

## ABSTRACT

An Overview on Death and Dying Including Cultural Influences Within the Major Non-White Populations of the United States

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This piece outlines the meaning of death, dying, and bereavement in the United States through artistic, medical, and psychological definitions of the words, all unique and different in their own ways. Medically, death may occur when the brain dies, but the existence of life support instills a sense of hope in loved ones. Media and art representations of death can show an inordinate amount of violence and unhealthy coping skills. The foundation of dying stages is laid out by Kubler-Ross' five stages of grief. At the same time, this alters for different races and ethnicities. Common funeral practices and coping skills as well as death in art and history is shown for the African American and Mexican American populations.

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AN OVERVIEW ON DEATH AND DYING INCLUDING CULTURAL INFLUENCES  
WITHIN THE NON-MAJOR WHITE POPULATIONS OF THE UNITED STATES

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Overview

#### *Introduction*

The concept of dying has formulated into a taboo topic in today's American society (Patricelli, 2007). The broadcast media and films have turned death into a show. Newspapers, magazines, television, and movies focus more on the violent nature that sometimes happens with death – murders, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, etc. – and less on the necessary emotional coping aspects that need to accompany death (Meyer, 2005). The media is not all bad when it comes to death. It could also provide a point of focus for a grieving community or nation (Corless, Germino, & Pittman, 2003). For example, with the recent catastrophe on September 11, 2001, many news stations reported background stories of affected individuals, displayed memorial services and so forth to further express the importance and seriousness of the situation. However, at the same time of capturing these experiences, the repeated reporting of death related events could also hamper survivors' grieving process, which could increase the pain caused by the event (Corless, Germino, & Pittman, 2003). It is a balancing act.

Death in literature has presented itself throughout history. Within these poems, novels, and plays death is handled in all sorts of ways. Death can be used as an instructional tool to teach about moral and social issues. For example, in the nonfiction work *Tuesdays with Morrie* the main point is the importance of life, which is discovered through the dying process. Albon (1997) discovered that fortune and success were not what he should be focusing on in life, but rather, establishing and building relationships. With other works, death may not be such a main topic, but is existent and a contribution

to the work as a whole. For example, in Gertrude Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the author mentioned the death of Stein's parents in one sentence, but never discussed or mentioned again. However, the impact of the death still occurred and was a part of the narrative background.

The topic of death cannot be avoided. Everybody must experience it at one point in their life, whether it is someone's death or their very own. Death is unavoidable. Therefore communication on the issue should be more prevalent. In the current American school system, before college, students are seldom exposed to concepts of death, dying, and grief (Kastenbaum, 1998). Lester (1992-1993) found that undergraduates prefer to avoid social relationships of any form with those who are dying of cancer or are suicidal. It was also discovered that nurses even take a longer time to go to the bedsides of those people that are dying as compared to other patients (Lester, 1992-1993).

Even in medical school, where the concept should be discussed at a high level, it is not mentioned as much as it should be. Mermann, Gunn, and Dickinson (1991) conducted a study on 111 medical schools across the United States. Each was surveyed about their death education programs. Only 30% of these schools required one or two courses discuss topics related to death and dying. In 52% of schools, death and dying was taught in a required course as a distinct component. In only 18% of schools was death and dying taught as a separate course. Of these schools, only half required their students to take the course. "Personal involvement of student with patients in the process of learning about death and dying [throughout all 111 schools] was minimal" (p. 36).

With this lack of discussion on death, many misconceptions about dying exist today. For example, some people believe delivering bad news to the patient will make

them more depressed or lose hope, or could even cause them to die sooner. Another fallacy that is determined as truth is patients should be physically treated as long as it will aid in keeping the person alive, whether or not that person may be beneficial for the person's emotional state. One of the biggest fallacies that stands today, and will be addressed in this thesis, is the concept that people cannot be reconciled to the idea of death and therefore cannot prepare to die (Oaks & Ezell, 1993).

### *Death and Dying*

The words death and dying have a much more complex meaning behind them than people originally think. The question is brought forward almost everyday with scientists and doctors. Is a person considered dying as soon as they are diagnosed with cancer or is the chance of recovery enough to keep them away from this word? In order to create more definable measures for these terms they must be discussed.

When saying someone is terminally ill that typically means there is no longer hope of recovery. The point in question is when this dying process starts. One can say that dying actually starts at birth since we all experience death (Kastenbaum, 1998). We all live knowing we will die one day. However, most people do not like to think of dying in this way because most people are not willing and ready to confront their own death, especially if they are fully healthy. Jeremy Taylor, chaplain of King Charles I of England, said dying happens simultaneously with the aging process. As people mature, body functions start to deteriorate, which is a main part of many scientists' definitions (Kastenbaum, 1998).

Collins (1975) describes his views on the dying process, which he modified from Kramer (1966). Collins believed there were three phases to dying: “disordered function (disequilibration), disintegration, and deanimation” (p. 33), in consecutive order.

In the first phase, disordered function, each organ system in the body begins to deteriorate. Collins also thought this phase could be considered “a period of early clinical death” (p. 33). It is important to note with Collins’ definition of this first phase of dying, a full recovery is still possible. However, that does not remove a person from the category of dying.

The second phase, disintegration, is represented by a deterioration of an organ in regard to its ability to respond. In this phase, a person is left in basically a vegetative state. Again, though, Collins believes a full recovery is in fact possible and calls this phase a “period of intermediate clinical death” (p. 33).

The third and final phase is represented by the beginnings of tissue disintegration. With this phase, a person cannot be revived. Collins determined that in this phase, certain organs and cells can be alive in the person, but the sum of these parts does not equal life. At this point, and only at this point, is it acceptable for a person to be considered dead and the remaining cells that are still active can be disengaged. This is known as a biological death.

Kastenbaum (1998) states four different ways in which the beginning of dying can be interpreted. From one viewpoint, Kastenbaum declares, “the dying process begins when a physician has obtained and analyzed enough information to make such a judgment” (p. 91). Therefore, until a physician has diagnosed the problem, a person is not dying. The Glaser-Strauss research team (1968) discovered that staff interaction with



patients is positively correlated with their knowledge about time and certainty of death with the patient. With this information, though nothing can be known for sure, tensions are still reduced because it provides more concrete information on how much time is left.

Another perspective is the dying process does not actually begin until the physician communicates the diagnosis to the patient. The difference lies in the patient's awareness of their condition. The delay between the communication and discovery could be days, weeks, or even months, yet from this perspective the dying process has not started (Kastenbaum, 1998). However, if this were the case a person may never enter the process of dying. Another article follows these same guidelines. The process of dying does not begin until the patient receives a terminal diagnosis. The article defines terminal illness by "a medical diagnosis that indicates to the individual for the first time that there is a disease process that will probably culminate in death" (Allan & Hall, 1988, pg. 32). This article inserts the careful word "probably" in this definition, which maintains hope in patients their condition will improve.

Yet another perspective states the dying process does not begin until the patient "realizes or accept the facts" (Kastenbaum, 1998, p. 92). This does not necessarily occur immediately after a doctor informs the patient. People can be in a state of denial and might not even hear what the doctor is saying. This is why open communication is especially important between patients and doctors. A patient's awareness of their situation is further complicated with a term called "middle knowledge." A patient's mind on his or her own conditions is not always grounded and can switch from time to time. A patient with "middle knowledge" may be intellectually aware of their current state, but may not be able to put it in words (Weisman, 1993). This may confuse the people around

the patient. The dying person's perception and reality of death can change depending on his/her strength of relationship with people. A patient may stay hopeful to some people, but to others close to them they may wish to express their fears or vice versa.

The last perspective from Kastenbaum (1998), which is shared by many, is dying does not begin until it is absolutely sure that nothing more can be done to help preserve a person's life. Then, and only then, is a person truly dying. Even if a situation may seem dire, a doctor may not diagnose death because there are still treatments, surgeries, medications that have not yet been tried as a cure. This definition seems basic, but yet there is room for confusion and disagreement. Different doctors and specialists could argue about possible options that are left or argue if there are options that are even left. It is this constant shimmer of hope that can postpone people from accepting their state of dying and later death. Plus, death can be a very sensitive topic to the point where many do not acknowledge its reality until it is happening (Alan & Hall, 1988). This makes it hard for the patient, and those close to the patient, to accept death and the grief that come with death.

In the United States, many fear and avoid the reality of aging and death (Wink, 2006). The irony is death can still be considered as indefinable. The American Medical Association (1974) stated it is not necessary to formulate a legal definition of death. Further, they stated that an "irreversible cessation of function of the brain" can be considered as "one of the *various* criteria which can be used in the medical diagnosis of death" (p. 73). Though death can be interpreted in a number of ways the majority of the population in American consider death to have to have two parts. First, there must be an absence of respiratory and cardiac function as determined by a physician. Second, death

occurs if there is this irreversible cessation of total brain function as the American Medical Association mentioned (California Medical Association, 1975).

However, the concept of death becomes obscure when it comes to the topic of comas and those on life support. Are they truly living a life if they are unconscious? How long do they have to remain unconscious to be considered dead and for the hope of life to completely disappear? The Harvard Ad Hoc Committee (1968) determined a coma to be entirely irreversible if five criteria are met. First, there must be no receptivity or responsivity, even to intense pain. Second, there cannot be any movement or spontaneous breathing for at least three minutes once the body is taken off of the respirator. Third, reflexes must be halted entirely; this includes pupil movement, swallowing, yawning, and other reflexes. Fourth, there is a flat EEG for at least ten minutes. Lastly, all of these have to be repeated within 24 hours with no change. Many people base their definitions off of this basic outline, but the number in the fifth part changes. Minnesota Statute (1971) claims twelve hours of unchanged behavior in a coma is deemed irreversible. The question remains on which should be taken as truth and who should be deemed with such an honor to establish this truth.

### *Bereavement, Mourning, and Grief*

Bereavement, mourning, and grief have come to be used by the American population interchangeably. However, there is a clear definable difference between each word.

The term bereavement is more so a statement of fact. When a loved one dies, a person is bereaved (Kastenbaum, 1998). Bereavement is the simple fact that a person has lost something, more specifically someone. Bereavement is objective. The experiences

that come from bereavement are highly varied. This is because a single person can be involved on so many levels with many different people. Therefore, their death has far-reaching effects (Walsh & McGoldrick, 1991).

Mullan, Skaff, and Pearlin (2006) have determined there are three separate components to the bereavement process: loss, grief, and resolution. The *loss* component refers to the physical and emotional separation of a person that was involved in one's own life. This may even start to be experienced before the death occurs. For example, if the loved one is experiencing an ongoing terminal illness, the deterioration process may be slow and though death is not final, the loved one is not the same as before. Therefore, loss is experienced. Grief comes in many ways, shapes, and forms and complements loss. Grief refers to the "complex emotional, cognitive, and perceptual reactions" (Corless, Germino, & Pittman, 2006, p. 227) of a person that has experienced a loss. Lastly, resolution does not refer to the end of the grieving process (because this process could continue indefinitely), but rather the process people manage their new lives beyond the death they experience.

Though bereavement is deemed a process and is composed of these three parts, it does not mean one phase ends and the next begins. One phase may never fully replace the component before it. Even once resolution has been reached, people can still experience times of pain and hurt from their loss (Wortman & Silver, 1990). It is normal for some of the effects of grief to last the rest of a person's lifetime.

Therefore, the bereavement process not only incorporates this emotional coping of death, but it also encompasses "a restricting or major life domains: one's time, social relationships, occupational life, financial situation, and plans for the future" (Corless,

Germino, & Pittman, 2006, p. 244). A bereaved person will still be connected all their life to the loved one who has died (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996).

The concept of mourning is involved with grief, but they are not necessarily the same thing. The process of mourning is based off of one's culture. Different areas of the world, of the United States, have different customs and guidelines to follow when a person is in mourning. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary definition of mourning is "an outward sign (as black clothes or an armband) of grief for a person's death;" it also refers to mourning as a period of time (Merriam-Webster's, n.d.). The process and length of the formal mourning process may change depending on one's culture and belief system. This is a key difference between mourning and grief because grief, as stated earlier, continues indefinitely.

For example, during the Victorian era, widows wore clothes of mourning for at least two and a half years after the death of the spouse. This allotted time changed depending on which loved one passed. If a sibling passed away, mourning was to last six months (Oaks & Ezell, 1993). This guideline laid in front of bereaved persons helped to move them forward because they were allowed to think of their loss while still carrying on through the day (Schoenberg et al., 1975).

Today in American society, the rules of mourning are not so clearly defined. This makes the grieving process more difficult because what is customary in today's world is to move on as quickly as possible. People who are dependent and weak might be frowned upon and their behavior highly discouraged. People are not given long periods of mourning today (Oaks & Ezell, 1993); however, this is sometimes the healthiest option for people. Bereaved persons can feel even more loss and abandonment because of the

stigma forced upon them. The avoidance that comes naturally to people surrounding the bereaved also hinders emotional progress (Oaks & Ezell, 1993). Bereaved people need companionship and need to be allowed to mourn.

The term grief is formally defined as a “deep and poignant distress caused by or as if by bereavement” (Merriam-Webster’s, n.d.), but it is so much more than this definition. Grief looks different to every single person and is unique to personality types. There are many different kinds of grief – anticipatory, disenfranchisement, complicated – as well as many formal grief processes that have been studied and refined over the years by many researchers (Kastenbaum, 1998). However, there is a clear distinction between grief and the grieving process. Attig (1991) said that grief can instill feelings of helplessness and passivity while the grieving process requires much energy as it brings challenges and opportunities for the grieving to deal with. The process of grieving can help a person to gain control of their life again after one of the most stressful times of someone’s life (Oaks & Ezell, 1993).

It is important to note that grief is not the only response to bereavement. Feelings of anger, indifference, or what is known as dissociative flight (extreme patterns of denial) and other feelings can also be displayed by bereaved peoples (Kastenbaum, 1998). At the same time, grief is one of the pre-dominant responses so it is important to grasp the concept in order to comfort the bereaved (Kastenbaum, 1998).

In fact, there are many scientists and researchers who deem that the physical side of grief can be so severe it can be described as a disease. This concept started with an experiment conducted by Engel (1963) who said that bereaved people, who already have

a physical illness, experience a powerful or persistent grief process can experience further sickness, or even death.

As expressed earlier, the concept of dying is hard for the general population to discuss and talk about it. When it is encountered in everyday life, it is usually avoided. This is how the feelings of anticipatory grief have become more prevalent in today's society. People experience anticipatory grief before the actual death of the loved one has taken place. These feelings do not replace the feelings of grief when the death actually takes place, but studies have shown that "those who found themselves suddenly transformed into widows tended to suffer more intensively" (Kastenbaum, 1998, p. 322). Therefore, anticipatory grief acts as a way to brace people for the reality of the situation. It is the first steps for some to accepting death. Although sometimes this can be healthy for the people around the dying, it can make situations worse for the dying person. Along with anticipatory grief, detachment from the dying can occur. This can mean fewer conversations, less visiting time, and less overall connection which can lead the dying person to feel lonelier, abandoned, and scared (Oaks & Ezell, 1993).

Grief can also be complicated in another way. When a loss is not openly recognized by society for people, then the bereavement period is jeopardized because it is not acceptable or expected of people to grieve. This can lead to feelings of guilt and confusion about what to experience. This type of grief is known as disenfranchised grief (Leming & Dickinson, 1994). There are four different scenarios, as put forth by Leming and Dickinson (1994) that can lead to disenfranchised grief.

First, if society does not recognize the relationship between a person and the deceased then a person may not feel comfortable to publicly mourn and grieve. Examples

of these relationships are extramarital affairs, homosexual relationships, and heterosexual cohabitation partners. These forms of relationships are not widely accepted, many individuals choose not to accept at all, in American culture (Saad, 2012; Grant, 2014); therefore, bereaved people may not receive the level of support and understanding they need to get through this rough time. Another situation that can lead to disenfranchised grief is if the loss is not seen as a genuine loss like an abortion or miscarriage, or loss of a beloved pet (Kastenbaum, 1998). Also, if the griever themselves are not recognized as needing to grieve, like those of a friend, can lead to this type of grief. The strength of a relationship between a person and a friend can be unclear to people outside the friendship. People may not have realized how close the griever and the lost one were. Lastly, disenfranchised grief can be a result of a situation if the death itself is not socially acceptable, like when the death is caused by suicide, AIDS, or drug overdose (Rosen, 1989). People not directly involved may feel uncomfortable or be judgmental around griever from these experiences and may not lend the needed social support.

About twenty percent of grieving individuals experience what is called complicated grief (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006). Complicated grief is defined as “the long-term persistence of symptoms of separation distress and feelings of being devastated and traumatized by the death” (p. 53). Usually people who experience complicated grief had impediments before the death occurred like a separate loss, mental health problems, or a lack of a supportive social system surrounding them.

Hooyman and Kramer defined three different kinds of symptoms that separate complicated grief from “normal” grief. They use the term “normal” grief extremely lightly, referring more to the way grief is brought about. Complicated grief is associated



with distressful events like the death of a child or a sudden or violent death. The first kind of symptom is separation distress, which can be characterized by constant thoughts and memories of the deceased, as well as a physical search for the deceased, to the point where the person cannot properly function. The second category of symptoms is known as traumatic distress, which can include shock and disbelief. This can lead to detachment from society. The last category of complicated grief is somatic symptoms which are feeling the pain the deceased may have gone through leading up to their death. All feelings of positivity for the future are lost with complicated grievers. With this type of grief it can seep into more daily functioning for the individual. The diagnosis of complicated grief usually pairs with these more traumatic deaths.

There are two main types of grievers: intuitive and instrumental (Doka & Martin, 2010). One type is not considered better or healthier than the other type of griever. Until recently, these terms used to be known as masculine versus feminine types of grief. However, these leave implications that a man must grieve the “masculine” way when it is perfectly normal and acceptable for a man to grieve in the “feminine,” or now deemed intuitive, grieving process.

An intuitive griever typically experiences grief in terms of emotions. Intuitive grievers draw more on the people around them and have a high need to express their feelings. This is seen in this society as the “proper” way to grieve. However, this is not necessarily true because it may not be what the griever needs. Instrumental grievers feel the need to express their grief behaviorally or cognitively (Doka & Martin, 2010). For example, a father who has lost his wife who loved flowers may fully dedicate himself to

starting a beautiful garden in the backyard. Though he may not talk to people about what he is experiencing, the garden is a way for him to cope with the loss.

*Kübler-Ross: The Five Stages*

Kübler-Ross (1969) is known to have established the foundation of the dying process. The majority of theories that were developed after Kubler-Ross' initial five-stage theory are influenced in some way by her model. Kubler-Ross' model is known as a sequence of psychological stages; however, they are not necessarily consecutive. Many people may not even experience all five stages or may bounce between two stages. Therefore, her model can more so be categorized as five basic emotions that accompany the dying experience. Kubler-Ross (1969) says the stages begin, though, with the initial communication from the doctor about the diagnosis.

The first emotion described is denial, characterized by shock and a refusal to accept the diagnosis. The second "stage" is anger. This can be anger toward anything and anyone. The patient becomes especially difficult to relate and talk to at this point. Next, comes bargaining. This can be a deal about something that person will begin to do if allowed to live, such as go to church every Sunday or it can be a temporary extension for example death only after they see their engaged son/daughter get married. The fourth "stage" is depression. A person may begin to feel unworthy and less responsive to things taking place around them. The final "stage" is acceptance. This does not necessarily mean happiness and usually does not. Rather, acceptance is characterized by no feelings at all; the struggle is over.

There are some critiques of Kubler-Ross' theory, as there are with every theory; however, it is still considered the foundation of the dying process. One critique does not

deny that people experience the emotion presented in each stage, but claims it does not encompass everything and the feelings do not necessarily belong in stages (Kastenbaum, 1998). For example, the need to control and a desire to preserve a relationship between them and the people around them are also expressed by the dying. Plus, Kubler-Ross, and subsequent believers in the five-stage model, has actually found research to fully give credit to prove this model.

One of the bigger critiques of Kubler-Ross is made by Moller (1996). Even though Kubler-Ross has stated it is inappropriate to rush people through the stage, it can be thought as an impulse for those who are fairly acquainted with the model. Some may view the stage of acceptance as a glowing crown on a pedestal that all dying people must climb to and wear. This can add unnecessary strain in one's emotions if they do not feel comfortable ever reaching acceptance. Moller (1996) thinks Kubler-Ross has therefore created an "ideal death" based on her thoughts and beliefs, not factual data, which people must attain. Moller does not think there is any set destination for people to reach, but instead, people should simply focus on the feelings they do have, one at a time.

### *Cultural Overviews*

Culture can be defined as "an integrated system of learned patterns of behavior, ideas, and products characteristic of a society" (Hiebert, 1976, p. 25). In the United States, many cultures are prevalent. Murillo-Rhode (1976) describes the country as a one that reflects the diversity of the entire world. Because of this, it is highly important that doctors, nurses, social workers, and many other professionals accommodate to the level of differences in views and beliefs that are prevalent in today's society.

More specifically, culture heavily influences the response of persons to death and the dying process. The two terms cannot be separated. Ross (1981) states at least five ways that culture can influence death. First, culture can affect the comfort needs and the kind of care provided for the dying. Culture also influences the doctor and hospital chosen to care for the dying as well as methods they use to help cure the dying. Third, culture influences beliefs about the causes of death. After death occurs, funeral and burial rituals are heavily influenced. Lastly, the bereavement roles are shaped by one's culture.

The two major non-white populations in the United States are African-Americans and Mexican-Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Each has distinct ways in which their culture and ancestral history influence death and dying.

## CHAPTER TWO

### African-American Population

#### *Overview*

African Americans, recorded in 2010, make up 13.6% of the total U.S. population, around 42 million people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Their start in American history is tragic and they have overcome and grown through many trials and tribulations to reach their current freedom in today's society. In fact, it is these experiences that have influenced their views, values, and beliefs on death and dying the most. Their long history simply cannot be ignored. Death and dying has also heavily influenced African American literature and music and vice versa. This theme plays throughout all different time periods of these art forms.

History is not the only influence on African Americans when it comes to death and dying. Family also plays a big role in their lives in general, so it also plays a big role when it comes to death. This is not just the immediate family, but with African Americans especially, this includes grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, departed relatives (through memories), close friends, and then the church company is also included within the family (Allen, 1995).

Spirituality and religion also play a big role in African Americans' lives. More than half of African Americans report themselves as Baptist. Another one-third say they belong to another Protestant denomination and six percent were Catholic (Hayslip & Peveto, 2005). These spiritual beliefs provide important coping mechanisms for African Americans.

Historical events and their unique culture have established their own style of dealing with death and dying.

### *History*

It is estimated that between 15 and 50 million Africans were taken from their native lands and forced into slavery in the Western Hemisphere (Davidson, 1961). These are just the persons that made it through the horrific journey. It is thought that above 30 million, quite possibly up to 100 million never finished their trip (Davidson, 1961). These deaths were caused by suffocation, drowning, malnutrition, disease, suicide, whippings, beatings, mutilation, and outright murder. These deaths did not just stop because their ship reached the destination. The dying further persisted. There are many personal accounts that exist in today's world of the many horrible deaths slaves had to endure through time. It is easiest to show how much these deaths impacted African Americans through these personal tales than to try to express such depravity second-hand.

In 1789, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, an autobiography, was published. In it he writes of his time across the Middle Pass (some time before 1766):

“One day, two of my wearied countrymen who were chained together, preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings and jumped into the sea: immediately another quite dejected fellow, who, on account of his illness, was suffered to be out of irons, also followed their example; and I believe many more would have done the same if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew, who were instantly alarmed” (p. 23).

In 1829, there is another account from an onlooker who rode with the slaves on the ship. The slaves were being returned to their homeland from Britain and the U.S. when the countries decided to stop importing slaves. This excerpt is after the ship ride

and the slaves had all been squished into too small of confines for too long of a period. They were all chained together, some chained to those who died due to poor living conditions.

“Many destroyed one another in the hopes of procuring room to breathe; men strangled those next to them, and women drove nails into each other’s brains. Many unfortunate creatures on other occasions took the first opportunity of leaping overboard and getting rid, in this way, of an intolerable life” (Walsh, 1829, p. 4).

Another excerpt is written from the viewpoint of a slaveholder, Mr. Caulkins, between the years 1837-1839:

“There was another slave shot while I was there; this man had run away and had been living in the woods a long time, and it was not known where he was, till one day he was discovered by two men, who went on the large island near Belvidere to hunt turkeys; they shot him and carried his head home” (Caulkins, 1839, p. 15).

This excerpt is from a woman named Elizabeth. This particular event took place in the 1850s. To preface this story, a pair of plough lines went missing and the master replaced them, warning Lizzie’s uncle not to let it happen again. Yet, it did.

“My uncle hung himself rather than meet the displeasure of his master. My mother went to the spring in the morning for a pail of water, and on looking up into the willow tree which shaded the bubbling crystal stream, she discovered the lifeless form of her brother, suspended beneath one of the strong branches. Rather than be punished the way Colonel Burwell punished his servants, he took his own life. Slavery has its dark side as well as its bright side” (“A Slave’s Life,” 1868, p. 5).

Not only have African Americans experienced the death of their loved ones, but also deaths of people in power like in this case where Colonel Burwell took his own life because he could not handle the power. This excerpt states a happier side to death, which can be morbid in some people’s eyes. In spite of the happiness, it portrays yet another way African Americans experienced death.

The laws regarding capital punishment are another way African Americans received an unusual exposure to death. Before the Civil War, in Virginia, there were 71 crimes that slaves could be punished for by death. For whites', for these same 71 crimes, maximum punishment was imprisonment. Similarly, in Mississippi, slaves could be punished for 30 crimes by capital punishment while whites were punished for these same crimes by imprisonment or a fine (Kalish, 1977).

This account during the Civil War comes from a woman remembering her past. She was interviewed by another woman in the early 1900s.

“Very often medicines and doctors failed to save life; and whenever a slave died he was buried the same day. Mrs. Avery remarked, ‘If he died before dinner the funeral and burial usually took place immediately after dinner’” (“Georgia Slave Narrative,” 1938, p. 3).

These sudden deaths triggered complicated mourning and grief patterns, which is typically associated with more daily processing, something slaves were not usually allowed. They were immediately put back to work and whipped if anything was done otherwise. During war time, deaths of African Americans typically exceed other ethnicities' deaths. Specifically with the Civil War, the rate of mortality for African American soldiers was 40% higher than the mortality rate for whites (Kalish, 1977).

After the Civil War ended, a social group called the Ku Klux Klan started in December 1865. They were known for vicious treatment against blacks in an effort to increase white supremacy. In 1871 Congress finally took direct action against them by authorizing federal troops to suppress any Klan activities (Wang 1997). Even with this, the Klan only died off temporarily. Ben Johnson, a freed slave, remembers:

“I never will forget when they hung Cy Guy. They hung him for a scandalous insult to a white woman an' they comed after him a hundred strong. They tries him in the woods, an' they scratches Cy's arm to get some blood, an' with that



blood, they writes that he shall hang ‘tween the heavens and the earth till he is dead, dead, dead, and that any nigger what takes him down the body shall be hanged too. Well sire, the next morning there he hung, right over the road, an’ the sentence hanging over his head. Nobody would bother with that body for four days an’ there it hung, swinging in the wind, but the fourth day the sheriff comes an’ takes it down” (“Ku Klux Klan, 1868,” 2006, p. 2).

African Americans had to deal with these unseemly deaths even after slavery ended deaths that many other ethnicities in America do not have to come close to experiencing. These tragedies became a norm to the black culture and handled them with coping skills that other ethnicities would use for a less violent death like old age or cancer. If this was not a norm, blacks would have had to develop, like other ethnicities, coping skills for outstanding calamities. People handle the murder of a loved one much more severely than death of old age. These normalized tragedies further dehumanized blacks to other deaths.

Referring back to capital punishment policies, these unfair injustices did not stop when slavery ended. Between 1930 and 1968, 3,859 prisoners were executed on the state and federal level. Of these, 2,066 (54%) were black (Nabrit, 1969). Lynchings also did not stop when slavery ended. At least 3,400 blacks were lynched between the years 1882 and 1962 (Polski & Brown, 1967).

After both World Wars where African Americans had been allowed to fight, shed blood, and die for their country, they came back to America not wanting to be subjected to demeaning segregation laws. When they defied the laws, some whites attempted to suppress them by murder.

During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, African Americans also experienced severe deaths. One 26-year-old black man named Jimmie Lee Jackson walked on February 18, 1965 in a nonviolent march with 500 other people in Alabama.

The police broke up the march, brutally beating many people. Jimmie, his mom, and his grandfather ran into the safety of a local café. That is, until police came and shot Jimmie twice at close range then beat his mother and granddad (Combs, 2013).

Today, this sort of maltreatment still exists. An African American man by the name of Kenneth Chamberlain was murdered in his own home on November 19, 2011. When his medical alert system, which he had due to a heart condition, accidentally went off, four police officers rushed to his aid. However, after being told to leave multiple times, they continued to stay and harass Chamberlain. Events were recorded via his alert system. His son lives to tell the tale:

“They insisted that my father let them into his home, banging loudly on my father’s door for over an hour. On the recording, the police can be heard calling my father a ‘nigger.’ Ultimately, they broke through his apartment door and first shot him with a Taser. He was wearing nothing but boxer shorts when the police began their assault against him. Shortly after that, he was shot with two 40-caliber rounds and killed” (Arce & O’Brien, 2012).

One police officer even said he was going to pee in Mr. Chamberlain’s bedroom. This is far from the only instance of this occurring in today’s society. The struggle against racism and discrimination is still highly prevalent. There is no way of documenting the quantity of such incidents, but this does not keep them from being reality (“Study: Racism Kills Black Men”, 1998; Connelly, 2013).

One study was conducted on the amount of deaths several ethnic groups – Asian Americans, Caucasians, Hispanics, and African Americans – experienced. It was discovered that the African Americans within the study personally knew four to eight or more persons who died in the last two years. This is more deaths than other ethnic groups experienced (Hayslip & Peveto, 2005). This is due to both a greater sense of community among blacks as well as the simple fact that more African Americans die. The mortality

rate in each age group for African Americans is the highest among ethnic groups. This is due in part to socioeconomic disadvantages resulting in health care disparities (Hayslip & Peveto, 2005). Since they have to deal with not only death, but also violent death, African Americans tend to have the most experience with mourning and grief.

Kalish and Reynolds (1976) conducted a survey on death among ethnicities. They asked Japanese Americans, Mexican Americans, Caucasians, and African Americans if they would carry out their spouse's last wishes even if they were ridiculous. Over 80% of Caucasians, Mexican Americans, and Japanese Americans claimed they would while only 66% of African-Americans said they would. It is uncertain for the causes of these results, but this may lend itself to traces of desensitization taking place within the African American family unit.

The study also asked each group about dating after a spouse dies. Blacks were the least likely (11%) to believe it necessary to wait two years before dating. Anglo Americans were next with 21%, Asian Americans with 34%, and Hispanics with 40%. It was also asked if it was important to wait to remarry. Thirty-four percent of African Americans claimed time was unimportant to consider when remarrying after a spousal death. Twenty-six percent of Caucasians said this same thing, as well as 22% of Hispanics, and 14% of Asian Americans.

These results could be, again, because of the number of deaths, violent and nonviolent, African Americans have had to experience over and above other ethnic groups. They may have learned it necessary to continue on with life at a faster pace than other groups and need to formally mourn less because they have become accustomed to this way of life.

## *Music and Literature*

The extreme amount of tragedies and deaths African Americans have experienced has led to a big representation in their music and literature. These cultural cues have also impacted people outside of the African American community. Themes of death as freedom, departure, rest, and finding peace are all very common through black music and literature.

One of the most impactful books in the 1800s was *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. In this autobiography, Douglass not only appealed to slaves and revealed much of the horrible torment endured, he also appealed to slaveholders. He showed how they have become desensitized to the violence. He tries to sympathize with them in order to show them what they are doing is wrong. By appealing to them, Douglass had a better chance of getting them on his side and changing their viewpoint toward slavery. At one point, Douglass writes, "I'm not going to Hell, she is. I've lost everything, but my salvation" (Douglass, 1845, p. 56), referring to his slaveholder Mrs. Ald. This shows that he looked forward to his death because it meant freedom and happiness and justice. She would be righted for her wrongs and he would finally find peace. This reflects many slaves' attitude toward death. They looked forward to this time, which is very different from other ethnic groups, especially Caucasians who typically fear death.

Many slaves used music as a way to raise awareness that this treatment against them was unjust. They also used music as a way of coping with the deaths they experienced. Many slave songs during this period reflect the idea that death was not viewed as the worst thing that could happen to a person. One musician, Howard

Thurman, wrote, “Oh Freedom, I love thee! / And before I’ll be a slave, / I’ll be buried in my grave, / And go home to y Lord and be free” (Thurman, 1999). Death is preferred because this way the slave could be free. Death and dying have heavily weighed on African Americans’ consciousness since they were treated as imports. Their worry about death had to revolve around vicious behavior which scared more of them than happily thinking about the freedom that would come after the pain stopped.

In much African American poetry, death is defined. One poem, *A Death Song* written by Paul Lawrence Dunbar in 1899, draws a familiar physical surrounding in describing a death scene. The poem describes death as a place of rest, “Fu’ I t’ink de las’ long res’, / ‘Gwine to soothe my sperret bes’ / If I’s layin’ ‘mong ‘de t’ings I’s allus knowed” (Kalish, 1977, p. 95). This African American is looking forward to lying down and finding his peace which comes with death.

Another poet, a Mr. Claude McKay, defines death in his poem *If We Must Die* as a social relationship in the world. Death can be noble or ignoble. Obviously people would rather die a noble death. McKay states that it is better for blacks, though outnumbered and out-powered, to die fighting back and thus earn this noble death. Therefore African Americans should approach death with an eager attitude to advance rights for their people.

A shared value within black culture is the essential nature of music. The Blues have become an integral part not only in African American culture, but in American culture in general. Blues is more meaningful than a simple mood though. “Blues is also an active agent, a means of overcoming the sense of despair. Ultimately, the blues music and experience give hope and strength to overcome disappointment” (Daniels, 1985, p.

21). One example is a song by Skip James “Hard Time Killin’ Floor Blues.” The song is a representation of the continuing oppression of African Americans through the restraints of the Jim Crow laws and during the Great Depression. The discriminatory nature of America was a daily ordeal for African Americans. However, a way to overcome the hardships and the deaths was to openly grieve about it in song form. The songs acted as a public declaration of their sadness and helped them to carry forward. This is why the blues were popular for so long.

More current examples of death in African American literature are also evident. In Claude Brown’s *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1965) death is a reward for masculinity. The funerals marked in this book showed them as a reward to blacks for standing up for themselves. The author writes at one point, “The best (church) songs were sung at the funerals for the ‘bad niggers’” (p. 48). This relates back to the noble deaths. They fought for rights and were thus revered in their death. These types of deaths can be seen as more common for African Americans because they were known highly for standing out against injustices as opposed to Hispanics and Asian Americans where it is not heard about as much.

### *Funerals*

In African American culture, funerals are of high importance. This traces back to slavery and even further to their African heritage. Though there are many cultural variations in funeral practices across Africa, one main theme found throughout was that of placing pots on the burial mounds. Each pot represents a different social status as well as a difference between genders. Many slaves carried this tradition with them to America. While in slavery, pots were replaced with items that actually belonged or were used by

the individual who had passed on. Symbols of water and the color white were common characteristics of these items. White ceramic chickens and roosters were of the most common objects. There were two main purposes behind this tradition. One was to satisfy the spirit and therefore keep it from wandering. The second was to make sure to break the chain of deaths that could occur in the community after the first one. This tradition, though not very common in today's society, is still somewhat prevalent, but mainly in the South. In fact, researchers started observing the use of clockers as the markers on graves in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The clock would either read the time of death or 12 o'clock so as to wake the dead on Judgment Day (Jamieson, 1995).

Faulkner in *Go Down, Moses* portrays this tradition. He describes a cemetery with "shards of pottery and broken bottles and old brick and other objects insignificant to sight but actually of a profound meaning and fatal to touch, which no white man could have read" (Faulkner, pg. 135). This passage helps to show the importance of this cultural tradition and, at the same time, outsiders lack of understanding and appreciation for it. This seeming "junk" that many people mistake it as is a beautiful look into the dead's soul.

Slavery funerals were the only time that slaves could gather in groups more than three. Some slave owners felt too callous if they refused this, but most feared causing a slave rebellion. The funerals happened at the grave site since many slaves did not have church homes. Also, church authorities did not dedicate burial grounds to slaves so this alone was a chore for many (Jamieson, 1995).

The Tashjians (1974) discovered, while studying gravestones in New England, from 1650, that many of the gravemarkers described slaves as "servants." This could be

because people considered the word slave to be too derogatory. The gravemarkers also tended to be very decorated and elaborate. These two facts lead one to believe that some slaves were actually highly valued and respected by their white families. At the same time, since the burial was clearly Christian style in nature, the funeral could also be seen as a further disregard and mistreatment of African Americans. Some researches believed the lack of African cultural influence on these gravesites show the African Americans had no say in the funeral because it did not matter, rather than believing the white household was attempting a nice tribute (Kastenbaum, 2003). According to this viewpoint, the gravestones are a mark of eternal enslavement since it is a clear mark of white tradition. Both viewpoints are credible.

With this background, African American funerals are seen today as a combination of African heritage and traditional western Christian practices. Funerals, for African Americans, have become a way to honor their loved ones in death, even when disrespected in life. Funerals have also been a means for parents and grandparents to teach the youth. It has been recorded that many adults bring children to funerals to show that death can happen to anybody at any time (Collins & Doolittle, 2006). These lessons are more taught in mourning for those that have died due to discrimination.

A big example of this is the infamous death of Emmett Till in 1955. Emmett Till was a 14 year old boy who was brutally abused and murdered for reportedly flirting with a white woman. Emmett Till's mother desired for her son's burial to have an open casket so as the world could see the terrible situation. Parents forced kids to see Emmett Till and warn them against similar events that could occur (Adams, 2004).



Overall, African Americans learn to accept death and view it as a part of life. Many see the funeral as a way to open up their souls to the next step of life (Collins & DooLittle, 2006). Therefore, they create an environment within the funeral that allows the deceased in the best way possible to cross over to the next life. Contemporary African American funerals tend to be very large with immediate and extended family present as well as fictive kin and broader kin networks such as family friends labeled with titles like aunt, uncle, and cousin. The importance of appearance from family is so high that, at times, funerals are delayed so people from out-of-town have enough time to make travel arrangements (Collins & DooLittle, 2006). This is because attendance can be seen as a sign of respect and love. If attendance is deemed impossible, it's customary for a letter or flowers to be sent and for the letter to be read at the funeral.

Another common feature of the funerals are upbeat music with singing and clapping. The songs are usually that of promise, understanding, and hope. For example, some common songs are "We'll Understand it Better By and By," "God Will Take Care of You," and "May the Works I've Done Speak For Me" (Collins & Doolittle, 2006). Special readings, dances, and poems are also shared in African American funerals.

African Americans tend to spend more on average on funerals than any other population in the United States (Corless, Germino, Pittman, 2006). This is interesting because African Americans make the lowest income on average as well. In 2009, Black families median income was \$38,409, just slightly lower than Hispanics at \$39,730 and significantly lower than White families - \$62,545 – and Asians - \$75,027 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). This shows how important it is for this cultural group to give their loved ones a proper funeral. Funeral costs and arrangements have the potential to show to the

world how important an individual was and how much they were loved. Again, this is even true of those deaths that occurred in “bad light.” Therefore, the main goal of African American funerals is to show honor.

### *Common Coping Mechanisms*

African Americans typically experience more deaths than any other race or ethnic group. Kalish and Reynolds (1976) completed a survey of death encounters between ethnic groups. The survey showed African Americans not only experienced the most death, but also had the most experience with multiple deaths in a given year. The study shows 27.3% of African Americans had experienced 4 or more deaths the previous year compared to 22% or less of Whites, Asians, and Hispanics. The U.S. Census Bureau (2010) shows data on mortality rates across race and ethnic groups. Blacks experienced 919.2 deaths for every 100,000 people from 2008-2010 compared to 750.5 for Whites and 565.7 for Hispanics. For this reason, their coping methods leading up to and after death present differences than other groups. Plus, as Hayslip and Peveto (2005) write, African Americans’ view on death should be viewed in conjunction with “the struggle, violence, suppressed anger, and exposed aggression that have followed African Americans since the earliest days of slavery” (p. 31).

One of the biggest trends of coping with death for African Americans is religion. African Americans heavily rely not only on their faith, but on clergy and church members as well. In fact, out of all sources, religion and church play the most influential role in attitudes about death (Kalish & Reynolds, 1976). African Americans do not typically turn to family members for practical or emotional support. Blacks are the least likely to encourage family members to spend time with them as they are dying. Instead, many call

their clergyman when they are dying. At the same time, African Americans overall are the least likely to have told someone that he/she was about to die (Kalish & Reynolds, 1976). There is no real explanation for this. It could be adapted behavior over time. Slaves had to create their own kin relationships and rely on outside help, or even simply help themselves in order to gain any sort of assistance. This behavior could have been taught inadvertently from parent to child as the years went by.

Only 39% of African Americans believe the dead “watch over the Earth” (Kalish and Reynolds, 1976). This influences post-death behaviors in certain ways. Upon interviewing bereavement coordinator at Texas Home Health Hospice in Waco, Texas, Craig Klemptnaeuer, he explained African Americans funerals typically lasted the longest (Personal communication, November 13, 2013). This could be explained as an opportunity for loved ones to say goodbye one final time since they do not usually believe in angel-like figures. African Americans are also the least likely of whites, Asians, and Hispanics to visit the gravesite after death. This could be because they do not think the loved one is looking down to them to visit. This could also be linked to their high experience in death. They might not have as much as a need to remind themselves of each death.

At the funerals, emotions are understandably high. However, according to Kalish and Reynolds (1976) interviews, Blacks feel it is more appropriate to appear cool and collected publicly. They like to appear impenetrable by emotional pain. This could be linked to slavery days where emotions were a sign of weakness and punishment. At the same time, with such a high level of experience with death it could make outward

expressions of emotion (i.e. crying, sunken eyes, etc.) easier to control. It may not even occur as much because death is more seen as a common event in life.

Hayslip and Peveto (2005) completed a study on different race and ethnic groups' views on death. Seven statements were given to the participants which they were to rank on a scale from not at all important to of high importance. The seven statements are written out below:

1. Concerns regarding their body after death
2. Inability to care for dependents
3. Uncertainty as to what would happen after death
4. Inability to continue having experiences
5. Grief caused to survivors
6. Cessation of plans and projects
7. Pain during the dying process

The study showed that African Americans were most likely to say 6 of the 7 statements were not important. Since their high frequency in experiencing death they could be more likely to accept death.

However, Sanders, Poole, and Rivers (1980) also did a similar experiment looking across ages of Blacks and Whites' views. For the younger participants, there was no difference between Blacks and Whites on death anxiety. When looking at the older African Americans in the study, though, they scored higher not only on death anxiety, but on concern for the pain of dying. Both groups showed more anxiety in the older age groups which just means death is higher on the priority list than it was before. Their findings specifically regarding African Americans is not to be expected, but they demonstrate fluctuation in African Americans' attitudes.

One cannot view coping mechanisms African Americans use to handle death without looking at death by homicide and death by AIDS. In 2010, U.S. showed research

for the rates of causes of death. For every 100,000 Black deaths, 17.7 were done by homicide versus 3.3 for Whites and 5.3 for Hispanics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Though 17.7/100,000 is not a big number, these results show this is more of a common experience for Blacks. Thompson and Vardaman (1997) did a study on how Blacks typically handle homicide. The results showed that many do not express discontent or anger toward God after the death. (Only 13% expressed these feelings.) The main form of coping was to rely on their intimate relationship with God instead of pulling away from God or simply avoiding dealing with death. This shows their experience allowing them to fully embrace the death.

AIDS is another high cause of death for African Americans. Out of 100,000 deaths, 11.6 Blacks died from AIDS as opposed to 2.8 Hispanics and 1.1 Caucasians from 2007 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Hampton (2004) studied Blacks coping mechanisms with AIDS and found three main themes. The first is “viewing one’s individual life in the context of a collective.” Schiele (1997) expands on this saying one’s own situation and problems are of lesser importance compared to the family or group unit. African Americans do not typically reveal their diagnosis until months or even years after they find out. This could be due to the social responsibility concept or a factor of shame could be contributing as well. African Americans tend to rely on their HIV case managers and other staff instead of their family. This relates back to this idea of creating kin networks as slaves had to do. They expanded their idea of family in order to have an emotional support system. For African Americans today, it could be their immediate family unit is of higher importance than their own needs.

The second theme is “spirituality can be found in everyday experiences.” What Hampton means by this is many turning to prayer in order to deal with the disease. At the same time, they adjust their focus on everyday situations (paying bills, cooking dinner, etc.) they can control in order to feel better about handling the disease. They try to focus on what they can control in their life.

The last theme is “relinquishing control to a higher power,” meaning putting the illness into the “hands of the Lord.” Again, they’ve lost control and decide to leave it to someone who they believe can do something about it. Siegel and Schrimshaw (2002) expand on this idea by saying God becomes for them an individual they can talk to, someone who relates to them. People can feel as if they are drowning in this disease so they turn to God as someone they can confide in and someone who can comfort in the way they need.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Mexican-American Population

#### *Overview*

Currently, the Mexican-American population in the United States is higher than it has been ever before. In 2012, there were 33.7 million recorded Mexican Americans living within the United States border, this number includes both legal immigrants and people born in the U.S. self-identifying as Hispanic (Pew Research Center, 2012).

A large portion that is not easily quantifiable involves the illegal Mexican population in the United States. This population comes with a whole different lifestyle mainly prevalent along the U.S.-Mexican border. Violence and discrimination is rampant (Eschbach, Hagan, & Rodriguez, 1999). Many deaths occur along this border due to this violence and illegality and different mourning rituals are associated with these different deaths.

Like with African Americans, the arts influence the Mexican American thought process of death as well as these thought processes influence the art created. One of the main influences is the Day of the Dead holiday. The Day of the Dead brings merriment and joy to the concept of death in Mexican American lifestyles (Brandes, 1997). Images of death like skulls and skeletons are displayed compelling Mexican Americans to face death in ways other ethnic groups do not encounter.

Also, the influences of the Spanish language on Mexican American culture can alter coping mechanisms involved with death. Meaning, this language barrier can sometimes hinder people from adequately expressing emotions (Santiago-Rivera &

Altarriba, 2002). All of these factors come into play in the relationship between Mexican-Americans and the topics of death and dying.

### *Cultural Influences*

Death and dying for the Hispanic population is characterized by distinct aspects of their culture. Day of the Dead is a traditional holiday which is strongly associated with Mexican-Americans. The holiday allows people to embrace the face of death in a more light-hearted manner than is typical. These influences can change the ways Hispanic peoples cope with death since they are more highly exposed to death, especially in this lighter scene.

The U.S./Mexican border also creates a new form of death that other cultures do not really have to deal with. The border life even brings with it its own life style habits and mourning patterns.

With the Mexican population, the Spanish language also exemplifies a key point not many other populations in the U.S. have to handle. In the U.S., especially in the southern regions, many Hispanics speak Spanish as their first language as opposed to English (Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004).

There are many other cultural influences in the death and dying process for Hispanics, but these are the three key areas this section will focus on.

#### *Day of the Dead.*

Scholars struggle to find the exact origins for the modern day Mexican holiday Day of the Dead, though traces of this famous holiday can be found throughout European



and later Aztec history. A basic knowledge of the details of the holiday will help to comprehend its background.

Day of the Dead is actually celebrated over the course of two days: November 1 and 2 of each year. The first day is known as All Saints' Day to originally honor the Catholic Saints. Pope Gregory III (731-741 AD) implemented this day as a sacred occasion to celebrate the saints (Brandes, 1997). The second day is called All Souls' Day. In the beginning, this day was used to pay respects to the souls in Purgatory, and the hope was to eventually pray and commemorate them to help them attain final purification. This second day originated with St. Odilo (1048 AD), the fifth abbot of Cluny, who wanted to make special prayers and sing for those cleansing themselves in Purgatory (Cornides, 1967).

Today, the two days are used more so to honor friends and family (Brandes, 2003). People take time to remember and pay their respects to their loved ones. In the Mexican culture, it is thought that people die three times. The first death is the death of the body where their heart actually stops beating. The second death is when the body decays into the earth. The third death is when the person is forgotten by those who are living. This last death is the true death of the person, which is why Day of the Dead has become a time to set aside for those who are dead so they will not be forgotten (Waugh, 1997).

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, special masses became a big part of the days' celebrations. Spanish Dominicans began this tradition, and adopted in Spain, Portugal, and Latin America in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century when they were recognized by Pope Benedict XIV.

Modern day celebrations still incorporate this part of the holiday, but they are far from a major focus of the festivities (Cornides, 1967).

One of the most distinctive parts of the holiday is the *ofrenda*, or the offering. The *ofrenda* consists of breads, sugary candies, and other foods and placed on top of the deceased relative's graves and home altars. The food acts as food for the deceased individual (Brandes, 1997). This tradition can be seen in ancient Aztec funerary rites. Aztecs made images out of wood and covered it with *tzoalli*, like amaranth seed, dough and then shaped it to look like a human being. They then broke the bread during the mortuary ritual and passed it around to eat (Brandes, 1997). In modern time during Day of the Dead traditions, a soft spongy bread is shaped into a skeleton and called *pan de muerto* or "dead bread". (Brandes, 1998). This though is a small connection with modern day traditions and only explains a portion of why the food is used today.

The elaborate and wide array of sweets and breads appears to be unique and a huge part of Mexican traditions of Day of the Dead (Brandes, 1997). Though, Halloween is a very secularized version of Day of the Dead and exemplifies this aspect of candy and goods heavily (Brandes, 1997). During Day of the Dead festivities, many chocolate and candied goods in the forms of skulls and skeletons are bought and given to friends and relatives as gifts. Casket images and other items related to death are also turned into sugared forms (Brandes, 1998).

The tradition of Day of the Dead has definitely transformed into a more humorous holiday, shying away from its religious foundation. Today, newspapers are filled with pictures of celebrities and political figures drawn into skeletons. The images of smiling, dancing skeletons can be found all over through decorations (Brandes, 1998). Most

scholars believe these images act in a way for Mexicans to face death in a less scary matter (Hewes, 1954; Westheim, 1983; Brodman, 1976). At the same time, some scholars believe this can lead Mexicans to indifference toward death (Paz, 1961; Lope Blanch, 1963). Either way, scholars agree it allows Mexicans to face death more regularly and is a key difference between Mexican and Western attitudes toward death and dying (Westheim, 1983).

Brandes (1998) analyzed the ways the images of skulls and skeletons were being used and how they were used during Day of the Dead celebrations. Brandes narrowed it down to nine key areas of these death related images. The first way is through ephemeral art, meaning the death images are created to celebrate the current holiday and not meant to last. They are made from flimsy material for the purpose of temporary decorations or made from edible materials like the pan de muerto.

Second, this art is used seasonally, meaning it is not characteristic of the culture in another time of the year, but rather specifically used for this holiday. These same form of skulls and skeletons are not used formally for burial rituals of loved ones, rather just to celebrate the holiday. Third, the images are used humorously. Some are meant to make people laugh rather than as sad and painful images of the dead. For this reason, death acts more like a time of fun and enjoyment, which is not typical of many other cultures.

Fourth, the modern day celebration is very secular along with the images used. The majority of skulls and skeletons pictured have no religious ties. Fifth, these death images are used commercially. They are meant to be bought and sold and hung up and displayed proudly, thus advertising to people to buy more. Stores use the images to draw people into their store during the holiday season. The sixth characteristic is these images

are made and created for the living. They are not meant to actually honor the dead, evidenced by their nonexistence in funerals and other real burial rituals. They are meant to be exchanged among the living so as to take part in celebration and thus increasing social relationships of the day. Another characteristic is these images are ludic. They are meant to be played with and manipulated. They are built with moving parts so this can be done.

Eighth, these images are usually small and easily transportable so as they can be taken down and decorated with the following year. Lastly, these images are usually exchanged among Mexico's city life. The rural populations do not take part in the festivities as much. The target audience of the images is the "cultural elite" because these are the people that can usually afford the festivities.

Knowing the characteristics of these images can tell us more about the thoughts and feelings about death from the minds of Mexican and Mexican-Americans. The holiday, in general, provides an avenue for the Hispanic population to confront death head on. Other populations and cultures are more readily able to avoid dealing with even recognizing the death of their loved one if they so choose. The holiday also can begin people's thought process about their own death, thus possibly able to cope with it more when the time comes. This, though, is speculation about the effects of these images. If nothing else, this holiday displays a unique relationship Mexicans have with death and dying (Brandes, 1997).

*Border Life.*

The U.S./Mexican border expands 2,000 miles from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. The Rio Grande River marks the border from Brownsville, Texas to El Paso, Texas. The border between California and El Paso contains the Chihuahuahua and Sonora deserts as well as high mountain terrain (Daniels, 2010). So, the environment alone poses serious threats to health and safety if a person were to try to cross this "line." However, people still attempt to illegally cross into America in hopes of finding financial security for themselves and their family. In order to survive in Mexico, they risk their lives crossing the border.

People attempt to cross the border in a number of ways. They might swim through the Rio Grande river or hike through the mountains. They scale fences and other barriers. Some ride in dangerous freight compartments of trains or trucks or even ride on top of trains and beneath trucks while they move. Some people hire out a coyote who is a person that helps people cross the border, but coyotes are more associated with the criminal world and can be very dangerous (Eschbach, Hagan, & Rodriguez, 1999).

The Border Patrol officially began on May 28, 1924 with the Labor Appropriation Act of 1924 and was charged to protect the border between inspection stations. Prior to this, America had passed the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924, which limited the number of immigrants allowed to enter the United States (Border Patrol History, n.d.) Therefore, more people were trying to illegally cross and thus the U.S. desired to keep this in check with the Border Patrol. The organization has only grown from its start in the 1920s.

In 1993, the United States built a 14 mile solid, steel fence in San Ysidro, California in hopes to ward off the smugglers from crossing in this region. "Operation Gateskeeper," an anti-immigration program, was enacted in 1995. With this, the fence was extended to the mountains east of San Diego (Daniel, 2010). This program also called for the installation of more lighting, more technology, more surveillance, and motion sensors and thermal imagery devices along the borderlands. In essence, the border became less safe for migrants after these increases than it was before the onset of this program (Eschbach, Hagan, & Rodriguez, 1999). In 2013, the budget for the U.S. Border Patrol amounted close to \$3.5 million, nearly 7 times what it was in 1995 (Enacted Border Patrol Program Budget, n.d.).

Yet, still, the U.S. Border Patrol reported apprehending more than 700,000 people in 2008 attempting to cross the southern border (Rytina & Simanski, 2009). However, this does not include the number of people who try to cross and do not get caught or die trying.

It is hard to know how many people die trying to cross this border. Between the years 1993-1997, more than 1,600 deaths were recorded along the border. Around 62% of these deaths were people in their 20s and 30s and 85% were male deaths (Eschbach, Hagan, & Rodriguez, 1999). In 2013, there were 445 deaths along the borderlands, which is an increase from 375 in 2011 (Southwest Border Deaths by Fiscal Year, 2014).

Though, the amount of deaths is relatively small it brings forth a whole new set of elements when dealing with death. It can bring forth guilt for allowing a family member to try to cross or not being there to help them. These deaths deal with violence and come

with an unfortunate stigma. It might embarrass some people to talk about it with people who have no way of truly understanding the pain.

Some people may not even be recognized in their death. Eschbach, Hagan, and Rodriguez (1999) found that one Texas sheriff claimed he only arranged death certificates on human skulls if the deceased person's family became involved. Other officials participate in similar practices claiming the cost of these investigations and burials of the body are costly. Even more bodies are not even found and are left along the borderlands. These uncertainties can hinder relatives and friends from being able to properly mourn the death since it is left up to the imagination what happened to them.

These deaths are not the only significance to life on the border. The atmosphere and environment of the borderlands changes with the presence of the border patrol. The officials eat at the local restaurants and live in the local towns and the sheer sight can frighten residents, but also some officials are known for harassing the locals. Yet, the locals feel helpless to change the system. Most of them are a marginalized population who are struggling financially (Daniel, 2010).

In the borderlands, the racism toward the Hispanic population is high. Some locals believe that because it is the borderlands, this racism is considered acceptable (Daniel, 2010) when it simply should not be. This is yet another facet that Hispanics in these areas have to deal with on a regular basis. Plus, the militarization of the area increases the level of intensity and nerves in the people living here (Daniel, 2010). All of these factors come into play when Mexican-Americans are in the process of coping with death. The racist attitudes can hinder proper coping because the ego is torn down.

Other ways of handling with the death come into play. One ministry group, *Frontera de Cristo*, located in Douglas, Arizona take a group out every Tuesday and honor those who died crossing the border in that area. This particular area of Arizona has a high death count. The group lays out a cross with each person's name on it or the words "*no identificado*" (no identification) to pay respects to each individual. There are similar rituals across the border lands (Daniel, 2010). The people, Mexican-Americans mostly, in these areas have had to adapt their customs and rituals in order to accommodate for these specific deaths.

#### *Language Barrier.*

Spanish is spoken by nearly half of the non-English speakers in the United States (Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004). This means the Hispanic population is prevalent and encounter the issue of a language barrier more than any other group. This can be harmful or helpful, depending on the situation and manner it was handled.

For starters, individual memories are compartmentalized in the language that had the most meaning at the time an event happened. So, say Linda, who is bilingual, experiences her mother passing away in a hospital bed and the doctors speak to her in English. Then, she is more likely to remember details in English. If she were to describe her experience in Spanish, she could have feelings of detachment since it was not how she experienced the event (Santiago-Rivera & Altarriba, 2002).

Due to this detachment, one is more likely to be able to discuss embarrassing and taboo topics in his/her non-dominant language. For example, if Billy's first language is Spanish, he is probably more willing and likely to openly discuss his own funeral plans in English, his second language. This is because emotion words are learned in the first



language usually at a much deeper level than when they are re-learned in a new language, simply because it is a re-learning. So, these deep feelings can be more easily discussed using words in a language that do not have such a strong attachment to the emotion (Bond & Lai, 1986).

At the same time, it may be harder for people not speaking their dominant language to adequately express themselves because they may be unaware of the proper terminology or colloquialism to do so. When trying to describe one's feelings in a language other than the first, they might be too focused on the pure articulation of the matter rather than the emotions behind the words (Marcos & Urcuyo, 1979). This struggle to speak and say the right things hinders emotional expression and could hinder on proper coping techniques in the event of a death (Ramos-Sanchez, 2007).

With this, it's also possible one word in one language could trigger strong emotions that the same word in a different language does not trigger. This is again following with these same ideas that the emotion is learned hearing and processing one set of sounds and words. A different set of sounds simply may not elicit the same feelings and emotions (Aragno & Schlachet, 1996). Therefore, there is usually increased emotional expression in a person's first language because it is easier (Gloria & Segura-Herrera, 2004).

Research has shown that a person's self-perception can also vary depending on the language in which they are speaking. For instance, Becky might describe herself as a strong, independent woman in English while in Spanish she would say she was family-oriented. The socio-cultural ties with each country and language can influence this

relationship between descriptive words and self-reflection (Greenson, 1950). If trying to impress, it may come naturally to use words that are more valued in each culture.

This all shows that language can play a very important role when it comes to relating and discussing one's emotions. This discussion has been found to play an active role in the lives of Mexican-Americans when recovering from loss or experiencing any other range of emotion (Javier, 1989).

### *Art and Literature*

The image of death is highly prevalent in Mexican-American art and literature, associated especially with the Day of the Dead and a somewhat recent movement called border art. Death is not limited to these two categories of the arts though, but can be found throughout Mexican-American culture.

Frida Kahlo is perhaps one of the most known and celebrated Mexican artists, so it would be a sin not to mention her work. She was an artist of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Her use of strong intense colors appears throughout her paintings. Of the 143 paintings she created, 55 were self-portraits. These pieces are the ones she is most associated with today ("A Tribute to Frida Kahlo", 2014). One piece in particular, "Girl with Death Mask," is a representation of herself around the age of four or five. In this painting, the young Kahlo wears a skeletal mask like the ones seen at Day of the Dead celebrations and is also holding a yellow flower similar to the ones people line around grave sites to lead the dead back home. Kahlo, in the portrait, stands alone on a hill under a stormy sky. In the original portrait, at her feet lies the mask of a tiger. Both of these masks serve as a juxtaposition between the innocence of the little girl and the constant reality of death ("Girl with Death Mask", 2008). This helps to show an important difference in Mexican-

American culture: Mexican-Americans embrace the concept of death from the very beginning. They surround themselves with it, which can either serve as a way to never forget their dead loved ones or as a way to never forget their own forthcoming death. In remembering death, one can live life more fully or at least that is the hope of Mexican-Americans. This dichotomy of life and death persists throughout much of Kahlo's work.

Rupert Garcia, a Mexican-American artist, is known for his paintings portraying oppression and resistance of the Mexican-American population. Much of his work includes Mexican and Mexican-American cultural leaders. Included in these portraits is the 1979 "Assassination of a Striking Mexican Worker." This unnamed worker is lumped together with his pieces featuring these famous leaders because to Garcia each Mexican worker is significant. He wanted to show each individual of color is important and has potential, which is not something that is always reinforced due to racism and discrimination (Orsi, 1995). This unfairness is shown through the death of the worker in this particular piece.

Garcia, through the creation of this piece, helps to show the sad part of death in Mexican-American culture. Many times, death is portrayed as carefree and welcomed. However, this other side of death displays the serious side. This piece also serves as propaganda in a way, instilling action and motivation in its viewers to change the current system of abuse.

In Octavio Paz's book *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1961) he exposes this difference in Mexican-American's unique relationship with death. He writes

"The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his toys and his most steadfast love. True, there is perhaps as much fear in his attitude as in that of others, but at

least death is not hidden away: he looks at it face to face, with impatience, disdain, or irony...Life and death are inseparable, and when the former lacks meaning, the latter becomes equally meaningless” (42).

This passage connects with both of the former pieces of artwork. For Mexican-Americans, life is encouraged to be lived more fully so as to approach death with more ease. It's encouraged to fight against discrimination and make a lasting impact in the world whether that is through big change or through the relationships encountered each day. Again, it does not mean death cannot be viewed as scary amidst all the humor and play. Death is brought to a forefront in Mexican-American culture ultimately altering the thought processes during life.

#### *Day of the Dead Art.*

The most dominant image associated with Day of the Dead is that of the calaveras or skeletons/skulls. These figures are placed on everything from masks to chocolates to banners to murals and more. They are usually displayed in a more humorous light as well (Brandes, 1998).

One of the more famous skeletal representations is known as "La Calavera Catrina" painted by Jose Guadalupe Posada around 1910. Catrina literally means an elegant woman and in this painting Catrina refers to rich people as a whole. She is a skeleton wearing a very elaborate hat covered with flowers and feathers, the image of a wealthy budget (Delsol, 2011). Catrina represents, though, that in death every human being is equal. It does not matter how much wealth you earn in life because every person ends up a skeleton.

Originally, La Calvera Catrina's purpose at the beginning of the 20th century was to bring stories of the mistreatment of Mexicans to those that were illiterate. She ended

up becoming the image of the Mexican Revolution (Delsol, 2011). Since, her image has been used in many books, films, banners, everyday items, and murals. One particular mural was created by Diego Rivera (Frida Kahlo's husband) titled "Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park." Rivera painted Catrina in wedding attire holding a painted version of himself ("Diego Rivera: Dream of a Sunday Afternoon", 2014). Holding her hand while she is dressed in a wedding gown shows Riveras embracing death. The mural communicates the message to marry death because it cannot be escaped.

Francisco Franco is a modern day Mexican-American artist continuing this tradition of skeletal art pieces. He tried to avoid this association with Day of the Dead artwork at first because he wanted to do something new and different. He ended up fully embracing it because of the high significance it still holds today. He is quoted saying, "You can't have life without death. We are the walking dead, the living dead. Let's have a party. Let's enjoy life. Eat, drink, dance, and know that it's short and sweet" (Eydie-Mendoza, 2012). This shows this common trend in amongst Mexican-American tradition continues to live on.

#### *Border Art Movement.*

The term border art refers to pieces of work that represent the border life and culture along the U.S./Mexican Border. These pieces usually show violence, pain, death, and mistreatment in hopes to prove this current system needs to change. The works usually assume a controversial stance on immigration and policy change. The movement did not begin until the early 1980s. Pieces from the border existed before, but art used to address border politics are said to have started at this time (Prieto, 1999).

San Diego-based Border Arts Workshop/Talle de Arte Fronterizo (BAW/TAF) was one of the first groups to emerge for this new border arts movement in 1984. Their founding members were artists, journalists, and scholars whose purpose was to address the social problems along the border and work toward erasing this international boundary. The organization created giant art projects that consisted of interactive installations and environments in cities and performance art. One of the installations they created was called “La Casa de Cambios/The Money Exchange” which was an actual maze people had to venture through. The maze had stops along the way people had to pass through like the customs office, the passport bureau and such so people received a small experience in immigration policies (Prieto, 1999). The organization assembled many educational pieces like these to advocate for change.

Miguel Aragon, Adriana Corral, and Raymundo Delgadillo are all modern artists within this movement. Together, they focus on portraying the victims due to the drug war along the border. They use more of a subtle form to convey this violence rather than a shock factor so people will really think and analyze the gravity of the situation. The art pieces combine both U.S. and Mexican cultures in order to display the mesh of the cultures that dominates border life (Arena, 2012).

Authors are also partaking in describing and displaying this tumultuous scene along the border. Ana Castillo’s fictitious novel *The Guardians* (2007) handles real life situations people experience. At the very beginning of the book, Castillo describes some people attempting to cross the border:

“It’s been almost seven years now but Gabo was just a child. His mind sort of got stuck in that time when his mother didn’t make it. He was here with me that winter, too. When Rafa and Ximena were returning they got separated. The coyotes said no, the women had to go in another truck. Three days later the bodies

of four women were found out there in that heat by the Border Patrol. All four had been mutilated for their organs. One of them was Ximena” (pg. #s).

Though these characters are not real, the situations that are played throughout this book are events that happen in people’s lives. Castillo grabs at people’s heartstrings to show the emotional turmoil of the border life throughout her entire novel. Artwork like these is used to help push people toward changing policy, which is part of the purpose of the pieces.

### *Funerals*

Many cultural traditions of funeral practices were lost in the immigration of the Mexican population to the United States. Mexicans typically display death announcements in a way similar to advertisements: little text, big bold type with the name of the deceased, date of death, the names of the immediate family and details on the wake and funeral arrangements. However, this tradition did not transfer to United States newspapers because U.S. newspapers simply do not display this type of practice and there are not many large Spanish newspapers in the U.S. (Garcia, 2002).

Different tribes around Mexico also bare their own funeral traditions. Like in the Otomic tribe, the funeral does not occur until an animal passes in front of the deceased person’s home. The tribe believes the animal announces an angel has arrived to lead the deceased’s soul to heaven (Matsunami, 1998). Conversely, the Nahuatl tribe believes when a child dies, an angel is born. Happy music is played after the burial and a party can even occur (Matsunami, 1998).

The mentality of death has carried with Mexican Americans though. The concepts of death and dying are embraced and seen as a natural life stage. Mexican Americans

usually have elaborate funerals lasting a long period of time to help the deceased in their last journey (Garcia, 2002).

Ninety percent of first generation Mexican Americans is Catholic and, by the fourth generation Mexican American still 58%, is Catholic (Marquez, 2008). Therefore, it's safe to say that most Mexican Americans are influenced by the Catholic faith. This religion teaches an afterlife beyond death known as the "kingdom of God." So, in order to reach said kingdom, one must first die. Death is the necessary path to tranquility. At the end of one's life, one is blessed by the priest with holy oils and prayers for reception into heaven (Garcia, 2002). This process is known as Last Rites and also includes confession and communion. These are the last steps to take before death and act as a sort of acceptance ("Hispanic Funeral Traditions", 2011).

The funeral process itself can last between one and four days for Mexican Americans. It begins with the wake, which tends to happen at night, where the deceased's body is displayed for viewing purposes and a chance for people to pay their last respects. At the wake, often times priests will recite the Rosary while the family members kneel and follow along (Garcia, 2002; "Hispanic Funeral Traditions", 2011). The actual funeral service is the day after the wake. A homily and communion occur at the service. Even if a Mexican-American was not a practicing Catholic in life, many of these traditions are upheld in death (Hayslip & Peveto, 2005). Non-Catholic loved ones are encouraged to still attend the funeral despite the differences.

Following the service, the deceased are further honored at the burial site where more prayers are said over the loved one. Each person is also given the opportunity to throw a handful of dirt down into the grave on top of the casket. A gathering follows the



burial at the immediate family's home where an abundance of food is prepared. This tradition takes place amongst Irish and Italian families as well. It's a time where memories are shared and the healing process begins ("Hispanic Funeral Traditions", 2011; Garcia, 2002). These parties juxtapose rejoicing in life while acknowledging death, which is the representation of Mexican American's views on death.

Kalish and Reynolds (1976) studied some key characteristic differences between Mexican American funerals and other race and ethnic cultures. First, Mexican Americans tended to be the most emotional, especially the women. To the point, even, where physicians need to be called and medication taken. This shows the close ties Mexican Americans establish in life. Also, Mexican American wake and funeral services tend to have extremely large group attendance, again, showing the strong and close knit bonds grown in life. Lastly, Mexican Americans were the least likely of African Americans, Caucasians, and Japanese Americans, to choose cremation. Most Mexican Americans desired to be buried and in a place where family was buried also.

November 2<sup>nd</sup> marks All Souls' Day of the Day of the Dead festivities, a day of respect for Mexican Americans to all of those who have passed. Grave sites are visited and decorated with wreaths, flowers, sweet bread, and other items of offering. Some create *hudas* (the Spanish pronunciation of Judas), which is a skeleton shaped candy and presented to someone with their name written across the forehead. It's meant to help people ponder the concept of death and what it really means. Many people spend all day and night at the grave praying and honoring the beloved (Matsunami, 1998; "Hispanic Funeral Traditions, 2011).

All of these traditions and customs serve in a way to help mentally, physically, and emotionally process the significant life event that occurred. Ultimately the funeral acts as a final send off, a closure to the relationship. Within the Mexican American community, though death can be viewed as humorous and light-hearted, the funerals are at time of emotional hardship due to such strong familial ties that are typically prevalent.

### *Common Coping Mechanisms*

Kalish and Reynolds (1976) analyzed common practices in the dying process amongst Mexican Americans, African Americans, Caucasians, and Japanese Americans. They conducted hundreds of interviews to figure out these different populations' view on and interaction with death. They found several interesting trends in the Mexican American group.

First, they found Mexican Americans tended to have awareness of their personal anxiety with death. This is not surprising, since the topic of death is well established within the Mexican American population. Therefore, it presents an opportunity to think about and acknowledge the reality of death. Kalish and Reynolds (1976) also found that 34% of Mexican Americans, more than the relative groups, reported having frequent unexplainable feelings they were about to die, compared with 15% of African Americans, 12% of Japanese Americans, and 15% of Caucasians. Mexican Americans also had the most frequent feelings that someone they knew was going to die (38%) as opposed to 37% of African Americans, 17% of Japanese Americans, and 30% of Caucasians. Again, this can again be explained through the consistent dialogue on death that is typical within this population group.

When it comes to grieving, Mexican Americans reported high concern with making sure to show proper emotion during funerals. They were more likely to say they would have anxiety if they could not cry. (Fifty-nine percent of Mexican Americans reported this anxiety, while only 42% of African Americans, of Japanese Americans, and of Caucasians claimed to have this same anxiety.) With this, most Mexican Americans (88%) predicted they would bawl at some point because of a death, more so than any other group (64% of African Americans said they would break down and cry, 71% of Japanese Americans, and 60% of Caucasians).

Overall, Kalish and Reynolds conclude that Mexican Americans have the most fear related to death and dying. They are also more likely to express physical and emotional grief than any other group. Lastly, the idea of death in general for Mexican Americans, leaks into day to day life more so than African Americans, Japanese Americans, and Caucasians. This further proves that Mexican Americans tend to have a very open relationship with death. They do not avoid the concepts of death and think and discuss it, which is a key difference from other ethnic groups.

However, just because one discusses it frequently, does not necessarily make the actual death any easier to handle. Mexican Americans actually have shown to be the most emotional through the death, especially with family deaths. This is probably because the family bonds in Mexican American families tend to be very strong. Most Mexican American families rely on each other for emotional support and comfort, more so than other groups (Hayslip & Peveto, 2005).

It is seen as an obligation to attend the funerals of all family members, even if a relationship has not been formed. It is a sign of respect and helps family members to cope

through the dying process (Hayslip & Peveto, 2005). Through the massive funeral attendees and sometimes week long funeral rituals, loved ones can talk and flesh out their thoughts. Research has shown this is a very important part of the coping processes for Mexican Americans. They need to discuss their feelings to help digest the gravity of the situation (Kalish, 1977).

Religion also plays a big role in helping Mexican Americans cope with the dying process. Even those that are not practicing Catholics tend to turn to Catholicism during this time of struggle or unknowingly turn to the teachings that are long withstanding in the Mexican American culture (Shapiro, 1995). Through the Catholic Church, Mexican Americans again are given opportunities of group gatherings so to freely express their emotions and receive emotional and religious support.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

Some times people can partake in anticipatory grief where they begin to cope with the death before the death has occurred (Kastenbaum, 1998). This can be healthy for individuals so as to start mentally preparing for the upcoming loss. However, this can formulate itself into an avoidance-coping measure where individuals will not deal with the severity of the situation at hand (Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999). This can make the death rougher on the individual. People who avoid the reality of the death show more signs of depression. They are also more likely to participate in dangerous activities like alcohol and drug abuse (Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999).

On the other side of the situation, avoidance coping can result in reduce upkeep for the loved one, which is especially harmful if he/she is sick and needs attentive care (Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999). Some nursing home staff might cope by keeping their emotions at bay. Then there are nursing staff that may not realize the importance of their care. Over 30% of America's nursing homes have received a citation for various forms of abuse, including neglect, financial or material exploitation, and abandonment. At times, this mistreatment can lead to the patient's death (Elder Abuse: The Size of the Problem, 2014; Wrongful Death: Nursing Home Abuse and Neglect, 2012).

Stacy Rodriguez, a social worker at a hospice agency, reported a client in a nursing home who was absolutely miserable. The man struggled with COPD and various other malfunctions, which made it hard for him to talk. Nursing staff would skip over him some days because sometimes the effort to understand him was too great (Personal communication, October 20, 2013).

This type of abuse is not just subject to nursing homes; it can occur in loved one's homes as well. Taruna is an elderly woman living with her daughter and son-in-law because she can no longer take care of herself due to her declining health. Taruna misses multiple meals a week, worsening her health, because her daughter either is too busy or does not take time to properly supply her mother's needs (World Elder Abuse, 2009).

In death, individuals should still receive the same care and attention as human beings. The dying process does not take this human quality away. There are many reasons why abuse may occur: lack of understanding of appropriate care, cannot emotionally handle the dying process, or lack of resources. Educating on matters related to death (coping, treatment, etc.) could reduce the number of maltreatment cases.

### *Cultural Diversity*

Both African Americans and Mexican Americans have their differences when dealing and handling death and rightfully so. Each population has a unique history, which led them to the modern day practices that exist today. While both groups experience their own version of racism and discrimination, it manifested in separate ways. African Americans dealt with years of enslavement while Mexican Americans have and continue to deal with the rough borderland lifestyles.

Mexican Americans and African Americans have had to deal with different cultural upbringings related to death. African Americans, overall, experience the most death of close friends and family. This can result in a number of mentalities like desensitization to death or anger and frustration with these constant occurrences. African Americans are more prone to these behaviors ensuing.

Mexican Americans are exposed to the idea of death more so than other cultures rather than the reality, like African Americans. The Day of the Dead is the ultimate representation of this population's attitude toward death. The Day of the Dead is a time of celebration and merriment juxtaposed with images of death, most commonly skulls and skeletons. The holiday serves as a yearly reminder of death and forces people to confront death head on.

Both of these major populations campaign for the philosophical belief that everyone in death is equal. This belief is probably instigated from a place of discrimination and hardship that both groups have experienced. However, it is one many should realize. Death is a uniting component amongst the human population. All will have to experience this phase of life.

Death, dying, and bereavement are individualized concepts. Each person handles death and coping in different ways. Two African Americans can be the same age, gender, and sexual orientation, but personalities and life histories play a role in altering how one handles oneself. The concepts discussed in this thesis are generalized statements over the populations, but by no means represent each individual.

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