Of Broken Bonds and Bondage: An Analysis of Loss in the Slave Narrative Collection

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Available online: 19 Feb 2010

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OF BROKEN BONDS AND BONDAGE: AN ANALYSIS OF LOSS IN THE SLAVE NARRATIVE COLLECTION

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Relatively few scholars have made use of the Slave Narrative Collection, a collection of more than 2,300 autobiographical narratives detailing the lives of people who had been born into slavery. Housed at the Library of Congress, the Collection was gathered during the 1930s under the direction of the Federal Writers Project. Research derived from the Collection thus far has dealt primarily with the experience of slavery as a whole. The present study focuses on loss as it was experienced by former slaves. This qualitative study used a grounded theory approach to analyze 48 narratives. Results culminated in a core category or central theme that for former slaves loss was both a cause and a consequence of dehumanization. Findings also suggested that people experienced loss as a result of witnessing or experiencing violence and of living in deprivation and fear. Other losses included losses of hope and identity. Losses associated with the pain and suffering of family members were hardest to bear.

For 70 years, the largest and arguably the most important collection of historical documents detailing slave life in America has existed in relative obscurity at the Library of Congress. This collection, known as the Slave Narrative Collection, consists of interviews gathered in the 1930s by the Federal Writer's Project, of people who were born slaves. In the more than 2,000 personal accounts that comprise the collection, participants provide detailed descriptions of life under slavery.

Writer and historian James Mellon, who has worked with the collection for more than 20 years, said of the then-elderly

participants: "These were the last surviving Americans ... who could bear personal witness to the now extinct feelings that arose from being physically owned by one's fellow man like a chair or table, like a dog or cat" (Mellon, 1988, p. xii). Mellon was of course correct that no living American can understand slavery as did those people who had lived it. However, whether the feelings that arose from slavery are indeed extinct is another question. As many of the narratives in the collection attest, slave life was intolerable. People suffered from starvation, torture, and rape. Many were beaten to death. Family members were sold away from one another. People were not allowed to marry, to worship, or to name their own children, and there was no recourse for the wrongs done to them other than to hope that God would be merciful in the next life. The narratives tell of lives of misery, loss, despair, humiliation, and anger. They tell of the enormous grief the slaves experienced.

Recent research by African American scholars suggests that, contrary to Mellon's observation, feelings engendered by slavery may live on. For example, African Americans today report feelings of loss, depression, and sadness when performing activities that remind them of their ancestry, such as constructing genograms or family trees (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Such research suggests that a legacy of slavery has been a burden of loss, passed down through successive generations of the descendents of slaves.

Whether an act from the past can live on to affect the lives, particularly the grief, of modern people is an interesting question and one the present study proposes to begin to answer. The first step in this line of research is to investigate the loss and grief of slaves. Therefore, using the vast collection of life stories that constitute the Slave Narrative Collection, the present study explores loss in the lives of American slaves, to bring to light the ways in which the experience and expression of loss was unique to these people. A brief review of research using the Collection and the broader literature on contemporary African American grief will provide a context for the current study.

Culture, Grief, and the Construal of Meaning

So far as we know, no study to date has used historical documents pertaining to slavery to study loss in African American slaves. Much of the research derived from the Collection presents the

experience of slavery as a whole (e.g., Berlin, Favreau, & Miller, 1998; Botkin, 1994; Hurmence, 1989; Mellon, 1988; Yetman, 2000) rather than focusing on specific aspects. In addition, though rich in autobiographical detail, narratives from the 30 years before the Civil War were written with the purpose of stirring up anti-slavery sentiment. Narratives written during and after Reconstruction were almost exclusively nostalgic recollections of plantation life (Yetman, 2000) and provide even less material for exploring loss among slaves than the antebellum narratives. As such, little to nothing is known about loss or grief in this cultural group.

Where to begin to understand loss among slaves then becomes the question, and, fortunately, modern grief theorists have much to suggest. A growing body of research has identified patterns of reactions among bereaved people that are distinct to a particular cultural group as well as reactions that, while varying widely between individuals, appear to cross cultural lines. For example, recent research from China suggests that the intensity of grief felt by the bereaved person is based in part on the deceased's facial expressions at the time of death, which determine whether the death was "good" or "bad," a reaction to death that is uniquely Chinese (Chan et al., 2005). In contrast, researchers have noted grief reactions that share many commonalities. Bereaved people worldwide weep and yearn for their lost loved one (Bowlby, 1973; Rosenblatt, Walsh, & Jackson, 1976), and they often develop debilitating physical and psychological symptoms that profoundly affect their lives (Burnett, Middleton, Raphael, & Martinek, 1997; Parkes, 1996; Rando, 1995; W. Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987).

Theorists have also noted a tendency among bereaved people to make meaning of loss (Davis, Wortman, Lehman, & Cohen Silver, 2000; Neimeyer, 1998; Neimeyer & Anderson, 2002; Park & Folkman, 1997; Rosenblatt, 1988). When an important person is lost through death, the people left behind experience a changed reality. Consequently, people may try to make sense of the loss; to find some good in it, a sort of silver lining; or to reorganize how they view themselves as survivors (Gillies & Neimeyer, 2006). Adapting to the change is a process that is both personal and social, occurring in conjunction with the significant people in the bereaved person's life as well as in the context of the larger culture (Neimeyer, 1999; Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002).

The idea that meaning is made or reconstructed following a loss is a thread that runs through much modern grief theory, yet this reaction to loss appears to be far from new. Indeed, historical accounts of slaves who escaped from their bondage tell us that making meaning of their losses was a critical response to bereavement. Harriet Jacobs, who in 1861 was the first African American woman to publish her own slave narrative, remembers witnessing the death of a young girl. The girl had been raped and impregnated by her White master and died after giving birth to a stillborn child. Attended by her mother, the girl's suffering and death was also witnessed by the mistress who was well aware that her husband was responsible for the girl's torment. As the girl lay dying, the mistress mocked, " 'You suffer, do you? I am glad of it. You deserve it all, and more too.' " The girl construed her own death quite differently. To her mother, she said, " 'Don't grieve so, mother; God knows all about it; and he will have mercy upon me' " (Jacobs, 1861/2005, p. 14). The religious meaning the girl attached to her own death was a denial that she either deserved or earned her sad end and also implied that an omniscient God would grant her the justice she had been denied in life.

Religion, Spirituality, and Meaning Making

African Americans can trace a long history of finding religious and spiritual comfort in adversity. Enslaved Africans brought with them a strong spiritual orientation, which has been described as core to the African personality (Sofola, 1973). This strong spirituality sustained slaves and gave them the strength needed to resist the oppression of bondage. Church, when slaves were allowed to attend, provided social contact and religious comfort, and also gave slaves a place to express their pain, anger, and humiliation (Gutman, 1976; Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996; Yetman, 2002).

Religion and spirituality continue to be central to the lives of many, if not most, African Americans (e.g., Gutman, 1976; Rogers, 1998; Sudarkasa, 1997). A majority of African Americans report religious participation, religious coping, and spirituality at a much higher rate than the general population (Boyd-Franklin & Lockwood, 1999; Taylor, Chatters, & Jackson, 2007). African Americans report regular, often daily, praying; church attendance; or viewing of church-related materials (Ellison, 1997).

For African Americans, a sense of connectedness often extends even beyond death, with African Americans tending to report higher levels of an ongoing connection or relationship to their deceased loved ones, compared to Caucasians (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). Especially for individuals who have a traditional Afrocentric belief system, death is seen not as a parting but as a transition from this life to the next, and people are not likely to refer to the person as having died but rather as having moved on or gone to the next life (Barrett, 2001).

Spirituality also provides a basis for coping with adversity, and African Americans tend to be both optimistic and resilient even in the most difficult of circumstances (Denby, 1996). Difficulties are endured as part of God's will and are seen as bearable because God never gives more than one can carry (Boyd-Franklin & Lockwood, 1999). Similarly, spirituality plays a key role for African Americans coping with the death of a loved one by providing a cognitive framework for coping with the harshness of loss (Fletcher, 1998; Smith, 2002). Spiritual beliefs can also help the bereaved make meaning of their loss. In one study, bereaved adult African American daughters who lost their mothers understood them to be in God's care and in a better place than they were on earth (Smith, 2002).

Disenfranchised Grief, Prolonged Grief, and Racism

How loss is recognized and mourned is guided by a set of social rules determined by the culture. Who can be mourned, how mourning will take place, and how the bereaved will be comforted (or indeed whether they will be comforted) are decided by society (Doka, 2002a). Some forms of loss carry a social or cultural stigma, which serves to further disenfranchise the grief of the bereaved person (Doka & Martin, 2002). People who lose friends or family to homicide, for instance, often feel they are judged harshly by others and also judge themselves. They may be less likely to seek out support for their loss, whether from family, friends, church, or mental health professionals (Doka, 2002b).

Another reaction to loss considered to be particularly difficult is complicated or prolonged grief (Prigerson & Jacobs, 2001; Prigerson et al., 1995), a reaction that occurs more frequently due to sudden or violent loss—such as death due to suicide, homicide,

or accident (Currier, Holland, & Neimeyer, 2006); or when the death happens out of the natural order, that is, when a life is cut short, as in the death of a child (Davis et al., 2000). Under such circumstances, it becomes difficult for bereaved people to reconnect to a belief in a meaningful world. Their basic assumptions of life have been devastated. Bereaved people who have lost loved ones to sudden or violent death, or to premature death, may have a difficult time believing that the world is a safe and just place (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Because of historical and demographic factors, African Americans may be at greater risk for developing symptoms of prolonged or disenfranchised grief; indeed, a recent study found African Americans to have significantly higher rates of prolonged grief than Whites (Goldsmith, Morrison, Vanderwerker, & Prigerson, 2008). The loss of a loved one as a result of homicide is a predictor of elevated grief distress, and African Americans have a history of death by lynching, murder, and police violence (Holloway, 2003), and even today young African American males experience death by homicide at a much higher rate than any other group in the United States (Kochanek, Murphy, Anderson, & Scott, 2004).

Racism, too, significantly affects the bereavement of African Americans. In Rosenblatt and Wallace's (2005) qualitative study of bereaved African Americans, interviewees discussed direct racism as a cause of the death of their loved ones. One participant talked about the way his stepfather had died as a result of exposure to Agent Orange in his service in the Vietnam War. Not only was his stepfather exposed to hazardous chemicals, he and other African American service personnel were routinely placed on dangerous assignments that Whites were not. When reflecting on his grief, the feelings this participant described toward the racism that took the life of his stepfather prematurely were anger and rage. "A rage is what I feel," said this participant (Rosenblatt & Wallace, p. 10).

Study Objectives

A goal of the present study was to examine the ways in which loss was experienced and expressed by African American slaves, and there is reason to believe that loss in this group was a unique experience. Slaves lived under an authority that no longer exists

in America, one that took from them their dignity, selfhood, and control over their own destiny. It took from them such basic freedoms as whom they could marry and when, and whether they could parent their own children. Simply stated, slaves were denied their human rights. Such conditions should be expected to give rise to unique feelings and responses.

It is also possible that some responses to loss may unite past generations of African Americans with people of today. As has been discussed in the above review, bereaved people often attempt to make meaning of loss. We expected that participants in the current study would also make meaning of their losses in ways that were personal and social. We anticipated that participants would understood loss through friends, family, and through their culture, and that themes of religion and spirituality, continuing bonds that connect the living with deceased loved ones, and close connections to family and kin might also reveal themselves in the data. Also, it was with little doubt that we expected participants to talk about loss in terms of the racism they experienced, even if the vernacular of the times made reference to this term uncommon.

It should be noted that the terms *loss* and *grief* in this review have been primarily discussed in terms of the loss of a loved one through death. Parameters for defining these terms were broadened for the purposes of the analysis, in order to fully capture participants' experiences. For instance, it was necessary to include experiences related to the loss of one's culture, the loss of one's family members due to involuntary separation, and other types of loss as the data were analyzed. It was in line with the theoretical approach of this study that we let current research inform the understanding of the data while at the same time allowing the data to reveal themselves (Rennie, 2000).

Method

Participants

Participants were interviewed between 1936 and 1938 by the Federal Writers' Project. All participants were of African or African American descent and all had been born into slavery. These former slaves, who were then living in the Eastern and Southeastern United States, were interviewed in an effort to preserve a

part of their life stories. More than 2,300 autobiographical narratives were collected, and the entire collection is now known as the Slave Narrative Collection. These data are currently housed by the Library of Congress and are open to public access. They may be viewed at http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.

At the time the interviews were collected, participants were elderly, with the youngest participant aged 65 years and the oldest participant aged 103 years. At the time of their emancipation in 1865, participants ranged in age from 1 year to 50 years old. Of the total number of participants, 843 were female and 1,465 participants were male. All were born in the United States. At the time of the interviews, participants resided in primarily urban areas in 18 states.

Narratives included in the present study were collected from 48 former slaves whose ages ranged from 65 to 100 years old. Twenty-six of the participants were female and 22 participants were male. Thirteen of the 18 states represented in the collection as a whole are represented in this study (see further demographic data in Table 1).

Interviews

Interviews were originally conducted by employees of the Federal Writers Project (FWP). While the majority of interviewers were of Caucasian descent, an attempt was made to include African American interviewers. Of 30 interviewers who have been identified as White or African American, eight have been identified as African American (Yetman, 2000). All interviewers received some training in interview techniques through the FWP, and some effort was made to standardize the interview process. Interviewers were encouraged to use a questionnaire that suggested topics for discussion. However, the way in which interviews were carried out varied widely from one interviewer to the next, as evidenced by inconsistency in the quality of some interviews. Additionally, although interviewers appeared to pay much attention to dialect, there is no way of knowing how faithfully they recorded the participants' exact words. There is also evidence to suggest that writers and editors may have altered or revised the interviews. A comparison of early drafts of interviews collected in Texas with later drafts sent to Washington for inclusion in the Slave Narrative Collection

TABLE 1 Participant Demographic Information (N = 48)

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Birthplace	State of residency
46	Campbell Armstrong	M	86	Georgia	Arkansas
03	Sarah Augustus	F	80	North Carolina	North Carolina
15	Ellen Betts	F	84	Texas	Louisiana
17	Boston Blackwell	M	98	Georgia	Arkansas
48	Henry Blake	M	80	Arkansas	Arkansas
20	Mittie Blakely	F	80	Missouri	Indiana
26	Fanny Cannady	F	79	North Carolina	North Carolina
47	Ellen Cragin	F	80	Mississippi	Arkansas
32	Doc Daniel Dowdy	M	81	Georgia	Oklahoma
24	William Colbert	M	93	Georgia	Alabama
35	Sarah Debro	F	90	North Carolina	North Carolina
36	Esther Easter	F	65	Oklahoma	Tennessee
38	Gabe Emanuel	M	85	Mississippi	Mississippi
12	Eliza Evans	F	87	Oklahoma	Alabama
21	Mattie Fannen	F	87	Unknown	Arkansas
41	Lizzie Farmer	F	80	Oklahoma	Texas
33	Gus Feaster	M	97	South Carolina	South Carolina
08	Della Fountain	F	69	Louisiana	Oklahoma
23	Delia Garlic	F	100	Virginia	Alabama
37	Henry Garry	M	73	Alabama	Alabama
25	Robert Glenn	M	87	North Carolina	North Carolina
39	James Green	M	—	Virginia	Texas
01	Andrew Goodman	M	97	Alabama	Texas
29	Josephine Howell	F	72	Tennessee	Arkansas
31	Ben Johnson	M	85	North Carolina	North Carolina
16	Isaac Johnson	M	82	North Carolina	North Carolina
06	James Martin	M	90	Virginia	Texas
18	Malindy Martin	F	80s	Arkansas	Arkansas
10	Bessie Meyers	F	—	Arkansas	Arkansas
44	John McGuire	M	74	Missouri	Missouri
28	Herdy Miller	M	85	Georgia	Arkansas
09	Gip Minton	M	84	Arkansas	Alabama
19	Sena Moore	F	83	South Carolina	South Carolina
27	Claiborne Moss	M	81	Georgia	Arkansas
22	Sally Nealey	F	91	Arkansas	Arkansas
43	Mary Estes Peters	F	78	Arkansas	Missouri
05	Tempe Pitts	F	91	North Carolina	North Carolina
49	Ike Simpson	M	90	Texas	Texas
40	Tom Singleton	M	94	Georgia	Georgia
13	Edd Shirley	M	97	Kentucky	Kentucky
42	Georgia Smith	F	87	Georgia	Georgia

TABLE 1 Continued

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Birthplace	State of residency
30	Sarah Taylor	F	70	Tennessee	Arkansas
07	Mary Thompson	F	87	Texas	Alabama
04	Penny Thompson	F	86	Alabama	Texas
14	Albert Todd	M	86	Kentucky	Texas
02	Belle Williams	F	86	Arkansas	Kansas
11	Rose Williams	F	90s	Texas	Texas
45	James Wilson	M	87	South Carolina	Missouri
34	Lulu Wilson	F	97	Kentucky	Texas

revealed that material had been deleted. The deleted material was likely removed because it did not conform to White notions of what, at the time, was considered proper race relations (Yetman, 2000). Finally, problems within the FWP, such as a lack of central management in the early phases of the collection process, also contributed to the poor quality of some of the interviews.

However, while a few of the interviews demonstrate inconsistent style or are noticeably underdeveloped (e.g., less than one full page, contain stilted or brief responses), the vast majority of the interviews are of sufficient quality and length to fully capture the participant's life experience. The average length of interviews is approximately five pages. The data set is rich in detail and is the finest collection of documents available to researchers studying antebellum slave life. Yetman (2000), a researcher and scholar who has been working with the collection for more than thirty years, wrote that if "one wishes to understand the nature of [slavery] from the perspective of the slave, to reconstruct the cultural and social milieu of the slave community, or to analyze the social dynamics of the slave system, then these data are not only relevant; they are essential" (p.12).

Analysis

Transcription of the interviews took place in the 1930s immediately after the interviews were collected. Care was taken by transcriptionists to preserve regional and dialectical nuances in the language. However, as mentioned above, no clear evidence exists for how faithfully the participants' exact language was reproduced. Today,

the documents are available through the Library of Congress website in photo file format in their original condition.

For the present study, 48 interviews were selected from the data set. The narratives were selected by theoretical sampling and were selected for their richness of detail and for diversity. Selection continued to the point of saturation, when further data neither added to nor tested the understanding of the data (Fassinger, 2005; McLeod, 2001). At the point of saturation, four additional narratives were analyzed to ensure that data selection was complete.

The transcripts were analyzed using a grounded theory approach, an inductive method of analysis that generates theory by staying close to or "grounded" in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The final outcome of the analysis is a cogent hierarchy of categories that captures core meanings of the phenomenon under study (McLeod, 2001) . In addition, a methodological hermeneutic epistemological framework was used to guide the analysis. This framework acknowledges that the researcher's understanding of text is an essentially hermeneutic process. The researcher immerses him or herself in the data in order to better evaluate the latent meaning of the text (Rennie, 2000). Grounded theory is also a reflexive process, and during all phases of the research the researcher keeps a detailed record of preconceptions, hunches, ideas, formulations, and reactions to the data (Fassinger, 2005; Rennie, 2000). This process, often referred to as *memoing*, was used throughout the analysis and provided a way for the researcher to compare her understandings of the data with the data itself, in order to reduce the effect of researcher bias. While it is not possible to keep all bias from entering the analysis, memoing does provide a way of making the process transparent and open to scrutiny.

In the first step of the analysis, the investigator studied the transcripts and divided them into segments of text. These segments, known as meaning units, contained a single theme or idea. Once identified, meaning units were assigned a label; labels were constructed using language that stayed as close to the participants' own language as possible. Because the narratives are public records, meaning units were identified with a number corresponding to the participant's name. This method of identification is consistent with the practice of the FWP and will allow readers to compare the results of this study with the interviews as they appear in their entirety.

Once meaning units were established, each meaning unit was compared to every other meaning unit. Categories emerge as similarities between and among meaning units were observed by the investigator. The process of constantly looking for commonalities, or constant comparison, continued between categories. Similar categories were combined to form higher order categories and levels of categories proceeded from concrete to abstract. The hierarchy was considered complete at the point that a core category was reached. This core category identified a central theme across participants' experience.

Reflexivity and Credibility Checks

The credibility of a qualitative research study is assessed at least in part by its paradigmatic underpinnings (Morrow, 2005). The guiding paradigm of the current study, methodological hermeneutics, emphasizes the reflexivity of grounded theory analysis, which Rennie (2004) defined as "self-awareness and agency within that self-awareness" (p. 183). In the current study, the most important tool available to the researcher for promoting both self-awareness and agency was keeping a daily journal of thoughts, feelings, ideas, biases and understandings of the data. This journal provided a record for the researcher to analyze her own process. It also allowed others to assess the researcher's understandings of the data.

Results

In the present study, 1,538 meaning units were identified from 48 narratives. The final hierarchy, which was derived using the method of constant comparison described above, contained four levels: core, cluster, category, and subcategory, with each level subsuming the level beneath it. Seven themes or clusters emerged during the analysis and are described below, followed by a description of the core category (see Table 2 for an overview of cluster and category titles).

Cluster 1: There Was No Mercy: The Violence I Witnessed or Endured Lives on in My Memory

In this cluster, participants conveyed how widespread, even commonplace, violence was within the system of slavery. Those

TABLE 2 Clusters and Categories, with Number of Participants Who Contributed Units to Each

Cluster and category titles[a]

Cluster 1: There was no mercy: The violence I witnessed or endured lives on in my memory. (42)

    1.1: I witnessed or experienced rape, beating, whipping, torture, murder, and suffering. (40)

    1.2: I cannot forget the past: It hurt me to know that people could be treated so badly. (18)

Cluster 2: Slaves lost hope: Activities that sustained me, or advanced me or my people, were restricted or denied. (30)

    2.1: My religion sustained me, but prayer or worship were denied, restricted or mocked. (12)

    2.2: I couldn't read or write: Education was denied and punishment for disobeying was severe. (13)

    2.3: We were not free to mark the milestones of life as we chose. (8)

Cluster 3: A time of pestigation: I suffered a life-altering loss. (8)

    3.1: The violence that happened to someone I loved changed my life forever. (5)

    3.2: I was never the same: Something awful happened to me. (3)

Cluster 4: Loss came from living in daily fear and deprivation. (44)

    4.1: Daily life was hard: We didn't have proper food, clothing, or shelter, and the work was grindingly hard. (21)

    4.2: I was always afraid of master and mistress, overseer, patrollers and/or Ku Klux Klan. (32)

    4.3: I was always afraid that something awful would befall me or someone I loved. (40)

Cluster 5: I miss my White folks: I was better off when I lived with them and leaving them was a heartbreaking time. (11)

    5.1: I would not be cold and hungry if my master or mistress were alive. (3)

    5.2: I miss my White folks. (10)

    5.3: Leaving my White folks was a heartbreaking time. (4)

Cluster 6: Losses of self: Both publicly and privately, slaves were regarded as property rather than as human beings. (39)

    6.1: Being owned as property formed the basis of my identity. (26)

    6.2: I was property to be bought and sold. (23)

    6.3: I thought too little of myself, and thought better of my owners than they deserved. (19)

Cluster 7: Losses related to family were the hardest to bear. (36)

    7.1: I hate to think about the awful whippings and beatings my family had to endure. (30)

    7.2: The sale of a family member was an unbearable loss. (25)

[a]The number in parentheses is the number of participants who contributed units to the cluster or category.

who lived through slavery were affected well into old age by the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse they witnessed or endured. The 42 participants who contributed to this cluster conveyed the idea that there was little distinction between violence that occurred to them personally and the violence they witnessed against family, friends, and neighbors. Participants described the effects of first-hand and secondary violence in much the same terms: they never forgot the fear, anguish, and horrifying nature of the abuse, which too often ended in death. Participants talked with sadness and regret about what they had experienced; some voiced the idea that words were inadequate to convey the magnitude of the horror. All participants left little doubt that the violence affected them forever, and forever colored the way they viewed their White masters and mistresses, White culture, and humanity in general. Former slaves knew the evil side of human nature in a way that most people are spared. Participants in this cluster were unable to forget the violence just as they were unable to forget the ugliness of the people who perpetuated it. Sadly, many participants expressed the idea that what they had experienced exacted a toll, taking from them their ability to fully experience the joy of remembering the past, living in the present, and looking to the future. There were two categories in this cluster.

CATEGORY 1.1

In the first category of this cluster entitled "I witnessed or experienced rape, beating, whipping, torture, murder, and suffering," participants (40) recalled violence against themselves, family, friends, and neighbors. Lulu Wilson remembered being singled out for abuse,

> Now, Missus Hodges studied 'bout meanness . . . . She was mean to anybody she could lay her hands to, but special mean to me. She beat me and used to tie my hands and make me lay flat on the floor and she put snuff in my eyes. I ain't lyin' 'fore God when I say I knows that's why I went blind.

Participants' stories were horrifying in their brutality. It heightened the tragedy of their experiences that they often spoke with greatest anguish about the suffering of mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, and grandparents. Mary Peters said,

> I have seen many a scar on my mother. She had mean white folks. One day her mistress went to high mass and left a lot of work for my mother

to do. She was only a girl and it was too much. There was more work than she could get done. When her old mistress came back and her work was not all done, she beat my mother down to the ground, and then she took one of the skillets and bust her over the head with it—trying to kill her, I reckon . . . . She had all kinds of trouble. They just didn't treat her good. In them days, they'd whip anybody. They'd tie you to the bed or have somebody hold you down on the floor and whip you till the blood ran.

At times the horror is underscored by the matter-of-fact way in which participants relate the stories. For example, James Martin replied in response to whether slaves were beaten, "Did they whip the slaves? Well, they jus' about half killed 'em." That participants found these events important enough to tell interviewers who were strangers, often White, and representatives of the government is sufficient testament to the fact that the they were affected, however straightforward they appeared to be in retelling the event.

It is impossible to capture the gravity of the abuse spoken of by participants who contributed to this category. They talk of having their ears nailed to trees; of seeing their mothers stripped naked, tied to trees, and whipped on their "tender parts"; of, as children, being taught to run from hounds in order to train the dogs to chase runaways; of being burned by scalding liquid when they failed to act quickly enough in serving at mealtime. One former slave recalled a White master who drove nails into a barrel and rolled slaves downhill in it. That participants were not bitter is a wonder. Overwhelmingly, former slaves spoke in tones of regret, resignation, and sadness rather than with condemnation toward the people who deserved their scorn.

CATEGORY 1.2

In the next category of this cluster, "I cannot forget the past: It hurt me to know that people could be treated so badly," 18 participants who had been exposed to violence stressed the effects of witnessing violence and brutality. They spoke of how they could not forget what they had experienced and implied how little they wanted such an intimate knowledge of the cruelty of human nature. Fanny Canady talked about how she never forgot witnessing the shooting of one slave,

I don' 'member much 'bout de sojers an' de fightin' in de war kaze I wuzn' much more den six years ole at de surrender, but I do 'member how Marse Jordan Moss shot Leonard Allen, one of his slaves. I ain't never forgot dat.

Like Fanny Canady, Mittie Blakeley was unable to forget what she had experienced and it was the pain of others that most affected her when she said, "I am sorry for those who were treated so much worse than any human would treat a beast."

Participants in this category suggested that exposure to violence left an indelible mark. Though well into old age (Mittie Blakeley was 80 and Fanny Canady was 79 at the time of interview), both participants were clear in their recollections, which was representative of participants in this category in general.

Overall, the loss described in Cluster 1 is overwhelming: Slaves were exposed to a horrifying level of violence that stayed sharp in their memories. As a result, participants lost at least in part an ability to believe in human decency. Like a loss of innocence, they lost their belief in a safe world through experiences that demonstrated the world for them was anything but safe. For these participants, such knowledge could not be forgotten.

Cluster 2: Slaves Lost Hope: The Activities That Sustain Me, or Advance Me or My People, Are Restricted or Denied

Thirty participants contributed to this cluster, describing the loss associated with having their right to worship, to receive an education, and to celebrate important life milestones restricted or denied. Three categories are contained in this cluster.

CATEGORY 2.1

In this category entitled "My religion sustained me, but prayer and worship were denied, restricted or mocked," former slaves often described the centrality of spirituality and religion to their ability to cope with adversity. As Delia Garlic put it, "Us just prayed to the Lord for strength to endure it to de end." Some slaves experienced no limitation in how much they were allowed to pray, worship, and attend church. In contrast, those who were denied or restricted in their church attendance, or who were threatened or mocked in their religious practices, described the loss with a sense of pain and outrage in this category. Doc Daniel Dowdy spoke of one such experience: "My father was the preacher and an educated man. You know the sermon they give him to preach?—'Servant, Obey Your Master.'" Rose Williams described how she and her family and other slaves were not allowed to

attend church services: "Church? Shucks, we'uns don' know what dat mean . . . we'uns am never tooken to church." Participants who contributed to this category (12) reported that despite restrictions, their faith and reliance on a spiritual connection to God remained strong. They expressed hopelessness about life on earth but remained firm in their belief in a better life in the hereafter.

In the second category of this cluster, "I couldn't read or write: Education was denied and punishment for disobeying was severe," participants mourned the loss of an education. The penalty for education of any kind was high. Doc Daniel Dowdy described the severity of punishment for slaves caught reading and writing.

> The first time you caught trying to read or write, you was whipped with a cow-hide, the next time with a cat-o-nine tails and the third time they cut the first jint offen your forefinger. They was very severe. You most allus got 30 and 9 lashes.

Ellen Betts talked about the way ignorance was perpetuated because it was believed by Whites that education was a threat to the system of slavery. The benefit to slaves was not taken into consideration.

> I don't ever have no time for larnin' in slave time. If Marse cotch a paper in you hand he sho' whop you. He don't 'low no bright niggers 'round, he sell 'em quick. He allus say, "Book larnin' don't raise no good sugar cane." De only larnin' he 'low was when dey larn de cullud chillen de Methodist catechism. De only writin' a nigger ever git, am when he git born or marry or die, den Marse put de name in de big book.

Participants made brief but heartfelt reference to the loss they felt at not being able to educate themselves. "I was just an ignomus chile," said Rose Williams. "We'uns has no books for larnin'. Dere am no edumcation for de niggers."

CATEGORY 2.3

In the final category of this cluster, "We were not free to mark the milestones of life as we chose," 8 participants told of White masters' refusal to allow ceremonies to mark the life milestones of birth, marriage, and death. Though perhaps not as central or sustaining to the lives of slaves as the religious or

spiritual sustenance described in Category 2.1, the inability to mark important moments in life was nevertheless a loss and was discussed by a substantial number of participants. Georgia Smith reported that when a slave died, no ceremony was held. "When slaves died dey jes' tuk 'em off an buried 'em. I doan' 'member 'em ever havin' a funeral." Mary Estes Peters described how marriage ceremonies were conducted at the whim of White masters. When asked by the interviewer about the custom of marriage among slaves, she replied,

> My mother used to laugh at that. The master would do all the marryin'. I have heard her say that many a time. They would call themselves jumpin' the broom. I don't know what they did. Whatever the master said put them together. I don't know just how it was fixed up, but they halt the broom and master would say, I pronounce you man and wife' or something like that.

Cluster 3: A Time of Pestigation: I Suffered a Life-Altering Loss

A small but important number of participants (8) contributed to Cluster 3, a cluster that is unique from others in that participants described how an event, which often occurred in childhood, changed the course of their lives. Though, as has been discussed in Cluster 1, a majority of participants experienced first- or second-hand violence, the participants who contributed to this cluster not only experienced violence but also recognized that their lives were fundamentally changed by their experience of it. This cluster contains two categories.

The first of the two categories included in this cluster, "The violence that happened to someone I loved changed my life forever," illuminated how participants indicated that violence experienced by a family member, whether it was a mother, father, brother, or sister, had a direct, dire effect on their own lives. Mary Estes Peters talked about the rape of her mother,

> My mother's mistress had three boys, one twenty-one, one nineteen, and one seventeen. Old mistress had gone away to spend the day one day. Mother always worked in the house . . . . While she was alone, the boys came in and threw her down on the floor and tied her down so she couldn't struggle, and one after the other used her as long as they wanted for the whole afternoon . . . . That's the way I came to be here.

It is sad to note that the interviewer who spoke with Mary Estes Peters referred in the transcript to how difficult it was to get information from this former slave regarding her birth. Mrs. Peters offered the story only after being prompted several times, further evidence of how difficult it was for her to relate this piece of her own history.

In the second of the two categories of this cluster, "I was never the same: Something awful happened to me," participants described how an episode of violence affected them. No narrative illuminates this experience as clearly as that of Rose Williams. Rose tells of a series of events that resulted in a turning point in her life, which she called a "pestigation." After living with a harsh master, Rose and her parents were sold. She reported being grateful the new master bought them all together, and she was pleased with her new situation. Her happiness came to an end when the master indicated he wanted Rose to live with a man she didn't like. Rose explained in her narrative that at 16 years old she had no understanding that the master expected her to have sex, to "breed," with the man, Rufus. Rose related what the master said: "Woman, I's pay big money for you and I's done dat cause I wants you to raise me chillens. I's put yous to live with Rufus for dat purpose. Now, if you doesn't want whippin' at de stake, yous do what I wants." Rose's story ends with this,

> I thinks 'bout massa buyin' me offen de block and savin' me from bein' sep'rated from my folks and 'bout bein' whipped at de stake. Dere it am. What am I's to do? So I 'cides to do a de massa wish and so I yields . . . . But [after freedom] I never marries, 'cause one 'sperience am 'nough for dis nigger. After what I does for de massa, I's never wants no truck with any man. De Lawd forgive dis cullud woman, but he have to 'scuse me and look for some others for to 'plenish de earth.

Rose Williams had two children with Rufus, but left him immediately after she was freed. She never married or bore more children. She lived with her parents until they died of old age.

This cluster is unique in that it describes how participants knew that a single event had changed them fundamentally for the rest of their lives. Though comprising only a fraction of the narratives contained in the overall analysis of the present study, it nevertheless contains some of the most tragic and affecting stories of the Collection. It is not possible to read their stories without sadness for these long-dead women.

Cluster 4: Loss Came from Living in Daily Fear and Deprivation

Participants who endorsed this cluster (44) describe a particular kind of loss that comes from not having basic needs met, particularly the need for adequate food, shelter, clothing, and safety. An important point reflected in this cluster is the chronic nature of the neglect or fear the participants experienced, the result of which was loss due to a lack of a security. This cluster includes three categories.

CATEGORY 4.1

    The first category, "Daily life was hard: We didn't have proper food, clothing, or shelter, and the work was grindingly hard," described the hardships of daily life associated with deprivation and neglect. Twenty-one participants contributed to this category. They described childhood as a time when they were cold, hungry, and were expected to perform work that was too difficult for them. Lulu Wilson said of her childhood,

> Now, when I was li'l they was the hardest times . . . . I had to work and wash and iron and clean and milk cows when I was most too li'l to do it . . . . For years all I could git was one li'l slice of sowbelly and a puny, li'l piece of bread and a 'tater. I never had 'nough to stave the hongriness out'n my belly.

Other participants describe impoverished living conditions. Participants went without shoes, even in winter. Others slept on dirt floors, battling fleas, mice, rats, and mosquitoes. Cooking and eating were performed under appalling conditions. Several slaves described how slaves were fed in troughs.

    The next two categories, "I was always afraid of master and mistress, overseer, patrollers and/or Ku Klux Klan" and "I was always afraid that something awful would befall me or someone I loved," both relate to the way in which participants lived in chronic fear, whether it was fear of the master, mistress, overseer, KKK, or patrollers (typically poor Whites who patrolled for slaves who were off the plantation without express permission), or a more general fear of the violence that could befall a slave at any time. Participants (32 contributed to Category 4.2; 40 contributed to Category 4.3) described how they lived every moment in fear that they or their loved ones might be beaten, whipped, raped,

murdered, tortured, or sold. Delia Garlic talked about her experience of growing up in slavery,

> Babies was snatched from dere mother's breast an' sold to speculators. Chilluns was separated from sisters an' brothers an' never saw each other ag'in. Course dey cry; you think dey not cry when dey was sold lak cattle? I could tell you 'bout it all day, but even den you couldn't guess de awful-ness of it. It's bad to belong to folks dat own you soul an' body; dat can tie you up to a tree, wid yo' face to de tree an' yo' arms fastened tight aroun' it; who take a long curlin' whip an' out de blood ever' lick. Folks a mile away could here dem awful whippings. Dey wuz a terrible part of livin'.

The gravity of the loss reflected in this cluster lies in its magnitude. Fear and deprivation were part of a slave's everyday life, and, as Delia Garlic's story exemplifies, recalling the conditions under which slaves lived led to some of the participants' most vivid mem-ories.

Cluster 5: I Miss My White Folks: I Was Better Off When I Lived with Them and Leaving Them Was a Heartbreaking Time

The cluster illustrates the complexity of the human relationships that existed within the system of slavery. Though slaves often spoke clearly of the harshness and brutality they experienced at the hands of their former owners, others talked of their affection. Grief for the loss of the people of their past, and for past days when life may have seemed simpler and even easier, is evident in this category. In this fifth cluster, which was endorsed by 11 parti-cipants, there were three categories.

The first category within this cluster, "I would not be cold and hungry if my master or mistress were alive," described the longing participants (3) felt for earlier days, when they were warm, well-fed, and provided for. Participants expressed the perception that because masters provided for the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter, such behavior was equal to the virtue of goodness. Andrew Goodman expressed his regret over his present conditions by describing how much he missed the days when he lived with his White master.

> I never was cold and hungry when my old master lived, and I has been plenty hungry and cold a lot of times since he is gone. But sometimes I think Marse Goodman was the bestes' man God made in a long time.

In Category 5.2, "I miss my White folks," a majority of participants (10 out of 11) described how much they missed the people who were figures from their earliest memories. Participants talked about the attachment they felt for their long-dead master and mistress. Josephine Howell summed up her feelings for the people who raised her:

> Judge Milwee's wife and auntie, Mrs. Baxter, raised me from a baby . . . . Honey, I can't help but love them, they part of me. They raised me. They learned me how to do everything.

Participants spoke movingly of their love for people who were as close to them as blood connections. Georgia Smith expressed her affection for her White mistress who remained dear to her long after the mistress' death:

> I left de old place not long after Mistus died, 'cause it was too lonesome there an' I missed her so much. I come to town and just worked for white folkses . . . . But I can't work no more now, an it won't be so long 'til I see my old Mistus again, an' den I can still wait on her, an' we won't have to part no mo'.

It is of note that in this category, the sense of loss expressed by the participants is not affected by the skewed nature of the relationship. Owners were no less loved because they were owners; slaves did not feel less affection because they were slaves.

In the final category of this cluster, "Leaving my White folks was a heartbreaking time," participants (4) expressed the sadness they felt at separation from their White folks, whether the separation was due to the master's or mistress' death or due to the changing circumstances brought about by emancipation. The integral part slave and master played in the life of each other was illustrated in this category. Belle Williams described the grief felt by both Whites and Blacks in the story of her family's parting from their plantation after freedom:

> I must tell you about what happened one night while we were all there in the (Union) camp. One of the massa's boys that loved my uncle, came crawling on all fours, just like a pig, into camp. He passed the pickets, and when he found my uncle he laid there on the ground in my uncle's arms and cried like a baby. My uncle was old but he cried too and after a while he told the boy that he must go back . . . our young master never saw my uncle any more. Oh, honey, them was heart-breakin' times.

Cluster 6: Losses of Self: Publicly and Privately, Slaves Were Regarded as Property Rather Than as Human Beings

The three categories of this cluster illuminated how conditions of slavery created an identity for the people who were born into slavery. Thirty-nine participants contributed to this cluster.

CATEGORY 6.1

In the first category of this cluster, "Being owned as property formed the basis of my identity," 26 participants described how their identity derived in large part from the fact that within the institution of slavery they were considered to be property that could be bought and sold. Every participant in this category described him or herself with the statement, "I was owned by . . . ." However, people in this category not only described themselves as slaves who were owned by others, they also described the people of their lineage in terms of property. Malindy Martin provides an example,

> I was born a slave. Sam Shans and Miss Cornelia Shans owned mama and Master Rube Sanders owned pa . . . . My pa's ma b'long to John Sanders and grandpa b'long to Rube Sanders . . . . My mammy an' pappy, Silo an' Fanny Moss, belonged to Marse Jordan.

The fact that they were property and were owned by other human beings formed the basis of an individual's personal and family identity, and that did not necessarily change after emancipation. Belle Williams found there was not much difference after freedom when she said, "I always been a slave. I worked for all the white families in this here town."

CATEGORY 6.2

Closely related to Category 6.1 is the second category of this cluster, "I was property to be bought and sold." In the above category, participants (23) described themselves as having been owned; in the second, participants indicate that their identity was affected by having been property that was bought and sold. Robert Glenn's narrative is similar to that of Malindy Martin in that after emancipation he did not easily adjust to the role of a free man. This

participant described being sold as an 8-year-old boy, an event that thoroughly impressed on him the helplessness of being a slave,

> My father's time was hired out and as he knew a trade he had by working overtime saved up a considerable amount of money. After the speculator bought me, mother went to father and pled with him to buy me from him and let the white folks hire me out. No slave could own a slave [but] Father got the consent and help of his owners to buy me .... I was again put on the block and father bought me, putting up the cash. [The speculator] then flew into a rage and cursed my father saying, "You damn black son of a bitch, you think you are white do you? Now just to show you are black, I will not let you have your son at any price," Father knew it was all off, and mother was frantic but there was nothing they could do about it. I was not allowed to tell my mother and father goodbye. When the time of parting came, I burst out crying .... I was so weak from sorrow I could not walk.

Robert Glenn goes on to say that after living in bondage for several years in Kentucky, the war came and he was freed. However, his new identity did not come easily. At times he forgot he was no longer a slave. He said, "I took my freedom by degrees and remained obedient and respectful."

Like Glenn, other participants in this category indicated that being treated as property impressed on them their role as slave, whether it was they themselves who were sold or whether it was family member. Sena Moore said, "My Pappy was a slave of the Stitt family .... Stitts took a notion to sell him to Arkansas. My mammy weep 'bout dat but what could her do? Just nothin'."

Mattie Fannen's story also shows how sale tore families apart,

> My father was named Bob Lee .... I never knowed much about him. His folks moved and took him off. Mother was sold but not on a stand. She belong to Bill Davis .... They said Bill Davis drunk up mother and all her children. He sold Aunt Serina to a man in Elberton, Georgia and all he had left then was grandma.

Stories such as those above demonstrate that being sold like livestock underscored the fundamental nature of slavery—a slave had no rights and no recourse. They were property and so were their family members.

CATEGORY 6.3

The third category in this cluster, "I thought too little of myself, and thought better of my owners than they deserved,"

demonstrated a further facet of a slave's identity. Former slaves described how their perceptions of self-identity became distorted by their circumstances. These 19 participants suggested they somehow deserved the treatment they received, or minimized the slave owners' culpability. Participants commonly made statements such as that of Mary Thompson, "Marster took hold my ears and bumped my head 'gainst de wall . . . but gen'rally dey was good to me." Former slaves' perceptions were also colored by nostalgia. Ellen Betts said of her White mistress, "Mis Cornelia was de fines' woman in de world . . . . Sunday morning' she done put a bucket of dimes on de front gallery and stand dere and throw dimes to de nigger chillen jes' like feedin' chickens." Other participants showed the same inability to understand that what was deemed good behavior on the part of their masters might in fact have been demeaning. Gip Minton said, "I recken they was good to me. I et in de kitchen when they got through or on a table out in de backyard sometimes. I slept in an outhouse they fixed up mostly, when I got up big." Tempe Pitts' loyalty to her White owners battled with questions about her own birth,

> I ain't sayin' nothin' 'bout my white folkses, but sometimes I does wonder why I'se red-headed when my pappy an' mammy wuz black as tar. Maybe I is part white, but I ain't sayin' nothin' 'bout my white folkses as I done tol' you.

Participants in this category illustrated the idea that many slaves did not recognize the fact that they in no way deserved their circumstances. They do not seem to fully perceive their role as victims or their White owner's role as victimizer. Such distorted perception illustrates another facet of what slaves lost, their ability to fully appreciate a positive inner identity.

Overall, the loss described in Cluster 6 is one of self. The sum of the participants' experience suggested that how they understood themselves as human beings was altered by the horribly skewed circumstances into which they were born. Public identity formed self-identity, and publicly slaves were property with no rights of any kind. Slaves were deemed by law to be less than human and as much as some might have railed inwardly against such injustice, participants in this category suggested that the loss to them was in sum or in part a loss of authentic self-identity. Slaves lost a fundamental birthright. They were not allowed to become the

people they might have been had they been born in another place
and time.

Cluster 7: Losses Related to Family Were the Hardest to Bear

Of all the experiences participants discussed, losses related to
family were overwhelmingly the losses recalled with the most pain.
Even losses connected to an individual's experience, such as losses
that arose from experiencing firsthand violence, could not com-
pare to the misery that was evident when participants talked about
family members who were sold, whipped, beaten, or raped.
Thirty-six participants contributed to this cluster which contained
two categories.

In the first category, "I hate to think about the awful whip-
pings and beatings my family had to endure," participants (30) illu-
strated how witnessing violence against a family member was a loss
almost too painful to recall. Mittie Blakely summed up the difficult
nature of the experience. At 80 years old she said, "I hate to think
or talk about the way my older brothers and sisters were treated
very rough, whipped often and hard. I hate to think about their
awful treatment." William Colbert also described witnessing
violence against a sibling,

> One day I remembers my brother, January wuz cotched ober seein' a gal
> on de next plantation.... Well suh, when de massa found out dat he
> wuz a hour late, he got as mad as a hive of bees. So when brother January
> he come home, de massa took down his long mule skinner and tied him
> wid a rope to a pine tree. He strip' his shirt off and said, "Now, nigger,
> I'm goin' to teach you some sense." Wid dat he started layin' on de lashes.
> January was a big, fine lookin' nigger; de finest I ever seed. He wuz jus' four
> years older dan me, an' when de massa begin a beatin' him, January neber
> said a word. De massa got madder and madder kaze he couldn't make
> January holla. "What's de matter wid you, nigger?" he say. "Don't it hurt?"
> January, he neber said nothin', and de massa keep a beatin' till little streams
> of blood started flowin' down January's chest, but he neber holler. His lips
> wuz a quiverin' and his body wuz a shakin', but his mouf it neber open; and
> all de while I sat on my mammy's and pappy's steps a cryin'.

In the second category of this cluster, "The sale of a family
member was an unbearable loss," participants (25) talked about
the pain of losing a family member through sale. Once a family
member was sold, he or she was often never seen again. Sarah

Taylor said, "They sold [grandpa] to nigger traders and they drove him to Mississippi. Mother never seen him no more. Grandma died of grief." In a heartbreaking story, Ben Johnson wrote about the sale of his brother,

> I had a brother Jim who wuz sold ter dress young missus fer her weddin'.
> De tree am still standin' whar I sat under an' watch 'em sell Jim. I set dar an'
> I cry an' cry, 'specially when dey puts de chains on him an' carries him off,
> an' I ain't never felt so lonesome in my whole life. I ain't never hear from
> Jim since an' I wonder now sometimes if 'en he's still livin'.

Such stories are evidence of the overwhelming loss slaves suffered when they were separated from family, losses that were made even more tragic by the selfish, shallow motivations of slave owners. It is not possible to understand how Ben Johnson's owners could place more value on a wedding dress than in keeping a family intact. Such events were common among slaves, and were the common cause of loss for the participants of this category.

Core Category

In a grounded theory analysis, the core category reflects a central theme. The overarching idea that unified the present analysis was that loss for participants was inextricably tied to the experience of dehumanization. Therefore, the present study resulted in the core category: "For people born into slavery, loss was both a cause and a consequence of dehumanization."

In a very real sense, loss was a cause and in fact a very effective tool in creating dehumanization. This experience is most aptly described in Clusters 1, 3, and 7, clusters that pertain to the often violent losses felt by the individual or by a family member. The pain engendered by these losses was felt most keenly by participants. As is described in these clusters, loss came as an assault to the most essential of human experience, the ties to self and to loved ones.

In the present analysis, loss also emerged as a consequence of dehumanization. Clusters 2, 4, 5, and 6 best describe the ways in which the utter disregard for the participants' humanity resulted in loss. Slaves were treated as less than human and as such were not allowed their human right to identity, to education, and to safety.

The core category suggested how completely the institution of slavery succeeded in creating loss and dehumanization. Participants' lives were saturated with loss; it was accomplished on every level of existence, from the personal to the collective. A slave's life was simply one of loss.

The findings of this analysis suggested that for people born into slavery, loss was so pervasive as to be a given. No participant in the analysis was asked, "What were the losses that affected your life?" Yet every participant answered the question. In describing the most important events of their lives, they told of their tragedies and of loss.

Discussion

This study showed that loss permeated the lives of people born into slavery. Loss gave context to conditions that resulted in the dehumanization of an entire people and was felt on every level of existence, from the individual to the cultural. The large number of narratives used in this study provided additional insights into the complexity of loss for former slaves.

Disenfranchised Loss and Grief

Disenfranchised grief has been described as bereavement that goes unrecognized and unsupported by the larger social structure (Doka, 2002a), a definition that aptly describes grief and loss experienced by the participants of this study. As has been discussed above, when a slave died, mourning or ceremonies including wakes or funerals were rarely allowed. Public displays of emotion in response to loss were also discouraged, if not outright punished.

There was enormous pressure on slaves to keep quiet about their losses and resulting grief. Certainly slave owners had a stake in keeping people producing, so allowing people time from work to grieve and honor the dead was likely considered a loss of profit. But the narratives reveal that the disenfranchisement of loss and grief among slaves was more complex than that. Participants described the paternalistic attitude taken by slave holders who treated them as lesser members of the "family." It did not fit into the slave holder's view of himself or his station when slaves were unhappy or grieving. Grief responses might have been seen as a criticism of the master. It also fit with the larger precepts of slavery

that slaves, who were legally defined as less human, would not be expected by White authority to experience the higher emotion of grief. It is hard to imagine greater disenfranchisement of loss than the ones slaves experienced, one in which one is not even recognized as a person who experienced a full range of emotions including responses to loss.

Making Meaning of Loss

Constructing a narrative can be helpful in deriving meaning from a loss, in understanding the benefits or silver lining of loss (Neimeyer, 2001; Neimeyer & Anderson, 2002). The narratives of participants of this study suggested that talking about their lives and losses was beneficial to former slaves, and also suggested some of the ways in which they understood loss. In this study, we found that slaves most often made meaning of loss through reliance on family, and through religion and spirituality.

THE SOLACE OF FAMILY

Slavery imposed constraints on the way in which slaves were able to act on values and beliefs. White slaveholders largely ignored the boundaries of family to suit their purposes, failing to recognize marriage and selling children, parents, and other family members at whim. Participants discussed how families were torn apart by their immeasurable grief. Yet slave owners were never fully successful in sundering the ties between family members. The present research supported an observation made by Gutman (1976) that slaves adapted to adversity by developing strong family structures and kin networks that supported the family and the culture. Participants told stories of families who fought hard to stay together and were sometimes victorious, or of happily reuniting with family members after emancipation. A common thread among the stories told by participants was that people construed meaning in their suffering through their connection to family; their losses had purpose if they somehow benefited the family or if the separation ended in reuniting with family.

FINDING SOLACE IN RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

In spite of restrictions placed on their access to church or worship, slaves nevertheless found solace in religious and spiritual

beliefs. They found a way to pray and to maintain a connection to God, and trusting in a better life in the hereafter was a belief that slaves clung to. Participants sometimes made reference to hymns they sung, which gave an indication of how slaves were able to give voice to their faith and to their suffering. People who were not allowed to go to church services found ways to pray, and participants explained that very often prayer meetings were held in the woods or other private locations, though being caught worshiping against the master's wishes ended in punishment. For people who lived in slavery, losing their connection to God was a bigger loss and a greater threat to their existence than being whipped or beaten. Without prayer, people had little ability to cope with the suffering in their lives. Of great importance, too, was the fact that slaves found meaning in their suffering through religious and spiritual beliefs. A common belief was that strength was found in suffering and God would never give a person more than he or she could bear. Slaves understood Jesus's suffering on the cross, and his suffering helped give meaning to their own.

Strengths and Limitations

Limitations of this study include those related to the data set. The data used in the present study was chosen using theoretical sampling (Fassinger, 2005), which eliminated some of the problems of the larger data set. For example, narratives that were interpretations of the narrator's story (e.g., written in third-person point of view) rather than verbatim transcriptions were not used. However, other limitations were not so easy to avoid. At the time of collection participants were elderly and poor. They were asked a difficult task, to reflect back on experiences that had occurred more than 70 years in the past. To one degree or another, their stories were affected by nostalgia, a suspicion of White authority, hunger, and the hope that if they cooperated they'd receive a pension check.

Of particular concern to this study, participants were not specifically asked about the losses in their lives or how they felt about them. It was up to the current researcher to extrapolate loss from what is discussed in the narratives. In keeping with the hermeneutical theory that guided this analysis (Rennie, 2000), the findings reported here are not assumed to be the only possible interpretation of the data but are, rather, the product of systematic

research meant to describe loss experienced by people who had been born into slavery. Their loss might quite expectedly be different from loss experienced by other generations of slaves. For example, the conditions of slavery in the late eighteenth century when slave populations were centralized in Atlantic states were considerably different from conditions of slavery in the heavily cotton producing South. In the South, work was longer and slaves actually had fewer privileges than previous generations (Berlin et al., 1998). Differing conditions could reasonably be expected to produce different experiences, including the experience of loss.

Despite the limitations, a strength of the data set is that loss is addressed so completely. Even without having been asked, participants revealed their losses by what they chose to address. In reflecting over their lives, the elderly participants shared moments that had salience for them. They spoke powerfully about events that mattered. When they talked about separation from family members, about living in fear and deprivation, or about the violence they encountered, participants were describing the most important losses in their lives. As the excerpts selected for inclusion in this study demonstrate, the loss felt by participants is as tangible today as it must have been to the people who collected their stories so many years ago.

This study included measures to strengthen its dependability. A consensus was reached by experts in the field of grief and cultural studies, Dr. Robert Neimeyer, Dr. Theresa Okwumabua, and the researcher regarding the themes that emerged from the analysis. In addition, the analysis reached the point of saturation, indicating the sampling process was comprehensive. Finally, memoing documented the course of the study and provides a record of the processes involved and interpretations of the data.

Parallels to Loss Experienced by Modern African Americans and Other Populations

This study not only shed insight onto the losses experienced by people who had been born into slavery; it also offered the first opportunity to delve into the question, "How might loss and grief in modern African Americans compare to loss in a slave population?" Further research is necessary to fully explore this question, but some interesting parallels are apparent.

In this study we found that, as hypothesized, people born into slavery relied on each other and on God to cope with their accumulated losses, from the slights and routine denigration experienced in daily life to the brutality of rape and murder. In the 150 or so years since the Civil War, coping strategies for African Americans display continuity over time. People still rely on family and complex kin networks (Hines & Boyd-Franklin, 1996; Stack, 1974; Stack & Burton, 1993) and on religious or spiritual sources of comfort in coping with adversity (Boyd-Franklin & Lockwood, 1999; Fletcher, 1998; Frazier, Mintz, & Mobley, 2005).

The most prominent finding of this study was that loss for people born into slavery was experienced within a context of dehumanization. In the only known study of its kind, Rosenblatt and Wallace (2005) explored how the modern narratives of bereaved African Americans dealt with racism. Their research supported the conclusion that narratives about racism in the life of the deceased "might address deprivation, loss, and pain that hampered and shaped the life of the deceased." This finding so closely follows the findings of this study as to be a nearly exact parallel. The participants of the Rosenblatt and Wallace study spoke of the ways in which racism caused deprivation to their loved ones and caused them to lose opportunities that would contribute to the quality and length of their lives, how racism made people strong and caused them to fight back against oppression. In the present study, the stories of Delia Garlic, Mary Estes Peters, James Green, Gus Feaster, Herdy Miller, and other participants echo the observations made by modern generations of African Americans and indicate deep and abiding connections in loss.

Considered in tandem, the present study and research by Rosenblatt and Wallace strongly suggest the idea that loss and grief in African Americans is complicated by racism that can be traced back to the dehumanization African Americans experienced during slavery. Research has established that African Americans are more likely to experience bereavement due to homicide, to maintain a strong bond to the deceased, and to feel greater loss for the death of extended kin (Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). They have a substantially shorter lifespan (National Center for Health Statistics, 2004) and are more likely to experience complicated or prolonged grief (Goldsmith et al., 2008; Laurie & Neimeyer, 2008). Future research might study how racism that is experienced

by generations of a people affects these factors that contribute to grief and loss.

Finally, the focus of this study has been on loss in an American slave population. The question remains open as to whether the findings of this study may have applicability to other marginalized people. It is quite possible that the experience of loss has promoted dehumanization and disenfranchisement in disadvantaged groups across the ages and in instances in which one population's purpose was in maintaining power over another. Further research might very well yield common experiences in the losses of American slaves and other oppressed populations. Whatever the outcome of these comparative analyses, the present results underscore the complex braiding of personal, historical, and cultural factors in constructing the experience of loss, in a way that shapes, and sometimes assails, the humanity of those who suffer it.

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