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Grieving in the Muscogee Creek Tribe

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GRIEVING IN THE MUSCOGEE CREEK TRIBE

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A qualitative, collective case study explores grieving in the Muscogee Creek tribe. Data from interviews with 27 participants, all adult members of the tribe, reveal tendencies in patterns of grieving. Commonalities include (a) individual strength and certainty of recovery; (b) focus on giving to others in the family and coping as a family unit; and (c) support mainly received from family. Cultural factors of belief in nature's balance, family, community, and Indian medicine influence the meaning Creeks associate with death, which, in turn, contributes to grieving patterns.

A previous study (Walker & Balk, 2007) explored bereavement rituals in the Muscogee Creek tribe. In this article, I intend to take a deeper look into the grieving process per se, supplementing the earlier study of public rituals in the immediate wake of the death by examining the Creeks' report of their long-term personal adaptation to bereavement.

Despite the various differences among cultures in grieving behaviors and methods of expressing bereavement, certain feelings may be common. This study focuses specifically on bereavement and grieving patterns of Muscogee Creek tribal members. Creek culture appears to have remained somewhat intact despite the challenges of change, relocation, and loss facing this population over the past few centuries. In this study, I am suggesting that Creeks are in the process of transitioning through negotiations with mainstream culture and of re-establishing their cultural identity as it relates to grieving.

Literature provides us with a few studies regarding Muscogee Creeks, most of which focused on historical and cultural patterns in the tribe (Bell, 1990; Chaudhuri, 2001; Chaudhuri & Chaudhuri,

2001; Swanton, 1998; Wickman, 1999; Wright, 1986). Although literature on grief in various cultures is becoming more common, no empirical studies on grieving in the Muscogee Creek tribe were found. The purpose of this article is to explore Creek culture and its influence on the meaning Creeks assign to death, as well as the patterns and expressions of grief dominant among the people of the Muscogee Creek Nation.

Review of Literature

Van Winkle (2000) identified a few similarities among Native American tribes regarding grief and meaning of death. Except for certain tribes such as the Hopi and the Navajo, these commonalities include (a) death is viewed as a normal occurrence, neither avoided nor focused upon; (b) death is part of an ongoing life cycle; and (c) death does not terminate one's existence but merely transforms it. Many American Indians believe that the worlds of the living and the dead exist simultaneously and are interactive. At death their bodies help the earth produce new life, continuing the harmonious process and balance of nature, a value also held by the Creeks.

Several historical accounts describe changes in Creek rituals associated with death over time, but none of these addresses the deeply personal nature of grief. Creek cultural values, however, have been described in a few rare sources in literature, and results of this study replicated these values. Although four specific cultural values were presented here, Chaudhuri (2001) warned against drawing simple linear relationships between labeled variables that compromises a true understanding of the culture. Creek society has been in motion as the tribe has adjusted to the loss of land, life, and language over the past centuries, and values are interwoven and may not be understood separately. Currently, the tribal division between Christian churches and traditional ceremonial grounds, along with members adopting varying degrees of both perspectives, contributes most influentially to Creek society. Both historically and currently, Creek values of family, community, belief in nature's balance as experienced in intervals of "four," and Indian medicine influence Creek grieving.

Creeks have incorporated concepts of confederacy, equality, cooperation, and a circular view of authority (Chaudhuri, 2001) throughout history, prior to the influence of western hierarchy.

Creek culture was traditionally very communal in nature, to the extent that the notion of individuality was meaningless (Chaudhuri & Chaudhuri, 2001). For this reason, the difference between family and community may be unimportant to Creeks; family may be a construct that has recently emerged in contemporary Creek society because of the influence of the dominant society's individualism. Cultural values of nature in "fours" and perspective of life as a cycle are also interwoven as balance is reached through the inter-action of the earth's basic four elements, air, sun, earth, and water (Bell, 1990; Chaudhuri, 2001; Chaudhuri & Chaudhuri, 2001). The earth continually transitions through four seasons and four phases of the moon, suggesting that life and nature is cyclical. The mean-ing Creeks associate with death is also transitional and imperma-nent, thus affecting grieving patterns. All beings are part of the essential genderless, universal energy called *Ibofanga, the One Great Spirit* (Chaudhuri & Chaudhuri, 2001) in Creek culture. Health of an individual involves this same flow of energy throughout one's mental, spiritual, and physical states. Obstructions to the flow, even emotionally, are addressed with Indian medicine, which is used to promote health and prevent depression during grieving. These types of values, in such conflict with those of the dominant culture, make full understanding of Creek culture from an outsider challenging at best.

Finding a contemporary theoretical perspective that appropri-ately explains Creek grieving without flaw has been challenging. Many traditional and contemporary models are based on notions of individualism or have been presented from an individual or dyadic perspective and are thus not adequate to capture Creek communal structure. For instance, attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980) focuses on the effects of the caregiver-infant bonding beha-vior on grief in later life, and recent interpretations have also focused on the individual griever (Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2005). Other perspectives involve the concept of grief work, whereby a specific endpoint to grief exists (Freud, 1917/1957), a linear perspective that may also be inappropriate for the Creek worldview. Contemporary perspectives, such as the dual process model for coping with bereavement (Stroebe & Schut, 1999), have advanced the concept to consider the influence of culture in terms of a more cyclical view of death, but again the focus of the model has been on the individual.

Meaning making and meaning reconstruction becomes one of the few contemporary theories prepared to encompass complex perspectives of community as an operating unit in the world of grief and loss (Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002). This model was used in a previous interpretation of Creek bereavement rituals (Walker & Balk, 2007), another application to communal as opposed to individual response. In keeping with this approach, I will use this perspective as the lens through which to view Creek grieving.

Method

Participants

The present research involved a collective case study, consisting of 27 Muscogee Creeks and involving multiple sites.[1] Sources of information used for this study were primarily interviews, but observations and document analyses were used to supplement the data set when available. Participants in this study identified themselves as members of the Creek Nation who are familiar with Creek cultural bereavement practices and rituals. Participants' ages ranged from 21 to 79 years, mean age of 59, with 18 women and 9 men. Seventeen described themselves as having "considerable" or "extensive" experience with loss, 10 with "limited." After interviews were completed, detailed notes were typed and most were transcribed verbatim. Participants were given the opportunity to review the data for errors. Participants were given a small gift in gratitude for their participation.

Interviews

Samples of interview questions include the following:

1. How do you express your grief following the loss of a loved one? From whom do you receive most of your support during times of grieving?

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[1]The study was conducted under the supervision of David E. Balk, City University of New York at Brooklyn, as part of my dissertation completed at Oklahoma State University in 2002.

2. What does your family expect from you during times of loss and grief?
3. What does death mean to you?

   a. What happens to a person after death?
   b. Does life continue to exist for the deceased?
   c. Do you continue to have a relationship and communicate with the person after death?

All data were organized under three main constructs: grieving, meaning of death, and Creek culture. Accuracy was ensured through the use of triangulation of methods and data sources. Inter-rater reliability was confirmed by a human development researcher external to the project who verified the logical emergence of codes. A second researcher read the entire project after its completion and verified face validity. To minimize the influence of bias, a gatekeeper and two participants read the final project to ensure correct interpretation. The gatekeeper, employed as the Director of Cultural Research at the Muscogee Creek Nation headquarters, provided access to the tribe and helped the researcher develop a sampling frame.

Results

Participants could be divided into those who were members of ceremonial grounds or Christian churches, and those who had affiliations with both. Ceremonial grounds are traditional Creek structures that provide a means of government, social interaction, spiritual expression, and ritual. Churches were initially built near ceremonial grounds, were often based on the same structure, and incorporated Christian rituals and beliefs. The religious division, however, had little influence on grieving patterns or the meaning participants associated with death. Instead, these concepts were based on Creek cultural factors of Indian medicine, family, sense of community, and importance of nature's balance.

> When somebody loses a loved one or something like that, they think that they want to be left alone. But when I'm sittin' here right after I lost my (spouse), I was just wishing that anyone would come visit me and talk to me. That never did happen. My family don't live too far from me, but they

never did come around. Just seemed like I was stranded, ya know. But I finally got over that. (60-year-old man)

Need for family support was common across all participants. This excerpt of a participant's interview was extraordinary because most participants reported receiving more than adequate family support. Consistent with this quote, many of the participants openly discussed their unique personal losses. Throughout the interview process, the researcher identified repetitively across the participants what seemed to be a general theme of selflessness. Participants often described grieving behaviors that indicated focus more on others than themselves. Also, all participants indicated having a subtle determination to adjust to losses of family members. To this group, positive adjustment was a foregone conclusion; no other options appeared to exist. Major aspects of grieving revealed in interviews included individual coping, family coping, support systems, and meaning associated with death.

Individual Coping

A dominant theme among the participants was that they preferred to be alone during times of grief expression, particularly when highly emotional. Only one participant reported a desire to be around others during grief to talk about the person and to "let those feelings process through" her. A common perception among participants is that they are a "strong one" in the family and prefer to assist others during grieving while taking care of themselves individually.

I prefer to be alone initially to cry. Then I like to be around family so I can support them. I'm more interested in taking care of myself, so I can then serve my family. (59-year-old woman)

Well, to me, I guess, to me, I want to be alone. I just wanted to handle it myself, you know, without affecting the family, without being felt sorry. I didn't let it affect or show it emotionally or whatever because I just kind of contained it within myself and was able to cope with it. There was a way I could do that in our family, so that's how I handle my grief. (63-year-old man)

I don't think I've really learned that yet, because I had to make myself cold, staunch, whatever you call it, to be able to survive. I didn't express my own grief until almost a year, year and a half later. I don't do those things because I make myself so strong. (52-year-old woman)

Occasionally, participants, such as the man quoted at the beginning of this section, indicated prolonged personal grief or depression, triggering the need for intervention by the *micco*, or medicine man, a very spiritual and skilled individual in treating the physical, emotional, and spiritual sicknesses of the Creeks. Some participants reported that medicine men were successful in treating illnesses within the Creek people at times when the medical doctors of mainstream society were unsuccessful. Creek miccos were revered and respected among the tribal members, and one participant described them as "powerful."

During grieving, Indian medicine was used for cleansing to keep bad spirits away and helping the griever through the grieving process. The first of these Indian medicines was used after funeral rituals to prevent sickness. One participant explained that "herbal medicine is used to wash off when you're around dead bodies. It's harmful for you. It can harm the mind and emotionally, physically, and spiritually too." When a Creek person experienced grief or sorrow caused by the death of a family member, the ceremonial ground medicine man can treat the person with herbal medicine.

> You wash from the top down. You drink some, and you wash your legs and make sure nothing is left. It runs off into the earth and you feel light-hearted. You want to laugh again, not immediately, but you will. (53-year-old woman)

Through medicine, Creeks understand that grieving and feeling sorrow is expected, is treatable, and is not likely to be permanent.

An emotional sickness, such as depression, which is often triggered by grief from a loss, can also be remedied through the Indian medicinal treatment. The formulation of the treatment stays private within the tribe, but the effect is similar to that of an anti-depressant pharmaceutical prescribed by a physician in mainstream society.

> If a person is in that grieving stage for a long time, it could develop into a sickness. It deals with spirits drifting away from that person. This person can go to her ceremonial medicine man for treatment or to her medical doctor for an antidepressant. If she decides to go to a traditional medicine man then he would fix a treatment for her, like something to bathe in and wash off to get rid of or alleviate that depressed feeling. (63-year-old woman)

Indian medicine promotes an understanding among Creeks that negative, unpleasant, loss-oriented feelings are not permanent and that emotional illnesses related to grief, such as depression, are treatable.

Family Coping

Most of the participants reported that the family comes together and helps one another cope, talks about the deceased family member, shares fond memories of the deceased family member, and laughs. A few exceptions were made, however. One participant reported the above behaviors during the four days before the funeral, then family members dealing with the death "in their own way" after that. Another participant reported that her family functions by "going back to the normal everyday thing . . . work." Two other respondents reported that their families avoid talking about the loss until it is less painful. Some participants' actual responses to this question were as follows:

> We were going to the cemetery, my older brothers and my sisters and I. And we were in the hearse. Then my brother was, instead of us being sad, he would tell us things that my dad would do. And we were all laughing. About the time we all got to the cemetery, we were all laughing, and everybody was looking at us (52-year-old woman).
>
> I know of at least three times we've met together, and we just had snacks and fellowship. Before it was over it was all laughing and remembering the funny things and different things that mom did or said or whatever. And so it was a great release because we all came together. Sometimes we'd stay up til about 1:00, 2:00 o'clock just being together there, lifting each other up, and having a good time. (68-year-old woman)

A recurring cultural value of family throughout the interviews was consistent with the definition given by Lee and Cartledge (1996), who suggested that family is a large network of extended family and clansmen. Aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents are all part of one's family, and more distant relatives or "extended" family comprises one's clan. The Creek tribe is composed of several clans, and it's likely that every person within a tribe is related in some way.

> Many of the participants reported staying in close contact with these relatives. To us, family means close; cousins and nieces and nephews are just like sisters and brothers to us. (59-year-old woman)

The family was larger. The traditional Creek family considers immediate family what mainstream culture might consider extended family. My family has pretty much kept these traditional roles. (56-year-old woman)

Grieving in Muscogee Creeks appeared to be dichotomous. Individual participants in the sample tended to handle their grief away from other family members. As a family, participants reported that they typically coped with grief by "talking, laughing, and just being there for one another." On the surface, it appeared that these two statements contradicted each another. Further examination, however, indicated that such contradiction is illusory, and seeing contradiction in this context fails to discern the interactive function that family and individuals provide for one another. Perhaps the support of the family leads these individuals to develop greater emotional strength and ability to cope with grief independently. Also, with many family members contributing support and completing tasks that the deceased person would normally complete, adjusting to the loss may be more tolerable and grieving more controllable than without those family members. Having a larger family in closer proximity may make this support system more readily available to participants dealing with grief.

Still, a large majority of the participants reported grieving behaviors of "being the strong one," "being alone during grief," and "expressing emotion when alone." Shapiro (1996) suggested that grieving reflects a culture's boundaries in expression of emotion. Perhaps these participants recognized the value of the Creek family network. To maintain such a strong system of support during times of grieving, each individual must contribute to the family network. The strength provided to the participants during grieving enabled them to provide strength back to the system. Rather than focusing merely on receiving gratification for their own needs, these participants focused on contributing to the family. The participants appeared to incorporate a value of giving and service to the family in their grieving patterns.

Support Systems

From the whole family, mostly my cousins and my aunts, our family gives each other plenty of support. Those closest to the dead person are

surrounded by family. Everyone just makes themselves at home in each
other's houses. (54-year-old woman)

The whole stomp ground membership comes to support the indi-
viduals because it's part of that whole scheme of things. It's our extended
family. (55-year-old woman)

Again, family emerged as the common theme regarding
support systems, but we must consider its similarity to the cultural
value of community. Indeed, participants often used the term
family to describe clan, ceremonial ground, tribal town, and/or
church. The difference between family and community may be
negligible with only an ambiguous reference to size. Distinguishing
values of family and community may be more a reflection of the
researcher's perspective rather than that of traditional Creeks.

So, when you lose somebody, there's a lot of love behind it. I mean, people
don't go around and hug each other and kiss each other's cheeks. But when
you lose somebody, they're there for you. You've got friends and all of your
relatives; they're all there for you. It's always been that way for everybody
around here. We're all there for each other. (59-year-old woman)

Gilbert (1996) suggested that reality is constructed by family
and that family members grieve within the boundaries defined
by the family. In Creek culture, this means that family grieves
within the boundaries of community. The Creek community oper-
ates as a collective system of which the notion of individuality is
completely foreign (Chaudhuri, 2001). All other beings, both
human and non-human, are respected and considered in
decision-making (Chaudhuri & Chaudhuri, 2001). An advantage
of such a collective system is the automatic, built-in system provid-
ing emotional, social, and financial support (Kalish & Reynolds,
1976). Individuals from the clan or ceremonial ground might fill
the role of the dead person by performing the tasks that the dead
person would normally perform. This role fulfillment facilitates
adjustment to the loss and likely affects grieving.

That's all part of the communal philosophy of the Muscogee people. As a
people, we help each other get through crises. We help each other celebrate
in the good times. We come together and we help each other. Our tribe is
an extended family that helps us. Our tribe or our church or our ceremonial
grounds or our extended family helps the individuals get through a death.
It's very practical. (56-year-old woman)

Meaning of Death

Beliefs about life after death, whether or not there was an ongoing relationship with the dead person, and participants' general perspectives of death contributed to the general meaning assigned to death.

BELIEFS ABOUT LIFE AFTER DEATH

Though specific ideas about life after death varied greatly among participants, certain general aspects were quite homogenous. All 27 of the participants believed in life after death and a person's continued existence in a "better place," whether in the Spirit World, in Heaven, or in the Circle of Elders and that not every spirit goes to the "better place" after death; some go to a worse place, whether existing on earth in a disturbed state or proceeding to a literal Hell. The transition may take place instantaneously, or the spirit may stay nearby for four days. To all participants, death is not synonymous with finality.

> Your soul is going to live. Everyone. Either in Heaven and Hell, we don't know. If you believe in the Lord and did what he told you to do, you'll go to Heaven. Only God knows who goes to Heaven. (55-year-old man)
>
> Because the soul, according to our beliefs in the traditional way, that person, that soul, that spirit, whatever you want to call it, remains on earth for four days. During this four days and nights they travel to every place they have ever been in their life when they were little. Then they go to another place and they see all of our family and friends that have gone on before us and they see us, they watch over us. (52-year-old woman)

ONGOING RELATIONSHIP WITH DECEASED

None of the participants reported communicating with the deceased on a regular basis following the death. Although several participants reported episodes of brief contact with their deceased loved ones, the majority reported that they do not continue the relationship with the deceased indefinitely after death. Several participants gave detailed descriptions of incidences where they had felt, seen, or heard their deceased loved ones or sensed their presence. Others reported leaving out small amounts of food for the spirits to eat when hungry. Finally, most participants believed that they would see their dead loved ones again after the participants had died.

Well, I would wake up, and I could hear her in the kitchen. I could hear the pots and pans. I could hear her coming through the kitchen door. She would push that door, and you could hear her coming through the living room. Not once did we ever get scared because we knew that was our mother. Sometimes even in our dances, I believe that they come back and join us. They dance with us. (65-year-old man)

When my uncle died when I was a little girl, I felt someone cover my legs with the covers. But nobody around did it; everybody said they didn't touch the covers. I believe it was my uncle that covered my legs. (54-year-old woman)

She told me, "If I die before you, I'm gonna come back and pinch your toe." And do you know just before Thanksgiving (after her death) she did pinch my toe. I mean, it wasn't no brush. It was a squeeze. I knew it had to been her because I had funny feelings from my legs up to my knees, you know. I thought to myself, "Well now, what was she trying to tell me?" (59-year-old woman)

PERSPECTIVES OF DEATH

Most participants indicated an optimistic perspective of death, reporting celebrating the life of the dead person during funeral rituals, often including laughter and happy memories. Common themes were that death is part of the natural process, death must occur for life to stay in balance, and life is cyclical.

We had a few ceremonies in regard to death because, to us, we would rather celebrate life over death, even though grieving is a natural process. (54-year-old woman)

My personal view, after my own brother passed away is that death is a part of life. Death is the hardest part of life and everyone has to die because it is a part of the cycle, nature's cycle and that everybody has to grieve in their own way. (52-year-old woman)

People are just there, they start to tell stories and things about the person. A lot of laughter. It's not at that point a sad time. They are celebrating this life. (52-year-old woman)

Participants indicated having a close relationship with nature and a respect for its cycle of events. Changes are perceived as transitions, not beginning and end points, and take on a circular structure that forms balance and often represents this balance in "fours." Nature yields four winds, four primary colors, four directions, four seasons, and four phases of the moon, all of which operate in balance with one another. The importance Creeks placed on the belief in nature's balance permeates the meanings associated with death—that it is cyclical, impermanent, and in perfect balance with life.

I believe that there has to be a balance in life. There is positive and negative, hot–cold, salty–sweet, sadness–happiness to everything in life. If we maintain a harmony, that will affect everyone around us. I believe that what I do has a ripple effect. And everybody else also has that ripple effect. Therefore whatever we do can affect our neighbors. I can affect my tribe, my state, my nation. So I should maintain a harmony, and I should try to get my family and my children in harmony. If I do something to get out of balance, I cause an imbalance that has to be corrected somehow. That out of balance state will affect us in illness. If I get too stressed I get migraine headaches. (56-year-old woman)

And sometimes it's time for things to die. And I believe that many times when a person dies, often in that family, a new baby will be born. And that's like that cycle is picked up and carried. (53-year-old woman)

And I believe that life is a circle. Somehow I've reconciled in my life that there is one Supreme Being. And through that supreme spirit or energy or being or whatever that is, is how things came so that that energy, whether you call it God, or the Creek word *Wiponga*.[2] That energy had a part in creating everything that there is here on earth, from the soil, to the water, to fire, to the animals, to the birds. Because I believe that, I can justify evolution. I believe that the Creator started with the small things and created into larger animals and people happened later. So, I believe in evolution and that everything is cyclical. What goes around comes around. Life and death are all part of a continuum. Everything has a large cycle. (56-year-old woman)

Meaning of Death, Creek Culture, and Grieving

The results indicate a common conceptualization of death across the participants. Although opinions about specific factors regarding life after death differed, the general meaning associated with death was constant. The participants in this sample do not see death as the end of a journey but merely a transition. Life will continue after death in a positive or negative capacity. Most participants reported occasional ongoing, though not continual, contact with the dead person. Death is believed to be a natural occurrence and part of the cycle of life. Death is not an event to be feared but rather an event that will reunite Creeks with deceased loved ones.

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[2]The word for god or supreme being in the Creek language is *Epofvnkv*, according to Tim Thompson, Director of Cultural Research at the Muscogee Creek Nation.

> We don't have a word like the white man that says "goodbye." We have a word we say, "until we meet again," wherever the person is going or wherever they are going to be, in the world beyond, or where we meet again. (68-year-old man)

Consistent with Van Winkle (2000), one participant explained that to Creeks, death is "just another part of life. Under normal circumstances, death is considered neither a terrible tragedy nor a time of celebration. It is simply the next step in the cycle of life" (63-year-old man).

The meaning Creeks assign to death is influenced by cultural factors. In the discussions of family, values of closeness and relationship were emphasized, influencing the belief in reunion with loved ones and ongoing contact after death. After death a person will join a community of spirits who have passed before him/her. The function of death is "to override the discontinuity of the individual and to ensure the continuity of the community" (Kagawa-Singer, 1994, p. 102). There is therefore no finality in death; it represents merely a transition point in the life cycle where community is restored. Cultural beliefs in the balance of nature contributed to the meaning that death is a normal, necessary part of the cycle of life. Consistent with Rosenblatt (2001), one participant reported that death is difficult for everyone and is possibly the most difficult part of the life cycle. Although death is difficult, cultural beliefs in Indian medicine promote the meaning that pain associated with loss is expected and temporary.

> I believe it's a really difficult experience for people. It's a difficult experience for all of us. We try to understand, but we're just human, and it's a difficult time. So I believe there's that time, then you have to move on. (58-year-old man)

The meaning of death influenced the grieving patterns of Creeks. Gilbert (1996) suggested that meaning associated with death is defined by family. In this study, grief emotions were expressed inwardly and handled by the Creeks themselves or through talking and laughing with other family members. Perhaps the participants' perception of death, continuation of life and the absence of finality, influences the grieving they experience. Although death is difficult, and loss of a loved one requires a challenging adjustment for everyone (Rosenblatt, 2001), these

participants as a whole were certain of their coming reunion with loved ones who had passed. This belief of reunion with family may influence Creeks' tendencies to turn to family to cope with loss. The meaning of death of the participants appears to be integral in the patterns of grieving.

> You mourn, but also then, you're grateful. While they were here, they were your friends, they were your companions, and you learned a lot from them. You always take something. You always remember something that they've done and you always remember their ways. And it's just something, to me, that I was glad that I had met 'em while they were here. (65-year-old man)

Discussion

Participants in this study described grief in terms of a collective role. Consistent throughout the interviews was participants' heightened concern about group and lowered concern about self. Participants did express emotions and cope individually, but a major portion of the grieving experience occurred as a group, with support being given to and received from that group. Another dominant theme throughout the interviews was confidence participants exuded in their own ability to handle grief and support others. Though it was true that most participants had prior experience with death and grief, there was nearly a complete lack of despair evident in the interviews as they described their experiences.

Consistent with this theme, Neimeyer et al. (2002) emphasized the importance of language, culture, and interactions with others in shaping meaning during bereavement. The "most irreducibly personal . . . view of self and the world are anchored in our attachment bonds to significant others" (p. 248). Neimeyer et al.'s model of meaning reconstruction presented the possibility of difficult grief later in life resulting from poor childhood attachments, termed *complicated grief*, a concept that seemed to be barely present in this group of participants. In fact, these participants for the most part did not seem at all to experience shattered assumptions, the trigger point for meaning reconstruction. The Creeks in this study did, however, indicate originating from a group based heavily on a collective, communal structure. It is possible that having numerous opportunities for healthy childhood attachments mitigates the "complicated" effects of one or a few poor ones.

The influence of community on grieving processes may be understated in the contemporary world, even for collective cultures such as the Creek tribe. Tobias Schneebaum's (1969) classic anthropological account of his exploration into cultural realms of what was referred to as the Akaramas tribe in Peru described a world shaped by a common identity. Though the tribe experienced death, members' displays of grief were nearly absent. The commune of the Akaramas became its own organism separate from individual members, so that when a single person left or joined, the organism did not change. The sense of self was nearly absent in the tribal members, and Schneebaum reported being so encapsulated by the tribal unity that he nearly fled back to society to regain his individual identity. Perhaps there is credibility to the notion that communal/collective structures agonize less over losses due to such a feeling of unity. Creeks in this study showed evidence of other tribal members filling the role and completing the tasks previously performed by the dead family member. Though not as extreme as in Schneebaum's study, the structure and function of the group as a whole seemed to remain intact. Only when a participant reported a lack of family support, as quoted at the beginning of the *Results* section, was there evidence of complicated grief or shattered assumptions.

The relevance of Neimeyer et al.'s (2002) model of meaning reconstruction challenges the assumptions frequently made regarding mainstream grieving habits. There are certainly common occurrences of "uncomplicated" grief in the dominant culture, suggesting the influence of positive attachment bonds that bring into question the theories previously attempting to explain "individualistic" grieving. Perhaps these theories, namely psychodynamic, while shedding light on the individual, have ignored some interactive processes occurring within family during grief. The resulting implication is that mainstream culture's grieving, though less communal than that of tribal cultures such as Creeks, may be more collective in nature that typically described. Future research scrutinizing these social and family processes is in store.

We do not have the benefit of seeing how Creek grief has changed over time, but we do see how the culture and structure has changed with the influence of the dominant culture's greater emphasis on hierarchy and lesser emphasis on collectivism. Certainly the Creek government has traditionally been more circular,

as opposed to hierarchical (Chaudhuri, 2001), and the spiritual focus has historically promoted collectivity. Traditional Creeks emphasize a common energy, called *Ibofanga*, that combines all of life (Chaudhuri & Chaudhuri, 2001). It is possible that traditionally grief and loss meant something very different to the Creeks than it does today; missing roles may have been filled much more easily and quickly in a true community. Is it also possible that the introduction of a less collectivist cultural structure could actually lead to a higher incidence of complicated grief if ample social support is not provided during loss?

Creek culture is experiencing a revival, as evidenced in a resurgence of participation in ceremonial dances and in establishment of a new program in Creek Studies at a community college (T. Thompson, personal communications, July 10, 2006). As the Creek culture continues to transition, adapt, and thrive, its concepts of grief and loss continue to evolve. During the process of negotiation with the permanence and linear reality characteristic of the dominant culture, concepts of Creek grief and bereavement are likely to take on a new meaning. Perhaps Creeks will believe in the existence of permanence, if only applied to the idea that life and/or death is "always" impermanent.

Several limitations may have prevented this study from generating complete answers to the research questions. Obtaining clear, detailed descriptions of grieving was challenging because of cultural differences between this population and the researcher. Many members of the Muscogee Creek tribe are acculturated to varying degrees into mainstream society, making it challenging for the researcher to integrate the data from participants of different ages and degrees of acculturation to form an accurate picture of grieving in Creek culture. Because of the nature of the grieving issue and the sensitivity of personal loss, the topic was particularly difficult for some to discuss. Some participants chose not to answer certain questions about personal experiences that were painful or uncomfortable for them to discuss. Also, because the researcher was not Muscogee Creek, some potential participants hesitated to participate in the study. Finally, more data on historical background would have enhanced the understanding of grieving over time.

This study reveals several areas for potential future research. A detailed study on Creek history and how it affects current

grieving would improve scholarship on this topic. Future research might also focus on grief within a specific group, such as clan, ceremonial ground, or tribal town within the Creek tribe. An even deeper study might focus upon the development of spiritual beliefs or ongoing contact with loved ones after death. Finally, studies of grieving in other American Indian tribes, as well as a fresh look at grieving in mainstream culture, would enhance literature.

All studies on native cultures must be sensitive to tradition and the wishes of members of the population. Studies involving any American Indian tribe should be conducted with the approval and endorsement of the tribe's government. Because of the Muscogee Creeks' historical background and position within the United States, Creek ceremonial ground members, and likely members of other tribes, tend to be very cautious of sharing personal customs and rituals with researchers. When conducting studies, researchers must incorporate a global theme of respect for the Creek tribe, as well as any other American Indian tribe, and its culture. Conducting a study under any other premise will yield misunderstandings of the culture and unproductive results.

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