"It's changed who I am and my life": The psychological impact of miscarriage.

Lois de Cruz
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My research question

What are women’s perceptions of miscarriage decades after the event? An interpretative phenomenological analysis.
Motivation for this research

22 years ago I had a miscarriage and it changed my life.

- I felt compelled to discover whether my experience was similar to other women’s
- I wanted to give voice to women’s experience of miscarriage
- I felt the need to challenge some of the taboo and the stigma surrounding miscarriage
- I wanted to ask why is so little written about miscarriage in the counselling literature.
The conspiracy of silence

- Women may even collude in their own disenfranchisement because of the difficulties around discussing something so personal and private.
- As a researcher I can sometimes feel the need to protect my participants, myself and even my audience from some of the fear and distaste that I feel the subject can arouse.
Definition of miscarriage

In the UK a miscarriage is defined as the loss of a pregnancy up to 24 weeks gestation.

Miscarriage is a common event: 20%-45% of all conceptions result in miscarriage.

80% of these occur in the first 12 weeks. (NICE, 2012)
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)
My participants

- Five 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
- Commitment to in-depth analysis
- Good IPA focuses on the uniqueness in individual accounts as well as looking across transcripts

Data collection and analysis

- The data was collected using unstructured interviews lasting just over an hour
- The interviews were transcribed verbatim
- Analysed using IPA (Smith et al., 2009)
# My Findings

## SUPER-ORDINATE THEMES 2013 (8/6/13)

1. **MEMORIES OF THE INITIAL IMPACT OF MISCARRIAGE**
2. **THE LONGER TERM CONSEQUENCES OF MISCARRIAGE**
3. **MAKING SENSE OF MISCARRIAGE IN THE PRESENT**

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The psychological effects of miscarriage

- There is a general consensus in the literature that miscarriage is a stressful life event that may have psychological consequences for some women (Frost & Condon 1996; Brier, 2004; Nikcevic et al., 2007).

- Some debate around whether the feelings some women describe are depression, anxiety or grief and whether these can be delineated (Stirtzinger & Robinson, 1989; Lee & Slade, 1996).
“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”

(Lucy)
Is miscarriage a traumatic event?

For some women:

- Miscarriage is an out of the ordinary event
- The event is remembered vividly particularly the physical pain and the loss of blood and tissue
- There is shock associated with the sudden and unforeseen nature of miscarriage
- It can feel out of the women’s control
- It happens at a critical moment in life

In my view, these accord with the attributes for trauma described by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995)
“Ultimately, I can’t remember how I lost the baby – in the toilet and not completely either. It was horrible” (Tess)

“I could feel it slipping away. I called the nurse and they came and basically caught it” (Dee)

“Yea in my mind it was a baby. It was a lump. I felt the lump coming out” (Susan)
Miscarriage and anxiety

- In my research the prevailing psychological reaction of my participants is anxiety.
- The initial shock and then the difficulty of attempting to make sense of an inexplicable event may result in developing long term anxiety.
- Little research into the actual symptoms and nature of anxiety after a miscarriage.
“Almost before you knew what had hit you one minute you were pregnant and the next minute you weren’t” (Tess)
Acute anxiety leading to agoraphobia

- After the loss of her second pregnancy Lucy developed severe agoraphobia which she still struggles with today.
- This has also been my experience.
- Miscarriage turns your assumptive world upside down rapidly and therefore it is not surprising that the world begins to feel an unsafe place to be.
- However Geller et al., (2002) found that miscarriage did not increase the risk for panic disorder or specific phobia such as agoraphobia.
- More research is needed.
“And that’s the space I was trapped in for a long time, that metaphorical toilet” (Lucy)

This quote encapsulates for me what is means to have a miscarriage.
Anxiety during subsequent pregnancies

- 50%-60% of women become pregnant again within the first year after reproductive loss
- However, subsequent pregnancies can be overshadowed by fear that it might happen again (Fertl et al., 2009)
- Janet, Lucy, Susan and Tess all reported high levels of anxiety during subsequent pregnancies after their miscarriages
“I had got the idea that it wasn’t going to happen so I was pregnant but I wasn’t going to have a baby” (Janet)

“You just thought this is all going to go wrong again. I was really worried that it was going to go wrong” (Susan)

“I think it has left me hyper-sensitive to anxiety. I do a lot to avoid feeling anxious” (Tess)
Miscarriage does not have psychological consequences for all women

- Dee was an exception in my research:

  “I think it was a relief”

  “I almost feel guilty that I wasn’t more distressed by it because people expect it”

  “It wasn’t a huge loss because it never impinged on us really”
Why is Dee an exception?

- Dee was the only woman in my research who was given a medical explanation for her miscarriage. Her foetus was found to have a chromosomal abnormality.
- She also had a very strong Christian belief and saw her miscarriage as part of God’s plan.

“We have a predisposition to want to look for God’s hand in what happened”
Miscarriage as a life changing experience

- For Janet, Lucy, Susan, and Tess, miscarriage has been a major life changing experience.
- They have had to form new assumptions about the world and in some cases forge new identities for themselves.
- Theory of post-traumatic growth claims that this struggle can be positive and transformational (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2007)
“Had I not lost the three, I wouldn’t be doing what I am doing. It was a high cost but you can’t do the ‘what ifs’ can you? 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” (Tess)

“I want to say this is what happened. This is my life; this is where I am now. This is what made me and I’ve got there through this” (Janet)

“It’s changed who I am and my life” (Lucy)
My own life changing experience

- My baby’s blanket
- My Shadow Child
- Liminality
Liminality

Years ago now

You slipped
From my hand
Left to be lost in time
Where I could not follow.

Yet still you are there,
In the blurred edges of my life,
In the pauses where my body
Meets the world.

I glimpse you in the shadow
moments.
Those barely perceptible
Thresholds,
When dusk becomes night,

Dawn day
And the moments between life
and death
Are just a breath away,

Where pain is untouchable,
Tears bank high in nimbus clouds
Grey, black, monstrous.
Storms brew, never to break
And my bones crack
With the ache I feel
At your loss
Still.
(Lois de Cruz 2013)
References


