Unseen and unheard: women’s experience of miscarriage many years after the event

*The Forbidden in Counselling and Psychotherapy*
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Lois de Cruz
The wide mouth frog effect
Aim Of my PhD

- To use interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore women’s perception of miscarriage decades after the event
What is IPA

- IPA is a qualitative approach developed specifically within psychology – now widely used by health, clinical and sociological psychologists
- Attempts to explore personal experience and is concerned with an individual’s perception or account of an object or event
- The researcher is concerned with trying to understand how participants make sense of their experience
- Acknowledges that access is always dependent on the researcher’s own interpretation of another’s world

(Smith et al, 2009)
Statistics on miscarriage

- Miscarriage is defined as the natural termination of a pregnancy before the foetus is considered viable, that is generally up to 16 weeks.
- Approximately 15% - 20% of pregnancies end in miscarriage.
- Very little is written about the emotional impact on women in counselling and psychotherapy literature.
My participants

- 5 women: Janet, Dee, Lucy, Susan and Tess
- Aged between 50-65 years old
- All had miscarriages 10 – 25 years ago
- They have had 9 miscarriages between them
- They were all recruited as a result of my own contacts or through self-referral
Emphasis on the ideographic in IPA

- IPA generally requires a small, homogenous and purposive sample
- Samples are selected in order to offer insight into a particular experience
- Good IPA focuses on the uniqueness in individual accounts as well as looking across transcripts

Data collection and analysis

- The data was collected, over the past two years, using unstructured interviews, lasting just over an hour
- The interviews were transcribed verbatim
- Analysed using IPA (Smith et al, 2009)
Emergent themes…

The emotional impact of miscarriage
- look at more detailed individual accounts of this theme (fine grained analysis)

Perceived insensitivity of medical staff
Miscarriage is a life changing experience
- look at these 2 themes across the transcript
I was worried after the first miscarriage. It was a good job people didn't leave their kids outside Sainsbury's like they used to do a few years ago because I was worried that I might pinch someone else's...

I think I just shut off.. Didn't like the world, didn't like what was happening to me, couldn't deal with the emotions I felt.

And that's the space I think I was trapped in for a long time, that metaphorical toilet.
Well I kind of, I suppose, covered a lot of this stuff in my head, seeing babies in what’s their name dishes in hospital… being left in the sluice.

I was really frightened about it but I think I had this image of a baby. I just found that really difficult.

I suppose the connection must be that I think I’ve killed it or something.
Tess

I felt panic and anxiety and fear but I thought I’ve got two children and looking back I just tried to rationalise it.

The process with the first one was so quick and almost before you knew what had hit you one minute you were pregnant and the next you weren’t.

I processed that these were lives and that they were lost – you know we’ll never know the gender or how they looked.
Janet

I think after the trauma of that (stillbirth) the others didn’t seem quite as traumatic and there were two miscarriages…I think it was just one of those things.

I thought well I’m just going to struggle having a child… that sounds flippant but it was like if it happens it happens.
Although I remember the events, I don’t remember the emotions that clearly.

What did help enormously was they did some tests on the placenta and the foetus. I was told about 5 weeks later that the baby had an extra chromosome...It made me feel better about it.

I think I felt that this was nature’s way of dealing with a baby that wasn’t going to survive with any quality of life.

I almost feel guilty that I wasn’t more distressed because people expect it.
Janet
He said, “have you any live children?” and it was just absolutely horrific. It was like someone cutting you with a knife. I can’t believe that even now someone who is in that profession could be so insensitive to someone’s feeling after losing three children.

Susan
I found it quite shocking when I had the miscarriage… it’s though you’ve come to have your tooth out or you’ve got a broken toe. They’re buzzing round you just waiting for the baby to come out of you. I just thought it was dreadful because I was petrified.

Lucy
This really stupid radiographer, who should have known better, I’m sure they have training in these things, said never mind have fun trying again. I thought how callous is that – have fun trying again - and I’ve just lost my baby. I’m still really angry about this.

Tess
He said it was definitely a spontaneous abortion and I burst into tears and he went I don’t know why you are crying you already knew this. I didn’t know what to do with myself. It’s just a horrible name. It surprises me after all these years it can still evoke the level of emotion and it’s the treatment and the lack of compassion.

Perceived insensitivity of medical staff
Questions and interpretations

- Miscarriage in our society is often medicalised so women come into contact with medical staff, some who are less sensitive than others.
- Do medical staff struggle with reproductive loss because it makes them feel impotent?
- Suggestion that for some doctors miscarriage is very routine whereas for the woman it can be life changing.
Miscarriage is a life changing experience

- All five woman had something to say on this theme.
- Dee is more of the opinion that having the baby would have been a life changing experience.
Janet
Each experience of life is different so maybe it helped me to understand...and if someone wants to tell me what it is for them, that's what is for them. And maybe that's why I went into counselling.

Lucy
Not only did I lose my baby but I lost me. I lost who I had been. I had to rediscover myself.

Susan
I don’t think they’ve made me a more bad person – if anything I’ve got empathy for people who are in that situation...So I don’t judge people anyway in general. I don’t think anyone makes the decision to have an abortion or has a miscarriage without it having an effect, even if they say it doesn’t.”

Tess
So had I not lost the three I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing now. It was a high cost. What if the first had never happened...My life would have been very different and I would have gone on and been a clinical psychologist.”

Dee
Our family would have been very different I think. It could have been very difficult for the boys because they were going off to university. I would have a toddler and couldn’t be involved in the same way. If I try to imagine what it would be like not to only have her (daughter) but another ten years younger that would have been really, really awkward I think.

Miscarriage is a life changing experience
Questions and interpretations

- Janet, Lucy and Tess talk about losing a child as a catalyst for them becoming counsellors – food for thought!
- Janet, Lucy, Susan and Tess talk about it making them a better person – more understanding – is this how we make meaning out of loss?
- Tess talks about it being a meaningful experience but considers she pays a high price for it
In conclusion

“The fact that pregnancy loss still poses such an assault on women’s sense of self, on their sense of self-worth, on their womanhood, indicates that there remains a great deal to do in this area.”

Layne (1997)
Final word from Tess:

“I needed to talk about it. Maybe I wanted to talk about it and maybe it feels a bit grand but it’s about validating the experience… I wonder whether you gave me permission to talk about it. I’m going to get emotional now, nobody has ever given me permission to talk about it… and maybe it’s about legitimising miscarriage loss…

You know I wonder… whether society actually does recognise, culturally recognise, the emotional impact on women and potentially on men.”
References

