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“The top of my head came off”: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the experience of depression

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This study explored what it is actually like to be depressed, that is, to capture the content and complexity of this experience from the view point of the sufferer. We present a case study using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of one man diagnosed with reactive depression. A semi-structured interview explored the experience of depression. The interview was transcribed and analysed using IPA. We describe how his depression occurred in the context of work and financial difficulties and note how a sense of vulnerability emerged and contrast with his reported experience of conventional masculinity. The process of becoming depressed involved the eruption of old negative memories and a catastrophic view of the present and future involving failure and death. We present a detailed analysis of two metaphorical constructions of depression. The features of depression form an interconnected whole. The experience of depression is so extreme that it is reported as if the person or self is dying. Onset appears to involve the destruction of highly valued life projects of the person. For some individuals, metaphors and images may be an actual part of the experience itself and contribute to it.

Keywords: depression; phenomenology; metaphors; narrative; images; masculinity

Introduction

What is it really like to be depressed? It is tempting to think that we must understand given the large amount of research carried out in this area, or that as clinicians we have observed many cases. Yet some who have been depressed claim that others do not really understand, that the non-depressed, as it were, stand on the outside and cannot see within. We hope, however, in this paper to show that our attempts to understand can be facilitated by the use of in-depth, idiographic, qualitative analysis, in particular, by the detailed exploration of an interview with such an individual in a way that experiential qualities are retained.

Qualitative research can be thought of as complementary to quantitative research and it is not our intention to dismiss the many findings and theories generated in this tradition (Hammen & Watkins, 2008). It may not, however, as suggested above, capture the complexity and meaning of changes occurring over time for an individual, nor what these experiences feel like.

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There are a small number of qualitative studies focused on the personal experience of depression. One tradition is the publication of actual first-person accounts of depression, for example, Plath (1971), Styron (1991), Smith (1999), and Solomon (2001). These accounts tend to underline the utter extremity of depressive experience and its ineffability. The limitation of the above first-person accounts, however, is that such work tends to be published by those who are highly literate and often by people who have achieved major success in areas such as literature.

There has been relatively little qualitative research by psychologists into depression. We will describe two recent interesting examples. Granek (2006) suggested that the core experience of these participants was depression as social isolation and alteration in relationships with others. She argued that the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) list of symptoms tends to ignore relational features. Emslie, Ridge, Ziebland, and Hunt (2006), argued that we know little about men's experience of depression. They noted how several participants reported being the victims of bullying, often involving insults and attacks relating to areas such as masculine status. They note how, for some men, the very idea of being depressed may be in conflict with self-conceptions of masculinity, and hence may prevent such men seeking help.

Within the tradition of psychoanalysis there has been considerable writing and theorizing about depression (Lucas, 2004). The case material presented is, however, interpreted in terms of psychoanalytic theory. In this paper by contrast, we employ interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, 2004) an approach with a different set of theoretical imperatives. IPA tends to focus on the conscious, that which is presented, and begins with an interpretative stance of "empathy".

In sum, there is now an enormous literature on depression, yet, we believe, the area of qualitative investigation, particularly within psychology, has been underdeveloped. There is a need for more research that systematically investigates depression from the first person perspective. Furthermore, while there is a need for studies that take a comparative perspective, there is also a need for studies examining the experiences of unique individuals. In this paper we wish to present one such study, that is, a single case study exploring the reported experience of reactive depression.

Method

Participant

The case study we present is of one man who we shall name as Paul. Paul was one participant amongst others in a wider study of depression, but chosen to be the focus of this paper due to the richness of his description of depression. Paul was aged 46 at the time of the research, married with two teenage children. For many years he had run his own business with some colleagues. He had spent most of his youth in a British city, except for one year abroad. He had left school at 16 and had worked ever since. His general self-presentation was of someone who appeared quite conventionally masculine, with for example, an interest in sport.

Data collection

Paul was recruited for the research (Ethics Committee approved) from a waiting list for therapy; he had been diagnosed as having major reactive depression.

The interview was semi-structured (Smith & Osborn, 2008), that is, the researchers had discussed the possible areas of relevance and from this constructed flexible open questions. The central focus of the interview was to ask the participant what the experience of depression was like now and during the initial stages.

Analysis

The transcript was subjected to IPA (Smith, 2004, 2007; Smith & Osborn, 2008). First there was a close reading of the text and notes written. The second stage involved reading the text again in an attempt to transform the initial notes into themes. The third stage, involved clustering and organizing the many themes. The sequence was repeated many times until a level of conceptualization of the data could be achieved which best captured the core themes and the whole text. Each stage of analysis was discussed with the second author who thus acted as an “independent audit” (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The resulting analysis was written by both authors.

Results

The context for depression

Paul was asked what was happening in his life before the depression began. He first described several long-term difficulties: he had run a small business that had struggled to make money over the years. He had also worked excessively long hours, and had often stayed out in the evenings drinking. He did not mention any specific problems with his wife and children, but noted that due to his drinking he had often not seen his family.

He was then specifically asked about the time just before his depression started and as it took hold. He explained that he had not paid his tax for a couple of years and also had debts. At one point a large tax bill arrived. He went to the tax office and what he owed was reinforced:

I actually remember actually saying to him, “I’m going to join Dr Kelly at this rate” . . . and I really just felt so low.

Dr Kelly was well known at the time as someone who had committed suicide. Paul went straight to the doctor where he cried. Paul stated that he thought that this time was the actual beginning of his depression. After discussion with his wife, the only solution they saw for the debt was to remortgage. On being asked what this situation meant he said:

It meant the end. It meant the end.

Features of depression

Paul stated:

The reason I can look at this and say “oh, clinical depression”, because I can’t motivate myself, I don’t want to. Which is just not me. It’s not me at all. Or maybe it is?

It is interesting to note that Paul picked out these features of depression as central, in particular, he underlined that in the past he had had “that normal black cloud that

floats over”, but had been good at “snapping out of things”, at “motivating” himself. Now he found that the most ordinary every day activities were difficult. He gave an example of needing to go to buy some ready-made meals: before the interview, this had been on his mind:

Will I buy the right things? Why bother? . . . I do care, but I don’t.

Paul seems to be portraying a fundamental change in motivation, and motivation understood not only as having desires or aims to do certain things, but also the ability to get himself to do these things. The change in motivation and capacity to act is linked by him to not being his normal self. Although, interestingly, after asserting that it is “just not me”, he immediately questions that, suggesting a concern that this lack of motivation may indeed be creeping in to become a core feature of himself.

Beginning with his lack of motivation and lack of capacity to act, he went on to describe a series of interconnecting key features of his depression:

I suppose it’s like I don’t care, you know, to get myself out of this hole. Many things have been put in front of me to do. Meditation, err, anything. It’s just a complete nothingness . . . what is the point? . . . err, it’s the fear, as well, the fear, it’s terrible . . .
 . . . The hopelessness brings on the fear. I feel that everything I do, everything I’ve done, has been a waste . . . I know this moment of calm is going to go. I know it is going. It’s almost like there’s a big wave out there. A big tsunami outside that door . . . I’m waiting for that fearfulness to come on like a wave. Err, the fear of the day, of the next day and, if I think too much then I’ll be thinking about the whole picture and then the future, scary.

The various features or aspects of his state interconnect: hopelessness brings a crushing “wave” of fear and both lead him to excessive thinking, “it brings everything in”, and this everything involves both the past and future. The fact that he cannot stop thinking such thoughts also damages his relationship with his wife.

It’ll turn into something dark, you know about our, our circumstances.

He mentioned going for a walk in the morning sun with his wife who has suggested that he should “just imagine good things”. However, he said “I couldn’t see it . . . I focus on negatives”. He could only imagine being homeless, a “tramp”, and when asked explicitly what would happen stated:

I know I will die but what kind of, horrible death would that be?

Death, or its potential, is a theme he returned to at several points. As discussed earlier, he compared himself to someone who had committed suicide and when he got a letter finalizing the remortgage he said out loud in the presence of his wife, “bye bye life”. At this moment he appears to have “blended” (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) at least two conceptual areas (dying and remortgage) into one complex emotional experience.

Masculinity and vulnerability

Paul reflected on a particular change he noticed in himself:

Never thought it would come to me, to a state where I’m just so helpless or feel helpless. I almost feel like there’s something inside me that makes me want to be helpless. You know, I want to be looked after. You know, I just want somebody to hold my hand.

Over and above specific experiential features, he felt that he was not acting like himself and experienced something utterly new, a feeling of being vulnerable, perhaps weak. He emphasized how all his life he had been, or wanted to be, a “strong” person:

you’re supposed to be, as a young man, you’re supposed to be something . . . I think I always wanted to be a, a fearless person, I wanted to be not scared of the big bad world . . .

. . . you know, just, I’m going to become someone, I’m going to be strong.

Depression for Paul seemed to involve a central coming apart of these assumptions and/or what might be thought of as fundamental desires to be a certain sort of person. And to his shock and bewilderment, he has now found a vulnerable self:

I want someone to come and put an arm around me and say “come on, you’re alright. You’ll be alright mate, I’ll help you”.

We can only speculate, but it seems reasonable to suggest that, this newer unfulfilled yearning for care, to be someone looked after and not always the one out fighting and “snapping” out of things represents both a contribution to depression but also one possibility of a way forward out of it.

The horror of depression

We have now described the context of difficulties in Paul’s life and several features of being depressed. We next wish to turn to two complex and extended “images” or “scenarios” he used to vividly capture life at its worst.

“In that pit”

At several points Paul described his state of being depressed as if he was in a pit or hole and that this image had actually occurred to him many times during the depression. The pit or the hole is one of the most common metaphors in depression (Emslie et al., 2006). However, each person’s pit will be particular to him or her, drawing on details, implications, memories, fears, connections and unique symbolism generated from specific biographic experiences.

And at one point Paul recounts the following:

P: There were points where I would say to my wife, err, I feel like I’m in a hole, in a big well type hole with my hands tied behind my back, sometimes gagged. And water seeping in from the sides, with no way out . . . just filling up with water.

J: And how far has it got, the water?

P: I won’t let it rise. I won’t let the water rise. It’s almost like I can hear it. But I won’t let it rise. No, no, no I won’t let it rise.

J: It’s a deep hole, what kind of sides?

P: Oh rough and err stony, like it’s been dug out. It’s not like a well of bricks or anything like that. Just all rough and edgy . . . I had a vision, you know, a conjured vision of erm *Silence of the Lambs* with err Buffalo Bill, and as it keeps the, in that pit, and it was that, that sort of hole, you know, lots of stones, . . . just an earth hole. But it is a feeling of hopelessness, I get tremendous, tremendous fears sometimes . . . very scary. Cos that image to me is one of no escape. It’s not one of those, there wasn’t a ladder by the side. I didn’t think, well, you know, gonna get saved here you know, a rope’s gonna come down. Cos’ my hands are tied anyway, err, no no no no way out.

We would suggest that this image vividly captures a number of central features of Paul's experience of depression.

At one level he is completely helpless, his "hands tied", "gagged", with "no escape". The hands here may be symbolic of his practical ways of coping, of the normal ability to do useful things. In the pit, however, he cannot use these "hands" to escape. And even if he did try to use his hands to grasp the sides of the pit, he would only get hold of "earth", earth and stones which perhaps would crumble, fall off. Making an effort he would still fall back. And his mouth is "gagged" so he can't shout for help nor talk his way out.

In an anxious tone, he says that he will not let the water rise, but this is not said with confidence; it comes across more as a desperate plea, recreating his futile attempts to stop it rising. So there is also an implicit suggestion of a slow agonizing death as the water rises and drowns him. So he will be cut off from his very breath. And "breath" is one of the root meanings of the Greek "psycho". The psycho was breath but also that which contained the very essence of being alive, in fact, is life. Water will fill his nostrils slowly. He is not blindfolded, he will see everything, he will see his destruction. There is no easy clean and sudden escape. This serves then as a powerful image of the terrible death he has earlier described as being in fear of. It is interesting to note that it is water here that would kill him and it is water in the earlier "wave" of fear: perhaps the idea of water emphasizes for Paul the notion of suffocation by a force that cannot be handled, of not being able to take anymore, of an amorphous substance that cannot be easily escaped once a person is immersed in it.

The image also suggests being abandoned: in the earth, forgotten, un-mourned and not ceremoniously "buried" by others. He will be alone. Elsewhere in the interview, we have already seen that he thinks he will end up homeless on the street, alone, and then will die. The idea of being alone permeates his imagination. Part of depression seems to crucially involve a sense of utter loneliness. And this loneliness at the point of death is perhaps one of our deepest terrors. In Kiarostami's film, *The Taste of Cherries*, a man cannot bring himself to kill himself using sleeping pills until he can persuade anyone, any stranger, recruited at random, to go the next day to a chosen spot to bury his body or, if he wakes up with a response to a shout, to take him home. He could face the act of suicide, but not the loneliness of an abandoned body. The image of the pit for Paul violates this dread: he will die alone.

Who is Paul the victim of? Who has tied his hands and left him in the pit? This is left unclear. The reference to the film *Silence of the Lambs* emphasizes the anonymous, sadistic horror and his terror. Elsewhere in the interview, he speaks of the fear of being attacked:

P: I wanted to be able to go out there and if necessary, protect myself and protect my family.

J: From what?

P: ...the aggressors that are out there, you know, like, let's say muggers, hooliganism etc.

Yet in some ways this particular torture seems like it is uniquely his. The descent into depression is the descent into his personal hell, perhaps the Room 101 of Orwell? His situation is both real and external to him, yet it is one imbued with symbols perhaps emitting from past suffering. It is as though his worst terror, worst "nightmare" is

made concrete in the pit image. It is a sort of congealed image of past and present terror. It expressed his experiences now, but also draws up terror from the past.

And in some ways perhaps the nightmare represents some retribution, or self inflicted punishment. Elsewhere in the interview, he recalls both being bullied and being a bully at school and these are significant and painful memories. So being in the pit replays how others treated Paul and how he treated others; it may also represent his fear of being attacked, either because it is a senseless world or because he will be punished for his cruelty. Finally it is a symbol of self directed loathing, of an attack by the self on the self.

"The top of your head would pop right off"

In another vivid sequence, Paul recounts the following:

P: And then it brings on this dread. It just brings everything in, the brain is mad.

J: Your thoughts link up you mean?

P: Everything starts to link up then, and as much as sometimes you can, you would you would actually pop, your head would pop off, the top of your head would pop right off, it if you just.

J: Like blow up, you mean?

P: Yeah if you let everything come in all at once. And I have experienced that on a number of occasions at the beginning of this.

J: What was that like then?

P: Absolutely awful.

J: Can you describe it?

P: Yeah like you want to scream and scream and scream as hard as you possibly can to dispel it.

J: Dispel what though, you're in this state you want to scream, it's popping. What is it?

P: What happened to me was everything I had ever done had come into my head over a period of time. Say, initially over a, three to six week period.

J: OK in that six week period, everything you had ever done in the past.

P: Yeah.

J: Was reviewed?

P: Yeah.

J: It came through your mind?

P: It came into my head . . . All the dark things, all the bad things came into my head. And eventually it was like the sensation of having a hinge here [He pointed to the back of his neck]. . . a little hinge that grew and grew. And then the top of my head came off and all of it came out. That's what it was like. All these thoughts and they caused so much, I suppose frustration, physical frustration that you want to scream. And I did actually one morning I was in my car driving to a therapist. I was stuck in a traffic jam, I was shaking with fear. And I screamed in the car, and screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed, shouting. No, no words, just 'Aahh'. Didn't do me any good. I didn't feel better.

So Paul begins by describing how negative thoughts are accumulating. Their volume and the increased toxicity caused by their interactions leads to a point where "the brain is mad", reaches overload, needs a release. However the sequence is confusing and ambiguous. At one level, it appears that the screaming is in reaction to the frustrating build up and is acting as an attempt to facilitate the release, the explosion. At another level the screaming could represent the cathartic release itself.

Paul's description of the potential explosive release is particularly unusual. Describing the fault line which will allow the opening as a "hinge" introduces a depersonalized form. Perhaps accompanying the distress and self-directed anger, Paul sees himself becoming less human, more mechanical. A robot, terminator, or Frankenstein's monster is more likely to have a hinge which allows the head to swing

free, or the trap door to swing open. So maybe he is worried about both going mad, of becoming “unhinged” but also that the toxic brew of bad thoughts is eating away at his very humanity.

Is there something else going on at the same time? An iconic image of the top of a head popping right off while sitting in a car remains in the personal and collective memory of many people and that is the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Maybe Paul is in part invoking the ultimate release from his agonizing suffering, in this case through the violent death from a bullet to the head. And remember Paul had earlier suggested that he thought he might be found like Dr Kelly who it is generally assumed had committed suicide. So it is possible that one reading of the symbolism here is that Paul is actually describing a suicide fantasy. This reading connects with another important cultural referent, the lyrics in “A day in the life” by the Beatles: “He blew his mind out in a car; he didn’t notice that the lights had changed”. The song itself is open to multiple interpretations but it may just be that Paul is here at one level describing a fantasy that committing suicide might have led to the final release from his agony.

Discussion

In this paper we have attempted to present the experience of one man’s reactive major depression. Our results suggest a profound and near total change in his experience of self. Before, he worked, was competent, very social. During the onset of depression his self “unhinged” and then he found himself dying in a “pit”. The metaphor of the hole emphasizes the notion and feeling of no escape, loss of normal living experience, and ideas of imminent death.

Using DSM-IV diagnostic criteria, we could tick the diverse and separate boxes: he has no pleasure, is miserable, sleeping excessively, etc. Our account, however, demonstrates links not only between events and his reactions, but how his experience itself forms a whole of interconnected features. Nothing can be done, so he feels hopeless. But if hopeless, worse will come and he fears this. Feeling a “tsunami” of fear leaves him exhausted and hence less able to act. As this happens, he wonders how it is that he has become so weak.

Vulnerability and masculine violence

As he became depressed, he examined the “dark things”: more details of these memories emerged over the interview. Many concerned his childhood, and a distinctive part of that concerned memories of violence, bullying and racism carried out against him, and violence he himself committed against another boy. These topics concur with the findings of Emslie et al. who noted that many of their participants recounted episodes of a harsh “macho” early environment, one in which homophobic bullying, and the use of violence, were common.

Metaphors

The metaphors, or complex imaginative scenarios, particularly the hinge and the pit, suggest great suffering. It is crucial to remember that none of the key metaphors or scenarios was produced just for the occasion of the interview. The hinge, the pit, but

also his “bye bye life” on receiving a remortgage, were all images that occurred to him at various times throughout his depression. It seems possible that the greatest moments of suffering come imbued with metaphor or other forms of figuration (metonymy, personification, conceptual blends and so forth). What the person experiences is not something utterly separate from these figurations (Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Rather, the metaphors express, constitute, and amplify the very experience of the person. Mental experience is like this.

The images we have presented, we believe, illustrate the agony, horror, and extremity of depression. They might also be said to illustrate two sides of depression, that is, the explosion in a frenzied state of agitation and fear, but also the implosive collapse, the weight of being trapped, being helpless, weak and buried.

The metaphors given by Paul appear rich in meaning. It is fascinating to note that when we paid particularly close attention to explicit and implicit details of these scenarios, the details seem to resonate with information given throughout the interview. For example, the unhinging suggests an explosion and he had spoken of daily life as a battle. We do not believe Paul has deliberately set about composing all these details and implications and aimed for thematic consistency. It seems reasonable to suggest that metaphors and images in general say more than a person deliberately and consciously intends. This concept of saying more has been long considered in therapy (Cox & Theilgaard, 1987).

Narration

A striking fact reported by Paul was that during his breakdown all the “dark things” came back to him rapidly over a 3-week period. The “dark things” were memories of his apparent mistakes, that is, negative actions such as bullying another boy at school. It would appear that this content was not something he would dwell upon before and some may have been long forgotten.

Given that a person at various points in time might tell a typical “story” of his or her life (White, 2007), then we can imagine that in earlier times Paul would have told a story of strength and success. If so, it appears that a crucial step in becoming depressed was the, apparently involuntary, catastrophic re-narration of his life.

Depression as a form of dying

Both metaphors analysed in depth hint or speak of death and dying. Shweder (1985) in a review of several anthropological texts suggests that in many cultures depression is expressed as a death or loss of a person’s very “soul”, the latter standing for many things but certainly includes a feeling of being alive and being one’s self.

Given the many comments made about dying, and comments suggesting a fundamental transformation of the self (“It is me and it’s not me”), we wish to speculate that depression is not so much a “bereavement” for something lost, as Freud (1917/1961) famously suggested, but rather is a sort of wounding, reduction, or mortification of one’s normal self. It is a movement to dying of the normal self. This may seem an extreme claim, yet must be put in the context of the horror, strangeness and ineffability of depression as discussed in the introduction, the fact that many dread this condition, and further, that in severe cases the person literally stops normal life functions. Depression, is not just an emotion, for example, an

extreme feeling of sadness, but rather an un-hinging and alteration of all systems of the self, including motivation, emotions, thought, action capacities and ultimately the experience of being the same person over time.

But what destroys the self? In the case of Paul it seems to be that the trigger involved the ruin of his core identity and core motivational projects (for a house, money, success), his way of exiting in the world. The symbolism, meaning, of “success” are also central, but these are not just abstract “interpretations” of events. Rather, these are core projects to which he has committed his life. These are the essence of that he really “cares” about (Frankfurt, 1988).

Implications for therapy

Our analysis of this single case suggests several implications for working with depression. First, that when we approach someone with “depression” we should attempt to bracket, to put aside, our assumptions, our stereotypes of depression as a general “thing”, and explore with the person their unique experiences, the distinctive constituents and experiences for *this person*. And furthermore, we need to grasp how each aspect fits a complex whole. Second, our study points to the centrality of understanding a person’s real struggle in a difficult real world, yet also how experience is imbued with metaphor and other images. Third, our case study also points to the importance of aims, purposes, and projects constituting a person’s way of living. Not only that a way of living has not worked for a person but that it was obvious in the interview to Paul that he could not just go back to his old way of living. There is a clear implication that in working with men’s depression, there may be issues concerning attempts to live up to “strong man” stereotypes which have led to a suppression of the ability to seek care.

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Jonathan A. Smith is Professor of Psychology at Birkbeck University of London where he teaches social psychology and qualitative research methods. Prior to that, he held appointments at Keele and Sheffield Universities. He has developed interpretative phenomenological analysis as one particular experiential qualitative methodology and employed it in a wide range of areas. Much of his current research is in family and health. He has published many journal articles and edited a number of books. He is the lead author of the recently published book *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis* (Sage, 2009, with Paul Flowers and Michael Larkin).

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