Exploring the Energy Model of Cumulative Grief

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Abstract

Grief and loss are common experiences that can bring about numerous complexities. Grief is experienced through a set of common experiences. The following article contributes to the knowledge base by delving deeper into the exploration of the interconnections between grief and loss and the child welfare system. The article discusses the impact of grief and loss on Black families in relation to child removal and loss of custody and substance use and job loss. The article highlights the need for the child welfare system to utilize The Energy Model of Cumulative Grief to improve the mental health of Black parents and children and increase equitable outcomes for Black families.

Keywords: child welfare system, grief, loss, child custody, child removal, substance use, job loss

Researchers have documented the extensive impact of the child welfare system on Black children and families (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024; Children's Bureau, 2024). An estimated 407,493 children were placed in foster care in 2020 (Children's Bureau, 2024). Black children represent 14% of the United States population but comprise 20% of children placed in foster care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024). According to (Kim et al., 2017), more than 50% of Black children will experience some form of child welfare investigation before reaching adulthood (White & Persson, 2022). Black families continuously face higher rates of investigation by child protective services (CPS) than White families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). In addition, Black families encounter more punitive regulations across the different stages of CPS involvement (Thomas et al., 2022).

Black children are more likely to experience negative outcomes as a result of being placed in the child welfare system that include mental health conditions, placement in the juvenile justice system, lower academic achievement, and pathologizing and labeling (, Harris & Carpenter, 2024; Roberts, 2012; Stewart, 2022). The separation of children and families is an extraordinarily traumatic event that has a long-term impact on the emotional and psychological well-being of Black families (Stewart, 2022). Trauma is an emotional response to a serious event (American Psychological Association, n.d.-b). Children separated from families experience mental health outcomes including attention deficit-hyperactive disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), conduct disorder, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression (Engler et al., 2022; Kraft, 2018; Pecora et al., 2009; Stewart, 2022).

Ongoing separation of children and families or termination of parental rights induces toxic stress, grief, and loss (Stewart, 2022). Loss is the real or perceived removal of something or someone considered to be important (Smith & Delgado, 2020). Grief is an expression of loss (Mental Health America, n.d.). Grief is sorrow experienced after loss (Weir, 2018). As a result of the grief and loss caused by separating children from their families, child welfare professionals should examine and evaluate each family case carefully to consider the short-term and long-term effects of the removal process (Church, 2019). In order to fully address the disproportionality and disparities within the child welfare system, it is necessary to explore how grief

and loss impacts Black families. This study highlights the need to explore how grief and loss in relation to substance use and job loss affects the contact Black families have with the child welfare system.

Child Removal through the Child Welfare System and Substance Use

Researchers have extensively documented the punitive criminalization of Black mothers with substance use conditions which has resulted in investigations or losing custody of a child to CPS (Roberts 2012; Smith & Roane, 2023). According to Smith and Roane (2023) Black women are ten times more likely than White women to be reported to CPS for substance use. However, the connection between Black mothers and the use of substances as a result of child welfare removal or custody loss is an area of research in need of deeper exploration. Feelings of shame, stigma, devaluation of a mother's identity, and rage can contribute to harmful coping methods like substance use (Harp & Oser, 2018).

According to Keyes et al. (2014), grief and loss put adults at risk of developing substance use disorders (SUDs). The psychological trauma endured as a result of losing custody of one's child has been found to increase substance use in Black mothers (El-Bassel et al., 1996; Harp & Oser, 2018). According to Wall-Wieler et al. (2017) grief and loss are attributes that contribute to the manifestation of mental health conditions in mothers (as cited in Kenny, 2018). Researchers like Wall-Wieler et al. (2017) found that mothers ($N = 3,182$) who lost custody of their children to foster care had higher rates of substance use compared to mothers who lost a child due to death (as cited in Kenny, 2018).

Harp and Oser (2018) examined the impact of child custody loss on drug use and crime in 339 African American mothers through the Black Women Study of Epidemics Project (B-WISE). Results from the research study showed that African American mothers who lost custody of their children reported an increase in drug use. In addition, Jones et al. (2023) utilized the Black Women Study of Epidemics

Project (B-Wise) data and discovered associations between 443 African American mothers and intergenerational substance use, continual substance use, and current involvement with CPS. Children removed from their home by the child welfare system as a result of substance use by a parent encounter negative outcomes like parental incarceration and longer stays in out of home care (Brewsaugh et al., 2023).

It is important for behavioral health practitioners to be mindful that substance use disorder (SUD) is the most common condition connected to grief and loss (Szuhany et al., 2021). It should be noted that adults with SUDs regularly report personal loss and complications with grief and bereavement such as prolonged/complicated grief (Caparrós & Masferrer, 2021). Prolonged grief disorder is comorbid with SUDs (Reiter et al., 2024; Szuhany et al., 2021; Weir, 2018). In addition, prolonged grief disorder manifests differently based on cultural factors (Reiter et al., 2024). It is vital for practitioners to provide culturally compatible resources to Black families to address grief and loss and reduce removal or child custody loss connected to the child welfare system. In addition to substance use, it is important to explore how the dynamics of job loss and grief are connected to Black children and families' encounters with the child welfare system.

Job Loss and the Child Welfare System

According to researchers like Lanier et al. (2014) and Thomas et al. (2022), it is feasible for racism to create economic deprivation for Black families and result in contact with the child welfare system. Conrad-Hiebner and Byram's (2018) systematic review of longitudinal studies found parental job loss to be a primary factor related to future maltreatment and physical abuse in children (Lawson et al., 2020). The grief of losing a job is a significant life stressor that greatly impacts the mental health of individuals (Infurna & Luthar, 2017; Lawson et al., 2020). Judd et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis to assess the associations between parental employment and adverse childhood experiences

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(ACEs). Judd et al. (2023) found that parental unemployment was associated with an increase in parental mental health conditions.

Black families are regularly impacted by structural barriers like unemployment (Billingsley, 1994). Research has shown that parental job loss increased the risk of neglect among Black children (University of Oxford, 2017). Sedlak et al.'s (2010) National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) involving 10,791 sentinel professionals and 1,094 sentinel agencies found that children with unemployed or laid off parents were 2 to 3 times more likely to be neglected Schneider et al. (2024) conducted a longitudinal birth cohort study based on the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study ($N = 2,553$) to examine complex and nonlinear relationships between maternal employment, employment patterns, and child maltreatment. Schneider et al. (2024) results showed that for Black, White, and Hispanic mothers, not enough paid employment was associated with an increased risk of neglect. Harp and Oser (2016) conducted a research study with the Black Women Study of Epidemics (B-WISE) data to examine factors associated with official and informal child custody loss among 643 African American mothers. Harp and Oser (2016) showed that the highest levels of employment were reported among 643 African American women in their official custody loss group. Child welfare practitioners will need to screen and assess how prolonged grief and job loss affect removal and reunification plans connected to African American families. It will be imperative for child welfare practitioners to have resources to navigate the interconnections between grief and loss in relation to substance use and job loss when working with families. One innovative treatment found to be helpful to address grief and loss is The Energy Model of Cumulative Grief. The Energy Model of Cumulative Grief can be utilized to address the needs of Black families affected by the child welfare system.

Using The Energy Model of Cumulative Grief to Increase Equitable Outcomes

It is vitally important to provide innovative interventions to assist in addressing how grief and loss can affect the mental health of Black parents and lead to Black children involvement with the child welfare system. The Energy Model of Cumulative Grief is one intervention that is an effective resource in addressing grief and loss for African Americans. Conceptualized in 2018 by licensed clinical professional counselor Dr. Masica Jordan, and further developed by thought leaders, Dr. Joseph Hackett, Dr. Alaysia Black Hackett, Stephanie Strianse and Jamelia Hampton-Dugger, The Energy Model of Cumulative Grief builds on historical models of grief stage-based theories such as the Kubler-Ross model, Bowlby's Attachment Theory, Lindermanns' grief work, Rando's six "R" model, the Multidimensional Model and Strobe's Dual Process Model. These models view grief as a linear process, whereas the Energy Model of Cumulative Grief views grief as a set of common experiences. The model is oriented in cultural responsiveness, with an understanding that the complexities of culture and individual worldview are unique to each person. This model posits that grief is a form of energy and that the body produces energy that needs to be redirected. When one experiences grief and loss, energy is produced.

This energy cannot be destroyed but instead must be redirected to ensure that one does not experience physical and mental stress. This restructuring of energy (taking the energy that cannot be destroyed and teaching one to redirect that energy) is an effective approach to help one get to a place of discovery, which transcends recovery and healing. One can then repurpose their pain of grief and produce a new purpose from that place of discovery. The Energy Model of Cumulative Grief contends that time does not "heal all wounds" and if grief

is left untreated, one who is experiencing grief will likely endure circular issues. Consequently, a circular approach to addressing grief and loss is necessary. Not only should one's emotions be assessed and responded to when experiencing grief, but the energy that is flowing through the (1) mind, (2) spirit, (3) emotions, (4) physical self and (5) environment should also be assessed and responded to. This circular approach affirms that not one point of this process is more important than the other and that all five areas must be addressed.

The five energies are important due to their unique holistic nature to address grief and loss. The five energies function together based on a circular approach to provide tangible action plans of hope during the treatment process for clients. Treatment plans containing the Energy Model of Cumulative Grief work to tap into undiscovered strengths and needs of clients. For Black families in contact with the child welfare system, the model with the five energies can be utilized to assist in reunification and provide hope to buffer the effects of substance use and unemployment.

Organizations like the National Grief and Loss Center of America (NGLCA) have found the Energy Model of Cumulative Grief to be helpful in addressing grief and loss in African Americans (Jordan Alston et al., 2022). NGLCA created a web-based platform with over 100 hours of content grounded in the Energy Model of Cumulative Grief (Jordan Alston et al., 2022). The platform is evidence-based, culturally responsive, and trauma-responsive. NGLCA conducted a cross-sectional research study to examine the effect of the Energy Model of Cumulative Grief platform on professional practitioners and/or individuals experiencing grief and loss. Recruitment for two Grief and Loss Centers of America webinars occurred by utilizing advertising sponsors. A convenience sample of 140 people participated in the webinars in March of 2022. An estimated 57.7% of the webinar participants identified as Black (Jordan Alston et al., 2022). The webinars offered participants resources to support them as they addressed grief and loss on a personal basis and/or the needs of clients. A total of 26 participants completed one of three surveys pertaining to grief and loss and knowledge gained as a result of attending the Grief and Loss Centers of America webinar based on their identification as a professional, individual that experienced loss, or both. The survey for professionals contained a total of 15-items. Individuals that experienced loss also completed a 15-item survey. Participants who identified as both completed a 30-item survey.

Approximately 62.96% of participants attended the webinar as both a professional in the field serving clients and an individual that experienced loss. The majority (80.0%) of participants reported experiencing loss during the time frame of 1–6 months ago or 1 year or more. The vast majority of respondents (82.35%) reported that the Grief and Loss Centers of America's Energy Model of Cumulative Grief culturally responsive resources provided them with support during their time of loss. The majority of participants additionally reported the webinars were extremely useful or useful when it came to addressing their own personal experiences with grief and loss.

In addition, 94.12% of respondents' levels of hope were extremely high or high in relation to their grief and loss journey after watching the webinar (Jordan Alston et al., 2022). Most of the respondents (88.46%) working in a professional practice with clients experiencing grief and loss found the webinar to be extremely useful or useful. Seventy-two percent of professional respondents believed the Grief and Loss Centers of America's webinar equipped them to work with their clients who experienced loss. In addition, 70.59% of respondents believed the Energy Model of Cumulative Grief was effective in their professional practice. Lastly, results from a Spearman's rank correlation coefficient found a statistically large correlation between feeling equipped to work with clients experiencing grief and loss and how useful the webinars were for professional practice when working with clients experiencing grief and loss ($r_s = .61$, $p < .001$).

The Energy Model of Cumulative Grief can provide both practitioners and clients with hope. The webinar

results show that through the deployment of the model hope is not just a concept. Hope is a tangible gateway that can be deployed during times of grief and loss. The model can assist Black families with discovering newfound strengths, strategies, and plans to reduce interactions with the child welfare system in relation to substance use and job loss.

Conclusion

It is imperative for the child welfare system and court systems to assess the impact of substance use and job loss in relation to grief and loss and child removal. Doing so can improve reunification goals and outcomes for Black families. Once

Black children enter into the child welfare system, parents may suffer from grief and loss, lose hope, and believe the obstacles to reunification with their loved ones are insurmountable. It is critically important for child welfare workers to additionally account for racism, biases, historical trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) that may intertwine with grief and loss and influence reunification milestones and plans. Although the research on the Energy Model of Cumulative Grief is preliminary, the research conducted by Jordan Alston et al. (2022) shows that the content developed by the Grief and Loss Centers of America has an ability to greatly impact Black families and children who are experiencing grief and loss. ■

Author Bios

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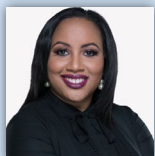
Angela S. Henderson *is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at the University of the District of Columbia. She has dedicated her life to advocating for social, economic, and environmental justice, and protecting the human rights of individuals, children, and families. Dr. Henderson is the CEO of Asher Services, Incorporated.*
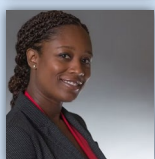
*The late **Dr. Angela Bullock** was a highly respected scholar, educator, and counselor whose life's work profoundly shaped the field of counselor education and the broader UDC community. As a dedicated faculty member at the University of the District of Columbia (UDC), Dr. Bullock was known for her exceptional leadership, deep compassion, and unwavering commitment to preparing culturally responsive counselors who could serve diverse and underserved communities.*

Dr. Bullock earned her doctoral degree in counseling and spent her career advancing equity, access, and excellence in mental health education. At UDC, she played pivotal roles in curriculum development, accreditation processes, and the mentorship of countless graduate students who credit her with inspiring their professional paths. Her teaching blended academic rigor with heartfelt authenticity, allowing students to feel both challenged and cared for.

A champion for community mental health, Dr. Bullock brought a unique blend of scholarship and service to her work. She was deeply respected for her ability to translate theory into meaningful practice and for her commitment to increasing representation within the counseling profession—particularly among Black, Hispanic, and justice-impacted populations.

Dr. Bullock's passing represents a tremendous loss to the UDC family and the counseling field at large. Her legacy lives on in the students she empowered, the colleagues she inspired, and the lasting contributions she made to culturally responsive counselor education. Her impact continues to guide the next generation of practitioners and educators who follow in her footsteps.
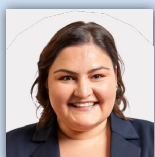
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