

cdr

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the lived experience of traumatic bereavement on therapists' personal and professional identity and practice

Item Type	Thesis or dissertation
Authors	Broadbent, Jeanne R.
Citation	Broadbent, J. (2015). An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the lived experience of traumatic bereavement on therapists' personal and professional identity and practice (Doctoral dissertation). University of Chester, United Kingdom.
Publisher	University of Chester
Download date	2026-05-19 15:51:12
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/10034/620934

TITLE PAGE

*'An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
of the lived experience of traumatic
bereavement on therapists' personal and
professional identity and practice'.*

Thesis submitted in accordance with the
requirements of the University of Chester for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy by Jeanne Roberta
Broadbent.

October 2015

IN MEMORY OF

S.L., my parents Tom and Joan, and my dear friend and mentor Professor Henry Pearson who died tragically during the completion of this study.

ABSTRACT

The self of the therapist is widely recognised as being a crucial component in the therapeutic relationship. However, comparatively little is known about the therapist as a person, or of how life-changing events in therapists' personal lives may impact on their professional identity and practice. The aim of this phenomenological study was to explore the impact of traumatic bereavement on the personal and professional lives of qualified humanistic therapists in order to shed further light on this under-researched area.

Underpinned by a phenomenological-hermeneutic philosophy, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was selected as the methodology most appropriate to reveal participants' lived experience. Purposive sampling was used to recruit a homogenous sample of eight humanistic therapists who had experienced traumatic bereavement while practising. Data comprised interview transcripts, participants' reflective writing and researcher field notes. IPA's idiographic approach facilitated the creation of a detailed and nuanced thematic analysis of the phenomenon, grounded in participants' voices.

Five super-ordinate themes were created from the interpretative phenomenological analysis, each of which provides a complementary 'lens' through which to view participants' holistic experience: '*Significance of context*', '*Confronting a changed reality*', '*Re-learning the world*', '*Facing professional challenges*' and '*Personal and professional reciprocity*'. Findings reveal the unique contextual and multi-faceted nature of traumatic bereavement, and suggest that this experience can profoundly impact on therapists' personal and social identities and beliefs. The professional challenges faced by grieving therapists are also highlighted. Findings illustrate that through a reciprocal process of personal and professional integration, the experience of facing, and living through grief, can lead to therapists' increased self-knowledge, understanding, empathy and authenticity that informs and enhances their therapeutic practice. Supportive supervision and continued self-reflection are evidenced as significant mediating factors.

The research demonstrates that the process of integrating the experience of traumatic bereavement into the therapist's personal and professional life is a continuing and oscillating process. It is crucial that therapists carrying this burden have opportunities to reflect on this process in supportive supervisory relationships in order to pre-empt and ameliorate difficulties they may face in client work. A greater understanding of therapist bereavement is needed across the profession.

DECLARATION

“The work is original and has not been submitted previously
in support of any qualification or course”.

TABLE OF CONTENT

	Page
Abstract	iii
Declaration	iv
Acknowledgements	xi
Abbreviations	xii
Definition of terms	xiv
List of figures	xv
List of tables	xvi
Statement	xvii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Context	1
1.2 Aim and purpose of research	2
1.3 Background to study and researcher positioning	3
1.4 Research questions	7
1.5 Original contribution to knowledge	8
1.6 Use of terminology	8
1.7 Structure of thesis	8
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW	11
2.1 Introduction	11
2.2 Setting the scene: historical developments in Western thanatology	12
2.2.1 The grief work hypothesis: stage and phase models of grief	13
2.2.2 Challenges to the grief work hypothesis – and beyond	16
2.2.3 Continuing Bonds: rethinking decathexis	20
2.2.4 The search for meaning following bereavement	21
2.3 Traumatic Bereavement	23
2.3.1 Introduction: the intersection between bereavement and trauma	23
2.3.2 Defining ‘traumatic bereavement’	24
2.3.3: Theoretical conceptualisations of traumatic bereavement	26
2.3.4 Traumatic bereavement: a clinical conceptualisation	28
2.3.5 Alternative conceptualisations of traumatic bereavement	29
2.3.5.1 Loss of the assumptive world	30
2.3.5.2 Disruption of the life narrative	33
2.3.5.3 Traumatic bereavement: existential crisis or ontological	35
authenticity?	
2.3.6 Positive growth following traumatic bereavement	37
2.4 Therapist bereavement	39
2.4.1 Introduction	39
2.4.2 Empirical studies: a trajectory of development	40
2.4.3 Laying the foundation stone: Millon’s 1998 research study	41
2.4.4 Empirical research studies: recent developments	44
2.4.5 Therapists’ personal accounts of traumatic bereavement	45
2.4.5.1 Therapists’ affective responses to the experience of	46

traumatic bereavement	
2.4.5.2 Catapulted into an alien world	47
2.4.5.3 Impact on sense of self	48
2.4.5.4 Impact on therapeutic practice	49
2.5 A life-long journey: the evolving professional identity development of counsellors and psychotherapists	50
2.5.1 Introduction	50
2.5.2 Models of therapist professional identity development	50
2.5.3 The evolution of the professional self	51
2.5.4 Major factors influencing therapist development	55
2.5.5 The influence and impact of personal life experiences	56
2.6 Brief summary of Chapter Two	57
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES	58
Section 1: Methodological choices, philosophy and design	58
3.1.1 Introduction	58
3.1.2 Theoretical positioning of the study	58
3.1.3 Qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy	61
3.1.4 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: a brief introduction	61
3.1.4.1 The philosophical foundations of IPA	63
3.1.4.2 Phenomenology: exploring lived experience	64
3.1.4.3 'Removing the brackets': Heidegger's existential- hermeneutic phenomenology	66
3.1.4.4 Hermeneutics	68
3.1.4.5 From philosophy to research methodology: IPA and the theory	70
3.1.4.6 To bracket or not to bracket?	72
3.1.4.7 Idiography	73
3.1.5 Criticisms of IPA	75
3.1.6 Rationale for selecting IPA	76
Section 2 – Methods	78
3.2.1 Introduction	78
3.2.2 Applying Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis	78
3.2.2.1 Sampling	78
3.2.2.2 Criteria for inclusion	80
3.2.2.3 Definition of 'traumatic bereavement' for purposes of inclusion criteria	81
3.2.2.4 Recruitment to study	82
3.2.2.5 Participant profiles	84
3.2.3 introduction to data generation procedures	88

3.2.3.1 Interview design: a relational-feminist approach to date generation	89
3.2.3.2 Initial meeting	89
3.2.2.3 Interviewing as a co-construction of meaning	90
3.2.3.4 Transcription: a necessary 'chore' or first step in interpretation?	93
3.2.3.5 Becoming a 'custodian'	95
3.2.4 Data analysis	96
3.2.4.1 Introduction	96
3.2.4.2 Cycle 1: interpretive engagement with the text	98
3.2.4.3 Cycle 2: initial coding/exploratory comments	98
3.2.4.4 Cycle 3: identification of emergent themes from initial coding	101
3.2.4.5 Cycle 4: clustering of themes for individual transcript	102
3.2.4.6 Cycle 5: contextualisation: identifying 'narrative constellations'	102
3.2.4.7 Cycle 6: creating a 'summary table of themes' for each participant	103
3.2.4.8 Cycle 7: cross-case analysis	104
3.2.4.9 Cycle 8: creating final super-ordinate and subordinate themes for the group	104
3.2.5 Ethical considerations: adopting an 'ethics-as-process' approach	106
3.2.6 Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research	109
3.2.7 Evaluating the study	110
3.2.7.1 Sensitivity to context	110
3.2.7.2 Commitment and rigour	111
3.2.7.3 Coherence and transparency	111
3.2.7.4 Impact and importance	112
3.2.7.5 Transferability	113
3.3 Summary of Chapter 3	113
CHAPTER FOUR: SIGNIFICANCE OF CONTEXT	114
4.1 Introduction	114
4.2 Super-ordinate and subordinate themes	115
4.3 Temporality	117
4.4 Overview of Super-ordinate theme 1: Significance of context	118
4.4.1 Subordinate theme 1.1: Pre-bereavement context and experience	119
4.4.2 Subordinate theme 1.2: Type and circumstances of the death	132
CHAPTER FIVE: CONFRONTING A CHANGED REALITY	140
5.1 Overview of Super-ordinate theme 2: Confronting a changed reality	140

5.1.1 Subordinate theme 2.1: Grief as a unique and multi-layered process	141
5.1.2 Subordinate theme 2.2: Impact on personal and social identity	159
5.1.3 Subordinate theme 2.3: Impact on beliefs and world view	167
CHAPTER SIX: RE-LEARNING THE WORLD	170
6.1 Overview of Super-ordinate theme 3: Re-learning the world	170
6.1.1 Subordinate theme 3.1: Searching for meaning and purpose	170
6.1.2 Subordinate theme 3.3: Establishing a continuing bond with the deceased	180
CHAPTER SEVEN: FACING PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES	187
7.1 Overview of Super-ordinate theme 4: Facing professional challenges	187
7.1.1 Subordinate theme 4.1: Time off: how long is long enough?	187
7.1.2 Subordinate theme 4.2: Initial impact of traumatic bereavement on clinical practice	191
7.1.3 Subordinate theme 4.3: Supervisor as 'container'	201
CHAPTER EIGHT: PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL RECIPROACITY	207
8.1 Overview of Super-ordinate theme 4: Personal and professional reciprocity	207
8.1.1 Subordinate theme 5.1: Feeling it and understanding it: personal insight, knowledge and growth	208
8.1.2 Louise – a prose poem	213
8.2 Introduction to Subordinate themes 5.2 and 5.3	216
8.2.1 Subordinate theme 5.2: Personal and professional integration: a symbiotic relationship	217
8.2.2 Subordinate theme 5.3: Opening and expanding: personal experience enhances therapeutic practice	223
8.3 Brief summary of findings	228
CHAPTER NINE: DISCUSSION	229
9.1 Introduction	229
9.2 Significance of context	229
9.2.1 Pre-bereavement antecedents	230
9.2.2 Type and circumstances of the death	232
9.3 Journeying through the labyrinth of loss: grief as a unique and multi-	233

layered process	
9.3.1 Participants' affective responses to traumatic bereavement:	234
clinical symptomatology	
9.3.2 The paradoxical nature of traumatic bereavement and the relevance of the Two Track Model of Bereavement	235
9.4 Confronting finitude: an alternative understanding of traumatic bereavement	236
9.4.1 Impact on the personal self	237
9.4.2 Impact on the social self	240
9.4.3 Impact on beliefs and world view	241
9.5 Re-learning the world	242
9.5.1 Searching for meaning and purpose	242
9.5.2 Experiencing presence-in-absence: maintaining a continuing bond with the deceased	244
9.5.3 'Feeling it and understanding it': traumatic bereavement as a catalyst for insight, understanding and positive change	245
9.6 Professional identity as a reference point in the personal experience of grief	247
9.7 Challenges to the professional self	248
9.7.1 'Closing down' the professional self: the emotionally vulnerable therapist	248
9.7.2 Supervisor as 'container'	251
9.8 Integrating the personal and professional selves	253
9.9 The opening up and expanding of the therapeutic self	256
9.10 Summary	258

CHAPTER TEN: CONCLUSION

	259
10.1 Introduction	259
10.2 A critical reflection on the use of IPA to explore lived experience	259
10.3 Strengths and limitations of the study	261
10.4 Implications for professional development and practice	265
10.4.1 Implications for professional development	265
10.4.2 Implications related to the therapeutic relationship	266
10.4.3 Implications for the support of bereaved therapists and supervisors	267
10.5 Significance of study and contribution to the field	268
10.6 Future research	269

EPILOGUE

REFERENCES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have supported and encouraged me throughout the process of completing this research. However, I owe a particular debt of gratitude to the following people and I acknowledge them here.

Firstly, my most sincere thanks go to the eight therapists who took part in this study. It has been an enormous privilege to have been the 'custodian' of those stories they shared with so much courage, honesty, openness and trust. I hope their stories will reach out and speak to others as they have spoken to me. My thanks go also to my colleague N.F. who took part in the pilot interview.

I have been fortunate in having two academic supervisors who have supported and encouraged me in all aspects of this research. Dr. Rita Mintz and Professor Peter Gubi have contributed enormously to my studies, and have provided constant support, encouragement and advice, as well as helpful and constructive comments on drafts. I thank them both most sincerely for their generous personal and professional support.

I would also like to acknowledge the support of my clinical supervisor, Kate Diggory, and thank her for her encouragement during this research project.

I acknowledge and thank my clients at the Hospice of the Good Shepherd who teach me so much about the vulnerability and resilience of the human spirit.

I thank my friend and fellow researcher Anna Constantine for sharing the journey.

I acknowledge the support of the N. West IPA group, in particular Kate Doran and Manya Merodoulaki.

My sincere thanks go to Catherine Richardson and Sue Parkinson for their unconditional support and friendship.

I am blessed in having a wonderful family who are the cornerstones of my life, and who lovingly support all my endeavours. They are my brother Paul, sister-in-law Carys and nieces Amy and Georgia. Thank you for being who you are.

Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to my partner, Gill, for her continued support, encouragement and patience during these last four years, and for understanding, right from the outset, what undertaking this research study has meant to me.

ABBREVIATIONS

AJ	Analytic Journal
AW	Assumptive world
BACP	British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy
BPS	British Psychological Association
CB	Continuing bonds
CG	Complicated grief
CI	Conscious identification
CPD	Continuing professional development
CT	Counter-transference

DG	Disenfranchised grief
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual
DPM	Dual Process Model of Bereavement
FN	Field notes
HC	Hermeneutic circle
IAPT	Improving Access to Psychological Therapies
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
PBIU	Post-bereavement insight and understanding
PCBD	Persistent complex bereavement disorder
PGD	Prolonged grief disorder
PTG	Posttraumatic growth
PTSD	Posttraumatic stress disorder
QR	Qualitative research
RRJ	Reflective Research Journal
SO	Significant other
S-O	Super-ordinate theme
ST	Subordinate theme
TRB	Traumatic bereavement
TTMB	Two Track Model of Bereavement
WR	Written reflection

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Bereavement: the objective situation of having lost someone significant through death (Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe & Schut, 2001).

Complicated grief (CG)/prolonged grief disorder (PGD)/traumatic grief: grief that “constitutes a persistently elevated set of specific symptoms of grief identified in bereaved individuals with significant difficulties adjusting to the loss” (Prigerson, Vanderwerker & Maciejewski, 2008, p. 166). These terms have been used interchangeably - and sometimes confusingly - in the literature to describe similar symptomatology. In more recent research, preference is given to the term ‘prolonged grief disorder’ or PGD (Prigerson et al., 2008). In DSM-5 (2013) the term Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder (PCBD) is used to describe a specific diagnostic category.

Disenfranchised grief: “grief that results when a person experiences a significant loss and the resultant grief is not openly acknowledged, socially validated, or publicly mourned” (Doka, 2008, p. 224).

Grief: the term identifying the reactions to loss through death of a significant other, including physical, psychological, cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual reactions (Corr & Corr, 2013).

Mourning: the term used to designate all the intra and interpsychic processes of learning to live with loss and grief. The term can also be restricted to refer to the social expressions or acts of grief that are shaped by the practices of a particular society or cultural group (Stroebe et al., 2001).

Posttraumatic growth (PTG): the term refers to “positive change that the individual experiences as a result of the struggle with a major loss or trauma” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001, p.158).

Post-bereavement insight and understanding (PBIU): my own term to denote the positive change and growth reported by participants in this study.

Thanatology: the academic study of dying, death and bereavement.

Traumatic bereavement (an exemplar definition): “one in which the death occurred in highly impactful circumstances, those that are not a universal, inevitable part of normal life” (Stroebe, Schut & Finkenauer, 2001, p.189).

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2.1: Domains of literature and synthesis of theoretical context	11
Figure 2.2: The Dual Process Model of bereavement	18
Figure 2.3: The Two-Track Model of bereavement	19
Figure 2.4: Traumatic bereavement: the intersection between bereavement and trauma	23
Figure 2.5: Additional factors influencing the grieving process	25
Figure 2.6: Conceptualising traumatic bereavement: a holistic model	30
Figure 3.1: Situating the research: an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm	60

Figure 3.2: Data analysis in IPA	97
Figure 3.3: Final super-ordinate and sub-themes for the group	105

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1: Modernist conceptualisations of grief: stage, phase and task models of the grieving process	13
Table 2.2: Challenges to the 'grief work' hypothesis: postmodernist conceptualisations of the grieving process	17
Table 2.3: Theoretical conceptualisations of traumatic bereavement	27
Table 2.4: Phases of counsellor/psychotherapist professional development	53
Table 3.1: General characteristics of sample	84
Table 3.2: Example of initial coding/exploratory comments	100
Table 3.3: Identification of themes from initial coding	101

Table 3.4: Criteria for establishing quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research	109
Table 4.1: Super-ordinate and subordinate themes	115
Table 4.2: Participants contributing to subordinate themes within S-O 1	118
Table 5.1: Participants contributing to subordinate themes within S-O 2	140
Table 6.1: Participants contributing to subordinate themes within S-O 3	170
Table 7.1: Participants contributing to subordinate themes within S-O 4	187
Table 8.1: Participants contributing to subordinate themes within S-O 5	207

STATEMENT

Some of the work in this thesis has been published as the following:

Broadbent, J. (2013a). 'The advantages and challenges of using interpretative phenomenological analysis in an exploration of therapists' personal bereavement and its impact upon their therapeutic practice'. *BPS: Psychotherapy Section Review* 50, 20-23.

Work related to the thesis has been presented at the following conferences:

- *Findings from an interpretative phenomenological analysis of humanistic therapists' lived experience of traumatic bereavement and its impact on their professional development and practice*. 10th QMiP Conference, 2nd- 4th September 2015, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge.
- *'Hear my voice': a phenomenological study of humanistic therapists' lived experience of traumatic bereavement and its impact on their professional identity development and practice*'. 20th BACP Research Conference, 16th-17th May 2014, London. (Awarded the PCCS Books Student Prize, 2014).

- *'The space between: exploring the complex relational dynamics existing between participant, researcher and supervisor in a qualitative research study using IPA'*. Joint presentation with Dr Rita Mintz at the 8th Keele Counselling Conference, 22nd-23rd March 2014, Keele University.
- *'Humanistic therapists' lived experience of traumatic bereavement and its impact on their personal and professional identity development'*. Society for Psychotherapy Research UK Chapter 25th Annual Conference, 12th-14th September 2013, Oxford.
- *'The advantages and challenges of using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in an exploration of therapists' personal bereavement and its impact upon their therapeutic practice'*. Psychotherapy Symposium, PsyPAG Conference, Newcastle, 18th-20th July, 2012.