of the sermon is to give families a sense of hope and calm to soften their sorrow. The unique aspect of the sermon that may be shocking is that the focus of the sermon is not the deceased or the type of life the deceased led but instead outlines the importance of life itself. Sermons much like the event of the funeral as a whole serve two purposes. Sermons are aimed to give hope to those who are "saved" meaning those who have accepted Jesus as their personal savior, while also encouraging those

who are not saved to bring their life to Jesus before it's too late. Sermons highlight the issue of mortality within the human experience.

Nikki- After that then you go into the actual sermon, that is to uplift, and also bring others to Christ who are in the actual church at that time. The person who is deceased, they are gone we can no longer help them. It's those that who are living.

The sermon is in contrast to the rest of the service, as the majority of the actions that happen within the service are centered on the loss of an individual. The various acts help pay homage to the life of the deceased, but the sermon makes people look past their grief and to the future. The act of moving forward is something that is explained in the focus groups as being a necessity, and the sermon is a structured event that is meant to encourage action for those who are grieving. Due to the sample of participants being drawn from a church setting there was also special attention given to the sermon as being a catalyst to encourage salvation among attendees.

Bringing others to salvation in many ways supersedes the need to reminisce on the dead, because as stated by Nikki the dead is gone and nothing can be done for the deceased, but the living still and will always have a choice to make.

Carlos- Once they hear the you never know when you're going to leave here. You better make your bed. You better be doing right. Especially when they hear that, they get that, oh, my gosh. Light bulb. That could be me.

The importance of causing people to reflect on the type of life they are living is the type of introspection that the sermon is meant to induce. The concept of making sure to “make your bed” refers to being sure in the type of life style is one that you are comfortable leaving behind. With the importance of God within the funeral makes God a sacred object, and if the deceased was saved there is hope for life beyond death. The sermon works on three levels. First the sermon

turns the attention from the deceased to God, second if the individual was saved it brings honor to both God and the deceased as those attending the funeral have hope that the deceased is in a better place. Lastly, the sermon serves as a warning to those who are not saved reminding them that dying without salvation is further reason for grief by those left behind.

### **Norms**

Many of the norms discussed within the focus groups have been discussed within the paper in an indirect manner, but in this section two norms and their meanings will be discussed explicitly. The norms seen within an African American funeral speak to the larger context of African American culture. The norms experienced during funerals reach beyond that specific event and show how African Americans live and experience their lives. While there are many norms that can be identified only two norms will be examined for the purpose of this study. The two norms analyzed are the outward expression of emotions of the duality of intentions at funerals.

**Emotions.** While all people have a different array of emotions, specifically within African American culture emotions are figuratively worn on a person's sleeve. The feelings that are conjured up during a funeral are expected to be expressed throughout the funeral service. The participants noted that during a funeral they expected to see "crying", "wailing", "screaming" and in extreme instances "passing out", and "throwing up". The outward expressions of emotions were described by the focus groups as innate and a part of the culture.

Kate- I think because we are a people of passion. We show our emotion. African-Americans, we have such a very rich culture. I think it's just embedded in us to embrace and portray our emotion and our passion. To portray our grief. We don't try to ... I'm just going to be honest. African American people don't try to cover up much, but you have a

lot of ... I'm not racial, but I notice that in the Caucasian community, their families are jacked up, but you would never know it. When our families are jacked up, you know it, and it's because we have ... I don't know. It's just this embedded passion in us that has to come out in one extreme or another I think that's one of the reasons.

In many ways the outpouring of emotion is used to show the authenticity of grief and blackness. As outlined above by Kate for African Americans showing emotion is a part of the African American experience and can be seen as unique as she even goes as far as to draw comparisons between African Americans and Whites. This comparison was made in other focus groups and was often used to show how the act of expression was unique.

The concept of expression being innate brought up the idea that these types of responses are beyond African Americans control as it is embedded into their enculturation. The expression of emotion is seen as an outlet in order for grief to be correctly handled, and the neglect of adequately expressing grief in the African American community is seen as negative. Due to expression being determined as a norm within the African American community this has implications for how people do not express their grief are perceived by the African American community. As seen below when asked how they perceive other cultures' grieving process they turn to comparisons of White culture and African American culture.

Dana- Theirs is a little quite

Ms. D- It is very quiet

Dana- But the thing about it is the thing that I see to that they don't let it out and then they turn to the bottle.

Ms.D- That's right, in another way

Dana- They turn to other things to soothe that pain cause they hadn't released it cause it's not their thing to be at the funeral you know screaming and crying you know

Lady K- And I see that in the Black culture as well you have your ones that don't grieve and like you say they turn to other things you know to help them.

The expression of emotions or "letting it out" has positive connotations within the African American culture because showing emotions within the context of a funeral shows that the person is dealing with their grief. As seen above the perception of how White people grieve are not seen as healthy which causes them to turn to other detrimental things to deal with their grief.

**An Interplay Between Mourning and Celebration.** In many cases funeral services are referred to as "home going" services as a symbolic reference of the deceased returning back to God. This notion of individuals returning home to a place where they will no longer suffer or feel the pain associated with the human experience is something to be celebrated among Christians in the African American community. In the African American church, when a person who is saved dies there is a careful dichotomy of emotions that is constantly being weighed. The rituals discussed thus far have outlined how grief is handled within the African American community and the topic of mourning is shown continuously. Through the outward expression of emotions there is importance in showing grief, but on the other side of mourning is celebration.

On one side death is a celebration because the deceased is now in a better place, on the other side those who are left behind must learn how to continue with their life and mourning must take place. The intent of a funeral is to celebrate a person's life and when participants were asked about the most memorable funeral they have been to many of them thought of examples where the funeral had overwhelmingly positive atmosphere. The participants described funerals that were joyous and truly a celebration of life.

Kelly-I remember one I think the first funeral I went to that was a celebration was at the end they played the Hallelujah chords, and everybody in the celebration got up and started singing. They had trumpets and it was truly moving, because it was so different. The focus of funeral service as a celebration is such a norm within the focus groups that none of the participants made comment about the balancing act they are asked to perform, yet this balance must take place.

Mitch-I see it as a celebration of that person's life. Sometimes sad, sometimes not, it wasn't a great life from my perspective, not that I'm the judge, but sometimes it was a really, really great life. In any event, it's a celebration, it's the time when everybody gets together and remembers. I think, as you get older you have a greater appreciation for that. When I was younger, I don't think I had that.

In Mitch's recollection of what a funeral should represent you see the importance of celebration within the African American funeral. He notes that with age comes the understanding that funerals are not to make you sad but rather to rejoice and celebrate the life the person had and see the prospects of where the deceased is going.

## **Participants**

Participants at an African American funerals include close family members, friends, co-workers, and members of the church that the deceased may have attended. Church members' presence at a funeral often dictates the environment of a funeral because much like an African American traditional church service the funeral is largely dependent of participation from those attending the funeral. Individual's participation is important to the African American community, and this is seen throughout the funeral service. This participation is both done



individually and collectively by the African American community. Participants in the congregation play an active role in the funeral service. Data from all four of the focus groups demonstrated the importance of the reflection period during a funeral. Individuals' participation in the reflections is multifaceted within a funeral service. Individuals are asked to read the biography located on the funeral program, which encourages personal reflection. In my experience, I have never seen a funeral in which attendees have been asked to read the biography of the deceased during a selection from the choir or during the sermon, the reading of the biography has always been given its own section within the program and is always done in silence. The importance of having that time is seen in Faith's comments about the reflections.

Faith- I like to read the accomplishments, what they've done in life. To me like a task, a challenge, because I'm like gosh they accomplished so much in the time that they were on this earth and it's like, to me it's a self-reflection, okay, what have you done?

Faith's excerpt above captures the type participation that happens on a very personal level causing those attending the funeral to have interaction within themselves and the deceased. This helps to illustrate how participation opens the door for different types of self-expression to be evident within a funeral by the participants. An example of participation on a collective level can be seen in explanation of the reflections done by family and friends.

Kate- The reflections because it also makes you reflect on how you treated that person. It makes you think about, these are all the things that that person has done for everyone that may have sat and have a conversation or may have been over to their house and had dinner or just passing by. It makes you think about, okay, this is how this person was to me. How was I to that person? Or how am I to others? It makes you reflect a lot.

The act of collective reflection was described as “funny” and breaking “the intense atmosphere of why you’re there”. Participation from attendees allows for collective support to be built between each participant and resolution to be had within each participant. This is seen in Kate’s statement as the importance of having the reflections in the funeral service as it allows for the deceased to be seen in a way that is holistic opposed to segmented.

Despite the seemingly positive support system that arises from these forms of expression there were also some negative undertones associated with some participants’ involvement in the funeral service. As described in the focus groups the outward expressions of emotions by many participants in funerals can take away from the honor of the deceased’s memory. There were numerous mentions within the focus groups outlining how participation can become distracting when the funeral becomes a spectacle rather than an honoring of someone’s memory.

Kate-The second one is we like to be the C.O.A., the center of attention. That is always going to be, and we know this. There's always going to be that one member of the family, that one girlfriend in the group, that one homeboy in the group that has to be the center of attention that has to make something about them.

In another focus group this same sentiment is expressed by Dawn while explaining a typical funeral program “Somebody walks in, somebody cries over the body, somebody needs to be dragged away from the body because somebody can’t stop crying over the body (group laughs) (group responds yea), somebody pulls themselves together.” While this type of personal expression is expected at an African American funeral its interpretation may not be favorable. Faith referenced these events offering her interpretation of these types of actions in funerals.

Faith-Yes. It was supposed to have been a celebration but to see them like jumping up and down and doing praise dances, that's not why we are here. You could tell that it was

just for show the way that they came in, what they wore, it was sad. Taking the focus off of the person that's deceased and the reason why you are there to me I think is so disrespectful. Talking about the antics that's the difference.

This type of behavior can prove to be distracting yet, contradictorily, seems expected by the participants.

Despite it being described as disruptive behavior by all four of the focus groups, it was also explained by some as being an innate response to grief. African Americans were referred to as an “expressive” people who wear their hearts on their sleeves and these types of behaviors while seemingly distracting only work to solidify African Americans expectations of one another.

Tyson-I was just going to say it's like an extension of what we see every Sunday. We're not quiet at church. If we're happy about something, we're happy

Cam- Yes, man, there you go.

Tyson- If we're sad about something, we cry. We laugh. I just think we're an expressive people. It's just an extension of that.

Tyson's remarks perfectly sum up why African Americans can be seen as overly expressive within in funerals. The outward display of emotions is an extension of how African Americans experience life, and according to Tyson this need for expression leaks into every event surrounding the African American experience.

**Loss of Community.** Perhaps one of the most surprising themes found within the data was how funerals reflect a loss of community among African Americans. This pattern is highly relevant to understanding the participants because while many individuals speak of the importance of community they also speak of the breaks within the community due to being

geographically dispersed. These breaks within community help show that, in some respects, African Americans have lost their sense of community with one another, and the concept of being there for each other has been lost. This sentiment is expressed throughout all of the focus groups but came forward in two very distinct forms: through funerals becoming family reunions, and the process of having to deal with loss alone.

The first way that participants explained this break in community was seen in the explanation of what funerals have come to mean to the community. Funerals were described by some as being a family reunion where normally separated families are finally forced to come together but under the most dire of circumstances.

Carlos-I think a lot of the times when I go to a funeral, sometimes you feel like you get a reunion from that family, from the family that you're in. You haven't seen your family in a while. Especially if you're not close to them like that. You see them come together, and it's just like, "Wow, I really do have family that care." Things like that.

Carlos' statement operates on two levels. First, this shows that death forces people together in order to pay homage to the deceased, and secondly this shows the sentiment of neglect. The familial and communal breakdown described contradicts the rhetoric that surrounds how African Americans grieve.

In the focus groups, the importance of being there for one another was brought up time and time again as participants described the African American community as "tight knit". The sentiments of funerals mirroring family reunions imply that connection had been lost between family members. This is seen in Denise's explanation of what funerals do to families.

Denise- No, I agree with both of them, but mostly with Janet saying it's more like a family reunion...People are not really eating, they're more talking than anything.

Trying to catch-up, or trying to find out who you're related to, how you're related... It is sad for African-Americans. That's how we come together. Unfortunately, that's how we come together. I'm hoping and praying that for my kids and grandkids, that's not how they actually come together.

This specific account shows that there has become such a disconnect within the African American community due to geography that families are not even acquainted with other family members. As it pertains to the participants this helps to show the disconnect between the ideology of how African Americans see their race as a whole and how they encounter their race on a personal level. Despite the togetherness of the community on an individual level the family unit is disjointed and in need of reconciliation before grief can be addressed as a collective unit. None of the interview guide questions asked specifically about communal disconnect yet this was referenced in all four focus groups. A rift within families and in the community was given focus and shows how prevalent this issue was to those who were studied.

The second example of the loss of community in the focus groups was seen when describing the days that follow a funeral. The support that initially comes when people lose a loved one quickly recedes after the funeral has ended and the supportive community that was there during the onset of loss fades. Many of those in the focus group describe having to process their grief alone. The implications of this seem to be an aura of disingenuous grief for those who are truly affected by loss. For those who have to deal with the loss of a loved one on a daily basis it can seem as though all of those who came around during the initial loss have forgotten about them. The act of forgetting can be seen as disingenuous.

Taraji- I think that for me ... I think that people forget after the funeral. I think that from the time we find out the person has passed up until the funeral, the family is

overwhelmed with water, toilet tissue, veggie platters, but after the funeral, where is my chicken? Where is my veggie platter? Where are you coming to sit up with me to just see how I'm doing?...I think for us, it's not the funeral. The funeral is like the wedding. We all get amped up when we're getting married. We get excited about the wedding. Not remembering that I got to snore in your face after the wedding day. I got to deal with your farting in the sheets and stuff like that and leaving the toilet seat up. I've got to focus on the actual relationship, so after the funeral, let's be honest. I think up until the funeral, you're numb. You're just going through the motion. Your emotions hit you three to six months after that funeral. That's when you start missing the cologne in the house, the way he used to do this, or the calls that this person used to make to you, or whatever this person was in your life. I think at that moment is when we need to step up and say, "Hey, here's a nine-piece chicken box for you and your family. Here's a veggie platter. Let me come sit up at your house and just watch something with you." That's when it's needed. Let's just not forget. Even years later, you know how we walk around, and we don't even acknowledge the fact that this person may still be grieving because it doesn't go away. I think that that's what happens after the funeral. We forget.

Taraji's words show how community quickly fades, and also shows the lack of follow through by the African American community. While this type of neglect was mentioned numerous times throughout the focus groups none of the focus groups implied that this neglect was intentional. This neglect was more described as people moving on from the loss, while the actual family who lost the loved one is stuck in their grief.

There were significant comparisons between how things are now and how things used to be, and the breakdown of community was attributed to African American being so separated

geographically. With the outspread of African Americans to many different places the ability to look out for each other's wellbeing was lost, and this break in community is perhaps most evident when a funeral takes place. Rather than being able to grieve the loss of someone collectively people must take the time to both become reacquainted with family members and mourn the loss of the loved one. With numerous people coming in town for a funeral it becomes inevitable that eventually people will go back to their homes leaving those who have dealt with the brunt of the loss to process their grief without the help and support of family members. The lack of follow through is not believed to be attributed to the nature of African Americans but instead is attributed to the geographical space between them. Even with current technology this seems to be a case of out of sight out of mind.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The results offered in this analysis offer insight into the multifaceted nature of African American culture. Looking at African American culture and the interactions within a funeral from an academic perspective offers interesting insights into how grief and loss are processed within the community. In order to better address the research question of “How African American funerals constitute cultural meaningful rituals?”, this discussion will look at the definition of ritual in pieces and explain how Hymes’ SPEAKING mnemonic helps to answer the question of how African Americans constitute cultural meaningful rituals.

### **Ritual**

Ritual is “A structured sequence of actions that correct performance of which pays homage to a sacred object.” (Philipsen, 1993, p. 108). This definition can be broken into three different parts that each adds insight into the results presented in this study. The first part being that a ritual is a structured sequence of events.

**Sequenced Events.** The act sequence section within this analysis works on two levels. The first level is seen in the presence of a physical program. A physical program allows for specific times to be allocated for specific events leaving little room for deviation. It is because of the structure that a program provides that specific events can conjure a reality between the attendees which allows for different events to serve a specific purpose for those attending the funeral (Pearce, 1995). Having a set program provides individuals specific times set for specific types of interactions and grief to take place. According to Cornell and Hartmann (1998), individuals rely on others and their environment to determine the appropriate actions needed to fit in within a situation. The act sequence in many ways mediates the environment so that



individuals can act accordingly. An example of the program helping to mediate behavior can be seen in the reflections part of the funeral service. Attendees are asked to personally reflect on their interactions with the deceased while also being asked to participate on a collective level through the use of narrative and storytelling. Storytelling can help individuals make sense of the loss they have incurred while also helping individuals make sense of what is left behind in the deceased's absence (Neimeyer et al., 2014), and this is seen within the African American funeral.

Through the structured sequence of events within the funeral between different individuals those who are dealing with the loss have the opportunity to reconstruct their environment so that proper homage can be paid to the deceased (Carmon et al., 2010). Even the seemingly smallest events within the act sequence have a purpose in helping African Americans mediate meaning. This can be seen in the reading of the resolutions during a funeral, which works to alleviate grief through allowing members to collectively form a functioning memory of the deceased.

**Symbolism.** The second piece of the ritual definition is the symbolic meaning behind each act in the act sequence. The results that best explain the symbolic meaning behind certain acts are the Norms and the Participants. According to EoC there is an emphasis on the use of all types of communication, which includes both verbal communication and non-verbal communication and no matter what type of communication is used the actions are all guided by culture (Hymes, 1962). Culture and language cannot be separated because both of these constructs have special meaning for individuals (Saville-Troike, 1989). The results of this study work to further define that point. Within the African American culture, the words and sentiments expressed are intimately linked through emotion and the performance of ritual. For example, having a processional line in which various family members have a chance to touch the body of

the deceased describes a very rich cultural ritual, but this act also serves as form of symbolic nonverbal communication that signifies the sealing of a bond. These types of examples help personify how important language is to culture and how important culture is to language.

**Homage to Sacred Object.** The third element of the definition of ritual is the act of paying homage to a sacred object. There are three sacred objects within an African American funeral to which homage is paid. The first sacred object honored is the deceased. This is evident through both the psychological scene and the physical setting of a funeral. Literally, the body of the deceased is at the center of everyone's thoughts and at the center of the room. As noted, many African Americans believe that the body should be kept intact after death (Reitz & Callender, 1993). Among the 25 focus group participants, only one mentioned having attended a funeral where the deceased was cremated. While the importance of having a body to pay homage to was not discussed it is inferred through all of rituals that surround specific interactions with the body. Having the body be at the center of the room in the favorite color of the deceased, surrounded by flowers all works to pay homage to the deceased as an act of love, thoughts, and well wishes.

The second object that is given homage is God. This study looked at African American culture within a very specific event, but this event serves as a microcosm that speaks to the larger context of African American culture. There are quite a few actions concerning God that happen within a funeral that coincide with what research findings regarding how African Americans preserve history and tradition (Owen, & Ehrenhaus, 2014). The sermon is typically the longest section of a funeral, and as discussed previously is not focused on the deceased, but God. This stressed importance of God is not only exemplified in the sermon, but also in the songs that are sung, and the importance of the deceased having known Christ before they died. While the

deceased is the physical center of attention God can be considered the space that fills everything in between. Homage is paid not only through the sermon but through the order of service as mourning family members are led into the sanctuary while a minister is reading a scripture. The ultimate homage is paid when the doors of the church are opened and individuals are invited to seek salvation in God near the end of the funeral service.

Lastly is the concept that homage is being paid to the African American community as a whole. Choosing to gather participants from the same church was strategic, because previous literature notes that African Americans place special importance on the bond created through religious community (Daniel & Smitherman, 1990; Painter, 2006). This bond is seen in the interactions within the focus groups, as many of the groups expressed having shared meaning and understanding of certain rituals that happen in a funeral. An example of this shared meaning can be seen as all of the focus groups expressed the importance of the opening of the doors of the church and the purpose of the sermon. Through shared community, the symbolic action of “opening the doors of the church” is shared. God is being exemplified as a glue that helps hold the community together. Within the results section Tyson says that the types of self-expression seen at funerals are just an extension of that which is seen every Sunday. For many African Americans religion represents the right to freely express themselves in an environment in which the outburst of emotion is encouraged (Barnes, 2005). The focus of an African American funeral is the loss of the deceased, and this focus on loss helps bond all of those participating in the funeral as African Americans tend to bond over shared struggles and pain (Collins & Doolittle, 2006).

The importance of community and family during the time of loss also helps explain why there was such a heavy-handed theme of community loss. The funeral serves as one ritual with

symbolic acts working to help preserve African American culture and community. In the absence of community, the ritual is lost. While there seems to be a dismantling of the African American community there is also a glimmer of hope presented at funerals. Funerals serve as family reunions and provide family members a chance to catch up with one another and re-establish a bond that was lost. Loss is devastating, but at least for the African American loss has the unique power to bring those in the African American community back together.

### **Limitations**

While this study did uncover some interesting findings it is important to note some of the shortcomings of this study. While the researcher was able to personally connect with the participants, using a group of participants that the researcher was familiar with could have altered participants' answers. Along with the familiarity factor the number of participants within the study could be considered low as 25 participants is not considered a large sample size. The interview guide questions did not address some of the background information pertaining to certain acts in the African American funeral. For example, while the interview guide seemed to encourage discussion of the actual funeral in the church, in one focus group, a participant pointed out that the funeral actually began outside the church as people began interacting. The group present agreed with that statement.

While autoethnography was useful within this study more data and perhaps different sentiments could have been discussed by the participants and given more depth and a different perspective to the results. Using my own experience regarding the setting and the typical program limits the amount of information. I can only recall things from my experience, which is limited. Some participants reported attending 100 funerals compared to the dozen funerals I have

attended. Further, more structured participant observation with in-depth note-taking would strengthen the observational data.

A more diverse sample of participants may have resulted in different themes and conclusions. Due to the fact that all of the participants were drawn from the same church within the area the sample was not diverse in religion. Along the same lines of diversity the majority of the sample was over the age of 40 and most participants identified as women. The concept of perception can be considered vastly different among different genders and ages as they all have different life experience and different perceptions.

### **Future Research**

The amount of research that can be done moving forward is vast, as the topic of African American funeral rituals has gone vastly undiscovered within the Communication discipline. Future research should look into African American funeral practices outside of religion. The majority of the answers given within this study were highly religious because participants were drawn from a church setting. Investigating if the themes such as self-expression and loss of community reach beyond religion would add more depth to the subject matter. Previous research focused on parts of the funeral, such as funeral home directors or pastors, but the research neglected those who are grieving. Looking at how the African American community handles grief is the undertone to this study and deserves more attention from the academic community. This study specifically looked at how grief is expressed within one act sequence but looking at how African Americans process and handle grief beyond the parameters of the funeral is equally important.

Moving beyond issues of just studying African Americans there also needs to be more research on all cultures' funeral practices and grieving rituals. Much of the research that focuses on grief within different cultures looks at communities that are outside of the United States of America, and while this is important, it is also important to look at different rituals of minority groups within the U.S. As the literature stands at the moment all grief is treated the same, but is largely based off of the study of one group of people. Conducting research that looks at what rituals have significant meaning within different groups can open doors to how grief is handled holistically. Both quantitative and qualitative research can benefit from this academic exploration and is certainly something worth looking into.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of looking at how different cultures handle and process grief through the lens of culture cannot be understated. This study only takes a small glimpse into how some African Americans process grief, but the results are profound. The rituals instituted within an African American funeral aid in bringing families together, help individuals deal with the loss, and help friends and family pay homage to the person of the deceased. This type of information has been vastly overlooked, yet it has large benefits for many people as it can help many. This type of research can help scholars better understand culture's bearings on every aspect of existence, grief counselors better counsel those who are trying to process loss, and lastly help affirm the validity of every culture's funeral practices. Understanding every aspect of a minority culture is important, but in my opinion pales in comparison to respecting cultural differences, especially when it relates to death and funeral practices.

Culturally diverse populations have a lot to offer the academic community, and while minority groups may be difficult to study this should not deter scholars from accepting the task. This study only highlights one unique speech event within one very specific community, but the results uncovered have bearings on what is seen as important to the African American community in a funeral. Looking at the importance of funerals and how it pertains to grief through one perspective at the very least is culturally insensitive, and should be considered unacceptable, which is why other cultures funeral practices should be studied. Having this type of information can take the focus away from things that maybe considered strange and places importance on what meaning specific things hold for a community, and how these acts help preserve culture.

## **APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT SCRIPT**



## **Script used for Faith Based Organizations**

Hello,

I am currently conducting a research study in which we are looking for African Americans over the age of 18 who have ever loss someone close to them due to death. Individuals will be asked to participate in a focus group and will be asked to talk about their experiences with this subject. The study will be audio recorded and will take approximately 60-90 minutes of their time, and refreshments will be provided. If you know of any members/residents who may be interested please hand them a copy of our Informed consent so that they may contact us and we can provide them with the time, date, and location of the focus group.

## **APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE**

## **Introduction**

Hello! My name is Danielle Grant and I am a student at University of Central Florida. I am in the process of completing my thesis with the guidance of three faculty members within the Nicholson School of Communication. As part of my thesis I will be conducting several focus groups to learn about their opinions on some communication behaviors people engage in when they lose someone close to them. All of us are here because we have experienced loss. I am interested in having a conversation about the things you've observed within the African American community that have surrounded that loss. While it is widely recognized that people do different things to cope with loss very little research has been conducted about this subject across different cultures, which is, why I am interested in this area of study.

In case you have not participated in a focus group before, I would like to explain what we are going to do. I will ask conversation-starting questions about loss and different behaviors that surround the loss of someone close to you due to death. There are no right or wrong answers, I only want to learn about your opinions and experiences. Because we all have experienced the loss of someone close to us, I will ask that we all be respectful of each other's opinions. If I ask a question that you would prefer not to discuss, you do not need to discuss that topic. If you find the discussion topic uncomfortable, you are welcome to withdraw from the discussion at any time.

## **Interview Questions**

1. Could you recall a memorable funeral you attended? What made it memorable?
  - a. ((Probe for the racial category of the deceased.))

(Ritual- Funeral )

I'd like for you to draw your responses to the questions I ask off of any African American funeral you have ever attended.

1. If you had to make an estimate, how many funerals would you say you've been to in your life?
2. In your experience what is the typical sequence of a funeral?
3. What types of self-expression normally occur at a funeral?
4. What parts of a funeral have special meaning for you?
5. What are parts of an African American funeral that you feel differ from White culture?
6. Is a funeral more of a showcase for the living or a celebration of life for the person who is deceased?

7. When have you seen disruptions in a funeral that are not considered normal? What were the circumstances?

(Ritual after a funeral)

1. What follows the days after a Funeral?
2. What is an acceptable amount of time to openly grieve the loss of someone close to you?
3. Do you feel that this time limit is different between White and African American culture? If so, how do you think it differs?

(Dealing with Loss)

1. In your opinion what are some good ways of dealing with the death of a loved one?
2. Are there some bad ways of dealing with the death of a loved one? If so, what?
3. What do you think are some of the differences between the way that African Americans express grief and Whites express grief?
  - a. Are there any ways that African Americans handle grief that you don't like?
  - b. Are there any ways that Whites handle grief that you don't like?

## **Conclusion**

Thank you for your time and for sharing your ideas. If anyone has something that he or she did not feel comfortable sharing during the focus group, I will stay here to speak with people individually. You will be able to indicate whether you want the tape recorder on or off during that discussion. Thank you!

**APPENDIX C: IRB HUMAN SUBJECTS PERMISSION LETTER**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Danielle Grant**

Date: **January 25, 2016**

Dear Researcher:

On 01/25/2016, the IRB approved the following minor modifications to activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination  
Modification Type: A revised interview guide has been uploaded in iRIS and approved for use  
Project Title: Grief in the African American Community  
Investigator: Danielle Grant  
IRB Number: SBE-15-11669  
Funding Agency:  
Grant Title:  
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the [Investigator Manual](#).

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kanielle Chay" with a horizontal line extending to the right.

IRB Coordinator

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